Parents as both problem and resource - the political management of parenting in marginalised residential areas

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This article addresses the question of how the parenting role has become an issue in relation to the contemporary politics of marginalized residential areas in Denmark. Drawing on the empirical and analytic categories of 'good' and 'bad' parenting, we explore how parenting skills and parental responsibility are central to problem solving and finding solutions for the area. We explore this to achieve a more critical approach to understanding how different discourses of integration and marginalized residential areas, create categories of 'parenting'. The analysis shows how policies have different kinds of impact on parents in the neighbourhood, and how discourses on parenting vary across the empirical material including governmental strategies, social master plans, and interviews. Despite, in political terms, being regarded as part of the problem, the parents themselves shape their children's lives, make decisions for them, and aspire regarding their children's futures that impact their actions.

Keywords: Parenting, policy, marginalised residential area, parent's everyday life.

Introduction

In this article, we examine how parents manage their everyday lives in marginalized residential areas in Greater Copenhagen while navigating expectations, norms, and categorizations created by the discourse of politics and strategies for these areas. We explore how the politics of marginalized areas become focused on parenting, specifically target parents with a so-called "non-Western" background, and creating specific categorizations of parenting as a parental responsibility through state intervention in these

areas with an integration strategy. The state's strategies in these areas are related to the reconstruction of the Danish social housing sector, implemented through various national strategies and laws aimed at preventing or changing the emergence of so-called "ghettos" and "parallel societies" that have developed in recent decades (Fallov & Birk, 2022; Schultz Larsen, 2015). Simultaneously, the Danish welfare state's interest in parents' obligations, roles, and responsibilities regarding their children's upbringing appears to have evolved over time, transforming parenting practices into a matter for the state rather than solely a family matter (Ball, 2021; Brix & Jensen, 2009; Elias, 1998).

Through analysing interviews with parents, predominantly mothers, and conducting a document analysis of the national strategy from 2018 to 2021, as well as local community projects from 2014 to 2022, we argue that parents with a "non-Western" background are portrayed as part of the social and integration problems in marginalized residential areas. However, paradoxically, these parents are also viewed as the solution to the problem. We interpret this as a duality in which parents are described as important collaborative partners in local community development projects while simultaneously being offered education within these projects to strengthen their parenting skills.

We contend that when parental responsibility concerning children's schooling becomes a central issue in the national strategy and local community projects, it undermines the potential role of schools and shifts the responsibilities from the state to the parents. The analysis also reveals that parents both challenge the problem-oriented discourse through their everyday parenting strategies and shape their own practices. For instance, they address racism and discrimination, striving to shield their children from the effects of these issues. This is the central focus of our article.

We present the context for the local community projects in the areas at the beginning of the article. This is followed by an analysis of the political problem constructions and problem designations in policy documents. Subsequently, analyses of the parent interviews are presented. In the article, we use the term 'local community workers' ('Boligsociale medarbejdere'). Mia Arp Fallov and Rasmus Hoffmann Birk (2021) has highlighted that in Denmark this term refers to social work which focuses on residential neighborhoods (Birk and Fallov, 2021, p. 266-268), often handled by social housing workers. We use the term "social master plan" (Boligsocial helhedsplan), also

known as 'social development plan' (Fallov & Birk, 2021; The National Building Fund, 2022).

Empirical data

The analysis in the article draws on empirical data from interviews and policy documents obtained as part of the research project, "Social Anchoring of Marginalized Youth in the City" from 2020-2022. In this article, the material was re-coded and analysed with a focus on the politics of parenting. The empirical data utilized in the first part of the analysis comprises the national strategies for marginalized residential areas from 2018 onwards; "One Denmark without parallel societies – No ghettos in 2030", including the 22 initiatives known as the "ghetto packages" (The Government, 2018); the " Ghetto Act" from 2018 (The Danish Parliament, 2018); the National Strategy from 2021 "Agreement on mixed residential areas: the next step in the fight against parallel societies'(Prevention areas) (The Ministry of Interior and Housing, 2021); and the strategy for Copenhagen 2017 – 2025 "Politics for Disadvantaged Areas of Copenhagen" (The Municipality of Copenhagen, 2017). In addition to this, we also included ten social master plans (Boligsociale helhedsplaner), from five areas in Greater Copenhagen on the "ghetto list". These plans were implemented between 2014-2018 and 2018-2022. A social master plan is a four to five- year plan between residents in marginalized residential areas, housing organizations, and the local municipalities and is financed by the National Building Fund, (National Building Fund, 2022). But, unlike national strategies and laws, the social master plans describe local community-based projects as social projects and activities formulated by local community workers in collaboration with the housing organizations and the local municipality (Fallov & Birk, 2022, National Building Fund, 2019). The ten social master plans represent five different marginalized residential areas in Greater Copenhagen from two different periods of government.

The empirical data utilized for the second part of this analysis consists of six in-depth interviews with parents, specifically, three Somali, two Turkish, and one Ugandan mother, who have teenage children. Hence, it can be argued that the emphasis in the latter section is predominantly on "mothering" or "maternal parenting" rather than "parenthood".   The study took place in an ethnically mixed district located in Copenhagen, and its aim was to explore how young people and parents in marginalized

positions obtain resources and engage in social anchoring. The research methodology employed observations and interviews with ethnic minority parents, complemented by a mapping of the district's leisure facilities. The interviews were conducted to ascertain the extent to which mothers selectively sought out and utilized the educational opportunities and resources available within their local community for the benefit of their children's schooling and education. This measure served as an indicator of parental engagement in their children's academic pursuits.

Parents were recruited for the interviews through associations and from leisure facilities within the district. Consequently, the parents interviewed in the study had already established connections to the district's leisure and social services.

National strategies and local social master plans

Over the last decades, there has been increasing political attention on the concentration of social, economic, and cultural problems in marginalized residential areas and the number of residents with "non–Western" backgrounds (Schultz Larsen, 2019, 2022, Wacquant, 2014). In 2006, the social master plans were introduced in "Boligforliget" and adopted by The Danish Parliament. The social master plans aimed at the holistic and long-term improvement of the residential areas. Local community workers in housing associations were employed to act as intermediaries between residents of the areas, the housing organizations, and the municipality, to ensure that state interventions in the areas were implemented through small- scale community-based projects (Christensen 2019, Birk & Fallov, 2021, The National Building Fund, 2022). This was a new way of linking political strategies, municipalities, and social housing areas, harbouring the ambition that the concentration of social problems could be solved with the involvement of residents and professionals such as local community workers (Andersen & Løve, 2007).

Over time, and from the 2000s, both the political identification of problems, and the social measures and solutions, were not only seen entailing of social and economic challenges. They were also linked to cultural issues, which identified the disproportionate number of "non-Western immigrants" as the major problem. The concern was that the areas would create segregated "parallel societies". Since the adoption of the ghetto list in 2010, Denmark has compiled the "ghetto list" annually, with modified changes in the terminology and criteria in 2013, 2018, and 2021. The criteria are still the following: The

numb of residents who are unemployed, have a low gross income, a low level of education, and has "non- Western" background and the rate of crime for the area. To be on the "ghetto list" the areas must meet two of the criteria. Later, the fight against parallel societies became the central justification for the state's efforts in the areas that fell within the criteria of the "ghetto list". This appeared, for example, in the Danish Government strategy from 2018 (The Government, 2018). In line with this, from 2019 the political aim of the social master plans was to prevent parallel societies (Schultz Larsen, 2022). In 2021, the former housing minister Kaare Dybvad phased out the use of the term "ghetto", arguing that the term was stigmatizing. He referred instead to parallel societies and introduced a new categorization of areas, such as 'exposed areas', 'suburban areas', and 'transformation areas' in the 2021 national strategy, 'Agreement on mixed housing areas: the next step in the fight against parallel communities' (The Ministry of Interior and Housing, 2021). At the same time, he reduced the number of immigrants accepted from 50% to 30%. Although there has been broad political support for these national strategies, political parties such as, for example, The Unity List[1], have fought against them. This shows how the categorization of the areas, the problems highlighted, and the resources allocated are continuously subject to negotiations. In the literature, the concepts of "ghetto" and "parallel societies" have been critiqued and examined. According to the Danish researcher Troels Schultz Larsen, it is problematic to talk about ghettos and parallel societies. Drawing on the theories of Loïc Wacquant, Larsen argue that "ghetto" is a misleading concept because it inaccurately implies that the residents are a homogeneous ethnic group (Schultz Larsen, 2015; Wacquant 2008, 2014). The problem is that the discourse around ghettos or parallel societies produces stigmatization, with its focus on neighbourhoods rather than the individual people who live there.

The political concepts of "ghetto" or "parallel society" inadequately address the underlying structural problems that exist in relation to labour and housing markets, as well as the poverty prevalent in marginalized residential areas. Such limitations have been recognized and emphasized by various scholars and researchers in the field (Sernhede, 2011; Schultz Larsen & Delica, 2019; Wacquant, 2008) Larsen instead suggests the term 'neglected housing estates' because the areas have been politically neglected for many

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[1] In Danish: Enhedslisten

years (Schultz Larsen, 2015). Fallow and Birk (2022) argue that the "ghetto list" for this reason should be understand as an empirical category, as a case of discrimination and repression that target residents with ethnic minorities backgrounds (Fallov & Birk, 2022, pp.221).

Who, and what, is represented as the problem?

With this starting point as exemplified above, our policy analysis is inspired by the understanding of politics outlined by the Canadian-Australian theorist, Carol Bacchi. Central to Bacchi's methodology is her question, 'What's the problem represented to be?' (WPR). WPR focuses on the definition and representation of problems in policy documents. The WPR approach is based on the argument that governments do not necessarily solve the problems but to a much larger degree produce the "problems". In the analysis, questions are asked like, 'what presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the "problem"?' and 'what effects does it produce?' (Bacchi, 2009) The WPR perspective has been applied to the political documents especially but is also implicit in the analysis of the interviews with the parents, in relation to their understanding of their own commitment, children's challenges at school, and their school strategies.

Bacchi's point is that in contemporary society we are governed by the definition of problems, or in other words, governing takes place through producing problematizations (Bacchi, 2009). She argues that these problematizations are of central importance in any analysis of how different population groups are categorized and perceived through the lens of the policies pursued. This is essential because these definitions generate opportunities for some people meanwhile it has consequences for others who are excluded and stigmatized through the categorization in the problematizations (Bacchi, 2009) The categorizations legitimize the emergence of politically effective solutions to the problems. We therefore analyse the categories in the political discourse to explore who and what is represented as a problem, and we go on to relate it to the parents' experiences and how it affects their strategies for their children´s school and upbringing.

When immigrant parents become part of the problem

In the analysis, it became clear that the territory, the concentration of social and economic problems in the marginalized residential areas, and the negative categorizations of residents with ethnic minority backgrounds created a politic rhetorical demarcation of "the other" and a problem which needed to be solved (The Municipality of Copenhagen, 2017, pp. 26; The Government, 2018). In the "National Strategy to fight Parallel Societies" (The Government, 2018) immigrants are highlighted in this way:

> Fortunately, many immigrants are doing well. In workplaces all over the country, day-to-day cooperation between colleagues runs smoothly. Many immigrants participate actively in local sports clubs, our many associations and Danish society in general… But there are too many who do not participate actively. Parallel societies have developed among people with non-Western backgrounds.
>
> (The Government, 2018, pp. 4)

The problematization in the document goes on to argue against parallel societies:

> There is only one way. The ghettos must go. Parallel societies must be broken up, and it must ensure that new ones do not spring up. Once and for all, we must tackle a formidable integration task, faced with a group of immigrants and their descendants who have not adopted Danish values and isolate themselves in parallel societies.
>
> (The Government, 2018, pp. 6)

These quotes emphasize that the problem is not immigrants in general but some immigrants, those with a "non-Western background" and the problem is that they don't work or participate actively in Danish society. They bring with them an integration task due to their "segregated everyday life" and they constitute a risk of parallel societies being created due to their lack of "Danishness" and integration. The problematizations legitimate the stated necessity for the government to transform these parallel societies. The linking of "non–Western" immigrants and increasing problems in Danish society - here, in relation to parallel societies - has been an issue in the discourse for a long time.

Gulløv and Kampmann (2021) point out that governance and regulatory measures previously aimed at the general population have more recently emerged as specialized and intensified measures targeting specifically identified social groups, groups perceived to be on the margins of society, such as citizens with ethnic minority backgrounds. In her thesis, Anna Freiesleben (2016) shows how citizens with ethnic minority backgrounds have been linked to a national discourse of parallel societies since the 1990s in Denmark (Gulløv & Kampmann, 2021; Freiesleben, 2016).

What we found interesting is that the discourse not only mentioned a generalization of immigrants but made a distinction between "good" and "bad" immigrants, and in doing so excluded and stigmatized a specific group of parents (Bacchi, 2009). The "good" immigrants are well-educated, employed, active in society, display Danish values, and are "well- integrated". The bad immigrants are the opposite: those who are unemployed, uneducated, and receive social benefits they are not integrated, and they don't demonstrate Danish values. However, it is a pseudo-division and a selling point for the ghetto package, as the division is between Western and non-Western immigrants. It is the non-Westerners who are the subject of the problem construction; regardless of their social and employment status, it seems to be their lack of Danishness and integration that is the main issue. In this way, the problematization of integration as segregation and the disadvantaged areas are connected, which legitimizes rhetoric making a similar distinction between different categorize of parenting in the national strategy, where parental responsibility becomes a topic in the 2018 Strategy Plan and the "ghetto package". It is described as follows:

> Most parents face up to their responsibilities. But there are also parents in parallel societies who do not assume responsibility and who leave their children to their own devices. This can harm the child, and may have consequences for schools, which may find it difficult to cope. The government aims to strengthen parental responsibility.
>
> (The Government, 2018, pp. 27)

In the quote, the same rhetoric is used as before creating a division not only between immigrants but between immigrant parents (Bacchi, 2009). The parents who are

stigmatized and excluded from the category of "good" parents are the "non-responsible" parent, leaving their children to their own devices, which has consequences for the children's schooling and for the school. This allows the state to intervene in this group of parents with the goal of *strengthening parental responsibility*. This is precisely what Elias argued for. The state's need to single out those parents who cannot cope with their parental task alone, allowing the welfare state to intervene through regulations, projects, and programs for parents (Ball, 2021; Elias, 1998). At the same time, the quote shows that the significantly political focus is on parental support for the children's schooling success.

> Students from non-Western backgrounds do not enjoy the same support from home. Parents who are involved in and can support their children's schooling will often contribute to the success of their children's school experience, which may help to prevent the formation of parallel societies
>
> (The Government, 2018, pp. 27)

The problem is not only that the parents do not take responsibility for their children, but that it is assumed to have consequences for the children´s education. The concern seems to be that the children will not complete their schooling or will achieve poor academic results because their parents are assumed not to be able to support them or undertake the expected parental responsibility. The phrase "may have consequences for schools" refers to another problem: "unlawful absence from school", which often has statistically high levels in marginalized residential areas. However, as a recent evaluation report has shown, the social mobility of young people in these areas is increasing (VIVE, 2022). So, instead of reversing the focus onto what schools may be able to do, or the responsibilities of the state, the parents are represented as being part of social problems in the marginalized residential areas. Even though raising the educational level in marginalized residential areas to increase social mobility and create equal opportunities for all children has been a political goal for a long time it also legitimates solutions to prevent and struggle parallel societies. In the national strategy of 2021, the "ghetto package" was not changed and the focus on parental responsibility was maintained - even

though the minister had argued that the term "ghetto" was stigmatizing (The Ministry of Interior and Housing, 2021, pp. 32-36) Instead the government changed one of the criteria of the ghetto list by reducing the number of immigrants with "non- Western backgrounds" from 50% to 30% to promote better social mix of residents and argued:

> When non-Western immigrants are concentrated in certain residential areas and the surrounding schools and daycare centers, it hinders integration and increases the risk of religious and cultural parallel societies emerging. It is one of the biggest structural challenges for the community and the foundation of the Danish welfare society. Therefore, ethnic, and social segregation is fought
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> (The Ministry of Interior and Housing, 2021, pp.7).

The discourse which created these kinds of categorizations connecting 'irresponsible and inadequate' parents of "non-Western" backgrounds, with problems of integration, social mobility, and parallel societies was maintained (Bacchi, 2009, The Ministry of Interior and Housing, 2021, pp.7).

On the one hand, the analysis shows that there is a political concern with creating greater equality and lifting social problems in the society; on the other hand, the problematizations the policies act on stigmatizes towards a specific group of parents. It sets an agenda for strengthening parental responsibility but ignores the findings in reports and research that conclude that these parents are responsible and supportive towards their children.

Schooling and education

Contrary to political stigmatization, research shows that ethnic minority parents show concern for their children's schooling and education, despite claims from the dominant political discourse suggesting otherwise. Several studies have confirmed that proficiency in school and educational attainment have become valuable aims for many parents. Rambøll conducted a study for the Ministry of Education and Integration in 2005, which examined the intentions of parents. This study found that parents of bilingual children tend to talk more frequently to their children about education and work compared to

Danish-speaking parents. Specifically, 48% of parents of bilingual children talk to their children about this matter on a weekly basis, compared to 32% of Danish-speaking parents (Rambøll, 2005, pp. 4).

Furthermore, a literature survey and registry data from the Danish National Centre for Social Research (SFI) in 2010 confirmed that ethnic minority parents have high expectations for their children's schooling and education, with a preference for medium and long-term higher education (Jakobsen and Liversage, 2010). The general trend shows that ethnic minority parents value their children's schooling and education highly, also in cases where they themselves do not have a higher education. They hold high ambitions for their children and strive to do things differently from their own parents. As Mirdal notes (Mirdal, 2006), it is almost seen as "shameful" not to encourage one's children to pursue education. Rambøll's study (Rambøll, 2005) also discovered that 80% of ethnic minority parents do not place much importance on family traditions related to education and work. This means that regardless of the family's educational background, parents are willing to support and encourage their children to achieve higher education.

Most parents believe in allowing their children to make their own educational choices. The children are expected to decide for themselves what they want to study and in what direction they want to take their education. This conclusion is also supported by Rambøll's study, which found that 71% of parents of bilingual children strongly agree that it is important to encourage their children to make their own decisions regarding education and work choices (Gilliam, 2023; Rambøll, 2005, pp. 5). Therefore, several studies suggest that schooling and education are highly valued by ethnic minority parents, and this is strongly confirmed by the parents who participated in our study. It shows how the policy documents describe a problem which has already been found not to be a general problem by research. So, to understand why it is politically necessary to focus on the "strengthen parent responsibility" in the "ghetto package" the theoretical perspective of Elias may help us understand why parenting becomes a significant area for state intervention. Norbert Elias argued that the Western welfare state from the mid-19th century onwards assumed more responsibility than in previous times for safeguarding the social conditions of citizens, including children. This allowed the state to intervene in general if necessary. Another important explanation according to Elias is the historical process in which parenting has shifted from being a purely private affair to being also a

matter of public concern. Changes in the perception of parenting itself play a role and the relationship between parent and child has been increasingly highlighted as important by science but also changes in family structures and the development process of the welfare state. This has at times created a robust, dominant theoretical conception and common-sense notion of what "good" and "bad" parenting is and a dominant view of the importance of having "good" parents (Ball, 2021; Elias, 1998). Following Elias' theoretical perspectives, this in turn and created an almost dogmatic belief that parents can contribute to solving the social problems of society (Elias, 1998). Elias argued that the Western welfare state from the mid-19th century onwards assumed more responsibility than in previous times for safeguarding the social conditions of citizens, including children. Simultaneously, a growing interest in the importance of childhood and parenting in research, changes in society and family structure created not only increased knowledge of the field, but also "good" as opposed to "bad" parents. (Ball, 2021; Elias, 1998).

Brix and Jensen (2009, pp. 200) made a similar argument in their article on efforts and education for parents in Denmark, when they described the political problem as stemming from government decisions to make special interventions concerning parents, servants on a municipal level, making the parents no longer protected by privacy. The national strategies analysed, previously are among others being carried out in the social master plans. Even though the local community workers know the residents very well and highlight their resources, the local community workers are still expected to follow the national strategy and laws.

When parents are both a part of the problem and a key to the solution

In the social master plans, there are several examples of a focus on parenting and parental responsibility as a key to social development. This is not surprising but in opposition to the politicians, the local community workers described the parents' competencies as more nuanced and the problematizations are more implicit in the text of the plans even though parental responsibility still is on the agenda in the small-scale projects.

> A parents' network will be established in close cooperation with the
> social housing master plans on X- area. The parent network will meet

in the premises also used in connection with employment and education. They will be offered talks, lectures, forum theatre, etc., dealing with the Danish education system. This will provide parents with a knowledge of the various factors that play a decisive role as regards their children's participation in education. It will also help parents to recognise their own resources in terms of motivating and supporting their children's schooling, as well as providing them with the tools for creating better communication with their children.

<div align="right">(Social Master Plan X2; 2018- 2022, pp. 3)</div>

This measure in the quote is the same as in the strategy from 2018: parents need to do more *as regards their children's participation in education* and to provide them *with the tools for creating better communication with their children* (Social Master Plan X3, 2018-2022. pp. 5). The focus is on the parents taking active responsibility for their children's upbringing and education. Even though *parental responsibilities* are highlighted in the social master plans it shows that there is a trust in the parents' resources which the projects support. In another social master plan, it is described as follows:

Parental responsibility is essential in breaking down a negative social legacy. The social housing work in recent years has helped to identify and make visible the fact that the area also has a range of strengths and resources: positive role models, parents with clear parenting skills and, not least, a wide range of strong, formal networks and groups.

<div align="right">(Social Master Plan X4, 2018-2022, pp. 17)</div>

Parental responsibility is here linked with reducing *negative social legacy"* to increase a positive social development in the area. Parents are important actors to problem-solving in the area and across the ten social master plans parents are highlighted as a resource, positive role models, good at ensuring their children's well-being, with clear parenting skills and with access to formal networks and groups. At the same time, it becomes clear that not all parents in the area are included in the rhetoric of the social master plan when is says "*the area also has a range of*" (Social Master Plan U 2018-

2022, pp. 3). This duplicity shows when the parents are described as constituting an important collaboration partner, while at same time the parents will be offered education and guidance, so their parenting skills continue to be strengthened through the various local projects. The duplicity can be explained by the role of the local community work which has its roots in empowerment and community development and at the same time shall implement national strategies and laws.

We found that the discourse of parental responsibility in the social master plans differs from the rhetoric in the national strategies from 2018 and 2021 by not "othering" the parents with "non-Western backgrounds". Birk and Fallov (2021) in their study of local community workers show how they exert resistance to the politicization and regulation of the marginalized residential areas and often towards stigmatizing categories. Opposite to the national strategies and the social master plans the reports and research present another picture, where parents are concerned about their children's education and support them (Birk & Fallov, 2021; Gilliam, 2023; Ulvik, 2002). This will become more nuanced in the following.

The school and education strategies of ethnic minority parents for their children

The political discourse maintains that parents are responsible for ensuring that their children exhibit proper behaviour, receive an education, and do not associate with other ethnic youth. Therefore, the parents are held directly responsible for meeting these expectations. In its simplest form, parenting involves a set of practices and intentions directed towards one's own children in various life situations. However, parenthood must be viewed as a constructed and context-dependent concept that is shaped by prevailing discourses and ideals regarding how to be a parent in an appropriate and legitimate manner. Thus, parenting is influenced by parents' expectations of their children and of themselves as parents in relation to the existing societal structures in which they find themselves (Ulvik, 2002). The prevailing political discourses about children's development goals and parenting methods, as expressed in policy documents, are constitutive of parenthood.

Oddbjørg Skjær Ulvik highlights that parenting is not a gender-neutral concept and is practiced differently by "mothers" and "fathers" based on societal conditions and expectations. Therefore, parenthood is both gendered and "two-generational" (Ulvik

2002, p. 60). Several other studies provide insights into various aspects of school and educational strategies among ethnic minority parents. One such study is Matthiesen & Ovesen's (2020) investigation into the challenges and dilemmas inherent in the collaboration between schools and ethnic minority parents. One of the key points raised in this study is that the efforts and challenges faced by ethnic minority parents can be overlooked within the established practices of schools. Gilliam (2023) examines the parenting and school strategies of the emerging second generation of minority Danish parents and how these strategies are influenced by their generational position. Like several other studies, Gilliam finds that parents are highly involved in their children's education and well-being, practicing a form of "intensive parenting" that is prevalent among the contemporary social generation and dominant among majority Danish parents.

Education - the key to opportunity

Education is widely considered as the key to opportunity by parents as by the politicians, who, from the analysis, believe it is crucial for their children's prospects in Denmark. They do their best to encourage their children to pursue education. Cemile, a mother of two teenage boys who are both interested in music and singing, is a case in point. Both boys currently attend Sankt Annæ High School in Copenhagen, which specializes in music education, and the mother and children aspire to attend a music conservatory. "As parents, we see it as an essential context," says Cemile, explaining how they strategically pursued better educational opportunities for their children.

> We live in an area with marginalized residential areas just across the road. At first, my children went to the school in this area. If we had left them at this school, they would not have got to where they are today. When they were in the second grade of primary school, there were entrance exams for SAG, and they both got in. We've been very instrumental in pushing them in that direction.

Parents understand that good schooling and education are crucial for their children's social mobility and recognition. As such, parenting is viewed as a commitment that requires sacrifices in order to support upward mobility. Yusur, a Somali woman with nine

years of schooling, exemplifies this perspective. As a single mother of six children, she works as a bus driver and moved all her children from the local public school to a private school when her eldest daughter was in seventh grade. Yusur made this decision after teachers repeatedly pointed out that her children were not academically gifted and required significant support at home. The cost of the private school was a major expense for Yusur's tight budget, and her children had to travel for half an hour by bus to reach the new school. Despite these challenges, Yusur and her family believed that the better education offered by the private school was worth the sacrifice.

> Yes, it's very expensive, but if you want something .... then you must fight for it. I'm not just thinking about money. I didn't come to Denmark to become a millionaire. It's important that children study and stay away from bad stuff. It's not just about bad teaching in public school, but [in a private school] you know that your kids are doing well and that the school is doing its best for the kids to do well. It's not like in public school where you' re told it's too late now.

Parental involvement in their children's schooling and education can be seen as an extension of the education and minorities discourse. This discourse highlights that education and skills are the most important forms of capital that ethnic minorities, particularly those from non-western backgrounds, may lack. Additionally, it emphasizes that to succeed in Denmark, it is essential to break free from cultural ties and fully comply with the expectations and demands of the educational system.

Zeynep, who studied German at university and is married to a Dane, is a schoolteacher at a school for students facing various challenges. She has chosen to look beyond the local public school system to find a school where her child can interact with children from different cultures and backgrounds from all over the world.

> I only took the private school because it was said that normal people from all over the world went there. It wasn't upper class or anything, but just ordinary Nørrebro people from all over the world with all sorts of religions, Buddhists, Christians, Atheists, Muslims, etc. I'm not

> saying I can save the whole world. I can do my bit. I'm trying to raise
>
> my boy to think that everything is okay.

In addition to valuing good schooling and education, parents also place importance on their children's multicultural skills as a necessary resource in a diverse society. They want their children to be able to navigate the different cultural contexts and environments that they encounter in their daily lives in Denmark, including those defined by both Danish norms and values as well as those linked to the family's country of origin.

As we have seen, parents have strong and positive intentions for their children's schooling and education, and they actively involve themselves in various ways. While parents like Cemile and Zeynep are able to support their children academically, not all parents have the necessary skills to help their children with academic challenges. Some parents feel they have nothing to offer in terms of academic support due to a lack of Danish language or academic skills. However, these parents are aware of their limitations and take action to address them.

Mbale is a mother of two boys who attend the local elementary school. She studied business in Uganda and is now seeking the knowledge required to support and monitor her children's schooling.

> I knew nothing about school and education when my first child went to
>
> school. I knew nothing about resources, support etc. [...] I thought the
>
> system was transparent enough and that it was enough if teachers and
>
> social educators talked to parents. But it wasn't. I found that out later.
>
> But with my youngest child I was a bit lucky because I was a bit more
>
> integrated and through friends and other parents I learned more about
>
> the school and what was going on in the school.

Yusur was also aware of her academic shortcomings, so she drew on the resources of others:

> There's no hiding. I always go to friends and neighbours to ask if they
>
> need anything or if something in the apartment is broken. I always visit

those who move into our part of the building. I always ask what they have studied and what they are good at. For example, if there is someone at work who knows French, I will say 'is it possible I could contact you one day if my children need some help with French'.

The increased emphasis on parental involvement in teaching and learning is a shared concern between parents and schools. Parents recognize that their active participation in their child's education is essential for success in school. This involvement includes participation in school-related activities, academic support, and helping with homework. However, for parents who lack the time and resources to participate actively, this expectation can be challenging. They may need to re-educate themselves or seek outside help to support their children's learning. Alternatively, they may need to accept that their children may not have the same advantages as their classmates (see also Højholt, 2016).

The parents in our study have chosen to tackle the problem themselves, as described in the previous paragraph. One parent, Fahiimo, has three teenage children attending the local elementary school, and she is also enrolled in an adult education course. Fahiimo is deeply involved not only in the education of her own children, but also in the education of other children. In fact, she has opened her own homework help service.

Now I have my own homework help service. Every Tuesday and Thursday there is a homework help in a communal meeting room. [...] I'm on my own doing homework help right now. Sometimes I ask my oldest son to open the session, and then I come along later. [...] Sometimes 25 children come and sometimes 6-7 children. It depends on what they need. [...] It's not me helping the children with their homework, but some volunteers who come along.

It is a common trait among these parents that they aspire for their children to receive a good education and achieve success. For those parents who lack expertise in certain school subjects and cannot provide academic support for their children, they often seek external help, including assistance from their personal networks. Despite having limited resources and opportunities, these parents make every effort to help their children attain

their educational objectives. At times, these parents face immense challenges and struggle to overcome difficulties, as illustrated by the case of homework help.

Racism and discrimination

The parents' efforts to aid their children's education are not always met with corresponding efforts by schools. Parents are confronted with the reality that their children must grapple with the devaluation of their worth and potential, both in school and in their future careers. Moreover, they face discriminatory practices and racism, which parents' endeavour to shield their children from, in addition to the routine challenges of supporting their children in their education. Regrettably, Fahiimo's children have had to endure a particularly egregious manifestation of racial abuse.

> My children experience racism mostly at school but also outside school. [...] racism comes from both teachers and students. [...] My eldest son was attacked by 4 classmates. They hit and kicked him. It was terrible. They also videotaped their attack and shared it with other students, including those in the parallel class. My son came home and told me what had happened and that a lot of people had seen the video. [...] I went to the school, showed them the video, and told them what my son had been subjected to. I also called the parents whose children had beaten my son. What upset me the most was the father of one of those boys. I told him that his son had done such and such to my boy, and without asking why or how and without him having seen the video, he said 'well my son does have a temper'.

The incident that Fahiimo's son experienced is a clear example of how racism and discrimination can affect children's education and well-being. The negative impact of such incidents can be devastating, leading to feelings of shame, embarrassment, and low self-esteem, and ultimately affecting their motivation to participate in activities they once enjoyed.

In response to the incident, Fahiimo demonstrated her commitment to protecting her child from racism and discrimination by confronting the parents responsible for the

assault. Her action is an example of the protective and supportive role that parents can play in their children's lives. It also highlights the importance of creating a safe and inclusive environment in schools and communities, where all children can learn and thrive without fear of discrimination or violence.

> The father of one of the other boys also came to football training. I went to him and told him what his son had done to my son. He called his son over and asked him 'Did you do it?'. 'Yes', he said. 'Why?' The boy said, 'Because Muslims kill people, they are stupid. I said he is black and African; he shouldn't be living in Denmark'. That was it. The man didn't even apologize to me.

The existence of racism in society is acknowledged by parents, regardless of their social and ethnic backgrounds, and the extent to which individuals have been exposed to it varies. While some parents have never experienced discrimination, others face it on a regular basis. These accounts from parents counter the notion that ethnic minority parents are disinterested or bad parents, emphasizing instead the importance of education while acknowledging the different methods and strategies employed to achieve educational goals. However, parents face numerous challenges related to their children's schooling, with limited opportunities and resources. Discrimination is a common experience, and the ways parents confront it range from direct confrontation to trivializing it as 'just-for-fun racism'. When parents address racism and discrimination and strive to shield their children from its effects, they challenge the political discourse at various levels. At the same time, the problem-oriented discourse that surrounds them shapes their parenting strategies. Other studies have also examined and documented the various strategies and efforts employed by parents to overcome discrimination and exclusion within the school context. Matthiesen and Ovesen (2020) conducted a comprehensive examination of the specific strategies implemented by schools and parents to enhance school engagement among immigrant families. Their research offers valuable insights into the effectiveness of these strategies, highlighting areas where improvement is warranted. Similarly, Abdi (2021) specifically focuses on the experiences of Somali immigrant mothers in relation

to school engagement. The study explores the distinct challenges faced by these mothers and investigates the implications for school leaders.

When parents remove their children from schools located in social housing estates, they both challenge and reproduce understandings of the problem-oriented discourses that link these estates with ethnicity. The government's housing policy in exposed residential areas, known as the ghetto policy, fails to address the issues present in the area. Poverty and lack of mobility remain unresolved, largely because the policy focuses on the physical conditions of the area rather than the people who live there. Ethnic minority parents are expected to behave like idealized Danish parents through this policy, and while it has had some success, these parents often encounter various forms of prejudice and discrimination, which the overall policy fails to acknowledge or address.

Summary and conclusion

The analysis has yielded two overarching conclusions. Firstly, it has been concluded that policies implemented in marginalized residential areas have become manifestations of a 'politics of parenting' which involve parents with "non-Western" backgrounds in problematized parenting. In this political understanding, parents are seen as both part of the problem and key to the solution. This view is substantiated by referring to social and historical developments in the West, which have contributed to a greater awareness and interest in the importance of child upbringing and the role of parents, as supported by the rise of the welfare state. These complex processes may help to explain why the problem formulations that guide political solutions in exposed social housing areas tend to single out parents with ethnic minority backgrounds living in these areas. These problem formulations are not monolithic but are constructed from multiple simultaneous problem formulations relating to certain neighbourhoods, to increase social mobility and the educational level, the concern of parallel societies, the proportion of ethnic minority residents, and parents who are considered unable to adequately fulfil their parenting role.

Finally, as supported by other studies (Abdi, 2022; Gilliam, 2023; Matthiesen & Ovesen, 2020) the analysis indicates that what the parents do refutes the political problem discourse about ethnic minority parents. Despite what the government says, ethnic minority parents prove to be responsible and committed to providing their children with the best opportunities to succeed in society. They are concerned about the opportunities

offered to their children in their upbringing, schooling, and further education. However, they are also aware of the racism and discrimination that exist in social discourse. They are aware of the problem-centred discourse about exposed social housing areas, and in their strategies, they try to oppose this and create a space for their children's future, for example, by opting out of local schools. In this way, they may unconsciously reproduce the political problem formulations. Parents are also guided by the official state formulations of problems, internalizing them in their own strategies for providing the best possible future for their children.

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