

Parents as learning facilitators - The institutionalisation of parenthood in learning-centred collaboration between early childhood professionals and parents

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This paper examines the implications of various learning-centred initiatives for the relationship between early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions and families in Denmark. Since the 1990s, promoting early learning has been a key objective for Danish ECEC institutions, reshaping the Danish social pedagogy tradition. Recently, early learning initiatives have become part of the collaboration with parents on so-called home learning. Based on ethnographic studies of such collaboration, I argue that the expansion of dominant early learning agendas from ECEC to families results in an institutionalisation of parenthood. The analysis shows that parents are expected to embrace a learning agenda promoted by ECEC professionals. They are appointed as learning facilitators who must strive to support early learning at home and improve their parenting skills. Furthermore, parents' engagement in early learning is intertwined with the practical organisation of family life and with ideals of a good family and a good childhood.

Keywords: Early childhood, collaboration between daycare professionals and parents, early learning programmes, home learning, ethnography

Introduction

This paper explores changing relationships between parents and early childhood professionals in light of an increased focus on early learning in Danish early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions. Danish ECEC institutions have a long tradition for collaboration with parents. This tradition is embedded in a Danish and Nordic social pedagogy tradition, characterised by a child-centred approach with a strong focus on children's play and social relations (Gulløv, 2012; Karila, 2012; Kjørholt, 2013). However, since the 1990s, this tradition has been reshaped by an increased political interest in early learning. Various policy initiatives and legislative frameworks have

promoted a greater focus on educational content within Danish ECEC (Bach et al., 2020; Dannesboe & Kjær, 2021; Dannesboe et al., 2021). Accordingly, ECEC institutions are required to support learning environments and create learning opportunities for all children (Juhl, 2018).

The rise of a learning agenda in Denmark corresponds with a shift from a focus on children's care and socialisation to learning in other Nordic countries, as well as international discourses on early learning and parental involvement (e.g., Alexiadou et al., 2022). For instance, in its *Starting Strong* publication series, the OECD highlights parents as important 'partners' for ECEC services and states that ECEC services can help families develop home learning environments (Schmidt & Alasuutari, 2023). In Denmark, recent changes in the legal framework governing the ECEC sector have stressed the significance of parents for children's development and learning, as well as the importance of a strong collaboration between ECEC and parents (The Danish Evaluation Institute 2016; Ministry of Children and Social Affairs 2017). Today, the objectives of strengthening learning communities and increasing parental involvement in ECEC seem to have merged, with ECEC institutions assigned the task of improving children's home learning environments while strengthening their collaboration with parents (Ministry of Social Affairs 2018). ECEC professionals are now expected to guide parents with regard to their children's learning and development, helping them create appropriate learning environments at home. In this paper, I explore how collaboration with parents on home learning intertwines with existing collaborative practices in Danish ECEC institutions. What are the implications of this collaboration on home learning for the relationship between ECEC professionals and parents? How does this new focus on early learning alter their respective roles and responsibilities? Based on ethnographic studies of specific learning programmes and parental involvement, I argue that the growing dominance of a learning agenda within Danish ECEC institutions extends to family settings, appointing parents as learning facilitators for their children, and leads to an institutionalisation of parenthood.

Parents and home-learning

Existing research on parental involvement in early learning within ECEC has emphasised that different ECEC curricula affect how the role of parents is perceived. Countries where a social pedagogy tradition dominates, such as the Nordic countries, tend to promote a form of parental involvement where parents are guided more broadly and have democratic rights. Meanwhile, ECEC institutions in Anglosphere countries, where the curriculum is often primarily focused on children's learning outcomes, usually involve parents to support children's achievement of early learning objectives and ensure their readiness for school (Janssen & Vandenbroeck, 2018).

Most research on ECEC and home learning builds on studies conducted in Anglosphere countries. This research is dominated by quantitative studies measuring the outcomes of interventions or programmes promoting home learning (Westerling et al., forthcoming). Such interventions and programmes are often designed to enhance children's school readiness by focusing on literacy and numeracy, providing parents with tasks to do at home with their children and instructions on how to engage in home learning activities (see e.g., Hindman & Wasik, 2010; Lin et al., 2019; Ma et al., 2014; Marti et al., 2018). However, with their focus on learning outcomes, these studies provide scant knowledge as to how the collaboration between parents and ECEC professionals on interventions or programmes takes place, how the collaboration is perceived by those involved, or how home learning tasks are embedded in everyday life in ECEC and families and entangled with existing relations between ECEC professionals and parents (see also Dannesboe et al., 2021; Westerling et al., forthcoming).

To better understand how collaboration on early learning and home learning takes place in everyday life as part of existing collaboration, I draw inspiration from studies within a Danish context focusing on collaboration in a broader sense. These studies have shown that, until recently, ECEC professionals' collaboration with parents has first and foremost focused on children's well-being and social skills (Bach et al., 2020; Høystrup, 2018; Schmidt, 2017). Relationships between ECEC professionals and parents are established and negotiated through daily encounters and formal collaboration. Building trustful relations with parents while balancing professional assessments of children are central issues for ECEC professionals (Høystrup, 2018; Houmøller, 2018; Juhl, 2021; Marschall & Munck, 2021). With a stronger focus on the role of parents, it becomes

paramount to provide guidance on parenting issues and child development (e.g., Gulløv, 2018; Dannesboe et al., 2018; Schmidt, 2017).

Theoretical framework

To address changing relationships between parents and ECEC institutions, I draw on anthropological and sociological perspectives on institutions and parenting. ECEC centres are often described as formative institutions with certain institutional norms guiding the interactions between children and childcare professionals (Gulløv, 2003). In this sense, we can understand institutions as particular forms of routinised social practice, taken for granted by those involved and guided by norms and rules (cf. Jenkins, 1996; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). I argue that, if we are to understand collaborative practices with parents, we must address how the collaboration is embedded in the institutional practices and logics of ECEC. Thus, I explore how institutionalised and taken for granted ways of working with learning influence collaborative practices among parents and ECEC professionals in ways that institutionalise parenthood and target parents as objects for learning initiatives.

To analyse the expectations towards parents and the respective roles of ECEC professionals and parents, I also draw inspiration from family studies focusing on parenthood and parenting. Such studies have argued that parenthood and parenting norms and strategies are embedded in social, cultural and historical conditions (e.g., Faircloth, 2014; Sparrman et al., 2016). Parenthood and parenting are influenced by dominant childhood ideals emphasising the crucial role of parents for their children's upbringing (Faircloth, 2014). In contemporary welfare state societies, such as Denmark, with an extensive ECEC sector, families and welfare institutions are entangled through shared work and a common concern for children's development and future possibilities (Lind et al., 2016; Dannesboe et al., 2018). Parenthood and parenting are influenced by welfare state institutions and experts, and parents' social background and living conditions shape their engagement in childcare arrangements and education (Sparrman et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2014; Lareau, 2003).

To better understand the efforts of parents and ECEC professionals in terms of early learning, I draw on the sociologist Anette Lareau's (2003) work on concerted cultivation, as well as parenting culture studies. Lareau describes concerted cultivation as parents'

careful and comprehensive efforts to stimulate children's development and maximise their potential (Lareau, 2003). Children are to be intensely cultivated by adults. To understand the Danish case, cultivation can be understood as a process involving not only parents, but also ECEC professionals. Parents and professionals engage in a shared effort to cultivate children's development (Bach et al., 2020; Dannesboe et al., 2018). Whereas Lareau describes concerted cultivation as a middle-class childrearing strategy, other scholars have stressed the normalisation of concerted cultivation, emphasising how middle-class ideals regarding childrearing have spread to other segments of society (Dannesboe et al., 2018; Vincent, 2017). Concerted cultivation can be seen in light of contemporary parenting ideals that stress parenting as a labour-intensive emotional, educational and practical endeavour. This kind of child-centred parenthood is increasingly associated with particular parental abilities and skills, and with a deterministic view of parenting that pinpoints the crucial role parents play in their children's development (Lee et al., 2014; Faircloth, 2014; Furedi, 2002). Parental determinism gives rise to an understanding of parents as in need of expert guidance to become better parents and minimise the risk of issues arising in children's development (Lee, 2014).

Even though parenting culture studies have primarily examined Anglo-American neoliberal contexts, the discourses they have identified on intensive parenting, expert guidance and risk assessment of children and parents are also part of the Danish welfare state (Dannesboe et al., 2018; Bach et al 2020). With a comprehensive ECEC sector, the Danish welfare state has appointed ECEC institutions with the task of guiding, supporting and monitoring parents in an effort to prevent some children falling behind. Drawing inspiration from parenting culture studies allows me to analyse the broader implications of collaboration on early learning, including how ECEC professionals offer guidance on early learning to parents, how notions of what constitutes proper parenting are embedded in such guidance, and the extent to which parents comply with this guidance and the tasks they are assigned to support early learning.

Ethnographic studies of learning programmes and collaboration

The paper draws on empirical data from two ethnographic studies of the collaboration between Danish ECEC institutions and parents on learning initiatives for children, conducted 2018–2022¹. Both studies followed two specific learning programmes integrated in everyday life at participating ECEC institutions to promote children's learning. Both programmes included collaboration with parents. One of the learning programmes, *the learning group programme*, was developed by the local municipal authority with the aim of enhancing young children's learning, strengthening collaboration with parents and developing a reflexive and systematic pedagogical practice. The learning group programme was organised as learning activities focused on a specific topic for a small group of children (aged between 10 months and 6 years) for a period of 4–8 weeks. Examples of topics include literacy and language, maths, music and movement, fantasy, senses and social relations. As part of their work, the ECEC professionals regularly informed parents about the learning process, occasionally assigning them small tasks, and organised a meeting with parents in each learning group to assess the process at the end of the programme (see also Dannesboe et al., 2021).

The second learning programme, *the READ programme*, was offered by the municipality with the aim of improving all children's language skills and early literacy before starting school. The programme was introduced in nurseries with children aged 0–3 and included a selection of books for use at the ECEC institutions and at home, as well as instructions for parents. These instructions guided parents in what they should do before, during and after reading a book – in particular, how to talk to their children about pictures and words. The ECEC professionals decided which book each family should read at home during the following week. The books were also read at the ECEC institution.

To examine how these learning programmes became part of daily life at ECEC institutions and explore the collaboration with parents, both studies used an ethnographic approach. Three ECEC institutions participated. In each case, this involved participant observations focusing on the learning programme's implementation at the ECEC institution, as well as the professionals' informal and formal meetings with parents

¹ Both projects were conducted in collaboration with Associate Professor Pernille Juhl and Associate Professor Allan Westerling, both Roskilde University.

regarding the specific learning initiatives. Across the two studies, interviews were conducted with 8 ECEC professionals and 16 parents, as well as 2 ECEC managers. Parents whose children participated in the learning programmes were included in the studies. The majority of participating parents can be classified as middle class based on their educational and occupational status. Consideration was given to ethical issues throughout the research process, complying with GDPR and ethical standards concerning, for instance, informed consent and anonymity. All names mentioned in this paper are pseudonyms.

Collaborating with parents on early learning

With their focus on early learning, the programmes expanded collaboration with parents by including prescribed and standardised ways for ECEC professionals to work with parents that supplemented existing practices (see also Westerling & Juhl, 2021). Firstly, the focus of collaboration changed, with less focus on the children's social relations and competences, which otherwise often dominate ECEC professionals' informal and formal collaboration with parents (cf. Bach et al., 2020; Dannesboe et al., 2018). Instead, the work with learning programmes encouraged a focus on the learning content and the children's progress. In their collaboration with parents, the professionals would outline learning aims, inform about learning activities and children's learning outcomes. Even though the ECEC professionals also reflected upon the participating children's social relations and social competences, this information was usually not passed on to the parents. The prescribed ways of involving parents institutionalised new ways of distributing certain kinds of knowledge about learning, promoting learning as something well defined in the form of specific learning goals. This rather narrow way of thinking about learning presented to parents in the learning programmes differed from ECEC professionals' general approach to learning, where learning is embedded in everyday situations and concerns children's development of social and academic competences (see also Dannesboe et al., 2021).

Secondly, the collaboration with parents was expanded with new information, tasks and meetings. For instance, in the learning group programme, the professionals sent parents short messages about ongoing learning activities, encouraging them to talk to their children about the activities and to try some of the activities themselves (e.g., to read a

story or sing a song at home that had been part of a learning group activity). In the READ programme, parents received books and instructions on how to use them at home. In this sense, the collaboration with parents on early learning extended the logics, objectives and practices of ECEC to family settings through the organisation of learning programmes that include home-based activities and require the active involvement of parents. As such, the work with learning programmes and parental involvement cannot be separated.

Helping parents to help their child

Overall, the ECEC professionals were preoccupied with how they could get parents to contribute to the learning programmes introduced by the ECEC institutions. In an interview with a local ECEC manager, she explained her thoughts about involving parents in the institution's work with learning groups:

It can be a photo [of learning activities in the learning group] or a pine cone that children and ECEC professionals found in the forest during learning group activities that we send home to the parents, because, well, it will start a conversation about what their children have done at kindergarten that day. And I think it is good if things merge together – ECEC and parents. [...] so they, the parents, can support some of the things we do with their children and what we would like children to learn in daycare. And they, the parents, can be supportive at home too, so that they can develop a home learning environment [...]. We should do more here, so we can help them to help their child in developing academic and social skills, and social relations too.

(Interview with local ECEC manager)

The aim of the learning programmes is to enhance children's learning; however, as this quote illustrates, this implies parents' active involvement and support. This was also a subject of internal discussions among the ECEC professionals. For instance, at a meeting where ECEC professionals and the local manager were planning how to introduce the READ programme to parents. During the meeting, they talked less about how they would

use the READ materials and books with the children in ECEC; instead, they were preoccupied with how to engage the parents:

In the end, what is most important is that we can see a sign that parents are reading with their children at home [...]. It is not so much about what the children think about the books, but how we can get parents motivated. [...] We would like if some of the things we do here [reading books] were also done at home.

(Meeting with ECEC professionals and local manager)

Motivating parents to engage in programme activities was also an issue in the learning group programme. Here, the ECEC professionals believed that sharing their reflections on their work with early learning at the assessment meeting with parents at the end of the learning group programme could inspire parents' engagement in learning tasks with their children by making them more aware of their children's daily lives in ECEC and of the work performed by ECEC professionals. One ECEC professional explained:

If parents get involved in their children's lives, talking to them [about the learning group activities], and they hear about our pedagogical reflections, it might trigger something in them too [...]. When they hear one of us talk about how we think at the assessment meeting, it might plant some seeds in them.

(Interview with ECEC professional)

Sharing knowledge is a way to integrate people in institutions (cf. Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Thus, by sharing knowledge about their work, the ECEC professionals tried to bring parents closer to the ECEC institutions. The above examples suggest that sharing knowledge with parents has a dual purpose. Firstly, by presenting their work, ECEC professionals make parents aware of the pedagogical reflections in ECEC. Thus, it is a way for the professionals to emphasise their professional role as experts on pedagogy and learning. Secondly, motivating or inspiring parents to engage in learning activities at home becomes a tool to integrate parents in an already institutionalised way of working

with learning. As the manager in the first example explained, it would help parents to be supportive of the institution. The ECEC manager and professionals' statements seem to build on the idea that parents could and would develop their parenting practices and mould their ways of being a parent according to the professionals' distribution of knowledge and taken for granted institutional ways of working (cf. Jenkins, 1996). As experts, ECEC professionals contribute to an institutionalisation of parenthood in which parents are expected to develop their parenting practices by mirroring the professionals' learning aims and strategies. In this sense, the ECEC professionals contribute to the promotion of an ECEC-sensitive parenting style, where parents are expected to support the ECEC institution's learning agenda and willingly comply with the priorities identified by ECEC professionals as important for children's wellbeing and development.

Overall, this illustrates that parents are targeted as objects for ECEC professionals' pedagogical work (see also Dannesboe et al., 2018). The sociologist Ellie Lee has argued that parents are targets of advice in distinct ways (2014:51). Targeting parents to ensure proper parenting was part of the birth of the welfare state. Since then, shifting ideas of expert-guided parenthood, often influenced by psychology, have influenced western societies (Lee, 2014; Rose 1990). However, as the examples above suggest, the field of advice has been expanded to include the home learning environment. Consequently, parents are targeted as learning facilitators for their children at home, expected to adopt the learning ideals, principles and practices that characterise Danish ECEC and integrate them within family life. Targeting parents illustrates how parents are not entrusted with the upbringing of their children on their own. On the one hand, parents are identified as important contributors to their children's learning at home. They are seen as a resource for promoting children's learning, with the time and ability to engage in learning activities with their children at home. On the other hand, parents are seen as a risk factor with a potentially negative impact on their children's upbringing and development (cf. Lee et al., 2014). They are considered unable to properly support their children's learning and development on their own – and thus in need of expert advice. With help and advice from ECEC professionals, parents are expected to develop so-called home learning environments, hereby contributing to the overall goal of enhancing children's learning within ECEC.

READING books at home: family time vs language training

The aim of the READ programme is to help parents support their children's development of language skills so they will become (better) future readers and to prevent learning inequality (municipal webpage). In this sense, sending books to family homes is a way of enhancing parents' awareness of the importance of reading books for their children's language development and of reaching out to those parents who do not already read to their children. The participating parents were aware of key municipality and ECEC policies on children's literacy and the strong focus on language and reading. For instance, one father told us:

I highly agree that it is a really good idea to get all parents to read to their children, because it is really important if they are to become good readers later on. We have been told that very clearly, which I think is good.

(Elisabeth's father)

However, when asked about their reading practices at the start of the READ programme, most parents stated that they already regularly read books with their children. As a mother described, reading was "a good way of spending time together with my children", adding that she did not give much thought to her children's learning. This corresponds with other parents, who referred to reading situations as moments of intergenerational togetherness, and as a 'cosy' escape from the hustle and bustle of everyday family life. In Denmark, cosiness, *hygge*, is a dominant cultural trope and something that we Danes strive for in our social life, including family life (Linnet, 2011). When the parents talked about reading and cosiness in relation to family life, they were often referring to existing family routines and everyday practices. In these families, the READ project became part of a steady rhythm of family life. As described by one mother:

My child was very preoccupied with it [the book from the READ project] and it was convenient for us to just read it as a bedtime story instead of one of the other ones she normally has (...). It meant that we read the same book every evening instead of her being allowed to

choose. But she sometimes picks the same book several days in a row anyway.

(Interview with mother)

For those families for whom it was easy to integrate the READ project in their daily life, as in the example above, the READ books usually became part of existing bedtime reading practices. The same mother stated that participating in the READ project did not require major changes to their existing practice, continuing:

Like, it didn't interfere with our rhythm. I mean, I could imagine that if they said 'You have to watch this film for an hour every day' or 'You have to eat cucumber every day for a week', or, you know, if it was something that we don't normally do, then it would have an impact on our everyday life. But this hasn't done that.

(Interview with mother)

This quote emphasises that the READ project can be integrated within everyday family life because it does not interfere with existing routines and practices. Those parents who explicitly stated that READ became part of a daily routine admitted that they had not read the accompanying instructions. However, they felt that they already read to their children in a similar manner. As other studies have shown, middle-class parents and ECEC institutions share many of the same values and engage in what Lareau defines as concerted cultivation (Lareau, 2003; Vincent, 2017; Stefansen & Skogen, 2010). It seems as though the READ programme can easily be integrated into existing family rhythms because of this shared focus on reading as important for young children, but also because it fits well with these parents' ways of organising and prioritising family life. Meanwhile, several parents stated that it would have an impact on family life if their children constantly brought books home from ECEC or were given some other kind of task on a regular basis, as stated in the quote above. As another mother put it, it would feel like "being given homework as a family". However, as long as the READ programme could fit into existing family practices and did not become an extra chore or burden, the parents found it easy to be supportive.

This is not the case in all families. Across families with diverse backgrounds, family conditions and work lives, such as having a tight schedule after returning home from ECEC, reading specific books selected by the ECEC professionals and following instructions could be an overwhelming task and even a source of conflict (see also Juhl et al., 2023). These parents described how they had more children to attend to, many other family activities during the week, and that they thought there were already “so many messages and so much information from the ECEC institution they had to deal with”, as one mother phrased it. When learning projects within ECEC cross over into family settings with no consideration for their existing everyday lives, they can become a burden. Overall, an institutionalisation of parenthood that promotes parenting practices mirroring those of ECEC professionals ignores diversity among families and parents, giving an advantage to those families who share many of the values promoted by ECEC in terms of childhood and learning and who can organise their everyday lives to accommodate the demand for home learning.

Adapting to learning agendas or supporting ECEC professionals?

Parents involved in the learning group programme and the READ programme generally expressed a positive view of the learning initiatives during conversations with the ECEC professionals. However, as I will show, the parents’ support reflects a more complex attitude to their children’s learning and to collaboration with ECEC professionals. This was the case in the learning group programme, which ended with an assessment meeting attended by the parents of participating children, the responsible ECEC professional and the local manager. The aim was to inform parents about the learning process and to gain an insight into the parents’ experiences at home. During these meetings, the ECEC professionals explained the learning goals, outlined the learning activities and described observed learning outcomes. During the assessment meetings, parents most often showed an interest in what they were told, nodding eagerly and smiling. While some parents recognised a few of the learning activities from their children’s accounts, others explained apologetically that their children had hardly told them anything about the activities. Nonetheless, they expressed a positive view on the learning group, as seen in the following example, where four parents attended an assessment meeting:

After ANITA, the ECEC professional, has presented the work with the learning group, the manager asks the parents what they have heard at home. Leonora's father has not heard anything, but he praises the ECEC professionals' work with the children. Lucas' father adds that Lucas talks a lot about ANITA and describes some situations at home where Lucas has mentioned ANITA. (...) Mai's mother has not said much, but the manager asks if she has heard anything about the learning group at home. She now explains that she has been singing one of the songs from the learning group at home with her daughter. She continues by saying that she thinks participating in the learning group has been good for Mai, teaching her to let other children make decisions [while they are playing together]. She looks at ANITA, who gives her a smile.

(Field note from assessment meeting)

At first glance, these parents appear eager to express a positive attitude by telling of how they recognise or have implemented learning group activities at home – like Mai's mother. They seemingly comply with the learning agenda by adapting to ideas about children's learning defined by the ECEC professionals – not by the parents themselves. By complying with the learning group programme, parents implicitly adapt to an institutionalised way of working with learning and learning goals. At the same time, the adoption of institutionalised learning agendas illustrates performative aspects of parenthood, where parents perform parenthood in ways that can be recognised as proper parenthood (cf. Finch, 2007). Other studies have demonstrated that parents are well aware of ECEC professionals' expectations of them as proper parents (Dannesboe et al., 2018; Bach et al., 2020). In the case above, the parents perform a role as positive and supportive parents in front of other parents and professionals at the assessment meeting to gain recognition as good parents, engaging with and adopting the ECEC institution's learning agenda within the family.

However, even though they were supportive of the learning agenda, most of the parents were less interested in the actual learning outcomes. Instead, in conversations with the professionals and in interviews, they highlighted the ECEC professionals' engagement with the children as the most important aspect of the learning groups,

praising their work with the children and emphasising the importance of working with small groups of children (like Lucas' father in the example above). As one of the parents said: "I am so happy that the ECEC professionals see my child [during learning group activities]". Perhaps this explains why the parents insisted that the learning groups made a difference, even when their children had not told them anything about the activities (as was the case with Leonora's father). In this sense, parents' engagement in the learning programme and participation in the assessment meeting is primarily in support of the professionals' work with their children, rather than in support of learning outcomes and home learning.

Being supportive of the learning agenda and engaged in the learning group activities is less about the learning agenda itself and more a matter of acknowledging the importance of the pedagogical and social space the learning group provides for their children in the ECEC institution. Thus, embracing a learning agenda promoted by the ECEC professionals is a way of maintaining a role as an engaged and supportive parent and emphasising one's support of the pedagogical work and confidence in the professionals without disturbing a dominant and institutionalised way of involving parents or explicitly expressing disagreement with the learning agenda.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined the implications of ECEC institutions being assigned the task of improving children's home learning while strengthening their collaboration with parents. Based on empirical studies of specific learning programmes that promote so-called home learning environments through collaboration with parents, the paper illustrates how such learning initiatives reshape collaboration, institutional expectations towards parents' engagement in their children's lives and the ECEC institutions, and parents' strategies for performing support and good parenthood without embracing all aspects of a learning agenda imposed on them by the ECEC institutions.

Until now, the concerted cultivation of children by ECEC professionals and parents has been influenced by an ideal of the 'social child' (cf. Gilliam & Gulløv, 2014), with their collaboration primarily focused on children's social competences (cf. Bach et al., 2020). While the 'social child' remains a strong ideal within Danish ECEC that both parents and ECEC professionals strive to achieve, collaboration on early learning extends

to children's learning in a more academic sense. As shown, the collaboration has been expanded to include new focus on learning and tasks to do at home. I suggest that this kind of extended collaboration is part of an institutionalisation of parenthood whereby the dominant learning agenda within the ECEC sector crosses over into family settings, establishing a collaboration where, in principle, there are no borders between ECEC and family life (cf. Dannesboe, 2013; Juhl et al., 2023).

The expansion of an early learning agenda influences the roles of ECEC professionals and expectations concerning parental involvement. ECEC professionals are expected to provide guidance to parents with regard to their children's learning and development, helping them develop appropriate learning environments at home. Guidance from various experts is an aspect of contemporary parenthood (cf. Lee 2014). However, within Danish ECEC institutions, the nature of such guidance changes, with ECEC professionals instructing parents to perform specific learning tasks at home. Compared to existing guidance structures, in which parents ask for and receive advice on children's well-being, this new guidance appoints parents with tasks that are usually conducted by professionals with pedagogical qualifications. Consequently, parents are instructed to mould their parenting practices in accordance with ECEC standards and professional knowledge. In this sense, the learning programmes represent an ideal of intensive parenting that builds on ECEC institutions' ideas of what constitutes good parenting while ignoring parents' own values and wishes.

The roles and responsibilities of parents change when they are expected to embrace a learning agenda promoted by the ECEC institutions and based on political objectives concerning young children's learning. On the one hand, parents are seen as key collaborative partners, on the other hand, as targets for pedagogical intervention. The analysis illustrates that providing parents with guidance to support their children's early learning implicitly promotes the idea that parents should strive to improve their parenting skills while being responsible for the creation of a home learning environment that supports and nurtures their child's development and potential. In this regard, governmental and institutional logics have infiltrated the private realm of the family home, targeting parents as learning facilitators, supporting their children's academic progress.

The strong focus on instructing and guiding parents suggests that parents are seen as representing a learning resource for their children and playing a crucial role in their academic development. This understanding of parents as a resource mirrors a dominant ideal of intensive parenting, characterised as a child-centred and labour-intensive parenting style (e.g., Furedi, 2002; Lee et al., 2014; Lind et al., 2016). In a Danish context, the efforts of welfare state institutions to strengthen parental involvement underline that parents' parenting practices are interpreted as crucial for their children's development – as well as for ensuring well-functioning ECEC institutions (Akselvoll, 2016; Dannesboe et al., 2018; Kryger, 2015). Nevertheless, parents are also seen as a risk, potentially impeding their children's learning and development. Implicitly, the involvement of parents in children's early learning is based on a belief that, if parenting is not in accordance with the predefined learning objectives, their children will not develop properly and potentially fall behind in the future. Risk management is part of contemporary intensive parenting and, according to Furedi (2002), illustrates a deterministic view of parents in which children's future development depends on what parents do or do not do. To reduce the potential risk, ECEC professionals are asked not only to work with children's learning in ECEC institutions, but also to help parents support their children's development at home.

It is striking that almost all the parents in the empirical studies on which this paper is based supported the learning agenda defined by welfare state institutions. However, as I have argued, their engagement is conditioned by parenting priorities, practicalities and ideals of family life and a good childhood. Thus, parents most often embrace learning tasks defined by ECEC institutions if they fit into existing family rhythms and parenting priorities. Implementing home learning initiatives without taking diverse family lives into consideration might be a source of stress rather than support for many families. The analysis of parents' engagement in the learning programmes also suggests that their support is a way of showing their appreciation for the highly engaged work of ECEC professionals, rather than for the learning agenda in itself. By actively showing their appreciation and support, parents demonstrate their awareness of the importance of maintaining a good relationship with the ECEC professionals, which is crucial in ensuring their children's care.

Overall, the spread of early learning agendas in the Danish welfare state has contributed to the promotion of an ECEC sensitive parenthood, advancing an agenda of intensive parenting through both explicit expectations and more implicit assumptions concerning parents' ability to mould their parenting practices in accordance with learning activities at ECEC institutions. While policies promoting early learning seek to enhance all children's learning possibilities, their entanglement with the goal of strengthening collaboration with parents accelerates the development of a far-reaching and comprehensive institutionalisation of parenthood that fails to take into account existing practices of ECEC institutions, the diverse conditions and priorities of family life as well as children's everyday lives across these settings.

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