



Tensions of Difference in Integrating Refugee Children in Norwegian ECEC Centers

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Abstract

This article explores the tensions arising in the integration process of refugee children in Norwegian early childhood education and care (ECEC) centers. ECEC centers have become important arenas for integrating refugees, particularly in light of the refugees' obligation to participate in Norway's introduction program. For many refugee children, ECEC centers are the first public institutions they encounter, where they learn about norms and values outside of their homes. Using institutional ethnography as the inquiry method, data were gathered using semi-structured interviews with ECEC professionals, focusing on how they interact with refugee children and carry out everyday integration work. The article adopts Elias' "civilizing process" as the overarching analytical concept. The findings reveal that the integration of refugee children involves tensions in negotiating language, civilizing children in relation to Norwegian ideals of childhood, and civilizing parents in relation to the Norwegian cultural ideal of parenting.

Keywords: *ECEC; institutional ethnography; integration; refugees; civilization process*

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Introduction

... and I think the parents are the ones who know their children best, and they bring their culture into ours. I'm thinking of the knowledge they have that we don't, that we need to have respect for that, we need to figure things out together so that the child can develop in a good way, instead of telling them, "You have to do it like this because that's how we do it in Norway"—yeah, I don't think that's the best way to do it, especially with those who are used to doing it in other ways; then, I think their ways can work just as well in many cases.

The above quote is from Ruth—a teacher working in an early childhood education and care (ECEC) center exclusively for refugees in Norway—who reveals some of the tensions that ECEC professionals face when working with immigrants in ECEC institutions. Teachers are expected to abide by the legislation while simultaneously using their discretion to act knowledgeably and competently when dealing with immigrants and refugees, for the public good (Scholz, 2021).

ECEC centers, also known as *barnehager* in Norway, are institutions for children aged 0–5 years (Ministry of Education and Research, 2023). All children in Norway have a statutory right to attend ECEC centers, which are not free but are highly subsidized; enrollment is voluntary (Engel et al., 2015; Thorud, 2020). ECEC centers are important arenas for the integration of immigrants into Norway. This aspect of ECEC is evident in government policy documents, white papers, and other legal documents. The underlying challenge facing ECEC professionals in carrying out integration relates to the tensions between cultural responsiveness and the institutional guidelines and practices to which professionals are held accountable (Norheim & Moser, 2020; Sønsthagen, 2020; Tobin, 2020).

The present article aims to highlight the tensions arising during the process of integrating refugee children and parents in Norwegian ECEC centers. The overarching research questions are as follows: What are the perspectives of ECEC professionals on the tensions arising during the integration of refugee children in Norwegian ECEC centers? How do ECEC professionals deal with different notions of child-rearing in Norwegian ECEC centers?

The current article conceptualizes ECEC centers as “civilizing institutions” (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2017). Host countries receiving refugees, especially in the Western world, engage in some form of socialization, especially when children spend time in welfare-state funded institutions such as ECEC centers (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2017). Therefore, the concept of the civilizing process is used analytically to explore the process of negotiation among ECEC professionals, refugee children, and parents, on what is considered to be civilized conduct and who decides what this is (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2017). The analytical lens is relevant for unpacking how civilized conduct for refugee children is conceived and negotiated in the Norwegian welfare state through institutions striving for equality, even though the institutions are based on norms that reflect and reproduce historical power relations among certain social groups, such as ECEC professionals and refugees.

Background and previous research

Enrollment in ECEC centers

Currently, 4.5% of the Norwegian population has a refugee background (Statistics Norway, 2022a). Syrians constitute the largest group with a refugee background in Norway, followed by Somalis, Eritreans, Iraqis, and Afghans, respectively (Strøm, 2019). Regarding

enrollment in ECEC centers, 93.4% of children aged 1–5 years and 97.4% of children aged 3–5 years attended ECEC centers in 2021 (Statistics Norway, 2022b). Although it is not known how many children with a refugee background are enrolled in Norwegian ECEC centers, 19.5% of children aged 1–5 years enrolled in ECEC centers in 2021 were children with minority-language backgrounds, based on the criteria that the children’s parents or guardians have a mother tongue other than Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, Sami, or English (Directorate for Education and Training, 2022; Thorud, 2022).

ECEC centers as arenas for integration

In Norway, integration and inclusion are concepts that are used almost interchangeably, displaying relative ambiguity in government documents (Korsvold, 2011). For instance, the Framework Plan for Kindergartens (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017) omits integration but uses inclusion, which focuses on providing equal opportunities and facilitating social participation and inclusive communities (pp. 8, 22, 40). Scholars have highlighted that Norwegian government documents, such as the Kindergarten Act (Ministry of Education and Research, 2005) and the Framework Plan for Kindergartens (2017), tend to show consensus but remain implicit and simplified regarding the ascribed meaning of important concepts (Burner & Biseth, 2016; Sønsthagen, 2021). For instance, the Framework Plan for Kindergartens (2017) does not define inclusion, instead leaving it open to ECEC professionals to delimit and implement in their own way.

Other government documents use the concept of integration but do not define its meaning, instead focusing on what the government’s ambition for integration is. For instance, Norway’s Migration and Integration 2021–2022 – Report to the OECD (Thorud, 2022, p. 8) and the Norwegian government’s Integration Strategy for 2019–2022 (Ministry of Education and Research, 2018, p. 4) both state that Norway’s integration policy aims at providing opportunities for refugees and other immigrants to participate in working life and community life. Moreover, the Migration and Integration Report for Norway to the OECD has a section titled “goals for integration – kindergarten,” where it highlights the Norwegian government’s ambition for increasing the enrollment of minority-language children in ECEC centers and the allocation of more financial resources for the development of professionals working in urban settings with ethnically diverse ECEC centers (Thorud, 2022, p. 65). The same report further points out that kindergartens and schools are important arenas for social inclusion, with a clear focus on enrollment statistics for immigrant children. Hence, inclusion is seen through the lens of enrollment of children in educational institutions.

Recent studies have emphasized that ECEC centers have increasingly become key sites for integrating refugees in host societies (Bove & Sharmahd, 2020; Bregnbæk, 2021; Kimathi & Nilsen, 2021; Kuusisto & Garvis, 2020; Scholz, 2021; Vandekerckhove & Aarssen, 2020). ECEC centers can contribute to improving refugee children’s general well-being

and language development (Jahreie, 2021; Kulbrandstad, 2017; Norheim & Moser, 2020; Sønsthagen, 2020). Moreover, previous research has explored ECEC centers as spaces for children's individual development through civic integration, where they learn the norms, values, and skills deemed important during childhood and later in life (Abu El-Haj et al., 2018; Goodman, 2019).

Similarly, there has been a growing political interest in the responsibility of ECEC centers to adequately enable children to learn the Norwegian language in preparation for school (Gambaro et al., 2021; Kulbrandstad, 2017; Norheim, 2022). There have been claims that delays in learning the Norwegian language can pose a risk of negative outcomes in future schooling (Kulbrandstad, 2017). Recent research has also indicated that ECEC professionals do not have the required competence and knowledge in their everyday work with immigrants and, therefore, may exclude minority children and parents (Lund, 2022a; Solberg, 2019; Sønsthagen, 2021). Researching how integration is enacted in ECEC centers allows for exploring both the opportunities accorded to refugees, and also the struggles they face in living up to the required norms of integration into Norwegian society (Bregnbæk, 2021).

In this article, I use the concept of integration to refer to a model through which refugees in Norway are socially incorporated and encouraged to maintain their social-cultural identities as they become a part of a multicultural society in which their distinct characteristics are accepted (Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2016); hence, integration is a negotiated process between refugees and the host society that takes into consideration the complex interplay of different factors and facets of both their individuality and group dynamics as part of their interaction. This differs from a functionalist perspective in which integration is framed in terms of taken-for-granted norms from the host society embedded in the social processes (Lindo, 2005).

Theoretical framework

The analytical framework is the concept of “the civilizing process,” derived from Elias (1994). The notion of civilization revolves around the need to understand how people regulate their behavior through social interactions, for instance, by developing a sense of self-restraint and shame in order to be perceived as respectable (Elias, 1994). Inspired by this concept, Gilliam and Gulløv (2017) analyze how childhood institutions, such as schools and ECEC centers, can be seen as civilizing institutions where children learn behavioral and cultural norms. Civilizing is a theoretical concept aimed at understanding what is considered appropriate and correct about behavior, relationships, and coexistence in a particular context. Hence, the “civilizing process” refers to the acquisition of cultural values, how they are passed on, and the interpersonal relations of interdependence and domination leading to their naturalization

(Gilliam & Gulløv, 2017). The definition of “being civilized” relies on expressions of the culturally dominant perceptions of how children should act and interact among themselves, with others, and within their surroundings. Therefore, ECEC centers, acting as civilizing institutions, practice integration by organizing and maintaining esteemed norms and values as envisaged by the welfare state (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2017). In their integration work, ECEC professionals transfer knowledge of civilized conduct, which translates integration into teaching children how to behave properly (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2017, p. 19). Similar to adults, over time, children adapt to markers of social behavior, observing norms of conduct that are perceived as acceptable civilized behavior. This is because people develop the fear of being judged for uncivilized behavior and/or of being excluded, thus aspiring to conform to expected behaviors to gain status and respectability (Elias, 1994).

Research shows that welfare institutions largely seek to promote civic integration policies (see Goodman, 2019; Joppke, 2017;). Here, civic integration refers to the policies and activities developed by the government and welfare institutions for immigrants, which form the basis upon which their integration is evaluated (Goodman, 2019). These policies and activities relate to competency in the language of the host country, child-rearing practices, dominant norms and values, and ideals of freedom, democracy, and equality, among other things (Goodman, 2019; Joppke, 2017).

In the Nordic countries, these ideals are increasingly being confronted by the complexities of superdiversity, which create relative tensions of exclusion and otherness in ECEC centers (Kuusisto & Garvis, 2020; Olwig, 2017). For instance, recent studies (Lund, 2022b; Sønsthagen, 2021) highlight how welfare institutions such as schools and ECEC centers covertly enforce compliance through unequal relations of power between professionals and refugees; the professionals take up the role of “civilizing” the refugees by imparting to them the social norms of the host societies, albeit concealed in the institutional practices that privilege the dominant values of the majority. By researching how ECEC professionals perceive their participation in integration, this is an opportunity to see how integration is organized to make people learn to adapt to the external requirements of the behavior expected of them, which is generally done with good intentions, but also risks becoming a form of covert assimilation (Jaffe-Walter, 2016).

Methodology

My inquiry was informed by institutional ethnography (IE), a method of inquiry associated with Canadian sociologist Dorothy Smith (2005). IE is both a theoretical approach and a method of inquiry that draws upon feminist standpoint epistemology, in which the research focus is on the social coordination of people’s everyday experiences (Smith, 2005, 2006). My intention in using IE was to conduct a sociological exploration that foregrounds

the standpoint of ECEC professionals as “knowers” with an ambition to explore how everyday integration work is organized through texts (Smith, 2005).

By using IE, I endeavor to unpack ECEC professionals’ integration work knowledge at a local site and the way this work is organized within institutional/macro processes of translocal relations, which, in IE, are referred to as ruling relations (Smith, 2005, 2006; Lund & Nilsen, 2020). I use work knowledge as a concept to refer to “descriptions and explications of what people know by virtue of what they do that ordinarily remain unspoken” (Smith, 2005, p. 210). To access the ruling relations of integration work, institutional ethnographers identify texts that mediate, regulate, and authorize the doings of ECEC professionals (Campbell & Gregor, 2004; Smith, 2005). Here, texts refer to “definite forms of words, figures, or images which exist in material form and can be replicated in a different site, and therefore connect people within social relations of that particular action” (Smith, 2001, p. 164). For instance, ECEC professionals partake in integration work that is socially organized by authoritative texts, such as the Framework Plan for Kindergartens (2017) and Norway’s integration strategy policy documents. The overarching reason behind the choice of IE is to explore the power of texts and language in people’s everyday work experiences as seen from their standpoint, along with how the messages in the texts are reproduced across different sites (Smith & Turner, 2014).

Participants and data collection

The analysis was based on semi-structured interviews with 13 ECEC teachers working in three ECEC centers in a southern city in Norway; the interviews were conducted between April and August in 2019. The sampled ECEC centers include a reception ECEC center run exclusively for refugees and two general ECEC centers (one public and the other private), all of which rely on funding from the state and are required to adhere to the Framework Plan for Kindergartens. Two of the participants worked in the reception ECEC center but also visited the other two centers as language consultants. They mainly worked with helping the children, after they had attended the reception ECEC center for a year, to make the transition to the general ECEC centers.

Except for the reception ECEC center, the spoken language was mainly Norwegian. The reception ECEC center also had part-time language interpreters who came in during parents’ meetings and when there were children in need of language support. The demographic of the ECEC professionals was homogenous—they were all women, predominantly ethnic Norwegian, and had Norwegian as their mother tongue. This has probably influenced the perspectives of the participants in relation to the areas of tension that the professionals perceived while conducting integration work in the ECEC centers.

The participants included pedagogical leaders, teacher assistants, and language support professionals. I used nonstandardized snowball and purposive sampling to recruit

the participants. The criterion was that the participants had to work at a site (an ECEC center) aimed at integrating refugees. Sampling in institutional ethnographic studies is not focused on being representative of or generalizable to the research population the participants belong to; instead, it focuses on finding a sample that operates within the examined institutional process (Smith, 2002, p. 26). The questions asked during the interviews covered the activities that ECEC professionals prioritized when interacting with refugee children, how the professionals interacted with such children and their parents, and how the professionals related to policy documents such as the Framework Plan for kindergartens.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in English, using the aid of a research assistant to interpret when needed. As a non-native researcher in Norway, I entered the research field from a position of unfamiliarity. Even though I was unfamiliar with the ECEC sector at a practical level in Norway, I was acquainted with the policies and organization of ECEC programs in the country, having lived there for eight years. The research was part of my doctoral dissertation at the University of Agder in the south of Norway. My position as an outsider offered me an opportunity to see and experience fieldwork through an external lens (Smith, 2005). My positionality can be understood as the perspective of a “stranger” (Schuetz, 1944) who finds themselves attempting to interpret the activities of ECEC professionals to orient themselves in their everyday work. In positioning myself as a “stranger”, I do not have the privilege of insider knowledge or the basic assumptions on how integration work is carried out by ECEC professionals. Hence, the ECEC professionals could occupy the expert position, offering me a chance to be the inquirer who questions everything that appears unquestionable or “ignorant” and to “see” what is taken for granted by those in the dominant position (Schuetz, 1944; Zhao, 2016).

The semi-structured interviews lasted between 45 minutes to an hour, and every participant was given enough time to provide an account of their experiences of working with refugee children. More than half of the interviews were conducted in the Norwegian language with the support of a research assistant, who helped to translate and transcribe the interviews in English. The involvement of a research assistant ensured that the participants expressed themselves in the language with which they were most comfortable. The ethical considerations made before, during, and after the study were in line with the guidelines of the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (2022). For instance, I sent a consent letter to all of the participants via postal delivery and email, which they all signed. The consent letter indicated that the project would anonymize the participants, that the whole exercise would be carried out confidentially, and that they had a free choice to join and withdraw from the project. The project was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) to ensure that the required data protection procedures were followed.

Data analysis

When performing data analysis, I began by identifying/ “mapping” the integration experiences and activities from the interview transcripts. Integration experiences refer to everything done by ECEC professionals that they deemed important for integration, as stated in the interviews. I tracked how ECEC professionals talked about their everyday experiences (Rankin, 2017). Mapping in IE involves engaging in a “dialogue” with the data in search of pointers on how the work is organized (Smith, 2005). Some of the commonly mentioned examples included conversations with parents, close attention to refugee children, guiding children on self-care, and language support. The focus was not only to explicate how ECEC teachers performed integration work but also how they were embedded in an institutionally standardized way of understanding their work. Mapping and explication of ECEC teachers’ experiences formed the basis from which the tensions emerged during the analysis.

During analysis, I identified three different tensions. I have termed these tensions *negotiating language*, *civilizing children*, and *civilizing parents*. Through the interviews, I familiarized myself with the lived experiences of the teachers, where I realized that there was a “puzzle” (Campbell & Gregor, 2004). Here, the “puzzle” was the tensions related to integration work that emerged from the expressed perspectives of the ECEC professionals and that, therefore, became the sociological issue within my investigation (Grahame, 1998; Smith, 2005).

The findings are presented with excerpts from the empirical data to demonstrate the three emerging tensions that ECEC professionals experienced when conducting integration work. In selecting the excerpts, I purposefully explored the interview material for clues in the verbatim transcriptions of the participants’ responses. This was inspired by IE’s recommendation to “look for detailed descriptions of work that make visible institutional hooks and traces in the lived experiences of the teller” (McCoy, 2006, p. 111).

Table 1. Characteristics of the sample.

Pseudonym	Job title	ECEC center ¹	Language (mother tongue)
Sophie	Preschool teacher/Language adviser	B and C	Norwegian
Ruth	Pedagogue/Language adviser	B	Norwegian and Arabic
Emily	Special needs teacher	C	Norwegian
Nancy	Psychiatric nurse/Teacher	C	Norwegian
Caro	Pedagogue	A	Norwegian
Salome	Deputy manager/Pedagogical leader	B	Norwegian
Nora	Pedagogical leader	A	Norwegian
Britney	Manager	C	Norwegian
Linnet	Pedagogue/Language adviser	A and B	Norwegian
Sheila	Pedagogue/Language adviser	B and C	Norwegian
Olivia	Pedagogue	C	Norwegian
Joanna	Pedagogue	B	Norwegian and Arabic
Purity	Pedagogue	B	Norwegian

¹ECEC center B is publicly and exclusively run for refugee children, while center C is publicly run for all children. ECEC center A is privately owned. All ECEC centers receive state funding in Norway.

Findings

This section presents the empirical findings and discussion. The analysis reveals three tensions that arose in the integration work carried out at ECEC centers, as seen in the interviews of ECEC professionals:

- i. Negotiating language, that is, learning Norwegian versus retaining their mother tongue.
- ii. Civilizing children, that is, exposing children to the ideals of “proper” Norwegian childhood versus incorporating refugee children’s diverse childhoods.
- iii. Civilizing parents, that is, teaching them to be “ideal parents” versus acknowledging their diverse parenting experiences and orientations.

Negotiating language

The interviews showed that ECEC professionals must contend with the tension relating to the expectation for refugee children to learn the Norwegian language vis-à-vis the retention of their mother tongue. Based on the Framework Plan for Kindergartens (2017, p. 47), children should receive appropriate language-stimulation instruction from teachers “to expose children to different languages, vernaculars, and dialects ... [and] create a diverse linguistic environment, highlight linguistic and cultural diversity.” Although this quote underscores a tolerance for language diversity in ECEC centers, refugee and other immigrant parents are first and foremost encouraged to enroll their children in ECEC centers for the sake of learning Norwegian (Directorate for Education and Training, 2022).

The findings revealed that because of the high number of children with foreign backgrounds, there was an elaborate arrangement for hiring foreign-language assistants who could speak languages such as Arabic, Somali, and Tigrinya (as reported by one ECEC leader). However, these language assistants were not full-time employees at this ECEC center, and they operated on a temporary basis when needed. The narratives provided by the participants indicate that the presence of language assistants played a significant role in promoting integration work at this ECEC center, as the following quote from Caro indicates:

Caro: However, we also have teachers and assistants who speak the mother language, that is, the children’s ethnic language ... I have to ask the woman who can speak Arabic to come and help me because I cannot speak Arabic, and the children cannot speak Norwegian ... So, the children need people who can speak their language, and then, they can slowly start to speak Norwegian; but first, we focus on how to make them feel safe ... If I want to have a conversation with the children or if I want to explain something ..., then I have to speak to the language assistant, who then explains to the children what we are going to do. So, they know what we will do and what will be needed.

The interviews indicated that the ECEC professionals prioritized the acquisition of Norwegian language competency among refugee children. Furthermore, there was consensus among the interview participants that refugee children were expected to learn the Norwegian language while in ECEC centers, which they said would give the children optimal preparation for the transition to other levels of the Norwegian education system. This is reflected in the quote from Joanna:

Joanna: I think my most important job is getting them integrated into the Norwegian society and essentially working with the families regarding everyday life here to help the children get better at Norwegian before they start in the Norwegian ECEC center ... And teach them normal Norwegian routines, too; that is our way of integrating. I think, for the language, it is best to go to the ECEC center with no home language support because then families have children who speak Norwegian, and they will learn the language faster.

Although the above quote reveals that priority was given to facilitating the children's learning of Norwegian, some responses indicate that they were aware of the importance of promoting the children's native languages, as Sheila stated:

I work a lot with these children. I'm pushing them to say something in their language and show them that I'm interested ... You're taking away a part of their identity if the ECEC professionals always push them to only use Norwegian.

The findings indicate that there was no consensus among ECEC professionals regarding how to negotiate the tensions of language and whether to focus solely on the Norwegian language or incorporate other mother-tongue languages in the integration process. Indeed, the Framework Plan for Kindergartens (2017) seems to prioritize the Norwegian language for all children attending ECEC centers, including refugee children, giving ECEC leaders the liberty to decide the manner in which to negotiate the language tension. Those ECEC centers that receive refugee children, therefore, seemingly face the dilemma of how to incorporate the mother-tongue language, because Norwegian is embedded in the integration strategy 2019–2022 (Ministry of Education and Research, 2018). The experiences of refugee children with their mother tongue while attending ECEC centers depends on which center they are enrolled in, because the centers have autonomy regarding how they work with languages.

Civilizing refugee children

The ECEC professionals revealed that integration work involves ensuring that refugee children understand the expected conduct and norms that they must follow. For instance,

they mentioned playing freely in nature, learning about personal space and autonomy, coping with different weather conditions, and independently resolving conflicts as important aspects of ideals that children learn at ECEC centers. The ECEC professionals emphasized that Norwegian children are expected to be independent; accordingly, most participants expressed the need for children to learn to follow instructions and perform self-care activities independently. Nora compared Norway with other countries regarding how children are encouraged to become more independent:

We have a lot of people coming from Turkey and Syria. In Turkey, ECEC centers are like schools. Children sit down and learn a lot. Here, we tell them, “You should sit on a chair; you have to wait for your turn, etc.” We have a play activity where we try to get the children to invest themselves, take their shoes off, jackets off ... In Syria, the parents do it for them, they don’t start so early like in Norway, and that’s a conflict. I give them some time and talk a bit about it, but I try to tell them why we are doing this. We want the children to eat by themselves. We also have people from Turkey who feed their children. But I don’t push them.

The ECEC professionals emphasized the need for children to develop independence as a core value of Norwegian childhood. Seemingly, integration work involves navigating the tension arising from the expectation by ECEC professionals that the children should learn to be independent. Moreover, the findings reveal that ECEC professionals noted contrasting ideals of child-rearing, particularly in relation to independence, children’s experiences of play, and their interaction with nature. For instance, the idea of children playing outside on wet days or during the winter was contested by refugee parents, who worried about the welfare of their children under such weather conditions, as Ruth indicated:

Many refugees come from countries with no snow, and once they bring their children to us, we tell them that their children will be playing in snow for 4–5 hours a day. This is very hard for them to accept at the beginning ... so I try to reason with them and promise to do less time in the snow.

The children’s encounters with Norwegian nature and play form the core values of the everyday Norwegian ECEC experience, in line with the Framework Plan for Kindergartens (2017). From the findings, it is arguable that facilitating refugee children in adapting to these ideals is part of the civilizing process of children in ECEC centers.

“Civilizing” parents

The ECEC professionals seemed aware of the tension that they faced when managing the cultural differences emerging during their interactions with refugee children and parents.

These differences included aspects related to food, religious celebrations, play, and outdoor activities, as Sheila indicated:

What's not acceptable in Norwegian ECEC centers is unhealthy food. Some of the parents put cake, chocolate, or juice in the lunch box. But we need to have patience with the parents and just tell them that won't be accepted in Norwegian institutions. We give them time to adjust ... As long as we are following the Norwegian law, we can have lots of discussions. It is very important to meet them with respect because there are so many different backgrounds. Some things we do are not in line with what they expect. We cannot expect that they will change just like that; things take time, and we need to be patient. They arrange things from food and clothing, how they treat and raise the children, and I have also experienced these conflicting experiences when I arrived here myself.

The quote reveals that ECEC professionals understand the challenges that emerge from cultural diversity in ECEC centers. In addition, it shows the strategies that they use to manage the differences in expectations, such as giving parents more time to adjust and advocating for respect, despite having conflicting experiences. This view aligns with the ambition of the Framework Plan for Kindergartens that seeks to foreground and celebrate diversity. Nonetheless, resourcefulness is also a source of potential conflict between teachers and parents. The ECEC professionals acknowledged that having different religious celebrations, such as Easter, Christmas, and Eid, a variety of foods, and different ways of dressing were all positive experiences for the children. Although some aspects of cultural diversity were celebrated, others appeared to cause tension because they represented different ideals of child-rearing, as Emily highlighted:

It's about things such as being outside when it's raining; lunch boxes as well, with two boring slices of bread. In a Norwegian ECEC center, you have to know many things, such as which boots to wear for what weather, and the expectations of the ECEC center from the parents.

Although some ECEC professionals stuck to the established practices and routines of ECEC centers, others seemed uncertain. For instance, Emily's quote shows some of the things that ECEC professionals expect the parents to fulfill, but at times, there is tension when these expectations are not met. It is equally notable from the quote that the professionals have ways of managing tensions through dialogue with the parents. Further, they exercised patience with those who might need more time to adjust to the demands of the ECEC centers. Here, the overarching priority of ECEC professionals seemed to be ensuring that parents knew what they were not allowed to do according to the law, that is, the legal limits of expected behavior and parenting ideals. The findings show that ECEC

professionals conceptualized their work with refugee parents as including “civilizing” them into the norms and ideals of the majority.

Discussion

The study findings revealed three forms of tension that the ECEC professionals perceived regarding how they carry out integration work with refugee children and parents. This discussion focuses on how ECEC professionals negotiated language, how they “civilized” refugee children, and how they “civilized” refugee parents. In exercising their professional responsibilities as organized in the authoritative texts (Smith, 2005), the ECEC professionals aligned with the “civilizing” project of the welfare state, which seeks to integrate refugees and is characterized by three forms of tension. The first tension that emerged from the study participants’ perceptions was how to negotiate the language of instruction and interaction in ECEC centers. This relates to the expectation that ECEC professionals should work to ensure that children acquire Norwegian language competency because kindergarten is conceptualized as an arena where different languages, cultures, and diversities meet (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). This tension is compounded by the Norwegian Government’s efforts to increase the enrollment of children with minority language backgrounds in ECEC centers to better prepare them for subsequent schooling (Kalkman & Clark, 2017; Ministry of Education and Research, 2018).

Exposing children to the Norwegian language can be seen as the “civilizing” project of ECEC centers, which comes with good intentions to perform the function of ECEC centers as part of the state’s wider ambitions of facilitating individuals to become culturally acceptable citizens (Gambaro et al. 2021; Gilliam, 2017; Kalkman & Clark, 2017; Olwig; 2017). While adult refugees attend the obligatory introduction program to learn Norwegian in institutions for adults run by municipalities, the ECEC centers play a similar role, particularly the reception ECEC centers that are run exclusively for refugee children. The present study shows that that the ECEC professionals perceive that refugees are expected to acquire competence in Norwegian language for them to be seen as integrated in the wider Norwegian society (Gilliam, 2017; Goodman, 2019; Jaffe-Walter, 2016).

Demands for this form of civic integration force ECEC professionals to confront the dilemma of how to integrate other language domains (Kalkman & Clark, 2017; Kulbrandstad, 2017). Although the Framework Plan for Kindergartens (2017) remains nonrestrictive, urging ECEC professionals to make use of rich linguistic diversity, it places strong emphasis on local Norwegian-language ECEC centers. The present study has shown that professionals have varying standpoints and strategies on how to work with language and, therefore, the tension that emerges. For instance, some ECEC centers have interpreters

and language-support teachers, while others do not, indicating that the overall language strategy may not be coherent.

Furthermore, the present study shows that the participants perceived that they had an obligation to “civilize” refugee children regarding appropriate routines and norms. The ECEC professionals deemed the ability of children to be tactful in terms of behavior and following instructions as a crucial aspect of integration (Norheim & Moser, 2020). The ability to follow a routine establishes a sense of normalcy, making the teachers feel confident in the children’s ability to adapt to a new environment and people. That norms have been routinized in the ECEC centers indicates that they were institutionalized and disseminated through the ECEC centers (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2017). Further, the teachers emphasized that it was crucial for children to develop independence. The findings show that ECEC centers in Norway are “civilizing” sites where refugee children experience early forms of civic integration, as ECEC professionals prepare them to be proper citizens of society (Abu El-Haj et al., 2018; Goodman, 2019).

Therefore, civilizing refugee children occurred through the civic lessons embedded in the routine practices of everyday life in the ECEC centers, in which they learned to take care of their own hygiene needs, feeding, and regulation of their own emotions (Abu El-Haj et al., 2018). Hence, it is understandable that this would be part of ECEC professionals’ perceptions of integration work, which they have a mandatory obligation to carry out. Recent studies have revealed that integration work is characterized by asymmetrical power relations between ECEC professionals and immigrant parents in Norway (Lund, 2022b; Norheim, 2022; Sønsthagen, 2021). Integration as a “civilizing” process is besieged by the tension between the civilizing project of welfare institutions, such as ECEC centers, which aim to integrate refugees into the dominant social values of being, and the civilizing project that ensures that refugees and immigrants enjoy the freedom of living within their identities in a socially cohesive environment (Jaffe-Walter, 2016).

It is unclear from the study whether the ECEC professionals were aware of the pressure to integrate that the refugee children and parents face in the ECEC centers. This pressure relates to the ambitions for civic integration that can be used to label those who conform as “the civilized” and those who do not as the “not-yet civilized” (Olwig, 2017). However, the ECEC professionals perceived that integration work involves cultural tensions that arise between them and the parents; they seemed aware of their professional role to guide, or “civilize,” the parents about how they are expected to raise children in Norway, because most refugees come from countries where child-care practices are different from those in Norway. Here, ECEC professionals occupy the position of experts as the authoritative texts conceptualize this, hence having the obligation to “civilize” refugee parents. For instance, some teachers invoked institutional means, such as national laws and curriculum guides, to get parents to cooperate. The Framework Plan for Kindergartens (2017) points out that

parents are welcome to participate in dialogue and present views to the professionals, but it is the professionals' mandate to uphold the social and set core values (p. 29). Here, questions can be raised as to whether the "civilizing" process is about making refugees "behave Norwegian" and whether integration is seen as a feasible relational process. In this regard, the debate is about whether integration takes a relational stance or a coercive stance, in which ECEC teachers' obligation is to make the refugees "behave Norwegian" (Goodman, 2019; Lund, 2022b; Sønsthagen, 2021).

Conclusion and implications

The present article contributes to the literature on cross-cultural integration in ECEC through the identification and discussion of three tensions in the institutionalized work of integrating refugee children: *negotiating the Norwegian language*, *civilizing refugee children*, and *civilizing refugee parents*. First, many refugee children and their parents may lack fluency in the Norwegian language, and ECEC centers have prioritized their focus on this. However, ECEC professionals are, at times, unsure of how to address other mother tongues. This implies that there is a need for more dialogue between parents and ECEC professionals regarding how to incorporate different mother tongues (Löthman & Puskás, 2022; Tobin, 2020). Second, the findings reveal how the teachers emphasized the importance of children developing independence by teaching them how to take care of their own hygiene needs, feeding, and emotional regulation. Third, there are many differences with respect to child-rearing norms between ECEC professionals and refugee parents. Integration work, therefore, is embedded in the relational and institutional power activated by ECEC professionals as they engage in integration work and the raising of socially cohesive citizens (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2017; Löthman & Puskás, 2022).

In a Norwegian society that has experienced demographic changes recently, the ideals of what it means to be civilized, good civic demeanor, and child-rearing practices can no longer be perceived as static. The implication is that ECEC professionals require training that equips them with the skills and strategies to aid in collaboration when dealing with refugee children and parents (O'Toole Thommessen & Todd, 2018). Moreover, a good relationship between professionals and parents at ECEC centers is vital during the integration of refugee families in their host countries (Gambaro et al., 2021; Norheim & Moser, 2020; Scholz, 2020). To build such relationships, strategies are needed to ameliorate the power differentials that may contribute to the marginalization of the voices and realities of the refugees in ECEC centers (Norheim & Moser, 2020). Recent research suggests that professionals need the skills and knowledge to handle tensions, and need to be aware of their own values and broaden their perspectives toward more flexible and culturally sensitive practices (Lund, 2022a, 2022b). In addition, ECEC professionals should be involved

in efforts that seek to reconfigure the dominant social discourses within policies, especially those that coordinate everyday integration work, not only at local level but equally at translocal level (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2017).

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