

“But we’re talking about Jonas?!” Danish ECEC Between Quality Cultures

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Abstract: The aim of the article is to support critical consideration about what quality is and might be in ECEC. It argues that two different quality cultures – understandings of what quality is, how it may be understood and supported – intersect and create tensions in relation to the ECEC area in Denmark. One is analyzed as influenced by a transnational quality discourse, a specific regime of truth regarding quality as a phenomenon “out there” that must be defined and assessed to improve. This technical-instrumental quality culture needs to be balanced by a quality culture founded in pedagogy as a distinct perspective foundational for ECEC. Drawing on a continental tradition of pedagogy as a human science discipline the article offers a language and understanding of *pedagogical qualities*. Such qualities refer to the attributes of pedagogy and go beyond what is easily disregarded as subjective in the prevailing quality culture. To identify such pedagogic qualities the article revisits empirical data from a narrative research project that explored pedagogic knowledge at play in ECEC professionals’ practice. The article argues that a critical quality culture founded in thoughtful consideration and ethical balancing of pedagogical qualities is crucial for the sake of the children and our democratic society.

Keywords: quality in ECEC, quality culture, pedagogical qualities, pedagogy as human science

Introduction

“3.4! Last year it was 3.7...” Ellen exclaims. She is clearly troubled and disturbed, sighs deeply and shrugs her shoulders. “But what can we do?!” Ellen is an experienced pedagogical leader in a medium sized ECEC situated in proximity to a larger city. The numbers refer to

the quality score that was assigned to the ECEC the day before when a consultant from the municipality visited to do observations and assess the learning environment. The observer was there for 4 hours and the 3.4 score the result of her reporting in a standardized observation form used in all the ECEC facilities in the municipality. Ellen explains how the evaluation was presented to her later that afternoon. The observer explained how they didn't do well in a category evaluating staff responses to children's emotional needs. She referred to a particular situation that took place in the playground where she observed a boy walking about on his own, clearly unhappy. At least two members of staff clearly registered his state of mind, she notices, but they did nothing to help him regulate his emotions. Therefore, she could only note a critical score on that parameter, she explained. When presented to the observation Ellen knew exactly what situation consultant was referring to. "But we're talking about Jonas!" Ellen protested. "He gets so upset. Especially when he and his friend William disagree. You must wait a bit for him to settle down before you can help him. He just needs a little space!" Ellen looks at me with indignation, then she shrugs and sighs deeply. "3.4" she repeats, shaking her head.

I accidentally stumbled across the situation above in October 2019 when I was visiting Ellen's kindergarten to prepare for a research project. Although it wasn't relevant to that project, I intuitively took notes and wrote it up later that day. As a researcher with interest in policies and discussions about quality in the ECEC field (Togsverd, 2015) I was intrigued by Ellen's story. It wasn't clear to me *what* practices and assessments the 3.4 score was signifying, yet the very fact that the number had gone down was clearly disturbing. But that was not all. I left that day with the impression that Ellen and her staffs' knowledge and judgements about their practices was silenced when met with the standardized quality assessment form. It seemed to me as if two fundamentally different ways of understanding, knowing, and practicing quality in ECEC – in this article termed as two quality cultures – interfered.

The Article's Aims, Theoretical and Methodological Approaches

The aim of this article is to critically explore and discuss the notion of quality in ECEC and what quality might be, stressing the need for a language and valuation of "pedagogical qualities". The article aims to do so by

unfolding what is analytically conceptualized as two quality cultures intersecting and creating tensions in relation to ECEC. The term *quality culture* is used heuristically to describe a shared set of beliefs, knowledge, values, practices, and tools (Bruner, 2006), shaping notions of what quality is and what ECEC, the ECEC professional and the child is and should be.

The article makes its argument by presenting two analyses. The first draws on a body of critical research on quality, accountability, and the implementation of standards in education (ex. Moss, 2005; Ozga et al., 2011; Segerholm, 2012; Schwandt, 2012; Reinke et al., 2012; Dahlberg et al., 2013; Alasuutari et al., 2014; Krejsler, 2015; Togsverd, 2015). I analyze Ellen's account of the 3,4 score as manifest of a quality culture dominated by a specific regime of truth, enabling some ways of speaking and acting and excluding others (Foucault 1971, 1997). This regime of truth – referred to in critical research as a transnational quality discourse (Dahlberg et al., 2013, Moss, 2005, Krejsler, 2015) or even "The Quality Turn" (Segerholm, 2012) - has become highly influential in relation to ECEC in Denmark as in other countries. Like other discursive practices, it constitutes a pattern of interconnected statements and technologies that refer to one another, thereby continually reinforcing the totality of the discourse. The analysis critically explores relations of knowledge, power, and subjectivity in this increasingly dominant quality culture demanding more systematic, effective, scientific, or even evidence-based practices. Also, the analysis critically points to the persuasive set of social technologies and practices that accompany the prevailing quality culture and reconfigures relations and knowledge of quality as in the case of Ellen's.

The second analysis presents a different analytical perspective as it aims at an appreciation of ECEC as a *pedagogical* practice (Friesen & Su, 2022, p. 16). It contributes to critical perspectives on quality by offering a language of what I conceptualize as *pedagogical qualities*. In this analysis the term *quality* is used in a specific meaning of the word - namely to refer to the attributes or characteristics of a phenomenon. Such *pedagogical qualities* become comprehensive by taking up a particular theoretical perspective, that of *pedagogy* as described in continental philosophy – by some termed "Geisteswissenschaft" or human science pedagogy (Biesta, 2015; Rothuizen, 2022; Friesen, 2022; Friesen & Su, 2022). In this tradition *pedagogy* designates a distinctive perspective and an autonomous discipline with its own specific questions, terminology, and ways of knowing (Friesen, 2022; Rothuizen, 2022). This theoretical perspective implies a clear distinction between ECEC as an institutionalized practice and pedagogy as a term that

designates the thoughtful and value-based practice of upbringing and education, supported by a distinctive disciplinary reflection (Friesen, 2022; Rothuizen, 2022). Pedagogy cannot simply be reduced to the denunciation of instructional strategies or political programs – such as “high quality” or the Strengthened Curriculum. Just as it can’t be reduced to whatever practices that might occur in institutional settings and professional practices (Friesen & Su, 2022). Instead, pedagogy corresponds with specific modes of responding, reflecting, and acting (Friesen & Su, 2022, p. 2)” related to human thrive and upbringing. Thus, “pedagogy” designates an ethical practice of open-ended negotiation and improvisation for the sake of children’s thriving and upbringing (Friesen & Su, 2022; Friese, 2022, van Manen, 2020).

To tease out what such *pedagogical qualities* might be, the analysis draws on empiric data and findings from a narrative research project (Togsverd et al., 2017). The project explored what ECEC professionals conceived as pedagogically significant in their everyday practices and investigated pedagogical “modes of responding, reflecting and acting” (Friesen & Su 2022, p. 2). Methodologically we arranged narrative workshops in 5 different ECEC facilities. The professionals were invited to tell us about their practice and reflect upon the pedagogical nature of their actions and reflections. Drawing on hermeneutic understandings that we are interpretive beings always already in a world constituted of meaning and cultural values (Gadamer, 2000), we took the stories seriously. Not necessarily as truthful accounts of what “really” happened (Bruner, 2006; Clandinin, 2015, 2016; Clandinin & Connely, 2000) but as accounts of what is pedagogically significant. In the study we found that pedagogical practice is structured, not so much by processes, methods, and outcomes, but by pedagogical values.

Combining the empirical data from this project with theoretical perspectives from the continental tradition, the analytic strategy is to tease out what is pedagogically characteristic or pedagogically valued as *pedagogical qualities*. My assumption is that acquaintance with and a language for what constitutes pedagogy might assist thoughtful and critical considerations of what quality might be and what is needed for a quality culture founded in pedagogy. In this perspective, the article contributes to a growing literature arguing there is a need for pedagogical languages that can critically inform and inspire questions of quality, purpose, and good practices in ECEC (Biesta, 2007, 2010, 2015, 2020; Biesta & Säfstrom 2011, Moss, 2005; Sæverot & Kristensen, 2022, Friesen & Su 2022; Rothuizen, 2022). Such languages and perspectives are highly relevant, I argue in the discussion, as the new Strengthened Pedagogical Curriculum is adapted

and translated in a quality culture influenced by technical-instrumental perspectives on ECEC.

All participant names in this paper are pseudonyms and made unrecognizable by contextual details. The study complies with the EECERA Ethical Code for Early Childhood Researchers (Bertram et al., 2015) and has been approved by the Ethical Committee at the University College of Southern Denmark

Quality as Thing – The Quality Discourse

The assessment in Ellen's ECEC facility proceeded a 2020 agreement on new minimum standards that also announced a new policy advising municipalities to perform annual evaluations of the learning environments in ECEC settings, adopted in national legislation in 2022. As part of the new standards, evaluations must include announced as well as unannounced observations of the learning environment, impartiality in observations, as well as public accessible evaluation reports. In 2019, when I sat with Ellen in her office, municipalities throughout the country were preoccupied with testing ways of observing, assessing, and comparing quality, imposing standardized and quantifiable evaluation tools in ECEC facilities such as Ellen's.

The political focus on high-quality learning environments is by no means unique to Denmark. Segerholm identifies what she terms *The Quality Turn* (Segerholm, 2012) to describe a transnational political focus on securing outcomes of education through quality assurance systems that allow to check, oversee, inspect, and improve quality in education (Segerholm, 2012, p. 117). Hence, there is an extensive research literature aiming to support the definition, assessment and enhancing of quality (ex. Cohrsen et al., 2023; Melhuish et al., 2015; Taggert et al., 2015, Sylva et al., 2003; Siraj et al., 2015; Slot et al., 2018; Mashburn et al., 2018, Mathers & Ereky-Stevens, 2018), supported by new journals such as *Quality Assurance in Education* (Schwandt 2012). As policies and research in quality has increased, there is also a growing critical research analyzing the tensions and underlying assumptions of what ECEC is about, when policies of quality are enrolled in the ECEC field (ex. Moss, 2005; Tobin 2005; Dahlberg et al., 2013; Segerholm, 2012; Reinke et al., 2012; Schwandt, 2012; Togsverd, 2015). This body of critical research has documented how quality has become a key element in what Krejsler calls "a persuasive policy trend across OECD and EU member states by means of ECEC-strategies that emphati-

cally employ quality reform discourse” (Krejsler, 2012, p. 98-99). Krejsler analyses how quality has become a significant driver in a society striving to prepare the nation for a competitive global knowledge economy. He and others (ex. Moss, 2005; Dahlberg et al., 2013; Segerholm, 2012; Reinke et al., 2012; Schwandt, 2012; Ozga et al., 2011) analyses how such processes of change draw heavily on transnational policy advice and access to compelling terminology and social technologies. Ozga et al. analyses how ideas of inspecting and assessing educational quality are transferred, translated, mediated and learned through organizations like the OECD (via e.g. country reviews, PISA), the EU (through e.g. the Lisbon Strategy), and the SICI (The Standing International Conference of Inspectorates) (Ozga et al., 2011). Within the framework of projects like Starting Strong 1+2 and Babies & Bosses among other initiatives, emerging standards for quality improvement are established on a transnational level (Krejsler, 2012). Thus, the discursive practices of quality reform work in combination with a global trust in digital quantification, standardization, and calculation (see also Popkewitc, 2012; Oosterhoff et al., 2023).

The Scandinavian countries are considered to constitute the prime benchmark due to the widespread diffusion of day care facilities, professional structure, and a child-centered content. Yet, policies in Denmark are highly influenced by quality discourse and its economic rationale. As an example, in 2016 the national assembly of municipalities (KL) in Denmark declared:

The return on investments in human development and learning in the early years is more profitable than investments made later in children and youngsters' lives. Therefore, high-quality ECEC are more cost effective than efforts and investments made later in life. (KL 2016, p. 3)

Such interest in securing high-quality is also the main argument for the relevance of a recently published national quality assessment, announced in an economic agreement between the government and municipalities in 2022. The assessment is performed by EVA (The National Evaluation Institute) and VIVE (The Danish Center for Social Science Research). The standardized observation form Ellen's setting was subjected to is used to assess quality in 200 ECEC facilities over the country, focusing on the youngest children. As this article is written an assessment of an equivalent number of facilities for 3-6 year-olds is being prepared. When presented to the public on the website of EVA the compelling terminology of the transnational quality discourse was highly recognizable:

We know very little about the quality of ECEC in Denmark and the possible quality differences. This is what the national quality assessment is about to change. The more we know about the quality of today, the better the baseline for us to develop and improve ECEC in future. (EVA 2022, my translation)

The presentation and rationale of the national quality assessment is exemplary of the prevailing quality culture spurred by quality reform discourses. It constitutes and is constituted of a regime of truth that as Krejsler puts it "conjure up visions of making more efficient use of human resources", soliciting knowledge, education, and innovation as key elements in securing economic growth (Krejsler, 2012, p. 95). Quality is understood as something that should and could be defined, documented, and evaluated objectively. In this rather technical-instrumental outcome-oriented approach to ECEC (Reinke et al., 2019), improving practices is merely a question of establishing a baseline (as that of the National Quality assessment) and then identifying and using the technique(s) that will ensure that ends will be met with least possible losses. Quality – or the lack of it – is "out there" as an unambiguous and stable condition to be observed and defined and quality improvement a simple question of developing the sufficient (amount of) data to support progress. Thus, defining quality indicators and gathering data about quality is seen as uncontroversial (Togsverd, 2015). Quality is exempt from any kind of moral-political or normative debate – it simply is the performance of ECEC professionals or children, a question of conforming to specific requirements. Evaluation is understood as assurance – a process of certifying and guaranteeing quality as a judgement against stable authoritative stands (Schwandt, 2012, p. 221). The rationale in such quality culture is to support what is effective – high-quality – and on the other hand phase out what hasn't proven to be effective. That is: giving the expected output. Thus, quality assessments and accountability constitute a basis for governmental decisions about future resource allocations, ensuring more public service and benefit for less money.

In this quality culture one can identify a growing market for digital tools that can enable the continuous gathering and comparing of substantial amounts of data concerning ECEC practices. Standards such as those in the observation form used in the Ellen's ECEC are introduced as sets of rules designed with the twofold intention of guaranteeing the quality of work and making this quality transparent to stakeholders (Nerland & Karseth, 2015; Bowker & Star, 1999). They are nurtured by an increasing trust in standardization in combination with a growing reliance on numerical evi-

dence (Jarke & Breiter, 2019; Ozga, 2016; Togsverd, 2015). However, as Ellen's story shows us, rendering ECEC in digital data sets limits on what is visible and what can be known about ECEC (Reinke et al., 2018; Lewis & Hartong, 2021). Assessments *do* (Bowker & Star, 2020). As Williamson, Bayne, and Suellen state, they 'loop back into action that can change the very thing that was measured' (Williamson, Bayne & Suellen, 2020, p. 353). Thus, the quality culture influences by quality discourse, its practices and technologies, poses significant challenges to practices, knowledges and perspectives of ECEC as something other than conforming to specific requirements and norms (Reinke et al., 2018, p. 192).

Pedagogical Qualities

Ellen's account of the quality assessment performed at her ECEC gives insights in some of the tensions that follow the growing political interest in high quality ECEC in Denmark. When Ellen first became a leader in the early 1990's she and her colleagues were largely trusted to take good care of the organization as well as content of the ECEC practice. The municipal quality assessment reconfigures relations and conceptualizations of quality of ECEC practices, rendering Ellen and the other professionals in ECEC to become some among other stakeholders in the field. I left that day with the impression that Ellen and her ECEC colleague's understandings of good ECEC practice were overruled and that she was subjected to a practice she obviously didn't think of as meaningful. What in the standardized form was interpreted as poor quality or maybe even neglect was in her perspective a pedagogue *doing the right thing at the right time* (Rothuizen, 2022) – an appropriate response to a particular boy in a particular situation.

The idea that quality could in fact be related and even relative to the singularity and specificity of relations, situations and values is easily disregarded as "subjective" in the discursive practices of high-quality culture (Sheridan, 2009). In the following section, I will draw on the continental tradition of pedagogy as human science to argue and elaborate, that *doing the right thing at the right time* is exactly what pedagogy is about. The point isn't to determine whether Ellen and her colleagues were right or not about how to approach Jonas in that particular situation. The point is to offer concepts and understandings of what might be conceived as *pedagogical qualities* - of what is distinctly pedagogical. The assumption of the analysis is that acquaintance with and a language of such qualities has the potential to serve a critical quality culture that can balance policies as well as institutionalized ECEC practices.

To develop my argument further I draw on a story told by an ECEC pedagogue in relation to a narrative research project. In the project we explored stories such as hers together with the professionals to understand what pedagogy is about or rather: what ECEC pedagogues consider to be pedagogically significant. The story about 4 year-old Simon is told by Sigrid.

Simon is a quiet and cautious boy. He doesn't like wild games and often retires when playing with the other boys as things easily become too noisy or wild. We're trying to help him become a bit more confident as we have observed his "better safe than sorry" can sometimes prevent him from participating in the communality of peers. So, we've started giving the children little challenges that they must do. Not big ones, little ones like trying out a swing on a zip line or climbing a steep hill. And he doesn't like those challenges – we really need to discuss this, he shouldn't feel that way – every time we are on an excursion he asks if there will be challenges. Anyway, this day we're on the beach. It's early spring and pretty cold. Simon tests the temperature of the sea with his hands. He suddenly smiles as if he has had an idea, comes over and whispers that maybe it would be a great challenge for everyone to take off their shoes and put their feet into the water? I tell him that's a great idea and ask him if he could maybe instruct the others? And there he is, Simon, instructing the others with a clear voice. Everyone was paying attention. I was so proud of him!

The story above is in many ways typical of the 200 stories we were presented to in the project. The stories are all about ECEC professionals seeking to support the children under their supervision to thrive and develop in the everyday practices of the ECEC. Most of the stories take place in unformalized and improvised settings such as that on the beach where Simon has an idea for a new challenge and Sigrid decides to support it. She sees an opportunity for something new to happen that might allow Simon and his peers to gain new experiences and grow in the widest sense of the word. We get the impression of a practice far from an ideologically focused or evidence-based instructional approach to be mastered by a professional or teaching specialist. It is better understood as an independent but ethically informed practical perspective where professionals such as Sigrid are aiming at *doing the right thing at the right time* with the children. The stories are all about professional responding, reflecting, and acting for the sake of the children with attention to what is held to be best for their growth and well-being as these are currently manifest. Doing the right thing at the right time, however, is not at all straightforward, the story seems to tell us. Although

it has an obvious happy ending described almost as a redemption of Simon becoming-courageous, Sigrid is not a mastering professional. In fact, she shares her doubts about *what* doing the right thing at the right time might be in relation to Simon. She interrupts the story, “*he doesn’t like those challenges. We really need to discuss this, he shouldn’t feel that way*” as if the very action of telling the story invites her to reflect on how the “challenging practice” – despite good intentions – might actually be inappropriate to children such as Simon.

Antinomies as Pedagogical Qualities

The story of Simon has a recognizable plot. It is a story about a boy (as many others) limited by his own cautiousness. As we read the story, we know that something new must happen for him to develop and we go along the story waiting for it to happen. From an analytical perspective, the plot is particularly interesting as it (re)presents a paradox or two opposites that are essentially pedagogical: to become more daring and confident Simon needs to feel safe, the story tells us. He must be *both* protected *and* exposed. The story is about searching for balances and the morale is that a child can develop when balances are met in appropriate ways. Such plots and morale were not unique to Sigrid’s story. On the contrary, we found that almost all stories give an account of pedagogy as a practice that is about balancing opposites in order to do good.

Although doing the right thing at the right time varies in different situations, we can analytically tease out what is conceived to be good or significant in a pedagogical perspective. To do so, we need to take a closer look at the pedagogical opposites that need balancing. They become comprehensive if we learn from Kant (1724 – 1804) who was a central figure in the continental tradition of pedagogy. Kant was one of many philosophers at the verge of modernity who understood that relations between the individual and society had become unstable (Rothuizen, 2022, p. 632). As Rothuizen points out, this instability raised questions that needed to be addressed philosophically, sociologically, and pedagogically. To Kant the question of human upbringing and education became necessary as a critique of the past for its conformity and oppression of individuality. Upbringing and education could in Kant’s perspective not only be concerned with the reproduction of society. It should also be about enabling something new to happen. Thus, Kant dealt with what is still a central issue in pedagogy and education: how to educate children and young people for freedom. To Kant this was by no means a simple question. In fact, he describes how pedagogy is character-

ized by opposites or antinomies and identified what has later been accepted as a principal antinomy in pedagogy: the opposition between freedom and constraint. Kant states:

One of the biggest problems of education is how one can unite submission under lawful constraint with the capacity to use one's freedom. For constraint is necessary. How do I cultivate freedom under constraint? I shall accustom my pupil to tolerate a constraint of his freedom, and I shall at the same time lead him to make good use of his freedom. (Kant 2007, p. 447)

What Kant is reflecting on is the pedagogical condition that adults need to impose some constraints to cultivate freedom in and for children and young people (Friesen & Su, 2022, p. 6). As Kant articulates this paradox, he also states the antinomic nature of pedagogy implying that the education and upbringing of children cannot be dealt with in a purely instrumental way. As Rothuizen states: "There are no simple answers, as freedom is an ideal and not an empirical state of affairs. Ideals cannot be reached technically; they have to be realized in specific ways in every new situation". (Rothuizen, 2022, p. 632)

The pedagogical paradox has been proven indispensable in understanding the nature of pedagogy (Friesen & Su, 2022, p. 6) as it encompasses other pedagogical antinomies creating tensions to be negotiated in practice¹. In our research we found that ECEC professionals were mainly concerned with realizing and balancing values of *emancipation* (the right to be a free subject with own emotions, thoughts, engagements, and aspirations), and *participation*, (the right to participate in (children's) communities of other free subjects). Such values or qualities are not easily compatible, and this makes pedagogy a complex endeavor. The story about Simon thematizes and reflects on the delicate balances of the values of freedom and constraint; emancipation, and participation. Sigrid and her colleagues want to help Simon overcome the restraints his cautiousness imposes on him (to emancipate) as they see this as a step towards better participation in the community of peers. To help him (emancipate) they decide to expose him and the other children to certain challenges (constraints) hoping the children will gain confidence. Telling the story, Sigrid seems to fear that they might have gotten the balance wrong. Does our practice strike a satisfactory bal-

¹ Friesen and Su describe these as involvement and separation, distance and proximity, exposure and protection, present and future (Friesen & Su 2022).

ance? she seems to ask, implying that courage and freedom cannot simply be produced or enacted in instrumental ways as this could in fact deny the child such freedom. The story about Simon is also a story about staging and seeking spaces of opportunities where children can become agents in their own life. The pedagogical paradox is that the values at stake – freedom and constraint; emancipation, and participation – imply that only the child can realize them. It cannot be done by the pedagogue. In a pedagogical interpretation the story has a happy ending exactly because Simon gives a promising glimpse of what he may become: a free person participating in a free society. The morale of the story is to remind us of the pedagogical significance *and* difficulty in striving for this.

The story also points to another set of antinomies at play. In the story we notice two simultaneous orientations. One is concerned with a here and now and implies a notion of what is already. Another entails an understanding of and attention to what is not (Biesta & Säfström, 2011) – giving specific significance to the future, to what is not but will become possible. There is a true tension here, framed by Friesen and Su as “the antinomy of present pain for future gain” (Friesen & Su, 2022, p. 7). The constraint imposed by a not yet, an unknown future, should ideally be balanced by a freedom embodied in an already. In the story we see how Sigrid is attentive to Simons interests and engagement most evident in the reflection that “*he should’t feel that way*”. Those few words imply a profound pedagogical perspective or knowledge: The substantial freedom that the constraint of the challenges might offer in the future does little to reduce the difficulties such constraint might represent to Simon, in the present. Friesen and Su draw on a beautiful quote by Schleiermacher who “acknowledges that younger children ‘live in the present and not for the future. Such a child cannot [fully] participate in [adult] purpose[s] and cannot have an interest in [these] for the development of his or her own individual character’” (Schleiermacher in Friesen & Su, 2022, p. 7). In this perspective the pedagogue should follow and accompany the child in a reciprocal relation and action, just as Sigrid does. Her story shows us how pedagogy is about supporting the humanity and uniqueness of the child, in the relations and tensions between the individual and the world. The nature of pedagogical qualities is mediated in the tension between facts and norms, as pedagogues seek to value both the child as (s) he is right now and with the child as the person (s)he can be(come) (Rothuizen, 2022, p. 631). To sum up there is a recognition of a present reality for the child (an already) that is in tension with one that will only unfold in the future (a not yet).

As both Friesen & Su (Friesen & Su, 2022, p. 6) and Biesta and Säfström state (Biesta & Säfström, 2011) this orientation towards the future is not an orientation towards a predefined developmental telos. The orientation is for the child to come into the world as a subject of his own life. This dimension is central in the tradition of the continental and human discipline of *pädagogik* but it has also been elaborated in Biesta's accounts of pedagogy as concerned with the educational and existential questions of "becoming human" (Biesta, 2020). Self-realization and autonomy in communities of other autonomous individuals can be seen to constitute the final goal of pedagogy – "one that, unlike so many others, is irreducible to means-ends rationality." (Friesen & Su, 2022, pg. 14). Sigrid's story is one of many about ECEC professionals organizing activities and learning opportunities (in the prevailing quality culture conceptualized as a "learning environment"), but such practices seem to be only a part of the pedagogical responsibility for both each individual child and for the communities of children (Togsverd, Jørgensen, Rothuizen, & Weise, 2017). In our research we found that ECEC professionals are preoccupied with a variety of processes and situations that can foster processes of community as well as self-examination and self-definition encouraging something to appear that has not yet come into appearance. Biesta would term such as processes of subjectification and point to the importance of such processes to our democratic society (Biesta, 2015).

Preparing for and engaging spontaneously with such unplanned processes could be described as the ultimate pedagogical task. ECEC professionals can prepare for this, but they cannot explicitly plan it. The story of Simon shows us that there are multiple forms of action, experience and reflection that would be clearly pedagogical – that would entail pedagogical qualities - in this sense. Pedagogy is about seeking opportunities for something new to come into the world in processes of delicate and ethical balancing antinomies. In this sense, good practices are about mediating values, finding a suitable mediating position that must constantly be redefined in practice from one situation to the next (Friesen & Su, 2022 p. 13). Such thoughtful pedagogical consideration implies a quality culture that is open to new considerations as the oppositional values – the pedagogical qualities - could always be mediated differently. A pedagogically founded quality culture supports an openness to what it means to do the right thing at the right time as a riddle or puzzle to be further investigated and pursued. Not with the purpose of achieving better but with the simple purpose of pursuing the profoundly pedagogical and ethical task of engaging with the child and the world. There is nothing stationary or relative to such a pedagogical quality culture. Pedagogical qualities are deeply rooted in our pedagogical tradition

and democratic society, in legislation and political governing documents (Togsverd et al., 2017) just as they are lived and enacted in everyday ECEC practices in various ways. Yet they need attention and thoughtful consideration for the sake of the children whom we are responsible for.

Between Quality Cultures – Towards a Tactful Consideration of The Strengthened Pedagogical Curriculum

Such attention to pedagogical qualities was widely recognizable in the first outlines for a new Strengthened Pedagogical Curriculum presented in 2016 as the *Master for a Strengthened Pedagogical Curriculum* (MCE, 2016). Not only was the term *pedagogical* introduced as signifier for the curriculum. It also presented a common pedagogical foundation emphasizing children's perspectives, engagement and play and a broad concept of learning pointing to formation in a broad sense, resonating with pedagogical qualities of emancipation and participation. Stressing that pedagogical documentation must be meaningful many saw it as a sign of a governmental shift away from practices of assessments and standardization towards a return to local and professional valuations, definitions, and judgements of good practice. Despite such openness towards pedagogical perspectives, The Strengthened Pedagogical Curriculum is also formulated in a quality culture dominated by the quality discourse (Kampmann & Togsverd 2021). As an example, the framework states that "*the ECEC leader is responsible for ensuring regular documentation of the relationship between the pedagogical learning environment and children's wellbeing, learning, development, and formation.*" (MCE, 2018, p. 50, my emphasis)

The passage above not only implies that evidence of such relations *can* and *should* be documented, rendering such practices uncontroversial. It also stabilizes a quality culture furthering the compelling and persuasive language and practices of continuous assessments and data production such as Ellen and her ECEC was subjected to. In line with the economic and technical-instrumental rationale of the quality discourse, documentation is a question of producing data. And data can be aggregated and scrutinized to gain insights in the relations between *input* in terms of efforts and resources on one side (in the curriculum termed as the learning environment), and *outcome* understood as the results of pedagogy; in the curriculum termed as children's well-being, learning, development and formation (Kampmann & Togsverd, 2022).

What stands out in the story about the quality evaluation in Ellen's ECEC facility is the way the pedagogical intensions and knowledge are not included in discursive practices of quality culture. Numbers travel smoothly from one place to another, whereas pedagogical qualities - the careful and thoughtful consideration of oppositional values and the quality of pedagogical relations and intensions - don't. They are stuck, silenced, and maintained in the pedagogical practice in the ECEC - even by ECEC professionals themselves. The ECEC profession, but more importantly - the pedagogical qualities that are foundational of our society - are not served by such silencing or devaluation. As a democratic society valuing the freedom of both the individual and our communities, we are deeply dependent on ECEC professionals carefully considering and balancing pedagogical qualities in their practice.

The article's inquiry in the continental tradition of human science pedagogy has been made to remind us of the pedagogical nature of such qualities - or one might say: the moral orientation at stake in pedagogy. This tradition also provides us with a pedagogical concept for those moral orientations, that is: the value-oriented ethical choices that ECEC workers do, in their practice: pedagogical tact. Max van Manen (van Manen, 2015), defines it in the form of a (another) paradox: "knowing what to do when you don't know what to do." Tact is the ethical attunement to the child's uniqueness that encourages us to shape our pedagogical actions in such a way that they can find their own way. Thus, tact requires an ongoing attunement to the heart to the situation as when Sigrid is reminded of the pedagogical qualities and the tensions they create as her story of Simon unfolds. In our research we found that sharing such thoughtful considerations through stories of practice is in fact a way of individually and collectively attuning to pedagogical qualities and to how they might be mediated and enacted (differently). In fact, such individual and collective practices might be central to spur a quality culture founded in pedagogy. They need attention in a prevailing quality culture that leaves little space and recognition for doubt, openness to what the child might bring into the world, and the moral orientations that are inherent to pedagogy. Critical perspectives on the prevailing quality culture are important if ECEC professionals are to navigate the contradictory and increasingly data field of ECEC practices. But they cannot stand alone. A language of pedagogical qualities is crucial to articulate a dynamic, culturally grounded and contextually sensitive quality culture that can engage in critical dialogue with the prevailing quality culture and its institutionalized practices.

Reclaiming Pedagogical Qualities – Concluding Remarks

In this article I have argued that Danish ECEC practices are influenced by two intersecting quality cultures. Each of them implies notions of what ECEC practices are about, how they contribute to society and what quality is in relation to this practice. Whereas the prevailing quality culture promotes a highly economic rationale focusing on improving ECEC as a learning environment, I have argued that pedagogy represents a distinctive perspective inherent in ECEC practiced. I have analyzed the *pedagogical qualities* that are characteristic to ECEC pedagogy as oppositional values that need thoughtful consideration for the sake of the child. The two quality cultures can be summed up:

High-quality discourse	Pedagogical qualities
Quality is “out there” to be defined, assessed, compared and obtained	Quality as a question or a riddle to be explored and pursued
Quality as generalizable	Quality as contextualized
Quality as thing	Quality as event
Quality as unambiguous	Quality as careful consideration of oppositional values for the sake of the child(ren)
Quality as uncontroversial	Quality as debatable
Quality as a technical matter	Quality as an ethical matter
ECEC as means to economic growth	ECEC as foundational in democratic society

A primary aim in the article has been to offer a language of pedagogical qualities to support a quality culture founded in pedagogy. The analysis argues that it is in fact possible to describe pedagogical qualities as general attributes or characteristics. They represent a set of values, practices and arrangements that are part of human existence and human nature (Friesen & Su, 2022, p. 14) and deeply rooted in our culture. They evolve in the relation between the individual and the world and are crucial to children’s learning and wellbeing, just as they are fundamental to our democratic society. In the article I have conceptualized these values as “emancipation” and “participation”, or with Kant: “freedom” and “constraint”. Thus, pedagogical qualities constitute a range of opposites or antinomies that structure both pedagogical engagement and pedagogical thought. Pedagogy is not a question of choosing between such abstract and opposite ideals, I have argued, instead pedagogical practice locates itself in tensions between them, mak-

ing educators responsible for searching and finding appropriate balances in specific situations. Hence, pedagogical qualities have "universal" features but are enacted locally in various ways. There are no universal receipts and techniques that can guarantee that pedagogical qualities are mediated for the sake of the child and with the delicate ethical consideration for the antinomic structure of "present pain for future gain". As Friesen and Su puts it, is not an issue that evolutionary science, evidence, or psychology will be able to settle once and for all (Friesen & Su, 2022, p. 4). Therefore, ECEC professionals need to engage in a quality culture that is dynamic, contextually sensitive and founded in professional dialogues about how to define and evaluate quality for the sake of the children and our democratic society.

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