



# Preschool Teachers' Perspectives About the Engagement of Immigrant and Non-Immigrant Parents in Their Children's Early Education

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## Abstract

The present study explores the perceptions of teachers about the engagement of immigrant and non-immigrant parents in preschool. Data were drawn from a larger evaluation study of a government initiative for preschools in Germany, which was designed to foster inclusive pedagogy and parent cooperation. In these analyses, teachers' perceptions of the engagement of immigrant parents and non-immigrant parents were rated for each parent group, on a 10-item measure, to identify how teacher ratings varied for the different parent groups. Data from 1397 preschool teachers, employed across 203 preschools, were analyzed using multilevel modeling. This statistical approach takes account of the clustered nature of the data. Teacher ratings of engagement for immigrant and non-immigrant parent groups differed between preschools. Most variability in the ratings could be ascribed to preschool characteristics. In preschools, in which staff held a shared understanding of dealing with cultural diversity and in which the director of the preschool had a multicultural mindset, teachers perceived engagement of parents more positively, especially for immigrant parents. Overall, the findings identified the importance of self-efficacy for inclusion and more positive beliefs about multiculturalism among preschool teachers. Such qualities are important for working with all parents. However, unfavorable social structures, such as those found in disadvantaged areas, may present major challenges for parent cooperation and engagement.

**Keywords** Preschool teachers · Teacher beliefs · Cultural diversity · Parent engagement · Family–preschool partnerships

## Résumé

La présente étude explore les perceptions des enseignants de l'engagement de parents immigrés et non immigrés envers l'éducation préscolaire. Les données sont tirées d'une plus vaste étude d'évaluation d'une initiative gouvernementale destinée aux

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établissements préscolaires en Allemagne, et conçue pour favoriser la pédagogie inclusive et la coopération des parents. Dans ces analyses, les perceptions des enseignants de l'engagement de parents immigrés et non immigrés étaient notées selon une échelle en 10 points afin d'identifier comment les évaluations des enseignants variaient selon les différents groupes de parents. Une modélisation à niveaux multiples a servi à analyser les données provenant de 1 397 enseignants du préscolaire employés dans 203 établissements préscolaires. Cette approche statistique tient compte de la nature groupée des données. L'évaluation par les enseignants de l'engagement des groupes de parents immigrés et non immigrés diffère selon les établissements préscolaires. La variabilité des évaluations pourrait en majeure partie être attribuée aux caractéristiques des établissements préscolaires. Dans les établissements préscolaires où le personnel partage un sens de la diversité culturelle et où la direction a une orientation multiculturelle, les enseignants perçoivent de manière plus positive l'engagement des parents, en particulier des parents immigrés. Dans l'ensemble, les résultats mettent en évidence l'importance de l'efficacité personnelle pour l'inclusion, ainsi que des opinions plus positives vis-à-vis du multiculturalisme chez les enseignants des établissements préscolaires. Ces qualités sont importantes pour travailler avec tous les parents. Des structures sociales défavorables comme celles trouvées dans les quartiers défavorisés peuvent toutefois présenter des défis majeurs à la coopération et à l'engagement des parents.

## Resumen

El presente estudio explora las percepciones de educadores sobre la participación de padres inmigrantes y no inmigrantes en la educación preescolar. Se obtuvo información a partir de una evaluación mayor de una iniciativa gubernamental para escuelas de preescolar en Alemania, la cual fue diseñada para fomentar la pedagogía inclusiva y la cooperación de los padres. En estos análisis, las percepciones de los educadores sobre la participación de padres inmigrantes y no inmigrantes recibieron un puntaje en cada grupo de padres, en una escala de 10 puntos, para identificar en qué forma varió la calificación de los educadores a los diferentes grupos de padres. Se analizó la información recolectada de 1.397 educadores de preescolar, empleados en 203 instituciones de preescolar, utilizando un modelo de niveles múltiples. Este método estadístico tiene en cuenta la naturaleza grupal de los datos. Los puntajes que los educadores le otorgaron a los grupos de padres inmigrantes y no inmigrantes difirieron entre escuelas de preescolar. La mayor parte de la variación en los puntajes podrían asignarse a las características de la educación preescolar. En las escuelas de preescolar en las que el personal compartía el mismo entendimiento sobre la forma de manejar la diversidad cultural y en las que el director de la escuela mostraba una mentalidad multicultural, los educadores percibieron de manera positiva la participación de padres, especialmente de padres inmigrantes. En términos generales, los resultados resaltaron la importancia de la autoeficacia de inclusión y creencias más positivas sobre el multiculturalismo en los educadores de preescolar. Dichas cualidades son importantes al trabajar con todos los padres. Sin embargo, las estructuras sociales desfavorables, como las que se presentan en áreas de bajos recursos, presentan retos significativos para la cooperación y participación de los padres.

## Introduction

Participation by immigrant children in early education programs has been shown to support learning across various developmental domains (Ulferts and Anders 2016; Van Huizen and Plantenga 2018). Moreover, when parents of preschoolers are more engaged, their children do better academically and socially (Van Voorhis et al. 2013; Wilder 2014). Effective communication between parents and preschool teachers is seen as the basis for parent engagement in children's learning at home and at preschool. Such engagement is therefore an important component of preschool quality. As a consequence, partnerships that exist between preschool teachers and families are increasingly an important focus for early childhood education (Sheridan et al. 2019).

Yet, perceptions of preschool teachers about their engagement and cooperation with parents has not been extensively researched, even though these perceptions are assumed to be crucial to the actual behaviors that these teachers will demonstrate with parents. In the present study, differences in teachers' perceptions of engagement with parents who do, or do not, have an immigrant background are examined. We investigated if there are differences in these perceptions of engagement and if these differences can be explained by the personal characteristics of teachers or whether it is the characteristics of preschools that can help to explain any differences in teachers' perceptions, according to parents' immigrant background.

In this research, we define parent engagement as the partnership that exists between families and preschools that can promote children's learning and wellbeing (Fox and Olsen 2014). This research focuses on one important aspect of the family-preschool partnership that considers teachers' perspectives about how parents engage with the preschool about children's early education and parental communication and cooperation with the teacher.

## Parent Engagement in Multicultural Preschools: Between Ambitions and Reality

Current debates about parent engagement are based on the premise that families, especially families with immigrant backgrounds, would benefit through close family-preschool partnerships to ensure better educational opportunities and outcomes for their children (Van Voorhis et al. 2013). Although no direct causal effects of the family-preschool relationship on child development have been established, correlational findings suggest that mutual exchanges between preschool and family have positive effects on parental behaviors (Lehrl et al. in press). Other research has also suggested that higher levels of parent engagement in children's (pre)school activities leads to better educational achievements for children with diverse ethnic backgrounds (Jeynes 2005; Jung and Zhang 2016).

Although cooperation with parents is viewed as an essential element of modern early childhood education, family-preschool partnerships are increasingly viewed more critically in order to understand if hierarchical differences or power relationships in educational systems may have greater impact on parents from disadvantaged or immigrant backgrounds (Betz 2015). Previous research has indicated that

preschool teachers are more likely ‘to instruct’ parents with an immigrant background instead of negotiating common goals (Betz and Bischoff 2017). Preschool teachers have reported less engagement with immigrant parents and problematized the issues as differences in educational expectations and language barriers (Buchori and Dobinson 2015). However, it has also been argued that close cooperation with preschool teachers is very important to immigrant parents because they wish to be highly involved in their children’s education (Hachfeld et al. 2016). Many parents with an immigrant background may also not feel welcome, accepted, or valued and perceive interactions with preschool teachers as challenging (Cheatham and Santos 2011).

Research has identified that many preschool teachers do not believe that they are adequately prepared for handling the challenges of cultural diversity and multilingualism in order to develop relationships with immigrant families with young children (Michel and Kuiken 2014). Teachers have reported that their relationships with families from an immigrant background can be conflictual or stressful (Sulzer 2013). There is also some evidence that parents with an immigrant background are focused on quite specific outcomes for their children’s education, compared to non-immigrant parents (Döge 2015; Durgel et al. 2009). For example, they may have higher educational aspirations for their children and place more emphasis on their child’s school readiness (Rosenbaum and Rochford 2008). These specific parent expectations for children’s education can result in development of tensions between immigrant parents and teachers.

### **Influences of Teacher Beliefs and Preschool Characteristics on Teaching Practices**

The ecological model, *Process-Person-Context-Time*, proposed by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) is used to inform this research to investigate the beliefs and practices of preschool teachers in engaging with immigrant parents and non-immigrant parents. In this model, process refers to the direct interactions that occur between individuals in their immediate environment. These processes are assumed to vary as a function of teachers’ personal characteristics, as well as the contextual factors (e.g., preschool environment and educational practices). They occur across extended periods of time, as teachers and parents interact in the preschool context.

At the personal level, teachers’ professional competence may support positive and mutual exchanges with families such as pedagogical orientations and beliefs, as well as the motivational and emotional experiences, which have occurred over time. These competencies influence teachers’ beliefs and decision-making as well as their behaviors in everyday situations (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002). While teachers’ professional attitudes and beliefs are subjective, they provide an important reference system which teachers draw upon in their current practices (Fives and Buehl 2012; Pajares 1992).

Multicultural beliefs reflect appreciative attitudes toward different cultures (Hachfeld et al. 2012). Teachers with strong multicultural beliefs take account of cultural and linguistic diversity when interacting with families and may be more sensitive and less prejudiced about cultural differences. While other teachers may

focus more on a person's group identity and cultural differences, such as by race, religion and ethnicity. In a literature review, Slot et al. (2017a) concluded that there is little research consensus about how cultural diversity is supported, or not, within classrooms. Some research findings have identified positive or neutral views toward cultural diversity in classrooms, while other research has identified more negative beliefs, although these may be expressed more implicitly rather than directly. Findings regarding the prediction of variations in multicultural beliefs are mixed. Whereas Sanders and Downer (2012) found teacher's immigrant background status to be positively associated with positive beliefs toward cultural diversity, Shepherd (2011) has identified the opposite direction. Neugebauer and Klein (2016) found no effects at all regarding teacher cooperation with immigrant families in preschools and the cultural background of the preschool teacher. Higher educational qualifications and teachers with experience in working with immigrant children have been found to have more positive multicultural beliefs (Van de Vijver et al. 2008), although Perlman et al. (2010) found contradictory results. Another indicator for positive attitudes toward immigrants by preschool teachers is appreciation of usage of different family languages in (pre) school. Discouraging children and their families to speak in their native language can increase feelings of rejection (Slot et al. 2017), while other studies have highlighted the importance of family languages for family cohesion and psychosocial wellbeing of children (Fillmore 2000).

Teachers are a part of a team of colleagues within a preschool and, over time, the preschool evolves its own identity in terms of vision, traditions, policies and shared beliefs. The context of the preschool and its identity will affect the interactions that take place between parents and teachers. Cultural diversity appears to be a double challenge, when a preschool has to deal with the cultural diversity of staff and families, as well as to consider its own cultural structures (Nohl 2007). The preschool director has an important role in promoting inclusive (pre)school policy. This person leads the professional development within the preschool and, usually, has the prerogative for interpreting policies and standards of practice (Philpott et al. 2010; Riehl 2000). A clear vision shared by everyone working within the early education setting is a crucial element of successful leadership in preschools (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni 2007).

The outer contextual level in the ecological model described by Bronfenbrenner (1993) is the exosystem. It identifies wider influencing factors on families and teachers, such as the socio-economic factors and educational policies. Research findings provide evidence that, although education is valued by all families regardless of socio-economic circumstances, educational provisions and opportunities for children in socially disadvantaged areas are often seen as under-resourced by teachers (Schreiber 2007). Other research has indicated that teachers' satisfaction with family-preschool partnerships is also negatively associated with the percentage of children who are non-native language speakers within a classroom. This finding could reflect a lack of confidence and uncertainty by teachers about how to deal with such differences in classrooms when there are high proportions of immigrant families (Hachfeld et al. 2016).

## The Current Study

This research was conducted in preschools in Germany. In contrast to other Anglo-Saxon countries, efforts to build family-preschool partnerships, especially for parents with immigrant backgrounds, have only recently been reinforced in Germany. The present study is therefore exploratory. It examines the influence of teacher characteristics, as well as preschool characteristics, on teachers' beliefs and perceptions about engagement of parents with, and without, an immigrant background. How preschool teachers perceive engagement by parents from different backgrounds is considered to be a critical influence on the classroom practices that will then be enacted by teachers with parents.

We address the following research questions: (1) Are there significant differences in how teachers rate the level of engagement in preschool by immigrant and non-immigrant parents? (2) Using multilevel modeling, what teacher-specific and preschool characteristics explain differences in teachers' perceptions of parent engagement?

## Method

### Research Design and Participants

The present study draws on secondary data from a large evaluation study funded by a German federal program, *Early-Years Language Learning: Because Language is the Key to the World*. This federal program was set up by the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth. This program began in 2016 and will complete in 2020. The preschools participating in this research were located in rural, urban and metropolitan regions in nine German federal states. The preschools, generally, catered for children aged from 1 to 6 years. The participants were informed in advance online about the data protection regulations and the ethical principles of the study. In order to participate in the study, participants had to give their consent online and agree to participate.

The data in these analyses are drawn from an online survey completed by the preschool teachers and director of each participating preschool. Data collection took place in the period from March to May 2018 and, overall, 1447 teachers completed the online survey. Teacher respondents were clustered within 203 preschools. These were 6.9 preschool teachers, on average, per preschool (range: 1–28). In these analyses, we used data from 1397 preschool teachers (5.8% men) whose ages ranged from 19 to 75 years ( $M=39.7$ ,  $SD=11.8$ ). The final analytic sample comprised survey respondents who did not have missing data on either outcome measures (i.e., perceptions of engagement for immigrant and non-immigrant parents).

### Sample Demographics

Within the sample, there were 1192 (89.2%) teachers who were German native speakers and 106 (7.8%) who had university degree. Preschool teachers holding

a university degree have completed either a bachelor or a master's degree in early childhood education or related subjects. Preschool teachers without a university degree had either finished a three-year post-secondary vocational education; a two-year study program at upper secondary vocational level or comparable vocational education. The average work experience of teachers in the preschools was 13 years ( $SD = 11.6$  years, range 0–49). The teacher–child ratio in classrooms was, on average 6.2 children per preschool teacher, ranging from 2.7 to 15.7 children. The average proportion of children with an immigrant background across preschools was 39% ( $SD = 25.1$ , range: 0–100). Family immigrant background was operationalized as a binary variable according to child's native tongue (0 = German; 1 = non-German).

In the 203 preschools, 5.8% of the directors were men, and directors ranged in age from 27 to 66 years ( $M = 50$ ,  $SD = 9.6$ ). On average, directors had been in their position for an average period of 14.3 years ( $SD = 10.4$ ). The average work experience in institutions of early childhood education, ranged from 1 to 45 years ( $M = 22.6$ ,  $SD = 11.7$ ) and 96.8% of the directors had German as their native language.

## Survey Instruments

### Outcome Measures

A measurement scale with 10 items was devised to assess teachers' perceptions of parent engagement. There were two versions of this scale. Respondent teachers rated the same set of items as they applied: (1) to parents with an immigrant background; and (2) parents without an immigrant background. To introduce these scales, the following information was provided on the teacher survey: "We are aware that an immigrant background can include many nationalities or ethnicities. This is just one among many factors that may affect an inclusive pedagogy. In spite of such simplification, we would like to know whether, in your experience, how the listed statements apply." Preschool teachers were then asked to rate their level of agreement with the 10 listed statements for each parent group, using a 5-point response scale (1 = strongly disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Example of items are: 'Parents with [without] an immigrant background look for opportunities to discuss their children's development.'; and 'Parents with [without] an immigrant background show minimal interest in the pedagogical concept of our preschool'. The internal consistency (reliability) for the overall rating scale for each parent group was satisfactory: parents with immigration background ( $\alpha = .84$ ) and parents without immigrant background ( $\alpha = .79$ ).

## Preschool Teacher-Level Predictors

### Multicultural Beliefs

A multicultural beliefs scale was adapted from Hachfeld et al. (2012) and measured how strongly teachers endorsed a cultural-sensitive approach to children and families with an immigrant background. The scale was modified for use in this research

and had five items (e.g., 'In counseling parents who have a different cultural background, I try to be considerate of cultural particularities.'). A 5-point response was used (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The internal consistency (reliability) for the scale was  $\alpha = .82$ .

### **Inclusive Self-efficacy**

This self-efficacy scale was designed to measure the subjective confidence that preschool teachers hold to address issues related to discrimination based on group characteristics (e.g., ethnicity) in favor of a positive view of the capabilities of all children and parents (Hachfeld et al. 2012). The scale had five items, two of which were adjusted for this study, and also included three items that explicitly refer to parents which were developed as part of this evaluation (e.g., 'I am confident that I can respond to the various concerns of immigrant children.'). Preschool teachers responded on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The internal consistency (reliability) of this scale was  $\alpha = .71$ .

### **Appreciation of Family Languages**

This scale measured the extent to which the teachers consider multilingualism as a special competence that should be promoted in day-to-day life. The scale was developed as part of the evaluation study in which two items were adapted from a scale measuring preschool teachers' attitudes toward first-language usage (Kratzmann et al. 2013), for example ('I encourage multilingual children to freely choose the languages in which they can communicate, depending on with whom they are talking.'). The five items on the scale were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The internal consistency (reliability) of the scale was  $\alpha = .66$ .

Teachers also completed demographic questions that included: native tongue of the teacher; holding a university degree; years of professional experience in ECEC settings; and the language diversity of the classroom for which the teacher had responsibility, measured by the number of spoken languages in the preschool group. We included the latter variable at the teacher level, as it represented and reflected teachers' perceptions about language diversity in relation to their current experiences, which might vary among teachers even for those teachers who were responsible for the same group of children.

### **Preschool-Level Predictors**

#### **Multicultural Beliefs**

We ascertain the multicultural beliefs of the directors of the preschools with the same scale used with preschool teachers. The internal consistency of the scale (reliability) was  $\alpha = .76$ . Additionally, we created an indicator that represents the range of multicultural beliefs across the preschool staff team to capture the overall variability of multicultural beliefs in the preschool. This was calculated by taking the lowest

and the highest multicultural beliefs score for the preschool teachers in each preschool. In preschools with only information from one preschool teacher (14 cases), we set the value to missing, and conducted the full-information maximum likelihood approach (FIML; Arbuckle 1996) to replace the range score for the missing data.

### Perceptions About Cooperation Quality with Parents with an Immigrant Background

We built a scale from a semantic differential that enquires the perspectives of the preschool director about the overall cooperation quality of immigrant parents. The scale is a 7-point bipolar rating scale using gradable and complementary antonyms. After a pretest, the scale was reduced by three items, so that the final version consisted of 7 items (e.g., 'Working with parents with immigrant background, in general, turns out to be more likely as: ... reserved—accessible'). The internal consistency (reliability) of the scale was  $\alpha = .88$ .

Other preschool-level predictors included in the analysis were: native tongue of preschool director, percentage of children in the preschool with an immigrant background, teacher–child ratio; as well as the judgment of the preschool director as to whether the preschool is located in a disadvantaged area.

### Statistical Approach

Hierarchical linear models were used to disentangle 'preschool teacher effects' and 'preschool effects' in teacher ratings of engagement for immigrant parents and non-immigrant parents, as teachers are 'nested' within preschools (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002). Two sets of hierarchical linear models were run to explain 'within-preschool' variation (Level 1—teacher characteristics) and 'between-preschool variation' (Level 2—features of the preschool).

In first step, we employed an unconditional model to assess the intraclass correlations for perceptions of engagement. In the next step, we included all preschool teacher predictors in one model and in a separate model, all preschool-level predictors to determine the contribution of each of the two levels. Finally, we entered all predictors simultaneously in an overall model to interpret all predictors as unique effects when all other variables in the model are held constant. This approach was implemented separately for perceptions of engagement of immigrant parents and perceptions of engagement of non-immigrant parents. Random-intercept models were employed to account for random effects on perceptions of engagement.

In order, to increase the interpretability of the model coefficients, all continuous variables were *z* standardized before modeling, while dichotomous variables retained original scaling. All negative formulated variables were reverse coded. Analyses were performed with Mplus (7.0). To maximize the validity of the results, full-information maximum likelihood approach (FIML, Arbuckle 1996) was used to handle missing data. At the preschool teacher level, the percentage of missing data for professional experience in ECEC was 16.5%, and for all other predictors was 4.4% or less. At the preschool level, the percentage of missing data for teacher–child ratio was 35.5%, and for all other predictors was 7.8% or less.

## Results

First, the differences in how teachers rated the overall engagement of parents with an immigrant background and non-immigrant background are compared. In the second set of analyses, hierarchical linear modeling is used to explore the contribution of teacher characteristics and preschool-level characteristics to explain variations in teachers' ratings of parent engagement for parents, according to immigrant background.

### Differences in Teacher Perspectives on the Engagement of Immigrant and Non-Immigrant Parents in Preschool

Table 1 contains descriptive statistics about the engagement of parents with, and without, an immigrant background in preschool. In general, preschool teachers perceived parent engagement more positively than negatively (on 5-point rating scale, mean ratings were above 2.5), even though the engagement of parents without an immigrant background was rated more highly,  $M = 3.4$ ,  $SD = 3.7$ . This difference between ratings by teachers was statistically significant ( $t = -19.45$ ,  $df = 1396$ ). The minimum rating of the perceived engagement of parents without an immigrant background was 2.1. This indicated less variability in the ratings of engagement for parents without an immigrant background. The Pearson correlation between preschool teachers' ratings of engagement of parents with, and without, an immigrant background was moderate and statistically significant ( $r = .50$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Intraclass correlations (ICC) were calculated to assess whether preschool characteristics affects teacher ratings. Results of the unconditional models in Mplus revealed 'between-preschool' variation in teacher ratings of engagement: for teacher ratings about parents with an immigrant background, this was 19% ( $ICC = .19$ ) and, for ratings of engagement of non-immigrant parents, it was 15% ( $ICC = .15$ ). These correlations confirmed that a proportion of variation in teacher ratings could be attributed to preschool effects and this was accounted for in the estimation of the hierarchical linear models.

**Table 1** Differences in preschool teachers' perspectives about the engagement of immigrant and non-immigrant parents

	Mean ( $N = 1397$ )	Standard Deviation	Minimum rating	Maximum rating
Parents <i>with</i> immigrant background	3.4	0.60	1	5
Parents <i>without</i> immigrant background	3.7	0.49	2.1	5

### Determinants Affecting Teachers' Perspectives on Parent Engagement: The Relevance of Professional and Preschool Characteristics

The second research question addressed whether, and how, teacher-specific and preschool characteristics predict teachers' beliefs about engagement. Table 2 illustrates three models using teachers' ratings of perceptions of engagement of immigrant parents, as the dependent variable.

In Model 1 (Table 2), only predictors at the teacher level are included, of which inclusive self-efficacy ( $\beta=.28, p<.01$ ) and multicultural beliefs ( $\beta=.18, p<.01$ ) showed the strongest relationship to teacher beliefs about engagement. A higher appreciation of different family languages ( $\beta=.07, p<.05$ ) also had a more positive relationship with perceptions of engagement of parents with an immigrant background.

In Model 2 (Table 2), only predictors at the preschool level were considered. Perceptions about cooperation quality with immigrant parents ( $\beta=.43, p<.01$ ), reported by preschool directors, and directors' multicultural beliefs ( $\beta=.18, p<.05$ )

**Table 2** Perceptions of engagement of immigrant parents, by preschool teacher: results from multilevel modeling

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE
<i>Preschool teacher level</i>						
Multicultural beliefs	.18**	.03			.16**	.03
Inclusive self-efficacy	.28**	.03			.28**	.03
Appreciation of family languages	.07*	.03			.07*	.03
Migration background	-.02	.03			-.03	.03
University degree	.03	.03			.02	.03
Professional experience in ECEC	-.02	.03			-.02	.03
Number of spoken languages in preschool group	.05	.03			.06*	.03
<i>Preschool level</i>						
Multicultural beliefs director			.18*	.09	.18*	.09
Range of multicultural beliefs in team			-.48**	.08	-.41**	.09
Perceptions about cooperation quality with parents with immigrant background			.43**	.08	.42**	.10
Migration background director			.00	.18	-.14	.23
Preschool located in disadvantage area			-.17*	.09	-.20	.11
Teacher-child ratio			-.03	.16	-.01	.20
Percentage of children with immigrant background			.06	.09	.01	.11
<i>Explained variance</i>						
Preschool teacher level	.17**				.15**	
Preschool level			.53**		.49**	

Model 1 = Preschool teacher predictors; Model 2 = Preschool-level predictors; Model 3 = full model

\*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$

were the only predictors positively associated with the perceptions of engagement of immigrant parents, by preschool teachers. In contrast, the variable measuring multicultural beliefs of the preschool staff team ( $\beta = -.48, p < .01$ ), and the directors' assessment that the preschool was located in a disadvantaged area ( $\beta = -.17, p < .05$ ) were negatively related.

In order to examine whether the range of multicultural beliefs in the team might represent an indicator of the preschool team climate, two additional models were calculated. In these models, the multicultural beliefs variable was replaced by a variable measuring pedagogical beliefs in the team related to additional language support; in another model by a variable related to the level of language education embedded into daily routines. Neither of the coefficients for these variables in the alternate models related to the perceptions of engagement of immigrant parents. Thus, the model with the negative coefficient for multicultural beliefs across the staff team confirmed a discrete effect of strongly divergent beliefs in dealing with cultural diversity in preschool teams.

In Model 3 (Table 2), all predictors, at teacher level and preschool level, were incorporated. The results remained stable relative to the Model 1 and 2, except for the preschool directors' assessment that the preschool was located in a disadvantaged area which was no longer significant while the proportion of different family languages spoken in the preschool classroom group became significant. The full model explained 15% of the between-teacher variance and 49% of the between-preschool variance in teachers' perceptions of the engagement of parents with immigrant background.

Table 3 illustrates a parallel series of models for teachers' perceptions of engagement of parents without immigrant background as the dependent variable.

In Model 1 (Table 3) focused on preschool teachers' characteristics, the variables measuring inclusive self-efficacy ( $\beta = .29, p < .01$ ) and multicultural beliefs ( $\beta = .14, p < .01$ ) showed the strongest positive relationships to perceptions of engagement. In contrast, teachers who appreciated different family languages more highly ( $\beta = -.07, p < .05$ ) and who had more professional experience in early childhood education ( $\beta = -.07, p < .05$ ) rated engagement less positively. We examined whether the professional experience might represent an age effect by replacing the professional experience variable by age of the preschool teacher and, secondly, by including both professional experience and age in a model. The significant negative effect of the professional experience remained in both models.

In Model 2 (Table 3) focused on preschool characteristics, the perceptions about cooperation quality with immigrant parents rated by the preschool directors ( $\beta = .26, p < .01$ ), as well as her multicultural beliefs ( $\beta = .23, p < .05$ ), were positively associated with the perceptions of engagement of non-immigrant parents, by preschool teachers. In contrast, the range of multicultural beliefs in the team ( $\beta = -.34, p < .01$ ) and the directors' assessment that the preschool was located in a disadvantaged area ( $\beta = -.29, p < .01$ ) were negatively related to teachers' ratings of engagement.

In the full model (Model 3, Table 3), at the teacher level, all significant coefficients remained significant. At the preschool-level predictors, directors' ratings of quality of cooperation from parents with an immigrant background did not remain statistically significant. However, the percentage of children in the preschool with an

**Table 3** Perceptions of engagement of non-immigrant parents, by preschool teacher: results from multi-level modeling

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE
<i>Preschool teacher level</i>						
Multicultural beliefs	.14**	.02			.13**	.03
Inclusive self-efficacy	.29**	.03			.29**	.03
Appreciation of family languages	-.07*	.03			-.07*	.03
Migration background	.02	.03			.02	.03
University degree	.06	.03			.05	.03
Professional experience in ECEC	-.07*	.03			-.07*	.03
Number of spoken languages in preschool group	.04	.03			.05	.03
<i>Preschool level</i>						
Multicultural beliefs director			.23*	.09	.23*	.10
Range of multicultural beliefs in team			-.34**	.08	-.23*	.10
Perceptions about cooperation quality with parents with immigrant background			.26**	.10	.18	.12
Migration background director			.12	.20	.00	.23
Preschool located in disadvantage area			-.29**	.10	-.32**	.11
Teacher-child ratio			-.09	.16	-.02	.18
Percentage of children with immigrant background			-.18	.10	-.29*	.12
<i>Explained variance</i>						
Preschool teacher level	.13**				.12**	
Preschool level			.43**		.40**	

Model 1 = Preschool teacher predictors; Model 2 = Preschool-level predictors; Model 3 = full model

\*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$

immigrant background was significant negatively associated ( $\beta = -.29, p < .05$ ) with teacher ratings. The full model explained 12% of between-teacher variance and 40% of between-preschool variance in teachers' ratings of engagement for parents without immigrant background.

## Discussion

The present study investigated teachers' perspectives on the engagement of immigrant and non-immigrant parents in preschool. The multilevel analyses indicated that teachers' perceptions of engagement differed substantially between preschools for parents with, and without, an immigrant background. In line with other studies, our findings identified the important responsibilities and influence of the preschool director in how teachers rated parent engagement for the two different parent groups (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni 2007; for a review see Riehl 2000). In preschools with a director who has a multicultural mindset and a shared understanding with the

preschool staff team about cultural diversity, there was more positive perceptions of engagement of, and especially for parents with an immigration background.

As Lynch and Hanson (2004) emphasized, it is impossible to be sensitive to another person's culture until one is sensitive to one's own culture. The teacher measure of inclusive self-efficacy, which focused on valuing the capabilities of all children and parents, also was a predictor of more positive ratings of engagement in the preschool for immigrant and non-immigrant parents. These findings are supported by research (Siwatu 2007) that found an increase in preservice teachers' culturally responsive teaching self-efficacy resulted in higher-outcome expectancy beliefs about teaching. Although in this research, higher appreciation of different family languages was positively related to ratings of engagement for parents with an immigrant background but not for ratings of engagement for parents without an immigrant background.

Research findings have also suggested that parents with less confidence in their ability to speak the local language may be less active or engaged in their children's education than parents who have this confidence (Sohn and Wang 2006). A culturally aware attitude held by preschool teachers that promotes parent engagement may reduce parent anxiety. Preschool teachers need to find new ways to reach out to reticent families so that they have the confidence to be involved in preschool activities.

For preschools, the findings indicated that more positive ratings of engagement became apparent if preschool teachers across the preschool shared multicultural beliefs for dealing with cultural diversity. If beliefs differ widely about the importance of cultural diversity within a staff team, this will have a negative effect on parent engagement. Research findings from Germany show that preschools shy away from intercultural dialogues that might result in conflict which may impair cooperation within the staff team, especially if it is culturally diverse (Gaitanides 2010).

## Research Implications

Preschool directors set the course for the staff team members so that everyone can identify with the organization and its vision. For the engagement of parents with an immigrant background, stronger beliefs held by the preschool director about the importance of cooperation with immigrant parents was reflected by more positive ratings of parent engagement by teachers. In line with the assessment by Slot et al. (2017b), we assume that dynamic forms of professional development that involve the team as a whole and focus on attitudes toward involving immigrant parents, alongside pedagogical knowledge and skills, would be required in order to ensure behavioral change into place to encouragement involvement of immigrant parents in the preschool. Discussions about cultural diversity and inclusive pedagogy are sensitive topics among teachers that are likely to elicit strong feelings, opinions and values. The preschool director can encourage reflections among teachers as a part of their professional development and in supervisory processes.

Research findings from Germany provide evidence that immigrant children and children of parents with less education are more likely to attend preschools of lower quality in terms of structural characteristics (Stahl et al. 2018). These preschools are

also often located in disadvantaged areas with high socio-cultural segregation. Our results show that living in a disadvantaged area may have a negative impact on the engagement of parents with, and without, an immigrant background. Teachers' ratings of engagement of parents without immigrant background also revealed a negative association with the percentage of children with an immigrant background in the preschool. This could be because parents without immigration background tend to withdraw in preschools in which there is a high proportion of families with immigrant background.

### Limitations and Future Research

The present analyses are based on a sample recruited within the evaluation of the federal program "Language day care centers: Because language is the key to the world". Since preschools with a relatively high proportion of families with an immigrant background participated and cooperation with families was defined as one goal of the federal program, selection effects among preschool teachers cannot be excluded. Regardless of the satisfactory scale reliabilities for the outcome measures of engagement, this study was limited to selected domains to describe aspects of parent engagement. A more comprehensive picture of parent engagement could be gained if there were greater breadth in the items rated about parent engagement. Finally, this is a cross-sectional study that does not allow causal interpretations.

This research focused on teachers' perspective on parent engagement, and it is very important that future research should explore parents' perspectives and the factors and the opportunities that support or reduce their level of engagement, taking account of immigrant status. Comparison of these findings could then be made with the perceptions of teachers. It also still remains an open question about the specific nature of the interactions that take place between preschool teachers and parents. Both qualitative and quantitative methodologies could be used in interview and observational studies to understand the forms and content of parent-teacher interactions.

### Conclusions

This study explored how teachers in preschools rated the engagement of parents from immigrant and non-immigrant backgrounds in the work. Parent engagement is an important aspect of the family-preschool partnership that considers how parent interact with the preschool and the teacher about children's early education and how they communicate and cooperate. The research drew on the ecological model proposed by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), with a focus on processes, persons, contexts, and time. In preschools, it follows that teachers should not only build trusting relationships with families through appreciative and strength-based attitudes, but also recognize the importance of multicultural beliefs within the team.

The findings furthermore point to the different influences on preschool teachers' ratings of parent engagement in their children's early education and how that varied

according to immigrant status. It is evident from these findings that it is important to address deliberately and explicitly the issues and experiences pertaining to cultural diversity in preschools. Teachers need to reflect on their current practices and if, and why, they may interact with immigrant and non-immigrant parents differently. Preschools directors are responsible for stimulating these reflection processes and for promotion of an inclusive preschool culture. They can support understandings within the preschool environment by formulating a clear vision of the intended family-preschool relationships. Attention is needed on these concerns, especially in socially and economically disadvantaged areas in which families may struggle to provide the necessary supports to their children. The preschool director has to intercept the risk of culturalizing attributions that prevent or discourage parent engagement within the preschool. Teachers should meet socially disadvantaged parents and immigrant parents and value the resources that they can offer (Leseman et al. 2019). Lack of parent engagement can be for many reasons. Preschool teachers can use a range of communication strategies to establish and maintain trusting relationships with all families. This is a desirable approach to enabling all children opportunities for positive development, regardless of random-start chances assigned by birth.

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