



Negotiating Parent Engagement and Children's Well-Being in Early Childhood Education: Insights from Swedish Preschools

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Abstract

This research investigates parents' perspectives on engagement in Swedish early childhood education, focusing on how home–preschool partnerships and communication practices contribute to children's well-being. Well-being is understood as the integrated promotion of care, development, and learning, as outlined in the Swedish Preschool Curriculum (Lpfö 18). Informed by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital, and field, and curriculum theory, the study examines how parental engagement is conceptualised, enabled, and enacted within preschool settings. Drawing on four interconnected sub-studies, a post humanist analysis of child–parent–teacher–environment relations, a phenomenological study of pedagogical tact, a comparative Nordic policy analysis, and a Bourdieusian reframing of engagement, the research identifies three dimensions of engagement: ontological (co-creation between actors and environments), ethical (teachers' professional responsibility), and structural (policy and institutional frameworks). Findings indicate that while the curriculum promotes collaboration and dialogue, its non-prescriptive nature leads to diverse practices shaped by educators' competence and institutional resources. This flexibility allows for context-sensitive approaches but can also reproduce inequalities, privileging families with greater cultural capital. Parents value preschool as a safe and developmental space yet often feel uncertain about their roles, reflecting persistent power imbalances in home–preschool relations. The study concludes that meaningful parental engagement is a dynamic, negotiated process requiring relational sensitivity, professional expertise, and supportive institutional structures. Strengthening teacher education in family engagement, addressing structural barriers, and incorporating parent perspectives into policy development are key to fostering equitable, democratic, and child-centred early education.

Keywords: parental engagement; early childhood education; children's well-being; home–preschool partnerships; educational equity