

«They need to ... »

- *exploring practitioners' attitudes in relation to newcomer migrant children's needs in Norwegian day care*

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Abstract: Taking a critical stance on day care as a social site for democratic practice, this article focusses on practitioners' attitudes regarding including newcomer migrant children in the assessment of their needs and decision-making processes in Norwegian day care. Considering the needs-discourse as a way of conveying both policy makers' and practitioners' conclusions about the requirements of migrant children's childhoods, we reveal how the individual agency of practitioners is captured by developmental culture-bound norms regarding what an ideal childhood should be.

Keywords: *migrant children, day care, needs, participation, agency policy*

When newcomer migrant children enter day care, it can become apparent that cultural norms related to childhood as well as practitioners' ideas about what constitutes a healthy childhood diverge considerably across both time and space (Christensen & James, 2008; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). Adults, both parents and caregivers, and children alike are required to make considerable psychosocial and cultural adjustments involving cognitive, social and emotional dimensions (Vogler, Crivello, & Woodhead, 2008). The adult-child relation is highly structural and powerful (Alanen, 2001; Mayall, 2015), and in this article, we are interested in exploring how practitioners govern newcomer migrant children's lives with rules, regulations and permission seeking (Thomas,

2002).

In view of how *needs-statements* (see Berg et al., 2015; Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2010a, 2010b, 2011) are not based on migrant children's voiced needs *per se*—but rather 'depend on [adults'] value-judgments, about which patterns of early relationship are considered desirable, what the child should grow up to become, and indeed what makes for the "good society"' (Woodhead, 1997, p. 73)—we consider in this article that practitioners organise and govern in the name of public interests (Lipsky, 2010), yet they do so through a relational attitude or willingness to include migrant children in decision-making processes (Thomas, 2002; Thomas & O'Kane, 1998). In particular, we look at how practitioners' developmental and sociocultural expectations relate to their needs-assessment practices and the possibility for migrant children to participate within those processes. For example, if migrant children do not adjust in accordance with practitioners' developmental expectations, how might this affect the process and outcomes of those children's needs-assessments?

This article assumes that needs-statements are linked to the types of childhoods that practitioners want to produce for newcomer migrant children. Following Woodhead (1997), needs-statements are understood as a set of complex assumptions and judgments that reveal much about the cultural location and personal values of practitioners. Simultaneously, needs-statements are understood to be products of a society's priorities, which are generally centred on migrant children's future economic utility and their expected duties and obligations and, as such, are linked to the types of childhoods that practitioners are expected to produce for migrant children.

Inspired by Lipsky's (2010) *Street-level bureaucrats*, we consider that day care practitioners are expected to uphold day care policies, yet their interpersonal relationships with children, propelled by developmental culture-bound norms about what an ideal childhood should be like, create particular *agency policies*. Agency policies are taken to be the decisions and actions of day care practitioners (Lipsky, 2010), including the allocation of *approvals* and *prohibitions* for migrant children to participate in decision-making processes.

The purpose of this article is twofold. First, we explore needs-discourse as a practical and efficient approach to convey both policy makers' and practitioners' conclusions about the requirements of migrant children's childhoods (Woodhead, 1997). Second, exploring how practitioners' agency policies and relational attitudes affect when and how migrant children can participate in decision-making processes, we take a critical stance on day care as a social site for democratic practice that gives children the right to participate at its foundations.

Drawing from the above-mentioned perspectives, the following interrelated research questions are explored in the article: How do needs-statements relate to practitioners' agency policies? How do practitioners' agency policies and relational attitudes affect when and how migrant children can participate in decision-making processes?

This research is based on an ethnographic study investigating the everyday social reality of two newcomer migrant girls in a Norwegian day care institution. Throughout the course of nine months, participatory observation in both formal and informal settings was combined with participatory methods (see Kalkman, Hopperstad & Valenta 2015, 2017 *in press*). This supported the participants in reflecting and acting upon important aspects in relation to their *immediate* lives (Hart, 1992). The goal of this article is to draw attention to practitioners' viewpoints and practices. It draws on data from two individual semi-structured interviews conducted with two pedagogical leaders in a Norwegian public day care institution. We focussed our analysis on the rationale of practitioners' needs-assessment regarding the decision to transfer two newcomer migrant girls, halfway through their initial and final year in day care, from an introductory group for children with a refugee background to an integrated group. Even though no *direct* indication of the children's views is provided, the ethnographic approach allowed for the establishment of a relationship between the researchers and the participants, and we believe that we have reflected sensitivity to their thoughts and concerns within the analysis.

Literature review and theoretical framework

The Norwegian Ministry of Education is the governmental body that is responsible for enacting day care laws, creating specific day care policies and allocating resources in relation to day care provision. With the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) as a cornerstone, young children's rights are represented through the law and regulations surrounding the provision of day care services (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2005). Practitioners are supposed to treat migrant children with care and respect, thus providing them with a pedagogical environment that presents them with challenges adjusted to their individual needs, age and developmental stage (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2010a).

As a consequence of mass human displacement, geographic mobility and increasing internationalisation, day care practitioners meet children with a range of experiences, abilities and risks that can differ from those of native-born children (Suarez-Orozco, Darbes, Dias, & Sutin, 2011). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) emphasises that Norwegian day care practitioners ought to

become more responsive towards the developmental needs of migrant and other children placed in vulnerable situations (Angel, Barnett, Anders, & Taguma, 2015).

Entering day care, newcomer migrant children are expected to ‘adapt’ themselves within socially, culturally and ethnically diverse surroundings—which can be fun but also highly risky at the same time (Devine & Kelly, 2006). A growing body of international research addresses how migrant children are required to negotiate a position, thus proving to their peers and day care practitioners that they are competent social actors who are deeply embedded within the negotiations of alliances and friendships and transitions between home and day care (Devine, 2009; Devine et al., 2006; Kalkman, Hopperstad & Valenta, 2015; Kalkman, Hopperstad & Valenta, 2017; McGovern & Devine, 2016).

Even when ‘[f]ramed in terms of children’s needs’ (Woodhead, 1997, p. 68), educational policies can have detrimental consequences, as they are not always attuned to migrant children’s immediate and particular needs (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011). U.S.-based research has revealed how large-scale migration can generate fears that newcomer migrant children will not learn the dominant language; therefore, increased focus is placed on language development (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011). The insight of Suarez-Orozco et al. could support the rationale of both politicians and practitioners focussing on how participation will help migrant children to learn the Norwegian language, supposedly increasing their social competencies and improving their overall wellbeing (CES, 2011; Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2010a, 2011). Additionally, day care participation is said to counter major social variations that influence children’s overall future academic results (Angel et al., 2015; CES, 2011; Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2010a).

Practitioners—being *street-level bureaucrats* who, through their decisions and actions, organise and govern in the name of public interests (Lipsky, 2010)—are obligated to meet the demands of the national day care policy. Inspired by Lipsky’s theory, we assume that policy statements may at times describe children’s qualities and needs that are different from those experienced at *street level*. As such, these statements may carry different judgments of what parents and practitioners deem as being best for their children. Furthermore, it is relevant to explore whether practitioners gradually create their own *agency policy* through direct and immediate contact with children and based on the outcomes of their relationships (Lipsky, 2010). It is assumed that practitioners’ agency policies are not normative or a set of ‘written customs’. We suggest that practitioners’ agency policies manifest through their relations with children and influence how they allocate to those children their daily benefits and sanctions. The conceptualisation of day care practitioners as street-level bureaucrats fits

well, in our view, within some strands from the sociology of childhood (Alanen, 2001; Mayall, 2015), especially how ‘institutional and ideological structures shape childhood and child-adult relations’ (Mayall, 2015, p. 13).

Although children’s right to participate in decision-making processes is outlined within Article 12 in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), § 1 (UN, 1989), many children in day care are excluded from voicing their needs and concerns within decision-making processes, which can affect their immediate lives and wellbeing. Even if participation is described as emphasising children’s living and partaking in a democratic society, and practitioners are expected to respond in ways that promote respect, acceptance, confidence and trust (UDIR, 2011), practitioners’ take on children and childhood will—consciously and/or unconsciously—affect the manner in which they interpret children’s participation (UDIR, 2011). Reading § 2 of Article 12, tensions surrounding children’s participation are enhanced as the value or sincerity of young children’s views and opinions in particular become contrasted by developmentally integrating *age* and *maturity* (Kjørholt, 2010). As a result of this formulation, Kjørholt suggests that, on the one hand, young children are acknowledged as social actors with the right to autonomy and participation, yet, on the other hand, they are considered vulnerable and in need of protection (Kjørholt, 2010). Being positioned between a *participatory* and a *protectionist* discourse, children’s rights are thus not considered to be something universal—applying to all children—but rather as a function of competencies, abilities (Burr & Montgomery, 2003) and values and dependent on fulfilling a particular expectation of the child—subject as a developmentally appropriate, rational and autonomous individual (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Considering how dominant discourses, such as those of the *rational* and *autonomous* individual child who acts alone and is self-sufficient, contribute to the construction of a specific sociocultural reality (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007; Foucault, 1999), we consider that young children who can be evaluated by standard developmental measures are appreciated in day care.

Children’s fulfilment of their right to participate, although structurally determined within day care policies and laws, is considered to be tightly intertwined with practitioners’ *attitudes*. Practitioners’ attitudes translate into either positive assertiveness (wanting the child to make herself understood, providing the necessary conditions in which she can be included) or a negative assertiveness (assuming the child has insufficient abilities to be included, and without any way to find out what she thinks) (Thomas, 2002). Negative assertiveness can come from the fear that the child desires to control the decisions to be made (Thomas & O’Kane, 1998).

Within needs-statements, such as in relation to children’s exclusion from participation due to the belief that they might have a desire to control the decisions to be made, lies an implicit judgment surrounding what is desired of children (what adults consider desirable behaviour for children), and how this can be achieved.

According to Woodhead (1997), an understanding of children as helpless, passive and requiring appropriate intervention is habitually embedded within needs-statements. Consequently, when dominant discourses, such as rational and autonomous, are used as *framing statements* (Woodhead, 1997), they serve as substitutes to emphasise children's dependencies and requirement for adult intervention (Woodhead, 2005).

Background and methodology

Kongsvingen is a public day care institution located in central Norway and funded by the municipality. It consists of four groups: two regular groups and two introductory groups. Children participating in the introductory groups have recently arrived in Norway as refugees or asylum-seekers. The overall pedagogical aim of the introductory groups is to support migrant children's overall integration into mainstream society, providing a one-year introduction to the Norwegian culture and its national language. After this year, children transfer internally to one of the regular groups, start participating in another day care institution or, if they are old enough, enter school.

With a reduced adult-child ratio, one of the introductory groups, called 'Badger', only had eight members (2-5 years old) and was gender balanced. In the fall of 2013, two girls entered the Badger group. The girls are referred to by the pseudonyms of Bahja, a 4-year-old from the Middle East, and Aisha, a 4-year-old from the Horn of Africa. Both had recently arrived in Norway, accompanied by their parents. Bahja entered day care with her 3-year-old brother, Mihran. Bahja and her brother started participating some weeks before Aisha. When Aisha arrived, it was expected that she and Bahja would establish a relationship; however, even though the two girls were the same age, Bahja preferred to play with her brother and two other peers. Aisha, unlike Bahja, was quite withdrawn and seemed to feel more secure in spending her time with the practitioners. Anne Berit, the leader of the introductory Badger group, had been working on this group for more than four years and described the introductory group as a place in which the children were not as bound by rules and regulations compared to the regular groups. Anne Berit believes it is important to ensure that newly arrived children feel security and belonging by giving them warmth and affection. However, since Bahja and Aisha would start school the following year, Anne Berit and the pedagogical leader from the mainstream 'Fox' group, Mari, initiated a discussion with the girls' parents regarding the necessity for Bahja and Aisha to be transferred to the Fox group. Seeing that the girls in the Fox group could establish a social network with majority-language-speaking peers, the practitioners argued that socialising within the Fox group would promote Bahja and Aisha's overall integration and support their Norwegian language learning. Simultaneously, joining the Fox group would benefit

Bahja and Aisha because the group's daily structure created predictability, which Mari understood to create a sense of security. After approximately three months of participation in the Badger group, Bahja and Aisha were transferred to the Fox group, which separated Bahja from her brother.

Methodology

Over the course of nine months (September 2013 – June 2014), the everyday social reality of two newcomer migrant girls was investigated using multimodal ethnographic methods, including participatory observation, interviews and usage of digital cameras, tours and arts-based activities (Clark, 2011; Clark & Moss, 2009; Authors 2015). In relation to this article, the main concern has been to investigate how practitioners, as *street-level bureaucrats* who create their own agency policy, allocate particular benefits and sanctions to migrant children. In an attempt to understand how the delivery of benefits and sanctions ultimately structures and delimits migrant children's lives and opportunities, the interactions between the children and the practitioners were observed and analysed. During the participant observations in the day care, the first author was able to interact with the children and practitioners, and several field interviews, informal focus group interviews and individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Yet, the focal data we present and analyse were primarily derived from two individual semi-structured interviews conducted with the pedagogical leaders from the Badger group and Fox group approximately four weeks after Bahja and Aisha's transfer. The interview guides were outlined by topic area (e.g., daily routines, group structure, relations, daily reality for newcomer migrant children, belonging). Each interview was set in the practitioners' conference room, audio-recorded and initiated with the researcher inviting the practitioner to describe her daily routines. The topics introduced were not strictly predetermined and binding; rather, the researcher's judgment and tact determined how to follow-up with the practitioners' answers to allow new directions to open up (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the interpretive process made note of pauses and tones. From the interviews, the researchers created vignettes (Barter & Renold, 2000), embracing the view that there is 'no true, objective transformation from the oral to the written mode' (Kvale et al., 2009, p.186). Although the practitioners' data stand central, ethnography allowed for the discovery of critical phenomena in relation to the migrant children's needs; otherwise, we assume that the migrant children's expression of needs would not have been detected (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Although the migrant children's expressions are not presented directly, they have framed our interpretation of the data and are understood as integral to our discussion of the findings.

Findings and analysis

In this section we present our findings and analysis of the interviews conducted with the two practitioners: Anne Berit, the pedagogical leader of the introductory Badger group, and Mari, the pedagogical leader of the Fox group. Through our data, we reveal how practitioners' needs-assessments seem to focus on cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects, thus linking these to school readiness.

Anne Berit's assessments of Bahja and Aisha's needs

Anne Berit and 'Kris', the first author, are located in the practitioners' conference room. Kris asks Anne Berit if she can elaborate on her daily experiences with the migrant children in her group. As she elaborates on both the positive and challenging aspects, she introduces the topic of Bahja and Aisha's transition from the Badger to the Fox group. Kris asks if Anne Berit can provide some more information on the rationale surrounding the girls' transition.

Anne Berit: Well, I was [as the pedagogical leader of Badger] one of those who were of the opinion that they [Bahja and Aisha] could be transferred. This for the reason that Bahja's 'mothering' over Mihran [her youngest brother] was so dominant that he didn't develop [short pause] he didn't get to do anything for himself.

Her use of *development*, combined with a particular assessment of Mihran's need for *independence*, can indicate that Anne Berit uses development discourse in a restrictive and regulative fashion, thus aiming to construct a specific sociocultural reality in which Mihran's expected and *culturally appropriate* development depends on Bahja's absence.

The opinion that Bahja was obstructing Mihran from reaching 'the ideal of independence from others, with self-sufficiency as a desirable goal' (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 21) warrants minor reflection upon the meaning and value of the relationship itself. However, Anne Berit seems to focus on the assumed benefits of separating the siblings. When asked if she could reflect on the idea that migrant children are said to have a need for *stability* and *predictability*, *trust* and *relation* (Bleka, 2015), Anne Berit replies:

Anne Berit: Bahja was [at the time of her transfer] mature and competent, a little vulnerable, but otherwise very adjusted, both with her language competencies and that she doesn't allow others to place boundaries around her. So that can be problematic, as in Fox there is a more structured routine than in Badger. But this is something she will experience in school, so she will receive some prior learning, and she is a real school kid. [In Fox], Bahja must conform to specific boundaries, and a half year of that, I think, will be good for her; not being able to decide everything, this has to do with her need to be in control, but she is mature enough to take on these challenges.

By indicating Bahja's dismissal of authority—'she doesn't allow others to place boundaries around her'—Anne Berit appears to make a framing statement (Woodhead, 1997) with the intention of conveying a conclusion about Bahja's requirements (namely, a need to 'conform to specific boundaries'), and, consequently, Bahja's interpreted problem with authority seems to indicate that she requires 'normalisation' through the employment of techniques of power (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). When she is transferred from one group to another, the expectation is that she will engage in a continuous effort of 'training and retraining, skilling and reskilling' (Dahlberg et al. 2005, p. 50), thus preparing herself and being prepared for the contests that assumedly lie waiting for her when she enters school. From such a vantage point, early childhood education for migrant children is not only expected to train and retrain, skill and reskill 'cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects, but [also reshape migrant children's] innermost desires [touching their] spirit, soul, motivation, wishes, desires, dispositions, and attitudes' (Fendler, 2001, as cited in Dahlberg et al., 2005, p. 39).

In expecting Bahja to learn to control her impulses and be initiated into becoming an obedient and docile future member of society (Corsaro, 2015), Anne Berit seems to be aware that the transfer is double-edged. On the one hand, she sees the transfer as preventative, as Bahja is anticipated to experience school as a more restrictive environment. On the other hand, however, Bahja has been in a vulnerable situation, and she is likely to experience the transfer as a destabilising event in an otherwise predictable situation. Although Bahja will lose a trustworthy relation to her brother and friends in the Badger group, Anne Berit still sees that the needs-assessment conducted by the staff was justified.

Anne Berit: I realise that she is vulnerable right now, that she has struggled with finding her place; I know this. But, it is wise to do this [transfer] before she starts at school. In school, things are even more square, teachers can be, like, [short pause] going into such a system can be a shock [short pause] if she would have stayed in our group an additional six months. Maybe she would be even more robust, but I don't know, I do know that going right into school [short pause] here in day care we see them more.

Being fully aware of Bahja's challenges regarding the majority language, Anne Berit indicates that for Bahja to achieve social belonging in her new group, especially away from her brother, she will need to go through some social and cultural struggle. Using school readiness as a justification, Bahja is expected to learn appropriate behaviours to meet the demands of compulsory school in the future (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). The social challenges Anne Berit sees are primarily related to the fact that Bahja 'is very resolute and has difficulty in making friends, so for her there is a fair amount of learning needed. In our group [Badger] she arranged and was

the leader in all the play, but it shouldn't be this way, I think'. Within this perception occurs a question about what is understood as desirable (Woodhead, 1997). Bahja's *leadership* seems to create a demand that Bahja must learn from her peers in Fox on how to establish 'proper' or non-controlling relationships. Yet, with no reflection surrounding how Bahja's leadership in Badger could be understood as a negotiated position with her expertise in particular forms of play at its foundation, Anne Berit implicitly contrasts Bahja's social and cultural 'shortcomings' with the socially accepted competencies of her peers in Fox. Consequently, it seems to be ignored how *resoluteness* might be an expression of the social and cultural landscape in day care and how language and social and cultural background, for example, might influence and become motives for how practitioners and children could interpret Bahja's expressions. Although Bahja wore the same clothes and attempted to be and act the same as her peers, her behaviours—although 'normal' within her familial environment—seemed at times to set her apart as being 'peculiar' and 'foreign' within the social landscape of day care (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Though Bahja's resoluteness was interpreted as being a social and cultural shortcoming in need of regulation, it was never discussed as an expression of her continuing desire to prove to her peers that she was 'normal' in her competency to play and in her desire to become accepted within the dominant culture by her peers.

Anne Berit was somewhat unsure whether Aisha's transfer was positive. Aisha had only been in Badger for a short period, and, as a consequence, Anne Berit's knowledge about the girl was limited. Aisha came some weeks after Bahja, and, as opposed to Bahja, Aisha seemed to be less content in the Badger group. Aisha enjoyed spending her time with the adults and was seldom observed playing with the other children. Additionally, both Aisha and Bahja showed little interest in playing with each other, and, as such, the girls seemed to have no significant relationship. Aisha's transfer was therefore perceived as something that could be positive, as she could be with girls her own age, learn the Norwegian language and hopefully establish some social belonging.

Mari's assessment of Bahja and Aisha's needs

As with the interview of Anne Berit, Mari and Kris are located in the practitioners' conference room. Mari, the pedagogical leader from the Fox group, elaborates on her daily experiences—both positive and negative. As she proceeds, the topic of Bahja and Aisha's transition into her group arises. Kris asks if she can provide more information regarding the rationale surrounding the girls' transition.

Mari sees the motive for Bahja and Aisha's transfer rather differently from Anne Berit. 'The way I [as the pedagogical leader of Fox] understand it at least, the decision [to transfer Bahja and Aisha] was mostly based

on economics. I had too many adults working in my group, so to balance this, Bahja and Aisha were transferred here'. Mari sees the motive for the transfer as being based on a bureaucratic decision, upholding state policy, sustaining the proper adult-child ratio, and achieving economic targets. However, she also underscores a more practical reason—saying that all the 'preschool children are located in my group, and with Aisha [being new in day care, she] would become more familiarised with the rest of the preschool group'. After stating the formal and practical aspects of the girls' transfer, Mari also discusses the transfer in a way that reflects dilemmas related to Bahja's social competence and needs in particular: 'The decision to transfer Bahja was taken because she is who she is and has problems with going in to play situations with other children without standing out as an adult'.

Aligning the practitioners' elaborations, we see two central aspects. First, their lines of reasoning seem to position Bahja as a girl with a desire to control others, something that was seen as an indication of the 'need' to establish boundaries. As a result, the scope and function of both Anne Berit and Mari's provision of day care services seem to be founded on equally protecting individual interests and the public interest (Lipsky, 2010). Second, although both practitioners were aware of the social struggles Bahja and Aisha experienced with the girls in the Fox group, the practitioners denied them the opportunity to voice their thoughts regarding the transition; this made evident the practitioners' impact on the lives of the girls. At the same time, the practitioners' attitudes and assertiveness created the necessary conditions for the girls to be excluded from partaking in decision-making processes.

Underscoring that both Bahja and Aisha were still in the early stages of their Norwegian language learning, their exclusion from partaking in assessment and decision-making processes related to their transfer can indicate a negative attitude, an understanding that the girls lack the abilities to voice their own needs and an inability to find out what they think (Thomas, 2002). With such an attitude, the practitioners might have further translated Bahja's *resoluteness* into a fear that she desired to *control* the decisions to be made (Thomas & O'Kane, 1998). Through conversations with Bahja's parents and the practitioners, the first author was informed that Bahja's parents were at first in agreement with the transfer, acknowledging that it would help Bahja's Norwegian language learning. However, after Bahja continuously expressed her concerns surrounding practitioners from the Fox group being too strict with her and that she was not allowed to visit her friends and brother in the Badger group, they recognised that Bahja no longer wished to attend day care. After her transfer, Bahja frequently expressed that she had a stomachache and wanted to remain at home. Bahja's father expressed his concerns to the practitioners, yet the transfer was not reversed.

Asked about her view on the nature of Bahja and Aisha's social struggles in the Fox group, Mari says, 'Here [in Fox] Bahja can be with peers who are more like-minded and learn the social rules that she needs to know if she is to make friends and be included in play'. Mari's use of the term *like-minded* could imply that in order to control Bahja's resoluteness, she was placed with peers who are, like her, assumed to be controlling and dominant. The answer might be found in Mari's next statement: 'In her other group [Badger], she didn't have such friendships, there she arranged and re-arranged, as far as I understand'. The phrase *such friendships* might be Mari's way of emphasising that Bahja required not only adult intervention but also peer intervention. Could it be that peers are assumed to provide a form of social regulation and a social fix? As Mari continues, she reflects, as Anne Berit did, on how Bahja and her brother Mihran experienced separation. Recognising how Bahja longed to be with her brother and that the transfer had a destabilising impact on the girl, Mari indicates that she uses Bahja's desire to be with her brother in a disciplinary and governmental fashion.

Mari: I tried to make some compromises with her [Bahja] by saying, if you want to visit you brother you have to play with the other children in Fox and when I see that you have played enough, I will permit you to go to visit him in Badger. [...] So then you have both the positive thing that she manages to play a bit and gets to spend time with her brother, talk Arabic and enjoy herself, because that is probably more comfortable than being in a situation which is new and a little scary.

Through Mari's governing we gain insight into how she creates a particular agency policy, controlling Bahja by placing boundaries on her autonomy and freedom and sanctioning her visits to her brother. Mari, being aware of Bahja's desire to be with Mihran and speak her first language, seems to use this knowledge to govern Bahja, not through coercion but through a practice intended to steer her towards a desired behaviour (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). It appears that Bahja's childhood needs are produced as an object in relation to Mari's power to define. In line with Burr et al. (2003), Mari positions Bahja in between a participatory and a protectionist discourse. Mari, in describing Bahja's desire to visit her brother, spend time with him, speak Arabic and enjoy herself, appears to suggest that Bahja and her brother have a need for protection. Their inter-dependency and caring relationship are seen as the opposite of learning and developing competencies and abilities in accordance with their new local surroundings. Mari uses a particular understanding of the migrant child–subject's need to become a developmentally appropriate rational and autonomous individual (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Bahja's expected requirement of developing independence from her brother appears to be a normative idea, reflecting "normality" (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005) within a Norwegian context.

As Mari describes Bahja's needs, it seems that she consciously or unconsciously neglects the fact that,

judging by Bahja's negotiated position in the Badger group, she could well have been a highly balanced, clever, rational, sensible, self-governing and self-determining girl within her original social and cultural surroundings. It appears that as a result of her new social and cultural surroundings, Bahja is evaluated as 'needy', and because she still requires an extended range of modalities to share her views and opinions, her right to participate within decision-making processes seems to be forfeited.

As the interview is summed up, however, Mari reveals that she is not free from concern. 'As an employee in the day care sector, I am required to do my job and must focus on that which can be good for Bahja. We need to look at the positive aspects and forget about the rest, unfortunately'. Thomas et al. (1998) suggest that the establishment of children's 'best interests' is not without problems; principal difficulties arise. We cannot know for sure what is indeed 'best' or for that matter agree on the values that are important for children (Thomas & O'Kane, 1998), as these are generally social constructions. Being a reflection of a particular sociocultural reality, general agreement about the character of needs could be approached if those who comprise the interaction are not in conflict, or if they are equals (Lipsky, 2010).

Throughout both interviews, there is a sense that Bahja's self-expression of her needs in visiting her brother and friends in the Badger group was understood as impulsive or perhaps even destructive behaviour. Although the practitioners focussed on language learning through socialising with peers, they conducted only minor reflection as to how transitioning into new social and cultural surroundings, learning not only the language but multiple forms of communication, understanding the social fabric of the landscape, experiencing unpredictability regarding when one is to be included or excluded from play, loss of relations and so forth are all central aspects in understanding the depth of migrant children's daily experiences and the challenges they experience when entering the day care environment.

Throughout the data collection process, Bahja stood central with Aisha in the background. This has been interpreted as a result of Aisha's relative newness to both practitioners. Simultaneously, due to her short stay in the Badger group, Aisha assumedly had not established close and meaningful relationships with her peers. Even though language was initially a challenge, overall, it seemed that Aisha was quite satisfied and enjoyed her presence in Fox; unlike Bahja, she rarely disputed the practitioners' actions and decisions.

Discussion of findings

The purposes of this article were twofold; through our analysis of data, we explored how needs-discourse was used by practitioners to convey conclusions about two newcomer migrant girls and what they would need in order to have proper and successful childhoods in twenty-first century Norwegian culture. Second,

having revealed how practitioners' agency policies and relational attitudes seem to affect when and how migrant children can participate in decision-making processes, we initiate our discussion of findings.

Through deliberating on how migrant children's participation depends on practitioners' agency policies, we have come to understand the right to participate not as something universal that applies to all children in day care. Rather, participation in this day care seemed to be intertwined with practitioners' conceptions of migrant children's sociocultural competencies and abilities (Burr & Montgomery, 2003), majority values and how migrant children are assessed as fulfilling all these normative expectations.

In order to support the girls' psychosocial and cultural adjustments when entering school the following year, the practitioners made an effort to assess the types of relationships they felt the girls should establish. The focus on the girls' establishment of relations with majority-language-speaking peers was aimed primarily at integration, language acquisition and increased sociocultural competencies in the hope of elevating the girls' overall wellbeing (CES, 2011; Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2010a, 2011). As a consequence, needs-statements made by the practitioners fulfilled the expectations of day care policies concerning what the girls should grow up to become, and what was required for the greater 'good of society' (Woodhead 1997). Governing in the name of public interests (Lipsky, 2010), specific value judgments ensure that migrant children can be easily positioned within a protectionist discourse.

In specific, practitioners' needs-assessments seemed to stand in contrast with one of the two migrant children's self-expressed desire to be in relation with someone familiar. The value-judgment surrounding the practitioners' denial of the type of relationship the girl was understood to desire—being with her brother, spending time with him, speaking Arabic and enjoying herself—raises some serious ethical concerns. The practitioners used controlling techniques—'if you want to visit your brother you have to play with the other children in Fox and when I see that you have played enough, I will permit you to go to visit him in Badger'—and made framing statements that underlined a particular set of normative needs, casting the child as incapable of understanding her own desires. Rather, by emphasising helplessness and passivity, practitioners made decisions highlighting the requirements of appropriate adult intervention.

Even though a relational attitude, or willingness to include migrant children in decision-making processes (Thomas, 2002; Thomas & O'Kane, 1998), should be part of day care policy, our data indicate that a *temporary* dependency, using an extended range of modalities to share views and opinions, influences practitioners' value-judgments. Perceived problems with authority, for example, seemed to frame practitioners' needs-assessments with a requirement for *normalisation* through a highly structured routine and governed

environment (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Normalisation, we argue, implies migrant children's social regulation through adult and peer intervention with the aim of controlling any signs of resoluteness and resistance to decisions taken without the child having partaken in the decision-making process.

From a deterministic and functionalist view, the *needs-discourse* maps into a deficit discourse that is often applied to migrant children who are outside the norm. Hence, it becomes a powerful means for an instrumental assumption, as needs require a 'technical fix' and are used to justify disregard for the rights of 'vulnerably made' children to participate. We argue that migrant children's participation in day care serves not to support and develop their living and partaking in a democratic society, but rather their obligation to overcome their sociocultural needs and to become, over time, competent and contributing members of society (Corsaro, 2015) within contemporary Western cultures (James & Prout, 1997).

Conclusions

This article has placed an imperative on understanding how needs-assessments are linked to the types of childhoods that practitioners want to produce for migrant children. Through our analysis, we have revealed how practitioners can be positioned between day care policy—serving to organise and govern in the name of public interests—and the requirement to make assessments in the best interests of children. However, given the practitioners' extensive focus on what is best for the public interest and their determination of what is best for children, we are concerned that particular relational attitudes, which are influenced by developmental expectations, prohibit newcomer migrant children's ability to express their wishes and desires. Moreover, agency policy is founded upon a relational attitude, which we have argued plays a central role in determining whether migrant children's particular wishes and desires are recognised as being representative of those children's self-understood needs. Given our concern with the praxis whereby migrant children are taken out of meaningful and inclusive relations and placed in restrictive and possibly exclusionary environments, we emphasise that more research is required to examine how newcomer migrant children experience their living and partaking in a democratic day care society, and how their needs are defined in relation to becoming competent and contributing members of society within contemporary Western cultures.

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