



# Negotiating learning in early childhood: Narratives from migrant homes

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 29 September 2016

Received in revised form 10 March 2017

Accepted 29 April 2017

Available online 27 May 2017

### Keywords:

Learning

Early years education

Multilingual children

Migrant parents

Narrative discourse

Positioning

## ABSTRACT

The study investigates how parents of Polish ethnic background, resettled in Norway, reflect on their children's learning in Norwegian early years educational institutions through 19 qualitative interviews. With narratives of experience as the main theoretical and analytical vantage point, their negotiations of positioning towards the Norwegian educational practice are explored in the narrative worlds they construct, in the interactional context of the interview and in the wider socio-cultural contexts. While questioning, challenging and deliberating the observed practice through a variety of narrative formats and discursive means, their positions are shown to range from open contest to variable forms of ambivalence and acceptance, subject to thematic variation. The study thus provides a platform for the interviewed parents to orchestrate unique situated voices engaged in a discursive process of reflection on their children's new educational reality.

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## 1. Introduction

Parents' involvement in their children's learning has received growing scholarly attention in the last few years. Consistently linked to student achievement (see Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005), it is seen as "a shared aspiration and goal" in educational policy and practice (Harris & Goodall, 2008, p. 278). A multidimensional concept with variable meanings across cultures (Huntsinger & Jose, 2009), parental involvement has been explored in terms of, for example, home-school communication and cooperation (Kjaerbeck, 2008; Kotthoff, 2015; Bubikova-Moan, 2017a), teachers' perceptions of home-based support (Huss-Keeler, 1997; Kim, 2009) and parental perceptions of educational practice and support (Rogers & Brefeld, 2015).

Scholarship focusing specifically on parental voices in ethnolinguistically diverse communities shows that parents often value their children's schooling and engage in school-related and non-school-related activities that may benefit their children's language and literacy development (Compton-Lilly, 2007, 2012; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Rogers, 2002; Roy & Roxas, 2011). Parental beliefs about children's language development have been, however, shown to vary across cultures (Aukrust, 2001). In the face of rapid technological change, families also find creative ways to draw on their literacy repertoires and include digital resources to connect,

share and learn across generations (Delgado-Gaitan, 2012). Furthermore, rather than relying solely on the extended family for counsel on their children's education, multilingual families may consider varied community opinions in their decisions (Wesely, 2016). Careful consideration of family cultural capital and their experience of early learning in a resettlement context has been called for (Yahya, 2015).

Despite these empirical insights, non-mainstream migrant families often remain foregrounded in terms of binaries such as "strength and deficits", "literate and illiterate" or "match and mismatch" between the home and pre/school cultures of learning (Compton-Lilly, Rogers, & Lewis, 2012, p. 33). With middle-class norms as the assumed benchmark for home-school partnerships, these families often remain an untapped resource for schools (Crozier & Davies, 2007). Given a rapidly growing migrant population worldwide (United Nations, 2016) and the accompanying changes in the ethnic composition of preschool and school classrooms in receiving countries, the need to pay continued empirical attention to resituated families' "funds of knowledge" (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) as a springboard to successful home-school partnerships remains high.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to this growing body of research through interviews with Polish migrants, parenting pre-schoolers and school-goers (3–8 years) in Norway. The focal analytical interest is on how they reflect on and negotiate their children's learning in the resettlement context. Drawing on the notion of positioning in narrative discourse (Bamberg, 1997), I explore how

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the interviewed parents negotiate their positions in the situated micro-context of the story worlds they construct, the interactional dynamics of the interview and the wider socio-cultural discursive context in which their narrative accounts are embedded.

To contextualize the study, I first outline the shifting currents of educational practice and discourse in today's multicultural Norway, focusing particularly on the early years. This is followed by an explication of my theoretical and methodological choices, including existing empirical knowledge on the Polish community in Norway. I then provide a broad overview of my findings as well as a detailed analysis of selected representative excerpts of data. In a summarizing discussion, I underscore the multiple ways in which the study may be seen as a platform for the participants' discursive reflection on their new social reality, their parenting practices in the resettlement context and their children's learning against the backdrop of a broader discursive change.

## 2. Early years education in the multilingual Norway

In the welfare societies of Northern Europe, including Norway, childhood has long been conceptualized as an essential stage of life during which each individual child has a right to unfold and explore the world on his/her own terms (Wagner & Einarsdottir, 2006). Constituted as a subject, the "participating child" is entitled to shape his/her own life as a valued member of the wider community that respects his/her various needs and legislative rights (Thuen, 2008). Along with the Nordic welfare model, child-centredness is pivotal for understanding how it is to grow up in contemporary Nordic societies (Kristjansson, 2006).

The Nordic discourse on children and childhood resonates with the traditional epistemology of early years education in Norway where children's rights, learning through play and caring child-adult partnerships remain focal (Bae, 2009; Wagner & Einarsdottir, 2006). Conceptualized here as a continuum covering both education before the compulsory school age, in Norway set at six, and the early grades in school, values such as curiosity, solidarity, democracy, independence, individuality and respect for difference are considered key at the national curricular level (Ministry of Education and Research, 2006a, 2006b). With play-based learning as particularly prominent in preschool pedagogy as well as in the transitional period of initial school training, ample empirical evidence has been generated on, for example, how peer-play in early childhood may contribute to longitudinal language-developmental gains for both first and second language learners (Aukrust, 2004), the role of outdoor play in development (Lundhaug & Neegaard, 2013) and the prevalence and forms of play in transitional first grade literacy classes (Hagtvet, 2003) and L2 classes in early school grades (Bezemer, Kroon, Pastoor, Ryen, & Wold, 2004).

However deeply entrenched, the collective allegiance to the national and local elements in what constitutes a *good Norwegian childhood* is increasingly challenged by globalization and multiculturalism (Strand, 2006). Within only four decades, the Norwegian society has made a leap from being largely ethnically homogeneous to becoming highly diverse. Currently, 15% of Norway's population have an immigrant background; in the Norwegian capital, Oslo, the numbers go up to 30% (Statistics Norway, 2015). This is reflected in the increasingly multi-ethnic profile of Norwegian preschools and schools, which is accompanied by a growing interest among policy-makers and practitioners in issues that arise from these changes. Enveloped in an increasingly polarized public and political discourse on Norway as a multicultural society (Andersson, 2012), the differential achievement of language minority children vis-à-vis their ethnic Norwegian peers across different educational levels has garnered much attention. Policy initiatives aimed at levelling

out these differences proliferate (see e.g. Ministry of Education and Research, 2010).

Not surprisingly, in this context, education in early childhood is increasingly promoted as a key policy area, foundational for language minority children's later educational attainment through early educational interventions as well as more systematic and rigorous L2 skills development and monitoring (Bubikova-Moan, 2017b). A closer alignment with the global educational accountability discourse (Ball, 2012) is also reflected at the national curricular level, and its variable implementation has become subject to much current debate in Norway (e.g. Elstad, 2009; Løvlie, 2005). Looking at early years education as a Bourdieian field of practice and a discursive space in which symbolic values continue to be re-assigned and re-circulated in a regulated way (Heller, 2008, p. 50), its Norwegian variant is clearly in a state of internal negotiation and change.

## 3. The theoretical and analytical approach

In this study, the main theoretical and analytical interest is in narratives constructed by Polish migrant parents on their children's encounters with Norwegian educational practice in the early years. In the vast research literature on narrative, the seminal works of Labov and Waletzky (1967) and Labov (1972) are regarded as establishing an analytical canon for the structural analysis of narrative as a distinct form of discourse to report on and evaluate past events.<sup>1</sup> For more than a decade, debates on canonical versus non-canonical storytelling, also referred to as a move from "big" to "small" stories (Bamberg, 2006; Georgakopoulou, 2006, 2007), have generated much empirical work that looks beyond structurally accomplished stories relating past experience and towards more fragmentary accounts of past, present and future events (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Ochs & Capps, 2001). In addition to narrative formats, the traditional divides between data elicited in natural conversational contexts and research interviews have come under much scrutiny, with empirical voices erasing clear-cut boundaries, questioning dichotomies in participant roles and emphasizing context as essential in understanding how identities and positions are orchestrated in a variety of narrative occasions (De Fina & Perrino, 2011).

In line with recent theorizing (Baynham, 2000; De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008), the narrative accounts in the present study are viewed as a form of social practice, firmly rooted in their interactional contexts and displaying socio-historical specificity. This implies that in addition to their local occasioning, narratives are here understood as replete with common sense, everyday theories that build on shared ideologies and presuppositions, and provide an interpretative context for individual social action (Compton-Lilly, 2007; De Fina & King, 2011). Variably referred to as "figured worlds" (Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte, & Cain, 1998) or "cultural models" (Gee, 2012), they do not imply a static condition. Much like Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus, these dispositions are both structuring but also constituted in practice. Individuals may adopt agentive positions in their figured worlds, contest dominant discourses and construct alternative counter-narratives (Compton-Lilly, 2007; Rogers & Brefeld, 2015; Simpson, 2011). Orchestrating positions indirectly through story characters, and/or narrative events (Poveda, 2004), narratives can be seen as discursive sites *par excellence* for the negotiation of social reality (De Fina & King, 2011).

<sup>1</sup> Labov's/Labov and Waletzky's classic units of narrative analysis include: (1) abstract – how does the story begin? (2) orientation – who/what does the story involve and where/when does it occur? (3) complicating action – then what happens? (4) resolution – what finally happened? (5) evaluation – so what? and (6) coda – what does it all mean? (signals the end of narration).

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