

Article

Becoming a Recognisable Parent: Parental Voice, Migrant Positioning and the Politics of Belonging in Norwegian ECEC

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Abstract

This article examines how differently positioned migrant parents gain unequal access to voice, trust and participation in parent–ECEC collaboration in Norway. Rather than understanding parental engagement primarily as a matter of parents’ willingness or interest, the article analyses how engagement is shaped by institutional expectations and by the forms of communication, trust and participation that ECEC staff recognise as legitimate. This article draws on selected material from a broader qualitative project, including interviews with refugee parents, professional interviews and focus groups with ECEC professionals, and fieldwork in four ECECs. It also includes a newly analysed interview with an American migrant father, used as a contrast to the refugee-parent material. The analysis is conducted as a theoretically informed, abductive and reflexive thematic analysis through the lens of the politics of belonging. The findings identify four forms of positioning: *guarded belonging*, *confident belonging*, *normative belonging* and *bounded participation*. The analysis shows that migrant parents are not positioned as one group. Rather, their possibilities of being recognised as legitimate co-educators are shaped by language, institutional familiarity, trust, cultural recognisability and staff expectations of “the good parent”. The article contributes to parental engagement research by showing that equitable parent–ECEC partnerships require more than formal opportunities for involvement. They require institutional conditions in which different parental voices are heard as sources of legitimate knowledge about children’s education, care, and belonging.

Keywords: politics of belonging; parental voice; parental engagement; migrant parents; ECEC partnerships; good parenthood; refugee parents

1. Introduction

Norwegian early childhood education and care (ECEC) highlights parental collaboration as a key principle. In policy and professional discourse, collaboration is associated with trust, dialogue, participation, mutual respect and the best interests of the child. It is also central to children’s learning, well-being and social participation ([Ministry of Education and Research, 2017](#)). Throughout this article, the term *parents* is used consistently with Norwegian ECEC policy and the terminology used by the participants, referring to the adults with primary responsibility for the child. However, collaboration is never simply a technical matter of exchanging information but an institutional relationship in which parents are recognised, interpreted, and evaluated in terms of expectations regarding communication, trust, involvement, responsibility, and appropriate parenting. In Norway, the Framework Plan for Kindergartens also states that staff are obligated to collaborate with parents and that this collaboration should be characterised by dialogue and respect ([Garvis et al., 2021](#); [Ministry of Education and Research, 2017](#); [Persson & Tallberg Broman, 2017](#)).



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For migrant parents, ECEC may be both a site of opportunity and uncertainty for their children's language development, social participation, and everyday stability, and enables parents to participate in their children's early learning (Geens & Vandenbroeck, 2013; Lastikka & Lipponen, 2016). At the same time, it introduces parents to routines that may be unfamiliar and difficult to interpret. These routines concern clothing, food, outdoor play, attendance and communication, but also more implicit assumptions about children's autonomy, professional expertise, parental trust and what counts as good collaboration. As previous research has shown, these ordinary routines may appear neutral to professionals while functioning as institutional codes that parents must learn to read (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2017; Lund, 2022b, 2024; Palludan, 2007; Van Laere et al., 2018).

This article approaches parent–ECEC collaboration as a “*politics of belonging*”. Yuval-Davis (2011) uses this concept to analyse the boundary-making processes through which people are positioned as belonging, not belonging or belonging only conditionally. In ECEC, these boundaries are rarely explicit. They are produced through ordinary expectations: which parents ask questions, which parents read digital information, which parents provide the right clothing, which parents express trust, which parents know how to disagree, and which parents are recognised as competent partners.

The article's data stem from a broader qualitative PhD project on parent collaboration, pedagogical leadership, and cultural diversity in Norwegian ECECs. Earlier publications based on some of the same data are relevant as prior research. Lund (2022b) analysed refugee parents' encounters with ECEC through the lenses of cultural capital, acculturation and institutionalised practices; Lund (2024) examined parent–professional partnership through the lenses of barriers, Norwegianness and trust; Lund (2026) developed a framework of just recognition as a professional practice. However, the present article uses a different empirical configuration and analytical lenses.

The analytical move in this study is away from treating “minority parents” and “refugee parents” as homogeneous categories and towards analysing how migrant parents are differently positioned within parent–ECEC collaboration. The empirical material used is part of a broader project that includes refugee-parent interviews, professional interviews and focus groups, and fieldwork in four ECECs. The main analysis focuses on Marwa and Zahra, two Syrian mothers; Adnan, a Syrian father; Michael, an American father; two staff focus groups; selected staff interviews; and fieldnote excerpts. Michael's interview has not been used in earlier publications and is introduced here as an important contrast to the refugee-parent material. This structure makes it possible to analyse migrant parents relationally and contrastively rather than as representatives of fixed groups.

The research question is: *How do institutional expectations of the “good parent” shape migrant parents' positioning as legitimate participants in parent–staff collaboration in Norwegian ECEC, and how do these expectations shape opportunities for voice, trust and participation?*

This study contributes to parental engagement research by shifting attention from whether migrant parents are involved to how parental involvement is recognised in everyday ECEC practice. In ECEC policy and professional discourse, collaboration is often framed through ideals of dialogue, trust, participation and the child's best interests. However, these ideals are not neutral but are connected to expectations about how parents should communicate, ask questions, express trust, provide information, handle disagreement, and support everyday routines.

2. Literature Review: Parental Collaboration and Cultural Diversity

Norwegian ECECs are part of the Nordic welfare-state model, in which childhood is treated as a collective concern. The ECEC institutions are expected to combine care, play, learning, democracy and equality (Kampmann, 2013; Ministry of Education and Research,

2017). Parents have formal rights to information, cooperation, and participation, and ECECs are expected to establish dialogic relationships with all parents (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). These ideals are particularly important in culturally diverse settings, where ECEC may be one of the first welfare-state institutions through which migrant families encounter Norwegian expectations about children, parents and professionals (Lund, 2022b, 2024).

This literature review argues that parental collaboration in culturally diverse ECEC settings should be understood not only as a matter of communication or parental involvement, but also through the lens of the politics of belonging, which draws attention to how institutional norms and boundaries shape access to voice and recognition (Crozier & Davies, 2007; Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2011). Accordingly, this article brings together research on parent–professional collaboration, migrant and refugee parents' experiences of ECEC, and broader work on institutional inequality.

Research on parent–ECEC collaboration emphasises that partnerships between families and professionals are important for children's well-being, learning and continuity between home and institution (Garvis et al., 2021; Norheim et al., 2022; Persson & Tallberg Broman, 2017; Sadownik & Višnjić Jevtić, 2023). In culturally diverse settings, such partnerships are also linked to belonging, inclusion and social support for migrant and refugee families (Lastikka & Lipponen, 2016; Lunneblad, 2017; Sadownik & Ndiujye, 2024; Sadownik & Višnjić Jevtić, 2023; Vandenbroeck et al., 2009).

Such collaboration cannot be understood only as a question of parents' willingness or interest, but is also shaped by language, trust, institutional expectations and asymmetrical power relations that influence whether parents are recognised as legitimate partners (Aghallaj et al., 2020; Lund, 2021, 2024; Palludan, 2007; Solberg, 2018; Van Laere et al., 2018). Recent Scandinavian research further describes this as equality blindness, where ideals of equality and neutrality may leave dominant institutional norms unexamined (Skaten et al., 2026).

Nordic and Norwegian research shows that parent–ECEC collaboration combines ambitions of inclusion with unequal institutional conditions (Eidsvåg, 2022; Migdad et al., 2025; Norheim et al., 2022). Everyday routines such as drop-off, pick-up and communication may become sites where minority parents negotiate legitimate parenthood, particularly in relation to racialisation, stigma and child welfare concerns (Handulle & Vassenden, 2021; Solberg, 2018). Swedish policy research similarly shows that diversity policies often emphasise participation and language learning while leaving structural inequalities insufficiently addressed (Papakosma, 2025).

Broader research on family–institution relations shows that institutions may reproduce unequal access while presenting participation as neutral. This is highly relevant to ECEC because collaboration depends not only on parents' willingness to participate, but also on their ability to recognise institutional expectations and communicate in ways that are heard as legitimate (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Crozier & Davies, 2007; Lareau, 2012; Vincent, 2017).

ECEC research has also shown that inclusion is not automatically achieved by giving ideals. A Danish ECEC study demonstrates how adults address children in different interactional tones that reproduce inequality, even within universalistic institutions (Palludan, 2007). Further, Gilliam and Gulløv (2017) argue how welfare-state institutions reproduce taken-for-granted norms that shape families' opportunities for participation and belonging.

Previous studies by Lund have shown that refugee parents may experience both positive encounters and uncertainty in Norwegian ECECs, while limited access to cultural codes and the Norwegian language can complicate collaboration (Lund, 2022b). Lund (2024) identified barriers, Norwegianness, and trust as central themes in parent–professional partnerships with refugee parents. The present article has a different empirical and analytical focus: how migrant parents are differently positioned in relation to institutional voice, trust and the politics of belonging.

Existing research has documented that migrant and language-minority parents may encounter language barriers, unfamiliar institutional expectations and unequal power relations in ECEC collaboration. However, less attention has been paid to how such barriers are unevenly distributed among migrant parents in different positions, and to how ECEC institutions themselves define the forms of voice, trust, and participation and whether parents are recognised as legitimate in parent–ECEC collaboration (Aghallaj et al., 2020; Norheim et al., 2022; Solberg, 2018; Van Laere et al., 2018). This article addresses that gap by analysing parent–ECEC collaboration as a politics of belonging, in which access to voice and co-educator status is shaped by institutional conditions and is unequally distributed.

3. Theoretical Framework: Politics of Belonging, Voice and Institutional Recognisability

This article uses the concept of *politics of belonging* as the main theoretical framework. Yuval-Davis (2011) distinguishes between belonging, as a sense of emotional attachment, and the politics of belonging, as the political and institutional work of boundary-making. Belonging is therefore not only a feeling of being at home. It is also a question of who is recognised as a legitimate member, who must prove belonging and which norms define the terms of membership. These terms are constructed, maintained and contested (Yuval-Davis, 2006, 2011). Antonsich (2010) also shows that belonging involves both personal attachment and socio-spatial conditions, while Anthias (2006) emphasises that belonging is situated within unequal relations and translocations.

The distinction between belonging as a personal matter and as a social and structural matter is important for ECEC (Antonsich, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2006, 2011). A parent may formally belong because the child is enrolled and the family has access to the service. However, the parent may still be positioned as an uncertain or conditional participant if their questions, silences, or concerns are interpreted as a lack of knowledge, trust, or engagement. Formal inclusion is therefore not the same as experienced or institutionally recognised belonging (Antonsich, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2011).

Everyday encounters matter in drop-off conversations, comments about clothing, practical reminders, and parent meetings, which together form an institutional texture. Through these encounters, parents learn what kind of participation is expected and which parental subject is recognised (Handulle & Vassenden, 2021; Solberg, 2018). Such routines are analytically significant because they regulate who can speak, what can be questioned, and which parents are recognised.

Voice is essential to the analysis of different parents' experiences. Bourdieu (1991) reminds us that speech does not have equal value across all social fields; rather, to speak effectively, one must possess not only linguistic competence but also legitimate language: the ability to speak in a way that is recognised as appropriate, credible, and worth responding to. In parent–ECEC collaboration, this means that the problem is not only whether parents know Norwegian or English. It is also whether they know when to ask, whom to ask, how to raise concerns, how much to trust and how to demonstrate concern without being read as difficult or suspicious (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Bourdieu, 1991; Crozier & Davies, 2007).

In this article, recognition is used in a narrow, but analytical sense: institutional recognisability. The key question is when parents' concerns, silences, questions and everyday practices become legible as competent, trustworthy and legitimate parenthood. Bourdieu's (1991) concept of legitimate language supports this focus by showing that speech has unequal value across social fields. Ahmed's (2012) work on diversity in institutional life further shows that institutions may include differences while still preserving the norms that regulate belonging.

The concept of “the good parent” functions here as a boundary object. It appears ordinary and practical, but it carries institutional norms. In the staff interviews, good parents are active, direct, open, informed, trusting and willing to use the staff as professional experts. These ideals are not unreasonable. They may be necessary for safe and responsive ECEC practice. However, they privilege parents who know the institution’s codes and can perform engagement in recognisable ways (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Crozier & Davies, 2007; Lareau, 2012).

The analytical task is therefore to examine not only parents’ experiences, but also the conditions under which parental voice becomes legitimate (Lund, 2021). Parents’ silence, caution or indirect critique should not automatically be interpreted as a lack of interest. Such practices may be responses to institutional uncertainty and the perceived risk of misrecognition (Bourdieu, 1991; Crozier & Davies, 2007; Yuval-Davis, 2011). In this article, guarded belonging, confident belonging, normative belonging and bounded participation are used to analyse these dynamics.

4. Materials and Methods

The empirical material is drawn from a broader qualitative project on parental collaboration, pedagogical leadership and cultural diversity in Norwegian ECEC (Lund, 2022a). The broader project includes interviews with 12 refugee parents, interviews and focus groups with 24 ECEC professionals, including four kindergarten managers, and fieldwork in four ECEC institutions. This article draws on selected parent interviews, staff interviews, focus groups and fieldnotes to examine parental voice, migrant positioning and the politics of belonging.

The analysis combines a newly analysed interview with Michael, an American migrant father, selected refugee-parent interviews (Marwa, Zahra and Adnan), two staff focus groups, selected staff interviews and fieldnotes. Michael’s interview was not analysed previously and serves as an analytical contrast case.

Recruiting migrant and refugee parents required methodological and ethical considerations, as language barriers, uncertainty, and possible mistrust of public institutions could shape both access to the field and willingness to participate. During recruitment, some refugee parents asked whether the researcher was a ‘controller’ who had come to check whether the ECEC institution was doing its job properly after a serious accident in another municipality (Lund, 2022a, 2024). This episode became methodologically important because it showed how the researcher could be associated with institutional authority and state control. These concerns informed decisions about consent, participation and the interpretation of cautious parental accounts (Klykken, 2022; Riese, 2019).

The broader project combined interviews, group interviews, participant observation and field conversations. This combination was important because the analysis not only focused on what participants said about collaboration but also on how ECEC routines, staff discussions, and everyday encounters made institutional norms visible. Fieldwork in situations such as drop-off and pick-up, wardrobe practices, meals, outdoor play, staff rooms and meetings provided contextual knowledge about how parent–ECEC collaboration was embedded in everyday institutional life.

4.1. Empirical Scope and Relation to Prior Research

Parts of the broader dataset have been analysed in earlier publications. The present article re-reads selected material together with a newly analysed interview with an English-speaking American father through the lens of the politics of belonging. Rather than seeking representativeness, the analytical selection explores variation within the broader category

of migrant parents and examines how institutional expectations shape legitimate parental voice, trust and participation.

Table 1 summarises the relationship between the broader project, the material analysed in this study and the analytical role of each data source.

Table 1. Broader project sample and material selected for the present analysis.

Empirical Material	Broader Project Sample	Material Selected for the Current Study	Analytical Role in the Present Study
Refugee-parent interviews	Twelve refugee parents: six women and six men; Syrian, Somali, Eritrean and Kurdish backgrounds; short residence time in Norway.	Central interviews with Marwa, Zahra and Adnan supported by excerpts from other refugee parents.	The primary empirical material is re-analysed through the lens of the politics of belonging to examine how institutional expectations shape recognised parental voice, belonging, and participation.
New migrant-parent interview	One American migrant father. The interview has not been used in earlier publications.	Michael	An analytical contrast case was included to explore variation within the broader category of migrant parents and to refine the emerging interpretation institutionally recognised parenthood. The case is not intended to represent non-refugee migrant parents, but to challenge and extend the analysis developed from the refugee parent material.
Professional interviews and focus groups	Twenty-four ECEC professionals from four ECECs, including four kindergarten managers/daily leaders.	Two staff focus groups and excerpts from selected staff interviews.	Provides institutional perspectives on how expectations of the “good parent” are constructed, negotiated and maintained through everyday practices.
Fieldwork and field conversations	Fieldwork in four ECECs: drop-off and pick-up, wardrobes, meals, outdoor play, staff rooms and meetings.	Selected fieldnote excerpts on clothing, food, sleep, routines, dialogue and ordinary ECEC practice.	Contextualise how institutional expectations are enacted in everyday interactions and support the interpretation of the findings.
Reflexive notes and analytic memos	Notes written during data collection on recruitment, gatekeepers, field roles, trust, mistrust and researcher positioning.	Used as reflexive background material, not as independent findings.	Supported by abductive and reflexive development of the interpretive themes and strengthened analytical transparency.

4.2. Reflexive Thematic Analysis

The analysis was conducted as a theoretically informed reflexive thematic analysis inspired by Braun and Clarke (2021). The analytical process was iterative and abductive, moving through a close reading of the empirical material, comparison across interview units, reflexive field notes, and theoretical interpretation through the lens of the politics of belonging. The purpose was not to identify topics that simply emerged from the material, but to develop interpretive themes through repeated engagement with the data, the research question and the theoretical framework. Because some of the material had been analysed in previous publications, the analysis involved a reflexive re-reading of selected excerpts.

Earlier concepts such as barriers, Norwegianness, cultural capital, and trust were treated as sensitising background factors rather than as final analytical categories.

Analytic memos and fieldnotes written during data collection were also used in the abductive analysis to document recruitment challenges, field roles, gatekeepers, researcher positioning, and early interpretations of how parents and staff presented themselves in relation to ECEC norms. The fieldnotes and memos were not treated as neutral records of the field, but as reflexive material that helped identify how trust, institutional authority and normality shaped both data production and later interpretation.

The analysis was contrastive, with each parent and staff unit first read separately to avoid treating migrant parents, refugee parents, or ECEC professionals as homogeneous categories. The parent material was then compared across differences in language, migration history, education and work background, gender, family networks and familiarity with Norwegian ECEC. The staff material was coded based on how professionals describe legitimate parental participation, including expectations that parents should ask questions, trust staff, provide appropriate clothing, follow routines, accept outdoor life, and communicate in recognisable ways. In line with RTA, coding was treated as an interpretive and flexible part of the analysis rather than as a procedure for extracting fixed meanings from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The final analytical themes were developed through abductive movement between empirical codes and theoretical concepts, understood as an iterative process of interpreting empirical material in relation to existing theoretical frameworks to refine and reframe emerging analytical categories (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). The codes, such as safety, cameras, interpretation, clothing, wool, food, outdoor life, sleep, critique, trust, and parental influence, were read through the concepts of the politics of belonging, legitimate voice, and institutional recognition. The final *themes*—*guarded belonging*, *confident belonging*, *normative belonging* and *bounded participation*—should not be read as fixed parent types or as descriptive topic summaries, but as interpretive themes that capture different forms of positioning within parent–ECEC collaboration.

To make the analytical process transparent, Appendix A presents selected examples of the abductive movement from data excerpts to data-near codes, interpretive categories and analytical themes. The examples in Table 2 illustrate the iterative, abductive analysis process, in line with reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Table 2. Abductive and reflexive analytical strategy.

Analytical Phase	Empirical Operation	Abductive/Reflexive Operation	Analytical Output
Familiarising	Read and re-read the selected refugee-parent interviews, the professional focus group interviews, field notes, and the analytically selected contrast case (Michael)	Asked how different forms of parental participation, trust and institutional exceptionality appeared across the dataset.	Initial analytical observations
Reflexive memoing	Used field notes and analytic memos on recruitment, gatekeepers, field roles, trust, mistrust and self-presentation.	Used memos to question emerging interpretation, researchers' positioning and assumptions rather than treating them as objective data or evidence.	Sensitising questions about identity, normality and the conditions for parental voice.
Within-unit reading	Read each parent and staff unit separately before comparing across the material.	Avoided treating migrant parents, refugee parents or staff as homogeneous categories.	Differentiated participant and institutional positions.

Table 2. *Cont.*

Analytical Phase	Empirical Operation	Abductive/Reflexive Operation	Analytical Output
Initial coding	Coded meaning units relating to parental participation, trust, communication, institutional expectations and everyday practice (e.g., clothing, food, outdoor life and sleep).	Treated coding as interpretive, flexible and situated, not as a neutral summary of data content.	Preliminary interpretive codes
Comparative analysis	Compared patterns across parents' and the analytical contrast case (Michael), professionals and field observations.	Moved iteratively between empirical contrasts and theoretical concepts to develop interpretation of institutional recognition and parental positioning.	Emerging interpretive patterns.
Institutional interpretations	Analysed staff accounts of good parents, demanding parents, passive parents, clothing, routines, critique and Norwegian values.	Interpreted staff accounts as institutional expectations and boundary making rather than as individual attitudes.	Emerging understandings of normative belonging and bounded participation.
Theoretical return	Returned to empirical codes through politics of belonging, legitimate voice and institutional recognition.	Asked who can speak, what can be questioned and which parental practices become legitimate.	Four temporary interpretive themes.
Theme refinement	Checked whether themes were coherent and analytically distinct.	Ensured that themes were internally coherent, analytically distinct and not simply summaries of individual participants.	Guarded belonging; confident belonging; normative belonging; bounded participation.

Note. The analysis was iterative rather than linear. The phases are presented sequentially to illustrate the process from coding to final analytic themes, although the movement between empirical material, reflexive meaning, coding, and theoretical interpretation occurs throughout the analytic process.

All quotations are short or lightly cleaned excerpts. Because the Syrian interview was interpreter-mediated, the analysis focuses on meaning-making across the interpreted exchange rather than on fine-grained linguistic detail.

Several interviews with refugee parents were conducted with the assistance of professional interpreters. While interpreter-mediated interviews enabled participation by parents who would otherwise have been excluded, interpretation may also influence linguistic nuance and the co-construction of meaning (Squires, 2009; Temple & Young, 2004). These considerations informed the analytical process, and the findings were interpreted in relation to the broader dataset, including staff interviews and field observations.

4.3. Research Ethics

All studies followed national research ethics and data protection requirements and were approved by the relevant national authority (NSD; now SIKT), in line with NESH guidelines. All adult participants received information about the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality and the right to withdraw, and informed consent was obtained. Participants, ECEC institutions and local contexts have been anonymised. Particular care was taken in interviews with refugee parents, as language barriers, institutional dependency and uncertainty about the researcher's role could affect participation. Interpreter-mediated interviews were conducted with attention to confidentiality and meaning-making across languages. Fieldwork in ECEC settings was carried out with attention to ongoing consent

and to the avoidance of identifiable information about children and families. Re-analysis of previously published material was conducted within the scope of the original consent and ethical assessment.

Particular care was also taken in the analytical representation of participants. Rather than treating refugee parents as a homogeneous group, the analysis sought to preserve variation in parents' accounts and avoid reproducing essentialised representations of migrant parenthood, consistent with a reflexive approach to qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

5. Results

The findings are organised around the four analytical themes developed through the thematic analysis: (1) guarded belonging, (2) confident belonging, (3) normative belonging and (4) bounded participation. The themes are kept analytically distinct to avoid presenting them as descriptive labels for individual participants, and they should not be read as a typology of migrant parents. Rather, they show different ways in which parents are positioned within parent–ECEC collaboration. The meaning of each theme is elaborated in the bullet list below:

- *Guarded belonging* concerns parental voice under conditions of uncertainty.
- *Confident belonging* concerns ease within recognisable collaboration norms.
- *Normative belonging* concerns staff constructions of good parenthood.
- *Bounded participation* concerns the limits of parental influence when core ECEC values are treated as difficult to negotiate.

Supplementary excerpts from the broader refugee-parent material are used where they clarify the analytical themes, but they are not treated as separate cases.

5.1. Guarded Belonging

The interview with two Syrian mothers presents two distinct themes in parental voices. Marwa speaks at length and provides material for the analysis of guarded belonging. Zahra is less vocal and should not be folded into all of Marwa's concerns. Both mothers describe the ECEC positively, but with different emphasis. This distinction is important because an analysis of differently *positioned* migrant parents should not reproduce homogenising categories within the material itself.

Marwa describes the ECEC as important and, in many ways, good. Her account does not support a simple interpretation of mistrust or dissatisfaction. Nevertheless, she strongly advocates for cameras in the ECEC: in the dining room, outside, in the indoor play area, and in children's sleeping areas. She knows that such surveillance may not be allowed, but she frames the request as a matter of safety rather than control: *"It is not surveillance. For me, for the child's safety, it is the same. As a mother, my feeling is that the camera is best."* (Marwa, Syrian mother.)

The request for cameras is striking because it risks being read as incompatible with Norwegian privacy norms and professional trust. However, Marwa frames it not as suspicion but as care. She emphasises that she has not seen anything negative from the staff. Her point is that institutional care cannot be identical to parental care:

"The only place where I feel safe for my son is my home. My home, me, and after that the ECEC. They are employees; they will never be mothers or fathers. So far, I have not seen anything negative about them." (Marwa, Syrian mother.)

Marwa's account distinguishes between professional responsibility and parental care. She does not reject the value of professional care. Rather, she marks a boundary between institutional responsibility and parents' affective role. In her view, staff may be competent and responsible, but they do not occupy the same affective position as parents.

Marwa also links her anxiety to a particular public story about serious incidents involving children who died in ECEC due to poor or a lack of surveillance during outdoor sleep. The argument is not whether these stories are statistically representative, but that they analytically shape the affective conditions under which trust is negotiated. She describes wanting to know what happened if a child falls or if children hit one another, not primarily to accuse staff but to understand the situation and prevent future harm: *"It is not that they do not care. We just want to know how he fell, so that they can understand the situation next time."* (Marwa, Syrian mother.)

The quotation shows that Marwa links trust to the possibility of receiving explanations about events affecting her child. Language exaggerates this guarded position. The mothers explain that they do not have sufficient Norwegian beyond simple words and therefore often wait for formal meetings with interpretation to discuss matters properly. This makes their voice episodic. Concerns accumulate until there is an interpreted arena in which they can be articulated: *"We often wait for the meetings between them and us, because then we can talk with interpretation. This is the first time I have spoken about it. I have not spoken about it with anyone else"* (Marwa).

Zahra has a different emphasis. When asked about what she wants from the ECEC, she does not elaborate on surveillance, excursions or institutional critique. Her clearest concern is language-learning. *"I just want my children to learn the Norwegian language and nothing else"* (Zahra).

The interview with the Syrian mothers also reveals a wide understanding of ECEC as a social world for children. Marwa wishes the ECEC could take children swimming more often, to the cinema, to restaurants, or on excursions. She even suggests that parents could contribute financially. Marwa describes activities outside the ECEC as having a different meaning when they take place with other children: *"The ECEC is the world of children. Mother goes with her friend, sits with her friend, eats with her friend, swims with her friend. It is not the world of the home"* (Marwa).

Whereas Marwa emphasises children's shared experiences within the ECEC, Zahra highlights Norwegian language-learning as her primary concern for the child's future.

5.2. Confident Belonging

Michael's account provides a contrasting migrant position. He is not Norwegian, but he is not positioned in the same way as the Syrian mothers. He speaks English fluently, has higher education, works as a senior business intelligence consultant, and is married to a Norwegian partner. These features matter because they give him access to institutional codes that are not equally available to all migrant parents.

His description of the ECEC is highly positive. He explains that his child cried during the first days of introduction but soon became comfortable. The child now smiles when staff enter and sometimes reaches toward them. This gives the father confidence that the child trusts the staff and is comfortable in the ECEC: *"It is a confident feeling that you are leaving him here with people that he trusts that he is comfortable with."*

Unlike Marwa, he does not seek additional documentation to secure trust. He reads the child's bodily response and the staff's routines as sufficient evidence.

The father's relationship to professional expertise is especially important. When discussing outdoor activities and pedagogical decisions, he says he has one child and limited experience, while the staff have professional knowledge and broader experience.

"From my point of view, they are the experts. I view them as experts in raising kids, so I am more willing to learn from them." (Michael.)

The father's trust is not passive. He has negotiated a sleep issue with staff and describes the collaboration as supportive. The father also aligns with dominant Norwegian

ECEC values of independence, social skills, outdoor life and exploratory childhood. He appreciates that staff do not immediately help children climb, because this supports autonomy. He values social development, exposure to new things and outdoor exploration. His own childhood memories include woods, building, roaming and experimentation, which makes the ECEC's outdoor profile culturally recognisable to him: *"He has plenty of friends. He has places to sort of roam"* (Michael). Michael chose the ECEC partly because of its outdoor profile. The father also has access to implicit expectations. When asked whether staff have expectations of him as a parent, he says they likely expect him to dress the child appropriately, love him and maintain good care. He reflects that if he brought the child in a T-shirt in cold weather, the staff would probably say something. When discussing how he knows such details, he points to his Norwegian spouse: *"Maybe I could read the details"* (Michael).

5.3. Normative Belonging

The staff interviews add the institutional perspective to the analysis. Across both focus groups, pedagogical leaders describe cultural diversity as something to meet with humility, openness and curiosity. They refer to practices such as celebrating Holi, Iranian New Year and Sami traditions, serving halal food, and using children's home languages as forms of cultural recognition.

Across the staff material, the good parent is constructed as active, direct, informed, trusting and cooperative. Across the staff and fieldnote material, the good parent is constructed not only through communication but also through everyday routines. Parents become recognisable through practices such as providing appropriate clothing, following routines, reading information and knowing how to approach staff with questions or critique.

However, the staff interviews also show that recognition takes place within a normative model of the good parent. When asked to describe a good parent, staff consistently emphasise engagement, dialogue, trust and active participation: *"Good parents are parents who dare to give notice, both praise and criticism. They come to us, they have trust in the job we do, and they use us as professionals."* (Staff focus group 2.)

Michael's practice closely matches this institutional ideal, whereas it is less readily available to parents who are uncertain about where influence is possible or fear that critique may be interpreted as mistrust. The good parent is therefore not a neutral figure but an institutional norm that some parents can inhabit more easily than others.

Staff focus group 1 explicitly identifies differences in parental influence. When the interviewer asks whether ethnic Norwegian parents have more influence than ethnic minority parents, one pedagogical leader gives a cautious but analytically powerful answer:

"Ethnic Norwegian parents are perhaps more on. They know our ECEC culture better. They dare to come with something." (Staff focus group 1.) They elaborate further: *"Those with another culture are often uncertain about where they can influence and participate. It is not certain that we get that information out"* (staff focus group 1). These statements show that unequal participation is recognised not only by parents but also by staff. Knowing ECEC culture, daring to speak and understanding where influence is possible are forms of institutional knowledge that are unevenly distributed.

Staff accounts also reveal ambivalence around demanding parents. On the one hand, staff want parents to ask questions and give feedback because this improves practice. On the other hand, parents who ask many questions may initially be experienced as irritating or as not trusting the staff. In staff focus group 2, a parent who asked many questions was initially perceived as demanding. However, staff later concluded that meeting her information needs made her feel more secure and led to one of the best collaborations.

The boundary is delicate. Parents are expected to ask questions and engage, but in ways that remain trusting, proportionate and institutionally recognisable. Staff also set a lower boundary for participation by categorising parents as insufficiently engaged. In staff focus group 1, a pedagogical leader refers to some parents as difficult to reach or almost ‘zero parents’, even while acknowledging that they may be satisfied. In staff focus group 2, another participant says that not all parents are equally invested or interested, and that staff adjust by not offering the same level of professional explanation to parents who do not appear interested.

5.4. Bounded Participation

Bounded participation becomes visible when staff invite parents into collaboration while also defining the limits of what can be negotiated. Parents may ask questions, suggest activities and share information, but core practices such as outdoor life, clothing, routines and understanding of the child’s best interests remain anchored in Norwegian ECEC values and professional knowledge.

The staff interviews identify outdoor life as a concrete arena where Norwegian and Framework Plan values are enacted. Staff describe outdoor activity as pedagogical and connect it to learning, language, physical development, risk management and childhood itself. As one pedagogical leader puts it: *“We are an outdoor ECEC. We are outside every day, on trips. We give children the opportunity to see the world. There is pedagogy in it.”* (Staff focus group 1.)

Parents may suggest places to go, food traditions or cultural activities, as illustrated in this quote: *“She must be allowed to be worried, and we must meet her in that. However, I have to reassure her that we cannot take the child away from the activities. This is ECEC. This is childhood. This is our culture”* (Staff focus group 2).

Staff explicitly connect outdoor life to Norwegian culture. In staff focus group 2, participants explain that Norwegian culture involves spending time outdoors, which may be unfamiliar even to families from countries not geographically distant from Norway: *“Norwegian culture is very much about being outside. It lies almost in our national soul.”* (Staff focus group 2.) This is also illustrated by a quote from Adnan, a Syrian father, about what they need to do to integrate into the society: *“We have to do things like Norwegians do, go hiking and things like that, integrate, so that we can have a good life in Norway.”* Adnan describes hiking and ‘doing as Norwegians do’ as pragmatic routes to a good life in Norway.

Kadnan further illustrates that parenting involves both adaptation to Norwegian society and maintaining the family’s own cultural and religious values:

“We are concerned with teaching our children what the rules are in this country [Norway], what is right for our culture, and what is important here in this country; how it is with our religion, and how they should show respect for other religions and other people. We try to give the children a good life.” (Kadnan, Syrian father.)

These everyday practices illustrate how institutional expectations shape the boundaries of participation by defining which aspects of parenthood are open to negotiation and which remain institutionally taken for granted.

6. Discussion: Conditional Belonging and Differential Positioning

In this article, I analysed parent–ECEC collaboration as a politics of belonging. In line with Yuval-Davis’ (2006, 2011) distinction between belonging and the politics of belonging, the analysis sees ECEC not only as an institution where parents feel included or not, but also as one where the boundaries of legitimate parenthood are produced, negotiated, and maintained. The notion of “politics of belonging” is connected to the power to define who belongs, on what terms and through which practices. These boundaries are not merely formal. Although parents have access to ECEC, receive information and are invited to

collaborate, the boundaries are also normative and interactional. They concern how parents are expected to speak, ask questions, show trust, provide practical information, dress their children and accept core pedagogical values.

The findings extend previous work on barriers, Norwegianness, and trust by showing how these dynamics operate as institutional boundary-making (Lund, 2022b, 2024). The good parent is an individual or relational ideal. It is also shaped by institutional norms regarding how parents should communicate, show trust, provide practical information, and support everyday ECEC routines (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Crozier & Davies, 2007). Such ideals may be professionally necessary, but they privilege parents who already know the ECEC's institutional codes. Michael's confident sense of belonging shows the ease that can follow from such familiarity. In contrast, Marwa's guarded sense of belonging shows how parental concern can become difficult to express when it risks being read as mistrust.

A key finding, therefore, is that belonging is conditional and unevenly distributed and is, in this way, directly connected to the politics of belonging; it is not only an emotional and affective feeling, but it is also a political and an institutional process where some practices become more recognisable than others (Antonsich, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2011). It shows that migrant parents are not simply included or excluded as one group. Rather, they are positioned differently in relation to the institutional norms through which parental voice, trust and participation become recognised. Formal access to ECEC does not automatically secure a recognised sense of belonging. Parents may have a child enrolled, receive information and attend meetings, while still being uncertain about how to ask questions, express critique or influence practice without risking misrecognition.

The contrast between Marwa's request for cameras and the staff's insistence on outdoor participation illustrates how the politics of belonging operates through competing understandings of children's best interests. In both cases, children's well-being is the central concern. Marwa seeks visibility and accountability because children matter most. Staff emphasise outdoor participation and shared routines because these practices are understood as central to childhood and to the pedagogical identity of Norwegian ECEC. The politics of belonging becomes visible in how some understandings of children's best interests are recognised as professional pedagogy, while others risk being interpreted as excessive control or mistrust.

This does not mean that the institution is simply exclusionary. The staff participants describe inclusive ambitions, cultural activities, respect for different religions and an interest in dialogue (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2017; Palludan, 2007). However, the terms of participation remain asymmetrical. Parents may be invited to speak, but not all parents have equal access to the forms of speech and practice that are recognised as reasonable, constructive and trustworthy.

6.1. Silence, Critique and Legitimate Voice

The finding of *guarded belonging* demonstrates how silence is a form of situated agency. In ECEC practice, limited verbal participation may be interpreted as a lack of engagement, a lack of competence or insufficient language skills. However, previous research has shown that parents' opportunities for participation are shaped not only by individual resources but also by institutional expectations regarding what counts as legitimate involvement (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Crozier & Davies, 2007). The present analysis suggests a more complex interpretation. Marwa is not disengaged. Her account is saturated with concern, care and reflection. However, she hesitates to raise her wish for cameras with the ECEC because she anticipates that it could become a matter of trust. Silence here is therefore not the absence of voice, but a strategy for protecting a fragile institutional relationship under the conditions through which belonging is negotiated and recognised (Yuval-Davis,

2011). The research interview becomes an alternative channel of voice. Marwa speaks because the interviewer is positioned as someone connected to a wider project and perhaps able to carry suggestions further. She does not necessarily dare to raise the camera issue directly in the ECEC, because doing so could be read as suspicion. This is a central feature of guarded belonging: the parent belongs enough to value the institution, but not enough to assume that critique will be received as legitimate care. Trust is not absent; however, trust is conditional on the possibility of explanation. In much ECEC discourse, trust is idealised as a relational good produced through everyday contact. For Marwa, however, trust also requires institutional transparency. She seeks trust in which the institution can show and explain what happens in the parents' absence.

Bourdieu's (1991) concept of legitimate language underscores that voice is not merely the ability to speak, but the ability to speak in a way that will be recognised as legitimate within a specific social field. In staff focus group 2, good parents are described as those who dare to offer both praise and criticism, come directly to staff, trust their work and treat them as professionals. This is a demanding communicative ideal that assumes parents can criticise without appearing accusatory, trust without being passive, ask questions without seeming suspicious and engage without becoming difficult. In light of the politics of belonging, a legitimate language is tied not only to communication as a resource but also to the boundaries of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2011). This is not a question of whether the parents speak, but rather of whether their speech is heard as that of a reasonable, trustworthy, and cooperative parent, thereby shifting the analysis from language skills to institutional recognisability. Marwa's voice is therefore not an instance of outside participation but a response to the anticipated boundary between legitimate concern and illegitimate distrust. Her guarded sense of belonging shows how parents may regulate or withhold their voices in order to remain within the boundaries of acceptable parenthood and aligns with the staff's expectation that good parents should treat them as professionals (Crozier & Davies, 2007; Yuval-Davis, 2011).

Michael, on the other hand, can more readily assume a communicative position. His questions about sleep are treated as part of ordinary collaboration, and he can position staff as experts without feeling that his parental authority is threatened. His confident belonging is therefore not reducible to nationality. It is produced through language, education, work background, a Norwegian spouse, familiarity with professional institutions, and cultural recognisability. This aligns with Anthias' argument that belonging must be analysed through social location and translocational positioning rather than through fixed cultural categories (Anthias, 2006).

The findings suggest that ECEC is more than a childcare arrangement. It constitutes an important social world for children and, consequently, a site in which parents also seek recognition as legitimate participants in their children's everyday lives. Belonging, therefore, operates at two interconnected levels: the child is expected to belong within the ECEC community, while the parent seeks recognition as someone who understands, supports, and cares for that world.

6.2. Recognisable Parenthood

The findings presented under normative belonging suggest a more specific mechanism: institutional expectations shape whether parents become recognisable as legitimate collaborators. The staff material shows that the construction of "the good parent" is shaped through institutional expectations (Lund, 2021; Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Crozier & Davies, 2007). Staff value parents who are engaged, informed, direct, open, trusting and willing to cooperate. These are professionally understandable expectations. They may help staff protect children and organise everyday work. However, they also define which forms

of parental conduct are recognised as legitimate. If only certain forms of engagement count as proper collaboration, then formal parental involvement may coexist with unequal access to voice.

Read alongside the staff material, Michael's confident sense of belonging shows how some migrant parents may more easily fit the expected role of the good parent. Staff describe legitimate parents as those who ask questions, trust the staff, use them as professionals and engage directly. Michael's account is close to this expectation. His trust in staff expertise, his comfort with outdoor life and his access to implicit expectations through a Norwegian spouse make his parenthood recognisable within the ECEC's normative order (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Crozier & Davies, 2007; Yuval-Davis, 2011).

This contrast does not make him more caring than the Syrian mothers. It shows that his care is more easily recognised within the ECEC's normative frame.

These expectations are professionally understandable. They support children's safety, well-being and participation in everyday ECEC life. At the same time, they function as markers of recognisable parenthood by defining which forms of parental knowledge and engagement are taken as ordinary. The point is not that staff should avoid offering guidance, but that such guidance operates within a normative order in which some parents already possess the implicit codes, while others must acquire them through explanation, reminders, and correction (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2017; Palludan, 2007).

The parent–ECEC collaboration is shaped by an asymmetrical relationship in which staff define which concerns, practices, and forms of participation are legitimate. This does not mean that staff act with exclusionary intent, but it shows how inclusion can be organised through adaptation to norms that appear practical, child-centred and ordinary (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Crozier & Davies, 2007; Yuval-Davis, 2011).

Kadnan's account also shows that recognisable parenthood is not only defined by the ECEC. Parents actively negotiate Norwegian institutional expectations alongside their own moral, cultural, and religious commitments. This resonates with earlier work on how equality, adaptation, and reflexivity shape professional practice in culturally diverse ECEC settings (Lund, 2026). Rather than importing a recognition framework as a theoretical perspective, the present article specifies a narrower mechanism: migrant parents are positioned differently depending on whether their concerns, questions, and practices are recognised as competent and cooperative within the normative order. Making diversity visible is not enough if it does not also open participation to negotiation. Practices such as halal food, the Polish language, Holi, the Iranian New Year, and Sami traditions show that ECECs are attempting to make diversity visible. Such practices matter. Yet the politics of belonging involves whether parents can ask difficult questions, raise concerns that unsettle professional assumptions, and influence definitions of normal practice. Cultural visibility alone does not secure a legitimate parental voice (Yuval-Davis, 2011; Skaten et al., 2026).

The findings also relate to equality blindness in ECEC, where visible inclusion and sameness may leave dominant norms intact (Skaten et al., 2026). The issue is not only whether diversity is acknowledged but whether migrant parents can participate in negotiating institutional norms that define legitimate parenthood.

Confident belonging is not simply about being welcomed into the institution, but about being able to take up the expected parent role with little visible strain. Michael illustrates how a migrant parent may nevertheless be readily recognised within the institution's normative expectations through trust, institutional familiarity and alignment with key pedagogical values.

6.3. Norwegian Values as Cultural Recognisability

The Norwegian and Framework Plan values exemplify bounded participation. Outdoor life is central to Norwegian ECEC and reflects broader values concerning nature, health, autonomy, sustainability and participation. Rather than representing an isolated practice, outdoor life illustrates how institutional values become translated into everyday expectations of parenthood.

For Michael, these values resonate with his childhood experiences and support a confident sense of belonging. By contrast, Adnan describes hiking and “doing as Norwegians do” as a pathway to participation in Norwegian society, illustrating how the same practices may represent familiar belonging for some parents and learned participation for others. These differences become visible not only in parents’ own accounts but also in the everyday practices through which staff enact Norwegian ECEC values.

Staff examples concerning clothing, wool, winter shoes and routines illustrate how everyday practices require embodied institutional knowledge. Staff intervene for legitimate pedagogical reasons; however, in doing so, they also become interpreters of appropriate childhood and parenthood. As one pedagogical leader explained: “*This is ECEC. This is childhood. This is our culture*” (Staff focus group 2).

Taken together, the contrast between Michael, Marwa and Adnan demonstrates that migrant parents are not simply included or excluded as migrants. Instead, they are positioned differently according to how their concerns, communicative practices and everyday parenting become recognised within institutional expectations of legitimate parenthood. Recognition in parent–ECEC collaboration therefore depends not simply on migrant status alone, but on how parenthood becomes institutionally recognisable (Bourdieu, 1991; Crozier & Davies, 2007).

Seen through the lens of the politics of belonging, parent–ECEC collaboration is not a neutral institutional space. Parents with high linguistic and institutional capital are more likely to navigate it successfully. Parents who lack such capital may appear passive because they do not ask questions, or difficult because they ask questions in ways that disturb professional trust (Bourdieu, 1991; Crozier & Davies, 2007). The staff interviews therefore show how inclusive intentions coexist with ordinary practices that position parents differently within the institution’s normative order.

6.4. ECEC as a Welfare-State Encounter

The politics of belonging identified in everyday parent–ECEC encounters are further shaped by ECEC’s role within the Norwegian welfare state. For refugee and recently arrived migrant parents, ECEC is not only an educational setting but also a key point of contact with the welfare state, linking settlement, language learning, social participation and broader expectations of integration. Questions from staff, reminders about clothing or advice about routines may therefore be experienced both as care and as signs that parenting is being observed and assessed within a wider welfare-state context (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2017; Handulle & Vassenden, 2021).

Zahra’s emphasis on Norwegian language-learning illustrates the welfare-state dimension of ECEC. When she says that she wants her children to learn Norwegian “and nothing else,” this should not be read as a narrow or passive expectation of the institution. Rather, it points to language as a route into schooling, social participation and future belonging, consistent with research showing that language is often positioned as a key condition for participation and inclusion in culturally diverse ECEC (Norheim et al., 2022; Van Laere et al., 2018).

Outdoor life exemplifies how core pedagogical values become institutional expectations that shape the terms of participation. Parents who are already familiar with these

values may navigate them with relative ease, whereas others may need to learn and negotiate their meaning through everyday collaboration.

Read alongside Marwa's emphasis on safety and institutional transparency, Zahra's account highlights a different form of parental investment. Whereas Marwa foregrounds the child's protection and institutional accountability, Zahra emphasises Norwegian-language-learning as a pathway to schooling, participation, and future belonging. Together, the two mothers illustrate that refugee parents do not articulate a single shared understanding of parent–ECEC collaboration. Rather, they invest in different dimensions of their children's present and future lives in Norway.

Kadnan's perspective, as presented in Section 5.4, further illustrates this double orientation. For refugee parents, ECEC is part of a broader welfare-state encounter in which children are prepared for participation in Norwegian society. At the same time, parents seek to maintain cultural and religious continuity. Read through Yuval-Davis' politics of belonging, this suggests that this is not simply imposed through institutional routines, but also interpreted, negotiated, and actively worked on by parents as they raise children for a future in Norway.

Löthman and Puskás's (2022) analysis of Swedish rural preschools similarly shows that integration is not a one-way process in which migrant parents adapt to institutional norms. Rather, dialogic encounters require professionals to reflect on their own assumptions, distinguish between negotiable routines and non-negotiable values, and create communicative spaces where different perspectives can be expressed. This supports the present analysis by showing that welfare-state encounters are not one-way processes. Migrant parents are expected to learn institutional norms, but professionals may also become aware of the cultural and normative assumptions embedded in their own practice (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2017; Löthman & Puskás, 2022; Yuval-Davis, 2011).

This does not mean that staff intend to surveil parents; rather, surveillance should be understood as an institutional condition in which parents know that professionals have the authority to define concerns, document observations and, when necessary, involve other welfare services. Handulle and Vassenden's (2021) analysis of ECEC drop-off shows how fear of being reported to Child Welfare Services can shape how minoritised parents manage their institutional visibility in everyday ECEC encounters. The welfare-state setting, therefore, intensifies the politics of belonging: parents must become familiar with ECEC routines while also managing their visibility to institutional actors (Handulle & Vassenden, 2021; Yuval-Davis, 2011).

The analysis thus shows a double movement. Migrant parents are offered support, access and recognition. At the same time, they encounter normative expectations about how family life, childhood and parental responsibility should be organised (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2017; Yuval-Davis, 2011). Belonging is produced through this double movement. It is made possible through institutional care but also constrained by the forms of voice and parental conduct that the institution recognises as legitimate.

Rather than treating belonging as a fixed outcome, the findings show that belonging is continuously negotiated through everyday encounters between parents and professionals, consistent with Yuval-Davis' (2006, 2011) understanding of belonging and the politics of belonging as constructed, maintained and contested. Although grounded in Norwegian ECEC, the analysis may also inform studies of parent–institution relations in other educational contexts where participation is shaped through implicit institutional norms. Across such contexts, partnerships with migrant families involve ongoing negotiations over voice, trust and recognition. A politics-of-belonging perspective therefore provides a useful conceptual framework for examining how institutional expectations shape not only

opportunities for participation but also who becomes recognised as a legitimate parent within parent–ECEC collaboration.

7. Limitations, Implications and Conclusions

This article is based on selected interview units from a broader qualitative project, combining previously analysed material with one interview analysed for the first time in the present article. The material is not statistically representative and should not be read as a typology of migrant parents. Michael, the Syrian mothers, Adnan and the supplementary Kadnan excerpt are analytically useful because they illuminate contrasting positions. However, they cannot stand for all Western, non-Western, refugee or migrant parents. The staff focus groups and selected staff/fieldnote excerpts are likewise used to analyse institutional norms rather than to represent the full range of professional perspectives consistent with a reflexive thematic approach that prioritises conceptual interpretation over statistical representation (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Michael's confident belonging may also be interpreted through the lens of gender. However, the present material does not allow gender to be analysed independently of language, education, migration history, family networks and institutional familiarity. Future research could more explicitly examine how gendered expectations of good motherhood and fatherhood shape migrant parents' recognised participation in ECEC collaboration (e.g., Jamal Al-deen & Windle, 2016).

For ECEC practice, the findings may have some implications. Interpretation should be understood as part of the democratic infrastructure for equitable parent–ECEC collaboration, and staff should discuss how they interpret parental critique, especially when parents raise questions about safety or institutional routines. Also, professional communities need to examine their ideals of the good parent and ask which parents can realistically live up to those ideals. Finally, core practices should be explained as expressions of Norwegian values, Framework Plan values, and institutional norms, while remaining open to dialogue where possible. These implications matter because parents cannot function as equal co-educators if institutional expectations remain implicit or if critique is read primarily as mistrust.

The article contributes to parental engagement research by showing that equitable parent–ECEC collaboration requires more than inviting parents to participate; it also requires attention to the institutional conditions under which parental voice becomes legitimate. Migrant parents are not positioned in the same way: some can take up the expected role of the trusting, informed, and direct parent with relative ease, while others must decode implicit norms, rely on interpretation, manage institutional uncertainty, and carefully regulate critique.

A politics-of-belonging perspective makes these differences visible and shows that belonging in ECEC is produced through everyday encounters, routines, and evaluations of parenthood: who asks questions in ways recognised as appropriate, who provides the expected clothing, who shows trust in recognisable ways, who accepts core values, and who is heard as a legitimate co-educator. Ultimately, the findings suggest that equitable parent–ECEC collaboration depends not only on inviting parents to participate, but also on recognising different parental voices as legitimate forms of knowledge about children, care and belonging.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

ECEC	Early childhood education and care
NSD	Norwegian Centre for Research Data
SIKT	Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research
NESH	The Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees

Appendix A

Appendix A below presents selected examples of the progression from data excerpts to data-near codes, interpretive categories, and analytical themes. The table is included to show analytic transparency. It is not a full codebook and should not be read as a rigid coding scheme. The examples show how data-near codes were compared across parent interviews, staff material, fieldnotes and reflexive memos. The final themes were developed abductively through movement among the empirical material, earlier analyses, and the theoretical concepts of the politics of belonging, parental voice, and institutional recognisability.

Table A1. Examples of abductive movement from data excerpts to analytical themes.

Data Excerpt	Data-Near Codes	Emerging Analytical Interpretation	Interpretive Theme
"For me, for the child's safety, the camera is best." (Marwa)	safety; trust; withheld concern	Concern expressed indirectly because criticising or questioning the professionals is experienced as risky.	Guarded belonging
"I just want my children to learn the Norwegian language and nothing else." (Zahra, Syrian mother)	Norwegian language; future; schooling;	Parents prioritise the opportunities in the future for their children while limiting their own claims of belonging	Guarded belonging
"It is a confident feeling that you are leaving him here with people that he trusts that he is comfortable with." (Michael, American father)	trust; staff familiarity	The institutional familiarity enables confident participation and recognises parental voice.	Confident belonging
"From my point of view, they are the experts. I view them as experts in raising kids, so I am more willing to learn from them." (Michael, American father)	Professional expertise	Trust in the professional expertise facilitates reciprocal participation.	Confident belonging

Table A1. Cont.

Data Excerpt	Data-Near Codes	Emerging Analytical Interpretation	Interpretive Theme
“Good parents are parents who dare to give notice, both praise and criticism. They come to us, they have trust in the job we do, and they use us as professionals.” (Staff focus group)	good parent; trust; criticism	Institutional expectations define legitimate parent participation.	Normative belonging
“These parents often need a little extra follow-up, especially in the wardrobe situation . . . They do not know this with wool and layer upon layer.” (Staff excerpt)	Clothing; instruction	Everyday routines become markers for recognisable parenthood	Normative belonging
“We try to tell them how we do it in Norway . . . warm clothes, enough sleep and healthy food.” (Staff excerpt)	Norwegian way; guidance	Participation is shaped through institutional expectations about appropriate parenthood.	Bounded participation
“We have to do things like Norwegians do, go hiking and things like that, integrate, so that we can have a good life in Norway.” (Adnan, Syrian father)	integration; good life	Parents negotiate belonging by aligning with institutionally values and practices	Bounded participation

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