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# The Diverse Subjects of Early Childhood Parenting Education

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## 1    Disentangling Diversity & Difference

In recent decades, "diversity" has become a central concept in numerous areas of society and academia. Discussions surrounding the term usually focus on the recognition of differences in the social sphere, in the biological sphere and between bodies (Bührmann, 2020, pp. 34-38). This focus relates to questions of inclusion and exclusion, standardization and normalization as well as representation and anti-discrimination.

In socio-political, socio-economic, educational and socio-scientific discussions, diversity is usually discussed in relation to a specific context: organizations and institutions. The focus is on the organizational implementation and administration of diversity management, diversity policies, diversity practices and diversity workers (Villeséche et al.; 2018; Ahmed, 2012). On the one hand, diversity refers to personnel-related practices and management, i.e., workforces. On the other hand, the debate extends to the addressees of certain organizations, such as customers, students or clients, shifting focus to the organizational mission.

Bührmann (2020) categorizes diversity research in the social sciences into two perspectives: a positivist-functionalist approach and a critical approach to diversity (pp. 38-46).

In positivist-functionalist approaches, diversity is described as an objectively given fact and as a bundle of personal characteristics (Bührmann, 2020, p. 40). The focus here is on the conceptualization of diversity management. Villeséche et al. (2018) describe the historical development of diversity management as a shift from a focus on social injustice, which manifests itself in debates about discrimination, equality, group-based differentiation and inequalities within groups, to a focus on individual characteristics, which is based on economic rationality (p. 14). In such a perspective, social differences are perceived as resources and instrumentalized for economic purposes (Bührmann, 2020, p. 107).

Critical approaches draw on the principles of critical theory or post-structuralist thinking (see chapter 2). They are based on the premise that diversity and difference are not simply ontologically given to be identified, managed and utilized, but are socially produced in the first place. Diversity is understood in terms of social processes of differentiation. These processes are embedded in the structural context of society as a whole, beyond the organizational framework (Bührmann, 2020; Villeséche et al., 2018; Formanek, 2016; Kelly et al., 2020; Jones, 2004; Ahmed & Swan, 2006; Ahmed, 2012; Ahonen et al., 2014).

Both positivist-functionalist and critical approaches regard diversity as a phenomenon to be addressed in the context of social practice. The term is used to define organizational social and educational missions and practices (Ahmed & Swan, 2006, p. 96). With regard to their practical relevance, both approaches are linked to normative strategies that involve either transforming social differences from a vertical, hierarchical structure to a horizontal,

egalitarian stance, or conceptualizing diversity as a political practice for the empowerment of marginalized groups, or focusing on the deconstruction of social differences (Tischhauser, 2023, pp. 11-24). In this context, a dilemma arises between the reproduction of social differences through their designation on one hand, and a critical view of the powerful effects of social differences on the other (Tischhauser, 2023, p. 13). Accordingly, critical approaches underscore the need to shift focus away from specific categories of difference towards empirical analysis of power relations and the processes of social differentiation (Bührmann, 2020: p. 12; Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012, p. 189). Further, the inherent normativity of critical perspectives themselves is emphasized, and there is a focus on the question of which norms are confirmed or challenged by the critique of differentiation processes (Arbeitsgruppe Inter Kultur, 2010, p. 22).

## 2 Differentiation in Social Work & Early Childhood Education

Mecheril and Melter (2010) characterize differentiation practices as a fundamental logic within social work that continually distinguishes between groups to determine eligibility for support (p. 117) and highlight the profession's dual role in enabling inclusion and exercising disciplinary power (p. 128). Against the background of this logic of differentiation, the addressees of social work are defined and selected (Mecheril & Melter, 2010, p. 119). Relevant points of reference include the attribution of 'migration experiences' and culture (Mecheril & Melter, 2010, p. 127). In this context, Eppenstein (2010) identifies a paradigm shift from homogenization or normalization towards supporting cultural 'others' in their 'otherness' (p. 96). Heite (2008) delineates a shift from 'inequality' to 'difference', and then to 'diversity', noting that the concept of diversity often entails an affirmative stance towards presumed differences, including those related to culture (pp. 77-78). In light of this, Georgi & Karakaşoğlu (2021) caution against allowing a focus on an attributed 'migration background' to obscure other important dimensions of inequality (pp. 11-12). Furthermore, Formanek (2016) underscores the importance of critical diversity research and the need for social work practices to engage thoughtfully with cultural attributions, thoroughly examining these processes and their societal implications (p. 23).

A closer look at the field of family education in Germany reveals that in this field, there is also a noticeable shift towards a greater focus on diversity. This shift has led to a more nuanced differentiation of its target group, taking into account factors such as migration background and cultural identity. At the same time, an activation of parental responsibility, a shift in public intervention, an expansion of educational support for parents and families with a special focus on early childhood, and a focus on educational and parental competences can be observed in this field (Fegter et al., 2015; Jergus et al., 2018; Oelkers, 2018). In a study on the relationship between parents and childcare centers, Özlem & Otyakmaz (2021) observe a general devaluation of migrant parents and their ideas about early childhood education. Criticism is also directed at ethnocentric quality models in early childhood education (Lengyel & Braband, 2021). Based on a discourse analysis of government policy documents, Betz and Bischoff (2018) show that parenting skills are politically defined as deficient in particular when parents are ascribed a low socio-economic status, a low level of education, single parenthood, a migration background, a cultural difference or a lack of German language skills (pp. 39-40). The effect of these differentiations is exemplified in interviews with childcare workers, in which nationality, culture and poverty are presented as partially interchangeable and problematized categories (Betz & Bischoff, 2018, p. 40).

In her analysis for the Ninth German Family Report, Fischer (2021) emphasizes the role of 'bridge persons' in family education with migrantified[1] parents – an expression already implying differences that need to be bridged. The required skills of 'bridge persons' are identified as bilingualism, an awareness of the heterogeneity of the target group, knowledge of the addressees' living situation and family culture, understanding of the education system as well as empathy and discretion (Fischer, 2021, p. 157). Considering this concept of bridge-builders, Heite (2008) addresses the problematic positioning of migrantified professionals in social work as 'native informants'. This positioning implies that the professional's migration experiences and cultural affiliations provide better access to certain target groups (Heite, 2008, pp. 84-86). Such positioning, however, tends to depreciate their professional competence and reduce it to merely ethnic or cultural affiliations, whereby migrantified social workers are apt to be viewed as tools for reaching specific target groups (Heite, 2008, pp. 84-86). Heite argues that this positioning constructs 'professional others' as 'representatives of others', potentially devaluing their professional identity and skills (Heite, 2008, p. 85). This discussion resonates with broader analyses of the nuanced positioning of diversity practitioners, albeit in different settings such as educational institutions (Ahmed, 2012). Such examinations reveal that within the framework of diversity and difference in social work, the construction of identities extends beyond the recipients of services to include the professionals themselves on the provider side, highlighting the complex interplay of positionings and differentiations within the field.

This outline of the current German research landscape relevant to diversity and early childhood parenting education reveals that the focus is either on evaluative studies (Fischer, 2021) or on studies critically engaging with positioning processes. However, these studies often concentrate on either the positioning of parents (Betz & Bischoff, 2018; Özlem & Otyakmaz, 2021) or the positioning of professionals (Heite, 2008), rather than examining these positionings in a relational, interactive context.

## 3    Analyzing Diversity: Conceptualizing Recognition beyond Affirmation

As hinted at in the previous chapter, this article adopts a critical perspective on diversity. These approaches can be divided into those based on critical theory and those based on post-structuralist theory. Without delving into the broad debate as to what similarities or differences exist between these two theoretical positions (with regard to diversity see Villesèche et al., 2018), the article alludes to post-structuralist considerations.

Post-structuralist approaches emphasize the fluidity of identities and the social construction of categories. Identity and diversity are addressed here as a constant process of becoming. The focus is on the relationship between power and identity formation (Villesèche et al., 2018). Social differentiations are understood as having both symbolic and material effects, i.e., they structure and constitute experiences while normalizing and subjectifying individuals (Mecheril, 2008, para. 6). Mecheril (2008) notes that incorporating the notion of subject positions into the analysis of power dynamics is essential for a fuller understanding of how identities and relationships are dynamically shaped within the context of diversity (para. 4). This article builds on these considerations but extends them to considerations on recognition

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[1] The term 'migrantified' refers to social processes of 'migrantification,' where subjects are positioned as migrants (see, e.g., Forkert et al., 2020, pp. 146-148). Within the framework of recognition theory and differentiation, this term indicates that in certain contexts, specific subjects are recognized as migrants, while others are not.

theory and addressing analysis formulated by Ricken (2013) and collaboratively by Rose and Ricken (2018), as this extension situates identities and relationships in interactive processes and clarifies the underlying structure of these interactions.

Subject positions include discursively constructed subject conceptions and identities, which are accompanied by "interpretive schemes, frames, storylines and dispositifs" (Bosančić, 2019, p. 93) – they constitute belonging and therefore differentiate, normalize, stereotype and thus include or exclude. Following Butler's framework, normative subject positions are constituted in acts of recognition, which according to Ricken can be operationalized as addressings and re-addressings (Ricken, 2013, pp. 92-94). This assumption builds on Butler's (1997) reflections on subject formation through interpellations, i.e., the process of addressing someone as someone, whereby this person becomes someone in the first place. Rose and Ricken (2018) extend this idea by conceptualizing addressings not only as specific interpellations based on broad social categories, such as 'citizen' or 'girl', but as a fundamental structure of interaction and communication. Acts of communication or interaction are understood as implicitly or explicitly directed towards one or more recipients (p. 166). According to Rose and Ricken (2018), addressings (1) select by choosing someone as addressee, whereby a differentiation is made from those who are not addressed; (2) normalize by (re-)constructing and legitimizing situational orders or frameworks; (3) position and relate by assigning positions and placing them in relation to each other; and (4) valuate by explicitly and implicitly linking (re-)addressings to value attributions (p. 168). Ricken (2013) points out that the valuation inherent in (re-)addressings encompasses more than mere positive or negative judgments, extending to intricate assessments like the evaluation of development potential and the consideration of varied temporal perspectives (p. 96). This approach opens up a broader perspective on recognition processes, as it proposes an analytical consideration of the variety of possible valuations instead of prematurely categorizing them in normative terms.

Recognition, conceptualized as (re-)addressing, is not normative. Recognition is not seen as a positive affirmation, but also includes non-recognition or disregard (Ricken, 2013, p. 96). Recognition refers to the process in which specific identities and roles are not only ascribed to individuals in specific situations but are also constructed in differentiation from others. A subject position is constructed in relation to other subject positions or self-related to past subject positions (Ricken, 2009, as cited in Alkemeyer & Pille, n.d., p. 10). Recognition, conceptualized as (re-)addressing, thus implies differentiation and goes beyond reproduction by also focusing transformation. This process is linked to norms of recognizability, i.e., overarching, often implicit rules and standards that define which behaviors, characteristics or identities are considered worthy of recognition in a certain social context and thus structure the possibility of recognition, both positive and negative, and the overarching criteria of difference formation (Alkemeyer & Pille, n.d., p. 10).

Individuals are inevitably exposed to addressings. They are forced to refer to certain addressings and the subject positions referenced therein – e.g., by interpretatively adopting, transforming, shifting, denying or rejecting them (Keller, 2012, p. 102; Ricken, 2013, p. 83). This means that even though subject positions are an important aspect of subjectivation, they do not coincide with identity or subjectivation, i.e., they do not determine self-positioning (Bosančić, 2019, p. 94).

Adopting a theoretical framework grounded in recognition theory and address analysis (Ricken, 2013; Rose & Ricken, 2018) facilitates an examination of diversity, in line with

Fuchs (2007), as an outcome of socio-historically variable and contextually specific social differentiations and interpretative processes (p. 17). Additionally, this approach avoids predefining specific categories of difference. By analyzing how (re-)addressings select, normalize, assign (subject) positions, relate and valuate, attention is paid to how acts of recognition within social contexts establish or consolidate hierarchical or horizontal differentiations that contribute to the constitution and maintenance of social orders and power relations beyond these settings.

Given these theoretical considerations, ethnographic approaches are particularly suitable for studying recognition and addressing practices, as they focus on identifying and reconstructing field-specific practices and how these interact to produce social order. This method allows for an open analytical focus, extending beyond material boundaries to capture discursive practices that shape power relations, norms, and knowledge orders within the field (Kuhlmann, 2023, pp. 84-85).

## 4    Data & Limitations: Early Childhood Parenting Education Provided by Parental Guides

This article draws on a study using an ethnographic approach, conducted within a regional initiative aimed at enhancing access to early childhood services in a medium-sized city in Lower Saxony, Germany. The focus is on one component of this initiative: a parenting education program that was accompanied over a four-month period. The data include: a) observational reports from various contexts, including weekly meetings of a parents' group in one district, group leaders' meetings, and project team meetings, b) three semi-structured interviews, c) ethnographic interviews, and d) documents and printed materials collected during the fieldwork.

The data were selected using theoretical sampling, allowing for the identification and exploration of emergent themes and the discovery of new contexts, subjects, and documents relevant to the research question and field. Access to the group meetings observed was fairly straightforward. In previous key informant interviews with project coordinators, the group's high participation rate, the parental guide's high level of professionalism and her 'excellent relationship work' were highlighted. The other district groups are not led by staff experienced in parenting education but by 'group leaders' who undergo training within the program to become parenting guides. This differentiation between parental guides will be further explored in chapter 5.3. Access to the other district groups (led by group leaders) was not arranged until well into the data collection and then proved unfeasible due to the COVID pandemic. As a result, the data do not cover the full range of practices in parenting education in this specific project and local context. However, given that differentiation practices in parenting education in Germany likely vary across different programs, regions, and contexts, this study provides a foundation for future comparative studies.

Against this background, it is important to emphasize that this article does not aim to evaluate the practices of a single parenting education program. Instead, the study's critical perspective aims to illustrate logics and frames of differentiation within parenting education, conceptualizing diversity not as a practice for escaping power, but as a powerful practice of recognition itself. In this context, power is primarily understood as productive, meaning it constructs, reconstructs or deconstructs subjects (Foucault, 1982, p. 781).

# 5    Findings: Becoming a Subject of Early Childhood Parenting Education

To investigate the research question of how participants become subjects of parenting education through differentiation in a specific parenting education program, this chapter is divided into four sections, focusing on the questions: (1) What differentiations are made in the selection of the target group for the parenting education program? (2) What differentiations occur in the norm formation of the program? (3) What differentiations are made between the different positions within the program, and how are they related to each other? and (4) How are differentiations within the program evaluated?

## 5.1   Differentiation and Selection

The selection process for participants in the parenting education program is characterized by a complex interplay of identity attributions. The program employs various channels to reach its target audience, among which the program flyer stands out. Distributed across public spaces such as daycare centers, neighborhood cafes, and municipal buildings, the flyer serves as a crucial initial touchpoint for prospective participants. This necessitates a deliberate communication strategy that clearly delineates the intended audience. The flyer therefore offers an insight into the practice of differentiation in the selection and definition of the target group in order to reach precisely those for whom the program is intended:

> "[program title]is a parenting education program. A trained parental guide (usually a mother herself) meets regularly with you and other mothers/parents in a group. You will be given advice and suggestions on how to support your child's development through simple games and exercises. You will also receive materials to take home from the meetings. The materials are available in Albanian, Arabic, Bulgarian, English, Farsi, French, German, Greek, Italian, Polish, Russian, Serbian/Croatian, Spanish and Turkish."

In the flyer, participants and parental guides are defined as mothers. The specific mention and prioritization of 'mothers' creates a gendered differentiation in contrast to fathers. Although the additional mention of 'parents' broadens the target audience, the emphasis on mothers as the primary recipients remains dominant. Educational advice regarding child development is mentioned as a benefit of participating in the group. Here, mothers are addressed as the primary caregivers responsible for the child's upbringing, in contrast to fathers who remain unmentioned. It is indicated that the materials are intended for use at home, thereby situating the mother's support of their child within the private family context. On one hand, mothers are addressed as 'seeking advice,' while on the other, a need for such advice is implicitly attributed to them. The use of the adjective 'simple' implies educational aids that everyone can understand, providing an initial indication of the nature of the materials and positioning mothers as potentially incapable of comprehending and implementing more complex educational advice or practices. Thus, all mothers are addressed regardless of their abilities. This is coupled with the note that the materials are available in various languages. The language range of the materials suggests an intercultural orientation. This not only implies acceptance of the language heterogeneity among the potential participants but also implicitly reflects an assumption about the necessity to specifically reach mothers who speak a language other than German. The flyer is not only available in German but also in Arabic, which specifies the origin of the potential participants, addressing them in a low-threshold manner and acknowledging possible lack of German language skills.

The flyer for the parental education program features three photographs depicting various interactive scenes: a child being assisted with reading, a child and a woman drawing together,

and a woman wearing a hijab who is smiling and lovingly embracing a boy. The pictures underscore the importance of early childhood development, mother-child interaction and bonding. Of the two women shown, one wears a braid, the other one a hijab. In the flyer's imagery, men are absent, indicating that the program is geared towards mothers. Additionally, the imagery suggests a welcoming approach towards mothers adhering to Muslim religious traditions.

At the level of the program's presentation in the flyer, its target group is constructed according to the criteria of gender, family, language, origin, and religion. These intersectional attributions not only shape the address in the flyer but also the internal positioning at the regional project and program level, with a specific culture being ascribed to the participants as well:

> "Well, you roughly know, because we work in cooperation with daycare centres, the parents who could make a good use of it, with a cultural background, I would say [laughing]. So, the parents with a cultural background, we roughly know. From the locations sometimes, also from the daycare centres. And also, the daycare directors are very, very nice and they tell us, she or her could really make use of it and she wants to learn a bit more, do a bit more […]" (Dora, parental guide).

In the quote, the target group is culturalized, and an implicit differentiation is made between people 'with a cultural background' and those without. This veils the cultural heterogeneity within society and leads to the normalization of an assumed 'majority society' devoid of culture. The term 'cultural background' thus serves to homogenize the program's target group while simultaneously segregating it from other ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) parent groups. Notably, the quote initially encompasses 'parents' broadly, but swiftly narrows to 'she', indicating a gendered differentiation and confining the address to mothers. The role of daycare centres in selecting participants for the program is emphasized in the quote, suggesting that these institutions are actively engaged in defining and selecting 'appropriate' recipients. The mention of specific locations and daycare centres underscores a deliberate selection, possibly influenced by socio-economic factors. From these multi-dimensional differentiations regarding culture, gender, and space, a need for education in ECEC is derived which, in the last sentence of the quote, is connected to the mother's willingness and motivation. The addressing of the participants as women, mothers and as culturally different is linked to fatherhood, migration and other ECEC groups of the parental guide as the interview progresses:

> "In the beginning, fathers were very welcome. I don't know it any other way. This morning I had a group and there were four fathers there, they come regularly. To the parent and child groups too. But then they [the participants] decided for themselves: no, among women we feel much more comfortable than when there are a few men. And that has to do with culture and a little bit with religion. But I respected that. If that's the case, then of course we can have mothers only meetings. But some fathers have asked. So, I said they were very welcome to come. But I don't think it would have helped much anyway, because of language courses and training opportunities men have to leave much, much sooner than the women, than the mothers. And so, they wouldn't have found the time for something like that" (Dora, parental guide).

Referring to her own experiences, the parental guide describes the participation of fathers as normal, thereby differentiating the parenting education group from other ECEC groups she leads. The parental guide refers to it as the participants' choice to feel more comfortable

without men, attributing this decision to their cultural and religious backgrounds. Further, she mentions that fathers cannot find time for such programs due to earlier integration into the labor market. Therefore, the sole participation of mothers is justified both by cultural and religion-related attributions regarding gender in the context of family life, and in relation to the structural limitations faced by migrantified fathers. This once again culturalizes being a migrant, on one hand, and places it within a specific structural context, on the other, where migrantified mothers are positioned as the primary caregivers for children through cultural and religious attributions, and migrantified fathers are marginalized by attributed structural constraints in participating in ECEC. This particularization of the target group implies a differentiation and othering in relation to an assumed majority society, where cultural and religious preferences and labor market integration supposedly do not entail gender differentiation, and where fathers are regularly subjects of ECEC offerings. The statements that fathers were initially very welcome, and that they are welcome to drop by, with a subsequent emphasis on the structural conditions that would prevent this anyway, highlight a fundamental openness to the participation of fathers. Meanwhile, their exclusion is attributed partly to the participating mothers and partly to migration-specific structures of labor market integration. The gendered group formation is thus relativized, remains unquestioned, and is situated outside the responsibility of the local project.

In summary, the target group for the program is characterized as migrantified, multilingual mothers within a traditional gendered family structure, possibly of the Muslim faith and potentially lacking adequate ECEC skills. Thus, those not addressed include non-migrant, solely German-speaking, culturally unmarked parents, as well as migrantified fathers.

## 5.2  Differentiation and Norm Formation

The selection of the program is deeply intertwined with norm formation depicting an engaged, responsive, language sensitive mother. This norm of motherhood is updated in the interactive practice of the program. Children are present during the weekly meetings but are cared for in a separate area of the room. If a child cries, the parental guide appeals to the mother to look after it: "Look, Lale, put that aside for a moment and check what she needs" (observation report 1). If the child remains unsettled, the participant is advised to leave: "You know what, I think he's just tired. Maybe he should be put to bed" (observation report 5). The parental guide's intervention calls on the participants to take responsibility for their child's needs and to prioritize them over participation in the program, and thus positions the mother as the child's primary caregiver. The exclusion, i.e., the norm, is accepted without question and accompanied by an invitation to the next meeting, meaning the exclusion is temporary and does not jeopardize membership.

The program's materials encourage mothers to discuss topics such as "my body, clothes, seasons, day care, playing outside [...]" (Document 2) in German during group meetings and to follow up on these topics at home in their family language. This content focus underscores the expectation that mothers will deliberately support both the cognitive and emotional development of their children and will maintain family multilingualism. These expectations are adhered to in the practice of the program through the application of the educational materials. At the same time, the materials are described to me, as a researcher, as 'deficit-oriented' (observation report project meeting 2) and are placed in a context of acquiring German when working with the participants. This is particularly evident in the parental guide's use of a small blackboard, on which she notes the vocabulary while working through the materials:

"We practice a second finger game, touching different parts of the head. Dora [the parental guide] gradually draws a face on the board and writes the vocabulary next to it. Lale points out that an article is missing. Dora responds, 'Oh yes, thank you' and adds it. The women all draw a face on their materials and copy from the board" (observation report 9).

As shown in the quote, the participants are actively involved in shaping the group meetings in terms of learning German, indicating that this is their central objective. They ask questions about vocabulary and point out to the parental guide when something is missing on the board. By doing so, the participants position themselves primarily as 'strangers to the German language', which challenges their positioning as mothers with a fundamental need for ECEC impulses. However, a lack of proficiency in the German language is associated with motherhood:

"[...] it's also about the daycare parents' evenings. And ok, should I go or not? And when I go, do I understand everything, do you think? Yes, please, I say, shoulders back and head up. And first of all, you have to present yourself and stand there as a mum, and that is very important. Especially for your child it is very important, mum takes it seriously and mum is there for me, she's going" (Dora, parental guide).

In this quote, mothers are encouraged to actively participate in the daycare parent's evenings and to adopt a confident stance. Despite potential language barriers and insecurities, they are encouraged to step into the public sphere, engage in the child's educational context, and present themselves as mothers. The quote implies that this expectation originates from the child's perspective and that the mother's involvement in the daycare center is directly linked to the child's well-being. To become an engaged, responsive mother is described as a process of prioritizing the child's needs over one's own fear, overcoming personal language challenges and being courageous. This narrative is deeply rooted in the program, as illustrated by the following quote taken from an observation report of the group leaders' meetings. Here, the parental guide and the group leaders discuss options for their presentation at an upcoming event where the group leaders, having led a group for a year, receive a certificate as parental guides. Local politicians, professionals in integration and education, daycare staff, and the press are invited to this ceremony:

"You can start with how you've developed during the program – Yeah, I can do that, Jasmin responds turning to me – Before I was part of the team, I could never have spoken in front of a group like this. I just didn't dare – […] And now I'm considering becoming a social assistant – Supportive words from the others – Yes, I think now I have the confidence for it – says Jasmin – And that's something you can pass on to the mothers – Dora explains. Jasmin refers to a woman in her group who was initially very shy and hardly dared to speak German. Recently, the woman told Jasmin that for the first time she went to a parent-teacher meeting alone – And before, she went everywhere only with her husband – Jasmin emphasizes. Dora interjects – Yes, that's also a beautiful story. You can talk about that too...how our mothers are becoming more confident" (observation report 12).

Jasmin describes her time and work in the program as a personal journey from shyness to self-confidence. This transformation is seen as a direct result of her experiences within the program, positioning the program as a transformative and empowering force that enabled Jasmin's integration into the labor market. The mention of another woman in Jasmin's group, who for the first time went to a parent-teacher meeting alone, without her husband,

symbolizes progress in societal, familial and gendered independence. By placing the focus on personal development and emphasizing the importance of these stories as a source of inspiration, Dora underlines this as the central narrative of the parenting education program. Dora's statement that self-confidence is a transferable skill that Jasmin can pass on to the mothers in her group reflects the notion that these are cyclical transformation processes within the program, where mothers support and encourage each other.

Against this background, two normative subject positions are constituted and differentiated: On one side stands a migrantified mother who speaks little or no German, lacks self-confidence, and thus cannot take responsibility for herself or her child, retreating passively to the private sphere. On the other side is the 'model migrant mother', who actively overcomes her insecurities and lack of knowledge with the help of the program to become the representative of her child's needs. This mother serves as a role model for others, engages in the program's gendered work, and subsequently moves on to the broader labor market.

## 5.3  Differentiation and Positioning

Having identified the attributions regarding the participants, the group leaders and the child as a co-addressee of the program in the previous sections, the focus will now be on the position of the parental guide. Subsequently, the relations between the different positions will be outlined. For this purpose, attention is drawn to a quote from an ethnographic interview with another parental guide in the project, who was leading a parent-child group. This parental guide was discussing the project's continued funding, which was uncertain at the time:

> "She says she hopes there is a way to keep her group – but I definitely give priority to Dora and Evin – she adds – the experience is important, or the language in Evin's case" (Stephanie, parental guide).

The parental guide Stephanie distinguishes between herself, parental guide Dora, and parental guide Evin, who works with the daycare centers, in terms of their roles in the project. She deems her work as secondary to that of Dora and Evin, stating that she would prioritize their positions in the event of potential job cuts. She justifies this by highlighting the importance of experience and language. Regarding Dora, it is implied that due to similar experiences, she can establish a unique rapport with participants. Dora is thus linked to the participants by an assumed bonding migration experience.

A regional information document features an interview with Dora about her work in the program. In this context, she is asked, "How do you manage to get in contact with the mothers if they don't speak your language?" (document 5). The question refers to the fact that Dora, unlike the majority of the program's participants, does not speak Arabic. This identifies language differences as a particular challenge in working with migrantified mothers. The phrase 'your language' positions Dora as primarily belonging to her first language, which is not German. Subsequently, Dora is asked: "When you arrived in Germany [...], what made settling in easier for you?" Dora shares her experiences and concludes with:

> „[...] Thanks to these experiences, I can empathize well with the situation of the mothers. I often share my own experiences with them, which gives them a lot of courage" (document 5).

As the interview focuses on the parenting education program and Dora's work as a parental guide, both migration experience and language are directly linked to the performance of this

work. Dora frames her migration experience as a form of cultural capital that helps her develop strong empathy with the participants. This suggests that the ability to empathize with the life situation of migrantified mothers is a valuable tool in her work and derives from personal migration experiences. While Dora is addressed with reference to her migration experience and language, her formal qualifications remain unmentioned. Professionalism is subordinated to traits that are presumed to facilitate bonding. Dora's mention that sharing her own migration experience 'encourages' the participants suggests a role model function with regard to the processes of settling into German society.

In the programs' interactive practices, Dora self-positions as a participating group leader, meaning that she acts as an authority, a counsellor, and an educator, while also portraying herself as a mother, woman, multilingual speaker, and migrant. She shares experiences from her family life, her marriage, her first language, and from settling in Germany. When a participant emphasizes to me that they learn German 'playfully' in the program, this is her reaction:

> "Then Dora tells of a grammar course – at her beginning – which was terribly dry and the topics were covered too quickly – I came to my husband in the evening and said: I didn't understand anything! – she imitates sobbing. Laughter and agreement follow" (observation report 3).

Dora shares the challenges 'at her beginning.' Through this phrasing, she clarifies that her arrival in Germany was followed by a process of settling in. This personal insight into Dora's life creates a relationship between the experiences of the participants and those of the parental guide. The phrasing characterizes life in Germany not merely as a geographical change but as the start of a personal transformation, linked to the acquisition of the German language. The disclosure and humorous portrayal of personal challenges and emotions create a space for empathy and understanding, normalize initial fears, and underscore Dora's position as a role model.

The program's group leaders, similar to the parental guide, are positioned as 'model migrant mothers' by being selected either from daycare centers or from among the participants of the parenting education groups. Their weekly meetings, which focus on exchanging experiences about their work in the groups, are led by the parental guide, who further navigates them through the materials for the upcoming meetings. Thus, the group leaders are subordinate to the parental guide. A linguistic connection between their roles is established through the qualification process of the group leaders: after leading a group for a year and attending a training course, they receive a certificate as 'parental guides.' This qualification positions the group leaders as pre-professional parental guides, who, in the program, take a first step into the labor market. However, in an interview with parental guide Dora, she differentiates between her position as a parental guide and the prospective position of the group leaders:

> "There are actually two different types of parental guidance. One is further training. I did this a couple of years ago and it was a very, very extensive training program. […] And there's also a parental guide, well maybe this term is not quite accurate, but the mothers [group leaders] actually call themselves parental guides, too. They had a short little training opportunity and we [the regional project] did that too, which means they can now also lead the groups" (Dora, parental guide).

Dora emphasizes that her position as a parental guide differs from those of the group leaders in terms of qualification. She describes her own training as 'very extensive,' distinguishing it

from the shorter training of the group leaders. This differentiation attributes more substantial expertise and higher authority within the program to the position of the parental guide that Dora holds. The program's designation of the leaders as 'parental guides' reflects a positive recognition of their commitment to the program. In the quote, this recognition is relativized in Dora's self-reference regarding the professionalism of the group leaders. Dora self-positions as an active part of the project and central figure within the organizational framework of the program. In doing so, she indicates a hierarchical differentiation between the parental guide and the group leaders during and after the program.

Within the hierarchical structure of the parenting education program, the parental guide occupies the top position. The parental guide is assigned the responsibility for the work of the group leaders as 'model migrant mothers' and serves as a role model for their transformation towards labor market integration. The position of the group leader is one step below and serves as a role model for the participants in their transformation into 'model migrant mothers'. Below this is the position of the participant, whose transformation into a 'model migrant mother' is equated with the responsibility for her child's development: "Children learn from role models - the first and most important role models are you" (document 2). In this quote from the program flyer, the mother's responsibility is associated with role modelling as well. This implies that the mother's responsibility extends beyond direct parenting to also include modelling behaviors and attitudes for the child to emulate. To sum up, the parenting education program establishes a hierarchy from the child to the mother to the group leader to the parental guide, all linked by role modelling.

## 5.4 Differentiation and Valuation

The previous sections have shed light on who becomes a subject of the early childhood parenting education program through differentiations, and how these subjects are related to one another. The following section will delve into the valuations associated with this.

The selection of participants is accompanied by the ascription of gendered traditional family structures: Mothers are positioned as the primary caregivers responsible for early childhood development, while migrantified fathers are considered absent due to their earlier integration into the labor market. This gendered differentiation remains unquestioned and is thereby normalized, which homogenizes families in relation to migration experiences and distinguishes them from families without such experience, subsequently leading to the marginalization of migrantified fathers. Furthermore, the gendered differentiation within the parental education program is located outside the local project's responsibility, attributed instead to the families on one hand and to politics on the other.

The hierarchically organized positions in the program – child, mother, group leader, parental guide – are structured in a role model logic that reflects a gradation of experience, qualification and participation in German society. Against this background, the norm of an engaged, responsive, German-language-aware, self-confident, working mother takes shape and is presented as a transformative process of becoming. This implies differentiation from a type of motherhood that is primarily characterized by passivity and withdrawal. This norm upholds motherhood as primarily responsible for ECEC because fatherhood is not addressed within it. Consequently, the traditional, gendered family structure regarding the division of family tasks is not challenged. Although the engaged working mother participates in public life, her role is confined to the gendered context of ECEC. Both subject positions are placed in a hierarchical relationship that entails a dichotomous differentiation between 'good' and 'inadequate'. Voluntary and active participation in the program is described as an active first

step in the transformation towards the ideal of motherhood. Mothering practices are only implicitly problematized in the program; instead, an orientation framework is established:

> "They [the participants] report meetings with family and friends, activities with their children and days spent at home. Dora turns directly to the speakers. She smiles, nods, comments – Lovely! – Oh great, that must have been fun! – or – That's needed sometimes! – and asks follow-up questions. There's talk of an event at the mosque, which several mothers from the group attended. Leyla shares that she taught the children about the story of the Prophet Muhammad. Elina interjects that Leyla is a teacher at the Quran school. Dora responds – Oh, I didn't know that! – and adds that she thinks teaching children why certain festivals are celebrated is great" (observation report 2).

The parental guide's affirmative responses to mothering practices in family life endorse and validate these activities. The statement 'That's needed sometimes' serves as an acknowledgment of the need and normality of rest periods in the engaged family life, accepting the various aspects of motherhood and its challenges. The parental guide positively evaluates education about cultural or religious festivals with children, in this case, Ramadan. This underscores the mother's role as a mediator of cultural or religious values, which adds another dimension to the norms of motherhood. The parental guide self-positions as appreciative of culture and religion. Within the group, she creates an atmosphere of openness and acceptance of various expressions of religiosity. The parental guide compliments new glasses as well as long hair and a new way of wearing a hijab (observation reports 4, 8, 9), thereby signaling affirmative recognition for the different ways in which participants present themselves physically, culturally, or religiously. Nonetheless, the parental guide positions religion as a matter of differences:

> "I would include religion and politics only for specific purposes because everyone has their own views and sometimes it can cause offence, or someone may feel offended" (Dora, parental guide).

In the quote, the presence of different religious and political beliefs within the group is acknowledged. Participants are positioned as vulnerable in the face of these differences, yet also potentially harmful to others. The parental guide describes a sensitive approach to topics that could evoke negative emotions and potentially lead to conflicts. This reflects a cautious strategy of introducing such topics only in specific contexts deemed appropriate in order to maintain group harmony and protect individual well-being. It involves the deliberate creation of settings which are inclusive to varying degrees, where all participants feel safe to express their various identities. It also extends to the inclusion of heritage, culture, and language in group activities:

> "Initiated by Dora or not, the participants share how various kitchen utensils are named in different languages – It's interesting how these words are so similar – says Dora. The participants laugh about using different names for the same object in the same language. Maya informs us that the hole in a spaghetti spoon measures one portion of spaghetti – But that's the way in Italy, not in Syria – laughter. Dora writes the name of another object on the board. I look puzzled. Maya catches my gaze – I didn't know that either, I admit. Maya laughs. Fatima leans over to whisper to me – I have no idea what it's called in [language] either. The mood at the table is cheerful" (observation report 3).

The quote illustrates that the participants' various first languages are an integral part of the program's practice, and referencing these languages is linked to the goal of learning German. The parental guide initiates moments where participants explore language similarities and differences, and she positively deems this as 'interesting'. Language uncertainties are portrayed as communal experiences that occur regardless of individual background or role within the group. Maya introduces a cultural differentiation by referring to the spaghetti spoon, using it as a self-referential joke that plays on stereotypes. These differentiations relating to language and culture are intentionally initiated by the parental guide to foster group inclusion and cohesion, and to address the participants in terms of their competencies.

## 6 Discussion: Guiding Diversity in Parenting Education & Social Work

The analysis of differentiation at the levels of selection, norm formation, positioning, and valuation enables a perspective on diversity as context-specific interactive recognition practices. In these practices, the subjects of early childhood parenting education – both participants and workers – are produced and placed within a social frame of reference.

Diversity is ambivalent in that it has both inclusive and exclusive, empowering and subjugating effects. The accepting, unquestioned recognition of participants as culturally and religiously 'others' is accompanied by a gender differentiation, which is reproduced by the structures of the program insofar as it is deemed consistent, normal, and beyond the project's field of responsibility, thus legitimizing the exclusion of fathers. The affirmative recognition of participants as engaged mothers and as capable mediators regarding their first language, culture, and religion has an inclusive effect within the group. At the same time, religious and political differences among participants are problematized as sources of vulnerability and harm within the group, which places their performance under the regulation of the parental guide. The subject position of the passive, withdrawn mother lacking self-confidence due to insufficient German language skills is also problematized, serving as the starting point of the project and thereby legitimizing it as an educational program requiring funding. Simultaneously, this subject position is put into a transformative relationship with the subject position of the engaged, responsive, language-sensitive, working mother, inscribing a makeover narrative into the project. This is closely linked, firstly, to the psychologization of migration experiences as a loss of language, which limits self-confidence and activity. Secondly, it is associated with a strategy of empathetic recognition of these psychological aspects, which are described as a resource that is best understood and addressed by someone who has overcome this experience. The positive recognition of the languages or migration experiences of the parental guide and group leaders as a resource for work in the program positions them as 'professional others' (Heite, 2008) and diversity workers (Ahmed, 2012); it is a resource that grants them special access to the target group and helps them to manage differences. These guides and group leaders stand in a role model hierarchy above the participants and children, yet simultaneously embody the addressees of the program at a further stage of development. The program empowers participants and group leaders in terms of social integration demands, yet simultaneously imposes limitations, as adherence to the norms of good motherhood is required to ascend the hierarchy. The parental guide receives affirmative recognition regarding her migration experiences, with her professional qualifications being subordinate. Thus, the structure of the program resembles the 'therapeutic culture' (Rose, 1996) of a self-help group and the role modelling aspect of peer-to-peer approaches, except that the peer does not act in a supportive role but has supposedly grown into the professional role herself.

Diversity as a practice of recognition can thus be understood in the interplay of the three levels of social work and power suggested by Kraus and Krieger (2021). Firstly, diversity practices are subject to societal power. On the one hand, this implies a dependency on societal discourse and the orders of differentiation within it; on the other hand, it implies a reliance on legitimization strategies that make the funding of an educational mission possible. Secondly, diversity practices act as a mediator of power in society, reproducing certain differentiations and structures. And thirdly, diversity practices act as a force in the interactions that determine the relationship between professionals and addressees. At this level, the relationship between the parental guide, group leader, and participant in the parenting education program can be understood as a form of governmental power in the Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 1988). The focus is on guidance towards self-guidance, where this external guidance is provided by an expert not primarily defined by formal qualifications, but by identity characteristics such as attributed migration experiences. This demonstrates an identity-political rationality of governmentality that needs to be further explored in relation to diversity practices in parenting education and beyond.

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