



# European Early Childhood Education Research Journal

ISSN: 1350-293X (Print) 1752-1807 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/recr20>

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To cite this article: Katrien Van Laere & Michel Vandebroeck (2017) Early learning in preschool: meaningful and inclusive for all? Exploring perspectives of migrant parents and staff, European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 25:2, 243-257, DOI: [10.1080/1350293X.2017.1288017](https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2017.1288017)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2017.1288017>



Published online: 20 Feb 2017.



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## Early learning in preschool: meaningful and inclusive for all? Exploring perspectives of migrant parents and staff

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### ABSTRACT

Over the last decades, increasing attention has been paid in research and policies to the importance of children's early learning in preschool as a foundation for later life. This is considered especially beneficial for children living in disadvantaged societal conditions and those at risk of school failure. However, the perspectives of those most closely involved in a child's learning, namely parents and preschool staff, are often absent in early learning debates. Ten video-elicited focus groups with migrant parents and three focus groups with preschool staff took place in the Flemish Community of Belgium. By conducting a 'conventional content analysis', we present similar and opposing meanings that parents with migrant backgrounds and preschool staff attribute to early learning in regard to managing bodily needs of children and (dominant) language learning in preschools. Based on these results, we recommend that preschool policies and practices should continuously conceptualise early learning in dialogue with parents so that inclusion and exclusion mechanisms can be tracked, revealed, and dealt with.

### KEYWORDS

early learning; parents; professionals; preschool; migrant; inclusion

### Introduction

Over the last 40 years, increasing attention in research and policies has been paid to the importance of children's early learning in preschool as a foundation for later life. This is considered especially beneficial for children living in disadvantaged societal conditions and/or those at risk of school failure (Bennett 2012; Leseman and Slot 2014; Matthews and Jang 2007; Melhuish et al. 2015). We use the term preschool to designate all educational provision before the compulsory school age.

Scholars present various viewpoints on what children need to learn in preschool. In analysing OECD countries, Bennett (2005) identified a continuum between curricula with a focus on broad developmental goals (health and physical development, emotional well-being and social competence, communication skills, and general knowledge) and curricula with a focus on cognitive goals in school-like learning areas (mathematical development, language, and literacy skills). Some scholars have focused on pre-academic learning including early language, math and science (Jordan et al. 2009; Kermani and Aldemir 2015; Poe, Burchinal, and Roberts 2004), while others stress social learning including

civic and democratic learning (Dahlberg and Moss 2005), developing pro-social behaviour and self-regulation (Shanker 2013) or developing identity and self-esteem (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke 2000). Early learning can also concern physical development (i.e. gross and fine motor skills) (Turner and Hammer 1994) and embracing physicality and the body as a way to communicate (Giudici et al. 2001) or as a way to develop more cognitive self-regulation (Becker et al. 2014).

Whilst researchers have different views about what they value in early learning, there is little research on the views of parents and preschool staff. The focus in scholarly publications is often on what parents can do to help their children achieve the learning outcomes that the preschool or government has set, rather than on involving parents in discussions on the meanings of early learning (Doucet 2011; Garnier 2010; Lawson 2003). A small number of qualitative and quantitative studies have given a voice to parents, some focusing on general opinions and expectations of preschool (e.g. Foot et al. 2000; Gregg, Rugg, and Stoneman 2012), while others have addressed the perspectives of parents and staff on early learning during a child's transition to preschool or primary school (e.g. Arndt et al. 2013; Piotrkowski, Botsko, and Matthews 2000). In these studies, parents view early learning in preschool predominantly as a way to prepare children for primary school. Therefore early learning is seen to concern pre-academic skills in language, math and science (Arndt et al. 2013; Diamond, Reagan, and Bandyk 2000; Doucet 2000; Piotrkowski, Botsko, and Matthews 2000; Tobin, Arzubiaga, and Adair 2013; Whitmarsh 2011). Parents who use a different language at home consider learning the school language as a key objective to ensure a successful school career for their child (Durand 2011; Gillanders, Mc Kinney, and Ritchie 2012; Gregg, Rugg, and Stoneman 2012; Tobin, Arzubiaga, and Adair 2013; Whitmarsh 2011). Other parents have pointed to objectives such as learning to socially interact, learning the routines of school or learning to obey the teacher (Evans and Fuller 1998; Foot et al. 2000; Hwa-Froelich and Westby 2003; Mc Allister et al. 2005; Piotrkowski, Botsko, and Matthews 2000; Wildenger and McIntyre 2011).

Several studies have shown how parents and teachers share a similar view that early learning is about acquiring pre-academic skills which prepare children for primary school (Gill, Winters, and Friedman 2006; Lara-Cinisomo et al. 2008; Lin, Lawrence, and Gorrell 2003). In some studies parents have questioned this sole focus of readying children in pre-academic skills, instead underlining the importance of social, emotional and physical support as necessary aspects of early learning in preschool (Hwa-Froelich and Westby 2003; Mc Allister et al. 2005; Piotrkowski, Botsko, and Matthews 2000; Wesley and Buysse 2003). Parents with migrant backgrounds have particularly emphasised this, as they are often concerned that their child will face discrimination and prejudice in (pre)school and society (Jeunejean et al. 2014; Mc Allister et al. 2005; Tobin, Arzubiaga, and Adair 2013). Equally so, Wesley and Buysse (2003) have documented that some teachers in the US may oppose the idea that early learning is primarily about pre-academic skills and school readiness as they claim to have less time to support children's social and emotional development and their need to explore and discover things on their own (Wesley and Buysse 2003). In the same vein, preschool teachers, in a study by Adair (2012), have expressed concern that children from migrant backgrounds are pressured to give up their identity, due to discrepancies between school and home cultural contexts. Several scholars have demonstrated how preschool teachers in Nordic,

Balkan and Continental European countries value more facilitating the social, interpersonal and aesthetical development of children over the formal learning structures, such as circle time and (preparatory) reading and writing activities (Arndt et al. 2013; Broström et al. 2014, 2015; Johansson and Sandberg 2010).

In conclusion, the apparent international consensus on the importance of early learning may hold profound disagreements on what early learning *is*. The views of parents and teachers continue to be under-explored and under-theorised. This article contributes to closing this gap by analysing the multiple meanings that parents and preschool staff working with young children between two and a half- and four-years-old attribute to early learning in preschool. The Flemish Community of Belgium is a unique setting to do so, because it offers free preschool for all children from two and a half years onwards. This allowed us to concentrate on parents with migrant backgrounds in mainstream provision, as these parents are often of political and scientific concern with regard to equal educational opportunities (Bennett 2012; Vandebroek, De Stercke, and Gobeyn 2013).

## Research context

Belgium is characterised by a split system in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) with childcare services for children from 0 to three-years-old (*kinderopvang*) under the auspices of the Minister for Welfare, and preschool services (*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. In Belgium, 99% of five-year-old children are enrolled in preschool, and 82.2% of two and a half-year-old children are enrolled in preschool (Department of Education 2015); this is one of the highest enrolment rates in the EU (European Commission 2011). In many preschools, entry classes (*instapklassen*) or reception classes (*onthaalklassen*) are organised for children who are between two and a half- and three-years-old. In other preschools, the youngest children attend the first-grade class of preschool, which comprises children from two and a half- to four-years-old. A preschool class consists on average of 20–25 children with one teacher, although this may vary depending on the school and the time of year (Hulpia, Peeters, and Van Landeghem 2014; Van Laere, Vandebroek, and Peeters 2011). Teachers often have additional support from a teacher's assistant for a few hours per week. Teacher's assistants are typically responsible for caring for the youngest children (e.g. potty training, eating) while preschool teachers are responsible for the formal learning activities. All preschool teachers hold a bachelor's degree in pre-primary education and teacher's assistants usually have a secondary vocational degree in childcare (Van Laere, Peeters, and Vandebroek 2012).

## Methods

### Inviting respondents

We organised 10 focus groups of migrant parents who had children between two and a half- and four-years-old ( $n = 68$ ) and three focus groups of preschool teachers and

teacher's assistants working with the youngest children ( $n = 33$ ) in the cities of Ghent, Brussels, and Antwerp. The respondents gave permission to participate in this study by oral or written informed consent and approval was received from the ethical commission of the authors' university. Parents were invited by the researcher who was repeatedly present in different schools and organisations that work with young families. Staff members were invited through different educational umbrella networks as shown in Table 1. With the exception of three teachers, most staff members worked in schools than the schools that the parents' children attended. While speaking to potential respondents, some parents ( $n = 7$ ) who could not attend the focus group, provided relevant information concerning the research question. Therefore, we also included their input in the data analysis.

### ***Video-elicited focus groups***

Spivak (1988) argues several reasons why the *subaltern* cannot or does not speak; capturing the opinions of parents from migrant backgrounds is therefore not self-evident. A lot of hegemonic colonial research that aims to 'give voice' to people who find themselves in the margins of society, often result in the reverse effect by addressing people in their victim and helpless position and by doing so people are unintentionally silenced (Spivak 1988). Because of this, Tobin (2009) developed a method of conducting video-elicited focus groups that has shown to give a voice to parents and preschool staff (Tobin and Hsueh 2007; Tobin, Arzubiaga, and Adair 2013). In this study, discussions and reflections among parents and preschool staff were stimulated and evoked by showing a short movie of a day in a preschool entry class. The movie shows how 19 children, with and without migrant backgrounds, experienced a half or full day at a preschool in Lokeren, a small town in Belgium. The scenes include parents bringing and fetching their children, teacher-guided and free activities in class, free time at the outdoor playground, toileting, snack time and lunchtime. Respondents were invited to interrupt the movie and discuss it. They were also asked whether they found the movie to be 'typical'. While discussing typicality, underlying understandings and concepts of early learning were identified (Tobin 1992). No additional pre-structured questions concerning early learning were asked. The focus group sessions lasted from between one and a half and three and a half hours.

### ***Data recording and data analysis***

All focus group sessions were audio-taped and transcribed. In conducting a 'conventional content analysis' (Hsieh and Shannon 2005) the first author did axial coding and identified themes separately for staff and parents: language development; social development; discipline and structure; self-regulation and autonomy; and preschool readiness. After discussing these initial themes with the second author, the first author regrouped and recoded the data. Within this time-consuming process, three underlying core themes became apparent: fear of exclusion, managing the body; and readying children for early learning. These three themes were of a different analytical order than the initial themes that were more clear and seemingly evident when listening to the focus group discussions. These higher order themes were then coupled with the initial themes to discover similarities and differences between the perspective of parents and preschool staff.

**Table 1.** Respondents focus groups.

Parents	#	♂	♀	One of home languages =		Home languages ≠		Language focus group	Invited in
				Dutch		Dutch			
FP1	3	1	2	0		3		Dutch	NGO for undocumented persons
FP2	8	0	8	2		6		Dutch, Turkish, Slovak and English**	municipal school
FP3	3	0	3	0		3		Turkish and Dutch**	community health center
FP4	11	1	10	1		10		Dutch, Turkish and Arabic	Catholic school
FP5	8	0	8	2		6		Turkish**	toy library
FP6	2	0	2	2		0		Dutch	meeting space for young children and parents
FP7	8	1	7	1		7		Dutch, French and English	state school
FP8	3	3	0	2		1		French and Dutch	center for intercultural community development, out-of-school care and state school
FP9	13	1	12	2		11		Dutch, French, Turkish and English	private NGO school (Catholic)
FP10	9	0	9	1		8		Dutch, French, Turkish, Arabic and English**	private NGO school (Catholic)
Other parents	7	2	5	2		5		French, English and Dutch	small conversations while inviting parents for focus groups
<b>Total</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>15</b>		<b>60</b>			

  

Staff	Profile	#	Experience inschool ≤10 years		Experience inschool > 10 years		Invited through
			♀	♂			
FS1	preschool teachers	8	8	0	4	4	pedagogical guidance center of privateNGO schools (Catholic)
FS2	teacher 's assistants	13	13	0	5	8	pedagogical guidance center of privateNGO schools (Catholic)
FS3	preschool teachers andteacher 's assistants	12	12	0	10	2	local network of private NGO schools(Catholic), municipal schools and state schools
<b>Total</b>		<b>33</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>14</b>	

\*\*With professional translator Turkish-Dutch, Turkish-French.

## Results

### *Fear of exclusion*

A fear of exclusion from early learning ran through the discussions of parents, many of whom expressed the hope that their children can actively participate in preschool learning practices. Other parents associated this fear with the desire that their child will have a prosperous future in terms of school and employment. Some parents were concerned that their child will not succeed and will get left behind in school or be sent to a special needs education facility.

Parent: You are already happy that they do not send your child to special needs education. Therefore, you accept the minimum. (FP 8)

In order to prevent this from happening, this parent tends to be compliant with the preschool institution. The fear of exclusion towards their children causes parents to be prepared to adapt their expectations to the norms of the teacher and the school system.

Parents addressed different aspects of children's inclusion/exclusion in early learning practices, such as language learning. They considered learning the dominant language (Dutch) of the school to be imperative for inclusion. They claimed to notice a difference in the treatment, and consequently the learning, of children who speak the dominant language compared to those who do not.

Parent 1: The other children have Dutch as their mother tongue. Our children have Turkish as their mother tongue and Dutch is the second language. That is why those children have more priority than our children.

Parent 2: Actually, there is no difference because they are all children. But the language is the big difference. One child masters the Dutch language better than the other children. That difference will disappear from the moment the child masters the Dutch language. (FP2)

This quote illustrates a common belief among parents that all children will be treated equally once they master the Dutch language. For this reason, some parents tried to teach their children Dutch or to find other organisations (e.g. childcare) or persons to assist them in teaching their children Dutch prior to preschool. In contrast, other parents considered Dutch language teaching to be the responsibility of the preschool because it is something the school can offer and because they wish to preserve their home language. Some parents questioned the tendency for them to be held responsible when their child does not make enough progress in learning the dominant school language:

Parent: The teachers often tell me that my child speaks a foreign language with the other children. But it is their task to teach them Dutch! Once they told me to find another school. But what is wrong with my child when the basis of learning in preschool is not properly done? Teachers should have better training in supporting children in learning the language. The teachers should work harder and not conveniently state that my child has a problem. I do not talk Dutch at home because I am not able to speak it well. At home I speak French and Arabic. And when my child comes home, he sleeps and doesn't see me so much as the teacher. (FP9)

Because the preschool teacher masters the dominant language of school and society, they were by many parents considered as a gatekeeper to their children's learning

possibilities in order to be included in (pre)school and society. They urged, for example, more teacher-initiated early language learning instead of child-initiated learning activities, especially in situations where all children in the class spoke different home languages. From this perspective, some parents expressed worry that there are too many children in each class for the teacher to give each child the necessary language support. Other parents questioned the initial training of preschool teachers, which they considered insufficient for enhancing the second language development of young children in a multilingual context.

Besides the importance of learning the dominant language, many parents addressed the social learning processes that emanated from being in a group of diverse children. Parents considered the diversity of the children to be a potential enrichment for the personal, social and pre-academic learning opportunities of the children, which in turn could endorse their inclusion in school and society. It was assumed, for example, that by being in a diverse group of children, children could help each other to learn so no child would be excluded.

Parent 1: They see the world in the class. They learn habits in how to deal with people.

Parent 2: That is how they gain self-consciousness and more self-confidence. (FP7)

This concern for exclusion in early learning practices was entirely absent in the focus group discussions of preschool teachers and teacher's assistants. Only two teacher's assistants problematised potential exclusive mechanisms in preschool and underlined that early learning, if well organised and well thought out in preschool can make a difference in a child's life, relating the acquisition of the Dutch language and social and intrapersonal competences to be an asset for further educational possibilities.

Teacher's assistant: We have a unique task that is invaluable for many children. In a school career of a child this really can make a difference. (FS2)

### ***Managing the body***

Parents and preschool staff expressed similar views that young children learn to manage bodily needs such as eating, drinking, blowing their nose, toileting, sleeping, comforting, and dressing themselves. Learning to deal with these processes, which are connected with the physiology and emotional state of the human body, was considered a crucial issue for young children. Notwithstanding this common ground, there were differences between parents and preschool staff reasoning regarding why this is considered important and how, when and where children are supposed to acquire these abilities. While many parents considered 'becoming autonomous in life' to be a shared educational mission of teachers and parents, teachers considered 'becoming self-sufficient in (pre)school' to be the individual responsibility of the child (or the parent-child unit). This subtle but important difference between the teachers' conception of the 'self-sufficient' child and the parental conception of the 'autonomous' child should be noted. Teacher's assistants took an intermediary position in this divide.

Several parents and teacher's assistants understood managing bodily processes to be a part of the upbringing of a child which will help the child in their present and future lives to become autonomous at home, in school, and in broader society.



- Parent 1: The children need to learn things that will help them in their lives  
 Researcher: Like?  
 Parent 1: Things for in the home like dressing themselves, go to the toilet.  
 Parent 2: They learn to be autonomous!  
 Parent 1: Yes, that is it! (FP7)

From this viewpoint, some parents and teacher's assistants stated that preschool teachers do not always facilitate these learning processes enough in preschool.

- Parent: One of my friends sends her child clean and tidy to school. Although my friend always puts a handkerchief in the pants pocket of the child, her child often has snot on her face when returning from school. The teacher told her that her child needs to learn to blow her nose herself. My friend thinks that her daughter is too young for this and this causes issues. For example, last year her child had snot on her face on the school picture. (FP 5)

As shown in this citation, some parents, and also some teacher's assistants, expressed that preschool teachers often consider toileting and nose-blowing to be the sole responsibility of the child. These practices were considered age inappropriate because the child's own rhythm is not respected when it comes to natural processes such as toileting and eating or because parents were used to different educational practices in the country of origin. A few parents wondered if a child needs to be trained to have no support at all from others in learning and be completely independent, which indicates a sense of 'interdependency' within the educational goal of human 'autonomy'. Some teacher's assistants stated that they try to compensate for the perceived lack of individual support from the teachers as they consider this a vital part of a child's well-being and learning in preschool.

Several teachers stated that learning to manage the bodily needs was a typical learning process for young children. Some teachers said they prefer children who have already learned to manage their bodily needs at home or in a childcare center. Some parents concurred with this idea as they were afraid that their children will not receive appropriate attention from the teacher in early learning processes if they cannot manage their bodily needs by themselves. If this was the case, the teachers stated that children should learn to control their needs as soon as possible, in order to become 'self-sufficient' in the preschool.

- Teacher 1: In gymnastics the older children go alone to the toilet and the younger ones go to my class. But they all do this independently.  
 Teacher 2: That is fantastic!  
 Teacher 1: I find this convenient as well. ... I tell them 'everybody put his pants down' and they stand in line with their pants down. One on the toilet and off the toilet and ... hop, time for the next one.  
 Teacher 2: Wow, that is great! You drilled them well! (FS1)

The use of the verb 'to drill' in the last phrase indicates that the teacher needs to discipline the child's body in order for them to achieve 'self-sufficiency'. Disciplining the body also played a role in ensuring that children sit still and obey the rules of the teacher:

- Teacher: I have a serious little fellow in my class. I only have 16 children in my class. He is a very bright child. But to me it felt on the first school day like he was the equivalent of 14 children. So, I was like 'oops, I have to do something about this', I took him five times around his waist under my arm. Just to let him know 'hey you, it is like this' and then I put him on the bench. Well, results started showing, he stays on the bench. (FS1)

Many teachers and some teacher's assistants urged children to become 'self-sufficient' as soon as possible so children do not have to depend on them as they regularly claimed in the focus groups that the adult-child ratio does not suffice in preschool: learning children to control their bodily needs was considered a way to unburden the teacher.

Teacher: I run around a lot and when I want to start my painting activity, he pees in his pants. Then I have to remove the painting materials and the scissors so I can first clean the kid. Sometimes I feel the frustration at the end of the week: 'what did I actually achieve this week?' (FS1)

The focus on 'self-sufficiency' went beyond merely a pragmatic stance. As illustrated in this quote, the undisciplined body of a child was perceived as a hindrance to the educational work of being a teacher, which is in clear contrast with the parental conception of the 'autonomous' child.

### ***Readying children for early learning***

A recurrent view of preschool teachers was that young children between two and a half- and four-years-old are often not yet able to 'really learn' because of their undisciplined bodies and their lack of understanding of the dominant language of instruction.

Teacher: It is impossible to do everything you have planned with the young children. In the second and third class of preschool you can progress more than with the younger children. With the young ones a toilet accident happens now and then. (FS 1)

Teacher: Their concentration is excessively low that ... well, they are just not interested. They do not understand when I say 'take a big apple'. They do not know what 'big' means. So they cannot do this task. But these are such basic things! (FS 1)

Accordingly, preschool teachers expressed frustration that they cannot do their job as they learned it in university college. When asked what was meant by *real learning* and *real job*, haziness prevailed among the teachers. Indirectly, we identified some discussion items related to this real job. Some teachers addressed the importance of activities such as painting or circle time and learning about time and weather. Others referred to mathematical initiation or sensory exercises. Disciplining the bodies of the children and learning the basic Dutch terminology was seen as prerequisite for children to be ready for early learning in preschool. Several staff members stated that parents should make their children ready for early learning prior to starting preschool, which in some cases resulted in incidents in which parents were pushed to keep their children at home if they are not considered ready enough (e.g. toileting). One teacher's assistant tried to problematise these incidents by addressing her own experience as a mother to the other teachers and teacher's assistants in the focus group.

Teacher's assistant: Aren't you bothered by this? You have children who are just not ready for potty training and then you tell them 'You cannot come to the preschool'. My first son is born prematurely and he wasn't ready to become potty trained. I tried many times. He started to become potty trained in the beginning of the first year of preschool. But then I started thinking. He would miss a whole year of school if he wasn't allowed. Because in preschool they learn a lot, don't they? (FS3)

Some parents have adopted the view that they are responsible for preparing their child for preschool. To this end, some of these parents tried or advised other parents to send their children to childcare to make them 'ready' for early learning in preschool. Other preschool teachers and teacher's assistants considered it a shared responsibility between parents and staff to make children as soon as possible 'ready' for early learning. In contrast, some teacher's assistants and several parents considered (dominant) language learning and learning to manage bodily needs inherent to early learning in preschool instead of viewing it as a prerequisite for early learning.

## Discussion

Despite the proclaimed importance of early learning as a foundation for later life, the voices of parents and preschool staff of young children are often absent in these debates. In this study, we have demonstrated how parents and preschool staff attribute similar, yet at times opposing meanings to early learning.

As previously pointed out in a few studies (Mc Allister et al. 2005; Tobin, Arzubiaga, and Adair 2013), the data results reveal an omnipresent fear of exclusion in early learning which can be concerns for all parents but have particular relevance to parents with migrant backgrounds. With the exception of two teacher's assistants, preschool staff did not address the issue of possible exclusion in early learning. While parents assigned a central role to the staff as gatekeepers to inclusion (i.e. through language support) the teachers did not explicitly acknowledge this role. Instead, teachers often used deficit terms to refer to children from migrant backgrounds as being 'language poor' or 'having language delay' and as a consequence sometimes these children were perceived as being not motivated or interested in early learning. This implies that teachers view dual language learners as problematic and situate the problem first and foremost in the child or the parent, rather than considering how these learners enrich the school environment or seeing the children's learning as their responsibility. This is a troubling tendency since teachers' deficit beliefs in the learning capabilities of children inform how they interact with these children, which in turn impacts negatively on their learning outcomes (Pulinx, Van Avermaet, and Agirdag 2015; Souto-Manning and Swick 2006; Van Houtte 2011). This field of tension between the perspectives of parents with migrant backgrounds and preschool staff, challenges the popular consensus that ECEC is particularly beneficial for migrant and disadvantaged children (Bennett 2012; Matthews and Jang 2007). When emphasising the importance of early learning of young children as a foundation for life, it is imperative that (often unintentional) inclusion and exclusion mechanisms in early learning are tracked, revealed, and dealt based on continuous dialogue with children, parents and preschool staff themselves.

The existing literature seems to display a consensual opinion that early learning in preschool makes children ready for learning in primary school (e.g. Arndt et al. 2013; Lara-Cinisomo et al. 2008). Our study shows how readiness ideas also occur in regard to making children ready for learning in preschool. Many teachers, some teacher's assistants and parents assume that readying practices, such as disciplining the body or teaching the dominant language, should take place prior to preschool entry which implies that children must beforehand adapt to the preschool system in a unidirectional way. In contrast, several parents and teacher's assistants, who view bodily management and learning the

dominant language as an inherent part of early learning in preschool, seem to place less emphasis on readying children and adapting them to the system. Bloch and Kim (2015) problematised the introduction of a formal notion of 'readiness' in the Head Start programs in the US in which, for example, children's needs for emotional stability and security were increasingly reframed as competences or skills within a developmental hierarchy that children need to possess and demonstrate. If the child cannot sufficiently self-regulate and demonstrate the required skills it becomes the problem of the child instead of the problem of the teacher, the preschool or the curriculum (Bloch and Kim 2015). Moreover, in our study many parents and preschool staff experienced that children who did not master the dominant language and had not attended childcare before, had a higher risk of experiencing adaptation problems, which in turn could hinder their early learning. Nevertheless, they assumed that each child had to adapt in a unidirectional way to the preschool system. In this line of thinking, Lehrer, Bigras, and Laurin (2014) pointed out how implicit ideas and practices of readying children for Canadian preschools has paradoxically contributed to marginalising and stigmatising children considered disadvantaged. Despite the omnipresent fear of exclusion, it is remarkable how many parents did not address the unidirectional adaptation discourse. While they were fully aware of the gap between where their children were at and what the school expected, they did not explicitly ask how the preschool staff and system would adapt to the different experiences and starting positions of children. This may confirm the question Spivak (1988) raised about whether the subaltern can speak, and it may be associated with the notion of a 'culture of silence' (Freire 1996). He used this term to express the internalised oppression that parents experience in a school system in which knowledge is given by those who consider themselves knowledgeable (i.e. teachers) to those whom they consider to know nothing (i.e. children and their parents). This may help to explain the conformity of parents with the dominant norms of the preschools despite these norms possibly contributing to the exclusion of their children.

There are some limitations of this study to consider. First, despite efforts to recruit fathers, the focus groups predominantly consisted of mothers, which could result in gender-biased data. Second, this study predominantly covered the perspective of parents whose children regularly attend preschool. In order to focus on the meanings of early learning in preschool for all children, it is important to also enter more into dialogue with parents who do not often make use of the preschool system.

### ***Implications for policy and practice***

In order for preschool staff to constantly re-examine how the conceptualisations of early learning can benefit all children, including children from migrant backgrounds, continuous critical reflection is recommended on different levels. These critical reflection processes cannot take place without dialogue with parents as the meaning making of early learning should be the result of a democratic reflection involving those who are involved in the life of a young child, rather than the result of mere scientific discourse as communicated through curricula, equal opportunities policies and professional training. On the micro-level this implies that preschool institutions and staff members engage in dialogue with a diverse group of parents and enhance their listening skills. This will enable them to share their thoughts on early learning processes of children in view of also adapting their

own practices and systems in order to accommodate diverse children and families. Nevertheless, dialoguing and negotiating requires a reciprocity and democratic atmosphere which remains challenging in hierarchical systems in which the valuable knowledge of parents is often considered subordinate to the knowledge of the preschool staff on the children (Hughes and Mac Naughton 2000). To this end, we endorse the plea of many scholars to continue working on a more normative-reflective conceptualisation of ECEC professionalism in which the use of emotions and value-bound elements of professional actions, such as personal involvement and social responsibility, have a central place (Colley 2006; Kunneman 2005; Osgood 2010; Peeters 2008). Being open for multiple perspectives and being aware that knowledge about a ‘good practice’ in early learning is always provisional and tentative, is the core of the matter (Dahlberg and Moss 2005; Urban 2008; Vandenbroeck, Roets, and Snoeck 2009). Therefore, preschool staff members need to be more supported in order to be able to critically reflect and develop early learning practices in conjunction with parents, such as providing adequate pre-service and in-service training, reflection time in teams without the presence of the children, and good working conditions (Peeters and Sharmahd 2014). These discussions on early learning between preschool staff and parents will not only serve a purpose on the micro-level of the individual child and parents and the meso-level of all the children and families from the preschool institution. It should also be used as valuable input for local and national policy makers in ensuring meaningful and inclusive early learning for diverse children in different contexts.

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