




Power, Knowledge, and Marginalization: A Foucauldian Analysis of Children from Low-Income Immigrant Households in Norway

Patrick Agyare^a

a. School of Business and Economics,
UiT The Arctic University of Norway
Email: patriagy@outlook.com

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ABSTRACT

This study critically analyzes the discursive constructions of immigrant children from low-income households in Norwegian official publications between 2014 and 2024. The study uses Foucauldian discourse analysis to explore the representation of these children, the power dynamics and knowledge claims present in these discourses, and the implications for policy interventions and resource allocation. The analysis focuses on publications from key institutions, including the Directorate of Integration and Diversity, the Ministry of Children and Families, the Ministry of Labor and Social Inclusion, the Norwegian Labor and Welfare Administration, and Statistics Norway. The findings reveal that the portrayal of these children as vulnerable and socio-economically disadvantaged frequently exacerbates their challenges due to their immigrant background and poverty status. While such narratives drive targeted interventions aimed at alleviating poverty, they risk reinforcing hierarchical power dynamics and perpetuating the marginalization of immigrant families by focusing on remedial measures rather than addressing systemic inequalities. The study identifies a deficit-based framing that emphasizes dependency and vulnerability, which overlooks the potential, resilience, and agency of immigrant children. Instead, it advocates for a shift towards policies that address structural inequalities, promote social inclusion, and emphasize empowerment. A more comprehensive, intersectional approach to policy is recommended—one that not only provides economic support but also ensures equitable access to education, housing, and employment opportunities while dismantling systemic barriers. The findings underscore the necessity for transformative policies that challenge existing power structures and prioritize social justice, equity, and inclusive communities that better align with the host society's values and social structure.

KEYWORDS

Immigrant children, low-income households, Foucauldian discourse analysis, Norway, socio-economic integration, social justice.

INTRODUCTION

Norway, known for its strong social welfare programs and equitable distribution of wealth, faces a growing concern regarding children from low-income immigrant households. Despite the country's commitment to social justice, a significant portion of this population endures financial hardship, impacting their overall well-being and future prospects (Dzamarija, 2016; Epland, 2018; Fløtten, 2020). This issue is particularly pronounced among children with immigrant backgrounds, who are statistically more likely to experience socio-economic deprivation compared to their native-born peers (Epland & Kirkeberg, 2014; Oppøyen, 2023). Studies such as Dalen et al. (2022), Dzamarija (2016), Ekren and Grendal (2021), Epland (2016, 2018), Epland and Kirkeberg (2014, 2015, 2017), Epland and Normann (2021), Furuberg et al. (2022), Grini and Pettersen (2021), Langeland et al. (2014), Normann (2019, 2021), Normann and Epland (2022), Omholt (2018), Oppøyen (2023), Pettersen (2021), and Statistics Norway (2024) have extensively examined the socio-economic challenges faced by immigrant communities in Norway. However, a critical gap remains in understanding how power dynamics, the construction of knowledge, and official discourses shape, perpetuate, and reinforce the marginalization of children from low-income immigrant households.

This study aims to address this issue by critically analyzing the structural and socio-political factors that hinder equality and social justice for immigrant children from low-income households. By examining official publications from 2014 to 2024, the article seeks to uncover how dominant discourses, power structures, and institutional narratives contribute to their marginalization and oppression. In particular, the study investigates how these children are represented in official publications, what power dynamics and knowledge claims underlie these discourses, and how such constructions influence policy interventions and resource distribution. Employing Foucault's (1982) concepts of power, knowledge, and discourse, this study reveals how these publications shape the identities and socio-economic circumstances of children from low-income immigrant households.

Focusing on power uncovers how these communications influence public opinion and policy decisions regarding such children. For instance, the careful selection of language, framing of issues, and presentation of data in official documents can either reinforce or challenge existing power structures and inequalities. Examining knowledge production highlights the significant role these publications play in creating and disseminating information about children from low-income immigrant backgrounds. These documents often establish what is considered 'true' or 'valid' knowledge, shaping public understanding and guiding policy decisions. Analyzing the discourse used in these communications allows for an exploration of the underlying systems of meaning and belief that influence how these children are represented. Scrutinizing the language, narratives, and images within the texts helps identify whether dominant ideologies and stereotypes are being reinforced or challenged (Feder, 2010; van Dijk, 1992; Wodak & Reisigl, 2015). Therefore, analyzing the documents can reveal the power dynamics and knowledge claims embedded within them, while also identifying factors contributing to the

disparities and inequalities faced by this demographic. These insights are essential for guiding advocacy, policy development, and interventions aimed at promoting social justice and equity.

The paper proceeds as follows: The literature review covers key theoretical perspectives, starting with the role of discourse in shaping identity, policy, and societal change, followed by power, knowledge, and discourse from a Foucauldian lens. It then looks at immigration, demographic shifts, and integration in Norway, as well as discursive constructions of low income and poverty. Finally, it addresses socio-economic disparities among immigrant children in Norwegian discourse. The methods section outlines the analytical framework used in Foucauldian discourse analysis. The findings present insights into discourse construction and implications for policy. The discussion connects these findings to the literature, and the conclusion summarizes key points and suggests future research directions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of Discourse in Shaping Identity, Policy, and Societal Change

Discourse plays a critical role in shaping identity, influencing policy, and driving societal change. The studies by Guion Akdağ and Swanson (2017), Leipold et al. (2019), Riley et al. (2021), Smith-Carrier and Lawlor (2017), and Spohrer et al. (2017) are very helpful because they show how power dynamics and the ideas that are part of official discourse affect how disadvantaged groups are portrayed and dealt with in policy interventions. Spohrer et al. (2017) conducted an in-depth analysis of UK policy discourses aimed at raising aspirations among disadvantaged youth, employing Foucauldian discourse analysis to examine how such policies regulate and shape individual identities. Their study demonstrated that these policies framed disadvantaged youth in dualistic terms: simultaneously as deficient and as possessing latent potential. This construction of identity through policy discourse highlights the role of power in shaping how individuals from marginalized backgrounds perceive themselves and are perceived by society. The emphasis on attitudinal change and personal transformation in these policies echoes broader neoliberal ideologies, which prioritize self-improvement as a pathway to mobility. The current study seeks to understand the similar representation of children from low-income immigrant households in official publications and how these representations shape their self-perceptions and opportunities in society.

Guion Akdağ and Swanson (2017) extended this line of inquiry by applying Foucauldian discourse analysis to the context of higher education policies, specifically focusing on internationalization policies at Scottish universities. Their study revealed how certain regimes of truth dominate official discourse, marginalizing alternative narratives and ideologies. This insight into the exclusionary nature of official discourses is pertinent to understanding how the experiences and needs of children from low-income immigrant households may be similarly marginalized or silenced in policy documents. The concept of "regimes of truth" helps to illuminate the ideological investments that underlie the construction of these children in official discourse and the policy implications that follow. Riley et al. (2021) further explored the utility

of Foucauldian-informed discourse analysis in identity research, particularly in understanding how neoliberal norms embedded in societal structures shape individuals' self-perceptions and behaviors. Their findings suggest that individuals are often encouraged to conform to neoliberal ideals of self-sufficiency and personal responsibility, even when such expectations may not align with their lived realities. In this study, the representation of children from low-income immigrant households in official publications may similarly reflect neoliberal assumptions, framing them in ways that emphasize individual responsibility while obscuring structural inequalities that shape their experiences.

Leipold et al. (2019) highlighted the growing application of discourse analysis in environmental policy, underscoring the need for comparative studies and theoretical cross-fertilization to understand how discourses influence policy outcomes. Their emphasis on discursive effects on policy practice resonates with the aim of the current study, which seeks to explore how the representation of children from low-income immigrant households in public discourse influences resource allocation and policy interventions. The publications' Foucauldian discourse analysis may reveal the extent to which these children are framed in ways that perpetuate existing power imbalances. Smith-Carrier and Lawlor (2017) provided a critical analysis of Ontario's poverty reduction strategy, demonstrating how the exclusion of human rights discourses from policy texts allows governments to evade responsibility for ensuring basic living standards. This insight is particularly relevant to the present study's focus on low-income immigrant households, as it suggests that the way policies frame poverty can significantly influence the extent to which governments acknowledge and address the needs of marginalized groups. By omitting human rights frameworks, policymakers may create discursive spaces that justify the continued marginalization of disadvantaged groups. These studies underscore the central role of discourse in shaping identities and informing policy interventions, particularly for underprivileged populations. They demonstrate how discursive constructions of disadvantaged groups, such as children from low-income immigrant households, are informed by power relations and ideological investments, ultimately influencing resource distribution and perpetuating cycles of marginalization.

Power, Knowledge, and Discourse: A Foucauldian Lens

Foucault's (1982) conceptual framework of power, knowledge, and discourse provides a robust lens through which to examine how knowledge is produced and power is exercised through language. By understanding how these elements intertwine to construct and maintain social realities, this study effectively explores how dominant discourses impede equality and social justice for children from low-income immigrant households. According to Foucault, the dominant class does not wield power as a repressive force but rather as a productive mechanism deeply ingrained in social structures and practices (Townley, 1993). It produces topics, knowledge, and social realities. It is not only top-down but also distributed across various social fields. Consistent with this study, power is evident in the ways official documents construct and regulate the identities and opportunities of children from low-income immigrant households.

Analyzing how power is exercised through institutions allows for a holistic examination of the production of particular kinds of subjects - the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor - and to maintain existing social hierarchies (Wodak & Reisigl, 2015).

Foucault argues that knowledge is not neutral but is inextricably linked to power (Levin, 2010; Townley, 1993). Power/knowledge produces specific forms of knowledge that are considered true and valid, while simultaneously excluding other perspectives. Analyzing how specific forms of knowledge about poverty, childhood, and immigration are produced and circulated through official documents, and ultimately, policies and practices that impact children from low-income immigrant households. Discourse, for Foucault, is more than language; it is a system of thought and practice that produces knowledge, shapes subjectivity, and governs social practices (Levin, 2010; Townley, 1993).

In this study, discourses about poverty, immigration, and childhood intersect to create specific representations of children from low-income immigrant households. These discourses are not mere vessels of language; they are the very architecture of power (Foucault, 1982). They do not float above reality, detached and impartial, but are deeply entrenched in the fabric of social hierarchies and control (Heracleous, 2006). Every word, every phrase carries with it the weight of historical and contemporary struggles, the echoes of dominance and resistance (van Dijk, 1992).

These discourses are battlegrounds where meaning is contested, where the powerful inscribe their narratives onto the world, shaping perceptions, beliefs, and actions. They are the tools of influence, wielded to maintain the status quo or to challenge it, to include or to exclude, to empower or to oppress (Wodak & Reisigl, 2015). There is no neutrality in discourse—only the persistent interplay of power, where silence can speak louder than words and the unspoken can dictate the terms of engagement (Feder, 2010; van Dijk, 1992; Wodak & Reisigl, 2015). The battlefield not only exchanges ideas but also fights over them, with the victors setting the rules that others must abide by (Foucault, 1982). By exploring the interplay of these discourses, this study can discover how power relations are produced, maintained, and potentially challenged.

Immigration, Demographic Shifts, and Integration in Norway

Understanding Norway's immigrant population, their demographic changes, and the challenges they face in integration is crucial for analyzing their representation in official discourses and how these narratives influence policy interventions and resource distribution. According to Statistics Norway, an immigrant is someone legally residing in Norway who was born abroad to two foreign-born parents and four foreign-born grandparents (Dzamarija, 2008; Dzamarija, 2014; Lysen et al., 2024). This definition includes individuals born abroad or in Norway under these conditions, with the latter being termed Norwegian-born to immigrant parents (Dzamarija, 2008; Dzamarija, 2014; Lysen et al., 2024). Therefore, this study uses ‘immigrant’ to refer to both immigrants and Norwegian-born individuals with immigrant parents.

The immigrant population in Norway has seen a significant increase over the past five decades. In 1970, there were 57,000 immigrants, making up less than 1.5% of the total

population. By 2023, this number had grown to 877,000, accounting for 16% of the population (Steinkellner et al., 2023). Over these 53 years, the composition of the immigrant group in Norway has also evolved, with immigrants in 2023 hailing from 223 different countries and self-governing regions (Steinkellner et al., 2023). The motivations for immigration encompass a range of factors such as employment opportunities, family reunification, seeking refuge, and educational pursuits (Dzamarija & Bjørnskau, 2019). This demographic is characterized by diversity, with the largest immigrant groups hailing from Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, Sweden, and Syria, while the largest Norwegian-born individuals with immigrant parents came from countries like Pakistan, Somalia, and Iraq (Lysen et al., 2024; Steinkellner et al., 2023).

However, the integration of immigrants into the host society presents challenges across several dimensions, including education and employment. Educational attainment varies significantly among immigrant groups, with language proficiency being a critical factor for successful integration (Ekren & Grendal, 2021). Employment rates also differ, with many immigrants facing barriers such as language skills, credential recognition, work experience, and networking (Dzamarija, 2016; Dalen et al., 2022). Discrimination, whether direct or indirect, contributes to these disparities and is often based on characteristics such as ethnicity, religion, and language (Cossette-Lefebvre, 2020).

Discursive Constructions of Low Income and Poverty

Poverty in Norway is a multifaceted issue, influenced by various social and economic factors. It is primarily understood as a relative concept, meaning individuals or households are considered poor if their standard of living is significantly below the average in their community (Borgeraas, 2017; Langeland et al., 2017). This contrasts with an absolute definition, which focuses on the lack of basic necessities. Accurately measuring poverty is challenging. Traditional income-based measures like the EU-60 and OECD-50 may not fully capture its complexities, as they focus mainly on economic factors and may exclude non-monetary resources (Decancq et al., 2014; OECD, 2016). To address these limitations, alternative approaches such as consumption-based measures and the inclusion of social and material deprivation factors have been explored (Brady, 2019; Deeming, 2020; Mood & Jonsson, 2016). Consumption-based measures assess whether a household can afford a minimum basket of goods and services necessary for a decent standard of living, exemplified by SIFO's minimum budget (Borgeraas, 2017). Social and material deprivation factors, including access to housing, education, healthcare, and social networks, are also crucial in understanding poverty (Mood & Jonsson, 2016). Cultural factors, such as home production and informal exchanges of services, can influence perceptions and experiences of poverty, particularly in immigrant communities (Brady, 2019).

Moreover, low income is often referred to as poverty, which is largely associated with perceived living conditions and problems such as material and social deficiencies. It can be linked to more than just a low level of income. Children from low-income immigrant households represent a particularly vulnerable segment of the host society (Dzamarija, 2016; Epland, 2016; 2018; Grini & Pettersen, 2021; Normann, 2019; Omholt, 2018; Vrålstad, 2014). They are

increasingly overrepresented in poverty statistics, with 6 out of 10 children in this category belonging to immigrant households (Epland & Normann, 2021). However, recent statistics indicate that 10.6%, or approximately 102,600 children under 18 years old, belonged to households with persistent low income in 2022—the lowest number and proportion since 2016 (Normann, 2024). This figure marks a decline of 0.7 percentage points, equivalent to 8,100 children, compared to the period from 2018 to 2021, when 115,000 children belonged to households with persistently low income, representing 11.7% of the total population (Epland & Normann, 2021).

Persistently low income can be analyzed using a variety of methodologies. One commonly used approach involves averaging household incomes over several years and identifying those below a specified percentage of the median average (Eurostat, 2021). Consistent with Eurostat (2021), persistent low income is defined as having an income below the annual limit in the most recent year, as well as in at least two of the three preceding years. The challenges faced by children due to poverty are especially concerning because children lack the agency to alter their circumstances—a situation that starkly contrasts with Norway's ideal of equality. Nevertheless, immigrants may face various forms of shortcomings, including overt acts of prejudice or bias, as well as situations where seemingly neutral policies or practices disproportionately disadvantage them (Directorate of Integration and Diversity, 2021, 2024; Oppøyen, 2022, 2023).

Socio-Economic Disparities among Immigrant Children in Norwegian Discourse

Norwegian official publications consistently highlight the significant socio-economic disparities faced by immigrant children in the country. These studies reveal that immigrant children are disproportionately concentrated in low-income households, a condition influenced by factors such as educational achievement, labor market participation, housing conditions, and future economic prospects compared to their native-born peers (Epland & Kirkeberg, 2014; 2015; Vrålstad, 2014; Dzamarija, 2016; Epland, 2016; 2018; Omholt, 2018; Normann, 2019; Grini & Pettersen, 2021). Early foundational studies by Epland and Kirkeberg (2014, 2015, 2017) offer critical insights into the demographic, educational, and income characteristics of these children, emphasizing their overrepresentation in low-income households and the associated links to lower academic attainment and diminished economic opportunities. Notably, Epland and Kirkeberg (2014) underlined that the relative importance of child benefits declined from nearly one-fifth of household income in 1998 to just 8% in 2012 for low-income families.

Kalcic and Ye (2023) further examine the educational paths of immigrants and Norwegian-born individuals with immigrant parents, focusing on how socio-economic status and parental education influence their outcomes. The study reveals that immigrants, particularly from Africa and Asia, achieve lower primary school points and have reduced secondary education completion rates compared to the general population, though those from EU/EFTA/UK countries fare better. Ekren and Grendal (2021) also emphasize the long-term educational and employment disadvantages for children from low-income households, linking

prolonged economic instability to lower educational attainment and weaker labor market attachment. Their findings are supported by Lian et al. (2022), who analyze the economic impact of rising household expenses, noting the disproportionate burden on low-income families. Normann (2019) further highlights disparities in academic performance among children and young adults with immigrant backgrounds in Norway, linking these to parental education and socio-economic factors. Correspondingly, Pettersen (2021) discusses the socio-economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly on young people not in employment, education, or training (NEET), stressing the need for targeted support to address increased vulnerabilities.

Expanding on these economic dimensions, Langeland et al. (2014) and Epland (2016) discuss how sustained high levels of immigration have exacerbated poverty among immigrant families, despite Norway's generally high standard of living. A recurring theme in these studies is the persistence of low-income status among immigrant households and its long-term implications for children's educational and economic prospects. The Official Norwegian Reports (2017: 2) assesses the impact of immigration on social cohesion and the welfare state, examining cultural differences and the effectiveness of current integration policies. The Directorate of Integration and Diversity (2024) also emphasizes the importance of equal opportunities and robust integration policies to address these disparities. The intersection of immigration and socio-economic status is highlighted by the disproportionate impact of economic shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and rising living costs on low-income immigrant families (Pettersen, 2021; Lian et al., 2022).

Epland (2016) and Dzamarija (2016) underscore the disproportionate concentration of children from countries such as Poland and Somalia in lower socio-economic strata, concerning both income and education. Grini and Pettersen (2021) further analyze the socio-economic conditions of immigrant children, revealing significant disparities in educational outcomes and income levels. They stress the urgent need for targeted policy interventions to bridge the gaps between immigrant and native children, particularly in education and economic stability. Similarly, Omholt et al. (2018) reveal the declining role of child benefit for low-income families in Norway. Between 2006 and 2016, its share of total income significantly decreased, while other social benefits like introduction benefit, social assistance, and housing allowance gained importance (Omholt et al., 2018). During this period, poverty rates among families with children, particularly those from immigrant backgrounds and single parents, increased. Despite a steady rise in the nominal value of child benefit since 1996, its real value has eroded due to inflation and a weaker exchange rate, highlighting the growing financial strain on low-income immigrant families and the need for policy adjustments (Omholt et al., 2018).

In exploring the multifaceted nature of child poverty, Fløtten and Nielsen (2020) emphasize the importance of addressing structural inequalities and advocate for targeted policies to mitigate the adverse effects of poverty on children's development and well-being. Furuberg et al. (2022) offer a comprehensive examination of low-income living conditions in Norway, focusing on trends and developments over time. Their study delves into various socio-

economic factors affecting low-income households, such as employment, education, and social benefits. Through both quantitative and qualitative methods, the researchers identify systemic issues like employment instability and insufficient social benefits that disproportionately impact immigrant families. This study is pivotal in highlighting the disparities and challenges faced by different demographic groups, thereby laying the groundwork for informed policy-making and targeted interventions. Normann (2021) provides an in-depth examination of the socio-economic conditions affecting children growing up in low-income households in Norway. The study analyzes statistical data, highlighting the increasing prevalence of child poverty and its correlation with various socio-demographic factors. It further explores the multifaceted nature of poverty, particularly its impact on children's educational outcomes, social integration, and overall well-being. Additionally, the study discusses the geographical distribution of low-income households, noting significant disparities between urban and rural areas. By situating the analysis within the broader context of Norwegian social policies, the study underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions to mitigate the adverse effects of poverty on children (Normann, 2021).

Immigrant children face significant challenges beyond educational and economic difficulties. Oppøyen (2023) highlights housing insecurity among immigrant families, often due to lower incomes and limited access to the housing market. Expanding on this disparity, Vrålstad (2014) pointed out that approximately 122,000 people in Norway face housing challenges due to tight living conditions or financial constraints. Vulnerable groups, including households with children, especially those with more children, and immigrants are disproportionately affected (Vrålstad, 2014). In line with this, the Directorate of Integration and Diversity (2015) highlights that low-income levels among those with an immigrant background can heavily influence their experiences in Norway's housing market. Adding to these concerns, Thorsen (2017) suggests that between 177,000 and 282,400 individuals may face significant obstacles when trying to secure housing, varying based on different metrics. Immigrants, particularly those who rent or reside in Oslo, are among the most at risk (Thorsen, 2017).

In a similar vein, Statistics Norway (2024) underlines lower homeownership rates and higher levels of overcrowding among this demographic. Such housing issues are tied to broader systemic problems like rental market instability, high rental costs, and lack of long-term job security. These factors significantly increase the risk of poverty for immigrant families, particularly those who rent rather than own homes. Although the income gap between immigrants and the general population has narrowed since 2015, homeownership rates among immigrants and their descendants remain lower (Lysen et al., 2024). Additionally, a high proportion of immigrants relied on social assistance between 2015 and 2022 (Lysen et al., 2024). Oppøyen (2023) further examines the housing conditions of immigrants and their children in Norway, revealing that they are less likely to own homes and more likely to live in overcrowded conditions compared to the native population. This disparity is attributed to socio-economic factors like lower income, employment instability, and systemic housing market barriers, with

statistical data underscoring how these inequalities persist and affect the well-being of immigrant families (Oppøyen, 2023).

Normann and Epland (2022) analyze the persistent low-income conditions affecting children in Norway, focusing on data from 2020. According to the study, 115,000 children, or 11.7% of all children in the country, live in households with a sustained low income. The authors examine various contributing factors, including employment status, household composition, and social benefits, with particular emphasis on the impact on immigrant families (Normann & Epland, 2022). In a follow-up study, Normann and Epland (2023) note a slight decline in the proportion of children in low-income households, with 11.3% (110,700 children) affected in 2021, marking the first decrease in a decade. Moderate income growth, particularly among families with young children, and increased child welfare contribute to this improvement. Despite this decrease, the overall proportion remains high, and the issue persists (Normann & Epland, 2023). By early 2024, the proportion of children in low-income households had decreased to 10.6%. However, this remains above the 10% threshold crossed in 2015, following a period of relative stability around 8% between 2008 and 2012, with figures as low as 6.7% in 2005 (Normann, 2024).

Oppøyen (2022) explores the prevalence of discrimination, revealing that one in five people experiences it. The study uses quantitative data to examine how discrimination varies across demographics such as ethnicity, socio-economic status, and gender within the broader context of social inequality. It identifies young adults, immigrants, non-heterosexuals, and those with poor health or low socio-economic status as the most affected groups, with young people particularly reporting higher rates of age-related discrimination. Supporting this, the Directorate of Integration and Diversity (2021) notes that discrimination can hinder immigrants from securing jobs. A larger proportion of immigrants work part-time compared to the general population, often involuntarily. Furthermore, immigrants from Asia, Africa, and Latin America are more frequently employed in temporary positions (Directorate of Integration and Diversity, 2021).

Midtbøen's (2016) correspondence test study in Norway revealed that individuals with Pakistani-sounding names received 25% fewer callbacks for initial interviews compared to those with Norwegian-sounding names, despite having identical qualifications. This finding is consistent with other research suggesting that hiring managers tend to favor candidates who resemble themselves (Rogstad & Sterri, 2014). Similarly, the Directorate of Integration and Diversity (2024) conducted a nationwide survey among individuals with immigrant backgrounds, investigating trust, belonging, participation, and discrimination. While many respondents felt integrated, they also encountered ongoing barriers and discrimination. Issues of identity and belonging were significant, as many with immigrant backgrounds felt that others viewed them as less Norwegian than they perceived themselves to be.

Furthermore, discrimination remains a persistent issue across various aspects of life, including the workplace, housing market, education system, and public spaces (Directorate of

Integration and Diversity, 2024). Immigrants from Africa, Asia, and Muslims, in particular, experience widespread discrimination. Norwegian-born individuals with immigrant parents face discrimination at similar rates as individuals born abroad (Barstad, 2024). According to the Fafo survey on everyday integration, nearly half (47%) of individuals with backgrounds from Pakistan, Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Poland reported experiencing worse treatment in the past 12 months, compared to 21% in the control group. The main reasons cited were ethnic background, skin color, and religion/worldview (Dalen et al., 2022). Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive policies focused on promoting equality and social justice. These policies can be informed by understanding how official publications portray immigrant children from low-income households, the power dynamics and knowledge claims embedded in these representations, and their impact on policy interventions and resource distribution.

METHODS

This study employs a Foucauldian discourse analytical framework to explore how official publications from 2014 to 2024 construct and represent children from low-income immigrant households. It examines the underlying power dynamics and knowledge claims implanted in these representations, as well as their influence on policy interventions and resource allocation. Foucauldian discourse analysis is a critical, constructionist approach that examines how power relations shape knowledge, discourses, and societal practices (Waitt, 2010). Rooted in the work of Foucault (1982), this framework investigates how language, institutions, and cultural norms influence the production of knowledge, the categorization of individuals and groups, and the construction of societal truths (Khan & MacEachen, 2021). In Foucauldian terms, discourse extends beyond language to include systems of knowledge and meaning that structure our understanding of reality. These systems comprise organized statements, ideas, and practices ingrained in specific historical, social, and political contexts. Discourse determines what can be said, who can say it, and what is accepted as knowledge. It also governs what is left unsaid, marginalizing particular ideas or perspectives (Waitt, 2010). This study examines how dominant discourses in official publications construct the experiences and identities of children from low-income immigrant households. By analyzing the language used, it uncovers implicit assumptions and power relations implanted in these texts. The analysis explores whether these children are portrayed as “problems” requiring intervention or as individuals with potential, revealing how knowledge about them is constructed and normalized within broader societal frameworks (Feder, 2010; Foucault, 1982; van Dijk, 1992; Wodak & Reisigl, 2015).

Foucault’s concept of power/knowledge is central to this analysis. Power is relational, continuously circulating through society, and shapes—and is shaped by—knowledge. Discourses function as vehicles of power, creating norms and categories that guide behavior and social order (Khan & MacEachen, 2021; Waitt, 2010). This study scrutinizes the publications as instruments of power that generate specific knowledge about immigrant children. For example, a document may construct a narrative portraying these children as “at risk” and in need of

intervention, thereby reinforcing existing power structures. Such narratives legitimize certain policy measures while marginalizing alternative perspectives that could challenge dominant discourses. Normalization is a crucial process through which power operates. It establishes certain behaviors, values, and identities as "normal," while marginalizing others as deviant. In policy texts and official reports, the way immigrant children are discussed can produce categories of "normal" or "problematic" childhoods, influencing how these children are perceived and treated (Khan & MacEachen, 2021; Waitt, 2010). Resistance, inherent in power relations, need not always be overt; it can manifest as counter-narratives or alternative representations challenging dominant discourses, such as those concerning low-income immigrant families (Foucault, 1982; Khan & MacEachen, 2021; Waitt, 2010).

This study also employs Foucauldian genealogy to examine the historical conditions that give rise to specific discourses, practices, and institutions. Rather than viewing historical events as direct causes of the present, genealogy traces how power relations create particular truths and norms over time. For example, the study explores how past discourses surrounding immigration, poverty, and childhood have shaped contemporary policies and societal attitudes (Khan & MacEachen, 2021; Waitt, 2010). Foucault's concept of "games of truth" is also applied to explore how societies determine what is considered true or false. In the context of the documents, these "games" involve assumptions about immigrant families, the role of the state, and societal obligations. Foucauldian discourse analysis helps reveal how these assumptions operate as mechanisms of control and governance, shaping specific social realities (Khan & MacEachen, 2021; Waitt, 2010). Foucauldian discourse analysis further highlights the role of exclusion in discourse formation. In the case of children from immigrant households, the study may reveal the marginalization or ignoring of certain voices or perspectives, framing their issues in relation to broader concerns like integration or welfare dependency, rather than addressing their unique experiences, needs, and systemic impediments (Foucault, 1982; Waitt, 2010).

The analysis operationalizes key Foucauldian concepts, such as discursive formations and subjectification. Discursive formations are identified by examining how official texts describe immigrant children, using language that subtly contributes to their marginalization. For instance, a document may depict these children as a "challenge" to socio-economic integration, framing them in a way that aligns with societal concerns about resource distribution. Such language shapes public perceptions and influences policy approaches toward this group (Khan & MacEachen, 2021; Waitt, 2010). Subjectification is explored by investigating how immigrant children are positioned as subjects within the discourse. Here, a document may label these children as "vulnerable" or "dependent," which has significant implications for their social standing and access to resources. This labeling process is critically examined to assess its impact on the children's self-perception and the types of interventions deemed appropriate by policymakers (Foucault, 1982; Khan & MacEachen, 2021; Waitt, 2010). Through these discursive strategies, the study illuminates how power relations are fixed in official discourse, ultimately shaping the lives and opportunities of children from low-income immigrant households.

To ensure methodological rigor, a systematic approach to document selection was employed, prioritizing data from key institutions based on their relevance to the research question. This selection process focused on documents that explicitly addressed immigrants, immigrant children, low-income families, education, poverty, housing, or socio-economic integration, ensuring the credibility of the source material. A comprehensive search was conducted across key institutional websites and academic databases to identify relevant documents and literature. The search targeted both governmental and academic sources, specifically focusing on the 'Directorate of Integration and Diversity', the 'Ministry of Children and Families', the 'Ministry of Labor and Social Inclusion', 'Norwegian Labor and Welfare Administration', and 'Statistics Norway'. In addition to these institutional websites, academic databases such as Google Scholar, Springer Link, and Taylor & Francis Online were also included in the search process. Specific keywords and search terms, such as "immigrant children," "low-income households," "Foucauldian discourse analysis," "Norway," "socio-economic integration," and "social justice," were systematically employed across all platforms to ensure a comprehensive collection of relevant data and literature. Following data collection, a rigorous qualitative analysis was conducted using a Foucauldian discourse analysis framework. This involved a close reading of the documents to identify key themes, discourses, and power relations concerning children from low-income immigrant households. Particular attention was paid to language choices, framing mechanisms, and underlying assumptions about this population (Foucault, 1982). The inclusion of diverse sources, both governmental and academic, ensured a robust and multidimensional analysis.

To enhance the reliability of the findings, a systematic coding process was implemented, with thematic codes developed based on the research questions and refined throughout the analysis. The study also focused on identifying patterns and shifts in discursive formations over time, comparing how these children were positioned and addressed within official publications across different policy areas and throughout the designated timeframe. While careful attention was given to data collection and analysis to enhance the study's reliability, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The emphasis on official publications provides valuable insights into policy discourses, but it does not directly capture the lived experiences of children from low-income immigrant households. Further, the study is confined to the Norwegian context, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other settings. However, by applying a Foucauldian discourse analytical framework to official publications, this study illuminates the societal, economic, and structural factors that prevent disadvantaged groups, such as children from low-income immigrant families, from fitting in.

FINDINGS

According to the Foucauldian discourse analysis of official publications from 2014 to 2024, intricate patterns and recurring themes in the representation of immigrant children from low-income households are revealed. The analysis focuses on three key areas of inquiry: (1) the

portrayal of immigrant children; (2) the power structures and knowledge claims that support these representations; and (3) the influence of these discourses on policy interventions and resource allocation. This approach provides an in-depth understanding of how these children are constructed within official narratives, as well as the broader implications for their social and economic standing.

Positioning of Immigrant Children from Low-Income Households

A dominant theme in the documents is the portrayal of children from low-income immigrant households as socio-economically vulnerable. The intersection of their socio-economic status and immigrant background often depicts these children as facing compound disadvantages. Normann and Epland (2023) note that a larger proportion of immigrant children grow up in households with persistently low income compared to children without an immigrant background. Epland and Kirkeberg (2014, 2015, 2017) underline the overrepresentation of children with immigrant backgrounds in the low-income group, identifying it as a key factor in the rise of poverty among children in Norway. They note that such children often come from families with weak labor market attachment, low-income mobility, and a dependence on social support. The authors further emphasize that children experiencing prolonged poverty encounter more significant challenges than those facing temporary financial difficulties. These challenges include limited participation in social activities, which creates additional barriers to integration for immigrant children, who are often excluded from leisure and social events due to their families' financial limitations.

Similarly, Ekren and Grendal (2021) and Epland and Normann (2021) point out that immigrant children are less likely to complete their education and are more prone to long-term socio-economic disadvantages compared to their non-immigrant peers. The portrayal of these children as particularly vulnerable is further emphasized in studies focused on educational outcomes. For instance, Kalcic and Ye (2023) report that Norwegian-born children of immigrant parents tend to perform worse in school and have lower secondary education completion rates, reinforcing the view that these children require targeted state intervention to address these challenges. Furthermore, terms like "at risk" of lower academic achievement, housing, and employment instability are frequently used, thereby positioning children from low-income households as dependent on state intervention and normalizing the state's role as both provider and protector (Ekren & Grendal, 2021; Epland & Kirkeberg, 2014, 2015, 2017; Epland & Normann, 2021; Kalcic & Ye, 2023; Statistics Norway, 2024). Lysen et al. (2024) highlight that immigrants with low income are more dependent on social benefits and have less wealth to fall back on. They are also at a higher risk of falling into the low-income group. Similarly, Fløtten and Nielsen (2020) argue that structural issues such as unstable employment and inadequate social benefits disproportionately affect immigrant families, necessitating government intervention to mitigate these systemic challenges. Furuberg et al. (2022) similarly note that immigrant families are often caught in cycles of job insecurity and insufficient benefits, which exacerbate their socio-economic challenges.

The intersection of rising living standards and low-income status further amplifies the discourse of vulnerability. Pettersen (2021) and Lian et al. (2022) show that low-income immigrant families are disproportionately affected by rising living costs, which hampers their ability to achieve upward mobility. Housing insecurity is another recurring issue, with Vrålstad (2014), Thorsen (2017), and Statistics Norway (2024) revealing that immigrants, especially those in large families or renting, face significant challenges in securing stable housing, reinforcing the positioning of “vulnerability,” “at risk,” and “dependency.” However, a critical aspect is the erosion of financial support over time. Omholt et al. (2018) demonstrate that the real value of child benefits for low-income immigrant families has diminished due to inflation, further entrenching their financial vulnerability and dependence on state aid. This language legitimizes the need for targeted policies aimed at addressing the compounded disadvantages these children face but does not fully capture these children’s and their families’ experiences from their own everyday life, living environment, and workplace.

Power Dynamics and Knowledge Claims Underpinning Discursive Formations

The discourses surrounding children from low-income immigrant households are largely shaped by the state's focus on statistical data and socio-economic indicators, which highlight their vulnerabilities and justify targeted interventions. For instance, Epland (2018) emphasizes the overrepresentation of immigrant children in low-income households, showing that they are almost seven times more likely to live in persistent poverty compared to their non-immigrant peers. Other studies, such as Oppøyen (2023), underscore additional challenges like lower homeownership rates and overcrowded living conditions among immigrant families. Similarly, reports from Statistics Norway (2024) suggest that families with children who rent their homes are at a higher risk of poverty, further linking economic conditions to the well-being of immigrant children. Normann (2021) reinforces the connection between child poverty and various socio-demographic factors, demonstrating the ongoing need for state intervention to manage these challenges through policy. Fløtten and Nielsen (2020) also point to the long-term consequences of growing up in low-income households, such as poor living conditions, health risks, and social exclusion. Normann (2021) further stresses that children with immigrant backgrounds are especially vulnerable due to lower employment rates among their parents and a greater reliance on state transfers. Education is highlighted as a critical factor for improving labor market participation, which is seen as a pathway to reducing poverty and improving living conditions over time.

Despite this, the state's reliance on quantitative data, such as income levels and employment statistics, may not fully capture the complexities of immigrant children's experiences. While economic indicators provide a clear picture of material hardships, they often overlook other important factors, such as cultural identity, discrimination, and the social exclusion faced by immigrant families. Barstad (2024) emphasizes the widespread experiences of discrimination, particularly among immigrants from Africa, Asia, and Muslims. Norwegian-born individuals with immigrant parents experience as much discrimination as individuals born

abroad. Studies by Dalen et al. (2022) and Rogstad and Sterri (2014) further highlight issues like labor market discrimination and housing inequities, which are systemic barriers that immigrant households encounter but are often overshadowed by the emphasis on economic statistics. The information presented in these reports tends to simplify immigrant children's realities by reducing their experiences to measurable data points. While this approach effectively supports state-driven policies, it risks marginalizing other perspectives, such as the impact of cultural factors or the role of discrimination in perpetuating socio-economic challenges. As a result, the focus remains largely on economic hardship and dependence on state assistance, with less attention given to alternative ways of understanding and addressing the diverse challenges faced by children from low-income immigrant households.

Impact of Discursive Constructions on Policy Interventions and Resource Allocation

Discursive constructions significantly influence policy interventions and resource allocation by shaping which issues are prioritized in policy agendas. For example, the portrayal of immigrant children as “vulnerable” and “at risk” has a profound impact on how policies are formulated, leading to targeted interventions that address the challenges this group faces in areas such as education, housing, employment, and social welfare. Kalcic and Ye (2023) highlight the educational struggles of immigrants and their children in Norway, showing that a higher proportion of immigrants have only completed primary education or lack formal education compared to the general population. This demographic also tends to achieve lower grades in primary school and has lower high school completion rates, particularly among refugees and immigrants from Africa and Asia. In contrast, immigrants from the EU/EFTA/UK and North America generally perform better. The narratives surrounding immigrant children's educational challenges justify the allocation of substantial resources to improve their access to education and other social services. Framing issues in this manner, however, can also result in unequal resource distribution, as certain groups may receive more attention at the expense of others, potentially overlooking broader structural inequalities. For instance, while the vulnerability of immigrant children is highlighted, the structural issues like discrimination and labor market challenges faced by their families may not receive the same level of policy focus.

These discursive constructions also shape public perception, influencing how the general population views both policy measures and the groups they target. For instance, Dzamarija (2016) reports that immigrant children generally perform worse on national tests compared to Norwegian-born pupils with immigrant parents, reinforcing the narrative of educational disadvantage. This framing helps justify the continued emphasis on targeted policy interventions. However, it can also lead to public support for restrictive measures if immigrant populations are portrayed as a financial burden (Official Norwegian Reports, 2017:2). Such shifts in discourse, in which immigrants are seen as an economic strain, may result in welfare cuts or stricter immigration policies, affecting both resource allocation and future policy development. The impact of discursive framing extends beyond education. Lysen et al. (2024) discuss how lower income levels among immigrant families, particularly those from non-Western

backgrounds, are linked to housing insecurity and employment instability. These systemic issues, as explored by Furuberg et al. (2022), perpetuate poverty within immigrant households and necessitate policy responses focused on economic assistance and housing stability.

The framing of immigrants as socio-economically vulnerable serves to mobilize policies aimed at strengthening support systems, such as increasing child benefits and social assistance, as emphasized by Fløtten and Nielsen (2020). However, this discourse can create blind spots by failing to address the root causes of poverty and exclusion, such as labor market discrimination. According to the Directorate of Integration and Diversity (2021), discrimination can prevent immigrants from securing jobs. A larger proportion of immigrants work part-time compared to the general population, often involuntarily. Immigrants from Asia, Africa, and Latin America are also more frequently employed in temporary positions (Directorate of Integration and Diversity, 2021).

Midtbøen's (2016) correspondence test study in Norway further demonstrates this, showing that individuals with Pakistani-sounding names received 25% fewer callbacks for initial interviews compared to those with Norwegian-sounding names, despite having identical qualifications. Notwithstanding policies aimed at reducing socio-economic disparities, the persistence of exclusion and discrimination highlights the limitations of vulnerability-based discourses. For instance, Pettersen (2021) reports that exclusion rates are nearly three times higher among young immigrants than the general population, exacerbated by structural inequalities. While vulnerability-focused discourses may drive policy interventions, they often fail to address deeper issues of systemic discrimination and exclusion, limiting the effectiveness and fairness of policy outcomes.

DISCUSSION

Discursive Construction of Vulnerability and Socio-Economic Disadvantage

The study's examination of how children from low-income immigrant households are framed in official publications reveals a discursive construction that risks reinforcing their vulnerability and socio-economic disadvantage compared to native-born peers (Epland & Kirkeberg, 2014, 2015, 2017; Epland, 2018). While such narratives are often employed to justify the allocation of resources and policy interventions, they also perpetuate imbalanced power dynamics. By positioning the state as both provider and protector (Fløtten & Nielsen, 2020; Official Norwegian Reports, 2017: 2; Omholt, 2018), these discourses may inadvertently marginalize immigrant household's agency and contributions. They often focus on economic indicators while paying less attention to the systemic issues that contribute to these children's socio-economic challenges, such as inequitable schooling, unstable housing, and difficulties in finding employment (Dalen et al., 2022; Ekren & Grendal, 2021; Epland, 2016, 2018; Epland & Normann, 2021; Epland & Kirkeberg, 2014, 2015, 2017; Grini & Pettersen, 2021; Kalcic & Ye, 2023; Lysen et al., 2024; Oppøyen, 2023; Thorsen, 2017; Vrålstad, 2014).

In these governmental discourses, the privileging of empirical data and statistical analysis reinforces the state's authority in diagnosing and addressing the issues facing immigrant children. While data-driven approaches are valuable for crafting evidence-based policies, they can oversimplify lived experiences, thereby obscuring the root causes of inequality. Policies often focus on managing poverty (Fløtten & Nielsen, 2020) and addressing symptoms, such as income insufficiency, rather than targeting structural factors like discrimination in education, housing, employment, and public spaces. By constructing low-income immigrant families as passive recipients of aid, these policies risk limiting their role to dependent beneficiaries, rather than empowering them as active participants in shaping their children's futures.

Drawing on Foucault's (1982) ideas about power and knowledge, the results show that these representations not only make inequality worse, but they also hide the ways that discrimination is spread through speech (Feder, 2010; van Dijk, 1992; Wodak & Reisigl, 2015). Language, as a tool of power, can normalize such representations, legitimizing the state's role in controlling resources and shaping public perceptions. This unequal portrayal of immigrant children overlooks the agency and resilience of these families, focusing instead on their socio-economic challenges in isolation from broader systemic contexts. For example, Barstad (2024) emphasizes the importance of 'everyday integration,' which highlights daily interactions and social integration in shaping immigrant children's experiences. However, these efforts must be inclusive, addressing the diverse needs of low-income immigrant households and ensuring that social integration efforts do not reinforce assimilationist tendencies.

Moreover, the reduction in economic support, such as the decline in child benefits from 1998 to 2012 (Epland & Kirkeberg, 2014), exemplifies how policy decisions can exacerbate economic disparities. Immigrant families, particularly refugees, tend to rely more heavily on social assistance due to lower employment rates (Epland, 2016, 2018; Grini & Pettersen, 2021; Lysen et al., 2024), which points to systemic barriers in accessing stable employment. Without addressing these root causes of inequality, policies that focus solely on economic support risk perpetuating cycles of dependency and marginalization. For instance, economic assistance, while necessary, cannot resolve deeper issues such as cultural exclusion and discrimination in housing and employment (Dalen et al., 2022; Directorate of Integration and Diversity, 2021, 2024; Midtbøen's, 2016; Oppøyen, 2022; Rogstad & Sterri, 2014; Thorsen, 2017; Vrålstad, 2014).

Broader Implications for Social Justice, Equity, and Inclusion

The findings underscore the importance of shifting from a remedial approach to a more systemic, equity-focused policy framework. Social justice demands addressing the intersectionality of poverty, immigration status, and systemic discrimination. Policies should not merely provide temporary economic relief but also confront the deeper structural challenges facing immigrant households. Fløtten et al. (2020) stress that all children in Norway, regardless of their background, should have equal opportunities to succeed. This includes access to safe living conditions, stable friendships, and meaningful participation in social communities.

There is a need to shift the perspective from a deficit model that views low-income immigrant children's economic status or immigration background as a problem, to an empowerment model that prioritizes equity and inclusion. This perspective draws on the concept of intersectionality, acknowledging that immigrant families experience overlapping disadvantages not only due to their immigration status but also because this status intersects with other aspects of their identity, such as socio-economic background, language barriers, and cultural differences (Feder, 2010; van Dijk, 1992; Wodak & Reisigl, 2015). These challenges are compounded by systemic barriers embedded in policy and institutional frameworks. Addressing structural inequalities is essential to ensuring that marginalized groups have equal opportunities and can fully participate in society.

Spohrer et al. (2017) examined UK policy discussions about disadvantaged youth and found that these discussions often frame these individuals as having both problems and potential. This framing, while seemingly positive, inadvertently reinforces existing power structures. Similarly, Guion Akdağ and Swanson (2017), using Foucauldian discourse analysis, revealed how ideological frameworks in higher education policy suppress alternative narratives. Additionally, Smith-Carrier and Lawlor (2017) argue that the exclusion of human rights frameworks in poverty-related policies leads to a narrow focus on economic relief, failing to challenge the structural inequalities that perpetuate poverty. In the same way, discourses that focus primarily on the economic vulnerabilities of immigrant households risk reinforcing power dynamics and limiting their potential for upward mobility and full societal inclusion.

Hence, advancing social justice, equity, and inclusion for immigrant families requires a transformative shift in policy discourse. Rather than focusing solely on alleviating poverty, policymakers must engage with the complex realities of intersectionality. For example, policies that dismantle systemic barriers—such as limited access to quality education, housing, and employment—can empower immigrant families. Furthermore, the location where refugees are settled has a greater impact on their employment prospects, with areas with low unemployment and high labor demand being preferred. Tailored labor market measures are most effective for new refugees. Language and job training programs are beneficial, though their effectiveness varies. Nevertheless, higher education levels lead to better job prospects (Ekren & Grendal, 2021). Therefore, ensuring equitable access to education and creating fair employment opportunities fosters inclusiveness that better aligns with the host society's values and social structure.

CONCLUSION

This study, employing Foucault's discourse analysis, critically examines the positioning of children from low-income immigrant households within official publications in Norway. The analysis reveals that these children are consistently portrayed as vulnerable and marginalized, with their immigrant status and economic challenges intersecting to shape a narrative that is not only descriptive but also prescriptive, guiding policy interventions focused on perceived

deficiencies. This narrative underscores the power dynamics and knowledge claims inherent in these discourses, where state institutions, bolstered by empirical data and statistical analyses, assume the role of authoritative voices in defining and addressing the socio-economic challenges faced by immigrant children. While this approach lends legitimacy to the discourse, it simultaneously marginalizes alternative perspectives, particularly those from immigrant families themselves, reinforcing existing power hierarchies. The discursive constructions identified have a significant influence on policy interventions and resource allocations, with the framing of immigrant children as particularly vulnerable driving targeted social policies. However, this same discourse can also rationalize exclusionary practices, especially when aligned with broader narratives concerning the economic burdens of high immigration.

The study opens several avenues for future research. Firstly, it underscores the need for more inclusive research that incorporates the voices of immigrant families. While government reports and empirical data offer valuable insights, they often exclude the lived experiences of those most affected by these policies. To better capture these perspectives, future research could employ qualitative methods such as interviews or participatory research. Secondly, scholars should investigate the long-term impacts of current policy discourse on immigrant children as they transition into adulthood, with longitudinal studies offering insights into how their discursive positioning influences their educational, employment, and social integration outcomes. Thirdly, comparative studies examining how different countries address the socio-economic challenges faced by immigrant children could identify best practices and lessons to inform more effective and equitable policies. Such studies could also highlight the unique challenges and opportunities presented by different cultural and institutional contexts, broadening the understanding of how to promote social justice for immigrant children globally.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations inherent in this study. The analysis relied predominantly on official publications, which, despite their authority, may not fully reflect the diverse experiences of immigrant children and their families. Furthermore, the selection of publications from the study period may not include all relevant perspectives, potentially narrowing the analysis's scope. While Foucauldian discourse analysis is valuable for understanding the construction of policy narratives, it may not fully capture the practical implications of these discourses in real-world settings. Nonetheless, this research highlights the critical need for ongoing scrutiny of policy discourses and their implications for marginalized groups, advocating for more inclusive and multi-faceted approaches in future policymaking.

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