The Pitfalls and Possibilities of Laughter—Sustainability in the Light of Parental Collaboration involving Refugee Parents

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to explore how laughter is played out in parental collaboration between ECEC practitioners and refugee parents. This part of the communication is seen in relation to the terms of ECEC practices regarding social and cultural sustainability, operationalised as inclusive institutions that enable parents' participation and the sense of belonging. The study includes six days of observation during delivery and pick-up in the hallway of a Norwegian ECEC practice, and observation of one parents meeting. Four communication sequences are interpreted in the light of theories regarding laughter and different aspects of social and cultural sustainability. The findings suggest that laughter might contribute to strengthening relationships between ECEC practitioners and refugee parents. However, laughter can also create boundaries between the collaborators, leading to a notion of "us" and "them." The article suggests that ECEC practitioners reflect upon their use of laughter in communication with minority parents and take cultural aspects into consideration, in order to enable equal participation and achieve social and cultural sustainability.

Keywords: *laughter; parental collaboration; refugee parents; social and cultural sustainability*

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Introduction

The Kindergarten Act (2005) states that Norwegian early childhood education and care (ECEC) practices are obligated to "work in partnership and agreement" with parents[1], and that parents have a statutory right to participate (Kindergarten Act, 2005, Section 1). Due to an increasingly multicultural population, 19 per cent of children in Norwegian ECEC practices today come from linguistic and cultural minorities (Statistics Norway, 2019), and the number of inhabitants with a refugee[2] background has nearly tripled during the last twenty years (Statistics Norway, 2020).

Research points to challenges regarding parental collaboration with minority parents, in terms of equality and inclusion. The recognition of refugee parents as significant stakeholders seems to depend on the parents' language skills and their understanding of social codes (Sønsthagen, 2020), and research shows that minority parents tend to be less involved in meetings and other forms of collaboration than parents with a majority background (Gjervan & Svolsbru, 2013). Practitioners on their part are not necessarily open-minded towards the parenting practices of minority parents (Sand, 2014). Overall, there is a tendency of insecurity among many ECEC practitioners regarding how to communicate, and what to communicate about, when collaborating with minority parents (Gjervan & Svolsbru, 2013). The cultural component to communication is significant (Dahl, 2013), and it can be argued that ECEC practitioners implicitly convey their views on normality in interaction with parents (Markström, 2005). Hence, the cultural aspect is of great relevance when refugee parents' rights of democratic participation are to be valued and complied with.

Laughter plays a significant role in parental collaboration, such as parent–teacher conferences (Alasuutari, 2009). Parental collaboration in an intercultural context calls for awareness of cultural aspects in the communication processes. This article aims to highlight laughter as a part of the verbal and nonverbal communication between ECEC practitioners and parents. In the light of the 16th Sustainable Development Goal *Peace, justice and strong institutions* (United Nations, n.d.), I explore how laughter aspects of the parental collaboration might influence terms of participation and inclusion regarding refugee parents.

The understanding of sustainability has often been reduced to environmental and economic issues, while social aspects have been ignored (Johansson & Rosell, 2021). However, these aspects are crucial regarding the understanding of parental collaboration involving refugee parents in a sustainability perspective. This article seeks to build on previous

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1   In this article the term 'parents' also refers to other caregivers with parenting responsibility.

2   The term 'refugee parents' will be applied when referring to parents who (1) find themselves outside the borders of their land of origin, (2) cannot or dare not receive protection or return to their land of origin, and (3) fear persecution in their land of origin due to race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or because of their political views (United Nations Association of Norway, 2022).

research on laughter as a part of communication in interpersonal relations, perceiving this as a central aspect of an equal and meaningful parental collaboration with refugee parents. The use of laughter is seen in relation to the goal of creating inclusive institutions, with the aim of achieving socially and culturally sustainable ECEC practices. I explore the issue by asking: *How is laughter played out in parental collaboration with refugee parents within an ECEC context, and what may the implications be, in the light of social and cultural sustainability?*

Laughter as communication

Communication involves processes of meaning-making (Dahl, 2013), and can be defined as "a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior" ("Communication", 2022). Communication is affected by the involved individuals' *cultural filters*, described as subjective, culturally influenced frames of understanding (Dahl, 2013). These aspects of communication will necessarily be in play when parents and practitioners meet in daily interaction.

Anything can be seen as communication (Bateson, 1972), therefore it would be impossible *not* to communicate. This point of view implies that communication will occur even in instances where the parties do not intend, or are unaware of, the clues being sent and interpreted. Nonverbal communication constitutes important parts of interpersonal communication processes that have received little attention by scholars (Burgoon, 1994). Focusing on this aspect of parental collaboration will open up to new perspectives that might impact both practicalities and ethics regarding the professional role of ECEC practitioners.

This article focuses on how laughter plays out in daily interaction between ECEC practitioners and refugee parents. Laughter can be categorised as one type of paralinguistics, which constitutes one kind of nonverbal communication (Burgoon, 1994). However, laughter is frequently closely connected to a verbal message, which often makes it reasonable to understand laughter as a part of verbal communication (Trouvain, 2014). Although laughter is connected to physiological reflexes, it also occurs in more intentional manners, which can be said to be the case with *speech-laugh*, where laughter occurs simultaneously with articulated speech, or *smiled speech*, which involves vocal messages delivered with a smile (Trouvain, 2014). The way laughter is played out in interaction between parents and ECEC practitioners, will likely affect the interpretation of the other part's intention.

Laughter is often perceived as a way of expressing joy, amusement and well-being, and involves both physiological, psychological and social processes (Glenn, 2003; Trouvain, 2014). It is "strongly social, in that its occurrence, form, and meaning are shaped deeply by the presence of others, roles, relationships, activities, and other contextual features"

(Glenn, 2003, p. 32). Laughter might function as a means of establishing and nurturing social connections, build a sense of belonging and ease interpersonal tensions (Glenn, 2003; Trouvain, 2014). However, laughter may also occur when negative emotions, such as nervousness or maliciousness, are involved (Trouvain, 2014), when one feels superior to another individual, or when one is surprised by an unthinkable response out of place for its situation (Glenn, 2003). Laughter may even be used as a coping mechanism when individuals face unpleasant situations (Keyton & Beck, 2010; Ladegaard, 2013; Sanders, 2004). In professional conversations, research finds that laughter often occurs without being connected to something explicitly "funny" in the situation or communication (Foot & McCreaddie, 2006; Glenn, 2003).

Based on the laughter's functions, one might distinguish between different types of laughter (Foot & McCreaddie, 2006). Some of these can be considered relevant for laughter in parental collaboration: *social laughter* is described as a way of expressing friendship or social acknowledgment. *Embarrassment laughter* seems to be a way of hiding one's feelings, or express insecurities regarding the other part's intentions. *Apologetic laughter* often occurs when the professional has to deliver "bad news" (Foot & McCreaddie, 2006). A study of laughter in parent–teacher conferences in Finnish ECEC practices revealed a high amount of laughter episodes, which led to an analysis with a main categorisation dividing the results into *shared laughter* and *solo laughter*, based on who initiated and participated in the laughter episodes (Alasuutari, 2009). Shared laughter between the parent and the practitioner occurred in more than half of the laughter episodes. According to this research, shared laughter constructed settings for "negotiating potential interactional problems and produced affiliation, alignment and also intimacy between the parent and the practitioner" (Alasuutari, 2009, p. 115). In these situations, the cooperators seemed to position each other mutually as owners of knowledge regarding the child. Shared laughter could also be an indicator of the sensitivity of a topic (Alasuutari, 2009). Solo laughter occurred in more than a third of the laughter episodes, where the parent was the one to laugh alone in most of the solo laughter episodes (Alasuutari, 2009). These episodes often included descriptions of the child or the parenting that deviated from the norm, where laughter on the parent's side was not reciprocated with laughter by the practitioner. Other episodes tended to involve parental resistance, where the parent's statements did not seem to fit the descriptions or opinions of the practitioner (Alasuutari, 2009). Solo laughter by practitioners, though rarely occurring, was seen when the practitioner seemed to allay parents' worries, or when the discussed topic was related to family life or parenting (Alasuutari, 2009).

The presented research and theories regarding communication and laughter will in this article be seen in relation to the overreaching question of how to promote socially and culturally sustainable ECEC practices operationalised in parental collaboration with refugee parents.

Sustainable parental collaboration

The United Nations' 16th Sustainable Development Goal revolves around promoting inclusive institutions (United Nations, n.d.), a concept that is related to *social and cultural sustainability* (Grindheim et al., 2019). Social sustainability can be understood as "the preservation and development of stable societies with social justice, equal rights, citizenship, participation, well-being, health, education, and safety for all people in the community" (Bergan et al., 2021, p. 2). Participation, participatory decision-making and agency are regarded as central aspects of social and cultural sustainability (Grindheim & Grindheim, 2021). These can also be considered as core elements of parental collaboration where parents are being included as equal partners.

Cultural aspects of sustainability are often included in the understanding of social sustainability. In this symbiosis, cultural sustainability refers to identification of the different roles culture might play in sustainability (Bergan et al., 2021). Social and cultural sustainability are essential elements within the ECEC context, where one seeks to establish and maintain multicultural communities that are just and inclusive (Boldermo & Ødegaard, 2019). Welcoming refugee parents into the hallway, the parents meeting or the ECEC practice per se, involves processes that bear the potential of communicating inclusion or exclusion of the contribution of these parents. Exploring how laughter plays out in everyday interactions sheds light onto how this "innocent" form of communicating might play a role in establishing the terms of sustainability within the ECEC context.

Social sustainability could conceivably be connected to the notion of *belonging* (Johansson & Rosell, 2021), a concept that includes psychological and individual experiences of feeling at home, involving processes of sharing cultures and values with other individuals, materials and places (Eek-Karlson & Emilson, 2021; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Building on the theory about the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006), one might raise the question of who is on the "inside" and the "outside" of a particular community, in the sense of who is considered "a stranger," and therefore does not belong within the society (Johansson & Rosell, 2021). In this article, I explore how laughter in the parental collaboration might influence refugee parents' sense of belonging and their experience of being regarded an "insider" or "outsider" within the ECEC community.

Belonging, however, must not merely be interpreted as an individual feeling, but should, according to Yuval-Davis, be understood in relation to structures and power relations in society (Eek-Karlson & Emilson, 2021; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Belonging entails an ongoing process that includes constant negotiations in different times and contexts (Stratigos et al., 2014). The occurrence of laughter may in this regard be connected to processes of implicit negotiations that involves soft power aspects as to whom is included as "worthy" participants in an ECEC context.

Several issues seem to challenge the collaboration between ECEC practitioners and minority parents. Time, outdoor activity, sexuality and gender identity appear to represent some difficulties (Eek-Karlson & Emilson, 2021) that can at least partly be explained by cultural frames of reference. There is reason to stress the significance of what ECEC practitioners require from minority parents in order to "earn" the "right" to belong (Eek-Karlson & Emilson, 2021). Variables such as sex, race, class, age, etc. might be implicitly or explicitly used in order to position parents and children on the inside or outside of the *borders* of the ECEC practice, leading to categorisations of "us" and "them" (Eek-Karlson & Emilson, 2021; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Communication sequences involving laughter will in this article be elaborated in order to explore possible experiences of being placed on either side of the borders of one particular ECEC practice.

Methodology

The article builds upon empirical data retrieved from a case study within the research project at the University of Agder called "Refugee children's encounters with kindergartens and local communities."[3] The project highlights ECEC practices as one of the first institutions that refugee families encounter when they cross the Norwegian borders. This article is based on a particular part of the research project that focuses on parental collaboration.

Method and research design

This is a qualitative study, which seeks to explore phenomena in depth (Creswell, 2014; Ringdal, 2013). Focusing on individuals' everyday actions within their natural context (Postholm, 2010), and emphasising proximity and observation of a few objects (Ringdal, 2013), the characteristics of qualitative research was considered well suited for my study of daily interaction in an ECEC setting. This method was chosen in order to retrieve rich information about the phenomenon being studied and to be able to provide thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973).

I have labelled the study a small case study, which involves explorations of systems bound by time and place (Postholm, 2010). The narrow focus on parental collaboration in one ECEC practice, involving few practitioners, implies that the study can be labelled a *unique case study* (Ringdal, 2013). The goal of a unique case study is to focus on the particular rather than the general (Stake, cited in Ringdal, 2013, p. 171), which resonates well with a study that explores laughter in communication involving few participants.

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Selection and data collection

The particular ECEC practice was selected due to the high amount of refugee families they collaborated with, which indicates a purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2014). This would allow me to observe many communication situations involving the parent group of interest. I contacted the head of the ECEC practice, who in her turn approached practitioners with the question of possible involvement in the study. I had a consent to observe all the practitioners in their interactions with parents, but due to practical aspects, I ended up observing one of the practitioners more than the others. She also showed a lot of interest in talking to me during my days at the ECEC practice. Three of the four sequences analysed in the article involve this practitioner.

Field observation, a common qualitative method (Creswell, 2014; Ringdal, 2013), was considered suitable for the aim of gaining insight into the interpersonal interaction between ECEC practitioners and parents. Observing everyday interactions between parents and practitioners allowed me to gain insight into cultural norms and patterns related to this specific context (Postholm, 2010). I took on the role of the nonparticipant observer (Creswell, 2014), with some exceptions when it felt unnatural to not greet parents with a "hi" or a smile.

Case studies typically involve a variety of data collecting techniques and represents an eclectic approach (Postholm, 2010). The data material concerning parental collaboration involving refugee parents consists of different types of data. However, six days of observations in the hallway during the times when the children were delivered and picked up, and one observation prior to a parents meeting, constitute the empirical foundation for this specific article. These situations allowed me to witness interaction between parents and ECEC practitioners during informal parental collaboration. The data were collected during a period of five months. The four sequences presented and analysed in this article include one situation that occurred prior to the parents meeting, two episodes observed in the hallway, and one episode described by a practitioner during one of the informal conversations.

The analysis process

The process of analysis is not restricted to the systematic retrieving of data following the period of observation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1996; Postholm, 2010). The ongoing process of both induction and deduction implies a continual interaction between the researcher's personal and theoretical preconceptions and the observed situations. This allows for a steadily narrower scope in which the researcher frames in the area of focus. At the same time the researcher must be open towards new concepts occurring in the empirical data (Postholm, 2010).

In preparation for the structured analysis following the data collecting, I collected handwritten notes from the observations in Microsoft Word documents. The field notes

were first written chronologically. I then structured the texts in tables through a process of open coding, where phenomena appearing in the data were labelled and categorised (Postholm, 2010). I constantly asked myself: "What is the essence here?," in a process of descriptive coding, resulting in codes such as "Food," "Language," and "Humour and laughter." The process was mainly inductive, in the sense that no codes were preplanned, but rather stood out from the data as it was read. The use of humour and laughter appeared frequently in the data material from the observations. These findings corresponded with my main impression after collecting the data.

Based on the findings of humour and laughter as one of the phenomena that stood out in the data material, I chose to explore the category "Humour and laughter" more in depth. I therefore collected the sequences related to this label and went from a surface level thematic labelling to more comprehensive interpretations of these extracts. For instance, in the case of "the stressed-out father," I went from a surface labelling regarding laughter involving a whole family, to a deeper and more analytic description of the shared laughter and its implications. Some of the observed episodes involved both humour and laughter, others mainly laughter. I was unsure whether to give the aspect of humour more attention in the article. I concluded that laughter was the element that was consistent across the episodes, and chose to keep laughter as the main focus of my analysis, notwithstanding that humour undeniably played a part in several of the instances.

Some of the sequences involving humour and laughter were rather similar to each other, such as different episodes where practitioner and parents laughed together, while other sequences seemed more unique. Such was the case with a situation that occurred right after the parents meeting, where the practitioners had done something amusing with the parents' shoes, and I heard laughter coming from the hallway. As I did not observe the situation myself nor ask the practitioners about this afterwards, I would not be able to justify involving this sequence in my analysis, even though it certainly was a unique incident, and I found it quite intriguing that the ECEC practitioners somehow "pranked" the parents. To sum up, the final four sequences were chosen for the purpose of presenting a variety of situations involving laughter, in order to highlight and discuss the different ways laughter is played out in parental collaboration with refugee parents.

Analyses are coloured by the researcher's theoretical perspectives and past experiences (Postholm, 2010). Therefore it is relevant to shortly elaborate on my subjective preconceptions of the phenomenon of laughter in parental collaboration. For several years I have participated in parental collaboration, both in the role of the parent and as a professional. Some of the parents with whom I collaborated were minority parents. Laughter as a phenomenon in communication caught my interest through everyday conversations during the last years. However, when I conducted this study, the initial aim was to explore communication in parental collaboration involving refugee parents in a broad scope. The initial

focus of this study was, as I have explained, not exclusively on laughter. I will argue that this strengthens the reliability of the study in the sense that the researcher was not originally set on one particular part of the communication. Rather, these findings stood out when the data material was analysed.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were made throughout the research process, and the research project was approved by the Norwegian centre for research data (NSD). The participants were informed that they would stay anonymous when presented in the study (Creswell, 2014). However, given the narrow focus of the study, individuals within the particular ECEC practice may recognise each other, especially the head of the ECEC practice, who is mentioned in one of the sequences. The one practitioner involved in three of the four sequences may also be recognised by colleagues who may have noticed that I followed her more than others. It is important to stress that no sensitive information is given in this regard.

Both practitioners and parents received oral and written information about the research project and their rights regarding participation (Creswell, 2014). I was especially aware of the ethics when it came to the refugee parents as representatives of a vulnerable group (Creswell, 2014), given both the language aspect and the possibility of feeling pressured to participate in order to please the practitioners. To provide clear information I informed the parents orally in a meeting, and those not in attendance received information through the practitioners. The parents were encouraged to take the informed consent form back home if they wanted to confer with their spouse or have someone translate the information. All the parents and all the staff members agreed to being observed.

The choice of singling out one particular group of parents constitutes an ethical dilemma in itself. In this article I apply the term "refugee parents" in order to clearly communicate which group of parents I include in the study. However, the term comes with connotations. Categorising a specific group of parents implies that these parents share similarities, which might underplay the fact that these parents are as unique as other parents. Applying the term "refugee parents" might even enhance prejudice towards this group, creating a divide between "us" and "them," which ironically is one of the phenomena I problematise in the article. However, I have pragmatically chosen to keep the term in order to maintain the focus of the study, while aiming at giving nuanced descriptions while analysing and discussing sequences involving these parents.

Ethical considerations were also involved in the process of analysis and the selection of the communication sequences in focus. By presenting a variety of situations involving laughter, and not just the "sensational" ones, I have aimed at conducting trustworthy and truthful research in a nuanced manner (Befring, 2002).

Analyses of communication sequences involving laughter

In this study, laughter repeatedly occurred in communication between ECEC practitioners and parents. The following sequences depict four situations involving laughter, one occurring prior to a parents meeting, and the three others taking place in the hallway. I first present analyses of the specific communication sequences separately and then follow up with a more comprehensive discussion.

The dancing practitioner

One of the laughter episodes took place shortly before a parents meeting. The sequence mainly includes one parent and one practitioner—the head of the ECEC practice—but other staff members were present as well, as some of them had come to work early to prepare for the meeting. The backdrop of the communication sequence is the fact that the head of the ECEC practice had participated as a guest at a Somali wedding in one of the families attending this ECEC practice.

> When one mother enters the meeting room this evening, she shows the head of the
> ECEC practice a video on her cellphone where the manager is dancing at the wedding.
> The mother and the manager both laugh out loud, and some other staff members join
> in watching parts of the video, laughing along.

I interpret the type of laughter occurring as shared (Alasuutari, 2009) and social (Foot & McCreaddie, 2006), which indicates symmetric interaction. This episode demonstrates how laughter might function as a means of bringing individuals together in shared moments of joy and amusement, and nurture social connections (Glenn, 2003; Trouvain, 2014). This communication sequence might therefore contribute to strengthening the relations between the mother (and the rest of the family) and the ECEC practitioner (and the rest of the staff). Episodes like this will likely lead to parents perceiving communication with the ECEC practice as pleasant and emotionally safe.

   Although the type of laughter and the situation itself indicate positive emotions and equality, this communication sequence might also entail a certain power imbalance in the mother's favour. The leader of the ECEC practice was obviously not a "natural Somali dancer," and the laughter—despite positive emotions—was on her behalf. In the light of Yuval-Davis' (2006) distinction between insiders and outsiders, the practitioner can be perceived as "the stranger" in this situation. Given that belonging is constantly negotiated and connected to other power structures in society (Eek-Karlson & Emilson, 2021; Yuval-Davis, 2006), one might argue that this moment was meaningful beyond the shared amusement. For the mother, used to being a minority in Norway, the laughter episode most likely

represents an exception. In this particular moment, while watching the video and laughing about it, the minority culture becomes the norm. Right there and then, the competencies belonging to the majority culture are not relevant, and the refugee mother gets the opportunity to interact on her own cultural terms, and at the same time introduce some elements from her culture to the staff members, who joyfully validates them.

The laughter episode involving the dancing practitioner gives a clear example of how recognition of cultural aspects plays a role in achieving sustainability (Bergan et al., 2021) and should be considered crucial when aiming at establishing and maintaining inclusive ECEC practices (Boldermo & Ødegaard, 2019).

The stressed-out father

The second laughter episode occurred one morning in the hallway. It includes a family and one ECEC practitioner. In this ECEC practice, many of the refugee parents attended school. Being quick when delivering the children could often be a prerequisite for the parents getting to class in time.

> A family enters the building to deliver the youngest children. The father rushes the children to hurry up. The oldest child, a young schoolboy, sighs, frustrated, but smiling: "Dad, calm down!" The whole family, along with the practitioner standing nearby, all burst into laughter. Following up, the father jokes about how he is always so stressed-out.

This episode gives an example of laughter occurring without something "funny" happening prior to it (Foot & McCreaddie, 2006; Glenn, 2003). What is perceived as amusing seem to be the accurate comment coming from the big brother, perhaps also the surprise element of the utterance (Glenn, 2003). As found by Glenn (2003) and Trouvain (2014), laughter may occur in situations involving negative emotions. In this case, a situation initially characterised by seriousness and annoyance, soon turns into an atmosphere of smiles and laughter. The comment of the older brother is the origin of this change, and laughter seems to ease the tension in this situation.

The laughter of this communication sequence is shared (Alasuutari, 2009) among both the family members and the practitioner. Though the situation could potentially imply apologetic or embarrassment laughter, I interpret the laughter as purely social (Foot & McCreaddie, 2006). It is quite possible that the laughter eased the tension not only within the family, but also on the side of the practitioner, had she been frustrated about stressful delivering routines.

Parents, children, and practitioners laughing together involves social processes that might strengthen the relationships between the individuals and lead to a sense of companionship (Glenn, 2003; Trouvain, 2014). Hence, something as "superficial" as laughter may

in fact contribute to fulfilling the commitment of the Kindergarten Act regarding equal partnership with parents (2005, Section 1). I will argue that this laughter episode sheds light onto how laughter at times can function as a way of diminishing inequality in roles, status and power. In joint laughter everyone involved are equal participants, and in regards to power negotiations, there seems to exist a common understanding of symmetric distribution in these particular situations. Within an inside/outside distinction (Yuval-Davis, 2006), there is no doubt that all the individuals are "insiders" and not "strangers" in the sequence involving the big brother.

Social sustainability is by Bergan et al. (2021, p. 2) defined as "the preservation and development of stable societies with social justice, equal rights, citizenship, participation, well-being, health, education, and safety for all people in the community." I will assume that at least within three of these aspects—participation, well-being and health—one will benefit from social laughter between refugee parents and ECEC practitioners. However, although laughter may likely lead to stronger relations between refugee parents and practitioners, a good relationship may also be a prerequisite for allowing parents (and practitioners) to feel emotionally secure to engage in shared laughter. The practitioner told me that she could not have laughed along with the family like that had she not known them as well as she did, and the spontaneous laughter on her part as well as the family's part indicated that they all felt close enough to be sure that the other part would appreciate a shared moment of laughter.

The "old woman"

The previous communication sequences have demonstrated how laughter can function as a good addition to parental collaboration involving refugee parents. At other times, however, laughter may lead to less positive outcomes. The following episode was described by an ECEC practitioner:

> A young father enters the hallway, and the practitioner says with a smile in her voice: "Good morning, young man!" Shortly after, a mother, somewhat older than him, opens the door and joins them in the hallway. The practitioner laughingly follows up: "What should I say to you? Good morning, old woman?" The mother initially does not seem to understand the greeting, but then starts to laugh along with the practitioner.

In this sequence, the laughter starts as a solo laughter (Alasuutari, 2009) coming from the practitioner, but the mother eventually joins in. This may be interpreted as a way of fulfilling what the mother believes is expected from her in that particular situation. As Trouvain (2014) points out, laughter might occur when one part is feeling nervous. This communication sequence was recounted to me by the practitioner, hence I did not hear the laughter myself. However, in the way the sequence has been described by the practitioner, I assume

that embarrassment laughter was involved, which regards insecurities towards the other part's intentions (Foot & McCreaddie, 2006).

The ECEC practitioner clearly had the best intentions regarding how to greet both the parents. While the father was met in a way he liked and understood, the attempt at connecting with and greeting the mother did not appear to work quite as intended. Instead, the mother seemed to be confused and perhaps also insulted. This apparent mismatch might be understood in terms of cultural frames of references regarding humour, the mother's Norwegian language skills, or the fact that the mother might not have heard the first comment, leading up to the next. Regardless of which information was available to the mother, either due to cultural, language-related or practical reasons, laughter was clearly not the way to connect with the parent in this scenario. In this particular moment one might argue that laughter implies a risk of creating a divide between the mother and the practitioner, potentially increasing the sense of distance between "us" and "them" (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

I have described communication as a process of creating meaning (Dahl, 2013), and the applied definition claims communication to be "a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior" ("Communication", 2022). There is reason to question whether the interaction between the mother and the practitioner during the described sequence involves a common system of symbols, signs, and behaviour. As each individual interprets each other's verbal and non-verbal actions through the lens of one's own cultural filter (Dahl, 2013), there will be a risk of not "hitting home" with the use of humour. The sense of belonging is connected to the experience of feeling at home and involves sharing of cultures and values (Eek-Karlson & Emilson, 2021; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Hence, practitioners might want to reflect upon when, how, and with whom one uses humour and laughter as a part of the parental collaboration. The sequence with the "old woman" highlights how the best intentions sometimes are not sufficient, and why cultural and interpersonal sensitivity is needed.

The mother with the dialect

The last laughter episode analysed in this article occurred in the hallway, towards the end of a longer conversation between a mother and an ECEC practitioner, containing small anecdotes from the child's life in the ECEC practice, as well as some serious issues regarding the family's living situation, where the mother was given emotional support by the practitioner.

> Suddenly the practitioner exclaims: "You are starting to get the [local] dialect!" The mother replies smilingly, but slightly annoyed: "I have lived here for six years!" The practitioner laughingly answers: "Yeah, that's right!"

In this sequence, the mother initially talks in a way that Trouvain (2014) would call smiled speech, then laughs a solo laughter (Alasuutari, 2009). I would interpret the mother's laughter as an apologetic laughter (Foot & McCreaddie, 2006), a way of making her message slightly more bearable as she indirectly contradicts the practitioner. The laughter of the mother is followed by a solo laughter from the practitioner while she is speaking, a so-called speech-laugh (Trouvain, 2014). This laugh might be perceived as embarrassment laughter (Foot & McCreaddie, 2006), as she realises that the compliment, despite her good intentions, did not sit well with the mother. In this sequence, laughter seems to cover up disagreement and make the conversation more vague and less threatening.

During the time of the episode, the mother and the practitioner are not laughing together. The conversation that shortly before seemed warm, suddenly becomes somewhat strained. What was meant as a compliment surely did not feel like that to the mother, who clearly thought that her level of language skills would be expected after several years of living in Norway. I understand the mother's response as a reaction to what she might consider an undermining of her belongingness, a categorisation of her as an individual "outside the borders" (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Yuval-Davis (2006) points to institutional and societal structures in the understanding of how relational and communicative phenomena impact individuals' terms of participation. Hence, discriminatory communication or behaviour regarding refugee parents does not only concern the individuals involved, but also the norms, values and practices that constitute the particular ECEC practice, and the expectations and boundaries reflected in the Norwegian society. The constant negotiations of belonging (Stratigos et al., 2014) will include both implicit and explicit communication regarding these boundaries of "us" and "them." The case with the young mother being complimented on her language skills can be interpreted as a kind of negotiation. Covered over with laughter, the parent and the practitioner implicitly discuss the mother's right to belong. Even though the situation is soon "clarified," the insecurity of being either "an insider" or "a stranger" (Johansson & Rosell, 2021) might stick with the mother for a while and impact the way she perceives herself and her terms of participation within the ECEC practice.

ECEC practices often represent one of the first institutions refugee parents encounter in Norway. Hence, communicational signals regarding inclusion and views on equality can be considered relevant for the refugees' perceptions of how they are being welcomed in their new society overall. Simultaneously, experiences of inclusion or exclusion in other areas of the Norwegian society might blend together with the feeling of being included within the ECEC context. Therefore, exploring the ways laughter is played out as a part of the parental collaboration, and discussing possible implications, is of great relevance in regards of establishing and maintaining socially and culturally sustainable practices.

Discussion

The described sequences show laughter used in different situations, with varying outcomes regarding communication and interpersonal relations. These situations show how delicate parental collaboration may be, and shed light onto how thin the line can be between appropriate and inappropriate use of laughter. I will further discuss possible implications regarding laughter in the light of social and cultural sustainability.

The importance of common ground

The analysis includes situations that all involve interpersonal communication. However, the presented definition of communication refers to symbols, signs or behaviour that are *common* ("Communication", 2022). Some of the sequences give reason to question to what degree the individuals involved share common ground. When the situation is interpreted in a similar way by both the ECEC practitioner and the parents, laughter seems to be a spice that enrichens the interpersonal communication. This strengthening of relations may be beneficial both in a short-term and a long-term perspective. However, when the interaction is interpreted differently by the communicators, laughter may create or increase asymmetric relations and possibly diminish the sense of community and belonging.

Categorising different types of laughter (Alasuutari, 2009; Foot & McCreaddie, 2006) gives insight into the ways laughter may function when applied in parental collaboration with refugee parents. Whereas the mother and the head of the ECEC practice, and the family and the ECEC practitioner, shared social laughter seemingly on the basis of a common understanding of the situation, this was certainly not the case with "the old woman" and "the mother with the dialect". Instead of laughing together, the two instances portray examples of parental collaboration where laughter is not based on a common understanding, and neither contributes to creating a common ground in the following collaboration. In the sequence with the "old woman," the practitioner clearly intended to laugh together *with* the mother, using humour and laughter as a way of sharing amusement, but when the comment was not received as expected, it is likely that the mother instead felt laughed *at*. Had she caught the joke, however, the same situation could have been an example of bonding and the strengthening of parent–practitioner relations.

When communication sequences seem to be perceived differently by the parents and the practitioners, this may at least partly be explained by the phenomenon of *cultural filters* (Dahl, 2013). Both verbal and nonverbal impressions constitute the signs we interpret in order to create meaning based on the actions of other individuals, laughter being one out of several nonverbal expressions (Burgoon, 1994). Interaction between refugee parents and ECEC practitioners involves a high amount of cues, but metacommunication is rare in these informal settings, and one might question whether there could be room for vocalising assumptions regarding each other's intentions in order to confirm or discard these. It is

important, however, to underline that Dahl (2013) does not limit the understanding of cultural filters to communication between individuals of different origin. According to Dahl (2013), any interaction between individuals involves interaction between two or more cultures. This implies that even parental collaboration regarding parents with a similar background to the ECEC practitioners will activate the cultural filters of the communicators. However, the consequences will most likely be more noticeable when the individuals do not share the same norms or values—including standards regarding humour and laughter.

Laughter influencing the sense of belonging

The shared laughter episodes, along with the attempts at making a joke and acknowledging a parent's language skills, show the good intentions behind the practitioners' communication with the refugee parents. The personal conversation leading up to "the dialect interaction" gives insight into an ECEC practice where the professionals clearly are engaged in the parents' and families' well-being. The fact that the head of the practice even participated in a wedding, suggests a deeper involvement in the families' lives than what is usually expected from the professional role. It is likely to assume that these aspects influence the parents' experience of being included and their sense of belonging in relation to this ECEC practice. However, I will argue that refugee parents' sense of belonging will also be informed by verbal and nonverbal forms of communication, with the occurrence of laughter being a central element. The experience of being inside or outside of the borders (Yuval-Davis, 2006) might be felt in situations like the ones described in this article. The sequence involving the dancing practitioner, and the episode with the laughing family, despite major differences in types of situation, are episodes that can be interpreted as communication contributing to diminish categorisations of "us" and "them" (Yuval-Davis, 2006). As a core element of belonging is feeling "at home" (Yuval-Davis, 2006), laughter episodes involving shared (Alasuutari, 2009), social (Foot & McCreaddie, 2006) laughter based on common ground, will likely strengthen the refugee parents' experience of belonging.

Another central element to the concept of belonging is the sharing of cultures and values (Eek-Karlson & Emilson, 2021; Yuval-Davis, 2006). The staff of the ECEC practice were very open to including elements from the families' home of origin, such as songs, fairy tales, and so on. However, there seems to exist a potential for ECEC practitioners to improve refugee parents' sense of belonging by showing an interest not only in the more "obvious" elements of the families' cultures, but also in the ways parents communicate and interpret different types of interaction, such as laughter, which is often rooted in cultural norms and patterns. These more implicit ways of communicating might never be reflected upon by the practitioners, neither individually nor among colleagues, and one's own way of communicating and interpreting verbal and nonverbal behaviour might become the "standard." In order to achieve the goal of sustainable ECEC practices, practitioners should reflect upon and communicate with refugee parents about these aspects of the parental

collaboration, as it includes the recognition of the role of culture within sustainability (Bergan et al., 2021).

Sustainability through equal participation

Despite the ideal of equal partnership between practitioners and parents (Kindergarten Act, 2005, Section 1), communication with minority parents seems to be characterised by more asymmetric dialogue than collaboration with majority parents (Solberg, 2018). This will likely affect the ability to achieve the ECEC practices' obligation to facilitate good dialogue with parents and take their views into consideration (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). Participation, inclusion, and equal rights are some of the core elements describing the essence of social and cultural sustainability (Bergan et al., 2021; Grindheim et al., 2019; Grindheim & Grindheim, 2021). Thus, welcoming refugee parents' active participation in the ECEC context is essential when aiming at reaching the 16th Sustainable Development Goal *Peace, justice and strong institutions* (United Nations, n.d.). This goal clearly points to the need for institutions to build on a foundation of democratic principles.

Laughter ostensibly appears to be a trivial aspect to human communication, but the empirical ground of this article suggests that laughter may play a part in the inclusion of refugee parents in ECEC practices. Through smiles, laughter, or jokes, practitioners might influence refugee parents' experience of being valued or devalued as partners in the collaboration. For social and cultural sustainability to be achieved, refugee parents, like other parents, must be included as equal participants in the ECEC community. Working towards this goal is made easier when the cooperating parties make an effort to understand and acknowledge each other's positions. Failing to acknowledge cultural aspects of communication might reduce refugee parents' terms of participation and inclusion. As Boldermo and Ødegaard (2019) state, social and cultural sustainability are important ideals in order to be able to create just and inclusive ECEC communities within a multicultural society.

Conclusion

The article aimed to answer the research question: *How is laughter played out in parental collaboration with refugee parents within an ECEC context, and what may the implications be, in the light of social and cultural sustainability?* The question has been explored from a perspective where laughter is seen as one of several crucial communicational aspects in collaboration between ECEC practitioners and refugee parents. The sustainability goal of *Peace, justice and strong institutions* (United Nations, n.d.) have guided the article, perceiving equality and parental participation within ECEC communities as a way of accomplishing just and inclusive institutions.

The headline of this article promised to give insight into the pitfalls and possibilities of laughter in parental collaboration involving refugee parents. I have analysed and elaborated on some situations regarding this topic. As some of the described episodes highlight how laughter may cause a divide between practitioners and refugee parents, others show that laughter sometimes creates unique situations that contribute to strengthen relations between the home and the ECEC practice. Laughter may release the tension of difficult situations and create new possibilities of understanding and cooperation.

This study emphasises the delicacy of laughter and the need to use "the power of laughter" with caution in parental collaboration involving refugee parents. Practitioners risk creating a distance between them and the parents, leading to a sense of "us" and "them" if laughter is not applied wisely to the communication. Good intentions are not sufficient when communicating in the professional role of an ECEC practitioner. Individual or collective professional reflection, or metacommunication with parents regarding these communicational aspects, could open up to other understandings on how laughter might be used and perceived.

The findings in this article are limited in the sense that three out of the four analysed sequences involve only one of the ECEC practitioners. Hence, one may hardly conclude that the selection represents this ECEC practice per se. These episodes are, however, suited for highlighting some of the ways laughter is included in daily interactions with refugee parents. Awareness regarding the phenomenon of laughter may compel professionals to reflect on how it plays a part in the wider picture of communication and parental collaboration. I suggest that further research on the topic should be conducted more systematically, preferably using video recordings in order to capture both verbal and nonverbal communication between parents and practitioners. In addition to more comprehensive research, a comparative Nordic or international study might also shed light on possible similarities and varieties across borders, and provide insight into the ways laughter plays a part in parental collaboration within different cultures and communities.

Some might argue that highlighting parental collaboration involving refugee parents, could lead to a sort of "othering" (Dahl, 2013). A study regarding parents in general might very well find some of the same phenomena. However, research that indicates insecurities or inequalities regarding communication with minority parents (Gjervan & Svolsbru, 2013; Sand, 2014; Solberg, 2018; Sønsthagen, 2020), shows the need for raising awareness when it comes to this particular topic. Given the cultural component to laughter, ECEC practitioners should take this aspect into account when communicating with refugee parents.

The ECEC institutions' obligation to facilitate parental participation (Kindergarten Act, 2005, Section 1) may fall short if cultural frames of reference (Dahl, 2013) are not considered. By recognising this aspect in parental collaboration involving refugee parents, and acknowledging different forms of meaning making, professionals may contribute to broaden the terms of participation. Working towards social and cultural sustainability in

ECEC practices will not only facilitate parental collaboration characterised by equality, but also contribute to accomplishing the 16th Sustainable Development Goal *Peace, justice and strong institutions* (United Nations, n.d.).

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