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Article

Racialized narratives about multicultural parental collaboration in early childhood education and care - Normality understood as whiteness

Anne Grethe Sønsthagen
Western Norway University of Applied Sciences
E-mail: anne.grethe.sonsthagen@hvl.no

Prisca Bruno Massao
University of Inland Norway
E-mail: prisca.massao@inn.no

Abstract

This study examines what racialized narratives emerge when staff in two Norwegian early childcare centers discuss multicultural parental collaboration. Results stem from a re-analysis of the narratives from two focus group interviews from a previous study that focused on staff conversations about their descriptions of their collaboration with parents and families with refugee backgrounds. Theoretically, the study draws on symbolic power and violence theories, white privilege, and critical race theory. The results were dominated by two main narratives: Normality and Language. Normality narratives appear to emphasize whiteness and Norwegianess as the norms that all parents are expected to follow, and parents who do not conform risk being alienated and generalized as representatives of "the others." Language narrative highlights the place the Norwegian language occupies in judging parents' and children's abilities and ways of interaction. Given the importance placed on parents and children mastering the Norwegian language for future success in Norwegian society, other forms of communication and interactions are devalued and condemned, marginalizing parents and children struggling to learn and understand the Norwegian language and culture. The consequences of these narratives minimize the early childcare center's role as a bridging institution.

Keywords: ECEC, symbolic power, symbolic violence, critical race theory, white privilege, narrative

Introduction

Early childcare centers (ECE) in Norway are educational institutions for children aged 0-5 years. One of its societal mandates states that the ECE staff shall "work in partnership and agreement with the home to meet the children's need for care and play, and they shall promote learning and formative development as a basis for all-round development" (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017, p. 7). Parents are significant stakeholders who should be able to express themselves, be heard, and participate. ECE leadership and staff are given an essential role in ensuring equitable and inclusive collaboration with all parents, regardless of social or cultural background (Barnehageloven, 2018). However, ECE staff are not solely accountable for this. Authorities and ECE owners must ensure that staff have sufficient competence and resources to build on and strengthen the inclusive community within the ECE (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2023).

This study is based on a secondary analysis (Heaton, 2008) of an existing dataset where Sønsthagen (2021) examined the ECE's role as an inclusion arena for parents with refugee backgrounds and the leadership's responsibility for this in the work of multicultural professional development. The results of the primary study form the basis for our analysis of two focus group interviews with eight staff. We investigated the following research question:

What racialized narratives emerge when ECE staff discuss multicultural parental collaboration?

The first author conducted the focus group interviews one year after the two ECEs had participated in the national program *Competence for Diversity* (CfD). Based on the conducted narrative analysis (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007), we draw on theories of symbolic power and symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991; Burawoy, 2019), critical race theory in education (e.g., Massao & Thorjussen, 2023; Svendsen, 2022; Yosso, 2005), and white privilege (Bergersen & Massao, 2022; Frankenberg, 1993; McIntosh, 2016).

The primary study (Sønsthagen, 2021) contained a diverse dataset[1] from five ECEs, two of which participated in the CfD program. The results showed, among other things, that symbolic power was visible in the ECEs even after participating in CfD. Neither the leadership nor the staff seemed to reflect on the asymmetrical power relations between themselves and parents with refugee backgrounds. They also did

[1] Pre-study: Interviews with five mothers of Somali backgrounds and four pedagogical leaders from four kindergartens. Main study: Interviews with parents with refugee backgrounds (n=12), managers (n=2), interviews, focus group interviews, and diaries written by assistants, childcare workers, and pedagogical leaders (n=8), and observations of drop-off and pick-up situations, parent-teacher conferences, and parent meetings.

not seem to reflect on how they might contribute to the reproduction of inequalities. This led us to investigate whether there could also be traces of racialized narratives in the dataset.

Previous research in Norway on potential power dynamics in multicultural parental collaboration

Several studies have been conducted on multicultural parental collaboration, nationally and internationally (see the international literature review by Norheim and Moser (2020), which examines barriers and facilitating factors for partnerships between parents with immigrant backgrounds and preschool staff). While we acknowledge that international research could be relevant to our study, we have chosen to focus on research from Norway that examines power relations between ECE staff and parents with minority backgrounds. Bergsland (2018) investigated how pedagogical leaders offered recognition and lack of recognition to parents with ethnic minority[2] backgrounds and discussed this using the concept of power. The cultural capital and habitus[3] of the ethnic majority appeared to dominate, and the parents attempted to adapt to the majority's perception of normality. Similarity seemed to be unconsciously emphasized, where the Norwegian way of understanding, for example, children, ECE, parental collaboration, and the parental role, was considered the norm. The minorities were regarded as the *others*, understood based on their cultures and not their individuality. At the same time, the majority was part of an *us* acting in line with dominant capital and habitus. Bergsland (2018) discusses whether this could contribute to systemic racism. Lund (2022) examined how pedagogical leaders handled cultural diversity and how parents with refugee backgrounds experienced their encounters with ECEs. The cultural capital of the majority related to parenthood seemed to influence both ECE educational practices and parents' narratives. The results highlight power structures in ECEs that can hinder and support cultural diversity and the parents' sense of belonging and recognition.

Sønsthagen (2020) investigated how ECEs functioned as arenas of inclusion for parents with refugee backgrounds through the staff's recognition of parents as significant stakeholders. The results illustrated three steps parents had to fulfill to achieve such recognition: (1) They needed sufficient Norwegian language skills, (2) they needed to have good 'chemistry' with the staff, and (3) they needed to understand

[2] In this article, based on the Norwegian context and literature, minority and majority concepts imply ethnic minorities and majorities, sometimes referred to as immigrants and Norwegians.
[3] Cultural capital accumulates knowledge, skills, and behaviors (Bourdieu, 1997). Habitus is an embodied form of cultural capital, referring to dispositions that include learned behaviors, culture, and language. These dispositions guide us on how to act and react, or not, in specific situations and what values and norms we consider necessary (Bourdieu, 1991).

the social codes of the institution. The discourse and capital of the majority seemed to dominate, and the ECEs functioned more as arenas of integration rather than inclusion for these parents. Handulle and Vassenden's (2021) study illustrates how second-generation Norwegian-Somali parents exhibited a Norwegian middle-class identity in interactions with ECE staff as a strategy to avoid being reported to child welfare services based on what could be interpreted as neglect by the staff. Despite being raised in Norway, being familiar with Norwegian culture and structures, and being well-educated and well-integrated, these parents were aware that Somalis (and Muslims) are subjected to special scrutiny in Norwegian society. The parents' racialized experiences stemmed from their own experiences of being part of a Somali and/or Muslim and Norwegian society. These experiences formed an essential backdrop of knowledge and navigation skills in interactions with staff. Such experiences influenced the parents' preparation for, engagement in, and reflections after meetings with ECE staff (Handulle & Vassenden, 2021).

The studies show that the majority's uncritical logic, norms, and approaches dominate the collaboration between ECEs and homes. While we find several studies that discuss cultural diversity from a majority/minority perspective or potential power dynamics, we see, except for Bergsland (2018) and Handulle and Vassenden (2021), few studies from the Norwegian ECE field that problematize race, racism, and whiteness, either theoretically or analytically. This indicates a need to investigate whether this framework is also relevant in Norway.

Symbolic power and violence

Symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991) in ECEs can be understood as a hidden form of power that neither the dominant group, such as staff with majority backgrounds, nor the subordinate groups, such as parents with minority backgrounds, reflect upon or try to resist (Sønsthagen, 2021). Symbolic power influences and shapes meaning through symbols and cultural resources (Bourdieu, 1991). Those who possess symbolic power define and dominate the symbolic order so that their norms, values, and perspectives are recognized and accepted as valid. According to Gast (2018), this can lead to mistakenly recognizing arbitrary differences as legitimate and taking them for granted. Consequently, symbolic power can lead to symbolic violence when dominant and subordinate groups uncritically accept and internalize the dominant group's perspectives, norms, and language (Gast, 2018).

Symbolic violence, according to Burawoy (2019), can contribute to maintaining an asymmetrical power relationship that is either naturalized or misunderstood as something other than dominance. Symbolic violence is ingrained in our daily lives, and at its core lies a combination of enthusiastic participation and systematic misrecognition. The dominant groups' overarching power in society dictates what type of knowledge, skills, and dispositions should be reproduced through the educational field, of which ECEs are a

part (Bourdieu, 1990; Sønsthagen, 2021). Thus, the educational field is a crucial example of symbolic violence (Burawoy, 2019). The educational field is portrayed as following universal rules and allowing everyone to acquire qualifications for the labor market. However, there is a hidden bias where the educational field, in reality, favors the cultural capital of the middle and upper classes, typically represented by the white segment of the population. For example, by emphasizing the majority language and the logic, norms, and approaches of the majority in ECEs, the staff can contribute to reproducing inequalities rather than reducing them (Sønsthagen, 2021).

Racism, critical race theory, and whiteness

Race, in our context, refers to intersectional social and cultural differences marked by, for instance, skin color or other characteristics that indicate a person's origin or national/ethnic affiliation (Fitzgerald, 2020). These differences are associated with ideologies and economic, cultural, and social practices (Acker, 2011) that are often subject to change according to political power struggles. In a Norwegian context, race is seen as an outdated and taboo concept that should not be discussed, and racism is generally understood as explicit hate actions performed by outsiders (Fylkesnes, 2019). This oversimplifies the concept of racism, which must be understood as a symptom of a more significant, structural problem. Racism is context-dependent, expressed in many ways, both directly and indirectly, and at various levels within social structures (see more in Massao, 2016; 2022; Massao & Thorjussen, 2023). Although racism can be perpetrated by and impact individuals, it is never an isolated individual practice since it is connected to history, ideologies, institutions, and the collective consensus power in society (Taylor, 2004). Therefore, critical race theory insists that racism cannot be seen as individual events but rather must be linked to the broader system that permits and enables it. In our case, this is the ECE institution and educational structure.

Critical race theory emphasizes thematizing race, racism, and whiteness in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) to create possibilities and a language to discuss how whiteness operates unconsciously and invisibly as governing norms in education and professions. Inequality must be pointed out to examine and thematize injustice based on racialization (Svendsen, 2022, p. 44). Yosso (2005) poses a critical question about whose culture has capital. Based on Bourdieu's (1997) concept of cultural capital, Yosso (2005) argues that the majority's middle-class culture is presented as the normal or necessary culture that others must strive to acquire or look up to, to succeed. Given the meanings, power, and values attributed to whiteness in our society, critical race theory becomes an essential analytical tool in education, as it highlights and addresses oppressive structures and discourses that can give some groups more privileges than others and create socially just power relations (Parker & Gillborn, 2020). White privilege refers to white supremacy that sees whiteness as normalcy, while minimal, subtle, systemic, and everyday practices of dominant discourses are

manifested (Fylkesnes, 2019, p. 41) through the ongoing oppression of people of color (Miller, 2014, p. 4). Frankenberg (1993) brought attention to whiteness as a structural advantage by showing how experiences of race, ethnicity, and racism were reserved only for people of color and minorities in a society. She emphasized the importance of recognizing that white people also belong to ethnic groups that have a structural advantage in society. White privilege is often taken for granted, and white individuals may be unaware of the privileges and benefits they have (McIntosh, 2016) and how these can be reproduced by minimizing or denying the existence of racism and white privilege (Bergersen & Massao, 2022). Critical race theory warns against a so-called grand narrative that is presented as the norm of society but is based on Eurocentrism and norms of whiteness (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Methods

In this study, we conducted a secondary analysis of existing data material. Heaton (2008) distinguishes between formal and informal data sharing, with the former referring to datasets available in public archives that other researchers can utilize for secondary analysis. We employed informal data sharing, meaning that the first author, who conducted the primary study, shared the data material with the second author, forming a secondary analysis team. Together, we carried out the secondary analysis, theoretical connections, and discussion of the material.

The participants in the study are eight white staff with a majority background from two ECEs located in two similarly sized municipalities: assistants (n=1), childcare workers (n=2), and pedagogical leaders (n=5). In presenting the results, we treat the staff equally, regardless of their job category, but use job categories to distinguish between the different statements in the text. We also make little distinction between the two ECEs. The staff participated in focus group interviews in 2018 at their respective ECEs one year after participating in the national program CfD. One focus group interview lasted for one hour and 10 minutes, and the other for one hour and 20 minutes. The first author established a relationship with the participants through her fieldwork from spring 2016 to spring 2018. The central theme of the focus group interviews was how the ECEs had worked with cultural diversity, inclusion, and multicultural parental collaboration the year after the program.

We conducted a narrative analysis of the focus group interviews (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). By narrative, we mean the main message that emerges from the staff's stories about the ECE and parent collaboration in a multicultural context. A narrative approach helps understand education, as it provides an opportunity to explore established social, cultural, and institutional stories by examining how actions and experiences are founded, shaped, expressed, and carried out (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). In our analysis, a dominant knowledge practice and power relation between different groups in the ECE became

apparent. Our article should be understood as a counter-narrative to a generalizing normativity and racializing narrative about multicultural discourse in ECE rather than an accusation against individual staff members or the ECE for being racist.

Ethical considerations

The primary study was approved and followed the national ethical guidelines for research (NESH, 2023). The staff received information about the study and signed consent forms. Audio recordings from the primary research have been deleted, so we are working with anonymized transcriptions. As researchers, we have power regarding what data we include and exclude, how we present the participants' narratives, interpret the content, and ultimately discuss the results (Sønsthagen, 2021). During the secondary analysis process, we must be aware of our backgrounds and how they affect our judgment, biases, and presentation of the study participants. The first author may have been perceived as both an insider and an outsider by the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013). She had the same background: white and majority, and she was also a trained ECE teacher with work experience from ECE. At the same time, she was employed as a PhD candidate in ECE teacher education and involved in the CfD program, which may have made her seem more like an outsider. She also had work experience in refugee services and had conducted fieldwork in southern Africa, which might have made her more sympathetic to the parents in the study than the staff (Sønsthagen, 2021). The second author is more of an outsider because she immigrated to Norway and is not white. Academically, she has a background in elementary school teacher education from abroad and sociology from Norway, and she researches racism using critical race theory. This may have influenced our analyses.

Often, when racism or racialization is discussed in connection with staff, and perhaps especially staff working with children, one can become defensive on behalf of both the staff and the institution itself. This discomfort related to the topic of racism can create anxiety and fear of negatively exposing skilled and caring staff, such as the staff in our study. We must emphasize that our goal is not to single out the participants who have shared their stories about multicultural parental collaboration because individuals, the staff, and the ECE do not solely represent themselves. They represent narratives shaped and accepted by the surrounding society as the correct norms, values, attitudes, and practices that often favor white majorities. Highlighting the staff's narratives in our study thus reveals a racializing societal culture and structure that normalizes certain narratives and practices in the ECE. We have emphasized extended quotes from the focus group interviews in presenting our results to illustrate how this normalization takes place in practice despite the marginalizing effects they may create.

Results

The focus group interviews highlighted the ECEs' work with multiculturalism the year after the CfD program. Questions such as "What do you think is the most important aspect of the ECE's work with minority-language families?" and "How do you now work on parental collaboration with minority-language parents?" were also asked. In our analysis of the staff's stories about multicultural parental collaboration, we identified two main narratives: normality and language.

Normality narrative

In both focus group interviews, the staff discussed the behavior of parents and children with refugee backgrounds by focusing on their gestures, voice levels, boundary-setting, and mealtime situations. Underlying these discussions, the staff appeared to generalize the parents and evaluate their actions against the whiteness narrative or Norwegian identity as the norm. In a conversation about whether the staff felt their competence or experiences from CfD were asked for by colleagues, a pedagogical leader and a childcare worker in a toddler unit mentioned that over the past year, they had seen an increase in children with refugee backgrounds: "We have about four who are Norwegian, and the rest are foreign language-speakers? (Pedagogical leader). Six, yes, foreign (childcare worker)." They found this challenging, which they further described through the mealtime situation in the unit:

> Last autumn, we faced challenges regarding mealtime with such young children that we had not faced before. It felt like 'Texas'. Gradually, we began to think, 'Yeah, but it is not certain that they are used to sitting at a table eating their food in the same way as us. They probably do not even have the same food as us.' It took months before we managed to get this back to being a normal mealtime situation again (pedagogical leader). If we have managed that (laughs) (childcare worker).

Here, the staff describes how the foreign-language-speaking, non-Norwegian children created challenges or chaos ('Texas') in their work and how they managed to get the children to adapt to the “normality" or the Norwegian way of behaving around the dinner table, as elaborated below.

> This applies to sitting on a chair, having a plate in front of you, having food on the plate, not just picking at it, and not making too much noise. But now we notice when we observe how other cultures talk to each other (...), there is an awful lot of noise. They speak very fast, over each other, very loudly. They eat in a different way than us, eat different foods than us, do not sit neatly by the table, and are not polite in how we perceive politeness. We did not know this. We saw this and did not understand it right away. Eventually, it dawned on us (pedagogical leader).

They did not seem to question their lack of experience as a challenge but rather applied a deficit approach that the children “lacked” proper table manners, training, or socialization. In the continuation of this story, it is particularly noticeable how the staff reacted to the way the “foreign-language-speaking” children gestured, more specifically, the way they used their index fingers:

> I think I have to tell you how they talk to each other, like this, right (waves index finger). (...) And then we have a boy in another department there, who is a lot of 'aaah, aaah,' whining, right? And then one of our girls (laughs) (...) He was walking around whining, and I think she just had enough. So she goes over to him like this 'dododododododoo' (waves index finger, laughs). Sounds like a machine gun. (...) But here (shows index finger), that is how you are spoken to, with the finger (childcare worker).
> (The others laugh)
> With a loud voice and a shaking finger. (...) (pedagogical leader).

Related to this example, the interviewer asked what she meant by "that culture": "No, then I am thinking about those who are dark-skinned."

Another challenge mentioned in both focus group interviews was boundary-setting and bedtime, as well as parents who would say what they thought the staff wanted to hear. This was, among other things, linked to a fear of external agencies, such as child welfare services.

> The person I attended the course with (a former refugee) said that the first thing they are told when they come to Norway is that Norwegian child welfare services will take the kids. So, in a way, they often say what they think we expect of them (...). I do think that, yes, what the correct answer is. (...). So this thing with bedtime, you ask them what time they go to bed, and they might say eight o'clock, but you can see them in (the town center) at ten o'clock (...) (childcare worker).
> They have learned that in Norway, children go to bed at seven or eight (pedagogical leader)."

Further, challenges with the parents' boundary-setting were discussed:

> But I think a lot about it; boundary-setting is one thing we should have more of. Because it is terribly difficult. (...) And we often do not know how they set boundaries. (...) It could be that they will say what we want them to, but still, it is a challenge (childcare worker).

In the other ECE, the staff expressed frustration with the lack of boundary-setting when parents picked up their children:

> We have this one kid who does not want to go home, not a single day, who cries. The father does much coaxing. 'Come! Yes, come, I have candy in the car, come on, get in the car' (imitates the father's voice) (...). Because he cries every day, even though he is the last child left. And those parents probably believe that we think he is unhappy at home because of the crying. (...) I think they actually need some reassurance that it is perfectly fine to be firm with your child (pedagogical leader).
> (...)
> We set boundaries, and the kids scream and cry because they are used to screaming and crying. Meanwhile, the parents sit there and say, 'Yes, but we set boundaries' (...). But it does not always match up (second pedagogical leader).

The conversations among the staff suggest that parents and children with refugee backgrounds are evaluated against a Norwegian logic and approach to child upbringing and how boundaries should be set regarding things like bedtime and discipline. There was uncertainty and less discussion about how the staff could contribute to this process to reassure children and parents regarding challenges related to boundary-setting. The staff, however, understand how parents find themselves in a vulnerable situation and are likely afraid of doing something 'wrong' in front of the staff.

Further, the staff in one of the ECEs mentioned that they had worked a lot on the terms they used and that words like "foreign cultural" were no longer used. "They are not so foreign to us" (pedagogical leader). They found such words hostile, and "it simply does not belong anywhere to talk like that about others, I think" (pedagogical leader). This shows a more inclusive attitude in the partnership with parents. However, it still appeared that the staff in this ECE also generalized these parents, particularly those with a Muslim background. When asked if they had worked with the topic of diversity on a personal level since CfD, the conversation eventually shifted to challenges related to certain food restrictions in Islam. The staff discussed whether the ECE had adapted too much to Muslim culture by changing the sandwich spreads they offered the children to avoid issues regarding what Muslims could and could not eat. Further in the conversation, they discussed challenges related to gender equality, which they also associated with Muslims.

> But remember, in the beginning, those women entered the innermost playroom and sat there. We had a table and everything there. I was like, 'Why are they sitting in there?' They should not sit in the same room as men, right? We have not arranged it like that at all, and we never will. (...) (pedagogical leader).
> I also discussed this with this boy (with a Syrian background). He comes and says, 'My dad can drive a car; my mom is not allowed to.' And I said, 'No, because she has no driver's license.' 'No, she cannot drive a car; only Dad is allowed to drive a car. Women cannot drive cars.' Oh no, do not tell me that, oh no. (The others laugh). (...) And I get so provoked, right? (...) And I am thinking, what does he think about this? I cannot understand it (second pedagogical leader).
> (...) And we have gone through a lot regarding this hijab and boys and girls, as such discussions come up, what can boys do, what can girls do. And we have a gender equality perspective, and we should have that. And that is something I am working a bit with. What do they think? I actually do not accept them saying that 'girls cannot drive cars.' Such silly attitudes (gestures with hand), away with that, done with it (second pedagogical leader).

It seems that the staff focused on what they consider to be challenges related to the Islamic religion, regarding meals and gender issues, and how that deviated from a Norwegian perspective on gender equality without further elaborations. One might question whether majority-background parents might also group themselves based on gender, or if boys with a majority background might, for example, say, "Women cannot drive tractors," or if this is something that only applies to parents and children with a Muslim background. The various situations the staff described as challenging could have been good opportunities for the staff to engage in dialogue with these parents and children rather than generalizing an entire group as a challenge and lacking a gender equality perspective.

When asked how they are now working with inclusion in the same interview, they particularly emphasized the importance of including children in plays and showed a greater interest in the children's different languages. In addition, they mentioned having experienced reverse racism from the parents. This was the only time racism was mentioned in the interviews, and there was no mention of whether some of the parents or children might have experienced racism in ECE.

> But we also felt a bit of reverse racism for a period here, when all the dark-skinned parents went to the Tamil assistant and talked to her (pedagogical leader).
> Yes! (Giggles) (childcare worker).
> Then I was reasonably pissed off and angry, about important things they had to do (giggles) (second pedagogical leader).

The various stories show that the staff have some inclusion reflections on how they talk about parents and children. At the same time, several elements of white privilege led to less critical reflection on their practices and language or the parents' situation. One ECE seemed to generalize parents with refugee backgrounds as foreign-speaking, foreign-cultural, foreign, or dark-skinned. In contrast, the other ECE seemed to generalize parents and children with a Muslim background as challenging.

Language narrative

A good collaboration between ECE and home depends on effective communication through language. Language is more than just verbal communication; it can also include gestures, facial expressions, and sounds, which were highlighted under the normality narrative. The staff in both interviews focused on the need for both children and parents to have sufficient Norwegian language competence, so in this context, the language narrative is about verbal language.

A conversation about how they worked with inclusion and cultural diversity quickly shifted to discussing challenges with the Norwegian language for both children and parents. According to one pedagogical leader, it was necessary for parents to master the Norwegian language and to receive information about and become familiar with the Norwegian system to succeed further in the educational system:

> We also see that they struggle when they go to school right away. The parents do not understand the messages they are given, and then they start lagging behind compared to the others because they do not know what things are about. So, learning to communicate in Norwegian and understanding what is being said is crucial for how they will do as they move up through the system.

It is essential to have Norwegian language competence to ensure good communication between ECE and the home and other societal institutions. At the same time, the staff seems to show less consideration in a transitional phase where parents and children do not master the language fully. Despite one pedagogical leader expressing that after the work with multicultural professional development, she had become "more aware of talking to the foreign-language speakers even though in many cases it would have been easier not to do it." The staff appeared to assess parents based on how fast they could learn the Norwegian language. Those who mastered Norwegian were predominantly spoken of positively and as individuals who had succeeded. Parents who mastered the Norwegian language to a lesser extent were often defined as representatives of a cultural group that had failed. One pedagogical leader stated:

> While we should recognize and make their culture visible, becoming familiar with Norwegian society and the Norwegian system is essential. Being able to speak Norwegian. We see that the parents and children who are best at speaking Norwegian manage best socially and probably also academically eventually (…). For those who only speak their mother tongue (…), we see that they have other challenges with understanding their surroundings and not being able to communicate with others.

However, according to the staff, a mother in this ECE succeeded more, which was also helpful for her daughter. The same pedagogical leader described her as follows:

> And then we have a mother who has decided, ' Now we are in Norway, we speak Norwegian.' Both at home and elsewhere, and they take cod liver oil and Sanasol. Her daughter is incredibly good at speaking sentences and very popular among the other children in the department, only two and a half years old. Now, I do not know what it means for her not to learn much of her mother tongue or whether it impacts her, but what we see in ECE is incredibly positive for her.

The childcare worker continued: "But you see the mother too, she believes that 'if we are in Norway, then we are in Norway.' She consistently speaks Norwegian with her. And she says that at home now, the child will not speak anything but Norwegian." This girl was further compared to another girl in the same toddler department, whose parents did not speak Norwegian to the same extent:

> So you see the difference between her and, for example, the other girl (...). I know that she is well integrated, as you say because she uses the language. She is a happy, smiling girl. The other one uses more screaming. And then, in a way, you have shut yourself out immediately because they do not want to. So you see a vast difference there (childcare worker).

Based on the stories from the staff, Norwegian, which is the dominant language, is partly used to marginalize minority parents and children, given the reinforcement placed upon language mastery. Mastering Norwegian is associated with happiness and acceptance, while the children who do not master the language well are regarded as “noisy and draining.” Despite that this might be undeliberate actions or attitudes from the staff or their ways of expressing ”concerns” about the children and parents' lack of Norwegian language fluency, they, however, show minimal interest in understanding the parents and children’s situations and desires to master the language and succeed in Norwegian society. They appear to demonstrate little critical reflection on their role and responsibility concerning the parents and children’s rights to be included rather than assimilated into the ECE and Norwegian society. The language pressure on parents and children seems to lead to poor communication.

Furthermore, the staff discussed their discomfort when parents spoke their mother tongue in conversations with their children in ECE.

> I think the worst is in the entrance hall when the parents speak their language to the child. They stand there talking and talking and talking, and we have no idea what they are saying. I find that difficult (assistant).
> And then I feel very tempted to think, 'I will just go inside (the department) and come back out when they are done in the dressing room.' Because you have nothing to do when you cannot be part of that conversation (pedagogical leader).

> I have actually asked because we have one who does that, and I might hear my name mentioned while she is talking. And then I have actually asked, 'What did you say to her now?' 'Oh yes, all right!' That is also a bit uncomfortable because you do not know what is being said, but you hear them mention your name (childcare worker).

> However, they may need to use our language when they enter a Norwegian ECE. Then, they need to interact with and communicate with us. They can speak their language at home if they want to. But when they collaborate with us and convey things, they must also use the language with the child so that we are part of the entire communication (pedagogical leader).

Even though the staff expressed that the parents' culture should be recognized and made visible, speaking a language other than Norwegian in the ECE and, to some extent, also at home is highlighted as negative and undesirable. Not understanding what is being said, especially when one's name is mentioned, can be experienced as uncomfortable, and perhaps the staff felt a need for control over what was being discussed. However, it does not seem that the staff put themselves in the parents' situation or reflected that this is a constant discomfort that many parents and children go through. Being able to speak their mother tongue with their children in the entrance hall to understand each other well is likely necessary and a relief for the parents and children.

Discussion

The two main narratives we have presented are characterized by racializing narratives about whiteness or Norwegianness as normality. In the following, we will discuss what this can lead to and what obstacles might exist in the ECE's role as a bridging institution.

Racialized narratives about whiteness as normality in multicultural parental cooperation

ECE promotes respect for human dignity by making diversity visible, valuing it, and fostering mutual respect (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017). The ECE owner is also responsible for ensuring that staff possess sufficient competence and resources to meet this requirement (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2023). Most participants in the study had formal ECE qualifications, and all had completed a year of professional multicultural development. Nevertheless, their narratives create a limited space for learning and recognizing other ways of being that differ from the Norwegian norm as part of diversity in practice. The estrangement of children and parents with refugee backgrounds is normalized in their stories, such as the situation around the dining table, setting boundaries, ways of speaking or expressing themselves, and which language is used. This can be viewed through the lens of Yosso (2005), who questions whose culture has capital. The cultural capital of the dominant majority (Bourdieu, 1997), associated with whiteness and Norwegianness, is reproduced and promoted through societal institutions like the ECE. As a result, there is a risk that cultures, different ways of being, languages, and religions

represented by refugees are problematized, alienated, and marginalized as inappropriate within both the ECE and society at large. Meanwhile, the ways and cultural backgrounds of the majority are seen as valuable resources (Yosso, 2005).

To be included in and through the ECE, parents or children with refugee backgrounds would likely need to uncritically adapt to the Norwegian way of being. The staff illustrates this, among other things, by speaking positively about the mother who "decided to only speak Norwegian" both at home and in the ECE and by highlighting that her children took both "Sanasol and cod liver oil" as a metaphor for a Norwegian understanding of how to ensure a healthy upbringing and care. At the same time, pedagogical leaders in another ECE expressed frustration when "dark-skinned parents" approached the assistant with a Tamil background, describing the situation as "reverse racism." Using such an approach to depict their experiences, they obscure and/or downplay the majority's power and institutional advantages (Massao, 2016; 2022) in and through ECE. In doing so, the staff positions themselves at a more vulnerable and excluded level than parents with refugee backgrounds and their Tamil colleague. A more diverse and culturally sensitive approach could be to acknowledge and recognize the value and cultural contributions that staff members with minority backgrounds bring to the team and the ECE, as that would ensure that all parents have somebody they could contact despite linguistic or cultural barriers, fostering a more inclusive environment.

The various narratives from the staff illustrate how whiteness, in the form of Norwegianness, can practically dominate the ECE (Miller, 2014) despite the emphasis on cultural diversity in policy documents. This becomes apparent in the staff's stories about their expectations of behaviors from parents and children and through the subordinate position that a non-white/Norwegian-Tamil colleague is expected to fulfill in the ECE. This creates a risk that the ECE becomes an assimilation institution with little appreciation for cultural diversity where whiteness (Frankenberg, 1993; Fylkesnes, 2019) sets the standard norms regarding language, child-rearing, behavior, equality norms, and the ECE's role in a diverse society. These standard norms are further communicated through what can be described as the regular (and desired) socialization and pedagogical practices in the ECE. The emphasis on Norwegianness as a norm by the staff can be both a conscious and unconscious attitude that carries fundamental expectations, beliefs, and practices. By normalizing the interests and perspectives of white Norwegians, the majority's consensus legitimizes the marginalization and exclusion of other groups' perspectives and ways of being through educational institutions like the ECE. This is based on the constructed and alienating dominant narratives developed and reproduced by the majorities (Taylor, 2004). Our findings reveal racialized patterns (Dei, 2006; Massao, 2022) that likely maintain invisible privileges for white majorities, risking excluding non-white parents through colorblind strategies (McIntosh, 2016). By failing to recognize and address these

underlying issues, the ECE inadvertently perpetuates inequality and fails to embrace the cultural diversity it aims to celebrate.

The staff's narratives also reveal that whiteness and Norwegianness function as symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991), perceived as valuable and rewarding in the public sphere and institutions. Mastery of the Norwegian language can serve as racialized symbolic power that, in many cases, is used to alienate and exclude parents and children who do not have Norwegian as their mother tongue and do not speak what is considered good Norwegian (Gast, 2018). Parents and children who quickly learn the Norwegian language are perceived as more willing to integrate or assimilate into Norwegian society. The staff does not seem to consider the various factors that can affect an individual's learning of a foreign language and culture, which can demonstrate discrimination and, at times, symbolic violence (Burawoy, 2019). By ignoring these factors, the staff may inadvertently pressure parents and children that align with the dominant culture's expectations, further entrenching existing power imbalances and perpetuating exclusionary practices.

Something particularly notable about symbolic violence is that it is so internalized in educational institutions that it becomes legitimized (Bourdieu, 1990; Gast, 2018). These actions by staff may be unconscious, as they simultaneously express care and understanding for the children and parents' situations. Nonetheless, when they unconsciously racialize, neglect, or marginalize children and parents with refugee backgrounds, they can "get away" with this by blaming ignorance, having good intentions (such as the importance of parents and children mastering the Norwegian language), or using colorblind arguments like "we treat everyone the same" (Burawoy, 2019; McIntosh, 2016). Expecting parents to speak only Norwegian with their children is likely based on the notion that parents must practice the Norwegian language to succeed further in education and other societal areas. However, the staff seems to take little account of the consequences this can have for the interaction between parents and children and the parents' sense of belonging. By imposing language expectations without considering the cultural and emotional impacts, the staff risks undermining the support and inclusion they aim for and are supposed to provide. Recognizing and addressing the complexities of linguistic and cultural integration would be crucial in fostering a genuinely inclusive environment.

When the actions of parents with refugee backgrounds challenged the Norwegianness that permeates the practices in the ECEs, these parents were portrayed as challenges and deviants rather than as equal parts of the diversity and inclusion community within the ECE. Based on these narratives, we discuss whether this can create obstacles for bridging different cultures.

Obstacles in the ECE's role as a bridging institution

The societal mandate for ECEs in Norway clearly emphasizes the importance of close cooperation with the home and parents as key contributors to the ECE (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017). The ECE is supposed to be an educational institution with professional staff who, among other things, ensure that diversity, inclusion, tolerance, and mutual respect are valued. Based on this, one can say that the staff should function as bridging facilitators between the parents' cultural backgrounds and the culture of Norwegian society and the ECE (Bergersen, 2017) and as an inclusive arena where parents feel they belong, are valued, and recognized (Sønsthagen, 2021). The narratives that emerge when the staff discusses multicultural parental collaboration highlight several obstacles. This can affect the trust between parents and staff, where the staff does not seem to trust the parents because they believe the parents say what they think the staff wants to hear and speak their mother tongue with their children. Parents must follow Norwegian ways of behaving to get accepted by the majority discourse within the ECE (Handulle & Vassenden, 2021). Bridging, among other things, involves helping parents gain a sense of mastery in raising their children in a new culture and language, where they have to balance their own culture with the culture their children are growing up in. In practice, this is little valued and recognized by the staff. Instead, they emphasize that parents should speak Norwegian with their children within the ECE area to demonstrate the importance of Norwegianness and that children and parents eat, speak, and behave in ways different from what is accepted. It is essential to highlight that the staff's stories about the parents are not uniformly negative. They also express understanding and care for the children and the parents' situation. Nevertheless, the narratives suggest that a discourse of whiteness underlies these interactions.

Even though individual autonomy is highly valued in Norwegian society (Bergersen, 2017), this does not seem to apply when the staff describe parents and children with refugee backgrounds. Through the staff's narratives, the parents seem to represent a group rather than individuals. This group does not raise their children in the "correct" way concerning setting boundaries and behavior at the dinner table. This group is characterized as loud, gesticulated, and noisier than the Norwegian norms allow as the standard. If, at the same time, these parents feel that they are not seen as autonomous and competent by the staff or that their actions are scrutinized and judged negatively, it becomes a vulnerable situation for those trying to gain acceptance in society. This also illustrates the findings of Handulle and Vassenden (2021). Even though the parents in their study are second-generation immigrants with a good understanding of Norwegian culture and competent Norwegian language skills, they know they will be judged differently than the majority due to their parents' origin from Somalia and Islam. In this way, the staff risks that their white privilege, consciously or unconsciously, is highlighted as the norm that parents should follow (McIntosh, 2016), which can contribute to systemic racism (Taylor, 2004). This does not mean that the staff as individuals are deliberately necessarily racist, but rather that the surrounding society normalizes whiteness

or Norwegianness. Without knowledge or awareness of their privileges and symbolic power, there is a risk of discriminating and contributing to symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991; Burawoy, 2019). The staff's narratives show a need for increased competence and awareness to use others' perspectives to reflect on their values and practices (Bergersen & Massao, 2022) and how racialization and whiteness, or Norwegianness, manifest in educational contexts like the ECE (Massao & Thorjussen, 2023; Fylkesnes, 2019).

Although the framework plan, policies, and other governing documents emphasize diversity and inclusion, these concepts are rarely defined (Sønsthagen, 2021). This carries the risk of various interpretations leading to assimilation and an ideology of uniformity, where the white Norwegian understanding is highlighted as the norm. The risk is that the authorities themselves, through their documents, reproduce an already established understanding among staff, where the dichotomy between them – the minority – and us – the majority – is maintained (Sønsthagen, 2021). This is in line with the studies of Bergsland (2018), Sønsthagen (2020), and Lund (2022), which point out that ECE staff emphasis similarity and the white Norwegians' norms, which can lead to alienation, cultural marginalization, and systemic racism.

Concluding reflections

The staff's narratives about cultural challenges related to collaboration between the ECE and parents with refugee-background were dominated by racializing narratives characterized by whiteness, white privilege, and symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991; Burawoy, 2019; Frankenberg, 1993) that create and reproduce asymmetric power relations between the staff and parents. This is because norms of whiteness give the staff structural advantages. Despite such power relations possibly being unconscious and invisible to the staff, the consequences can hinder building trust between the ECE and minority families. Showing how race and whiteness operate through normalized institutional practices, such as emphasizing the Norwegian language and behaviors as correct or desirable within the ECE, contradicts the ECE's purpose to promote respect for human dignity by recognizing, valuing, and promoting diversity and mutual respect (Barnehageloven, 2018; Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017). Mutual trust in the ECE is a crucial foundation for parents and children's trust in other institutions like child welfare and schools. This is not merely an individual responsibility for each ECE staff member or parent but is both an institutional and collective responsibility—ranging from the education and professional development provided to ECE staff, the information parents receive, and the expectations and knowledge conveyed from the ECE's owners and governing policy documents.

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