**Teacher Expertise vs. Parental Expertise: Responding to the needs of socioeconomically disadvantaged** **children with a migration background in Belgium.**

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In response to persistent educational inequalities, (progressive) educationalists and practitioners across the Western world have called for significant reforms that emphasize multilingual instruction, democratic pedagogies, and child-centred curricula. Yet, despite their commendable intentions, these initiatives might overlook the voices of the very families they seek to support. This study, therefore, engages with this tension by focusing on a (progressive) primary school situated in a culturally diverse and economically disadvantaged neighbourhood in Ghent, Belgium. Drawing on 29 interviews with both members of the school staff and socioeconomically disadvantaged minoritized mothers of whom the children are enrolled at the school, it is concurred that what (progressive) educationalists think best for children not necessarily coincides with what parents think best. Rather than determining who is right and who is wrong, the study concludes by highlighting the value of conflict and offering progressive educationalist a potential roadmap to navigate discord in a meaningful way.

Keywords: cultural conflict; progressive education; educational inequality; school improvement; expert knowledge; social class; migration; child-centredness

**Introduction**

Across the Western world, a rich tradition exists of (progressive) educationalist and educational practitioners advocating for sweeping transformations in both the pedagogy and the curricula of schools to meet the needs of all children. In fact, as many countries continue to be confronted with deep-seated inequalities within their education system (OECD, 2023), the overwhelming sentiment is that change is needed (Cairney et al., 2022). What exactly needs to change, however, has (not in the least due to the wicked nature of educational inequality) been an area of debate. A multiplicity of initiatives have (re)surfaced, ranging from the promotion of multilingual education (Agirdag & Kambel, 2017; Cummins, 2021), to the application of democratic education (Knoester, 2015; Rietmulder, 2019), to the implementation of child-centred, holistic and experiential curricula and pedagogies (Doddington & Hilton, 2007; Little & Ellison, 2015).

While it is accurate that these initiatives strive to disrupt the status quo and enhance outcomes for socioeconomically disadvantaged and/or minoritized pupils, this does not necessarily mean they are without trouble. As a matter of fact, akin to a variety of reforms coming from conservative strands of political thought (Levin, 2000), progressive educationalists and educational practitioners often tend to call for specific curricula and pedagogies while paying no heed to the ones who have most to gain or lose by its outcomes (Delpit, 2006). As argued by Vandenbroeck (2009: 166), ‘very often, the voices of parents and children themselves are not included in the elaboration of such curricula, as if parents and children would all be quite happy with what experts have imagined’.

This oversight—in which experts tend to shape the educational landscape for vulnerable families yet without them—raises concerns about the potential emergence of tensions and cultural conflict within and beyond the classroom, potentially exacerbating the very problem these initiatives aim to address: inequality. This paper, therefore, seeks to touch upon this issue by foregrounding the perspectives of socioeconomically disadvantaged and minoritized families. To achieve this, attention is focused on a particular primary school of Ghent (Belgium), which independently embraced progressive child-centred educational practices since the year 2000, this to improve the outcomes of its socioeconomically disadvantaged and minoritized student body. Drawing on 29 interviews with both school staff and socioeconomically disadvantaged minoritized mothers whose children are enrolled at the school, the study reveals that what (progressive) educationalists and educational practitioners think best for children not necessarily aligns with what parents think best. In so doing, special attention will be given to the rationales behind parental perspectives, a matter which has been overlooked in initial studies yet might prove to be essential when determining a future course of action. The objective here is thus neither to establish who is right nor to advocate a need for a lasting consensus. Rather, we wish to engage with intricacies that come into play when parental perspectives are included into the equation. Before delving into the details, we will first explore why progressive educationalists and educational practitioners advocate for child-centred, holistic, and experiential curricula and pedagogies, followed by a brief discussion of research on the pedagogical perspectives of minoritized communities. Next, an overview of the research context and the employed methods will be provided.

**Progressivism as an alternative**

Born out a discontent with the then existing forms of education, progressive education emerged as an international phenomenon at the turn of the twentieth century (Koerenz, Blichmann and Engelmann, 2018). While educational progressivism can be viewed as both a rebellion against and an alternative to traditional educational approaches (Reese 2001), pinning down a unifying definition has proven difficult (Davies, 2002; Gamson 2003; Hofstetter and Schneuwly 2009) as ‘throughout its history, progressive education meant different things to different people’ (Cremin, 1961: x). Nevertheless, progressive educational practices often do share a discernible cluster of ideas (Zilversmit, 1993). In fact, whereas traditional educational emphasizes teacher authority, a rigid curriculum, and deference to adult knowledge (Mirel, 2003), progressive education represents a ‘Copernican revolution,’ placing the child at the centre of the educational cosmos (Darling and Nordenbo, 2003; Mirel 2003). It prioritizes problem-solving, student-initiated projects, active engagement, and collaboration. Rather than transmitting knowledge, teachers in progressive education create stimulating environments for students to construct their own understanding. Furthermore, progressive education stresses the need for a holistic education, addressing not only academic aspects but also social, creative, emotional, and ethical development. In line with its commitment to democracy, progressive schools function as miniature democratic societies, promoting democratic education and embracing diversity within the student body. Finally, promoters of progressive education reject evaluation via grading which might foster ranking and competition (For a more elaborate discussion on the characteristics of progressive education see Darling & Nordenbo 2003; Mirel, 2003; Zilversmit, 1993).

Via the implementation of progressive educational practices, advocates and practitioners aim to transcend traditional educational models where pupils are believed to learn both the wrong things and the wrong way (cf., Tyack and Tobin, 1994). Many proponents feel this promise holds especially true regarding the education of disadvantaged communities. As a matter of fact, in its inception phase, progressive education has been pushed forward by some to accommodate to disadvantaged communities and hence to tackle inequalities. As has been argued by historian of education, Arthur Zilversmit (1993; 17) some progressive practices were explicitly ‘tied to social reform,’ had ‘a genuine compassion for immigrants,’ and ‘shared Jane Addams’s commitment to bettering the lot of the poor and dispossessed’ (Zilversmit, 1993: 17; see also Weiler, 2004). These goals remain relevant today and contributed, in fact, to the resurgence of progressive education from the 1970s, following a period of decline. For example, in Flanders, progressive schools were established by radical reformers to promote equality both in education and society (De Coster et al., 2009; see also Gaiffe et al., 2017; Meier, 1995; Reuters, 2007; Tyner-Mullings, 2016 van der Ploeg, 2014 for similar results in other contexts). Although revolutionary aspirations have waned under neoliberalism and capitalist realism (De Coster et al., 2009), many progressive practices still aim to combat educational inequality,[[1]](#footnote-1) as our case study will demonstrate.

**Conflicting pedagogical perspectives**

While (progressive) educationalists and educational practitioners may believe their practices are serving the best interests of disadvantaged and minoritized families, it's essential to recognize that the families involved may not always share this sentiment. In fact, some initial studies have tried to uncover the pedagogical perspectives of minoritized communities, revealing disparities between their perspectives and those commonly held by progressive educational professionals (Bossong & Keller, 2018; Christie & Szorenyi, 2015; Civil, Planas & Quintos, 2005; Delpit, 2006; Dyson, 2001; Tobin & Kurban, 2010). Dyson (2001), drawing on interviews with 21 Chinese mothers whose children attended a Canadian elementary school, observed that these mothers felt the curriculum lacked rigorous academic standards. Many expressed a desire for the school to prioritize structured instruction, discipline, homework, and traditional academic competencies like reading, writing, and mathematics. Similar studies conducted across various countries and educational contexts underscore this disconnect. Bossong and Keller (2018), for instance, examined the pedagogical perspectives of both day care teachers and minoritized parents in Germany. Their results reveal that while day care teachers tend to emphasize the development of psychological autonomy (e.g., developing their own interests, preferences, intentions and opinions) and free play, minoritized parents tend to stress directive guiding and the teaching of academic skills. While these studies provide valuable insights, further research is necessary to explore how the perspectives of marginalized families may clash with those of educational professionals and risk being undervalued (Melnikova, 2023).

 Moreover, whereas initial studies highlight the contrasting pedagogical perspectives of (progressive) educational professionals on the one hand and minoritized parents on the other hand, they do not provide us with an explanation as to why the latter tend to uphold more ‘conservative’ pedagogical perspectives. Many existing studies simply tend to *assume* the perspectives of minoritized parents are based on their own educational experiences in their country of origin, where more conservative educational practices may have prevailed. However, we argue it is imperative to seriously engage with the rationales behind the pedagogical perspectives of minoritized parents as these may inform proper courses of future action. The novelty of this study lies in the fact that we will exactly do this and hence not only will engage with the pedagogical perspectives themselves but also with the reasons behind them.

**Research context**

This study, which was part of a six-year doctoral research (Goossens, 2019), focuses on Park Lane (pseudonym), a progressive public primary school situated in a minority-majority and economically disadvantaged neighbourhood within Ghent, a mid-sized Belgian city with a population of 267,712 residents. More precisely, according to the latest numbers, 54.5% of all neighbourhood residents had a foreign background, significantly higher than the 38.1% city’s average. Likewise, with 15,666 euro the average annual net income is 22.6% below the Ghent average of 20,235 euro. Despite experiencing a surge in popularity among a segment of white middle-class families in the last two decades, Park Lane's student body still mirrors, albeit to a lesser extent, the demographic composition of its neighbourhood. Within the student body, 38.7% do not speak Dutch at home (the official language of instruction), 53.7% receive a school allowance, and 40.1% have a low-educated mother.

Since 2000, Park Lane has operated as a progressive school, adopting this approach in a deliberate attempt to enhance student outcomes and address the perceived limitations of traditional methods. Central to its philosophy is the Jena Plan pedagogy, developed by German educator Peter Petersen (1884–1952), which emphasizes child-centred, holistic, and experiential practices. More precisely, in accordance with Petersen’s pedagogy, the school board of Park Lane asserts that during day-to-day activities stress should not only be put on work, but also on conversation, celebration and play. The school, therefore, combines traditional instruction with diverse activities, such as morning assemblies, week-end celebrations, field trips, group and individual work, pupil-led projects, and performance preparations. Furthermore, Park Lane also employs mixed-grade classes (i.e., so called *Stammgruppen*), modelling the natural family structure. Younger pupils (ages 2.5–6) are grouped by two grades, while middle and upper levels (ages 6–12) are grouped by three. For most of the time, pupils remain in this *Stammgruppe*. Pupils at Park Lane leave their *Stammgruppe* only for ‘cluster activities’ (i.e., collaborative projects involving ages 2.5–12) or ‘instruction activities’ (i.e., short, level-based sessions for subjects like mathematics and Dutch). Instruction time is limited, as pupils are encouraged to learn independently or with peer support. To foster independence, pupils create a ‘week plan’ with their teacher, outlining assignments to complete by week's end. As pupils are free to determine when they will work on these assignments during the school hours, it is believed they will learn to plan and to take responsibility for their actions. Finally, with regard to evaluation, pupils are no longer graded. Instead, student report cards give a qualitative description of a child’s development to avoid demotivation or competition among pupils. In addition, pupils are also encouraged to discuss their progress with their teacher and parents by going through their portfolio (i.e., an individual map in which the products of diverse activities are listed) during half-yearly held meetings (For an elaborated description on how Jena Plan schools operate see Gläser-Zikuda et al., 2012).

**Methods**

This study draws on interviews with 23 socioeconomically disadvantaged mothers with a foreign background of whom the children are enrolled at the progressive primary school Park Lane. We deliberately singled out socioeconomically disadvantaged parents with a migrant background as it is especially their children who are defined as the ones who will benefit from progressive education and are, in fact, the reason why progressive education was installed in the first place. As the Ghent education system is characterized by parental freedom of choice,[[2]](#footnote-2) it can be expected that most participating mothers have consciously selected Park Lane, for whatever reason that is (parental motives will be discussed in the result section). Participants were recruited at the school when they were dropping of or picking up their children. In the conversation that ensued, information on the research and researchers was provided and parents were asked for an interview. Although mothers were not deliberately targeted, the resulting sample comprises exclusively women, something that can be explained by the fact that, just like in white middle-class families (Reay, 1998: 148), educational matters appeared to be predominantly ‘mother’s work’ in families with a migrant background (Fleischmann & De Haas, 2016). Although most mothers held no post-secondary degree (22/23) and were unemployed (13/23) or employed in low-skilled jobs (10/23), some were, however, additionally vulnerable as they were foreign born (14/23), making communication in Dutch in almost all instances complicated if not impossible. Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol and were conducted either in Dutch or Turkish and took place in the school, a nearby park or their home, both depending on the choice of the interviewees. The interview protocol focused on mothers’ school choice processes and their preferences regarding pedagogy and curriculum. Mothers were also asked to relate these preferences to Park Lane’s educational practices, reflecting on whether their views aligned with the school’s progressive approach. If not, they were prompted to discuss whether they had voiced their concerns and how the school staff addressed them.

In addition, 6 interviews were carried out with school personnel. More precisely, next to the former and current principal and the bridge figure (i.e., a full-time employee who provides support to disadvantaged and minoritized families and who involves them into school issues) also one teacher per level was interviewed. In these interviews we were particularly interested in whether differences in the preferences of mothers and the actual practice at Park Lane were observed by the school personnel and, if so, how these differences were explained and handled. Interviews with the school personnel were conducted in Dutch and took place at the school. Later on, all interviews were transcribed orthographically. Transcripts were read multiple times and complemented with memos and already existing notes that were taken during and/or immediately after interviews. Finally, a thematic analysis was carried out using the qualitative data analysis software package NVivo (version 11). This provided not only a firm basis to determine how often certain sentiments came to the fore but also a structure for communicating our results. It should be noted, however, that given our small sample size and the focus on one school in one city, results should be interpreted with caution.

**Results**

## The perspectives

Park Lane embraced the Jena Plan pedagogy to enhance their educational effectiveness, believing it could provide all students with a proper education. In interviews, members of the school staff indicated that, in their school, pupils not only learned in a better way but also that they learned better things. As the principal remarked:

I think we are providing these children with traits, traits for life. (…) We provide them with some skills which I think are 21st century skills: co-operation, problem-solving, being flexible, and so on.

This promise was felt to hold especially true in relation to vulnerable children, for whom the Jena Plan pedagogy was felt to be a ‘perfect’ match. However, the fact that the school staff thought progressive educational practices to be best, did not mean that parents thought the same way. In fact, as in other studies on the working-class and/or minoritized families (Albeda, Karsten, and Oosterlynck, 2020; Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe, 1995), it seemed that the school choice process of our respondents was predominantly driven by distance or proximity, in which the shorter a school was located to the home, the more it was considered as an option. Moreover, many mothers indicated ‘not having much information’ beforehand and as such going through the process somewhat uninformed or as one mother argued ‘as blind people’ (cf., with the ‘disconnected choosers’ of Gewirtz et al., 1995). Although mothers were often not able to decipher schools and looked for schools near the home, this did not mean that they were ambivalent toward schooling or the importance of it for their children’s future.

I want them to take their education in a very good school. I think every parent is an idealist when it comes to their kids’ education life. Education, the way of teaching at the school is the most important thing for me. (Meyrem)

However, it did mean that many of them did lack detailed information about Park Lane's progressive (and unconventional) methods at enrolment. This often came as a surprise upon discovery, certainly because most mothers did not seem to support several aspects of the Jena Plan pedagogy. In fact, we were able to discern at least six intertwining aspects of conflict between mothers’ pedagogical vision on the one hand and the one brought into practice by Park Lane on the other hand. In what follows, we will discuss each of these aspects separately. First, many mothers explicitly objected the way in which pupils are grouped in Park Lane. According to them, rather than grouping children in *Stammgruppen*, children should be grouped in single grades. Mothers believed that in a single-grade system, children will book more progress and, hence, be more successful. More precisely, mothers described mixed-age grouping as a ‘disorganized system’ where the ‘age gap’ is too big, both for teachers and pupils, as a consequence of which children might get ‘lost’. Thus, while progressive educators are pushing forward mixed-grade classes as an innovative approach, there were indications that our mothers set such grouping system aside not only as ineffective but also as old fashioned. Indeed, in a profound disbelief, another mother openly wondered why a Belgian school would still hold on to a system that used to exist in Turkey in the past, hence making us question what exactly is progressive. This is not to say that we view ‘things from the past’ in general and mixed-grade classes in particular *de facto* as unprogressive. Rather we want to stress that educational options can appear as progressive or not depending on the perspective taken.

Second, the opinions of mothers and Park Lane differed with regard to evaluation. More precisely, the progressive school recently changed its grading system in accordance with the Jena Plan pedagogy (Gläser-Zikuda et al., 2012). Students are no longer evaluated via points but only via a qualitative description which according to the principal provided parents with ‘a wealth of information’. This, however, is against the position that many of our respondents took.

This new system confuses me a lot. I want to know to what extent my kids are successful or unsuccessful at the school. I need to see it concretely on paper. (…) Now how come they expect us to track the progress of our kids? (Zenyed)

Whereas the school board of Park Lane dropped their old point-based grading system as it was felt points ‘don’t tell you anything’, many mothers in our study indicated the exact opposite, namely having a clearer view of their child’s progress through point-based grading. Indeed, it appeared as if mothers find it hard or even impossible to keep track of their children’s progress via report cards comprising exclusively qualitative descriptions. Commenting on the changed grading system, another mother, for instance, indicated feeling ‘excluded’ from her child’s school life (cf., Bernstein, 1975).

A third point of incongruence between the pedagogical preferences of mothers and the employed pedagogy of Park Lane revolved around styles of teaching. More precisely, some mothers felt that Park Lane puts too much emphasis on self-directed learning, inquiry-based learning, independent learning and/or peer learning at the expense of direct instruction which was preferred. Underlying this preference for direct instruction, is the view that an understanding of subject matter arises only, or most effectively, through instruction. Consequently, mothers believed that exercise and inquiry should follow understanding, not the other way around. Such a sentiment vividly came to the fore through Öykü’s discourse:

If the children don’t know or understand something, they [i.e., the teachers] have to explain it to them. Explanation is understanding. If they do not receive any explanation, they cannot understand it either. (…) I notice that my daughter and also my son do not understand much of the subject matter. I say ‘well if the teacher is present and you do not understand something, you should ask the teacher’. And they reply ‘I ask them mother but she tells me to try and solve it on my own’. They have to understand first to be able to solve things. This is not an okay response from a teacher! (Öykü)

Next to different opinions on adequate grouping systems, evaluation, and teaching styles, the views of mothers and Park Lane also differed around issues of homework. As the school opposed homework, this both from a romantic idea (i.e., the vision that children should be able to act as children) and an egalitarian one (i.e., the belief that homework could strengthen existing inequalities), teachers either did not provide homework assignments or kept these to an absolute minimum. While some mothers supported these arguments, most advocated for a substantial amount of homework, viewing it as crucial to their children's success. They asserted that homework assignments allowed (i) their children to apply and repeat subject matter through exercise, (ii) teachers to keep track of their children’s’ progress, and/or (iii) their children to become more disciplined. This emphasis on discipline extended beyond homework to behaviour within the school and *Stammgruppe*, highlighting discipline as a fifth area of conflict:

Here, at this school, they give children free rein which I really hate and causes me trouble at home. (…) The school should be disciplining the children but they are not. Kids can do whatever they want at the school. I doubt whether my kids are aware of the fact that they go to school rather than going to a playground where they can act freely (…) The children should know the difference between education and entertainment (…) otherwise the kids get confused and become unaware of their educational life and responsibilities. How can they even progress without homework or solely by playing throughout their entire educational life? (…) Whenever I utter my complaints about their way of teaching, I have been repelled by the same answer ‘We do not give homework, this is how the progressive educational system works, you should have known that’. (…) At parents’ evenings, teachers are complaining about the fact that my kids do not study hard and they are not successful in class. What would they expect if they do not give the students homework to make them study hard? It is their fault my kids are unsuccessful. (Azra)

As becomes clear through Azra’s statement, disciplining children and not giving them free rein is found important to avoid ‘trouble at home’ that can be caused by a mismatch between the culture of school and the culture of home. Yet, it is equally clear that the focus on discipline (this through homework assignments and the activities in the school) was also linked to something different. In fact, throughout the data it becomes clear that mothers view discipline (i.e., in the form of hard work in contrast to play) as a key to success in school and in life.[[3]](#footnote-3) When children are forced to work hard, it is believed that they will also become aware of their responsibilities, adopt a rigorous work ethic and develop necessary and valuable skills (see also Lopez, 2001 on ‘the value of hard work’). Of course, this raises the question as to what skills are deemed necessary and/or valuable. Indeed, the answer to the question to what skills should be emphasized in the curriculum was, in fact, a final point in which the opinions of mothers and Park Lane lay at variance. Although often only implicitly present in their discourse, it appeared that mothers gave priority to what can be called ‘basic skills’ and competences in the curriculum, such as ‘the three R’s’ (i.e., reading, writing and arithmetic). In contrast, Park Lane emphasizes educating the ‘whole child’, this through a diverse curriculum in which a significant amount of time goes to the development of creative and social skills. This approach left some mothers rather feeling disgruntled as they felt an insufficient amount of time went to things that matter. One mother, for instance, openly questioned whether the children enrolled at the school are even taught valuable subject matter by teachers.

I think the language level of the children is not really good. I tell them [i.e., the teachers] ‘The classes are very easy. You do not oblige them to do anything. You do not look where things go wrong with the child.’ (…) I ask them ‘what is your job? (…) What do you do to learn them something?’ (Sümeyye)

We want our children to study and get good grades and have a good future, that’s it. We do not think ‘our children have to be able to express themselves’, no. (Imane)

In summary, most mothers in our study seemed to be more partial to traditional or visible pedagogies (see Bossong and Keller, 2018; Tobin & Kurban, 2010 for similar results in an early childhood and care context). This, however, is not to say that no variation exists between respondents’ discourses. In fact, four mothers in our sample shared more ambivalent or even positive feelings regarding progressive educational practices. These mothers indicated, for instance, that ‘a child should be able to stay a child’ and that the children at the school seemed to learn through play and were overall happy. Quite interestingly, it turned out that the mothers who were ambivalent or positive toward progressive education were also the ones who were most fluent in Dutch and had the largest amount of economic capital (e.g., all were owning their home and were part of two-income households), social capital (e.g., although they carried out low-skilled jobs, all of them were integrated in professional settings and, hence, indicated to interact frequently with professionals on an informal level), and cultural capital (e.g., they and their partners all had degrees of high school or higher). In turn, these resources allowed them to monitor and remedy potential educational backlogs.

If I notice ‘he [i.e., Büsrar’s child] has a deficit somewhere’, then I’ll help him. (…). I will always follow up on the school. (…) If necessary, I’ll ask for help. (…) I have a lot of acquaintances and people who are specialized in some studies. And if I would notice ‘there is a problem here that I cannot handle’ then I will always be able to find someone in my environment who could give me advise. (Büsrar)

## The explanation

These differences also explain why other mothers opposed educational progressivism. Indeed, at first glance, these mothers might seem like ‘conservatives’ favouring ‘conservative pedagogies’ (whatever this might mean as our example of mixed-graded grouping makes clear). However, their preferences were not solely shaped by personal educational experiences or beliefs but also by their assessment of (i) the competencies and skills necessary for success in school and life, and (ii) the resources they have at their disposal to facilitate the development of these competencies and skills in their children. Mothers, for instance, knew a high proficiency in the Dutch language was essential for being able to run successful trajectories at school or later in life. For instance, many had experienced, and still are experiencing, the consequences of a poor proficiency in the Dutch language first-hand, something that is not likely to change in the future given the current popularity of assimilation policies. Often this became clear when mothers elaborated on the question as to why they did or did not do something:

We’re always standing outside. (…) This is how I feel. Because we do not speak the language, we’re always standing on the side. This is how I feel all the time. You cannot participate. You cannot say anything… (Kübra)

Moreover, our respondents often evaluated that their children had a backlog in terms of Dutch prior to enrolling in school. They were also aware that such a backlog in the official school language could affect the development of other skills and competencies. As such, these mothers believed their children started their school careers somewhat vulnerable. On top of that, mothers deemed themselves somewhat incapable to respond to such situation. In fact, they (whether or not rightfully) believed that (i) their proficiency in the Dutch language was insufficient to facilitate and monitor their children’s progress and/or (ii) they did not have enough competencies or resources (read: capital) to remedy potential educational backlogs, a sentiment that is in sharp contrast with the confidence displayed by white middle-class parents consciously choosing for progressive education (see Goossens, 2024).

I cannot help my kids with their school life by teaching at home as I am uneducated. Well, even if I had taken education before, I still would not have been able to help them without knowing the language. As their father and mother are both uneducated and unable to take part in their school life, hopefully God will help them find their way… (Azra)

I only knew a few words in Dutch. I felt guilty when my children weren’t doing so well in the school. (…) I tried to help or to follow things up like ‘what have you done today?’ but I did not understand anything. (Ajkuna)

Consequently, most mothers in our study favoured an educational approach that kept children on a structured path: direct instruction in single-grade classes focused on basic skills like the three R’s, regular homework, and point-based evaluations (see also Bossong & Keller, 2018; Christie & Szorenyi, 2015; Civil, Planas & Quintos, 2005; Delpit, 2006; Dyson, 2001; Tobin & Kurban, 2010). Unlike parents who viewed their capital, language proficiency, and children’s language skills as sufficient to allow for broader curricular priorities (see Goossens, 2024), these mothers were less confident that their children would easily develop basic skills. As a result, they prioritized rigorous academic focus through a ‘visible pedagogy,’ believing basic skills to be both essential and challenging to master given their circumstances.

Without Dutch, without any language, what are you? You are nothing! I have experienced this myself in the beginning. I do not speak perfectly but I already understand [i.e., the Dutch language]. (…) If they [i.e., Ajkuna’s children] know Dutch well, they will have better report cards. (…) School is everything. (…) If they have a nice degree, of course they will get a nice job. (Ajkuna)

This did not mean mothers opposed creativity or social skill development. Rather, they saw basic skills as foundational, arguing that these must take precedence, especially when their children struggled with Dutch proficiency. For these mothers, it was a matter of priorities: while creativity and social skills were valuable, they felt they lacked the luxury to emphasize them when fundamental skills were at risk.[[4]](#footnote-4) Basic proficiency, they believed, was a prerequisite for both academic and future success. Moreover, although there is certainly a risk of falling into researcher speculation, it appeared as if mothers, while not being able to ensure the development of basic skills, could, however, personally take care of the development of social and creative skills. Some mothers, for instance, indicated doing handicrafts with their children at home or going to park which allowed both the mothers and their children to socialize with peers; the latter of which we could experience first-hand as most interviews took place in a park adjacent to the school.

## The response

As the quotations illustrate, mothers occasionally voiced complaints to school staff about aspects of the Jena Plan pedagogy. This created a challenging dynamic for staff, who were torn between their commitment to educational progressivism and their desire to engage with and involve parents (see also Tobin and Kurban, 2010 for similar results in an early childhood and care context). Indeed, while this tension was less evident with white middle-class parents who often supported the school’s practices, it frequently arose with socioeconomically disadvantaged parents of migrant backgrounds. These parents tended to favour traditional or visible pedagogies; a preference which was believed to be caused by ‘conservative’ or ‘uninformed’ views.

You notice that they [i.e., parents with a migrant background] are still more conservative with regard to their view on education and homework than many of these white parents (…) So you always try to find a solution that everybody can accept and that fits with our way of working. Because when a parent comes around and says ‘I think my child doesn’t get enough homework and I want that he/she gets two worksheets every week, one for arithmetic and one for spelling’, I cannot say ‘alright, here you have two’ as this totally does not fit to the way we work around here. So you try to explain ‘look, we do not work here in the way that you have possibly been used to in the past. (…) We work here like this.’ (Eric, teacher of a *Stammgruppe* in the higher levels)

[While highly-educated middle-class parents have thought a lot about pedagogy], I think another category of parents think a lot less about these things. (…) Reading a book about pedagogy, or knowing who Rousseau is, what do they care? I think these parents are not aware what a school can be except from a machine that transfers knowledge. (Principal)

As becomes evident through the statement of Eric, school staff sought solutions acceptable to all when pedagogical conflicts arose. However, they tried to do this without compromising their commitment to the Jena Plan pedagogy. they frequently resorted to explaining the school’s practices. As one staff member remarked, ‘it is up to us to convince these parents of the value of our project.’ Convinced of the Jena Plan’s benefits—especially for socioeconomically vulnerable and minoritized pupils—staff felt compelled to stand their ground, even if opposition came from the very families they aimed to help. Mothers in our study, nevertheless, were not really satisfied by such response and argued that, whenever they utter their complaints, they get the ‘usual answer’ from the school staff, namely that ‘they [i.e., the teachers] cannot change the school’s education system’. Consequently, some mothers felt as if the teachers never listened to their ‘complaints and concerns by heart’. Ultimately such strategy made it possible for the school staff to maintain the educational practices they thought best. However, at the same time, this strategy caused mothers feeling unheard, disempowered, and excluded from their children’s education.

**Discussion**

From time to time, progressive educationalists and educational practitioners have tried to respond to the needs of all children by turning to child-centred, holistic and experiential practices. However, this is not the same as responding to disadvantaged and minoritized families by adapting the educational system to their views. Indeed, as this study makes clear, many disadvantaged and minoritized mothers tend to oppose progressive pedagogies. Rather than a progressive system, these mothers see more value in a traditional approach characterized by single-grade grouping, point-based grading, direct instruction, homework assignments, thorough disciplining, and a focus on basic skills. So how can progressive educationalists deal with such situation? When professionally convinced that a system could benefit pupils, what to do when parents do not share this opinion and even oppose to it? As it seems paradoxical to try and help disadvantaged and minoritized pupils by ignoring and silencing the perspectives of their families, should they then do the exact opposite, meaning adapting an educational system to the wishes and preferences of disadvantaged and minoritized families, thereby abnegating any professional beliefs (cf., Dyson, 2001)? Vandenbroeck (2009: 167) accurately describes this conundrum when stating:

As progressive academics or practitioners, how can we not take into account the perspective of parents who wish to ‘conform’ to standards of academic achievement (or to achieve this cultural capital as Bourdieu could have said), rather than to discuss holistic education? But on the other hand, how can we, if we have consecrated a major part of our lives to child centeredness? As a critical pedagogue I may argue that this parental question of conformity with the dominant norms and values is to be considered as ‘internalized oppression’ (Freire, 1970). But then again, wasn’t it also Freire who said ‘Dialogue cannot exist without humility? […] How can I dialogue if I always project ignorance onto others and not perceive my own?’ (1970, 78).

The staff of our case study school first and foremost tried to convince parents of the value of progressive education. Although genuinely entering into a discussion with parents when complaints were made, the staff was not willing to open the door for any alterations (see also Bossong and Keller, 2018 for similar results in a day care setting). The staff adhered to what they felt comprised a proper education, certainly as the perspectives of parents were attributed to conservatism and ignorance. Parental perspectives were regarded as problematical, something that needed to be overcome on the way to providing better education. Consequently, discussions were primarily seen as a way to manage parents and bring them into their camp. While this view of parents and its ensuing strategies proved effective in safeguarding progressive practices at the school, it also tended to foreclose discussions on educational matters even before they took off. The mothers in our study seem to buttress this as they felt unheard and did not have the feeling that any real dialogue took place. Consequently, such an approach runs risk of installing new inequalities in an attempt to tackle old ones. Rather than trying to swiftly overcome parental opposition, it could prove out more meaningful to fully engage with the perspectives of parents. This is, in fact, what is suggested by Lisa Delpit (2006, pp. 46-47) in her book Other People’s Children:

Educators must open themselves to, and allow themselves to be affected by, these alternative voices. (…) To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment – and that is not easy. It is painful as well, because it means turning yourself inside out, giving up your own sense of who you are, and being willing to see yourself in the unflattering light of another’s angry gaze. It is not easy, but it is the only way to learn what it might feel like to be someone else and the only way to start the dialogue.

While engaging with parental perspectives might not be easy—Housen (2022), for instance, shows that the fear of being judged is a key reason why teachers tend to keep parents at arm’s length—our findings suggest that engaging in dialogue can be meaningful in at least two significant ways. Firstly, embracing parental perspectives holds democratic significance. Given the inherent connection between educational progressivism and democracy (Darling & Nordenbo 2003; Mirel, 2003), engaging in dialogue enables educators to both honour and reimagine progressive educational practices. Second, seriously engaging with parental perspectives might serve as a pathway to delivering a responsive education to all children. This is because parental perspectives along with the reasoning behind them, can be valuable sources of information rather than inherent obstacles. Contrary to the prevailing assumption in previous studies, where parental perspectives are often attributed to traditional educational experiences in the country of origin without much interrogation, our research unveils a more nuanced reality. We found that parental perspectives may also be influenced by negative experiences in the host country and a desire to strategically shield their children from similar challenges in the future. While we acknowledge that the educational experiences of minoritized communities in their countries of origin may indeed shape their perspectives to some extent, it's essential not to oversimplify or solely attribute their viewpoints to outdated experiences without questioning. In this regard, our study serves as a cautionary tale against over-culturalising parental perspectives. By highlighting the structural barriers that parents identify as hindering their children's ability to benefit from progressive educational practices, we are compelled to consider not only pedagogical but also broader societal interventions.

By engaging with parents, this study has thus drawn a more complex picture. This does neither imply that the mothers in our study got it all right, nor that progressive educationalist and educational practitioners should simply concede or abandon their expertise. It is nevertheless a call to engage with parents as experts in search of such picture. While it is needless to say that our (scientific and experiential) expertise is, and deserves to be, crucial in developing educational practices – not in the least because it can give us an insight in what might work—it's essential to recognize that this knowledge cannot definitively predict what will work in practice. This is because education occurs within dynamic, context-rich environments, and our study revealed that mothers often questioned the effectiveness of progressive educational practices, particularly in relation to the unique context in which they and their children find themselves. As Biesta (2016, p. 3) argues, dialogue ‘is not about winning or losing,’ nor is it necessarily about finding a compromise. It's about challenging our perspectives and striving for justice (Delpit, 2006). To foster meaningful dialogue, we propose three key considerations next to open hearts and minds. Firstly, a willingness to temporarily set aside predetermined questions or to reframe them in new ways (e.g., from ‘how can we integrate progressive educational practices effectively?’ to ‘how might we create a responsive education?’). Secondly, an openness for new and additional questions to emerge (e.g., ‘what could a responsive education entail?’). Finally, a recognition that educational decisions should not be solely guided by scientific knowledge but should also incorporate other forms of knowledge, values, and value judgments. While the outcomes of such dialogue may be unpredictable, and the answers may never be definitive, we believe this process is not only meaningful but point to the essence of education itself.

**Disclosure statement**

*The authors report there are no competing interests to declare*.

**Ethics approval and informed consent statement**

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences at Ghent University. Written informed consent was obtained from all mothers that participated in this study.

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1. One could, in fact, argue that tackling educational inequality doesn’t challenge neoliberalism—if anything, it strengthens it as its target is not inequality itself but the unequal distribution of inequality, hence looking to make the workings of our meritocratic society purer and more efficient. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. . During a certain period, parents are allowed to submit enrolment requests for all Ghent schools, after which requests are ordered on the basis of the distance between a child’s residence and the school, in which the shorter the distance, the higher the ranking a child obtains. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. . As Bernstein (1975) argues, ‘play’ is central to progressive pedagogies, allowing children to reveal themselves to teachers, who can then assess and guide their development. In this context, the line between work and play is blurred. As Bernstein (1975: 24) states, ‘in essence, play is work and work is play.’ While many mothers in our study recognized the emphasis on play in progressive education—both literally and figuratively—they did not perceive play as a form of work or an effective method of learning. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Similarly, Louis (2024), reflecting on his brother's death, highlights how socioeconomically disadvantaged families are deprived of the possibility to take risks or experiment as the consequences could be disastrous. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)