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**Parent-Preschool Partnership:
Many Levels of Power**

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the meaning-making of parents in five Icelandic preschools concerning the collaboration between preschools and families. Further, the perspectives of educators on the views of the parents were also sought. The theoretical background was Moss's ideas of democratic early childhood education and MacNaughton's ideas of power relationships between parents and educators. Data were gathered in two steps: first, focus-group interviews were conducted with parents; and second, focus group interviews were conducted with a group of preschool educators who reflected upon the parent interviews. The parents and educators seemed to have similar experiences and views of the parent-professional collaboration, and of the division of power and knowledge between the two groups. The type of collaboration the parents and the educators described is not in line with democratic preschool pedagogy as explained by Moss (2007). They did not seem to believe that parents should be involved in decision making concerning the purposes, practices, and environment of the preschool. The parents from other cultures who participated in the study were in a marginalized position, and the educators seemed to be unsure about how to communicate with and accommodate families from cultures different from their own. The study reveals power relationships on many levels in the preschool community.

Key-words: preschool, parents, participation, power relations, democracy

Introduction

In recent times, the quality of early childhood services has been both scrutinized and criticized for neglecting the social aspects of ECEC along with the perspectives of children and their parents (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Peeters, & Van Laere, 2011). The apropos concept "meaning-making" has been used to make meaning from actual practice, while recognizing that there may be many meanings or understandings that people arrive at based on their experiences. Meaning-making specific to education is constructed for deepening the understanding of pedagogical work. Consequently, varying perspectives of different stakeholder groups are sought (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007). It has thus been proposed that the quality of early childhood programs is multi-dimensional and that it can be looked at through various lenses. Katz (1993) suggested that there are four different perspectives that contribute to the quality of child care: that of researchers in the field; that of parents; that of educators; and that of children who attend the program.

Parental engagement refers to the formal and informal relationships that parents have within ECEC settings. The involvement of parents has been recognized as an important part of preschool pedagogy. The *Starting Strong III* report regards it as a basic right of parents to

be involved in the education of their children, and it also encourages family and community involvement in early childhood services. The report argues that the continuity of children's experiences across different environments is greatly enhanced when parents and staff members exchange information regularly and adopt consistent approaches for socialisation, daily routines, child development, and learning (OECD, 2011).

This article reports on a study conducted with groups of parents and educators in Icelandic preschools. The aim of this study was to deepen our understanding of both parents' and educators' "meaning-making" as it pertains to the collaboration of preschools and families.

Early childhood education in Iceland

Preschools are the first level of the educational system in Iceland and almost all children attend full-day preschools between the ages of 2 and 6 years old. Preschools are thus an integral part of the lives of young children and their families. The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture formulates the educational policy and publishes the National Curriculum Guide for Preschools (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011). According to a law that took effect on July 1, 2011, all teacher education in Iceland now mandates five years of university education and training; hence, only those who have attained a Master's degree from an accredited university and a license by the Icelandic Ministry of Education can use the occupation title of "preschool teacher". There exists, however, a shortage of well-educated preschool teachers in Icelandic preschools. As of 2014, only 32% of the educators working in preschools had been educated as preschool teachers, another 16% had some other type of pedagogical education, but 52% had none at all (Statistics Iceland, 2016). In praxis, this means that experienced preschool teachers take on administrative positions, devoting much of their time to the leadership and guidance of unskilled staff with the result that most of the people who work with preschool children on a day-to-day basis are not qualified preschool teachers.

University education for early childhood professionals aims at providing deep theoretical knowledge that they can draw on in their work with children and develop their practices. However, research has shown that early childhood professionals with university-level education are facing increasing difficulties in applying their education and theoretical knowledge to everyday practice (Karila, 2012). Preschool teachers have been found to experience professional isolation as not only are they in a minority in the schools, but additionally lacking colleagues with whom they can reflect and discuss daily issues, they are

unable to make proper use of their knowledge and education (Pálmadóttir & Thórðardóttir, 2005). The problems facing unskilled assistants in preschools, by contrast, often relate to their lower status resulting in frequent staff turnover, since, for many of them, the work represents a temporary job rather than a long-term career in education.

A new national curriculum for all school levels in Iceland was published in 2011. It has a common section for all school levels where six basic areas are introduced as common thread: literacy, sustainable development, health and wellbeing, democracy and human rights, equality, and creativity. As before the main emphasis of the national curriculum guidelines for preschool is on play, democracy, and caregiving (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011). According to the curriculum guidelines, preschool practices should stimulate the cooperation of children, educators, and parents, and be built on reciprocal understanding, trust, and respect. Preschool educators are expected to show understanding and respect for different family types and forms. The wellbeing of children in preschool is seen as inseparable from the welfare of their families, and family and parental contributions to preschool activities are regarded as important. Mutual sharing of information between the parents and the preschool is encouraged. Parents should have opportunities to become acquainted with the preschool's pedagogy and curriculum, while preschool educators should receive information concerning the circumstances, experiences, and interests of the children.

The guidelines stress that educators, parents, and children should all be active participants and collaborators and that they should all influence decisions concerning the preschool. The guidelines also stress parental participation and the fact that parents' views should be heard and their influence should be encouraged. Furthermore, the individual preschool curriculum guidelines are intended to be written in partnership with parents and children, and the participation and cooperation of educators, parents, and children should form the basis by which preschools are assessed. Although the curriculum guidelines emphasize parental participation on the grounds that families and preschools are collaborators, the guidelines also clearly express the belief that, as professionals, preschool teachers are responsible for the preschool's curriculum and pedagogy.

Diverse groups of parents

The composition of the Icelandic population has changed considerably in recent decades. Immigration to Iceland has grown rapidly, with the immigrant population growing from 2.3% of the total population in 1998 to 8.9% in 2015. Similarly, in 1998, 3.7% of Icelandic preschool children had a foreign mother tongue while, in 2014, the figure had grown

to 11%. Polish born immigrants to Iceland were, by far, the most numerous group. (Statistics Iceland, 2016). As a result, and in a relatively short time, Icelandic society has changed from being rather homogenous to being much more diverse and multicultural.

The municipalities who run most of the preschools and compulsory schools in Iceland have responded to these changes in the preschool demography in various ways. The city of Reykjavík has, for instance, put forward a policy that is aimed at all children and families. Emphasis is placed on the staff getting to know all of the children and their families, with the aim of developing flexible ways to handle the different views, cultures, and experiences, which might otherwise create challenges. Diverse ways of communicating with families who do not share the same language and culture as the teachers have also been introduced (Skóla- og frístundasvið Reykjavíkur, 2014). The concept “democratic professionalism” has been used to describe the complex role that early childhood educators play today (Oberhuemer, 2005). Democratic professionalism implies finding ways to communicate with *all* parents, not least with those groups who are normally inactive in the formal discourse.

Preschools as a democratic practice

In the beginning of the last century, John Dewey discussed democracy as a way of being in the world, as a mode of living together. He said, “A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (Dewey, 1916, p. 101). Today’s scholars continue to explore and reflect on how early childhood institutions can foster democracy. Peter Moss’s (2007) conceptualisation of early childhood institutions as places of democratic practice inform the findings of this study. In a democratic early childhood institution, all citizens participate: children, parents, practitioners, politicians, and other citizens. Moss suggests that bringing democratic politics into early childhood institutions means that citizens engage in at least four types of activities. In the first place, decision-making about the purposes, practices, and environment of the preschool; in the second, evaluation of the pedagogical work through participatory methods; in the third, contesting dominant discourses; and in the fourth, opening up to change.

Dahlberg and Moss (2005) have suggested that democratic ECEC practice needs certain values to be shared among the institution’s community including: (a) respect for diversity; (b) recognition of multiple perspectives and diverse paradigms for viewing and understanding the world, as there exists more than one approach or answer to most questions; (c) welcoming

curiosity, uncertainty, and subjectivity, and the responsibility they require of us; and finally, (d) critical thinking.

It can be readily seen, in early childhood documents in the Nordic countries, that democracy is high on the list of desirable values. Findings from a recent study on values in Nordic ECEC curriculum guidelines indicate an emphasis on democracy as a fundamental value (Einarsdottir, Puroila, Johansson, Broström, & Emilson, 2015). The Icelandic National Curriculum Guidelines emphasize democratic practice and equal partnership between preschools and families. It states, “Preschool should be a democratic forum and learning community where personnel, parents, and children are active participants and influence decisions concerning the preschool” (p. 33).

Negotiations of roles and power

Recently, reconceptualization of and critical perspectives on the collaboration between educators and families have emerged. Scholars in the field of education and diversity have criticized the traditional ways of working with families, which do not always take social, political, and cultural contexts into consideration (Blaise, 2009). Souto-Manning and Swick (2006), for instance, propose an empowerment paradigm for parent and family, facilitating collaboration and embracing diversity as a resource. Similarly, Blue-Banning and colleagues (2004) have recommended an equal partnership that encompasses not only a harmonious relationship but an active effort by professionals to empower families.

Thus, the main challenge to the “traditional” view of the parent-educator partnership concerns issues of power and professional knowledge. This study applies Glenda MacNaughton’s ideas concerning power relationships between parents and educators, where she builds on Foucault’s theory about the relationships between knowledge, truth, and power and the effect of these relationships on us and on the institutions we create. It involves a move away from acquiring universal truths and expert knowledge about children, and a move towards producing local critical knowledge drawing on Foucault’s distinction between the will to know and the will to truth (Mac Naughton, 2005).

MacNaughton and Hughes (2011) have highlighted how parental knowledge has been marginalized and how educators’ formal and professional knowledge of children is, in general, often prioritized over parents’ informal, anecdotal knowledge about their own particular children. To address this, the authors have developed an alternate model of knowledge-power relationships in the area of staff-parent communications. They suggest that educators can create new knowledge-power relations with parents through a “communicative

collaboration” that acknowledges, respects, and utilizes parents’ knowledge of their children. Through such communicative collaboration, staff and parents are able to “co-create” expertise as both the foundation and the outcome of the social relations between them (Hughes & MacNaughton, 1999, 2001).

A partnership that assumes cooperation on equal terms and an appreciation of parental expertise, however, might be construed as challenging the professional identity of teachers. Alasuutari (2010) points out that the Finnish understanding of partnership seems to assume communication on equal terms and an appreciation of the parent’s expertise in questions regarding their child and the child’s education. This understanding can challenge the expertise and the expert-layperson relationship. Alasuutari’s study with Finnish preschool educators identified two different collaboration frames: a vertical frame, and a horizontal one. The former describes a more traditional approach to the parent-professional relationship that emphasizes expert knowledge. The latter is in accordance with more recent discussions about expertise and democratic professionalism in ECEC.

Research questions

Profound changes in the population of children in Icelandic preschools and their families have occurred during the last two decades. The Icelandic national curriculum guidelines state that preschools should be a democratic community, where personnel, parents, and children are active participants. Policy documents from the municipalities also put more emphasis on educators working with families. In the wake of these changes, this current study aims to examine the meaning-making of parents and educators in Icelandic preschools concerning the collaboration between preschools and families.

Specifically, we address the following questions:

- What is the relationship between parents and educators in the preschool community?
- How do the parents and the preschool educators negotiate roles and power?
- How do the preschool educators accommodate diverse groups of parents?

Methods

Data were gathered in two steps. First, focus group interviews were conducted with 26 parents in five groups comprised of 19 mothers and 7 fathers. The parents had children in five preschools in the municipal area of Reykjavik, Iceland. Most of the parents were of Icelandic origin, except for two mothers who were Polish. The other parents of foreign origin did not

choose to participate. An interpreter assisted the Polish mothers during the interviews. The participants in each group had in common that they were parents of the oldest children in the same preschool. The second data-gathering step included a focus group interview conducted with a group of preschool educators who reflected upon the interviews with the parents.

Since the intention was to create a non-threatening environment where the participants were able to express themselves freely, focus groups were used. The hallmark of focus groups is that they capture the interaction between participants to produce information and insights that would be less accessible without this interaction within the group. Using a focus group enables a group discussion, which resembles in many ways a lively conversation, in order to find out the attitudes, opinions, and perspectives of the group members. The aim is not to have the group reach a consensus. Instead, attention is placed on understanding the feelings, comments, and thought processes of the participants as they discuss the issue at hand (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Morgan, 1998).

The interviews in the focus groups with the parents were predetermined but flexible. The parents were asked what they thought was meant by “parents’ participation in the preschool”, what they found to be the purpose of collaboration between parents and preschool educators, and what their experience of collaboration was with the preschool. They were also asked if they wanted to have more influence on what was done in the preschool, and if they thought collaboration with the preschool would have a real influence on the children. Further, they were asked about what form of collaboration they preferred, and what influenced whether or not they collaborated with the preschool. Since the parents all had children who were starting compulsory school in the fall, they were also asked what they thought about the transition between preschool and regular school. The interviews were carried out at the end of the day, around 5:00–6:00 pm.

The second data-gathering step was conducted after the parent group interviews were transcribed and analysed. It involved a focus group interview with a group of preschool educators from five different preschools comprising two preschool directors, one deputy director, and two preschool teachers. The views of the parents were presented to the educators who came from different preschools from the parents. The preliminary findings from the focus group discussions with the parents were sent to the educators beforehand. They then met with two researchers for a two-hour meeting, where the report based on the focus group interviews with the parents were presented and discussed .

Thematic research analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyze the data. Thematic analysis is characterized by flexibility and involves searching across a data

set to identify, analyze, and report patterns. A theme captures important aspects of the data in relation to the research questions and represents some level of meaning within the data set. The themes reflected the theoretical viewpoints that informed the study. The main themes identified concerned firstly, the relationship between parents and educators, secondly, negotiation of roles of power, and thirdly, diverse groups of parents.

Qualitative research recognizes the existence of multiple voices. In all of the focus groups, the researchers tried to capture individual voices within the discussions as well as the group interactions and the discussions in the group (Barbour, 2009). It should be noted that the participants in this study do not represent the general population of parents in Icelandic preschools. All of the parents in the five preschools were invited to participate, but only a limited number of them accepted. Nor were the preschool educators randomly chosen, rather, all were specifically asked to participate due to their reputation of being enthusiastic professionals. Thus, it should be remembered that this study reports the experiences and views of this group of parents and educators at this point in time, and does not imply that the views of all preschool parents and educators in Iceland are the same as the ones found here. The analysis and detailed description in what follows is intended for the reader to see how these findings fit into the general scheme of things, and also to determine to which other parents and educators they might be transferable.

Findings

Relationship between parents and educators

In the focus groups, the parents discussed their interactions with the preschools and most of them expressed satisfaction in regard to their relationship with the educators. All of the parents in the focus groups valued informal, verbal collaboration with the preschool staff, an opportunity to discuss their concerns about their own child's behaviour and development. The two Polish mothers especially found it important to foster informal discussions about their children, when they brought them to school in the morning and when they picked them up in the afternoon. Formal events, such as the summer grill party, the Christmas celebration, cultural week, and the graduation of the oldest children, were also mentioned as important parts of their collaboration with the schools.

Many of the parents also mentioned the importance of getting information about what the children were doing, either through photos or through the preschool's website, so that they could discuss the daily school life with their children. Much discussion took place with the

parents concerning the means of communication, which led to different viewpoints being expressed. These included whether information should be provided on Facebook or through e-mail, if there should be pictures of the children, etc.

These findings from the parents' focus groups stimulated robust discussions in the group of preschool educators. They agreed that some parents stopped by in the morning to chat, but that there were always some who never stopped by. They did not talk as much as the parents did about informal communications; instead, they focused more on the mode of information delivery. They seemed to see it as an important role for them to provide parents with information. The preschool educators also were experienced in using various forms of online communication. One of them said: "We are getting a new generation of parents, technically capable people ... Although some of them want eye-to-eye contact others just say: 'Send me an email' or they want to get [information] on Facebook."

The educators also discussed the implications of how much effort they were putting into providing the parents with information, and constantly reminding them of things. The discussion below illustrates this:

Educator 1: "We inform parents through so many means—through emails, we have added Facebook, we put information on the board, and we talk with parents directly to remind them. Even though we have sent emails there is always one or two who do not take notice..."

Educator 2: "Always someone..."

Educator 1: "And you have to phone them and say that we are catching the bus now..."

Educator 2: "Reminding the parents, to please arrive at 9 o'clock tomorrow morning. It is tiring as you do not always remember it yourself."

Educator 3: "We are serving them too much."

Educator 1: "Yes, unfortunately, we also overreact sometimes, about the clothes and so on..."

Educator 3: "You do not want them [the children] to miss out on some adventure. But somewhere the parents must take responsibility ... this is very difficult..."

As the dialogue above illustrates, the preschool educators felt they were often serving the parents too much, especially when it came to reminding them of upcoming trips or changes in the routine. They said they did this because they felt it was important that all children were able to participate, but they still felt they were, perhaps, taking on some of the parents' own responsibilities. At the same time, they found it important to keep the parents informed about

the pedagogical practices and daily life of the children in the preschool. Thus, the educators were concerned that they were providing too much service to the parents and they seemed to experience a dilemma about the role of the preschool, with its being an educational institution, on one hand, and its being a service provider on the other. This can be a sensitive course to navigate. As they saw it, they were caught between their responsibility to provide the parents with information about practical matters and their responsibility as educators.

MacNaughton and Hughes (2011) have pointed out how parental knowledge has been marginalized and how educators' formal and professional knowledge of children has often been prioritized over parents' informal knowledge about their own particular children. The findings from the focus groups show that the parents and educators in the present study were in agreement on the division of power and knowledge and seemed to have similar experiences and views of parent-professional collaboration. Both groups discussed extensively different modes of communication between preschools and families. The parents especially valued informal verbal collaboration with the preschool staff where they could talk about their own children. The participating educators, on the other hand, seemed to find it of primary importance to provide parents with information, and they spent a long time discussing the various modes they had used for disseminating information to parents.

Parents' and preschool educators' negotiation of roles and power

Many of the parents who participated in the study emphasized the importance of having educated preschool teachers working with their children, saying that they recognized and valued the preschool teachers' expertise and professionalism. They acknowledged the differences they experienced in collaborating with educated preschool teachers as compared with unskilled staff. Not only did they recognize the professionalism and expertise of the teachers, but also their stability as employees. In one of the preschools with high staff turnover and a lack of educated preschool teachers, the parents discussed the way this affected their participation and the effects it had on the children as well. They felt they were constantly meeting and interacting with new staff who often stayed for only a few months. One of the mothers said:

The young people that have been working here are in many ways fantastic, but they do not always understand the importance of things. Like when we arrive in the morning and the department leader welcomes you, and says 'nice to see you' and so on, the others are more like, 'okay, the child is here, check'. This has its influence.

In reflecting on these findings, the preschool educators all agreed about how difficult it was when there was not only high staff turnover but also when those working with the children were often young and unskilled. They found it very stressful and said it affected them as professionals as well as having negative effects on the children and on their cooperation with the parents. They discussed ways to make the parents more aware of the importance of having professionals working in the preschools. They mentioned, for example, that by making the curriculum and the pedagogical activities more visible to the parents, their professionalism would become more apparent.

When the parents were asked if they felt they could have any influence on the practices at their children's preschools, many of them said that the educators were willing to listen to their concerns and respond to them. One mother gave an example of a positive reaction from the preschool after contacting the department leader about an incident when her son had been teased because he was wearing pink clothes. His favourite colour was pink, but another boy had asked him if he was turning into a girl and informed him that only old women wore pink. After the mother's complaint to the school, it was decided to hold a *pink day* in the preschool when everyone (children and educators alike) was encouraged to wear something pink. By doing this, the preschool teachers gave recognition to the mother's knowledge of and views about her own child.

During the group interviews, an example of a negative reaction to a parent's criticism also emerged. One father had expressed his dissatisfaction with the outdoor education at his child's preschool and the amount of time the children spent outside every day. The practice was simply introduced, he said, the parents had not been consulted. The father recounted that he had spoken to the department leader about his dissatisfaction, but the response he got was that the preschool's policy would not be changed.

Father: "[I was told] 'this is your opinion, you can have it, but we will not change it'."

Father: "...I was just expressing my opinion...I wasn't satisfied with the reaction...but I won't talk about it more."

This was a father who had earlier said that parents should not influence preschool pedagogy. Later, when he decided to present his views about outdoor education and discuss the matter with the preschool teachers, it was made clear that a dialogue on this subject was

not welcomed. As his child was happy in the school, he did not pursue it further. This was a matter of attempting to change the preschool's policy, something which could not be done.

The preschool educators agreed that although parents were mainly interested in their own children, there was now, more than previously, interest in the aims and practices of the preschool in general. Some mentioned that parents were encouraged to criticise the preschool's policies if they did not like what was going on. The main ideology of the preschool, however, would not be changed, as illustrated in the exchange below:

Educator 1: "I find the parents are becoming much more interested, and they have started to look critically on what we are doing. We emphasize that parents come to us and draw our attention to what can be improved because if we do not hear anything...everybody can sleep on their watch...so we welcome it. If parents are not satisfied with, e.g., outdoor education—which is a kind of a basic ideology of the preschool you know—we are not going to change that; but we welcome all suggestions about what could be better."

Educator 2: "It is also important that you explain it professionally..."

Educator 1: "Exactly..."

Educator 3: "...not only saying 'yes, this is the way we do it here'."

Educator 1: "This is the pedagogy of the preschool and we explain it so...as soon as you argue it well, you can sell people the idea."

The preschool educators who participated in the discussion above felt their primary responsibility was to explain to the parents the preschool's ideology and not simply to change things to appease the parents. Thus, the preschool educators and the parents seemed to agree about the division of knowledge and power between themselves. When parents expressed their concerns or made requests relating to their own children, the preschool educators made an effort to accommodate them and to fulfil the children's and their parents' wishes. When the parents' requests or criticisms concerned the preschool's pedagogy, the educators saw it as their responsibility to explain to the parents the purpose and the aim of these practices.

Both groups made a clear distinction between professional knowledge, and the parents' knowledge of their own children (MacNaughton and Hughes, 2011). On the one hand, the parents provided examples of collaboration on equal grounds when their knowledge of their own children was respected. They mentioned that they could always express their wishes and worries concerning their own children to the educators, and they felt that they were listened to. On the other hand, the parents trusted that the professionals generally knew best and they

respected their expert knowledge. They emphasized the importance of having well-educated professionals working with their children, even if they did not always agree with the educators' practices. They did not, in general, agitate for change but acknowledged rather the expertise of the professionals as long as their children were happy in the preschool.

The educators' views were in concord with those of the parents. They saw themselves as the experts who were in charge of the pedagogical practices and curriculum of the preschool, things which would not be changed even if some parents were critical. They were conscious of their professional role and discussed how they could best communicate to the parents not only the importance of well-educated professionals working in the preschool, but also the purpose and aims of the school's practices. The educators seemed to see the preschool schedule and curriculum as somewhat unchangeable. They expected families to adapt to things as they were and did not respond flexibly to the parents' suggestions or worries.

Accommodating diverse groups of parents

Although the parents in the study were not a homogenous group, the two foreign mothers who participated were in a somewhat unique position. They seemed to have less chance of taking time off from work for school meetings than the Icelandic parents did. They worked from 8 to 16 daily and maintained that it was very difficult for them to participate in the preschool's activities during working hours. The Polish mothers' marginalized position was also evident when it came to modes of communication with the preschool. As with the Icelandic parents, they appreciated informal discussions about their children when they brought them to the preschool in the morning or picked them up in the afternoon. When it came to other modes of communication, however, they preferred to receive emails in Polish or English. They said it was a problem when emails were only in Icelandic as they would have to get the messages translated the next day which might then be too late, especially if the emails concerned something happening that day.

The two Polish mothers also lacked the background knowledge that the Icelandic parents had, and what the Icelanders took for granted was often unfamiliar to the newcomers. Knowledge about the primary schools was one example. One of the mothers expressed great concern about her daughter's transition to primary school, the prospect of which raised many questions. Not only would this be her first child to enter an Icelandic primary school but, since she did not speak Icelandic, the process would be more difficult. She had questions such as: How long would the child's school day be? What would happen on the first day? Should

she stay with her the first day or the first week in the school or leisure centre? And what was best for the child and the school? Furthermore, she wanted the child to be introduced to the daily schedule, and to know what she was supposed to learn, how to behave in the dining room, how snack time was conducted, and whether the routine was similar day to day.

The preschool educators had varied experience of working with diverse groups of parents. They discussed the findings from the parents' focus groups and agreed that the foreign parents were often isolated but said that the preschools were trying to find ways to communicate with them, as the following excerpt illustrates:

Educator 1: "I think they are often isolated."

Educator 2: "Yes, I think so too."

Educator 3: "Just as it said in the paper [the findings from the parents' focus groups]. They are not equal..."

Educator 1: "...especially when they do not speak English."

Educator: "Yes, it is devastating when they cannot cope with English, because then you yourself are stuck."

The educators saw language as the main barrier, especially if the parents spoke neither Icelandic nor English. They mentioned that the municipality had translated booklets and that there were interpreters available for formal meetings. One of the educators had a Polish woman among her staff, which had been helpful. They talked about how far they should go in accommodating these parents, as when, for instance, they have sent newsletters but then a parent comes in who has not understood the information because it is all in Icelandic. The preschool educator in the following example explains:

Educator: "Regarding informal communications, they, the foreign parents, come after we send out a newsletter because they do not understand. They want to ask if they have understood things correctly."

Researcher: "Do you communicate with them in a foreign language?"

Educator: "No. I send everything out in Icelandic. I mean these are people who are going to live here."

Researcher: "Exactly."

Educator: "You know. They have to learn to manage. I try talking to them in English if they don't get it [in Icelandic]."

Researcher: "Aha."

Educator: "Perhaps I am too tough. I don't know."

The educators who participated in the focus group seemed in some ways insecure about how to communicate with, and how to accommodate families from cultures different from their own. They discussed whether they were perhaps *too* helpful, and one of them mentioned delivering letters to a speech therapist instead of letting the parents take care of it. Another one said, “We are learning. This is a new group, which is growing, and we have to experiment and find new ways.” They had guidelines from the municipalities, emphasizing cultural sensitivity, which they were making an effort to follow. And while they were hesitant to serve the foreign parents too much, they had the children’s well-being in mind and wanted to afford them the same opportunities as the other children in the class, regardless of the language problems with their parents. MacNaughton and Hughes’ (2011) model of knowledge-power relationships with parents, which acknowledges, respects, and utilizes parents’ knowledge of their children, could be helpful in these circumstances.

The two Polish mothers were in a marginalized position. They did not speak the language, they did not have the taken-for-granted knowledge that the other parents had, and they seemed to have less flexibility in their employment to attend events and meetings in the preschool during working hours. The expertise, resources, and circumstances of these parents did not seem to be recognized, and meetings were generally adjusted to the working hours of the majority of parents. As MacNaughton and Hughes (2011) point out, the educators were thus in the position of silencing the cultural and linguistic background of these parents, although that was not their conscious intention, when working time conflicts made it difficult for them to participate.

Discussion

The present study sets out to construct and understand the cooperation between families and preschools through the meaning-making of parents and educators. To address these issues, focus group interviews with parents of the oldest children in five Icelandic preschools were conducted. The findings from the interviews were presented to a group of preschool educators who discussed the views of the parents. Thus the views of the parents, as well as the views of the educators that appear in the transcripts from the focus group discussions, were used as the data set.

The theoretical construct of the study was Peter Moss's (2007) ideas of democratic early childhood education. Democratic practice in early childhood institutions involves participation of parents and educators built on equal terms. That means respecting diversity, recognizing multiple perspectives and paradigms, and welcoming curiosity and uncertainty (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). This is consistent with the Icelandic national curriculum guidelines for preschools (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011), which state that the preschool should be a democratic learning community where educators, parents, and children are active participants and collaborators, and that they should all influence decisions concerning the preschool. The guidelines, however, also clearly express that, as professionals, preschool teachers are responsible for the school's curriculum and pedagogy, which they, subsequently, introduce to the parents. This may seem paradoxical but is consistent with Karila and Alasuutari's (2012) study in Finland, which shows that although the guidelines and legislation on ECEC emphasize equality and partnership in the parent-practitioner relationship, the meaning of equality is not clearly defined in the documents. On the one hand, parents are given the status of experts; while on the other hand, the use of this expertise seems to be confined and limited. In addition, an important component in this relationship involves educators providing the parents with information.

When the type of collaboration described by the parents and the educators is examined through the theoretical lens of preschools as a space of democratic practice (Moss, 2007), it does not really meet the required criteria. Democratic preschool pedagogy challenges prevailing discourses and welcomes change. It is a space where citizens are involved in decision-making about the purposes, practices, and environment of the preschool, and are engaged in the evaluation of the pedagogical work through participatory methods. Neither the parents nor the educators who participated in this study saw these issues as being the parents' business.

The findings are in harmony with Alasuutari's (2010) vertical frame that emphasizes the professional expert's knowledge. The horizontal frame, where the relationship between practitioners and parents is one of equal partners and the knowledge of parents is valued, was only evident to the extent that it concerned parents' knowledge of their own children. Alasuutari (2010) discusses challenges that relate to expertise and the expert-layperson relationship, suggesting that partnership that assumes cooperation on equal terms and an appreciation of parental expertise might challenge teachers' identities as professionals. That may have been the case with the Icelandic preschool educators who participated in the present

study. They are in the minority in the preschools, working in a primarily layman environment, often struggling to apply their knowledge and education. Thus, they find themselves in a position where it necessary to emphasize their education and professional knowledge.

Parent and preschool cooperation involves many levels of power. The findings from this study show that there were unequal power relations not only between parents and educators but between parents as well. These findings indicate that preschools are facing a dilemma when it comes to educator-parent partnerships, a dilemma involving the negotiation of power and roles. This dilemma is also evident in the National Curriculum guidelines for preschools (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011).

The main limitations of this study that must be acknowledged concern the selection of the participants. All the parents of the oldest children in five preschools were invited to participate but only a limited number chose to do so, with the result that we do not, in any way, have a typical group of parents. Additionally, the educators were not selected randomly; rather, they were selected because they were known to be keen professionals.

This study has the potential to contribute to the discourse on parent-professional relationships and to be of importance for ECEC policy: for educators, for parents, and for preschool teacher education in general. In today's multicultural and ever-changing societies, preschool educators need to reflect on what democracy in preschools really means when put into practice, and on power relations in the preschool community. By focusing on empowering parents and families and on collaboration that embraces diversity as a resource (Souto-Manning and Swick, 2006), new windows of opportunities may open up.

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