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Great expectations: migrant parents and parent-school cooperation in Norway

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ABSTRACT

One long-standing characteristic of schools in Norway is inclusive education as a primary goal. The last years, the Norwegian government has emphasised increased parent-school cooperation as a way to limit risks, i.e. of drop-outs. This article focuses on how parent-school relationship is played out in an economic and socially diversified urban borough in Bergen, Norway. It draws on fieldwork and interviews among parents, teachers and principals in three different schools. As this article shows, the increased focus on parents' active engagement in the school encourages and creates expectations of an intensive parenting model. Yet, not all parents are ready, willing or have the capacity to pursue the intensive parenting model. We suggest that the current promotion of middle-class intensive parenting by schools, in practice, shifts the responsabilisation of equal education away from the state towards individual families and undermine the ideals of inclusive education and equal opportunities in Norway.

KEYWORDS

Intensive parenting; migrant parents; inequality; egalitarian; parent-school cooperation; expectation; inclusive education; welfare state

Introduction

In Norway, engaging in children's schooling has become an increasingly important part of the activities that define being a good parent, a pattern that is consistent with international trends (Crozier 1998; Crozier and Davies 2007; Hornby and Lafaele 2011; Turney and Kao 2009). Acceptable engagement includes following up on children's homework, keeping in touch with teachers, and taking part in activities at the school. The school reform often referred to as the 'Knowledge School', applied from the mid-2000s onwards, into Norwegian primary and lower secondary schools has shifted focus onto parents' contributions to their children's schooling and on the effects that parental involvement has on learning outcomes (Helgøy and Homme 2015). The formal rights of parents to influence schools increased further from around 2006 onwards as part of the democratisation and neoliberalisation of society (Bæck 2015). One consequence is that teachers encourage parents and pupils to embrace particular, middle-class views of what a 'good' parent and a 'good' pupil are, which often translates into an intensification of parenting

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(Crozier 1998; Akselvoll 2016) and a school policy regime that has increased expectations of parental school involvement (Bæck 2015; Helgøy and Homme 2015).

In this article, we discuss how the school's expectations towards parent engagement are conveyed in encounters between parents and teachers, and how these expectations are experienced by parents with migrant backgrounds from Iraq, Ethiopia, West Africa and Somalia. In Norway, researchers have been concerned with how satisfied parents are with their level of cooperation with their children's schooling along with what their attitudes towards this cooperation may be (Bæck 2010b), and have evaluated the success of particular programmes designed to enhance parents' involvement in schools (Helgøy and Homme 2015). Researchers have also suggested the role of schools in generating perceptions of 'good parenting'. Very few studies have focused on the normative ideals of parenting that permeate home-school relations or on the increased expectations of parental involvement in students' education. This article aims to complement and contribute to previous literature by focusing on the relationship between migrant parents and schools.

We begin with a discussion of the shaping of current-day parent-school relationships in Norway before we discuss the research on parent-school cooperation and theories on intensive parenting. After presenting our method, we move on to discuss how schools frame their parental expectations. Next, we discuss how parents with migrant backgrounds understand the school's expectations. Finally, in the conclusion, we argue that while the school pursues parental engagement partly in order to limit the risks of future dropouts, 'pupils' under-achievement on tests, and low integration, this approach, risks increasing the effects of existing social and economic inequality in educational outcomes by putting too much responsibility on parents who despite the egalitarian vision of Norwegian population (Bendixsen, Bringslid, and Vike 2018), have different resources (economic, social and cultural capital) and prerequisites to provide their child with the best possible educational outcomes.

Parent-school collaboration in the Norwegian welfare state

In line with social democratic values, most schools in Norway are fully publicly funded and there are few privately run schools compared to many EU countries. Schools are considered to be a tool for promoting social equality and inclusion, and education is seen as one of the most important measures for reducing socio-economic inequality in society (Norwegian Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion 2012-2013, 10-11). Further, schools and kindergartens are presented as institutions in which the 'integration' of migrants and refugees should be pursued (Norwegian Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion 2012-2013, 10-11). Simultaneously, in spite of their foundational, egalitarian ambitions, schools in Norway reflect largely middle-class values (Rugkåsa 2012), and schools (generally) are recognised as one of the main sites for the reproduction of social class (Brison 2011) and thus social inequality.

During the past two decades, parents' formal rights have strengthened, for example, through parents' representation in cooperative and decision-making bodies in schools and through parent-teacher meetings and student-parent-teacher conferences.¹ This move towards increased parent-school cooperation can be explained in various ways. The Regulations to the Education Act § 20-1 states that the collaboration between

schools and parents must have the student in focus and should bring about a good follow-up (of parents and the school) of the individual student's academic and social development. Several governmental reports highlight parental cooperation as an important area that promotes students' learning.² On the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training's homepage,³ cooperation between school and home is promoted because 'Parents and supervisors have the main responsibility for their own children, and they have a great influence on their motivation and learning outcomes'. Further, the increased role of parents within the educational system can also be understood as pertaining to the introduction of the citizen as client, brought about by the neoliberalisation of society (Bæck 2010b): parents are viewed as consumers with rights who expect the promised quality of the goods they are given (Bæck 2015; Breidenstein, Krüger, and Roch 2020).

Key concepts: the parent-school relationship and intensive parenting

We draw on two topics of research that are strongly interrelated: the parent-school relationship and ideas of intensive parenting. The first strand of scholarship discusses schools as places where hegemonic construction of what it means to be a good parent are constructed and played out, more or less explicitly. Research has indicated that the relationship between parents, particularly working-class and some minority-ethnic parents, and educational professionals is characterised less by equality (although termed 'partnership') and more by class background and an inequality of power in favour of the professionals (e.g. Lareau 1989; Vincent 1996, 2000, 113; Gillies 2005).

Studies in Norway show that parents, to a large degree, are satisfied with the home-school cooperation that they take part in (Nordahl and Skilbrei 2002), although some parents push this to the limit and confront the authority of teachers and school leaders, straining the parent-school relationship (Bæck 2010b). Further, Bæck (2010a) suggests that a specific category of parent, the more educated ones, are more inclined to participate and dominate the formalised settings in school and hence be more visible. Some parents engaged in public bodies in urban schools seek to represent the diversity of parents, aiming at social inclusion with various success (Danielsen and Bendixsen 2019). Notwithstanding, the voices of less resourceful groups (in economic and educational terms) are more seldom heard. Researchers have, therefore, questioned whether parental involvement in Norway and beyond is always a good thing (Reay 1998; Mcgrath and Kuriloff 1999; Crozier 2000; Vincent and Martin 2000; Hanafin and Lynch 2002; Bæck 2010a). Increased parental involvement risks expanding the differences between pupils from different socio-cultural backgrounds (Bæck 2010a).

The second strand of literature discusses intensive parenting as a hegemonic form, not only in schools but also in society more generally. Concerted cultivation or intensive parenting refers to how some parents (usually from the middle classes) intensively shape their child to take their place in society, for example, through paid-for extra-curricular activities or fostering particular styles of speaking within and outside the family that emphasise the ability to look people in the eye and present as a confident, engaged person ready to meet the world and its challenges (Lareau 2011). Globally, this child-centred, expert-guided parenting norm is common among the middle class (Hays 1996, 8) and is also identified in Norway (Bendixsen and Danielsen 2019). It is characterised by a prioritisation of the children's activities before all else (Vincent 2017) and involves shaping parenting as

'an educational project' of the parent; parenting has to be learnt and improved (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, 139; Vincent 2000).

The intensification of parenthood includes a process of parental determinism, namely a belief that all forms of parental behaviour will have direct consequences on the child's future (Lee et al. 2014). Such responsabilisation of parenting also encourages the privatisation and individuation of parenting (Lee et al. 2014) in that it becomes the parents' duty to ensure that their children have the best possible potentials for their current lives now as well as in order to have a good life (through good employment) later. In Norway, as in other European and North American countries characterised among other to be a 'risk society' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995), children are thought of as being in constant risk, and thus the 'good parenting' style of intensive parenting is also about 'risk management'. Risk, in this article, refers to a category of the emic discourse; it refers both to the subjective understanding of risk by the parents and the discourses about risk in society.

Methods: researching parents in Bergen

Our project, titled 'Parenting Cultures and Risk Management in Plural Norway', draws on fieldwork and interviews among parents, teachers and headmasters in Årstad, an urban borough in Bergen, the second largest city in Norway (300,000 inhabitants). It examines how migration and increased class differences reflect and contribute to generate differentiations in ideas of parenting. We have conducted fieldwork and interviews in three neighbourhoods in Årstad with staff at three different schools, and in conjunction with activities that involve parents, neighbourhood initiatives, and welfare state interactions. At all schools, we pursued observation during teacher-parent meetings at the beginning of the school year (first to sixth year) and at events in which parents were invited to the schools, such as end of school-year events, National Day celebrations (May 17), and particular events such as bike repair day and UN day. The particular demography of Årstad is marked by its clusters of very different socio-economic settings for its inhabitants: while one part is quite central to the city centre and largely made up of refugees and social assistance recipients who are provided municipal social housing, and a creative middle class in private owned houses (location of school B), another part is similarly made up of social assistance recipients with social housing and a middle class but situated further from the city centre (location of school C). The third area is a sought-after and expensive residential neighbourhood for upper middle class employees at the state hospital (location of school A). During the last couple of years, Bergen municipal and local actors have initiated projects and events in parts of the Årstad borough targeting parents and children specifically aimed at creating a 'safe environment' for children, particularly those areas characterised by a high concentration of child poverty.

A total of 45 interviews with parents (middle-class and working-class, non-migrant Norwegian and migrants) lasting between 1 and 3 hours each were conducted. These were informal, open-ended, digital recorded interviews, sometimes in their own homes, other times in a neutral place. In a few cases, we made use of interpreters. We recruited our informants through the meetings and activities at the schools we attended through the snowball method and through various free-time and neighbourhood activities where we met parents living in the area.

During the interviews, we asked about their parenting practices and ideals, including their relationship to their children's schooling, neighbourhood, their thoughts about free-time activities, and what it meant to them to be 'a good parent'. We also conducted more than 15 interviews with representatives of the municipality, teachers, and other professionals. We found differences in what the teachers and principals expected from the parents at the different schools (named here school A, B, and C), yet many of the parents' expectations were similar regardless of the school in which their children were enrolled. While acknowledging the differences that exist, in light of the main question of this article we have chosen to focus on the points of similarities and commonalities between these schools.

Many researchers have presented social class as the main variable in defining the relationship between teachers and parents (Lareau 1989; Vincent 1996; Reay 1998); however, parents with migrant and refugee backgrounds cannot be easily categorised into the working or middle classes. When we consider the differences among the 'migrant parents' we met, originating as they did from Iraq, Ethiopia, West Africa, and Somalia, we recognise a broad range of differences. Broad categories, such as 'migrants' and 'refugees', are not homogenous. Class differentiation, educational background, orientation towards a child's education (Irwin and Elley 2011), as well as place of origin, the number of years of residence in Norway, and the social networks available are all relevant forms of differentiations. Many migrants and refugees have a middle-class background in their country of origin, but in Norway, their occupational and economic positions belong to that of the working class. As we will show, their middle-class family 'habitus' (dispositions, assumptions, and expectations) and the school's expectations of the parents' performance of a particular, middle-class habitus do not converge to the extent that is often expected by teachers. Yet, for the purposes of this study, we focus on the more general category of 'migrant parent' rather than their specific places of origin, because, we found important aspects in common among these parents that are highly relevant to our consideration of the parent-school relationship. The similarity in practices and experiences evident among parents with a migration background from a non-Nordic country include the ways in which they understand the school's expectations and how the school approaches them, and, whether it is taken into account that they are parents in a country in which they did not grow up themselves. It also includes the fact that many have a relatively low level of Norwegian language competence, have been given municipal housing in an area that is considered to be socio-economically disadvantaged, and are included in categories that are frequently viewed by state officials (i.e. policy makers, teachers, child authorities) as potentially 'at risk' in terms of not providing their children with a 'correct' upbringing. Thus, while recognising the internal differences, and that the experiences of people with a migrant background should not be reduced to the social categories to which they are allocated, we would like to draw attention to some of the particular experiences of (and challenges in) the parent-school relationship that are shaped by simply being a migrant.

Great expectations from the schools: limiting risk?

At the beginning of every school year on a certain afternoon, teachers have parent meetings to which all parents are expected to attend. Teachers and principals consider these

meetings to be an opportunity for the school to communicate directly what they expect of the parents. During our fieldwork and in the context of these meetings, most, if not all, of the teachers we encountered emphasised that a child's learning process occurs in a partnership between the school and the parents. One teacher at school A (with a rather homogeneous parent population and a high number of middle-class families in the area) put it like this when speaking to all of the parents:

You cannot overstate how important it is to read with and to your children and to help them with homework. I will do my part, but you must help me. We must work together to ensure that the children learn what they should learn.

This exchange is one example of the ways in which teachers talk about the role of parents, conveying that the school is dependent on the parents' contribution to their child's learning if they are to achieve the learning goals as completely as possible. Some teachers showed the parents the specific learning objectives issued by the government for individual subjects, sometimes with the teachers saying that the learning objectives are extremely demanding and thus difficult to obtain with the few hours set aside for that particular learning goal. Several teachers asked parents to assist at home in correcting the children's mathematics, to memorise English vocabulary with them, or to contribute to the pupils' reaching the learning goals in swimming. Some of the parents we spoke with expressed surprise at how much children were expected to learn and showed anxiety about how this was supposed to happen.

At school B, where the number of pupils with migrant backgrounds was more than 50 per cent, we participated in a regular parent meeting for grade two. Around half of the parents present were of migrant background and during our conversations before and after the meeting, they gave the impression that they did not understand Norwegian to a significant degree. One teacher, Monica,⁴ interpreted her messages into English at the request of some parents, however, only occasionally. This teacher initiated the meeting by pointing out the importance of parents coming to know one another and that this would help their children and improve the school's social environment. 'And you can help each other', Monica, the teacher, argued, and continued: 'Social training is very important for children – throw a party and so on'. She argued that they must talk nicely about school at home and that they can also use their native language.

Later during the meeting, Monica talked about different subjects and homework, saying: 'Give kids math skills in everyday life. Think math, talk about numbers'. She mentioned different math games that the parents could play with their children, some of them quite complex and some that we, as fieldworkers, did not understand. She stressed: 'We are dependent on having you folks with us'. As Monica continued discussing homework, she argued:

It is you who must ensure that the child is doing his or her homework. You should not *do* their homework, but make procedures, facilitate. You should tell them that homework is important. But make a phone call to the teacher if it gets bad, your child should not be crying about homework. And read to your child, gladly in your mother tongue.

She reminded parents about the folder that the children bring home weekly and asked them to check it regularly – there might be signatures they need to give at short notice. Monica explained: 'We should do homework that includes reading every day

and work with different sounds. Give feedback to the child. Make it into a cozy moment. For example, give them fruit. Give praise instead of criticism. It always works'. Monica suggested that the parents should time their child when reading and make it into a competition. One mother said that her son thought it was tiring to read and that it was difficult to make it into a fun situation.

After the talk about the parents' responsibility concerning homework, practical information was given. At this stage, Monica talked about cooperation with the school concerning behaviour, clothing, breakfast, and birthdays. The teacher urged the parents to go hiking in the nearby mountains and to attend their children's football matches to get to know other parents. Notably, during her talk, we observed that much of this information was not interpreted and how much of it was understood by the non-Norwegian-speaking parents was unclear.

In another parent-teacher meeting, in grade three in school C, there was an interpreter present. The interpreter translated: 'You have homework as a family. Every day you should practice English, writing. We hope to offer a homework group, do you want to volunteer?' A father asked about the homework, explaining that everyday life is busy in the afternoons and wondered if it would be possible to plan a little in advance with the homework. The teacher, Anita, answered that parents need to be in control: 'It will be your job to go through it'. The parents started to discuss how difficult it is to understand the children's homework. Anita responded that while she understood that it is complicated, the government has given learning goals that she must follow. Parents wondered about their role; how often should they write a mark on the lesson's overview: every single day or every single reading lesson? They were confused. The teacher responded that she considered this as feedback and she would reflect on it later. Meanwhile, the interpreter was unable to follow, and commented that he was unable to translate the whole discussion about homework. A father with a Polish background commented, somewhat humorously but also looking horrified, 'really?' (i.e. 'this is what is expected of us?') in relation to the discussion about homework.

In school C, there were 60 nationalities among the pupils attending and the principal emphasised: 'Parents should be engaged in the school'. At the time some groups of parents were not attending formal meetings, nor were they inclined to approach school staff about educational matters. The principal attributed this lack of contact to both language and culture and also unknown causes that the principal described as an x-factor. The school has tried a lot, he added,

here and now, a lot is expected of parents' and he pointed out that not everyone could understand this. The school had initiated special programmes including hiring an extra advisor for parents and making extra homework groups, but still they did not come ...

In school B, where the number of pupils with migrant backgrounds was more than 50 per cent, one parent in the Parents' Council Working Committees (PCWC) initiated the idea of inviting another PCWC and their respective school leaders to discuss how to improve their efforts of reaching out to migrant families. During this meeting, the principal of the school said: 'the basic value of school is to develop competent people. We see opportunities in the diversity we have and we should help each other'. The principal made use of the keywords 'competence', 'curious', 'generous', 'open and inclusive', 'tolerant', and 'respectful'. He asked the following rhetorical question:

Are we representative? No. We are not good enough at inviting people in such a way that everyone feels it is equally natural to participate. (...) The conditions for good cooperation with parents are based on the ability to see the parents' significance in collaboration, and to create a sense of belonging for all.

During our interview with the principal of school B, she explained that in this particular school, when it comes to multi-language learners, they are invited to a 'welcome conversation' and to take advantage of home visits. Home visits are organised in order to get to know each other, the principal added, and 'some parents accept it and others don't want it. It is important that parents get to contribute on their own terms'. The principal implied that parents have different resources and starting point when meeting staff from the school. He self-critically stated that the school is not good enough at inviting parents in a way that would include everyone to participate in activities related to the school. He highlighted the following: 'We are good at meeting those who went to school in Norway. We need to think of new ways in order to include new parents as a resource'.

At this school, the principal was very concerned with the fact that children who attend the school had both highly educated parents and very poorly educated parents, as well as many single mothers, and parents who were drug addicts. Annually, he sent around 50 messages to the public child protection service due to violence, substance abuse, a failure to provide care, high absenteeism among students, as well as suspicions about child marriage and female circumcision. The principal worked actively to create a good public reputation for the school, and to ensure that the school results were above average in national tests in order to show that the area is an attractive place to live with children. In his work, he saw that some pupils had difficulties and high absenteeism, and many parents were not participating in the parent-teacher conferences. He believed that the school produced social inequality and thus he sought to strengthen the school-home relationship, among others measures, as one means of working to alleviate the social inequality.

One of the teachers at school C, Anne, believed it was her job to follow pupils and parents closely and to facilitate parental contact with her through informal conversations about 'how we together can make your child's school day as good as possible'. Talking to Anne, she explained her role: 'My goal is to get parents more involved. Parents are resources, they just need guidance. (...) We have to get parents to understand that they need to change their attitudes [towards the school]'. She was concerned that some parents were not following up on homework at home. She was leading a school initiated project which was targeting all pupils and parents who faced some difficulties; however, it was clear that the main target group, and the main group using the service, was made up of parents with migrant backgrounds outside of Europe and the US who were not performing what was expected of them as parents in the Norwegian school system. She also used time to explain what she considered to be the social and cultural codes and expectations in Norway to the parents, such as how to dress during winter, in addition to homework. Anne told us:

Everyone must perform, so we must keep the parents with us. It takes time to change routines, to be able to follow up, do homework at a scheduled time, allow for the computer only after the homework has been done, get up on time, go to school even if they are a little sick. Having the right clothing, food, drink, maintain a few routines so that the children can manage school. One mother argued with me that she did not have the time to help her children do homework

because she had to keep the house clean, and I told her that it is more important to follow up on homework [than to keep the house clean].

She explicitly contrasted migrant and 'Norwegian' parents and their ways of following up on their children:

Norwegians follow their children very closely. People from other countries send their children alone to arrangements and gatherings at the school, so the school gets a lot of responsibility. Parents do not come to fetch their children after the May 17 national day parade in the city centre.

Anne sought not to be moralistic in her argumentation, but instead to get the parents to understand how important it is to follow up on their children and she wished to guide them in how to direct their children. She said: 'Many immigrant parents want their children to become a doctor. But they do not know what is needed to reach that aim'. She wanted to make explicit to immigrant parents the expectations that the school – and society – had towards them, to let them know what majority parents 'already know', and that they learn to follow up on their children very closely as 'Norwegians do'. Several of the teachers, like Anne, promoted parenthood constructed as a role defined by its significance for the future of individual children and society as a whole. Parents were considered as the main driving force behind fostering children that would behave as they should in school and thus be able to succeed later in life. We will now look at how these expectations were understood by migrant parents.

Great expectations from parents: doubt and hope

Parents expressed that the school had great expectations concerning their role as parents and many experienced it as demanding. They talked about the school's expectations as including an intense engagement with their child's education and in their daily interaction with their child. Simultaneously, the parents also expressed great expectations of their children's future – what their children would become or achieve – and for the future of the family.

When we asked more generally about how it is to be a parent in Norway today, many parents with a migrant background said that they found it difficult. Several struggled with following up on their children's schooling. They found it hard to understand the routines, the homework, the grades or lack of grades (in Norway, children are not graded before grade eight), and the information given by the school. Some of these difficulties derived in part from a lack of skills in the Norwegian language and, as we will see, an unfamiliarity with the Norwegian school system and especially the particular role given to parents in the educational system.

Among the parents with migrant backgrounds from Iraq, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Western Africa, we found great expectations for their children's educational success and later employment, which should ultimately lead to the whole family's social climb in Norway. We found both hope and fear concerning the future: a hope that their children would do well and a fear that their children (or they) would have to rely on welfare in the future. Education and work were ways to be included in society. One working-class migrant father said:

I hope that my children will not be a burden on society. I want them to contribute. I want them to get an education and good jobs. I want to move from this area because there are too many

migrants right here. I want my children to interact more with Norwegians. I feel like I am half Somali, half Norwegian now, I am integrated. I want my children to be integrated.

The anxiety of not being included in the employment market, a fear of segregation, and that the neighbourhood constellation would adversely affect integration were mentioned by several parents with migrant backgrounds. Many stressed that the area where they had been given municipal housing was socially and economically challenging: too many non-Norwegian-speaking inhabitants could undermine the ability of their children to learn Norwegian well and put stress on the school as many pupils needed extra follow-up. It could also impede their children making enough 'Norwegian friends'. One Iraqi-Kurdish father said about his son's school: 'there are 36 nationalities that attend his school and most of them speak their own mother tongue at school and it affects the quality of the language (...). It affects integration negatively'.

The risk, as these parents considered it, was not related to their own engagement or involvement with their children's education, but that their children were growing up in an impoverished socio-cultural environment, which was detrimental to their Norwegian language abilities and limited their possibility of being included in Norwegian society. The way some migrant families dealt with this predicament was to move or by planning to do so when they had accumulated enough economic capital. Others wanted to stay in the area as it was central and they had a good social network in the area.

We found that many parents talked about feeling alone in their parenting simultaneously as they experienced the Norwegian state as scrutinising and judging their parenting practices:

The parents here, especially migrants, have to follow a child to school, you have to pick up your child from school, you don't have relatives. But where I come from [Rwanda], if we are neighbours, I can collect your children from school, tomorrow you collect him ... we make that arrangement. But here you have to do it on your own. And another issue I have seen, that the state, they decide a lot, they enter into private parenting activities ... the people [working in Child Welfare Service] are manipulating the system and they steal children from migrants and they give them to Norwegian families ... yes.

These parents experienced what we could call the privatisation of parenting in the context of a lack of shared responsibility for a child's activities compared to their home countries where they would involve more adults in sharing these time-consuming practices. Simultaneously, as the parents talked about the loneliness of parenthood compared to how they believed parenting would be pursued in their home country, the parents also expressed what it took to meet the high expectations placed on them as individual parents, particularly from the school when it came to their involvement in their children's education. They were also very concerned about 'the system', referring to the State and the Child Welfare Service's potential to intrude on their family. Not many of the parents were involved in the Parents' Council Working Committee. Some argued that they had no time, others felt that there were barriers to their involvement because of their language competence.

Many of the parents we interviewed expressed satisfaction with their children's school. They articulated no complaints about the teachers or the organisation of the school. One Palestinian father said: 'I don't mind the school, it is very good. Because, as I heard, they have very good competence, very good teachers'. Yet others voiced uncertainty about how the school conducted its education and the school system generally. One parent-couple from East Africa exclaimed that while they liked their children's school and had

no complaints about the teachers, they did not understand the school system and, in particular, the expectation that they, as parents, should contribute to the teaching of their children. These parents had university degrees and had lived in Norway for ten years. The father expanded:

They don't teach them well, they just say 'you go and your parents will help you'. So I don't know, I ask myself what they teach them ... homework ... some of it is complicated, I don't understand it, how they teach, so ... It's not like in Africa where the teachers teach everything, you work in class, if you fail, they correct you, but this one, even if you fail, there are no exams, and if you fail, nothing you can do ... (...) What if the parents don't know how to help? Like these people from Asia, they didn't go to school.

He explained that he finds that the schools in his home country in Africa were better because their children should not ask their parents to help them, but rather do the homework themselves. He was also not satisfied with the teacher not correcting the homework and that they, as parents, had also been told not to correct it: 'Even if they fail, the work is not good: you can't tell them ... they go ahead, they don't make corrections'.

The father's comment indicates the discrepant philosophies of learning and teaching between himself and the school staff. He was used to leaving education to those educated as teachers rather than being directly involved in his children's learning process. He and his wife expected that the school should correct the children, including their homework, grade them, and notify the children when they made mistakes in order for the children to improve. Parents with such a point of view thus had different expectations of the teachers and their own role as parents compared to what the school expected of them.

Other parents expressed that teachers had high expectations of them to become directly involved in their children's educational path. Sometimes, parents interpreted this expectation of parents' involvement as deriving from a lack of resources or competence on the part of the teachers. Additionally, how they were to engage with their children's education remained unclear to them, as neither the teachers nor they were to correct their children's mistakes, apparently. This made some parents confused and even irritated, as the parents consequently were without any means of letting their children know what they needed to improve or in which areas.

Discussion and conclusion

The title of this article, 'Great expectations', alludes to the school's expectations towards parents' participation in the cooperation between home and school, the parents' experience of this cooperation, the parents' expectations of what the school will do for their children, and their expectations for their children and their future. These expectations do not always correspond, complement, or facilitate each other and they are not necessarily directed towards the same goal or with similar ideas of how to fulfil the expectations.

Teachers' rhetoric and argumentation that emphasise the power of parenting drives the focus towards particular parenting skills and specific social characters and aspirations. The parents become the main determinants of their children's educational achievements and, ultimately, their future. The risks of a lack of success are presented as being the responsibility of individual parents. Parents' behaviour should help the child succeed, and some parent's behaviour (some more than others) towards their children is looked upon as a

potential risk for the children's school performance. The focus remains on the individual parents, or the parents as part of a category ('immigrant parents') whose behaviour is culturalised ('they act like that because they are Muslims or from Kurdistan'). The expectations expressed during the parent-teacher meetings and the particular actions directed towards migrant parents promote, perhaps unconsciously, an intensive parenting style fronted as a way in which the success of the individual child can be enhanced. This depoliticises the policies and school practices as regards the parents and the ways in which the school staff deal with their pupils.

A middle-class way of life comes to represent a norm against which everything is measured: it has become the civilising normality (also see Rugkåsa 2012). In this process, an intensive style of parenting becomes naturalised as the best for the child as a pupil and as a future citizen. It constructs the idea that the school can offer possibilities for all children in Norway, but in order for the child to become successful, and for the school to provide the pupils with the best potentials, parents must comply with a frame of teaching and education that embraces, expects, or even demands the intensive involvement and participation of the parents. The demands on the parents' involvement come across as responsabilisation, accountability, and increased duties for the parents. These initiatives are also situated in a risk discourse in the sense that if the parents are not doing what they are supposed to be doing, it will have a negative impact on their child's education and the school as a whole. The initiatives might also be understood within the context of the Norwegian government's 'duty turn' and in terms of how it pursues its 'citizen-making', in which emphasis is placed on the activation of citizens. As in other EU/EEA states, the desired 'good citizen' should develop the respected civic dispositions that will make productive incorporation into society feasible, which is tied up with labour market participation and civic virtues, like learning the language and participating in civil society (Brochmann 2014). Through moralising and incentivising individual citizens, the Norwegian government has simultaneously contributed to individualising the task of contributing to social cohesion (cf. Soysal 2012; Brochmann 2014).

By expecting parents to be actively involved in the education of their children – an issue formerly held to be the responsibility of authorised governmental or private professional actors – education becomes an important part of parenting practices. The parents are required to take on an involved responsibility for these activities, both for getting them done and for their results. This obliges specific forms of behaviour and action and is a new form of 'responsibilisation'. Additionally, the schools' and teachers' expectations towards the children's parents are based on certain ideals and norms of intensive parenting as a way to alleviate the risk that a child will not 'make it'. While the principals and some of the teachers emphasised that they sought to use the different resources of all parents, their explicit and implicit expectations draw this into question. The great expectations from the teachers and principals towards the parents implicitly draw upon a specific ideology of parenting, in which some resources are considered as more valuable and relevant than others. The parenting approaches presented in the teacher-parent meetings implicitly evoke the idea that in order for a child to succeed in Norwegian society, both educationally and in future employment, the parents must strive to fulfil an ideal of intensive parenting.

While parent-school cooperation is structured in an individualised manner, with an emphasis on responsabilisation and self-discipline, the migrant parents are not, in large part, responding as expected by the school teachers and principals. The discrepancy

between school expectations and that of the parents can be understood in light of the fact that many parents are uncertain as to what the school expects and how to fulfil those expectations. Some are also uncertain as to why the school is not meeting their expectations. Additionally, the lack of interpretation during meetings at various stages (i.e. when discussing birthdays and homework) which we experienced during our fieldwork, might contribute to the failure of the school to communicate appropriately and thus exacerbate the gap between parents' and schools' expectations. This state of affairs increases the loneliness of parenting, which is already prominent, partly because their relatives are far away and their ideas are linked to their own experiences growing up in a place where their nurturing was not only dependent on their particular parents.

Parents do not necessarily adapt an intensive parenting model as a response to these expectations. Many parents with a migrant background find the expectation that parents should engage with their children's education puzzling, which amplifies their distrust of the educational system ('do they not have enough or good enough teachers?'). It also causes uncertainty and doubt as to whether they, as parents, are capable of providing their children with the right kind of assistance in order for their children to progress towards the anticipated great future. In view of the fact that they have not gone through the Norwegian education system, or sometimes any educational system, and lack Norwegian language skills, many doubt whether they can provide what(ever) is expected of them for their children.

Several teachers and principals promoted a particular form of parent engagement with the indirect promise that this would contribute to their children's success in school. However, few of the parents we interviewed talked about a 'lack of cooperation' with the school or saw their own (lack of) involvement as a potential risk or major problem. Instead, they saw greatest risks to their great expectations for their children's education as being related to their neighbourhood's socio-economic constellation, as well as the perceptions and realities of a highly individualised parenthood. Difficulties in helping their children because of low Norwegian language skills and a lack of knowledge of the Norwegian system were also identified the struggle to be involved in their children's education, in a system that is highly unfamiliar was a frequent topic of conversation. While the teachers focused on the individual parents and what they could do or were not doing, many of the parents were concerned about the socio-linguistic composition of the area, problematising the fact that there were too few children with Norwegian as their mother tongue in the area, which they saw as the greatest risk for their child's education and ultimately their future.

The new and great expectations of parents' involvement and engagement in their children's schooling in Norway shift the responsabilisation of equal education away from the state towards individual families. This form of responsabilisation on individual families for their child's education might reproduce social inequality in new ways. Migrant children's educational opportunities can be limited by their parents' unfamiliarity with the school's way of operationalising linguistic structures, systems of organisation, and models of learning, particularly if the school is not consciously working to counter such issues. There is an irony in that the focus on greater parent engagement with the school and the education of their child, brings along increased alienation of the parents most in need of teachers' professional assistance and guidance. While the great expectations towards parents should facilitate and produce upward mobility for the children, they are, though often not

explicitly, an incursion of the home and act as a normative directive of how people should parent. Moreover, parents have different starting points to understand the expectations, as well as different resources and readiness to carry out this particular way of parenting. This lead to, on the one hand, frustrated teachers who blame the parents for not following up their child in the 'right way', and on the other hand, parents who doubt the school's capacity to provide their child with good education for the future. At the end of the day, this undermines the ideal of inclusive education and infringes on children's possibility of equal opportunity, a longstanding social ambition in Norwegian society.

Notes

1. The Regulations to the Education Act § 20-3 set the requirements for the content of the parent cooperation in primary and lower secondary schools.
2. See [Ministry of Education and Research](#).
3. From <https://www.udir.no/kvalitet-og-kompetanse/samarbeid/hjem-skole-samarbeid/>, Accessed March 6, 2019.
4. All names in this paper have been anonymised.

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