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# Would it really matter? The democratic and caring deficit in 'parental involvement'

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## ABSTRACT

The discourse on parental involvement as a means to increase the educational attainment of underprivileged children has gained ground in the scholarly and policy field of preschool education. Nevertheless, this discourse is characterised by a 'democratic deficit' in which parents themselves are rarely involved in determining goals and modalities of parental involvement in sociological and educational studies (Tronto, J. C. 2013. *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice*. New York: New York University Press). Ten video-elicited focus groups with migrant parents were organised in the Flemish community of Belgium in order to explore their meaning-making of preschool education and the parent-school relationship. The qualitative data suggest a perceived lack of attention for the care dimension in education. While parents are eager to know more about preschool, they cannot always express this eagerness. Based on these results, we recommend that preschool policies, practices, and research should consider communicative spaces for parents, professionals, and researchers in which multiple, yet opposing, meanings can be discussed.

## KEYWORDS

Parents; preschool; migrant; care; democratic deficit; inclusion

## Introduction

Since the 1960s, the relationship between social inequality and school has been of considerable interest to sociological scholars and policy-makers (Downey and Condron 2016). The mass dissemination of primary education in many countries after WWII and of secondary education in the 1960s was envisioned as an 'equaliser' (Peschar and Wesselingh 1985; Van Houtte 2016). In most affluent countries, the construction of preschool education as an equaliser before compulsory education gained momentum (Zigler and Styfco 2010; Van Laere and Vandenbroeck 2014). This is considered especially important for working class children or children living in poverty, who are believed to need compensation for their 'social-cultural handicaps', enabling them to start 'on an equal foot' with the other children in primary education (Van Laere and Vandenbroeck 2014). The idea of 'preschool as equaliser' gradually permeated policies worldwide, consolidated by various studies that underlined the importance of early learning as a foundation for reaching high educational attainment and employment in later life, especially for children living

in poverty and children with migrant backgrounds (Heckman 2006; Matthews and Jang 2007; Unicef Innocenti Research Centre 2008). Despite this gradual shift in focus to the equalising potential of the early years, the educational gap between children with high socioeconomic status and low socioeconomic status (SES) and between children with and without migrant backgrounds, remains persistent in many countries, albeit to a different degree. According to the latest PISA studies, Belgium is one of the countries with the most pronounced educational gap, which is related to the home situation of the children (OECD 2013, 2016).

In order to ‘close’ the persistent educational gap, international organisations have pleaded for increased parental involvement in preschool (OECD 2006, 2012; European Commission 2015). Similar to studies in primary education (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1995; Carter 2002; Barnard 2004), research suggests that parental involvement in the preschool learning of children is associated with better learning outcomes and later academic success (Marcon 1999; Miedel and Reynolds 2000; Eldridge 2001; Castro et al. 2004; McWayne et al. 2004; Sylva et al. 2004; Arnold et al. 2008; Halgunseth 2009; Galindo and Sheldon 2012). Several of these studies draw upon the Epstein’s Overlapping Spheres of Influence model (Epstein 1987, 1995; Epstein and Salinas 2004). In Epstein’s model, different types of parental involvement are described in terms of what parents can do at home and in the school environment to help their children perform well at school and in later life (Epstein 1987, 1995; Epstein and Salinas 2004). Scholars in the field of sociology of education have criticised this line of thought for several reasons (Lareau 1987; Lareau and Shumar 1996; Lareau and Horvat 1999). They point out that Epstein promotes a model of consensus by using terms such as ‘partnership’ and ‘reaching common goals’. By assuming consensus, this model fails to acknowledge patterns of unequal power distribution between diverse parents and schools (Lareau and Shumar 1996; Todd and Higgins 1998). When Epstein’s theoretical model is translated into educational policies, the focus is on increasing the individual parent’s involvement in education, starting from the assumption that all parents are equal. According to Lareau (1987) and other scholars who use concepts of the Bourdieusian social reproduction theory, the equality of parents is a problematic assumption, since parents have to deal with unequal financial, social, and cultural resources. Parents, therefore, have different skills to activate their cultural and social capital in order to create an educational advantage for their child. By ignoring these differences, it is argued that it is hard for parents from working or lower classes to comply with the staff’s expectations about parental involvement, as these are permeated by social and cultural experiences of the economic middle class and elites (Lareau 1987; Lareau and Shumar 1996; Lareau and Horvat 1999; Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003). Consequently, scholars point out that schools’ efforts to involve parents may paradoxically create greater inequalities in children’s learning, resulting in an even larger educational gap (Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003; Lee and Bowen 2006; Gillanders, McKinney, and Ritchie 2012).

A more participatory approach on parental involvement may shed additional light on this debate, by relating this sociological approach to an analysis of daily practice and the lived experiences of parents themselves (Vandenbroeck et al. 2011). It can indeed be noticed that both the work of Epstein and Lareau bear a striking commonality: they do not question the ultimate purpose of parental involvement and the very meaning of preschool as increasing academic performances of especially underprivileged children.

It seems that the goals and modalities of parental involvement are defined without the involvement of parents themselves. Tronto (2013) framed this phenomenon as a ‘democratic deficit’, ‘the incapacities of governmental institutions (such as preschools) to reflect the real values and ideas of citizens’ (17). As a result, they risk instrumentalising participation, reducing the parents to spectators of their alleged problems.

This instrumentalisation of parents in the debates on parental involvement has been severely criticised for thinking *for* parents, yet not *with* parents (Hughes and Mac Naughton 2000; Rayna and Rubio 2010). In this instrumentalising discourse, parental involvement has an alleged preventive value in terms of avoiding school failure. One of the side effects of this discourse is that non-participation of parents is considered to be a problem (Brougère 2010; Bouverne-De Bie et al. 2012). All too often, it is assumed that poor and migrant parents therefore need to *learn* to participate. Doucet (2011) and Dahlstedt (2009) pointed out that ways to increase parental involvement are actually codes or implicit strategies to socialise underprivileged parents into the mainstream white middle-class norms, but still within an inequitable educational project. Studies that give voice to these parents, however, are only recently emerging (e.g. Tobin, Arzuviaga, and Adair 2013).

In sum, instead of constructing parental involvement as a ‘solution’ to the educational gap in preschool, it is important to counter, what Tronto (2013) referred to as, the ‘democratic deficit’ and gain insight into what is at stake for parents themselves: what meanings do parents attribute to preschool education? How do parents understand the relationship with the preschool staff? In this article we explore multiple perspectives of parents with migrant backgrounds in the Flemish Community of Belgium, as they are objects of concern with regard to parental involvement and potential school failure of their children (Dahlstedt 2009; Doucet 2011). Finally, we discuss what parents’ meanings of preschool education signify for conventional approaches to parental involvement.

## Research context: the Flemish community of Belgium

The Flemish Community of Belgium is historically characterised by a split system with care services for children from zero to three years old (*kinderopvang*) under the auspices of the Minister for Welfare; and preschool institutions (*kleuterschool*) for children from two and a half to six years old belonging to the educational system (Oberhuemer, Schreyer, and Neuman 2010). Every child is entitled to free preschool from two and a half years onwards. Over 99% of the five-year-old children are enrolled in preschool, and 82.2% of the two-and-a-half-year-olds are enrolled in a preschool in Flanders (Department of Education 2015). Despite almost universal enrolment in preschool education, there is an unequal attendance – children from migrant and/or poor families are more often absent from preschool than their more affluent peers – that causes policy concerns, as it is associated with later school failure (Department of Education 2015).

## Methods

We organised 10 focus groups in the autumn of 2014 and spring of 2015 of parents with migrant backgrounds ( $n = 66$ ) in Ghent, Brussels, and Antwerp, the three largest cities of the Belgian Flemish community. All parents in the focus groups had children

between two and a half and four years old. They gave permission to participate in this study by oral informed consent and approval was received from the ethical commission of the authors' university. In a period of two weeks prior to the focus group, we met parents several times at the school gates and repeatedly invited them to participate in this study. These focus groups took place at the preschool premises without the presence of the preschool staff. Schools were selected on the basis of their school population that consists out of children with migrant backgrounds. We focused on mainstream schools and did not focus on schools with specific pedagogic profiles such as Freinet, Steiner or Montessori schools. With the aim of including parents who would not feel at ease enough in a school environment, we also invited parents through the staff of five intermediary organisations that work with young children (see Table 1). In order to include fathers, we organised two focus groups solely for fathers. However, the turn-out was low, reaching only one father with migrant backgrounds (FG8) and one focus group was cancelled.

We chose to work with focus groups as they are considered a form of collective research for participants in which the authority of the researcher is decentred (Kamberilis and Dimitriadis 2003; Howitt 2011a). Furthermore, since the method of video-elicited focus groups by Tobin (1992) has proven to be a good way to capture parents' voices with multiple language backgrounds, discussions and reflections among parents were triggered by showing a 20 minute movie of a day in preschool in the focus groups. This self-made movie showed various learning and caring moments and activities in a Flemish reception

**Table 1.** Participants focus groups.

| Parents          | #         | ♂        | ♀         | One of home languages = Dutch | Home languages ≠ Dutch | Language focus group                                    | Invited through                                                                     | Region   |
|------------------|-----------|----------|-----------|-------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|
| FG1              | 3         | 1        | 2         | 0                             | 3                      | Dutch                                                   | NGO for undocumented persons                                                        | Ghent    |
| FG2 <sup>a</sup> | 8         | 0        | 8         | 2                             | 6                      | Dutch, Turkish, Slovak and English <sup>b</sup>         | Municipal school                                                                    | Ghent    |
| FG3              | 3         | 0        | 3         | 0                             | 3                      | Turkish and Dutch <sup>b</sup>                          | Community health centre                                                             | Ghent    |
| FG4              | 11        | 1        | 10        | 1                             | 10                     | Dutch, Turkish and Arabic                               | Catholic school                                                                     | Ghent    |
| FG5              | 8         | 0        | 8         | 2                             | 6                      | Turkish <sup>b</sup>                                    | Toy library                                                                         | Ghent    |
| FG6              | 2         | 0        | 2         | 2                             | 0                      | Dutch                                                   | Meeting space for young children and parents                                        | Antwerp  |
| FG7              | 8         | 1        | 7         | 1                             | 7                      | Dutch, French and English                               | State school                                                                        | Brussels |
| FG8 <sup>c</sup> | 1         | 1        | 0         | 0                             | 1                      | French and Dutch                                        | Centre for intercultural community development, out-of-school care and state school | Brussels |
| FG9              | 13        | 1        | 12        | 2                             | 11                     | Dutch, French, Turkish and English                      | Private NGO school (Catholic)                                                       | Brussels |
| FG10             | 9         | 0        | 9         | 1                             | 8                      | Dutch, French, Turkish, Arabic and English <sup>b</sup> | Private NGO school (Catholic)                                                       | Brussels |
| <b>Total</b>     | <b>66</b> | <b>5</b> | <b>61</b> | <b>11</b>                     | <b>55</b>              |                                                         |                                                                                     |          |

<sup>a</sup>Including one grandmother.

<sup>b</sup>With professional translator Turkish–Dutch, Turkish–French.

<sup>c</sup>Three fathers participated in this focus group, one of which has migrant backgrounds.

class starting from the moment the parents and the children arrive at the preschool. Participants were invited to interrupt the movie and discuss it, which gave them the opportunity to discuss meanings of preschool education without necessarily having to criticise the school their children attended. They were also asked whether they found the movie to be ‘typical’. While discussing typicality, underlying understandings and meanings of preschool education and the relationship between parents and schools were identified (Tobin 1992). The focus group sessions lasted from between one and a half to three and a half hours. Parents would sometimes translate for each other. In four focus groups, we could foresee professional translators whom we talked to and prepared beforehand concerning the aim of this study and the focus group.

All focus group sessions were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. In conducting a thematic analysis (Howitt 2011b), we identified several general themes that emerged from the data such as curiosity, inability to speak out loud, care of the body, and belonging. Transcripts were coded along this initial coding scheme. In a next step, we performed secondary coding guided by additional literature on the dimensions of care (Tronto 1993; Hamington 2004, 2015; Wikberg and Eriksson 2008) and scripted practices (Antaki, Ten Have, and Koole 2004; Bernstein 2009; Vuorisalo, Rutanen, and Raittila 2015), which resulted in the identification of three main themes: parents’ eagerness to know; the value of caring practices; and parents’ subordinate position.

## Results

### *The eagerness to know, experience, and communicate*

An eagerness to know more about the daily experiences of their children in preschool ran through the discussions of parents, many of whom expressed the hope that their children would feel well and actively participate in preschool practice. They professed to having little knowledge about what exactly happens at preschool and this was explained as having limited possibilities to communicate with the preschool staff and by an inability to enter the classrooms in many preschools:

Every day I pass the school at about 10 a.m. You can see the children playing at the playground. And when your child is in one of the classes in front, you can peek inside. But now my child is in one of the classes located on the other side of the playground. I just don’t know; I cannot see her. I tried to ask this of the preschool teacher: as I’m not able to see her, are you treating my child well or not? (FG3)

Many parents like this mother wanted to see for themselves and experience how their children were doing in the preschool environment and how they were being approached by the preschool staff. Other parents stated that they did not necessarily need to enter the preschool and talk to the teacher. Still, this did not necessarily mean they were not eager to know what was happening. One father claimed to not have a desire to enter the school; however, it turned out at the end of the focus group that he was very curious to know more. He asked the researcher for a copy of the movie so he could watch and discuss the movie with his children. Generally, most parents expressed the desire to have more contact with the staff and not only as a one-way process of the school giving information to the parents:

Parent 1: It would be a good idea if they could organise times at which the school staff talks to the parents. How is it going for you as a parent?

Parent 2: So they listen to our concerns about what we feel and experience.

Parent 3: It would be good to resolve some frustrations and even fears of parents before the start of preschool. (FG9)

For several parents, the lack of concrete knowledge about what happened in preschool, the perceived lack of reciprocal communication, or the inability to be able to be present in preschool and experience it for themselves, generated feelings of uncertainty, worries, and sometimes even frustration.

### ***Questioning care in preschool practices***

The eagerness to know, experience, and communicate about their children's preschool experiences was in many cases associated with questions about physical, emotional, and even political notions of care. A recurrent general remark was that preschool classes were understaffed which was believed to hinder the ability to meet the care needs of all children.

### ***Care as an activity and mental disposition***

Many parents had questions about how preschool staff addressed the physiological and emotional needs of the child during various moments of the school day. Parents, for example, problematised toilet events and the perceived lack of follow-up by the staff, some of them having no idea if and when their children were being taken care of after a toilet visit or after a peeing accident or when their diaper was changed. The question of whether children were being well taken care of not only concerned the physiological, but also the socio-emotional, needs of the child.

Parent: I noticed in the movie that the teacher does not want to see the child.

Researcher: What do you mean by that?

Parent: During the whole morning she did not once go to the child that was sitting alone and crying. At the start of the school day the teacher could embrace the child and talk to the child. A teacher for me is a bit like a mother to the children in the class. They have to be able to laugh with the child. Really embrace the child! So the children can feel from the teacher that they are here and they matter. I really was fed up with it last year. My child started in September and everything went well until January. All of a sudden my child did not want to go to school anymore. This lasted until June.

Researcher: So what was happening?

Parent: I don't know! I really don't know. I went to the teacher and asked her what was going on. The teacher just said 'everything is good', nothing more. So I asked my son, he was just crying. Everyday this was happening! I did not know what the problem was. But I don't think it is normal that this took such a long time: six to seven months! The teacher needs to provide warmth if they do this work – taking care of children. The child needs to feel 'my mother is gone, but my teacher is with me'. (FG4)

This mother addressed how care requires actual concrete actions like embracing and talking to the child, which should stem from the preschool teacher being caring and

warm to children. Care was viewed as both an activity and a mental disposition that the teacher should embody (Tronto 1993).

### *Care as a phenomenon*

The statements of this mother also reveal several symbolic meanings of care, which – according to Wikberg and Eriksson (2008) – refer to care as a phenomenon. In the last participant quotation, the parent used the words ‘the teacher does not want to see the child’, which refers indirectly to the importance of attention, a symbolic meaning of care that appeared repeatedly in many stories of the participants. Several parents contested the perceived lack of attentive supervisory staff during recess time: who supports the children, particularly as some children can fall and hurt themselves or can be hurt by other children in the outdoor playground? Although attention as a symbolic meaning of care was highly valued by the majority of parents, the way in which care is acted out was expressed differently depending on the parent’s own personality, history, gender, socio-economic, and cultural backgrounds (Tronto 1993; Wikberg and Eriksson 2008). Some parents thought that the supervisory staff should be immediately adjacent to the children and protect them from falling or fighting. Other parents underlined that falling is part of learning life, yet the staff should be attentive and able to comfort and actively listen to children’s needs. A few parents – who all happened to be fathers – emphasised that children need to learn to defend themselves as many conflicts can occur in the outdoor playground. They emphasised the importance of an attentive staff that can balance between giving freedom to children and intervening in order to resolve a conflict or in order to physically take care of the child when they are hurt.

Besides the emphasis on attention, we identified other symbolic meanings of care in the focus groups. In her exclamation, ‘Really embrace the child!’ in the last citation, the mother highlighted the need for bodily contact between the preschool teacher and the child as a way to comfort and interact with the child. At the same time, she symbolically referred to the importance of children ‘being there’ and ‘knowing that they matter’. Care was understood as giving presence to somebody and respecting and acknowledging the child in his/her individual personality. The concern that children may be forgotten in the collective preschool environment was particularly salient, as many children from the participants had not mastered the dominant school language, which according to the parents could jeopardise the full participation of the child in preschool learning activities. From that perspective, parents hoped that children, irrespective of their backgrounds, belonged to the group in preschool and in broader society. The focus on attention, presence, and belonging in the class and in society as symbolic meanings of care, seems to touch upon a more political connotation of care (Tronto 1993; Hamington 2015).

### *Discontinuity in care*

The mother finished her thought by articulating that the child needs to have the feeling that ‘my mother is gone, but my teacher is with me’. Attention, giving presence, and being connected are considered important symbolic meanings of the care of a child in every life domain, including preschool and home. As care permeates the human condition (Hamington 2004; Wikberg and Eriksson 2008), several participants drew attention to a discontinuity of care between the home and preschool environment which initiates a

desire to keep their children at home. They expressed their wish for a more continuous care across the private-public boundaries between home and preschool.

### ***Adopting a subordinate position***

#### ***From silent to silenced voices***

While parents had questions on how care was provided in preschool, it did not always occur to them that they could raise these questions with the staff:

Parent 1: But you went to the teacher to ask this. I also have this question but it never occurred to me to ask it, because school is a system and who am I to change this system? Do you think it would really matter if I asked this question?

Parent 2: That is not true. You cannot think like that. I had the same experience: I thought it was too cold for the children to eat their fruit on the outdoor playground. If you have a question, you should raise it. (FG3)

The first mother did not consider addressing questions about care because she identified herself as being powerless in the school system. In response, the second mother urged the first one to raise questions with the staff. But even within the stories of the second mother, a dynamic of being silenced is noticeable when she, for example, tried to ask the teacher why she was not able to see her child in the classroom when she passed the school, as presented earlier in this article.

I discussed this with the preschool teacher. The teacher told me that when she goes to higher grades, I will not be able to see her either. In the beginning it was difficult for me to accept this, but now I'm used to it. (FG3)

Moreover, this mother found it important to ask questions; yet, she perceived her questions as an indication of being stupid:

I know that some of my questions are bad or silly questions. It is a personal issue: I experience psychological issues because my mother was never really there for me when I was young.

Researcher: So, according to you, what is another bad or silly question?

Parent: Let me think. For example, is there a toilet connected to the classroom of my child? If not, how does my child has to go to the toilet by herself? I asked this question to the teacher and she responded that children go collectively to the toilets. And then I asked her 'but if they are all together on the toilets which bottom will you wipe first?' (FG3)

It is remarkable that she – by referring to her psychological problems – blamed herself for having 'bad' questions that were actually along the same lines of the concerns of other parents in the focus groups. Another mother implied that staying silent is the best strategy for a parent in order to ensure that your child will receive the best learning opportunities and not fail in preschool. In general, parents tended to be rather compliant and subordinate by adapting their expectations to the implicit and explicit rules, norms, and routines of preschool institutions. Some scholars have called this 'scripted practices' in which material and social space is never a neutral context as it directs human action as scripts (Antaki, Ten Have, and Koole 2004; Bernstein 2009; Vuorisalo, Rutanen, and Raittila 2015). We found that some participants tried to go along with these scripted practices, while others challenged these scripts.

### ***Following scripted practices***

Despite some exceptions, most parents wished to have more contact with the preschool staff. Nevertheless, since it was not customary in many preschools to enter the class or have extended talks with the teachers, parents tried to approach the teacher, but restricted themselves to a maximum number of visits per week.

Parent 2: I don't talk to the teacher every day but I try to do it twice ... twice a week is perfect [Other participants nod their heads].

Parent 3: I try to contact the teacher once a week.

Researcher: Why this exact number?

Parent 2: If we talk every day to the teacher, it will be hard for her.

Researcher: Would you like this to be different?

Parent 2: Yes of course. Like, one hour per week so every day we can talk with the teacher for 10 minutes. (FG4)

On the surface, it seems that these participants took a respectful position towards the teachers in order not to bother them too much. Yet, their stance is more likely to be coming from deference, acting according to the assumed wishes or opinions of the teacher. The way parents engaged in activities that the school organised to stimulate parental involvement, can also be interpreted as yet another example of their subordinate position.

Parent 1: Yesterday it was fruit day at the school. Parents cut the fruits and brought them to all the preschool classes. Although I do not speak Dutch, by showing my presence, the preschool staff, director, and school can feel that I'm an involved parent.

Parent 2: I have noticed that the more a mother is busy with the child, the more the school will be concerned with the child and the mother. A lot of other mothers unfortunately didn't come to the fruit day. I told them they should come since you do not need language to cut fruit ... I would like to ask you what we can do for other mothers so they can become more involved in the school. I don't want the other mothers to feel excluded from the school. How can we make clear to the other mothers 'Please, come to the school and dare to ask questions to the preschool staff!?' (FG3)

By doing these activities and expressing the desire that more mothers do this as well, these mothers confirmed the construction of school-centric approaches of parental involvement (Lawson 2003). Yet, at the same time, by reading the scripts and 'performing' parental involvement accordingly, what they actually hope for themselves and for other mothers is to create a possibility to have more communication with the teachers, even when parents did not speak the school language. Since school-centric parental involvement activities were merely a means to this end, these mothers followed, but simultaneously challenged, scripted practices with regard to parental involvement.

### ***Challenging scripted practices***

As parents were often not allowed in the preschool classes, several parents challenged these scripts by using the physical space in unconventional ways in order to gain more information about their child's preschool experience.

Parent 1: When I am bringing my daughter to preschool, I sometimes try to peek through the windows. One day the teacher caught me doing this! [*Some participants laugh*]. (Grand)Parent 2: You can also watch them from behind the trees! Just try the trees! That is what I do when my grandson is playing on the outdoor playground [*Laughter of other participants increases*] (FG2)

The words ‘the teacher caught me’ and the laughter in response from the other participants, indicate how the layout of a school is a powerful tool to script human actions according to certain expectations and constructed power relations. The parents told us that the windows in this preschool were recently painted blue so parents would not be able to look inside the classrooms. When parents did manage to have contact with preschool teachers, they stated that it was not easy to discuss matters of caring for children. It is noteworthy that parents who tried to ask questions of the preschool staff wanted to legitimise or excuse their need from a cultural, gender, or personal perspective.

Parent 1: We, as a group of Turkish mums, we are always concerned. Will my child experience difficulties, will they be sad, will they receive sufficient attention?

Researcher: That is an interesting statement you make. How is this for the others?

Parent 2: No, being concerned for your child is the same for all mothers, not only Turkish mothers. (FG2)

The mothers discussed whether being a caring mother was a typical characteristic of being of Turkish origin. A few mothers explained their urge to discuss questions about care as the result of having only one child or of having a concerned personality (‘I’m an extreme case, I know’). This resulted in parents apologising for asking ‘stupid’ caring questions on issues that seemed to matter less for the preschool staff. These explicit legitimations may also be understood as a form of agency of mothers resisting being submissive to the preschool scripts. By ‘blaming themselves’ because of their personality, gender, or culture, they actually managed to table their questions in the preschool.

## Discussion

We started this article by problematising the democratic deficit in educational and sociological studies on parental involvement (Tronto 2013). Instead of adopting an instrumental role of parental involvement in preschool learning, we explored the meanings parents – in this case with migrant backgrounds – attributed to preschool education and how they position themselves in relation to the preschool staff.

With regard to meaning-making about preschool education, parents in our study concurred with concerns about the academic and economic future of their children and the role played by early learning in preschool in this future; yet, this is not what worried them most. Their primary questions concerned the child and their bodily and socio-emotional care needs in the present and the actual belonging and participation of the child in the classroom, no matter what their backgrounds or language skills are. Reinforced by the alleged importance of early learning as an important foundation for later successful school and work life for children with migrant backgrounds and/or children living in poverty, aspects of care seemed to be undervalued in preschool policies, practices, and research. Parents’ requests for more attention, presence, and belonging as symbolic meanings of care activities and attitudes touch upon an even more political

connotation of care since parents feared that their children could be excluded from school and society. Tronto (1993) and Hamington (2015) highlighted the political potential of care in public institutions like preschools, claiming that care can ‘maintain, contain and repair our ‘world’, including our bodies, ourselves and our environment, so that we can live in it as well as possible’ (Tronto 1993, 101).

With regard to the relationship between parents and preschool, the focus groups revealed an eagerness of parents to know what was happening to their child in preschool, even when they did not show this eagerness by entering the school or communicating with the preschool staff. Our data indicate that parents take a rather subordinate position in relation to the preschool staff and preschool as an institution. Accordingly, Lareau and Shumar (1996), Hughes and Mac Naughton (2000), and Todd and Higgins (1998) drew attention to the fact that relationships between parents and schools are characterised by unequal power dynamics, which are often masked by notions of ‘partnerships’. Our results show how subaltern parents find themselves in complex and ambiguous positions in which they adhere to, yet simultaneously challenge, scripted preschool practices.

Despite these attempts, the request to be more connected with the staff and to be able to communicate and share in the care of their children remains somewhat unanswered in the stories of parents. Due to a lack of reciprocal communication and dialogue between parents and preschool staff, aspects of care remain under the radar. Tronto (2013) relates this democratic deficit to a caring deficit; that is, ‘the incapacities in advanced countries to meet the caring needs of children’ (Tronto 2013, 17). The connection between those two deficits originates from ‘the construction of a public/private split that is an outdated inheritance from Western political thought that misses important dimensions of both contemporary caring and democracy’ (Tronto 2013, 17). Parents in our study indeed questioned the discontinuity in care between the home and school environment and asked to install a shared caring responsibility, since care permeates the human condition and therefore cannot be compartmentalised (Hamington 2004; Wikberg and Eriksson 2008). In this vein, Tronto (1993, 2013) argued that it is impossible to work on a more socially just and inclusive society when care remains locked up in the private and parochial spheres.

Our study has some important limitations. Despite efforts, the focus groups predominantly consisted of mothers, which could have resulted in gender-biased data. A second limitation is that we predominantly reached parents who felt enough at ease to participate in a focus group in a school environment.

What do these meanings of preschool education and the parent-school relationship signify for policies and practices in parental involvement in preschool education? First, this study demonstrates that when parents’ participation is considered an ontological fact rather than an instrument for the sake of ‘closing’ the educational gap between privileged and underprivileged children, other insights (e.g. the importance of care) appear. Taking into account the position of parents as subalterns, preschool policies and practices should develop conditions in which *voice consciousness* is addressed. This is not a simple endeavour. Rather than claiming an equal partnership, schools may wish to encompass a continuous search for creating moments of reciprocal dialogue within unequal relationships. Instead of the more school-centric approaches of parental involvement (How can the parents help the teacher and the preschool in reaching a higher educational attainment?), more parent and community centred approaches of parental involvement are desirable (Lawson 2003; Doucet 2011). Our results suggest that school-centric approaches

risk failing to address what really matters for parents. Parents ‘perform’ as the good parent in these activities as a means of sharing information and caring responsibilities of the children with preschool staff. Finally, in contrast with the common understanding of parental involvement as an individual responsibility, preschool policies and practices should encompass a systemic view in which the preschool plays a crucial role in initiating connectedness and solidarity with parents and communities.

Our study suggests that parents want to be connected to the preschool and share the care of their children, but face many barriers. Ideas on individual parental involvement as a means to increasing educational attainment of underprivileged children risk perpetuating social inequalities rather than challenging them (Clarke 2006). We therefore advocate that further research take on a more systemic approach towards the parent-school relationship that explores how a democratic and open atmosphere in the context of unequal power dynamics may influence inclusive pedagogical practices for a diversity of children, families, and communities. Quality indicators may be discussed with parents and include well-being and physical health of children or ways in which parents and communities feel supported by the preschool.

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