Chapter 13
Collaboration Between Child Care and Parents: Dilemmas and Contradictory Conditions in the Institutional Arrangement of Child Care

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Abstract In Denmark, as in many other countries, children live their lives across different contexts, primarily in the home and in childcare institutions. The child's contexts are simultaneously both separated and related. On the one hand, the family and childcare are not automatically involved in each other's arrangements, but on the other hand, they are structurally connected and continuously interacting due to the crossover of the children's activities. Therefore, collaboration and coordination between parents and professionals is an important part of childcare practice. Based on comprehensive empirical work in different Danish childcare centres, this chapter discusses how parental collaboration in the pedagogical practice is often a rather paradoxical effort, developed in relation to contradictory historical and institutional conditions and requirements to treat parents both as equal participants, consumers and clients. In this way, challenges and dilemmas in parental collaboration in childcare are analysed in relation to larger societal conflicts about the relation between society and citizen and the overall purpose of childcare as state institutions.

Introduction

The Nordic countries have a long tradition of young children spending part of their lives in out-of-home care practices, and almost all children aged 1–6 attend childcare on a daily basis (e.g. Haagensen 2011). This is a trend that is also developing in many other OECD countries (Dalli et al. 2011; OECD 2001; Reedy and McGrath 2008; Sphancer 2002). In this way, an increasing number of children live their lives in settings inhabited by other children and different adults – parents and professionals. These different settings are separately organised, but at the same time, they are related through the children's trajectories of participation. Different research perspectives have shown how children's learning and development processes extend

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across the division between home and childcare – what occurs in one context is significant for what occurs in another (e.g. Andenæs and Haavind 2015; Dencik 2004; Fleer and Hedegaard 2010; Kousholt 2006, 2008; Sommer et al. 2013). This corresponds with a Danish social pedagogical tradition of focusing on the collaborative processes between parents and pedagogues, who have common and related, but also different, tasks in relation to supporting the children's possibilities for well-being, learning and development (e.g. Andenæs 2011; Andenæs and Haavind 2015; Højholt et al. 2014; Kousholt 2006; Røn Larsen 2011a; Røn Larsen and Stanek 2015). In general the Nordic countries and other parts of the world have experienced an increased focus on the processes of collaboration and shared care between parents and pedagogues (for the Nordic context, see, e.g. Andenæs 2011; Andenæs and Haavind 2015; Drugli 2010; Kousholt 2008, 2014, and for a broader international context, see, e.g. Bleach 2015; Boag-Munroe 2014; Morrow and Malin 2004; Reedy and McGrath 2008; Singer 1993; Sphancer 2002). Correspondingly, parental collaboration is a still more integrated part of childcare practice. However "parental collaboration" tends to be a collective name, covering a range of diverse meanings, when it comes to defining quality, content and forms of parent-childcare relations. The reasons and methods for parental collaboration in childcare are conceptualised and played out in very different ways. The various descriptions of "positive relations", collaboration and partnership represent everything from daily interaction and major goal-oriented parental programmes to the social interventions for children or families, who are of concern to the professionals (Boag-Munroe 2014; Højholt and Kousholt 2015; Juhl 2014; Røn Larsen 2011a; Røn Larsen et al. 2014). In this way, the concept of "parental collaboration" seems to draw on various figures of understanding in practice, policy and research – figures that sometimes conflict in relation to fundamental questions about how to understand children's learning and development processes. Even so, there is a *limited focus on these differences* and their implications in both research and practice.

Danish childcare is currently undergoing a major development that breaks with the previously unique professional autonomy to insist on the children's right to a childhood, with a high degree of independence and influence primarily centred around activities of free play in childcare (Gulløv 2015; Højholt and Røn Larsen 2015; Kampmann 2009, 2014; Kragh-Müller and Ringsmose 2016; Wagner and Einarsdottir 2006). Historically the Nordic social pedagogical tradition has involved the parents as collaborative partners in the development and support of children's everyday lives across their different life contexts. Over the last decades the professional autonomy has gradually been replaced by a political focus on the content and outcome of Danish childcare institutions. This focus includes different issues. Since the beginning of the 1980s, there has been a focus on involving "the user perspectives" in developing the quality of Danish welfare institutions such as childcare. This ambition has had ambiguous meaning with a democratic ambition of including the citizens' perspectives on the one hand and a more consumer-directed ambition on the other. When looking across the tendencies of parental collaboration in childcare, a political focus on educational or preventive objectives can also be identified. In a broader international tradition, which focuses on children's school life, parental

collaboration is often discussed in terms of "goal orientation", to improve the rate of "school success". Finally the parental collaboration is also related to overcoming "social heritage" from a "disadvantaged" family background (e.g. Bæck 2005; Kousholt and Berliner 2013; Lareau 2003).

Over the last decade, I have investigated some of the compound and conflictual processes in parental collaboration together with different research teams (Højholt et al. 2014; Kousholt 2008; Røn Larsen 2005a, b, 2011a, 2012; Røn Larsen and Stanek 2015). The empirical material from the projects consists of participants' observations, interviews with various agents from the childcare field (pedagogues, directors, parents and municipal managers) and a range of different policy documents about childcare development from both the municipality and government. The analysis presented in this chapter will encompass these different projects, in order to shed light on some general dilemmas and tendencies of parental collaboration in childcare. The analysis shows that for the pedagogues, the different, conflictual understandings of parental collaboration tend to present themselves as dilemmas, situations where the tasks in relation to parental collaboration become unclear and sometimes contradictory. This chapter focuses on how problems and dilemmas in the concrete practice of parental collaboration in childcare reflect larger societal and historical conflicts about the relations between citizens and society. This approach breaks with a common and widespread tendency to reduce parental collaboration problems to a question of individual backgrounds, for either professionals or parents. Parental collaboration dilemmas are often related to questions of parents being too demanding or "hard to reach" or professionals lacking knowledge or competencies (Røn Larsen 2005a, b, 2011a). According to this suggested solutions to collaborative problems are often reduced to questions of methods and communicative strategies, often detaching the problems from their historical background and institutional conditions. As an alternative, this chapter will link the dilemmas of parental collaboration to the conditions of the complex institutional arrangement of childcare (Dreier 2008; Røn Larsen 2011b). These analyses may be of interest to a broader audience, because the specific historical context of Danish childcare at the moment seems to reflect some issues with a broader international impact.

Dilemmas and Institutional Demands in Practice: An Example

The following is an example from a Danish childcare, where the pedagogues experienced dilemmas in relation to the parents of a 4-year-old girl. First of all, it demonstrates the social pedagogical tradition, where the pedagogues intend to involve the parents in supporting their child's possibilities of participation in the free play activities in her peer group. But it also illustrates the dilemmas in parental collaboration and how different conflicting figures of understanding are simultaneously at stake in the childcare practice. The subsequent sections of the article will unfold the institutional context for these dilemmas.

According to one of the childcare pedagogues, the parents insist that the girl take a nap after lunch with the younger children. The pedagogue disagrees with the parents. She thinks that the girl is too old for this, and her experience is that it hampers the child's possibilities to participate in her peer group's activities. The pedagogues describe it as a dilemma, because on the one hand they believe that they should accommodate the parent's wishes and they feel anxious about criticising the parents' choice. On the other hand, the pedagogues feel obliged to intervene, because they observe that the girl have difficulties with her peer relationships, because she is never present in the playground situations after lunch because of her nap. The pedagogues explain that they have tried to ask the parents whether it was really necessary for the girl to sleep during the day, but the parents insist. Otherwise, the girl becomes too tired in the evenings. After the talk, the professionals are worried that the parents feel insulted, and they sense that the parents have been distant ever since the meeting. However, they also think that the problem remains unresolved because of the parent's insistence. Afterwards the parents and the pedagogues no longer chat as they had in the past, and the pedagogues describe their relationship as rather tense. The girl continues to sleep in the childcare institution during the day, and the pedagogues remain concerned about her peer relationships. The situation seems to have reached a deadlock.

The pedagogues continue to discuss the situation, but they do not involve the parents, because they fear the parents might file complaints against them. Finally, the director of the childcare centre insists that they invite the parents for a new meeting. At this meeting, they begin the discussions by *exploring the specific meanings* that sleeping in the childcare centre have for the girl in her everyday life. It becomes clear to the parents how their insistence on the nap is influencing the girl's social life. However, it also becomes clear to the pedagogues that what they had thought of as the parents' neglecting their child's needs could also be understood as the parent's attempt to consider her needs in relation to their family life. Both parents work far from home, and the girl is delivered to childcare early and picked up late. Since they want to spend as much time as possible with their child, the parents consider it meaningful for her to have a "siesta" at the childcare. After sharing their different perceptions and discussing the implications for the girl's possibilities of leading a life that spans the different contexts, the parents and the pedagogues reconsider their own standpoints and their contributions to the girl's life. The parents allow more flexibility in relation to the pedagogue's arrangements for their daughter's nap and try to arrange their work-life a little differently in order to occasionally collect her earlier. The pedagogues become more explorative in order to understand when it is important to allow the girl to sleep, and they also start working more actively on supporting the girl's participation in the children's communities at other times.

The central point here is not to emphasise or discuss what was right or wrong in this specific case. Rather it is to show how different expectations to the relation to the parents are at stake at the same time. It is unclear for the pedagogues how to handle the differences between their perspectives and the parents. As one of the pedagogues explains after the second meeting:

> Thinking back, I wonder what took us so long. Why did we drag it out? Well, I'm still not sure whether I agree with them [The parents]. But perhaps I understand them better now.

Why did it drag out? Why does conflict become something "dangerous"? The process of collaborating with the parents was in many ways experienced as threatening to the pedagogues, as a process filled with dilemmas and uncertainty of who was right and who was wrong. Another aspect worth noticing is what happens when the question of "standards" or "principles" are abandoned and substituted with a joint exploration of meanings across this specific child's different life contexts, where the different perspectives become important and relevant to each other, rather than being reduced to the question of who is right and who is wrong. Here it becomes possible to establish a "chain of care", where pedagogues and parents support each other in exploring different aspects of the child's life in contexts to which they do not always have access (Andenæs 2011; Andenæs and Haavind 2015; Gullestad 1979; Kousholt 2006, 2008). By investigating each other's perspectives and reasons, it seems to become possible to develop better and more flexible solutions for the children. However, establishing the common exploration of different perspectives seems very hard within this institutional context. In the following section, I will propose a theoretical and analytical framework for understanding the unease and the dilemmas of parental collaboration related to historically developed, contradictory institutional conditions and demands.

Conflictual Collaboration in Institutional Arrangements of Social Practice

The overall focus of this chapter addresses the relations between dilemmas in everyday life and the larger institutional and political arrangement of which childcare is a part. The analysis focuses on *dilemmas*, a concept that stresses the personal side of structural conditions in an institutional context, for example, expressed in politics and management. If we want to understand concrete dilemmas and challenges in relation to parental collaboration in childcare, we need concepts that relate pedagogical practice to a larger institutional context involving many and often conflictual conditions and demands. In my research, this is done by understanding the social practice of childcare as a compound institutional arrangement with many, often conflictual interests at stake simultaneously (Axel 2009, 2011; Dreier 2008; Højholt and Kousholt 2015). However, we cannot reduce the influence of institutional demands on social practice to a question of simple causal relations. Instead, we need to explore the different conflicting subjects to make sense of their everyday lives (Dreier 2008). Here, the meaning of the institutional conditions is explored through analysis of first-person perspectives in relation to the meanings that they have for *persons in practice* (Busch-Jensen 2013; Dreier 2008; Schraube 2010). This research perspective breaks with traditional research from a "macro-perspective", focusing on the processes of "implementation" of a special act or legislation as the explanatory framework for initiatives and outcomes in practice, implicitly suggesting that development is the outcome or "percolation" of political strategies and rationales.

Instead, these analyses draw on inspirations from primarily critical psychology (e.g. Axel 2009, 2011; Dreier 2008; Højholt and Kousholt 2015), institutional ethnography (Smith 2005, 2006) and social practice theory (Lave 2008, 2011), focusing on the experienced dilemmas in practice as a part of peoples' participation in social practice that again is part of a more comprehensive institutional arrangement. In this way, institutional conditions are approached from "within", focusing on the concrete and contradictory meanings that the institutional conditions have for people and for collaboration in the everyday life in childcare institutions (Røn Larsen 2005a, b, 2011a, b). This analytical focus provides an opportunity to understand the experienced dilemmas and contradictions as connected to specific and yet contradictory institutional demands and conditions. This analytical approach illustrates how contradictions and conflicts in the processes of collaboration cannot merely be understood as problems of approach and communication strategies. Neither can they be comprehended as questions of failed political strategies. Instead, dilemmas in parental collaboration are related to contradictory institutional conditions for the parent-professional cooperation. The following section will focus on the identification of different but contradictory figures of understanding, which seem to be working simultaneously in the institutional arrangement of parental collaboration. These figures of understanding are analysed situated in an actual historical setting in order to understand their institutional foundation. The idea of pointing out these different figures of understanding of parental collaboration is *not* to use them in a descriptive manner, as "real" unanimous categories existing in different pedagogical practices. Rather, the ambition is to visualise some of the different logics and demands that are simultaneously at stake due to the contradictory institutional conditions of the collaboration between parents and pedagogues in childcare.

Parental Collaboration Between Differently Positioned Participants

Studying the childcare sector and specifically the relations between the professionals and the parents, it becomes obvious that this is a field where many political intentions often simultaneously set opposing demands. The childcare centres have had a very mixed historical development, and over time the collaboration between parents and childcare professionals has been ascribed with different kinds of meaning (Andersen and Rasmussen 2001). One central figure of understanding is part of the social-pedagogical tradition of Danish childcare. A central historical root of childcare institutions is the "børnehave" [as it is called in Danish]. These childcare institutions were developed at the beginning of the twentieth century as part-time options, which offered better developmental possibilities for the children of the more well-off, upper middle class – often founded in the pedagogical tradition deriving from Froebel (Ahrenkiel 2014; Hviid and Villadsen 2016 this volume). The "børnehave" had an ideological foundation in the vision of contributing to

developing democratic citizens. Partly originating from this tradition, cooperation with the children's parents was often considered an integral part of the pedagogical work in childcare. This corresponds with the tradition of considering pedagogy as support for the children's learning and development processes as an integrated part of their everyday life (Andenæs and Haavind 2015; Højholt and Røn Larsen 2014, 2015; Kragh-Müller 2012; Wagner and Einarsdottir 2006). In the 1980s, there was a major focus on the "user perspective" in developing the Danish welfare state. This approach was founded in a general critique of the welfare institutions and the dominant tendency of autonomy among professionals in the beginning of the 1980s, especially in relation to the healthcare systems, but also increasingly in the social and educational welfare areas, like childcare and schools (Højholt and Kousholt 2015; Røn Larsen 2005, 2006). As it will be further discussed in the following section, this focus has had rather antagonistic meanings in the development of childcare (Højholt and Kousholt 2015; Røn Larsen 2005, 2006). In one line of thinking, the development of the user perspective was considered a further democratisation of the public welfare institutions, an initiative meant to allocate influence and responsibility of childcare institutions to citizens of the welfare state. When studying Nordic literature on childcare from the late 1970s and the 1980s, it is possible to identify a professional ambition for more democratic ways of developing parental collaboration – not only in relation to the interests of the parents' own child but also in relation to the institution as a whole and to the entire group of children (e.g. Clausen et al. 1987; Ladberg 1986). More recent research shows that this figure of understanding still plays an important part in the pedagogical practice of childcare (Ahrenkiel 2014; Højholt et al. 2014; Kousholt 2006; Røn Larsen 2005a, 2011a; Røn Larsen and Stanek 2015). The same tendency also appears in an ongoing insistence on parental participation in the development of childcare, e.g. with initiatives to create more collective strategies for parental collaboration, where parents are asked to engage in the development for the entire group of children (e.g. Schødt 2005; Højholt et al. 2014; Nielsen et al. 2013; Røn Larsen 2005a, b, 2011a; for corresponding international tendencies, see, e.g. Crozier and Reay 2005; Cucchiara and Horvat 2009). Here it is possible to identify a *participant approach* to parents, with appertaining expectations of the parents contributing with their knowledge of their children and participating in developing the appropriate support for the children's life within the family and in childcare institutions. Intertwined with these ambitions for parental collaboration, the parents are also encouraged to contribute with voluntary practical work in the childcare and support initiatives within class community building, play relations etc. As one of the pedagogues in a childcare centre puts it, when explaining the importance of the parental collaboration:

> *Parental collaboration is important to the child, because a large part of the child's everyday life is lived in the institution. The parents are raising that child, and so are we. We have the child in common…*

For the children, the different settings are interlinked and influence each other. Therefore, what is institutionally separated when we analyse it from the position of the child is connected through the child's trajectories of participation (Fleer and

Hedegaard 2010; Kousholt 2006, 2008; Røn Larsen and Stanek 2015). In their everyday life, children are often dependent of the adults exchanging knowledge about the child's life elsewhere, as we saw with the example of the parental collaboration about the girl's nap in childcare. So, analysed from the perspectives of the children, the relationship between parents and pedagogues is a relationship between differently positioned but interdependent participants. Because of this, they have different interests and access to knowledge about the child, but they are also dependent on each other *exactly* because the child, who unites them, lives his or her life across the different settings (Røn Larsen and Stanek 2015). Therefore, the positioned differences are in both cases the source of conflicts and the reason for collaboration. As a father puts it when referring to the collaboration with the childcare centre:

> We NEED to figure it out together. We are all interested in the well-being of all our children.

In the example with the girl's naps in childcare addressed earlier, we see this figure of understanding, in the ambition of working the conflicts out with the parents in order to support the child's everyday life among her peers in childcare. Here the mutual relationship between parents and professionals involves a constant exploration of situated challenges in the children's lives and an insight into each other's different perspectives (Andenæs and Haavind 2015; Røn Larsen 2005a, b). The conflict might be an unavoidable part of such collaborative processes, and consensus is neither the precondition nor the aim of the collaborative processes. However, in practice conflicts are often considered problematic – something that it is important to avoid (Højholt and Kousholt 2015; Røn Larsen 2011a, b). In many ways, this longing for consensus relates to another strong institutional demand on the professionals' relationship with the parents – namely, the expectation that the parents are treated as consumers of welfare services.

Parental Collaboration Between Service Agents and Consumers

Juxtaposed with the figure of understanding of the parents as "equal" participants, the extensive focus on "user perspectives" as a central driver in the development of public welfare has also contributed to the development of another figure of understanding of the parent as a *consumer* of welfare services. The critical discussions of user influence resulted in changes in the legislation for the childcare area demanding parental boards in all childcare institutions. The board would approve the childcare institutions' business strategy (since 1993) and their nursery curriculum (Nursery Curriculum Act 2004). Several research projects have investigated the discourse changes in the changing legislations regulating the childcare centres over time. From different theoretical perspectives, these changes have been interpreted as political attempts to break with the pedagogue's authority and autonomy – thus

creating a fundamental change in the childcare institutions, turning them into "welfare shops" with "business strategies" for improving the supply of "core outputs" declared and labelled in "nursery curriculums". According to these analyses, pedagogues tend to become suppliers of "childcare services" (e.g. Ahrenkiel 2013; Krejsler 2014; Plum 2010, 2014; Rasmussen and Smidt 2000; Røn Larsen 2005a, b). In this process of modernisation, the management of childcare has been developed paradoxically. On the one hand it has been decentralised, and the different institutions have been compared with private companies, with local directors responsible for developing a business strategy for the implementation of the national nursery curriculum, strategies that were constantly monitored and authorised by the parental boards. On the other hand, the overall aims of childcare have been centralised by the Nursery Curriculum Act (2004) and the Child Care Centre Act (2007). This development has reformulated the attempt to include user perspectives into a *consumer approach* to parents.

A general feature that appears in conversations and interviews with childcare pedagogues from different kinds of 0–6-year institutions over the years is a kind of duality between the many intentions and ideals of parents' participation and involvement, as mentioned earlier, on the one hand, and the challenges and dilemmas of their influence as demanding customers on the other. In one kindergarten, the pedagogues decided that they wish to include parents more directly in the everyday life of the childcare centre, because they want the parents to engage with the other children and obtain a deeper insight into what is taking place. The local director of the childcare centre emphasises the need for an equal relationship, where the parents are *less guests and more participants* (cf. the former paragraph of this chapter). She expressed it as follows:

> I would like them to just sit down and have a cup of coffee when they arrive to pick-up their children. And if the coffee pot is empty, they should just make another.

Over a 6-month period, the pedagogues developed different kinds of initiatives in this childcare centre, inviting parents to stay longer, having dinner arrangements and special parents' meetings focusing on problems within groups of children. They constantly urged the parents to come and ask questions, if they were critical or curious about anything. However, this was not completely unproblematic for the pedagogues. One of the pedagogues describes the discomfort she sometimes feels when parents stay:

> I generally feel that there is nothing they should not see. But still, sometimes I do wonder if perhaps we actually send them different signals. That perhaps we signal: 'Well now you should leave'. Because sometimes it is also awkward when parents stay on, right? Because you feel monitored and perhaps a little controlled.

This pedagogue experienced a dilemma between the duality of her acceptance of the parents' presence and her anxiety about having them there. On the one hand, she felt that parents should be allowed to see and participate in everything, which is also an institutional requirement, specifically formulated by the director. On the other hand, she feels monitored and controlled when the parents are present. This might be related to the fact that, while she is obliged to think of the parents as equal partici-

pants, she is also institutionally encouraged to think of them as consumers of her service. In this specific municipality, there have recently been major concerns because a group of parents complained to the mayor about another childcare centre. As a result of this issue, the central administration strongly emphasised the need to avoid parental complaints. Therefore, these contradictory demands placed the pedagogue in a dilemma, because she should consider the parents to be equal participants and explore the different perspectives and potential conflicts with them, while she is also subject to institutional demands to have the parents control the quality of her welfare service. This demand was described by another pedagogue, who claimed:

> I think I might be a little better at it [parental collaboration] than my colleagues, because I used to work in a shop before I became a pedagogue.

This emphasises the pedagogues experienced demand of keeping the parents satisfied with the "welfare service" of the childcare institution. The director of a childcare centre also described how she sometimes felt split between her pedagogical intentions and her obligations to the political and administrative system as an employee:

> Being the director, you are often placed in a major dilemma about where to direct your loyalty. But in relation to the political resolutions, whether you agree or not, you stay loyal. That is what we are hired to do.

She described situations where she kept a lid on conflicts with parents who were dissatisfied, because she was afraid that they would complain to the political system or even the mayor, even though she disagreed with their point of view. The director described the feelings of being left with the responsibility for decisions that were actually being forced upon her from above, because she was expected to manage her responsibility so that harmony and consensus would be maintained in relation to the parents. In other words, she described the institutional demands of a consumer approach to parents. However, the consequences are also that sometimes she feels obliged to make decisions that do not serve the best interests of the children as a group from a pedagogical perspective, in order to accommodate the parent's individual wishes. Therefore, she felt that she was sacrificing the institutional demand to involve parents as active participants.

> It is the user-perspective that is at stake. The core-output of this childcare institution is to take care of children.

Returning to the example of collaboration with the parents demanding naps for their child in the childcare centre, this becomes a central institutional demand, when trying to understand the dilemmas for the pedagogues. On the one hand, they feel obliged to deliver the service that the parents demand in order to keep them from complaining, but on the other hand, they think the girl is too old to sleep during the day, and they observe that the nap is preventing her from participating in the children's communities. The pedagogues are conflicted by contradictory demands. They are required to treat the parents as consumers that control the quality of their welfare service, consumers who need to be satisfied in order to prevent them from complaining. This means that it took a long time for the pedagogues to address the problem with the parents, in order to examine the result on the girl's everyday life of this conflict of perspectives.

Parental Collaboration Between Expert and Client

The first childcare institutions in Denmark developed in the late nineteenth century, and since 1919, it has been possible to receive state support for these initiatives. From the beginning, a key objective was to look after children from low-income families, keeping them off the streets while their parents went to work (Hviid and Villadsen 2016; Schwede 1997). Currently, these historical roots seem to be reactualised as another competing figure of understanding in the development of strategies for parental collaboration – namely, what could be called the *client approach* to parents. In recent years, the political interest in parental collaboration has increased, and new forces are at stake, especially connected to a political agenda on early preventive efforts in relation to children and families that are considered "disadvantaged" (Højholt and Kousholt 2015; Juhl 2014; Røn Larsen et al. 2014). This intention can be observed in, e.g. the Parental Responsibility Act (2007) and the Child Care Centre Act (2007 & 2010), both emphasising the parent's responsibilities to contribute to the child's life in childcare. In relation to parental collaboration, these ambitions seem to raise new questions, challenges and dilemmas. The Danish childcare is to an increasing extent considered a part of the social interventions around "disadvantaged" families and can be made mandatory, e.g. in relation to bilingual children, with a possibility of economic sanctions, if the parent doesn't deliver the child into childcare. In addition the pedagogues are often expected to participate in inter-professional family work, a relation that some pedagogues describe as counterproductive to the parental collaboration, since it tends to "install a relation of control" as a pedagogue puts it. In this relation it can be complicated for parents to express a different opinion than the pedagogues, without appearing suspicious. In the former example with the girl, we saw the contours of this figure of understanding in the silent, yet disapproving attitude to the wish of the parents that their child should continue to take naps in childcare. This is in contrast to the idea of parents as consumers, where they were monitoring and controlling the pedagogues. Here, the pedagogues are expected to monitor and control the parent's support of their child – a figure of understanding that tends to encourage the parents to hold back worries and problematics in relation to their child, thereby undermining the collective exploration in relation to supporting the child's everyday life across contexts.

Parental Collaboration as Partnerships About Learning

Since the beginning for the 1990s, an increasingly dominant trend in childcare institutions has been connected to a focus on learning and preparation for school and further educational progress for children. This is specifically clear in the Nursery Curriculum Act (2004) that mirrors the generally increased focus on children's education in an international context, reflecting a global competition context related to, e.g. the PISA processes. This persistent focus on learning and school preparation breaks with the former traditions of the Danish childcare and is also implicating

changes in the practice of parental collaboration. Previously, issues of education and learning played a rather insignificant role in the Danish childcare. The professionals have for a long time refused the concept of "pre-school teachers", insisting on being called pedagogues, continuously insisting on "childhood in its own right", with an emphasis on processes of free play, participation with and influence on the children (Kragh-Müller and Ringsmose 2016). This historical background is important in order to understand the Danish context for parental collaboration, which differs from most international research perspectives within the French-English tradition, which tend to have an immanent educational perspective, focusing on the possibilities for learning, and the possible "learning outcome" for children (e.g. Boag-Munroe 2014; Larsen et al. 2011; OECD 2012). This tendency reflects similar tendencies from the school area (e.g. Hedeen et al. 2011; Henderson and Mapp 2002). According to these trends, the Danish social pedagogical tradition appears to be under increasing pressure. The latest Primary Education Act states that "All children should be as clever as they can be" (Kousholt and Hamre 2015). Local Government Denmark states that this also applies to childcare services in preschool: "Children will only have equal possibilities in life if we start in the earliest years of a child's life" (KL 2014 – my translation). In Denmark, these discussions of learning play an increasingly significant role in children's childcare life. It also influences the processes of parental collaboration. In a childcare centre for 0–3-year-olds, the following notification about a parent meeting was distributed to the parents:

> We know from research that a childhood can either be won or wasted. We are eager to win the childhood of your children. This is why we do everything in our power to make your child thrive and learn everything he/she needs to be able to do - both here in nursery, and to prepare for 'kindergarten' and later for school.

In this childcare centre, a central part of the parental collaboration consists of meetings between pedagogues and parents when the child turns two. In the meetings, they discuss the children's achievements in relation to a two-page list with standardised learning goals defined by the nursery curriculum, as discussed by the pedagogues within this municipality. After such a meeting, the pedagogues and parents are supposed to sign a developmental contract, which includes what the parents will do prospectively in order to support the child's development in the areas where the child is facing challenges. The prevailing figure of understanding in these situations has central similarities to the one with parents as clients – but with a specific focus on *parents as supporters of learning processes*. In relation to the beforehand defined learning goals, the pedagogues are considered to be the experts on children's development and learning, who are supposed to support the parents improve their parenting. This figure of understanding has for a long time played a central part in relation to families that are considered to be disadvantaged (e.g. Højholt and Kousholt 2015; Juhl 2014) However, it is only recently that this kind of logic has dominated the broader parental collaboration (for contractual relationships with parents in Danish schools, refer to Knudsen 2010). As one of the pedagogues explained regarding supporting learning at home:

Well, we know from research that the real progress happens at home – if the parents change their attitudes, the children can take major steps forward, steps that the parents didn't even imagine.

Here it is important to notice that this approach also seems to silence the exploration of the concrete differences between the perspectives of parents and pedagogues, since the answers to what a child needs (in relation to learning properly) are already defined, no matter what the parents might think or imagine. Similarly to the consumer relationship, but with a reverse relationship of control, the exchange of different perspectives on the individual child's life tends to become irrelevant.

Concluding Discussion

This chapter has illustrated how parental collaboration in Danish childcare institutions is a very complex phenomenon consisting of a range of different activities, entailing several contradictory and often competing logics or figures of understanding. However, in practice and in research, we often consider it a unanimous and harmonious thing. By analysing pedagogues and directors' perspectives in practice, it becomes clear that parental collaboration is a field with great tensions and dilemmas. The dilemmas are strongly linked to the historically developed conflicts and contradictions in the institutional conditions and demands for pedagogical work in childcare. A central figure of understanding of parental collaboration follows the social pedagogical traditions by inviting parents in for development of conditions of children's influence and free play. As a part of this tradition, parents are considered equal but different participants than the pedagogues in ensuring quality in the individual children's lives within the family and childcare. Because they are positioned differently, their perspectives are considered particularly important. The investigation of the different perspectives, and therefore the potential conflicts, is central to the development of the children's life conditions and developmental possibilities within the family and childcare. However, parents are also considered consumers of the welfare services, including childcare: As consumers, they participate in the ongoing assessment of the quality of the childcare centre, including the work of the pedagogues – and the childcare centre personnel are made responsible for delivering a certain level of parental satisfaction. As shown in the examples, this entails the risk of covering up the differences of perspectives between parents and professionals. Since the parents have the authority to decide what is important for their children and to evaluate the childcare's capacity to deliver the expected service, it becomes risky for the pedagogues to challenge the parents' understanding. This anxiety relating to different perspectives and potential conflicts tends to undermine the process of joint examination of the underlying reasons for these differences. Another form of logic appears to be playing a still more significant role as a condition for the childcare institutions and the professionals. The leading figure of understanding is the relationship between the pedagogue as an authoritative expert and

the ignorant or "unwilling" parent as a potential client. The pedagogues are responsible for establishing a relationship with the parents that supports the goals for the children's development in order to protect them for "the social heritage" of their parents, goals that are often already defined in the legislation and the nursery curriculums. In this relation it becomes potentially threatening for the parents to be open about their problems and perspectives on the children's lives. Similar to the situation in the consumer relationship, the actual examination of the content and reasons for different perspectives is easily derailed. The differences between the parents' and the pedagogues' perspectives are, at best, irrelevant for the childcare practice and, at worst, problematic because they get in the way of achieving the defined goals. This figure repeats itself in relation to the parents as "supporters of learning", where the children are regularly assessed in order to support the parents developing efficient strategies for preparing their children for further education. Here the investigations of the parents' perspectives appear to be reduced to figuring out where they can improve their efforts to nurture strong future citizens. In both cases it therefore becomes risky for the parents to challenge the pedagogues' perspectives, which are often presented as standardised plans for the expected progress of development and learning.

For the pedagogues these different institutional demands and different figures of understanding present themselves as dilemmas in practice, because they represent contradictory ways of confronting or inviting parents to collaborate. Dilemmas like these give us an insight into the lived experiences with institutional contradictions through the different approaches to parents inherited from the history of childcare. Through the examination of the unease and dilemmas within the pedagogical practice in collaboration with the pedagogues, we are able to address the institutional and structural contradictions. Concurrently with the modernisation process of the public welfare institutions, the responsibility of harmonising the irreconcilable demands is decentralised to the local director, and, at the same time, the practice is increasingly regulated by centrally defined standards. Thus, the responsibility for the development of childcare practice and parental collaboration relating to the complex and contradictory institutional conditions becomes a matter of the director's capability and competencies. Due to this process of decentralisation, conflicts deriving from the immanent paradox of the modern welfare state are demonstrated by numerous situated conflicts in the parental collaboration. For the individual professional, it appears to be an insurmountable exercise to overcome the immanent conflicts and paradoxes of the modern welfare state, but as the responsibility is individualised and personalised, the structural side of these conflicts becomes very difficult to address.

The parental collaboration has gradually been influenced by different political perspectives on the relationship between citizens and society, with different figures of understandings of power relations and authority to define children's needs and potentials. These political interests have been supported by new regulations and governance strategies in relation to improving childcare services and measurable learning outcomes of child life in childcare institutions. The social pedagogical tradition of collective exploration and specific development of actual pedagogical

practice of negotiating and adapting to the specific children and their family's situation is under heavy pressure from globalisation, which has entailed increased focus on education, competition, measurement, standardisation and goal orientation.

To put it bluntly, one might ask if the future development of parental collaboration, which is all about developing the best practice for each child, is now reduced to simply negotiating how to most effectively achieve the standardised goals. Are we in fact at risk of losing something important in the process, having parents as important participants in supporting children's development of their lives, as a part of the collective life in childcare?

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