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Parenting Support and its Different Functions – Parents' Experiences. A Case Study from Norway

ASTRID O. SUNDSBØ

Assistant Professor, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL) (https://www.hvl.no/en/)
email: aosu@hvl.no

Abstract

The research literature is characterized by a fundamental controversy about what parenting support is and what it aims to be: A health-promotion measure that supports child development or a "totalizing tendency [. . .] of defining the relation between parents and children in technical terms" (Smeyers, 2010). This paper presents a study from Norway, where parenting support is offered as a "universal", publicly funded service. It presents and discusses findings based on in-depth interviews with 45 parents from different social (educational, economic) and cultural (migration) backgrounds, focusing on how they perceived the purpose and outcomes of parenting support programs in which they participated. A key finding is that parents with majority backgrounds are less enamoured with the quality and usefulness of provision, and tend instead towards other sources for advice on parenting (primarily their social and familial networks). Many also express scepticism of broad approaches to parenting support provision. In contrast, minority parents lacking "Norwegian" social and familial networks genuinely find the courses valuable, both for their own integration and self-confidence and also the development of their children. The findings help address the need for further research into the effectiveness of parenting support and its potential role in reducing social inequality.

Keywords: Parenting Culture; Parenting Support; Public Services; Minority Parents; Social Inequality; Migration

Introduction

The research literature on parenting support[1] engages in developing or measuring the outcomes of these interventions (mainly within the field of psychology), or (within the field of social sciences) in criticizing the more subtle functions that parenting support interventions are assumed to have (see Sundsbø, 2018a). Most research on parenting support does not focus on exploring the ways in which participating parents perceive and evaluate the content and outcomes of such interventions (Gillies, 2005; Shulruf *et al.*, 2009). Insights into parents' experiences and how they make sense of the parenting support they have received, are, however, crucial elements in analyzing what parenting

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support interventions are and seek to achieve (Daly, 2015; Gillies, 2011), as the task of studying and understanding the content, aims, and purposes of parenting support is a complex matter requiring analysis of different actors' perspectives (Daly, 2015).

A central aim of the present study was to explore how parents of diverse backgrounds perceive and evaluate parenting support interventions in a context where participation in such is (ostensibly) voluntary. The study was conducted in Norway and is based on in-depth interviews with 45 parents who participated in different parenting support interventions between 2015 and 2017. In Norway, parenting support is provided 'universally' rather than exclusively for groups who are considered 'marginalized' or 'disadvantaged' (Eng et al., 2017, p. 26; see also Bråten and Sønsterudbråten, 2016). Consequently, the sample group includes individuals from diverse social backgrounds regarding educational attainment, household income, cultural orientation, partnership, number of children, and country of origin. Learning how a more diverse group perceives and experiences parenting support interventions has the potential to bring new insights to the ongoing debate on policies and interventions in this field (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2014). This is because the research literature mainly comprises empirical observations from societies with less comprehensive welfare state models, where parenting support is first and foremost provided for 'marginalized' or 'disadvantaged' parents (e.g. Erstad, 2015; Fylkesnes *et al.*, 2018; Holt, 2008; Romagnoli and Wall, 2012). This focus of parenting support interventions on specific groups may contribute to their stigmatization and, furthermore, devalue parenting norms and practices that deviate from middle-class parenting ideals (Edwards and Gillies, 2011). Studies have found that, to some extent, parents (mothers) might find parenting support interventions "oppressive" (Erstad, 2015; Holt, 2008; Romagnoli and Wall, 2012). However, it is also claimed that parenting support might also provide new opportunities, as shown in a study of mothers who were subject to Parenting Orders (a UK court order concerning parenting arrangements for a child) (Holt, 2008, p. 214; see also Fylkesnes *et al.*, 2018).

The focus of the present article is to engage with how parents of diverse social backgrounds – with differing experiences, knowledge, and norms – perceive and evaluate the content, aim, and value of parenting interventions in which they have participated. The analysis is inspired by Carol Bacchi's '*What's the Problem Represented To Be*?' (WPR) approach (Bacchi, 2009), and focuses on how different groups of parents understand and 'frame' parenting support – more specifically, what they regard as the 'problem' that parenting support addresses, and how they perceive and evaluate the intervention as a 'solution' to that problem. The findings indicate that parents' descriptions and perceptions of parenting support interventions can contribute to a more nuanced research debate on what parenting support is and how it functions when implemented in practice.

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Provision of Universal Parenting Support in Norway

Public authorities in Norway have a particularly high level of involvement in both financing and organizing advisory services and courses for parents (Danielsen *et al.*, 2012). In 1995, the Norwegian national government launched its own universal parenting support intervention (*Foreldreveiledningsprogrammet, ICDP*). A few years later, government funding for parenting support was extended to other, non-indicative, structured parenting support interventions such as Circle of Security (*COS*) and Incredible Years (*IY*) as well as to less structured parenting support interventions in local communities (Bråten and Sønsterudbråten, 2016; Wesseltoft-Rao et al., 2017).

Parenting support was introduced in Norway during the 1990s, shortly after the launch of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989). Politically, it was framed as a response to children's rights to be heard and to receive sufficient care (Rye and Hundeide, 2012). Its potential positive impact on children's psychosocial health, through early intervention, was and remains a central basis for its political legitimization (BLD, 2018; Eng et al., 2017). This is based on the claim (from psychology) that parents' communication and relationship with the child is fundamental to healthy childhood development (Bufdir, 2015)[2]. However, in its latest strategy for parenting support (2018–2021), the government also emphasizes socio-economic motives for providing parenting support (BLD, 2018). It is stated that parenting support is important for ensuring children's future health and functionality, since the survival of the welfare state depends on future citizens who will be economically productive and pay taxes.

Policy makers in Norway describe parenting support as being useful for all parents, suggesting that it should be offered to all parents who request it (BLD, 2018). The Director of The Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs, Mari Trommald, has gone further and argued that all parents are *in need* of parenting support and therefore should seek advice from professionals (Trommald, 2015). The financial responsibility for providing parenting support has been delegated to the municipality level, except from some centralized funding at the national level that local institutions can apply for in competition with others. Consequently, due to economic pressures and negotiations at the local level, not all parents in Norway have the opportunity to participate in a publicly funded parenting support program (Sundsbø, 2018b).

In the research debate, the Norwegian Government's engagement in providing parenting support has been described as being driven by changing power structures and shifting responsibilities (Hennum, 2010) – similarly to trends observed in other European countries (e.g. Knijn and Hopman, 2015; Macvarish, 2014; Ramaekers and Suissa, 2012; Richter and Andresen, 2012). In recent decades, the policy legacy and the conceptualization of parenting support policies have undergone fundamental changes (Bråten and Sønsterudbråten, 2016). What is rather new is the framing of parents and parental behaviors as potential risk factors for children's development, a change that represents a

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Janus-faced increase in the state's interest and involvement in families' lives (ibid.; Kroken and Madsen, 2016). On the one side, parenting support aims to make parents more engaged and willing to take greater responsibility for child welfare (Kroken and Madsen, 2016); it thereby represents an attempt to strengthen the role of families (referred to as "refamilialization"; Leira, 2004). On the other, there is an interest in maintaining a high level of state regulation and control over families, referred to as "[state or governmental] paternalism" (Hagelund, 2008) or "defamilialization" (Danielsen *et al.*, 2012; Leira, 2004). The framing of parents and their parenting practices as a risk to their child can effectively oblige parents to seek professional advice, thereby making them less reliant on their own convictions or intuition since there is so much at stake (i.e., protecting the child from harm and promoting their development). Consequently, the government is in a position to increase its control over children's development and families' lives.

Methods

There have been attempts to provide a systematic and reliable overview of which parenting support interventions are carried out, and involving whom, but this was found to be difficult (Wesseltoft-Rao et al., 2017). Due to the absence of such information the study presented here builds on extensive fieldwork conducted in a selected large, central area of Bergen, Norway's second-largest city, from late 2015 to the end of 2017. Program administrators and parents were informed of the purpose of the study and all participants gave informed consent. The study methodology comprised two phases of research and data collection. The first data collection phase (not reported here) involved participatory observation throughout the duration of the parenting support interventions at all sites. The fieldwork identified six sites that hosted parenting support interventions, comprising: two *Well Child Clinics* (WCC), two community houses located in different social housing areas, an office building of the NGO *Church City Mission*, and a *Family Guidance Center* (municipality-driven, organized as part of *Child Welfare Services*). The participatory observations provided valuable insights into how the parenting support was conducted, and also facilitated recruitment of parents for subsequent interviews. The second phase comprised voluntary individual interviews with both administrators (not reported here) and participating parents after the interventions had ended. Observational data and interview material were collected from seven interventions in total. Of these, four were structured courses following standardized programs: two different *International Child Development Programme* (*ICDP)* courses, one *Circle of Security* (*COS*) course, one *Incredible Years* (*IY*) course. The other three were less structured and based on locally developed concepts: *Parent Groups* at the WCC, *Parents' Half 'n Hour* (*Foreldrehalvtimen*) as part of "Open Kindergarten," and the *Signpost-Course* (*Veiviserkurs*) run by Church City Mission.

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According to descriptions of the services on offer – obtained from websites, pamphlets, and service providers' oral descriptions – the interventions appeared similar in their purposes and aims as universal and preventive parenting courses, focusing on providing parenting advice to support child development. However, the continuous observations revealed substantial differences between the interventions in terms of group size, intensity (number of meetings, regularity, and amount of time for each meeting), and participants' social characteristics.

Overall, a surprising discovery during fieldwork was that parents (mothers) with poor educational qualifications who had immigrated to Norway as refugees were clearly overrepresented in the more intensive parenting support interventions provided and/or funded by public authorities during 2015 to 2017. The fieldwork revealed that both immigrant and non-immigrant parents were provided parenting support, but that they received this separately. The interventions ICDP, IY, COS as well as the 'Signpost course' can be characterized as the most intensive and obliging formats for parenting support, comprising weekly meetings over several months, whereas the Parents' Half 'n Hour and Parent Groups arranged by the WCCs had a lower frequency and less time available for presenting and discussing the outlined themes[3]. Given that parenting support is proclaimed as universal and useful for every parent, this was an unexpected finding.

More than 50% of the participants in each of the seven interventions observed during fieldwork agreed to be interviewed (all parents were asked). The literature has repeatedly called for deeper insights into how parents themselves view and evaluate parenting support, with claims that past studies have engaged more in talking 'about' parents, rather than talking 'with' them (Bråten and Sønsterudbråten, 2016; Gillies, 2012; Romagnoli and Wall, 2012). The material presented here is based on 44 face-to-face, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 45 parents (33 mothers, 12 fathers) who had participated regularly in one of these seven interventions[4]. The majority of the interviews were conducted in Norwegian language (one in English, eight in other languages in the presence of authorized translators), and generally lasted between 45 and 70 minutes. The interview questions aimed to encourage parents to speak as much as possible, using their own words to describe the parenting support intervention they had participated in. Up to nine main questions were asked (shown in Table 1), most of which were open and broad in nature.

Audio recordings were made of the interviews and later transcribed verbatim. The interviews took place shortly after the parenting support interventions ended, and were conducted at a different place from that of the intervention, wherever the interviewees found most convenient, such as in their homes, during a walk in their neighborhood, etc. Prior to beginning the interviews all participants were again informed individually about the purpose of the study and told that they could terminate their participation or withhold consent to use

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TABLE 1. Questions for interviews with parents

1. Please describe the background and circumstances of your participation in this intervention.
2. Can you please describe, in your own words, what this intervention, that you took part in, was about?
3. What did this experience, of taking part in a parenting support intervention, mean to you? Has it made any difference? (If yes, what kind of difference?)
4. Have you previously taken part in parenting support interventions?
5. Please describe how you feel about being a parent.
6. What is a good parent, from your point of view? How was it when you grew up yourself (family life, child upbringing)? Do you consider it to be different now?
7. Can you please describe your daily life and activities with your child(-ren)? What does a normal day or week look like?
8. Parenting support means the involvement of others in private, family matters. How do you evaluate this involvement?
9. The leader of the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth, and Family Affairs claims that all parents are in need of support regarding their parenting. What do you think about that?

their responses at any time. All participants provided written, informed consent prior to their participation as interviewees. Also, each participant kindly completed a form describing their biographical and educational background and current living situation. The category 'immigrant parent,' which is used in the analysis, refers to participants who reported that they and both their parents were born outside Norway.

The overall aim of this paper is to contribute to and extend the knowledge base on how parents with diverse experiences and social backgrounds perceive the content, quality, purpose, and impact of parenting support interventions. Many previous research contributions have convincingly stated a strong linkage between social class positions and parenting norms and practices (Hays, 1996; Lareau, 2011). For instance, an increasing number of parents – 'middle class' parents in particular – experience anxiety over not providing for optimal child development (Furedi, 2008). However, as mentioned previously, fewer studies have engaged with how parents from various social backgrounds and experiences perceive and evaluate parenting support interventions. For instance, do 'middle class' parents perceive parenting support advice as 'nothing new under the Sun,' simply mirroring their own parenting norms and practices? Furthermore, what are the different pathways and motivations for parents to sign up for or agree to participate in a parenting support intervention?

Norway, where parenting support is – ostensibly – accessible and recommended for all parents, was considered a particularly interesting context in which to study such issues, having the potential to cover a broad spectrum of evaluations and perspectives that parents may hold regarding parenting support interventions (cf. Vincent, 2000, 58ff.). Moreover, Norwegian society has repeatedly been characterized by a high level of trust in the welfare state, its

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institutions, and policies among the population (Skirbekk and Grimen, 2012). One question is thus whether this form of trust also applies to parenting support settings, and whether it is experienced equally by different groups. Another issue that informs the analysis is that of power and 'cultural hegemony' (Antonio Gramsci, see also Lee, 2014). Questions such as "How did the participants describe the setting and the interpersonal relationships where the themes and advice on parenting were exchanged?" were employed to study this via the collected interview material; and "(How) did the interventions refer to idea(l)s of 'good parenting practices'?" in order to identify participants' familiarity with the concepts and to gain information on whether they adapt to or reject them, and on what grounds.

The paper seeks to contribute to increased knowledge on how parenting support interventions are organized and experienced when implemented, as this may deviate from how policies are planned or intended by different institutions and agents (Daly, 2015; Lipsky, 2010). Bacchi's (2009) WPR approach provided valuable tools for the data analysis. The approach was applied to investigate, firstly, what the participants (in this case, rather than policy makers) understood as the 'problem' that parenting support interventions seek to address. Secondly, the WPR approach was helpful for identifying, from within the interview material, the presuppositions or assumptions underpinning these representations of the 'problem'. Thirdly, the approach was applied to study parents' own perceptions of how interventions affect their views or practices. Several sub-questions were generated for the analysis and to assist in coding the data, such as: From parents' accounts, how is the aim/target of parenting support represented? According to parents' descriptions of the intervention, which 'problem' does parenting support seek to solve? How do parents describe and conceptualize the need for parenting support interventions? And: What do parents themselves describe as the impacts or outcomes of having participated in a parenting support intervention?

Findings

Parenting support as confirmation

The majority of parents who had attended Parent Groups at the WCC described the support they were provided merely as an opportunity *to confirm whether they were doing well as parents*. The program follows a group consultation format and is offered as part of the regular check-ups for babies and toddlers instead of individual consultations. These groups enable parents (mostly in groups of three or four) to discuss and reflect upon different, mostly pre-defined, themes around parenting together with a nurse, in order to support child development. The initiative was explicitly supported in this particular locality, but according to public administrators is less common at WCCs. In terms of the

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total number of participants, 'Parent Groups' were the most common form of publicly provided parenting support in the research area. Nearly all parents make use of the WCC and the baby/toddler check-up program, and according to the service providers most parents who were offered participation in Parent Groups preferred this to individual consultations. However, in practice, participation in Parent Groups was not universal but instead only offered to those fluent in Norwegian[5].

Parent Group attendees were mostly highly educated, fully employed, and born in Norway. They stated that they were already very much involved in seeking advice on parenting and knowledge of children's needs, and were interested in how they could best support the development of their children, using books and the Internet to locate advice on parenting issues. They also expressed that parenting and child-rearing issues were a common topic of discussion with their friends and close family members, who they would predominantly ask for advice rather than approaching representatives of public authorities.

A father with a 10-month-old baby and a son around four years said that for him and his wife, as parents who already had some experience, the WCC parenting support did not hold great significance except to provide confirmation. He explained that the added value of the WCC Parent Groups was primarily the social setting and opportunity to meet other parents. He further stated that WCC nurses were not so good at giving concrete advice and answers to questions; consequently, he generally sought advice online. For him, the WCC was not a place where he was seeking – or expecting to find – advice. The long gaps between meetings meant that the WCC played only a marginal role in guiding him and his wife as parents: "We get information elsewhere," he stated, and explained that he and his wife had instead turned to reading books when seeking advice.

Furthermore, an interviewee, who was an educated nurse with her first child aged four months at the time of interview, explained that she would rather call her sister (who has three children) or a friend (who has a baby of the same age) rather than turn to WCCs for advice on issues. She expressed high confidence in the information she received from the WCC; however, since she was eager to receive an answer immediately rather than wait, she would seek information herself in other ways.

As with other parents recruited from WCC Parent Groups, this participant stated that she felt obliged to keep herself updated on what was the "right" thing to do for or with her child:

> *The times are changing all the time. So you need to keep up with what the recommendations are at the time period you are in. Because there is research all the time on stuff, and they find out many things, and I cannot – if they find out that something can go wrong if I do what my mother did, for example – then I cannot do it, when there is research on it.*

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She explained this through relating some of her own mother's actions during pregnancy with her three children, which were now considered risky. Her mother had, among other things, spent much time in the Sun because, at that time, there were no guidelines advising that pregnant women should not spend time outside when the Sun was too strong, or to avoid places where it was very hot. "She grilled us," she laughed, thus expressing her relief that she and her siblings had developed well, after all. None of the participants recruited from the WCC Parent Groups evaluated the guidance and advice they received as being very important or transformational for them, as it mainly provided confirmation. However, there is another way to interpret this finding. For many participants, the WCC Parent Groups obviously *did* have an important function. From their accounts, the groups helped them become more relaxed and less stressed about their own parenting practices. Thus, participation helped them negotiate and find ways of dealing with the knowledge they had accessed (from books and the Internet) about themselves and their practices as risk factors in their children's lives. This function – helping to reduce stress and "loosen up"– was something they gained through feedback from the WCC nurse, but primarily through comparison and exchange with other parents.

Although attendees of the WCC groups evaluated the intervention as a positive experience overall, it was primarily this group of participants that expressed strong skepticism about parenting support. Most, when asked explicitly, stated they would not be interested in participating in a parenting course such as *ICDP* or *COS*. Some explained that it would not be necessary, since they did not experience any specific problems. For others, lack of trust seems to be an issue. Mothers who had experienced problems with breastfeeding their child, for instance, said that they felt that their decision to give their babies formula milk was not supported, thus they could not speak openly with the WCC nurses about their (alternative) approaches.

Parenting support as repair

Rather than talking about confirmation, parents who had participated in the *COS* intervention appreciated the parenting support they were offered, describing it as an opportunity to learn to reflect upon their own parenting behavior and to recognize and understand the child's perspective. COS is a licensed parenting support program originating from USA, and is commonly used as a universal parenting program in different public institutions and publicly supported NGO activities in Norway (Wesseltoft-Rao et al., 2017). In Bergen, COS is provided by the NGO Church City Mission through municipal funding. Most participants in the observed COS intervention lived in the selected research area and had received information about the course from other NGO parent–child activities arranged in the area (mainly 'Open Kindergarten').

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Parents who had attended a COS intervention appeared less confident about themselves as managers of their own parenting and their child's well-being, compared to those who had attended Parent Groups at the WCC. It should also be mentioned that their children were some years older (past toddler age) than those of parents attending Parent Groups. In many ways, the COS-parents had similar backgrounds to those recruited from the WCC Parent Groups (medium to higher education level, predominantly non-immigrants); however, there was an important distinction: COS-parents had voluntarily signed up for the intervention (having read advertisements on Facebook, or received "recommendations" from friends or persons in their wider networks), hoping that it could help them overcome certain struggles or difficulties that they had identified before entering the course. As one mother who had attended the COS intervention stated:

Interviewer: What did this course mean to you?

Mother: First and foremost, it gave me this feeling that I am not so bad after all. There is always this insecurity about am I doing right or wrong, and then you realize that there is no right and wrong, but there is always room for improvement. No matter what you do, it might be right or it might be wrong, the main thing is that you are aware of what you are doing.

This interviewee stated that participating in the course had improved her self-image of her mothering capabilities and also made her more aware of her parenting practices. Her motivation for signing up for the course was that she considered her partner and father of her child to be so good at parenting. In comparison, she felt that she lacked experience with children and had problems remaining calm when the children started crying. She said the course had helped her to be more patient and understand "how children function."

A father from the *COS* invention explained that his wife, who worked for the child protection service, had seen the course announced on *Facebook* and said: "You have to prioritize this." He said that the course had made him reflect more on his shortcomings as a parent. When asked whether the course had brought about any changes for him or his family relationships, he responded that it had helped improve his relationship and communication with his three-year-old daughter. Similarly, the other COS attendees perceived the course as making them more self-reflective and understanding parents and better able to focus more on their child and his or her perspective.

Whereas this was evaluated positively among interviewees, one respondent also remarked that the course was based on a very narrow understanding of the dyad around the child: there was too much focus on either the mother or father as the main person with whom a child had close relationships; this did not represent the reality in which children live, as they also have close relationships with other people.

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Parenting support as education

Whereas the COS intervention and WCC Parent Groups targeted parents with advanced Norwegian language skills, three of the seven observed interventions explicitly addressed parents with an immigrant background (*ICDP*, *IY* and *Signpost* course). Only one of the seven interventions was composed of parents with very mixed social backgrounds (*Parents' Half 'n Hour*). Here and in the following section, information on the specific courses attended by interviewees is omitted to ensure anonymity. Before presenting the findings from programs targeting parents with an immigrant background, the three interventions are summarized. ICDP is a licensed parenting program developed in Norway (and forms part of the national Parental Guidance Programme). In the selected study area ICDP courses were offered in either Somali, Arabic, or Norwegian language. The local WCCs received national funding to arrange several ICDP courses each year, and elected to provide parents with fewer Norwegian language skills with group-based parenting support beyond the individual consultation/ follow-up at the WCCs. Compared to the WCC Parent Groups, the ICDP courses are more intensive, with weekly two-hour meetings over twelve to fourteen weeks, focusing on specific themes around parenting.

The IY intervention is a parenting support program developed in the context of the USA, which has been implemented in Norway in recent decades but primarily as a measure for treatment and less as a universal, preventive measure. However, in Bergen, Child Welfare Services (located at the municipality's Family Guidance Center) offers IY courses to all parents that it has been in contact with for any reason. Service providers stated that non-immigrant parents who are in contact with the Child Welfare Services prefer individual consultations, and therefore their group-based parenting support schemes instead target immigrant parents. The third 'immigrant-specific' parenting support intervention was the 'Signpost course', which is a locally developed intervention provided by the NGO Church City Mission. The Signpost course offers a group-based intervention for mothers with an immigrant background, and lasts approximately three to four hours weekly for approximately ten weeks. Parenting issues are central to many of the sessions but not the sole focus of the course. Information about the course and recruitment was pursued mainly through other NGO activities, such as the 'Open Kindergarten', but also through the WCCs.

In contrast to the perspectives on what parenting support is and its purpose(s), as presented above, parents who had visited interventions targeting the immigrant population commonly described these as a teaching situation, consisting of teacher(s) and learners, rather than a setting where knowledge is shared among professionals and parents with similar understandings or levels of knowledge. A large proportion of interviewees who attended support interventions for immigrant parents stated that they took part because they had been encouraged to do so by the Child Welfare Services, by social workers present at other events

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hosted at the sites where parenting support was provided, or by the WCC nurse. Thus, in contrast to the (largely) non-immigrant groups described previously, their participation was based less on their own initiative or personal engagement.

A father of five children described the course he attended as somewhere that he (together with his wife) had "learned many positive things, which [we] lacked."

Interviewer: Such as what, for instance?

Father: I can say "How are you?", for instance. I can cooperate with the children, sit together with the children around the table, for example, so that they do not make too much noise. So . . . we learned a lot about activities, for instance. Be outside with them. That's a lot, right? We also, for example, learned that you can reward them for cooperating with you. You [the child] can get a reward every week, for instance, 50 NOK or 100 NOK [approximately 5 or 10 Euros]. We learned a lot of different stuff. So the course was really interesting.

Apart from his positivity about all the things he had learned, such as specific techniques for improving children's willingness to cooperate, this father also commented that it had felt strange, at least initially, to sit together with other parents in a room and discuss what they do at home. The room was also small, with chairs placed very close to each other, so he had also felt slightly uncomfortable with the setting. He concluded by saying that it had been both a positive and a negative experience.

Another father from the same course perceived it as "very positive, a very good course." He continued: "That is because we were instructed about how we can raise children, talk to them, step by step, in a way."

A mother of two young children, who had participated in a different, structured parenting support group intervention for Somali-speaking mothers, explained that this had been a great help because, coming from Somalia, she had not previously learned how to treat children with respect:

We have a culture in us, from our own childhood, which has made us not used to adjusting to children, to have a dialogue with them and negotiate with them. Therefore, the course is very good, because it is important that children are treated with respect. They deserve the same treatment which we give our friends.

In this mother's view, the parenting support intervention was helpful in learning skills such as adjusting to children, and in holding a dialogue and negotiating with them. Another mother (different country of origin), who was generally positive about the discussions and themes in the structured program she had participated in, nevertheless added that she disliked some aspects of what was taught. To her, the content was "how Norwegian families raise their children," and one thing she disagreed with was the view that parents should always praise the child. She thought this was "a bit wrong," since it may encourage bad behavior. She explained: "You can do anything in life, then, right? If what you

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hear is always 'you are good; this is nice.'" As an example, she mentioned future problems in a marriage where, due to a lack of self-criticism, both partners might insist that their viewpoint was correct.

Parenting support in helping "fit in"

Participants with an immigrant background emphasized that the parenting course was an important opportunity to learn about child-rearing in the Norwegian context. A mother with two small children, who rather recently came to Norway from an African country to study in a Master's degree program, expressed gratitude for the parenting support provided to her in the community house (a non-structured intervention). She said (the interview was conducted in English): "We have lived in another tradition about the kids. And here, I found it to be totally opposite. And it is something good for the kids, better than we grew up with." The parenting support was, for her, an opportunity to learn a different and better way of parenting, in some ways similar to what was stated above. She added, though, that it was not only an issue of learning new things: It had also potentially avoided situations with severe consequences for her and her children. Through the parenting course, she had heard for the first time that hitting children was forbidden in Norway. She said she was unlikely to hit her children, but that the Child Welfare Services could then have taken custody of her children away from her.

Fear of the Child Welfare Services was a theme present in many of the interviews with parents of an immigrant background (see also Fylkesnes *et al.*, 2018). One mother explained:

> *We do not know the rules; everything is new for us. At the same time, we try as well as we can to raise our children in a good way. But we are also afraid to do something wrong, because we are in a completely new situation. There is a huge difference between us, who came here as adult foreigners, and Norwegians, who have grown up here and have much knowledge about the system. [. . .] We do not receive equal information about how to raise children in this country. We have fear, because we hear that the child protection service can come and take our children from us. So we become insecure. [. . .] As a result of this, our children do not feel secure at home. And they might not feel proud of their parents, because the parents know so little about the society and what is expected of them. [. . .] When parents are in a situation where they know little about what is right and important, then their children will lose respect for them.*

In order to explain this further, she shared an experience of her friend and neighbor. The friend's daughter (then aged around 13) told her mother that, under Norwegian law, she was entitled to the newest iPhone. The daughter claimed that, if she did not receive it, then the Child Welfare Services would take over her custody. The girl's mother had discussed this with a social worker while participating in a parenting support intervention at the local community center, where she was assured that this was incorrect and told she could relay

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this to her daughter. The interviewee used this story to conclude that parenting support was indeed a good measure, since it could help to reduce the knowledge gap between immigrant parents and their children (the latter being much better informed about the society, as they are growing up as part of it).

A father explained that the professionals providing him parenting support had replaced the role of his family when there was something on which he needed advice concerning his child or his parenting:

> *I cannot ask my father or mother for advice on this. Because these are such different societies, the Norwegian society and ours. In our country, for instance, children have to go out and work to help the family, help their father, when they are 10–11 years old. If they don't, it's shameful. But here, they can go on with school until they are 18 because the state helps them and makes sure they have everything they need. So that makes it very difficult to ask. [. . .] So they [the workers at the support center] have helped me a lot. They have become my family. I can just go there and ask anything.*

The overall positive evaluation of parenting support initiatives among parents of immigrant backgrounds was often linked to helping them learn what was considered right or wrong in their role as a parent in Norwegian society. However, as one father explained, another positive factor is that it provides parents who immigrated to Norway better opportunities to raise children who "fit in":

> *I think it was a very good course to take part in, and it was very important for me personally. Because it was about learning how to function well with your kids, with your wife, with your family – a family life. So even if it was arranged by those who lead the course, we [the parents] were the ones to benefit from it. Because, through this, we can raise our kids to become . . . well . . . children who are better adapted to this society. Yeah, because then we can raise children who are qualified for this society, in a way, and mature enough to fit well into this society. In order to make the children ready to live in this society. And to make that happen, you need to have learned yourself what that means, and you need to know the expectations here.*

As seen in this quote, this father interprets the value of parenting support explicitly as something that benefits his children's future more than himself. Initially, he had been skeptical of the course, and said that he attended because he felt compelled to. Child Welfare Services had encouraged him to participate, following an occasion where his daughter had told a kindergarten teacher that her father had once hit her arm. This had turned out to be a misunderstanding, the father said, and the Child Welfare Services had now closed the case. Nevertheless, he was grateful that they had given him the opportunity to visit the parenting course, since it was so useful. Furthermore, many of the mothers who had participated in an intervention provided by the WCCs specifically for Somali women (in Somali language) expressed that, for them, taking part in the course was beneficial, since they did not have much contact with Norwegians.

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Discussion

While parenting support was predominantly perceived as a measure that 'teaches' or 'socializes' parents with immigrant background to better manage the task of being a parent in Norway, non-immigrant parents expressed very different understandings of the represented 'problem' (Bacchi, 2009) that parenting support interventions address. The findings support those of previous studies, highlighting that parenting support interventions offered to immigrant parents implicitly problematize the ways in which (many) immigrant parents conduct their parenting (Erstad, 2015; Hagelund, 2008). In this study, immigrant parents who participated in parenting support interventions seem to agree with the conceptualization of themselves and their parenting practices as potentially problematic and a risk to their child. In many immigrant parents' accounts, 'the problem' that parenting support addresses is considered to be lack of experience with and knowledge about social rules and collective expectations as regards raising children in Norwegian society. An observed assumption underpinning this 'problem representation' (ibid.) is that without this information, conflicts and larger problems will occur, such as losing custody of the child.

Parents who had attended Parent Groups associated the provision of parenting support interventions with the authorities' desire for supervising and controlling citizens. One outcome was reduced openness about their own parenting practices, for instance. One reason for this might be that the 'problem' that parents identified as central for the intervention – i.e., advice to support parents in promoting their child's development – was not perceived as something the intervention actually lived up to in practice. Several interviewees referred to the Parent Groups as a social arena to build relationships with others and exchange experiences, rather than a setting where they received valuable information and concrete advice on how to conduct parenting 'in the correct manner.' In contrast, parents who had attended a COS intervention had very different views on this. All COS interviewees referred to it as a measure where they had been given useful tools that they could use to overcome struggles in their relationship with their children, which they related to their own failures or to previous negative personal experiences. Thus, according to these interviewees, the 'problem' represented in the COS intervention was the parents' techniques and attitudes when relating to their child – which could be changed by applying certain tools and perspectives as taught in the course. The assumptions underlying this representation of the 'problem' center on perceptions of the parent, and on how the ways in which parents approach and communicate with their child are interpreted by officialdom as being both a potential risk and (following successful intervention) a contributor to positive childhood development.

A striking finding is that parents who had immigrated to Norway (with both higher and lower levels of formal education) expressed more positive attitudes towards (further) parenting support interventions than did the parents

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from the WCC groups, even though they felt that they had been targeted and stigmatized as being in need of (particular) intervention. Many of the parents with immigrant background talked about the intervention as something they would not have wanted to miss, as it gave them an opportunity to access knowledge that they lacked in order to "fit in" (for themselves and their children). The findings suggest that parenting support provides immigrant parents with better opportunities to understand what is expected from them as parents in Norwegian society, and to position themselves as "worthy" parents vis-à-vis Child Welfare Services, for example (see a similar statement made by Holt, 2008). This is an interesting finding in light of the concern, within the social sciences, that parenting support may *enforce* social inequality and marginalization of disadvantaged groups (i.e., Gillies, 2005; Hagelund, 2008; Hennum, 2014; Widding, 2011).

Factors such as duration of stay in Norway, and familiarity with dominant norms and societal expectations, seem important – perhaps even more so than "class" itself (Lareau, 2011). Parents born and raised in Norway had very different educational backgrounds and incomes to those who had come to Norway as immigrants. However, several parents recruited from the 'immigrant' parent interventions had a high level of formal education. Nevertheless, they also felt insecure about how to conduct parenting in the 'correct' manner and how to avoid negative sanctions from the state.

Power imbalances between interviewees (of an immigrant background) and the researcher and interviewer (representing the 'majority population,' and a potential collaborator with Child Welfare Services, which interviewees tend to fear; cf. Fylkesnes et al., 2018), may have influenced the results and strengthened the interviewees' positive expressions of parenting support interventions. However, considering how some immigrant parents described the intervention as an informative experience, it is likely that parenting support actually was perceived as an overall positive experience.

Interestingly, parents with an immigrant background tended to see the content of the parenting support they were offered as being expressions of Norwegians' norms and culture, and did not relate this to "universal truths" about child-rearing and parenting. They considered such content as being the result of, and embedded in, a specific cultural setting and understanding of child-upbringing.

Conclusion

The present study, in examining how a diverse group of parents perceived the aims and benefits of parenting support programs, has shown that the most critical and skeptical evaluations came from non-immigrant, 'middle-class' parents, whose parenting ideals (and self-assessed ability to achieve those ideals) already

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closely aligned with Norwegian values of "intensive parenting" (Faircloth, 2014) despite having attended fewer comprehensive parenting support interventions (cf. Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2014). Their perception of the interventions as having limited influence is seemingly due to their already strong familiarity and engagement with the country's dominant societal norms concerning 'good parenting' and, furthermore, that they actively seek information on this elsewhere (Edwards and Gillies, 2004).

In contrast, immigrant parents expressed greater appreciation of parenting support interventions, describing them as an arena where they received new and useful information. One way to interpret this finding is that parenting support may increase these parents' self-determination and "empowerment" (Askheim, 2012), and serve to overcome social inequalities. However, immigrant parents' embracing of what many described as 'Norwegian idea(l)s' of parenting and childhood can also represent the opposite of self-determination and empowerment (Donzelot, 1979; Hagelund, 2008). The willingness of immigrant parents to change their mindsets and practices around parenting might also express resignation and lack of opportunity to conduct their parenting in line with practices that are most familiar to them. Parents who (are taught to) understand themselves as a potential risk to their child (or who believe that the Child Welfare Service perceives them as such) might find themselves unable to choose how to conduct their parenting, fearing the consequences of refusing official advice offered to them. An alternative interpretation for why parents with immigrant backgrounds evaluated parenting support so positively is that such interventions might represent their (only) opportunity to gain the information and skills that they feel are necessary to be considered 'good' (enough) parents in Norwegian society.

Parents' accounts of what the interventions were about, and what they meant to them, revealed that parenting support can have functions or benefits beyond those that the programs were designed for (Joas and Knöbl, 2009; Merton, 1936). This provision of co-benefits was identified in several previous studies (Bråten and Sønsterudbråten, 2016; Hägglöf, 2013; see also Skar *et al.*, 2014) but not investigated further: to the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to explore this issue in detail.

The present findings reveal the need for further empirical research on *what* parenting support becomes when implemented and the reasons *why*, including the outcomes that it produces. Parenting support interventions do not appear to be scaled for – nor to address – social inequalities and parents' differing needs. While some parents consider parenting support measures as being of limited help in obtaining specific information, others may consider them as very useful and might require longer-term support beyond the standard program duration (e.g. the father who expressed that the intervention would be a more suitable setting to ask for parenting advice than turning to his parents). This finding should be considered when developing parenting support policies and programs. There is

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also a stated need to further investigate the potential gap between what parenting support is claimed to be in policy documents and according to health experts' perspectives, versus how it is actually organized and perceived throughout its implementation. Health experts who have supported and promoted the implementation of parenting support policies and measures in Norway have insisted that this is necessary and useful for *all* parents. Nevertheless, for reasons yet to be explored, the scale of policy implementation has not matched the stated level of ambition. Observations of practice and parents' perspectives indicate that parenting support – at least in the Norwegian context – is largely a policy tool for social inclusion of parents with an immigrant background. Policies and parenting support programs should also acknowledge and address that parents with an immigrant background describe information they have received through parenting support measures as new – thereby giving reason to question the claim that parenting support is founded on 'universal' norms and values, at least in its actual implementation.

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Competing Interests

The author declares none.

Notes

1 Parenting support is defined as: "a set of (service and other) activities oriented towards improving how parents approach and execute their role as parents and to increasing parents' child-rearing resources (including information, knowledge, skills, and social support) and competencies" (Daly 2015, p. 599).

2 A claim that has been dismissed (i.e. by Frank Furedi, 2008) as "the myth of parental determinism."

3 The structured parenting courses and the *Signpost* course were arranged weekly, comprising between eight and fourteen meetings. *Parents' Half 'n Hour* was arranged twice-monthly throughout the year, whereas *Parent Groups* at the WCCs had either seven or eight meetings over a period of two years (primarily during the first eight months after the child's birth).

4 One of the interviews included two parents, a couple who had both attended the intervention.

5 This practice was stated by representatives of the providing institution, but is not covered in this article.

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