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Author(s): Karlsson, Marie; Perälä-Littunen, Satu

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Marie Karlsson & Satu Perälä-Littunen

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EDITORIAL

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Managing the gap – policy and practice of parents in child care and education

Families, preschools and schools are the three major societal institutions involved in the care, fostering and education of children in the Nordic countries. In fact, although the family is often seen as the most natural and important part of children's lives, and parents (custodians) are obliged by law to see to their care and education, these functions are to a large extent performed outside of the homes of children by people other than their parents. Compared to other parts of the world, parents in the Nordic countries thus share the task of childcare, and thereby their children's upbringing, with professionals in preschools/schools (Ellingsaeter & Leira, 2006). Thereby, children are also subject to processes of both familialization and institutionalization (Edwards & Alldred, 2000) as they are supervised, cared for and educated by both parents and professionals in a variety of settings. The shared responsibility for practices of cultural reproduction also force parents and professionals to cooperate, and to dependent on each other, for the benefit of children's learning and development. This special issue underscores, in accordance with much other research on parental–professional cooperation, that this cooperation is complex, as families (as private institutions) and preschools and schools (as public institutions) are founded on different logics, and fill very different functions in the lives of human beings, institutions and societies.

The saying that *the children are our future* presumably means quite different things for families, schools and societies, respectively. Knowing this, it is also quite understandable why the times, spaces and places of childhood have increasingly become affairs of the state, in terms of protecting children from both the dangers of unsupervised freedom and bad influences from families while they are being moulded into self-governing individuals who are expected to contribute to society upon reaching adulthood (Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2001). The increased focus on cooperation between families and preschools/schools, which is also visible in national and local policy in the Nordic countries, makes relevant the management of a gap between family and public institutions engaged in child socialization. What constitutes this gap and how to bridge it are highly important questions for educational research in terms of there being a need to shed more light on a relationship that constitutes the very foundation of cultural reproduction within and between nation states.

While much research on relations between parents and preschools/schools has theorized and conceptualized the characteristics of these relations as a shared responsibility for children (e.g. Böök & Perälä-Littunen, 2015), the field is also dominated by studies that focus on the beneficial outcomes of such cooperation in terms of the development and academic achievement of children (e.g. Epstein, 1995; Wilder, 2014). However, more critical research has shown that the forms for cooperation promoted by public institutions, while being constructive for certain groups of parents, in fact exclude others (e.g. Linde Matthiesen, 2016; Vincent, Ball, & Kemp, 2004). Moreover, as marketization and privatization of child care and education has led parents to be more acutely positioned as consumers, and professionals as producers, of childcare and education, these relations and forms of cooperation are changing (Bunar, 2010; Karlsson, Löfdahl, & Pérez Prieto, 2013). However, regardless of the forms and contents of relationships between families and preschools/schools, they are still formed by needs of nation states and families to manage the gap between the private and public spheres of society.

This special issue presents seven papers discussing research on relations between parents and preschools/schools in Norway, Iceland and Sweden from a broad range of perspectives. The contributions, although approaching the current issue from within different theoretical and methodological frameworks, all emphasize the importance of furthering our understanding of the tensions built into the policies and practices of shared responsibility for the care and education of children. Three of the seven papers take a broad grip on parental involvement in preschools/schools in Sweden, Norway and Iceland. Two papers report studies focusing on local implementations of strategies to facilitate the cooperation between parents and educational institutions. The last two papers focus on communications between parents and school, and how parental involvement can be facilitated or hindered by how information about what happens in school is made more or less available to parents.

General tendencies regarding the relations between parents and preschool/school are focused on in the first three papers. Persson and Tallberg

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Broman present an analysis of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Sweden as a historical place located in time and space, and consider its significance for how professionals' assignment in general, and parental cooperation in particular, are positioned in three periods; the beginning of the 20th century, the late 1960s and 1970s, and today. The results from two interview/questionnaire studies on preschool teachers' and student preschool teachers' views on their professional assignment, conducted 20 years apart, are discussed in relation to these three historical places of ECEC. The results show that although the ideology of ECEC has changed over time, from a focus on child care and parent education to a focus on learning and parental involvement, there is a consistency in that students and professionals view safety, caring and security as the most important tasks in their assignments as preschool teachers. And although parents' rights to influence the care and education of their children have become more strongly regulated in national policy on ECEC, this ideology of shared responsibility between parents and professionals is not necessarily seen by preschool staff as an important dimension of their preschool practice.

Baeck's paper addresses the concept of academic socialization and discusses this in relation to research on parental involvement and school performance in Norway and elsewhere. Baeck argues that formalized settings for parental involvement in school may actually increase social inequality in education, as they tend to attract educated middle-class parents and fail to engage less resourceful parents. Moreover, Baeck proclaims that there is a kind of symbolic violence inherent in the ways schools presuppose a specific form of academic socialization, which is made evident through promotions of certain standards, rewards for certain achievements, and the acceptance of certain social conventions. All parents are thus expected to get involved in their children's academic life through a format designed to meet the expectations and needs of highly educated middle-class parents. One step towards a solution to this problem is, instead of trying to fit all parents into the moulds of the educated middle-class, to problematize the education system as such and discuss why it has failed to motivate and create good learning environments for all students, and what has to change in order to meet the required level of social responsibility and engage more parents in education.

Jónsdóttir, Björnsdóttir and Baeck focus on the factors influencing parents' satisfaction with compulsory schools in Iceland, and the impact of satisfaction/dissatisfaction on social equity in education. Results from an online questionnaire administered to approximately 2,000 parents with children in 20 compulsory schools showed that while the majority of parent were satisfied, parents of children with special needs that were not being met by the school, as well as single mothers, constituted groups that expressed higher levels of dissatisfaction. Children's wellbeing and development was the aspect that had the strongest influence on parents' levels of satisfaction/dissatisfaction, followed by a sense of being able to influence the school's decisions and/or visions for the future. Less educated single mothers with children in need of special support that was not provided by the schools were overrepresented in the group of dissatisfied parents as a sign of inequality in education. The authors argue that the results of their study support previous findings in other national contexts, pointing out that gender, social status, and the educational level and cultural values of parents impact the rationale and practice of parental involvement in schools in Iceland. The image of the education system in Iceland and other Nordic countries as upholding values of quality and equality may, according to the authors, be the very reason why the question of equity is being downplayed in the practice of education. There is thus a need to discuss and encourage different forms or parental involvement in school in order to give all parents a voice.

Two papers in this special issue focus on local implementations of strategies to facilitate cooperation between parents and preschool/school. Helgoy and Homme present a qualitative case study focusing on how seven lower-secondary schools in Norway work to improve parent–school collaboration, and on the different governing strategies used in policy implementations. Data were collected from municipal and school policy documents, and from semi-structured interviews with representatives for the county governors, municipality school administration, head teachers, teachers and parents. An analysis conducted from within a theoretical framework, combining elements from theories on frontline work with theories on governing principles of New Public Management (NPM) and New Public Service (NPS), showed a strong connection between the municipal and local levels of policy making. The schools in which an NPS steering strategy was reproduced formed a linear relationship with parents, made use of their knowledge, invited them to dialogue and sought mutually agreed solutions. The schools reproducing an NPM-serving strategy formed a non-linear relationship with parents, perceived them as having bad attitudes towards the school, excluded them from making decisions on collaboration, and aimed to change their behaviour by making participation in collaboration activities obligatory. The results imply that the different strategies used to improve parent–school collaborations make visible different views on

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what motivates parents to get involved in their children's education. These different views on parents, either as a resource or as reluctant to participate, impact the strategies used by frontline workers trying to implement policies on parent–school collaboration.

Markström and Simonsson's paper presents results from a qualitative study of preschool teachers' perceptions of the interaction between parents and professionals in relation to children's introduction to preschool. The seven preschools participating in the study had all changed their means of organizing the introduction to preschool. Data were collected from seven focus group interviews with preschool teacher teams of two or three participants with extensive and recent experience of introducing new children to preschool. A discourse analysis focused on key themes that showed dominant and deviant statements that were built around different dimensions and discourses based on the teachers' perceptions of interaction with parents during preschool introduction. Results show that the teachers included in this study had changed their expectations and strategies regarding how to meet and introduce a new child and her/his parents to preschool. The authors conceptualize this change in the teachers' approach to and perceptions of parents' role in preschool as a movement from a parent-passive to a parent-active introduction strategy, Moreover, this new introduction strategy creates expectations regarding how parents should interact with preschools. Within the parent-active introduction strategy, the 'ideal parent' is expected to get involved in preschool in ways that follow the agenda offered by the preschool teachers. The results show that the teachers seem to draw on both old and new discourses on parental involvement. On the one hand, they want the parents to take a more active part in the everyday life of preschools; on the other, the teachers construct new boundaries on how far this active form of parental involvement should be taken.

How parental involvement in school can be facilitated or hindered by channels of information between home and school is focused on in two papers. Gu presents a study focusing on school websites as a tool for parental involvement, and focuses on what information for parental use is presented, and how. The websites of 12 K-9 schools located in four municipalities were analysed within a theoretical framework of components in parental involvement. The analysis accounted for both content and different forms for how the content corresponded with a theoretical model on six components of parental involvement, while specific website evaluation metrics were applied as units of analysis of interactivity, accessibility and usability. Results show that although many schools provided some degree of information about school management, local policies, student health care and the weekly lunch menu, information on other components related to parental involvement, such as parenting, volunteering, learning at home, involvement in the decision making process, curricula, programmes, and students' work and progression were sparse or lacking. Moreover, results show that the websites, with a few exceptions, applied a one-way-communication model to reach out to parents. The paper argues that the technology for supporting parental involvement through websites has potential and could be better utilized in order to involve more parents in two-way-communication in order to increase transparency and understanding in a visual and non-verbal environment that is of particular importance in processes of decision-making.

Löfgren and Löfgren show how parents are indirectly involved in school through the ways in which they perceive and interpret the meaning and value of grades given to their children. This paper investigates Swedish sixth-grade pupils' perspectives on educational resilience through an analysis of how they position themselves in relation to their parents' expectations on academic achievement and the school's grading practice. The data were collected through 91 group interviews with pupils shortly after they had taken a national test, and a year later when they had received their grades. A narrative positioning analysis of three pupil's stories show different expressions of resilience emerging from their stories of being graded, and of their parents' expectations on their schoolwork. In the stories, educational resilience becomes a matter of family expectations, pleasing yourself and others, and adapting to grading systems. The results show that parental views on the pupils' grades and on grades in general become important aspects of how pupils evaluate their own opportunities to learn and develop in school. Parental views on school and grades often refer to their own school experiences and to other grading systems. Following this, the authors argue that changes in grading practices may result in confusion among parents concerning what different types of grades actually represent. Pupils' storied experiences of manoeuvring expectations about school performance, from both school and parents, point to an importance of dialogue between schools and parents about the function and value of grades.

These seven papers address the topic of relations between parents and preschool/school by targeting and discussing them as part of processes and contexts more or less outside of the control of parents and professionals. They show how policies and practices designed to facilitate parental involvement in preschools/schools are permeated with

ideas and norms about what constitutes a normal child, family, parent or teacher – ideas that have taken shape over long periods of time. Moreover, several papers point out the importance of trying different forms of, and channels for, parental involvement in order to invite and engage different groups of parents. And, last but not least, the targets for cooperation are the children, whose perspective, presented in the last paper, shows that parental involvement in education can be problematic if parents lack sufficient knowledge about the norms, values and routines guiding it.

To sum up, if we consider cooperation between families and preschools/schools to be important, we must continue to research the policies and practices shaping and reshaping this cooperation in both local and global contexts. To date, most research on parental involvement in childcare and education has targeted one institution at a time, preschool or school – this special issue included. This can be understood as a sign of this field of research taking its points of departure from the perspectives, interests and needs of the institutions and their professionals, and not of the communities, families, parents and children. Maybe we need to adjust our camera lenses, zoom out and dim the view of what we expect to see in order to make room for other perspectives and understandings of institutionalized practices of cultural reproduction within and between societal institutions.

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Marie Karlsson
Department of Education, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden
http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6830-7488

Satu Perälä-Littunen
Faculty of Education and Psychology, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland
satu.perala-littunen@jyu.fi
http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4096-0578

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