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Danish Early Childhood Education and Care

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Abstract: This special issue presents a selection of current research on Danish early childhood education and care (ECEC) aimed at an international audience. The Nordic tradition of child-centred, local and holistic pedagogy is dominant within the Danish educational culture, but the Danish pedagogical approach is the focus of an ongoing dialogue involving political preoccupations with ECEC quality and what is best for the children's development and learning. Since 2004, Danish ECEC settings have been obliged to work on children's learning based on a pedagogical curriculum organised around six previously established themes prepared at each local ECEC centre according to specific guidelines. In 2018, a more detailed description of the content of the curriculum and a common pedagogical foundation was introduced in a strengthened curriculum – partly because the previous curriculum led institutions too far away from the existing pedagogical culture. The strengthened curriculum points to key elements such as play, child-centredness, communities of children and a broad concept of learning – to constitute the understanding and approach to work on children's well-being, learning, development and formation in ECEC. New research from Danish professionals is presented, revolving around key areas in the strengthened curriculum in order to invite further dialogue with international colleagues about children's play, fun and well-being, quality cultures, children's communities, transitions, aesthetics and vulnerability.

Keywords*:* danish pedagogy, early childhood, pedagogues, democratisation, curriculum themes

Introduction

Danish early childhood education and care (ECEC) is renowned internationally as a flagship for the Nordic welfare model due to high volumes of public childcare for children 0–5 years of age. Danish ECEC has a history

of almost 140 years, is universally available and affordable and has an in-built focus on pedagogy that enhances children's well-being and learning capabilities (Larsen & de la Porte, 2022). The pedagogical thinking for Danish early childhood centres is distinct, and the education for Danish early childhood professionals is separate and very distinct from that for school teachers (Jensen, 2016).

In this special issue, we choose to use the term 'pedagogue', which is a direct translation of the Danish designation '*pædagog*', instead of 'early childhood professional' or 'social educator' as commonly found in the English vocabulary currently used in many educational publications. We do this with reference to Jensen (2016), who argues that the rejection of transliterated Greek-based words such as 'pedagogues' and 'pedagogical work' reflects an Anglo-American paradigm in early childhood practice and theory, which is more school oriented and has different historical roots than the field in Scandinavia and many continental European countries.

In Denmark, as in other Nordic countries, the education of staff who will work in ECEC has been continuously considered important as a necessary precondition for the quality of child services. The rise and development of the pedagogical profession follows the development of the social-democratic welfare state (Brogaard-Clausen & Ringsmose, 2017; Karila, 2012).

As a result, Nordic ECEC centres have been a part of a democratisation project concerned with the protection of children's rights, as well as supporting children's obligations and abilities to participate in their communities. Thus, the aim of Danish ECEC pedagogy could be interpreted as education for citizenship. The underlying principles of Danish ECEC philosophy can be traced back to the ideas and theories of *Friedrich Froebel,*[1] and later *Maria Montessori,*[2] with adaptations for Scandinavian culture (Kragh-Müller, 2017). The formal education of ECEC staff in Denmark dates back to 1885, when a course based on *Froebel's pedagogy* was first offered. Later, it was expanded to a one-year period of study. In 1918, this programme was increased to two years and qualified pedagogues to work in kindergartens with three- to six-year-old children (Jensen, 2016). In 2001, the Dan-

[1] Friedrich Wilhelm August Froebel was a German pedagogue, who laid the foundation for modern education based on the recognition that children have unique needs and capabilities. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friedrich_Fr%C3%B6bel

[2] Maria Tecla Artemisia Montessori was an Italian physician and educator best known for her philosophy of education and her writing on scientific pedagogy. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maria_Montessori

ish pedagogue education became a professional bachelor's degree. Today, it is a three-and-a-half-year higher education programme. Currently, 57% of staff in Danish ECEC hold bachelor's degrees as pedagogues (Danmarks Evalueringsinstitut, 2020). Across Europe, Denmark has the highest participation rates of those under thee years old in public ECEC provision (Jensen 2018). In 2019, 88.3% of 2-year-olds and over 94% of those over three years old attended an ECEC setting (Schreyer, Oberhuemer & Koch, in press).

Danish ECEC Culture

The Nordic tradition of child-centred, local and holistic pedagogy is the foundation of Danish ECEC culture. It is a tradition that has a socio-educational approach with a focus on play, relationships and outdoor activities. In the Nordic tradition, the concept of learning is aligned with social development (Broström et al., 2014). As such, learning is assumed to happen through children's participation in social interaction and processes – in contrast to the English/French 'readiness for school tradition' emphasising ECEC centres as preschools (OECD, 2006). The culture in Danish ECEC settings is characterised by a home-like atmosphere with cosy furnishings, such as sofas and decorative cushions, and mixed-aged groups. The children have opportunities to play behind closed doors without adult supervision (e.g. energetic play in pillow rooms), and they are entitled and encouraged to develop their own children's culture and free play, as well as largely having the latitude to solve conflicts on their own. Informality and personal relationships between pedagogues and children are central. Equality, acknowledgement and respect for the children and their interests and the children's freedom to play and influence their everyday lives are essential to Danish pedagogues. During a day in ECEC, the children are out for at least two hours in all kinds of weather – based on the belief that fresh air is important for good health no matter what, as long as they are dressed in clothes suited to the specific weather conditions (Kragh-Müller, 2017).

Another Danish tradition is a holistic approach to the entire ECEC field. There are three official types of ECEC centres: kindergarten (3–5 years old), age-integrated centres (0–5 years old) and nurseries (0–2 years old). Nurseries and kindergarten centres are often integrated in the same ECEC setting. Regardless of the age group, ECEC is based within the same ministry, is covered by the same legislation, refers to the same pedagogical philosophy and employs pedagogues and pedagogical staff with the same educational backgrounds (Kascak & Koch, 2022).

Denmark has a long history of decentralised, deregulated ECEC provision and independent institutions with no links to school settings. In the wake of societal developments and international discourses on education, those involved with the Danish ECEC tradition have an ongoing dialogue with and are influenced by EU and national political preoccupations with ECEC quality, what is best for children's academic learning and 'schoolification' (Karila, 2012). In terms of the implementation of European ECEC policy (e.g. the Lisbon Strategy), the country faced a challenge (Kascak & Koch, 2022). Thus, a formal curricular framework was introduced in 2004. The increased incentive to adopt more educational perspectives and apply standardised and evidence-based practices and evaluations has led to the appearance of 'programmes' in some early childhood centres, which are encouraged to work with prescribed special methods from prefabricated designs (Jensen 2018).

Equivalently, evaluation processes and ECEC quality ideals in the Danish population are affected by the political preoccupations with ECEC quality and children's academic learning. In May 2023, a national report, *Quality in ECEC,* was published showing that the quality of the educational learning environment in ECEC centres and day care for Danish children two years old and younger was of varying quality. The report calls for better support for the children's communities, development of more responsive and sensitive interaction between staff and children, greater breadth in the activities offered to the children, and support for the children's play (VIVE, 2023).

The Strengthened Danish Curriculum

Since 2004, Danish ECEC settings have had to work purposefully towards children's learning based on a pedagogical curriculum prepared in each local ECEC centre within previously established curricular themes. In 2018, a supplement to the pedagogical curriculum was adopted by the Danish Parliament, indicating that ECECs had to work with new elements in addition to the six centrally established curriculum themes from 2004. The amendment to the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) was part of efforts to strengthen ECEC quality and included many new elements, but as the regulations were solidly based on Danish ECEC tradition, several ECECs had already implemented many of the initiatives in the strengthened pedagogical curriculum. A specific written pedagogical curriculum now had to be prepared in each local ECEC setting on the basis of a common pedagogical foundation, the six pedagogical curriculum themes and a link between the pedagogical learning environment and the children's learning.

It must be evident how the individual ECEC setting throughout the day establishes a pedagogical learning environment in which play, adult-initiated activities, spontaneous activities, child-initiated activities and everyday routines enhance children's thriving, learning, development and formation (bildung). It must be clear how the pedagogical learning environment supports the children's general learning, including curiosity, drive, self-esteem and movement within and across the following themes:

1. Comprehensive Personal Development
2. Social Development
3. Communication and Language
4. Body, Senses and Motion
5. Nature, Outdoor Life and Natural Phenomena
6. Culture, Aesthetics and Community

Furthermore, it should be evident how the pedagogical learning environment considers vulnerable children; cooperates with parents on children's learning; involves the local community; ensures continuity to the preschool class; and works on the children's physical, psychological and aesthetic environments in the ECEC from their perspective, including consideration of the age and maturity of the children. The pedagogical curriculum is not intended to be a long report but should serve as a pedagogical tool through short, relevant pedagogical considerations, reflections and examples (Ministry of Education, 2018, p. 10).

Current Workforce Challenges in Danish ECEC

Over the last ten years, Danish ECEC staff have been required to take on more tasks arising from the national government's policies, more demands from parents, children with special needs and higher quality work. Correspondingly, the strengthened pedagogical curriculum requires new efforts and more documentation. At the same time, staff-to-child ratios have become aggravated and the proportion of pedagogues has decreased among the staff – both are key factors for examining quality in early childhood centres – which challenges the pedagogical practice in ECEC.

Staff-to-child Ratios

The increased requirements and new tasks in pedagogical work have led to aggravated staff-to-child ratios in Danish ECEC institutions, more time where one pedagogical staff member is alone with a large group of children

and less time in general to provide care for the children (Pade and Glavind, 2017, 2018, 2021). The response from politicians has been to demand higher quality in the education of pedagogues. In contrast, the response from those in education has been a call for educational reform that embraces the Nordic tradition of democracy and formation, rather than focusing on the development of competences in an international competitive context (Brogaard-Clausen & Ringsmose, 2017). In addition, the responses from trade unions and pedagogues have been to demand better working conditions, higher wages and improved staff-to-child ratios. After years of debate, a law on staff-to-child ratio minimum standards was included in the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care in December 2021. To be fully implemented by 2024, there must be a minimum of one adult for three children 0–2 years of age and for six children 3–5 years of age (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2022). Although the number of staff members has increased overall, there is still a large proportion of pedagogues who feel that they are not able to provide the needed care to all children (Pade and Glavind, 2021). Approximately 63% of all pedagogical staff report experiencing on a daily basis that they either do not have time to comfort, solve a conflict or support a child in play or discuss problematic issues regarding a child with a colleague (Glavind and Pade, 2022).

Recruitment Challenges

An expected increase in the number of children in Denmark means that the capacity of ECEC centres needs to be significantly increased over the next 10 years. As the adult-to-child ratio must also be improved, the number of pedagogical staff members must be increased by more than 12,000 full-time employees compared to the present level (Glavind and Pade, 2022; Koch & Jensen, in press). In the future, it may be difficult to secure trained staff. The popularity of pedagogue education is not as high as it used to be, and the needed educational reform has not yet been enacted. The number of applicants has been slightly decreasing, which is a problematic tendency when society is vocal in demanding for more educated staff in ECEC institutions (Koch & Jensen, in press).

The content of the special issue

Seven paper contributions from the following ECEC researchers focus on key topics related to the strengthened Danish curriculum:

1. ENCOUNTERING CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES IN PLAY: HOW A PLAY EXPERIMENT WITH ANIMAL CLOAKS BECAME A RESEARCH APPROACH IN ECEC

Hanne Hede Jørgensen
Play and *experiments* are historically essential for the interactions of children and pedagogues. Based on empirical examples from a play experiment carried out by a pedagogue, two researchers and nine children in ECEC, the paper explores if and how such a play experiment can become a child-centred research approach in which children's different perspectives on participation in everyday life can emerge.

2. FUN AND LAUGHTER PROMOTE WELL-BEING IN ECEC: A PEDAGOGY OF FUN AND BIG HUMOUR
Anette Boye Koch
Fun is used rather unreflexively as a pedagogical tool, and the phenomenon is not included in theoretical discussions regarding happiness and well-being, although most people identify having fun as a fundamental reason for being happy. Based on field studies, this paper shows how fun appears in ECEC, and Danish humour philosophy is used to argue what it takes for a professional pedagogue to establish an ECEC culture of *fun* that promotes children's well-being.

3. "BUT WE´RE TALKING ABOUT JONAS?!" DANISH ECEC BETWEEN QUALITY CULTURES
Line Togsverd
Two different *quality cultures* intersect and create tensions in relation to the ECEC area in Denmark – a *technical-instrumental* one, which regards quality as a phenomenon to define and assess to improve, and a *pedagogical* one founded in pedagogy as a human science discipline that go beyond what is easily disregarded as subjective. Based on empirical data, the paper identifies different quality cultures and argues that one that is critical and founded in thoughtfulness and ethical reflection is crucial for the sake of children and democracy.

4. SELF-ORGANISED COMMUNITIES OF CHILDREN
Benedicte Bernstorff
Children self-organise their play in different categories of play-communities. This paper explores children's *play-communities* with a child-centred approach – as social spaces and fields for relations, fights and negotiations with specific admission requirements. The analysis describes how children's practices of being together are expressed through social language in play – linked to an institutional choreography affecting the opportunities for having uninterrupted periods of time and space for play.

5. QUESTIONING CONTINUITY: ON CHILDREN'S TRANSITION FROM DAY CARE TO KINDERGARTEN CLASS IN DENMARK
   Ane Bjerre Odgaard
   Continuity is a key notion regarding children's transitions from day care to school but is often approached as a matter of smoothing out institutional differences. This paper points to the problematic implications of this, exemplified by Danish transition policy and practice – suggesting that a distinction be made between *transition* as a process that necessarily implies change and transformation and *continuity* as a process where children's trajectories of experience, sense-making and learning unfold.

6. AESTHETIC ENCOUNTERS AND AGENCY WITH AND THROUGH MATERIALITY, INTRA-ACTION AND SENSITIVE ENTANGLEMENTS IN DANISH ECEC CENTRES
   Henriette Blomgren
   Children are always in an aesthetic and sensuous activity through play and encounters with the world. Nevertheless, aesthetics is often approached as learning processes and child-centred expression through hands-on work and rather formal activities in ECEC. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and collaboration between pedagogues and artists, this paper highlights aesthetics as subtle and informal processes engaging materiality as a symmetric co-player in support of children's aesthetic agency.

7. EXPLORING PEDAGOGUES' UNDERSTANDING AND DETECTION OF VULNERABILITY IN DANISH EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE
   Birgitte Theilmann
   The concept of vulnerability has significant focus within ECEC but pedagogues tend to focus on detecting individual factors or contextual factors related to the child without considering the institutional context as a potential source of vulnerability production. Based on phenomenological interviews, this paper emphasizes the importance of reevaluating current approaches and address vulnerability in ECEC in both the traditional understanding and as "new vulnerability".

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