Constructing the School-Ready Child

A Study of ECEC Teachers' Experiences of Preparing Children for School

Josefine Jahreie

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Sammendrag

I denne avhandlingen utforsker jeg hvordan et økende fokus på å sikre barns «skoleklarhet» innen skolestart påvirker barnehagelæreres arbeid i barnehagen. En rekke internasjonale studier rapporterer om en global vending mot en «skolifisering» av barnehagen forårsaket av et økende politisk fokus på å sikre barns akademiske ferdigheter før skolestart, og da særlig barns språklige og numeriske ferdigheter. I tråd med denne utviklingen rapporterer flere studier at det foregår en «accountability shove down» av skolens læreplaner og ansvar for barns framtidige skoleresultater fra barneskolen inn i barnehagen. Flere er bekymret for at denne utviklingen går på bekostning av sosialpedagogiske verdier tradisjonelt forbundet med barnehagen, som blant annet viktigheten av lekbasert læring og et helhetlig syn på barns utvikling.

Avhandlingen består av en kappe og fire artikler, der jeg utforsker hvordan barnehagelærere forholder seg til ulike dominerende forståelser av hva det vil si å være «skoleklar» og hvordan dette former deres interaksjoner med barn, foreldre og andre aktører innenfor utdanningsfeltet. De tre første artiklene tar utgangspunkt i en intervjustudie der jeg retter blikket mot hvordan norske og danske barnehagelærere erfarer myndighetenes økte bruk av språkkartleggingstiltak i barnehager som befinner seg i områder der en stor andel av befolkningen har minoritetsspråklig bakgrunn. I den fjerde artikkelen ser jeg på hva tidligere empirisk forskning sier om barnehagelæreres oppfatninger av skoleklarhet. Artikkelen tegner et større bilde av hva internasjonal forskning sier om hvilke faktorer som påvirker barnehagelæreres syn på skoleklarhet, hvorvidt barnehagelæreres oppfatninger av skoleklarhet har endret seg i lys av politiske reformer på barnehagefeltet og hvordan forskningen varierer på tvers av landegrenser.

Samlet beskriver avhandlingen hvordan nåværende politiske endringer på barnehagefeltet er med på å forme barnehagens samfunnsmandat, barnehagelæreres arbeid og rolle, samt hvordan sosial reproduksjon av ulikhet mellom majoritet og minoritet kan bli forsterket og legitimert gjennom institusjonaliserte prosesser i barnehagen i tiden fram mot skolestart.

Thesis Summary

This article-based thesis offers a study of how the increasing policy emphasis on children's *school readiness* shapes Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) teachers' work. I am particularly concerned with Norwegian and Danish policymakers' increasing use of standardised language assessment tools and procedures in kindergarten (0–6 years) as a political measure for enhancing the majority-language proficiency of children with minority-language backgrounds.

A range of international studies report a global turn towards the "schoolification*"* of ECEC, wherein the increasing policy emphasis on early intervention strategies is producing an "accountability shove down" of responsibility for children's future academic outcomes, from formal education to ECEC domains. In four articles, I examine how teachers both challenge and comply with the ruling constructs of school readiness by drawing on various and at times conflicting institutional discourses in their interactions with children, colleagues, parents, municipal authorities, and school representatives. The data material for the studies presented in Articles 1–3 consists of detail-rich transcripts of individual and group interviews with 22 ECEC teachers, describing their work of supporting and assessing the language development of children from minority-language backgrounds. I particularly focus on which texts and actors are involved in the different stages, before, during, and after a language assessment, and how standardised language assessments are used to inform ECEC teachers' work of preparing children for school transition. By unpacking ECEC teachers' descriptive accounts of their work, I elucidate how their task of preparing children with minority-language backgrounds is hooked into larger international processes, transgressing the local particularities of the individual kindergarten. In Article 4, I zoom out of the Danish and Norwegian contexts and conduct a systematic configurative research review of the existing empirical studies on ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness across several national and curricular contexts, painting a broader picture of ECEC teachers' perceptions and reactions to current changes in the field of education.

Overall, the thesis demonstrates how teachers' work of preparing children for school transition takes place in a complex interplay between policy, professionalism, opposing perceptions of school readiness, social class relations, immigration, and parenting ideals. It develops scholarly knowledge of how ECEC teachers "do" policies in practice by unpacking the institutional complex of school readiness and identifying *how* ruling constructs of school readiness are textually mediated. It demonstrates in what ways these constructs shape ECEC

teachers' everyday work, their perceptions of school readiness, and their relations with other actors.

The thesis contributes much-needed insights into the everyday experiences of ECEC teachers employed in kindergartens residing in high-minority and low-income neighbourhoods in Oslo and Copenhagen. Although kindergartens in these areas are recurrently the focus of public concern and intervention, the experiences of ECEC teachers working in them are seldom sought after or considered. The thesis brings attention to the sometimes large distances between the textual representations of school readiness and the local particularities of neighbourhoods and everyday lives inside kindergartens. Moreover, it elucidates how policy changes are reshaping the social mandates of kindergarten as well as ECEC teachers' work and professional roles, and it reveals how the social reproduction of inequality between majority and minority groups can be naturalised and legitimised through various institutional processes in kindergarten and school transition settings.

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The Articles

Article 1

Jahreie, J. (2021). The ambivalence of assessment: Language assessment of minority-language children in early childhood education and care. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 29*(5), 715–732. https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2021.1968459

Article 2

Jahreie, J. (2022). The standard school-ready child: The social organization of "school-readiness". *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 43*(5), 661–679. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2022.2038542

Article 3

Jahreie, J. (2022). Towards a renewed understanding of barriers to immigrant parents' involvement in education. *Acta Sociologica, 66*(3), 307–321. https://doi.org/10.1177/00016993221110870

Article 4

Jahreie, J. (forthcoming). Early childhood education and care teachers' perceptions of school readiness: A research review. *Teaching and teacher education, Volume 135*. Artikkel 104353. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2023.104353

Table Overview

1. Introduction

Policymakers, researchers, teachers, and parents are increasingly emphasising the importance of children starting school "ready", in order to facilitate coherent transitions from Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)[1] to formal school environments and to reduce stratified educational outcomes in the future (Brown & Lan, 2015, 2018; Christensen, 2019). This thesis offers a sociological study of Norwegian and Danish ECEC teachers' experiences of enacting language assessment policies targeted at enhancing children's school readiness. Departing from interviews with ECEC teachers, I identify institutional processes shaping their work of preparing children for school transition. I do so by reviewing the existing research and analytically examining teachers' descriptive accounts of how they negotiate competing discursive constructs of school readiness in their everyday interactions with policy documents, assessment tools, reports, and with actors such as children, parents, specialists, school representatives, and local authorities. Furthermore, I unpack how the teachers negotiate disjunctures between governing standards and the local lives and conditions of children's neighbourhoods. As such, the thesis answers recent calls for empirical research investigating how teachers negotiate the increasing policy emphasis on accountability, assessment, and standardisation in practice (Ball et al., 2011; Mausethagen, 2013b). Lastly, I zoom out and discuss how these contextual factors are changing the character of ECEC teachers' work and their professional roles.

Because of their central positioning in the implementation of educational policy and key role in assessing students' learning outcomes, teachers arguably have the influence to shape if and how a policy is enacted in practice (Ball et al., 2011; Lipsky, 1980). In recent years, Norwegian and Danish ECEC teachers' traditionally large room for professional discretion and autonomy has been increasingly challenged by national and local authorities

[1]In this thesis, I use the terms kindergarten and ECEC somewhat interchangeably. In the context of this thesis the term *kindergarten* refers to the non-compulsory part of the Danish and Norwegian education system for children between 0 and 6 years of age. In Article 4, I have notably increased the age range to 0–7 years to take into account international variations in compulsory school age (OECD, 2020). The term *kindergarten* implicitly refers to the social pedagogic values and curriculum that has been particularly prominent in the Central European and Nordic region. When I refer to ECEC more generally, I am nodding towards all international ECEC models and programmes, including those systems that do not fit within the social pedagogy tradition of curriculum development (Bennett, 2005). In some places, I have for simplicity used kindergarten as a term both referring to ECEC systems inside and outside the social pedagogy tradition. Yet, it is important to be aware of the different traditions and meanings that underpin terms such as kindergarten, ECEC, and school readiness. Particularly, the term kindergarten can be confusing since, for example, in the United States it refers to the first year of compulsory education. I use the term *ECEC teacher* to refer to professionally trained teachers who work with this specific group of children up until and during school transition. *Kindergarten class [børnehaveklasse]* refers to the first year of compulsory education in Denmark (6 years).

seeking to control teachers' pedagogic work in order to ensure that citizens receive the same quality of kindergarten across different local contexts (Børhaug & Bøe, 2022). Simultaneously, we observe a global turn in which ECEC curriculum is incrementally moving towards an increasing emphasis on children's academic skills and "school readiness" (Bassok et al., 2016; Niklas et al., 2018). Consequently, ECEC teachers face growing demands to implement programmes aimed at strengthening the language development and majority-language proficiency of children generally and children with minority-language backgrounds especially. Yet, few empirical studies have investigated how ECEC teachers enact language assessment policies and how they perceive and negotiate their professional roles in a changing kindergarten sector. Studies investigating recent political changes from ECEC teachers' perspectives can develop our understanding of the institutional processes underpinning current reports of stratified educational outcomes between majority and minority children in kindergarten and school (See, Copenhagen Children and Youth Administration 2019; OECD, 2019b, for examples of these reports). Such studies could additionally contribute to the scarce empirical knowledge available concerning how ECEC teachers perceive and negotiate changes to the ECEC teachers' role, their agency, and the character of their work. Moreover, the thesis contributes to developing our knowledge of how ECEC teachers approach changes in the socio-demographic character of the child population and negotiate the controversial debates on standardised assessment, high-stakes tests, and school readiness in the wake of recent policy developments.

Since the millennial turn, Danish and Norwegian authorities have implemented several language assessment policies targeted at detecting children with weak language skills or language development issues as early as possible. Several of these policies are specifically targeted at improving the majority-language skills of children with minority-language backgrounds who live in high-minority, low-income areas, specifically to "close the achievement gap" and reduce children with minority background's risk of future disadvantages in school and adulthood (Danish Government, 2018; Oslo City Council Section for Childhood and Education, 2019). The overall intention behind these policies is generally to shrink the gap in educational outcomes by improving children's *school readiness* through *early intervention* (See, for example, Norwegian Ministry of Education, 2020). Yet, Danish public authorities have displayed a comparatively stronger focus than their Norwegian counterparts on using standardised language assessments as a tool for enhancing the language proficiency in the majority language of children with minority-language backgrounds.

The motivation behind the study is threefold. *First,* in light of recent policy developments and current debates producing a variety of messages concerning what it means to "make children ready" for school, I sought to understand how ECEC teachers approach the scholarly and political controversies on language assessment policies in practice, particularly since existing studies suggest that ECEC teachers may be positioned in a cross-pressure between competing discourses on school readiness and demands from various actors in the educational field (See, for example, Ball, 2003, Ball et al., 2011; Kinkead-Clark, 2021; Kjær et al., 2020). A *second* motivation for conducting this study are scholars' previous calls for more empirical research investigating how teachers "do" policy enactment under increasing demands for children's school readiness and accountability as a leading educational policy of action (Ball et al., 2011; Holm, 2015; Mausethagen, 2013b). *Third,* since the millennial turn, policymakers have demonstrated increasing interest in using kindergarten as a space for *early intervention*, resulting in various new accountability policies targeted at socially disadvantaged and high-minority districts in both Denmark and Norway and children who are deemed to be "at-risk" for future educational failure (Houmøller, 2018; Kimathi & Nilsen, 2021; Nilsen, 2017a). I wondered whether the Danish Government's strict policies on immigration and integration would shape Danish teachers' language assessment practices in any way differently than their Norwegian counterparts. Moreover, I sought to develop our understandings of the institutionalised processes producing and reproducing social disparities in educational outcomes between children from majority and minority backgrounds in kindergarten (0–6), and how ECEC teachers understand and negotiate such processes.

1.1. School Readiness

School readiness is a complex idea, connected to multiple understandings of the relationship between child development, individuals, and society (Graue, 1993; Meisels, 1999). Yet, as a general term, school readiness is commonly used to describe the broad set of socio-emotional, motor, and academic skills needed to succeed in school (Carlton & Winsler, 1999). The characteristics and skills perceived to indicate school readiness are not only political but also founded on a broad range of studies predominantly focused on identifying the predictors of risk for educational failure and success (See, for example, Bleses et al., 2016 and Heckman, 2006). In the current study, I am particularly interested in the aspect of school readiness associated with children's language skills, also referred to as "lingual readiness" [*Sprogparathed*] by Danish authorities (See, for example, The Danish Ministry of Children and Education, 2022). More specifically, in the interview study (Articles 1–3), I was

particularly interested in studying ECEC teachers' experiences of enacting language assessment policies in practice and their accounts of assessing children's oral language skills and pre-literacy skills in the majority language. I sought to understand how these forms of assessment are perceived and negotiated by ECEC teachers in their everyday practices and how such assessment policies and practices potentially affect children's school transitions.

In the context of this thesis, the term school readiness is understood and used in two distinct ways. On the one hand, it refers to the explicit expectations of state and local authorities, such as the Danish policy *One Denmark without parallel societies* (Danish government, 2018), that dictate the base level of what is referred to as the *lingual readiness* needed in order to be deemed "ready" for first grade. Within this interpretation, school readiness is linked to certain skills and intrinsically relative to the education system children are being prepared for, meaning that the perceptions of what constitutes school readiness are institutionalised in formalised structures, such as policies and curriculum. On the other hand, school readiness is also understood as a discourse that is reflective of hegemonic knowledge systems structuring policymaking, research, and ECEC teachers' work. Yet notably, in the present study, discursive constructs of school readiness are not viewed as structuring teachers' work statically. On the contrary, I assume that the concept and practical implications of school readiness are actively challenged and negotiated on an implicit or explicit level between actors in the everyday lives inside and outside kindergartens. Along these lines, an important methodological assumption underpinning the current study is the arbitrary nature of what makes up school readiness. Hence, the thesis title *Constructing the School-Ready Child* alludes to both the identification of discursive constructions of school readiness reflected in policy and scholarly discourse on one side, and ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness and their practical work of preparing children for school transition on the other. I sketch out the broader lines of the field of studies on school readiness in Chapter 3, *Literature Review*, and in Article 4 I elaborate more on some of the most widely established perceptions of school readiness, and how current research suggests that dominant perceptions of school readiness might be changing.

1.2. Language Assessment

Children's early oral language and pre-literacy skills are widely perceived to be highly predictive of later educational achievement and are broadly applied as an indicator in determining children's school readiness (Aro et al., 2012; Bleses et al., 2016; Duncan et al., 2007). Thus, the early detection of weak language skills in children is increasingly viewed as

important for ensuring early intervention and reducing social inequality in adulthood (Højen et al., 2019; Lekhal et al., 2011). Yet, assessment in kindergarten is neither a new nor controversial topic in itself, as assessing children's development is arguably an intrinsic part of the ECEC teacher role. Traditionally, teachers' assessment of kindergarteners has involved formative approaches in which the assessment of children's development is integrated into their daily activities, relying on several different methods and sources for "data-gathering" (Holm, 2017). However, in recent years, a growing trend is the use of standardised tests on a large scale for system-level purposes in kindergarten, a trend following the rising popularity of such data- gathering methods and data use in formal school domains (Mausethagen et al., 2021; Skedsmo & Mausethagen, 2016). The rise of political accountability policies dictating standard instructions on how children's language development should be assessed in kindergarten and with what tools have met with critique from teachers' unions and scholars within the pedagogic field (Pettersvold & Østrem, 2012, 2019). In this vein, scholars have been concerned that the changes in ECEC policy have redirected teachers' attention from a more traditional focus on broad developmental goals to searching for deficits in children's development. Some researchers have warned that the growing popularity of standardised assessment and documentation regimes in kindergarten could contribute to teachers' constructing what Pierlejewski (2020) refers to as "deficit doppelgängers" of the children in their care. Researchers argue that such representations of children could be harmful for how teachers and society view children and how children view themselves (Nilsen, 2017).

In the articles based on the interview data (Articles 1–3), I was particularly interested in examining how ECEC teachers enact national and local educational policies instructing their assessment practices. Education policy is here understood broadly as decisions made by bodies with legal and legitimate authority, often constituted as curricula, framework plans, and regulations (Aasen et al., 2013). When addressing *language assessment policy*, I am widely referring to national and local policy documents, such as white papers, manuals, and curriculum-instructing procedures for how teachers shall assess and support the language development of children in kindergarten. My analytical interest is particularly focused in on ECEC teachers' interactions with policy documents and how texts function as the mediators of and reproducers of certain types of knowledge constructions. As such, I am not referring to a more traditional type of document analysis, in the sense where I, as a researcher, have analysed the documents as the main unit of interest. Instead, I have drawn on Institutional ethnographic methodology to "map out" and trace ruling relations by departing from teachers' descriptions of their reading, using, and interpreting of these texts, and how this shapes both

the performative and organisational aspects of their work (Smith & Griffith, 2014; Terum & Molander, 2008). See, *Appendix A: Map of the Textual Landscape from the ECEC Teachers' Standpoint* for a graphical overview of the social organisation of ECEC teachers' work in the two study contexts.

1.3. Children with Minority-Language Backgrounds

In this thesis, the terms *children with minority-language backgrounds* and *minority-language children* are used interchangeably when referring to children with a first language other than one of the Nordic languages, as well as English or German. As such, the group I am referring to in this study is primarily comprised of children with migrant backgrounds themselves and/or are children of parents of immigrant descent. These terms are utilised to emphasise the hierarchal relationship between the majority languages in the current study contexts and the languages associated with groups of migrant descent. They highlight also the hierarchal relationship between countries, cultures, languages, and groups of people within a specific context. In contrast, the term *multilingual* arguably veils the dominance of various languages over other languages, which underpins several tensions in the discussion of language assessment and school readiness in this study.

I, however, do not refer to the indigenous languages of Norway and Denmark when I use the term *minority languages* in the current study, as the use of these languages within the educational contexts is governed under their own special laws and regulations separate from the ones that are most relevant for regulating the work of the ECEC teachers working in the geographical areas that make up the contexts of the present study. This does not imply that the relationship between indigenous languages and majority languages has not been characterised by a history of dominance and oppression. On the contrary, I believe it is an important question for scholarly attention. Yet, the focus of this thesis is foremost on ECEC teachers' work with children and families of migrant descent, as this is a group that, in recent years, has become a main focus of public concern and political intervention (See, for example, Danish government, 2018; The Norwegian Ministry of Education, 2021). However, it has recently been brought to my attention that despite its wide adaptation in Nordic policy contexts, the term "minority-language children" bears negative connotations in some research communities. Some argue that the term portrays minority status as something you *are* rather than something you *have* and that it eludes the relative contextual factors shaping the relationship between minority and majority. According to this logic, the term *children with minority-language backgrounds* is more aligned with an understanding of minority language

status being something that you have. I have therefore chosen to use the term *children with minority-language backgrounds* in the "kappe", although I have used both terms in the articles.

1.4. Aims and Research Questions

Resting mainly on the ontological and methodological insights of Institutional ethnography (Smith, 2005), the study aims to identify and trace the relationship between the ruling constructs of school readiness on a discursive level and teachers' local everyday experiences in order to unpack the complex ruling relations shaping ECEC teachers' everyday work (Smith, 2005). Departing from the findings presented in the four articles written in the context of this study (See Table 1 below), I state new questions to analytically examine what the combination of findings presented in the respective articles contribute to the scholarly research field.

The overall research question this thesis sets out to answer is:

How does the increasing emphasis on school readiness shape ECEC teachers' experiences of their work and their relations to other actors?

To help answer the main question, I ask three supporting questions:

1. What characterises ruling constructs of school readiness in previous research and amongst groups of ECEC teachers?

2. What tensions are created, and what can these tensions tell us about the ruling relations shaping ECEC teachers' work, particularly ECEC teachers working in low-income, high-minority neighbourhoods?

3. In which ways could language assessment policies and the changing policy expectations of school readiness possibly influence ruling perceptions of the social mandate of kindergartens and the ECEC teacher role?

These questions guide the discussion in Chapter 6 and are used to zoom out of the questions stated in each article and sketch out the larger picture by reanalysing the findings presented in the articles through a new lens. Table 1 presents an overview of the research questions, key concepts, empirical data, and main findings presented in each of the four articles. See also *Table 2. Overview of Which Articles Contribute to Answering What Overall Research Questions* in Appendix B for an overview of how each article contributes to answering the research questions.

Table 1

Overview of Articles, Research Questions, Key Concepts, Empirical Data, and Main Findings

	Research questions	Key analytical concepts	Empirical data	Main findings
Article 1	How do Norwegian and Danish ECEC teachers approach language assessment policies in practice?	-Ruling relations (Smith, 2005) -Ideological codes (Smith, 1999) -Text-reader conversations (Smith, 2001)	Interviews with Norwegian and Danish ECEC teachers	The analysis of the interview data suggests that ECEC teachers are mostly pragmatic in their approach to implementing language assessment policies. Yet, they experience ambivalence in their work of assessing the language development of children with minority-language backgrounds.
Article 2	What constitutes a "school-ready child"? How do these perceptions shape Danish ECEC teachers' assessments of children with minority-language backgrounds and their school readiness in kindergarten?	-Ideological codes (Smith, 1999)	Interviews with Danish ECEC teachers	The study identifies prominent characteristics of "the standard school-ready child", which function as an ideological code, shaping replicable understandings of what constitutes "school readiness" in institutional discourse and assessment materials.
Article 3	What type of parent involvement do ECEC teachers expect from immigrant parents? How do teachers react if immigrant parents do not act in accordance with their expectations?	-Intensive parenting (Hays, 1996) -Concerted cultivation the accomplishment of natural growth (Lareau, 2011)	Interviews with Norwegian and Danish ECEC teachers	The study identifies three key tensions in teachers' descriptive accounts of interacting with parents of immigrant descent: (1) conflicting perceptions of responsibility, (2) conflicting perceptions of children's roles and how to communicate with children, and (3) conflicting perceptions of what kindergarten is and what constitutes valuable knowledge.
Article 4	What characterises existing empirical research on ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness? In what ways and to what extent does increased emphasis	-School readiness -The readiness for school tradition	Existing empirical research articles on ECEC	The review elucidates the relational aspects of ECEC teachers' perceptions and reveals

on children's "school readiness" shape ECEC teachers' perceptions of what it means to prepare children for school, and does this impact their relations with other actors? If and how do ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness vary across national contexts?	-The social policy pedagogical tradition (Bennet, 2005)	teachers' perceptions of school readiness between 2012 and 2022	the contextually relative nature of schoolification and school readiness.

The thesis offers an opportunity to discuss emerging topics from the analysis that move across the individual studies presented in each article. As such, the thesis seeks to sketch out the broader lines of the ruling relations shaping teachers' work. Yet, although the thesis format offers space for elaborating on certain topics, I still needed to choose which of the prominent topics that should be presented in the foreground and which topics and concepts would make up the backdrop of this thesis. As I see it, two topics in particular stand out from the analysis presented in the four articles: Understanding how the increasing emphasis on children's "school readiness" and the changing social demography in the Danish and Norwegian populations shape ECEC teachers' work, and the rising and persisting unequal educational outcomes between majority and minority groups within the population, and how these come about. In the thesis, I zoom in on the first, and primarily focus on the processes leading to unequal educational outcomes between minority and majority groups as part of the ruling relations shaping teachers' work.

1.5. The Outline of This Thesis

Each chapter of this thesis describes different parts of the research process and unpacks how different aspects of ECEC teachers' work are shaped by the changing policy climate. The thesis is organised as follows. In the *second chapter,* I outline the broader context of the changing political discourse on school readiness and the controversies surrounding language assessment, and link recent national debates in the Danish and Norwegian kindergarten field to the larger international controversies on the social mandates of ECEC and the ECEC teacher role. I continue by describing the local particularities of the language assessment policies and practices in Copenhagen and Oslo, the segregated living patterns of the two cities, and the changing socio-demography of the Danish and Norwegian population. In the *third chapter,* I review the existing empirical research addressing ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness and their enactment of language assessment policies. In the *fourth chapter,* I introduce the three key theoretical perspectives and foreground the analytical concepts that have proven most useful for my analysis and discussion of the

findings. In the *fifth chapter*, I elaborate on my choice of research design, the research process, knowledge production, and the analytical approach in detail. I discuss my methodological and analytical choices and the challenges of combining Institutional ethnographic methodology with other theoretical perspectives in the analysis. In the *sixth chapter*, I summarise the four articles produced in the context of this thesis. In the *seventh chapter,* I use the four articles in combination to answer the research questions and shed new light on the findings through the prism of modernity theory. In the *eight chapter*, I reflect on the study's contributions, limitations, and possible implications and end the thesis by suggesting avenues for future research.

2. Context

In the main research question, I refer to the "increasing emphasis on school readiness"; in this section, I establish what this entails. Thereafter, I describe and compare the local particularities of the language assessment policies in Copenhagen and Oslo and link recent national debates on school readiness and assessment in the Danish and Norwegian kindergarten field to global changes in the ECEC curriculum. I present the changing political and socio-demographical context by emphasising two overlapping key factors: *The Changing Politics of ECEC* and *The Changing Social Demography and New Social Integration Policies*.

2.1. The Changing Politics of ECEC

Current political and socio-demographic conditions constitute teachers' space for professional agency and the character of their work (Ball, 2003; Ball et al., 2011). Internationally, governing bodies are increasingly setting pre-determined baselines for what it means to be "school ready" and establishing goals and standardised approaches for achieving adequate levels of readiness (Brooks & Murray, 2018; Gunnarsdottir, 2014). The highly influential transnational interest organisation, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), describes that the aim of pre-primary education is "to develop cognitive, physical and socio-emotional skills necessary for participation in school and society" (2019a). The Nordic kindergarten model has traditionally been seen as an insular pedagogic space, separate from formal schooling, and is primarily associated with social pedagogic learning approaches, broad developmental goals, egalitarianism, and social inclusion (Bennett, 2005; Einarsdottir et al., 2015). Yet, following the global turn, Norwegian and Danish kindergartens (0–6 years) have evolved from a caretaking institution for a selected few to a school preparatory arena for all (Korsvold, 2005). In the international context, standardised language assessment and accountability policies were introduced at a later stage in the Nordic education systems compared to other countries, both in formal education settings and in kindergarten (Børhaug & Bøe, 2022; Mausethagen, 2013b). However, several researchers report of an increasing "schoolification" of kindergarten also in the Nordic context and a growing interest in early intervention and the implementation of standardised assessment routines in the kindergarten curriculum (See, for example, Gunnarsdottir, 2014; Kjær et al., 2020; Pettersvold & Østrem, 2012). In recent years, there have emerged broad political and scholarly discussions regarding what school readiness means, including if preparing children for school is the social mandate of kindergartens at all and whether

kindergarten as an institution has its own purpose separate from preparing children for formal education (See, for example, Pettersvold & Østrem, 2012; Russell, 2011). The OECD, on the other hand, has strongly recommended that Norwegian and Danish authorities implement a more unified curriculum in ECEC and primary education in order to bridge the cultural and curricular gap between kindergarten and formal education to enhance children's chances of "starting strong*"* (OECD, 2017).

In recent years, kindergarten enrolment rates have risen to almost full coverage in both Norway and Denmark, with, respectively, more than 93% and 84% of children aged 1–5 enrolled in kindergarten (Glavind & Pade, 2020; Statistics Norway, 2021).[2-3] Historically, the aim of full coverage *[full barnehagedekning]* has particularly been incentivised by the national economic value of high female participation in the paid labour force and to promote social cohesion between majority and minority groups. In Denmark, ECEC institutions are referred to as *daycare institutions [dagtilbud]* and are usually divided into *nurseries [vuggestue]* for children aged 0–3 years and *kindergarten [børnehave]* for children aged 3–6. In Denmark, state authorities guarantee children the right to a kindergarten placement from the child is 26 weeks old, while in Norway, children are guaranteed placement in August in the same year a child turns 1 (Kindergarten Act, 2005; The Day Care Act, 2018). Norwegian kindergartens operate within the same age-determined categories as Denmark, yet both the ages 1–3 and 3–6 are referred to as *kindergarten [barnehage]*. For simplicity, I refer to both administrative structures as *kindergartens* in this thesis. Kindergartens are recognised as educational institutions in both countries and governed under the Ministry of Education. Formal education in school usually begins the year a child turns 6, and starting school involves changing locations from kindergarten facilities to school premises. In both countries, kindergartens are governed under their own laws and regulations, separately from formal education, and the responsibility for monitoring and regulating kindergartens is largely delegated to the individual municipalities (Kindergarten Act, 2005; The Day Care Act, 2018). Municipalities also own a large share of kindergartens, and, respectively, 47% and 72% of Norwegian and Danish kindergartens are owned by the municipalities (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2018b; Trætteberg et al., 2021). Yet, the

[2] The Danish statistics only refer to municipal and independently owned kindergartens, leaving out the privately owned. However, in striking contrast to Norway, Denmark has very few private kindergartens.

[3] The kindergarten enrolment for the youngest children is somewhat lower, with an 85.4% share of 1–2-year-olds in Norway and a 39% share of 0–2 year olds in Denmark. These national differences can probably be explained by the differences in the regulations for parental leave benefits and the fact that Danish kindergartens *[Daginstitutioner]* enrol young infants in nurseries, while Norwegian kindergartens usually do not admit children until they turn 1 year old.

municipalities are also partly responsible for regulating the activities of kindergartens owned by private and non-profit actors, as the responsibility for regulating and overlooking kindergartens has been decentralised to the municipalities.

Although kindergarten is governed separately from formal compulsory education,[4] the Norwegian *Kindergarten Act* and the Danish *Act on Daycare* hold kindergartens partly responsible for ensuring children's school readiness and facilitating their successful school transition. Policymakers, researchers, and interest organisations are increasingly worried about the negative risks associated with children's educational transitions, such as between kindergarten and formal education (See, for example, OECD, 2017). The Norwegian Ministry of Education states that transitions; "[…] can be problematic, particularly for sensitive children and children with special needs. A safe transition between kindergarten and school involves that children and parents experience the transition as predictable and know what to expect when children commence schooling "(2018). The goal of reducing the risk of a cultural "shock" between kindergarten and school has resulted in several different measures both internationally and nationally over the last three decades. Creating "coherence" between the two educational structures is often presented as the most valuable solution to such problems (Christensen, 2020).

Danish and Norwegian authorities have taken several general measures to meet demands for a more "cohesive" transition between kindergarten and school, starting in the 1990s. *First*, in 1997 and 2009, the age for compulsory schooling was lowered from 7 to 6 in Norway and Denmark, respectively. In Norway, the new grade soon became the new first grade, and the name of each grade in primary and secondary education was "pushed down" one year. In Denmark, this new grade for 6-year-olds was named "kindergarten class", resembling the U.S. school K-12 system, where "kindergarten" (K1) refers to the first year of formal schooling on the school's premises. As such the name "kindergarten class" was chosen to underline the intention of bringing kindergarten pedagogy *into* formal schooling. This intention was also shared by Norwegian policymakers when implementing a similar reform back in 1997 (Hølland et al., 2021). However, several scholars in both countries have deemed this intention a failure, arguing that it has rather led to a "push down" of academic curriculum and expectations previously associated with higher grade levels (Christensen, 2020; Pettersvold & Østrem, 2012). *Second*, since 2007, the responsibility for kindergartens and

[4] A relevant exception in this study is the particular national legislation in Denmark, deeming compulsory kindergarten from age 1 for children residing in "at-risk neighborhoods" or "ghetto areas" (Danish government, 2018).

schools has been unified under the Ministry of Education, after previously being governed under the Ministry of Social Affairs. Similarly, the responsibility for Danish kindergarten has also been in the hands of the Ministry of Education since 2015, after several back-and-forths between different ministries in the years leading up to the decision.

Third, the renewed kindergarten curriculum in Denmark from 2018 states that one of the goals of the renewal is that there shall be "established a culture of assessment in kindergarten" (Ministry of Children and Education, 2018). However, the strengthened focus on formal assessment in Danish and Norwegian kindergartens started already in the first decennial after the millennial turn. In that respect, strengthening children's majority-language skills through assessment and early intervention has been a high priority. In 2007, the Danish Day Care Act was amended to include a formal language screening of all 3-year-olds. The wording was later changed from *all* 3-year-old children to the formal language assessment of 3-year-olds "if there are lingual, behavioural or other circumstances indicating that children may require language stimulation".

The municipalities often have their own assessment policies and practices. These language assessment policies often encompass, as in Copenhagen, a package of standardised screening tools, reporting systems, and procedures issued by the national authorities. Municipal policymakers and local stakeholders can also, such as in Oslo, instruct teachers to use a certain standardised observation tool for assessing the language development of children in the process of applying for further examination and/or additional resources for a child exhibiting weak language development. Both Copenhagen's and Oslo's national and municipal authorities have issued standard manuals instructing how to support children's language development and presenting schemes for tracking children's language development as part of the documentation involved in school transition (For example, Ministry of Children and Education, 2017; Oslo City Council Section for Childhood and Education, 2013; 2015; 2019; 2020). In both the Oslo and Copenhagen municipalities, the authorities officially state that in kindergarten, ECEC teachers can use the language assessment tools they prefer. In Copenhagen, teachers can use whichever tools they like in *addition* to the state-mandated screening tool, while in Oslo, the ECEC teachers enjoy a "freedom of method" *[metodefrihet]*. Yet, the Norwegian teachers in my study reported that other public institutions such as the Pedagogic-Psychological Services (PPT) require them to test children with the TRAS-tool when referring them for an evaluation or when applying for additional resources, and that the teachers therefore in practice usually end up using that tool in most cases, sometimes supplemented with other testing tools despite their formal "freedom of

method". TRAS is a language mapping tool consisting of closed-ended questions that the ECEC teacher, in theory, can fill in without the child's active presence, including questions such as "Does the child understand prepositions?" (Espenakk et al., 2011). In Copenhagen, on the other hand, teachers primarily must use the Ministry of Education's mandated assessment tool— a screening tool made up of several closed-ended questions requiring the reactive presence of the individual child being tested, including questions such as "What is happening in this picture?" (Ministry of Children and Education, 2017). An important point here is that the relationship between what is stated in a state or municipal-level policy as mandatory or not and how it is enacted on a local level seem to vary, and it is therefore more of an empirical question than a theoretical one.[5]

In 2016, the Norwegian Parliament, inspired by the Danish Day care Act, suggested that a standardised language assessment should be offered to all 3-year-olds. The suggestion received so much backlash from the practice field, the teachers' union, and the ECEC scholarly community that the proposition was revoked. However, in 2020, the Parliament once again purposed new standardised assessment routines for the assessment of children's language development, this time before starting school, like in Denmark (Norwegian Ministry of Education, 2020). At the time of the publishing of this thesis, we still do not know what the final decision will be after the official hearings. Similar baseline tests have recently been introduced in countries such as the UK and in a majority of U.S. states, aimed at producing data about all school-starters' developmental levels to create a baseline for the future comparison of progress at both the individual and group levels (The Government of the United Kingdom, 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

These three changes should be seen in the context of the growing influence organisations such as the OECD have on the development of national ECEC curricula and the increasing public spending on childcare and ECEC on a global level (Brown & Lan, 2015; Christensen, 2020). Although OECD (2017) recommends that the goal of cohesive transitions should be met by bringing the ECEC curriculum into the school setting, a range of empirical research suggests that the goal of cohesion has contradictorily led to a "shove down" of school-oriented curriculum and accountability for school readiness onto kindergarten (See, for example, Bassok et al., 2016; Christensen, 2020; Gunnarsdottir, 2014). Arguably, the recent

[5] When I contacted the Copenhagen municipal administration in 2019, I was told that the municipality does not require that the language development of all children in kindergarten must be assessed each year. However, the Danish ECEC teachers participating in the current study reported that it was decided on a local district level that they needed to screen the language development of all children.

policy changes to the Danish and Norwegian kindergarten laws and regulations can be viewed as a consequence of policymakers' increasing gravitation towards using kindergarten as a "readying" arena for formal schooling. As such, the original goal of creating cohesion between the two institutions by bringing kindergarten curriculum and learning approaches into primary school setting can be said to have been unsuccessful. Furthermore, implementing a new grade in primary school, seems to rather have had the opposite effect and Danish and Norwegian kindergarten curricula are arguably more academically oriented than ever before. I further describe and discuss existing international studies on teachers' perceptions of these changes in the literature review in the next chapter. Yet, based on the historical backdrop described in this section and the current developments in Denmark following the *One Denmark without parallel societies* policy that I will present under the next headline, Denmark represents a more high-stakes context compared to Norway. Stronger standardised measures for ensuring children's school readiness have been implemented in Denmark, along with stricter consequences for not being "school ready" (See also Article 2).

2.2. The Changing Social Demography and New Social Integration Policies

As previously described, we not only observe an increasing exchange of ideas across national borders, but the rising rates of international migration of families is also leading to a growing number of children with migrant and minority-language backgrounds attending ECEC (Castro & Prishker, 2018). Consequently, ECEC has become a highly important integration arena for young children with migrant backgrounds and their families (Bove & Sharmahd, 2020; Tobin, 2020).

2.2.1. Immigration to Norway and Denmark

Compared to other regions, the Scandinavian population remained largely ethnically homogenous up until the 1960s and 1970s, when greater groups of foreign workers started migrating to the Scandinavian region than before primarily from southeastern Europe, Turkey, Yugoslavia, and Pakistan (Gursli-Berg et al., 2021). In 2022, 15% of the Norwegian population have immigrant status, while 4% are born in Norway to parents of immigrant status. In Norway, most people of immigrant descent are working immigrants born in one of the Nordic or Western European countries. The largest group of immigrants are born in Poland. About one fourth of all people with immigrant status are refugees or are related to someone with refugee status, and the largest groups of immigrants within this group are people born in Asian and African countries (Statistics Norway, 2022). Correspondingly, 11%

of the Danish population are registered with immigrant status, and 3.5% are born to parents with immigrant status (Statistics Denmark, 2022). According to Danish population statistics, 43% of people with immigrant status have migrated from what is registered as so-called *Western* countries, while 57% have migrated from what is listed as *non-Western* countries. Respectively, 18% and 82% of children are born to parents who have migrated from *Western* and *non-Western* countries[6] (Statistics Denmark, 2022). Policymakers are increasingly viewing kindergarten as an effective arena for the social integration of children with immigrant and minority-language backgrounds. Although kindergartens in the Nordics traditionally have had a social mandate to promote social inclusion, the increasing responsibility of assuring that all children have a certain fluency in the majority language before transitioning to formal schooling presents new types of professional challenges for ECEC teachers.

People of immigrant descent are statistically faced with multiple social disadvantages compared to the majority population. Studies from the Danish and Norwegian context identify strong correlations between immigrant background, weak educational outcomes, and child poverty (Galloway et al., 2015). The compound effect of being foreign to a new culture and the majority language, as well as living under socio-economic deprivation leaves many children of immigrant descent at a disadvantage in educational settings compared to their native-born peers. Results from the most recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) report reveal substantial disparities in educational outcomes between native-born students and children of immigrant descent, particularly in the Nordic countries (Beuchert et al., 2018; OECD, 2019b). Moreover, Scandinavian statistics from Statistics Norway reveal that students with immigrant backgrounds are significantly more likely to drop out of school compared to native-born students in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden—boys in particular (Statistics Norway, 2013).

In recent years, Norwegian and Danish authorities have taken several measures to close the achievement gap between children from majority and minority backgrounds. A strong focus has been on ensuring that all children obtain a certain level of fluency in Norwegian/Danish before starting school, as research shows that knowing the majority

[6] Statistic Denmark (2022) defines Western countries as: EU-countries, Andorra, Australia, Canada, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Monaco, New Zealand, Norway, San Marino, Switzerland, Great Britain, The United States of America, and the Vatican state. Respectively, these are the countries defined as non-Western: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Belarus, Yugoslavia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Russia, Serbia, Turkey, and Ukraine. Alle countries in Africa, South- and Middle America, Asia, and Oceania (except Australia and New Zealand). Statistics Denmark also includes people in the category of non-Western immigrants if they are state-less or born in the Soviet Union before its demise in 1991.

language before school transition is highly associated with later educational success, particularly for children of migrant descent (Højen et al., 2019). A large focus has been on ensuring that as many children with minority-language backgrounds are enrolled in kindergarten as early as possible to compensate for the problem of some immigrant parents' presumed "lacking" ability to instil sufficiently strong majority-language skills to ensure that the children can follow ordinary lectures in Danish and Norwegian. Moreover, studies report that children with minority-language backgrounds start kindergarten at a later age than the majority population. According to the Norwegian state budget 2021–2022, a 54.4% share of children with minority-language backgrounds attend kindergarten in Norway at age 1, compared to an 83.2% share of children with non-minority language backgrounds. However, the discrepancy between the enrolment of children from minority and non-minority backgrounds progressively evens out with age up until school transition.

2.2.2. Oslo and Copenhagen

The living patterns of Oslo and Copenhagen, the capital cities of Norway and Denmark, mirror the segregated living patterns of other large international cities (Ljunggren, 2017; Skifter Andersen et al., 2016). As such, Oslo and Copenhagen are heavily segregated compared to the rest of Norway and Denmark, countries widely recognised for universal welfare models and relatively flat wage structures (Esping-Andersen, 1990). For example, statistics from the Norwegian context show that Oslo is home to both the richest and the poorest people in the country (Ljunggren, 2017). Segregated living patterns between disadvantaged and privileged groups in society are widely associated with the reproduction of social disparities in educational outcomes and overall life chances, in favour of those who grow up in the more affluent neighbourhoods (Toft & Ljunggren, 2016).

To increase the likelihood of future educational success and social mobility for children of minority-language backgrounds from disadvantaged backgrounds, several different political measures have been implemented to increase kindergarten enrolment and enhance the majority-language proficiency of children of immigrant descent in both capital cities. For example, Oslo municipality has tested a pilot project offering free of charge kindergarten in certain Oslo districts that are characterised by a comparatively high share of residents from disadvantaged social backgrounds and immigrant backgrounds (See, for example, Bråten, 2018). However, in recent years, arguably the most noticeable, controversial, and intrusive policy was presented in 2018 when the Danish government introduced their report *One Denmark without parallel societies: No ghettos by 2030 [Ét*

Danmark uden parallelsamfund: Ingen ghettoer i 2030] (Danish government, 2018).

During the past two decades, Danish authorities have directed particular concern towards decreasing the segregated living patterns of the so-called *at-risk neighbourhoods* and *ghetto areas*,[7] with the aim of increasing the overall life chances of "non-Western" immigrants living in Denmark. The authorities' reasoning have been that segregated living patterns of particularly so-called non-Western immigrants with low socioeconomic status pose a threat to the social integration and upward social mobility of the residents belonging to disadvantaged groups of the populations living in these areas. Moreover, since 2011, Danish state authorities have prepared a list of *at-risk areas* and *ghetto areas* (See, Danish Ministry, 2018, pp. 11 for a list over the inclusion criteria. I have translated parts of this list to English in Article 2). The 2018 report included several strict measures aimed at disrupting the segregated living patterns and socio-economic disparities between residents of Danish and migrant backgrounds, which included amendments to the Danish Day Care Act (2018). *First*, from the school year 2019/2020, all children in these particular areas must be enrolled in kindergarten from age 1 or else their parents can lose their right to childcare benefits *[børnecheck]*. *Second*, the Danish government altered the Day Care Act's language assessment and school transition policy by hindering the automatic promotion to first grade in schools where 30% or more students live in what the government refers to as *at-risk neighbourhoods* and *ghetto areas*. Grade promotion from kindergarten to first grade is decided based on the outcome of the compulsory language screening in *kindergarten class* (6 years), and a child gets four tries to score above 15% on the test before they are retained for another year. I provide a broader description of this particular policy and its implications for children's school transition in Article 2. In this respect, Oslo and Copenhagen serve as interesting study contexts, since despite their common historical origins and the curricular underpinnings of the kindergarten system in both countries, Danish and Norwegian

[7] Although it is statistically evident that the living patterns in Copenhagen are segregated by residents' socioeconomic status and between the native majority and immigrant minority population, scholars have questioned whether the word "ghetto" is a good term for describing the type of segregation patterns observed in Copenhagen (Damm et al., 2006). Historically, ghettos refer to more or less enclosed areas where people belonging to primarily one ethnic minority group are held together more or less voluntarily. Examples of this were the Jewish ghettos in Venice in the 1500s and the ghettos concentrated of people of African American heritage in the United States in the 1900s (Damm et al., 2006). However, as Waquant (2004) famously points out, the segregated patterns we observe in Western Europe do not fulfil these criteria, as the segregated living patterns in these areas are foremost segregated by socioeconomic status, where residents have a diverse ethnic and cultural background—far from the homogenous segregated patterns of ethnicity observed in what historically has been described as "ghettos". Waquant's point also rings true for Copenhagen, and Oslo for that matter, as we find a rich variety of people of immigrant descent residing together in the areas described as "ghettos" by the Danish authorities (Damm et al., 2006).

kindergarten and immigration policies have differed to a certain degree since the millennial turn (Statistics Norway, 2013).

2.3. Concluding Remarks

As I have outlined in this chapter, the teachers in the ECEC sector are experiencing significant policy changes, both internationally and in the Nordic region. In recent years, we have seen a growing political interest in unifying ECEC curricula and primary school curricula and in using ECEC as a tool for early detection, early intervention, and as a "school-readying" arena. Additionally, mirroring the socio-demographic changes to the populations in the Nordic countries, kindergarten is increasingly used by policymakers as a space for social integration for children with migrant and minority-language backgrounds. Compared to their Norwegian counterparts, Danish policymakers have used more controversial methods to reduce stratified educational outcomes between the native majority population and people belonging to groups with low socio-economic status and migrant backgrounds. The political and organisational changes I have described in this chapter are inevitably reshaping ECEC teachers' responsibilities; however, we have scarce empirical knowledge of how teachers experience these changes and how this shapes their everyday work. In the next chapter, I identify and analyse what characterises the existing studies, empirically investigating and addressing these questions. Moreover, I seek to unpack what this research generally can tell us about the consequences the increasing emphasis on school readiness is having on ECEC teachers' work.

3. Literature Review

In the preceding chapter, I presented the current changes reshaping ECEC teachers' responsibilities and the conditions for performing their work. I described how kindergarten is increasingly viewed as a unified part of the education system, the changing views of school readiness, and some of the political implications for teachers' room for professional autonomy and discretion. The existing field of research examining ECEC teachers' work must arguably be viewed within this context in order to understand the intentions behind the focus of the existing research and the relationship between research, policy, and practice. At the start of this project in 2018, there were (even) few(er) empirical studies exploring how ECEC teachers enact language assessment policies in practice and how they perceive school readiness. Although the research on these topics is still limited, further studies have surfaced since I commenced the current study. Since my initial searches in 2018, I have continually searched, read, and collected new studies on the topic of language assessment along with the development of the project. The concept of *school readiness* caught my attention during the initial stages of the data analysis—as constructions of school readiness embedded in transition forms and assessment materials seemingly shaped ECEC teachers' work with children in kindergarten, long before they reached the age of compulsory schooling. The teachers reported disjunctures between the policy expectations from national and local school authorities and children's various preconditions for meeting the expectations of school readiness from schools and municipal authorities, such as the level of language proficiency in the majority language. Consequently, I started digging deeper into the broad range of studies addressing school readiness and the surrounding political and scholarly debates.

The existing body of research on school readiness and language assessment policy is both vast and complex in its reach, as scholars from several different lines of research are interested in solving problems associated with decreasing social inequality and increasing the life chances of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and how this can be done efficiently through the use of educational policy. Thus, the literature review for this thesis could be performed in several ways and taken in various directions. Since I already have performed a systematic configurative review of the existing empirical research on ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness between 2012–2022 (Article 4), I am focusing the scope of this literature review chapter on identifying what the existing literature can tell us about the various aspects shaping ECEC teacher's work under the increasing emphasis on school readiness and their enactment of language assessment policies. In Article 4, I also

elaborate on the current conceptualisations of school readiness and unpack the complexity of how changing, competing, and enduring perceptions of school readiness co-exist in the scholarly field. Hence, in this literature review, I focus less on these topics and zoom further in on other important aspects of the ruling relations and interpersonal relationships shaping teachers' work of preparing children for school.

This literature review chapter is two-folded in structure in the sense that I first use the existing research to describe what we already know about the different societal changes that are shaping ECEC teachers' work before I present a small review of empirical scholarly research on ECEC teachers' enactment of language assessment policies.

3.1. Understanding Changes for ECEC Teachers' Work

In the following section, I review how research developments in various fields of study have contributed to reshaping how policymakers, scholars, and the public understand risk, the social mandate of kindergartens, child development, and ECEC teachers' work and responsibilities. Arguably, questions of school readiness essentially raise three intertwining questions: What is school readiness?,Who is responsible?, and What kind of approaches are appropriate for assuring school readiness? Research on school readiness and standardised assessment is arguably positioned within an enduring scientific and political controversy (Essahli Vik, 2017; Holm, 2017; Klem & Hagtvet, 2018). On one side, we find researchers from the developmental psychology, economy, and linguistics fields focusing largely on the most efficient ways of assessing and ensuring that children gain certain skills prior to school transition, such as academic and behavioural skills. On the other side, we largely find researchers from the humanities, such as pedagogy, and the social sciences, such as anthropology and sociology. This type of research is mainly dominated by critical voices questioning the changing goals and learning approaches introduced to the ECEC field by policymakers and scholars belonging to the former category (Read more about these developments in Article 1; Essahli Vik, 2017; Holm, 2017; Klem & Hagtvet, 2018). Yet, to understand the current political controversies, it is important to trace the broader historical societal changes, political developments, and scholarly lines of research leading up to the present conflicts in the ECEC field.

3.1.1 The Rising Popularity of Investment Return Logic and the Growing Focus on Risk Reduction

In 2000, James Heckman won the Nobel Prize in economy for his work on *early childhood intervention* and *investment return*. Importantly, for the field of educational policy,

Heckman had demonstrated how state investment in early intervention was the political strategy that yielded the most monetary investment return for a society on an aggregated level. Around the same time, several large events, such as "the PISA shock"[8], had caught the attention of the general public, scholars, and policymakers worldwide. Another highly influential event occurring around the millennial turn was the implementation of the Bush II government's federal policy *No Child Left Behind Act* (2001), introducing several accountability measures including holding states, districts, schools, and parents accountable for improving children's educational performance.[9] In combination, these events arguably mark an international turn in educational policy towards an increasing focus on early intervention in ECEC to reduce the risk of the negative effects associated with child poverty and inequality in the learning conditions for young children.

Building on Heckman's theories, scholars within the field of economy have found that universal childcare seems to be "levelling the playing field" by enhancing educational outcomes for the population generally and disadvantaged groups in particular (Havnes & Mogstad, 2011, 2015). Using the Nordic kindergarten model as an example, Havnes and Mogstad's influential studies also suggest that the benefits of providing universally subsidised ECEC, even to children from middle- and upper-class backgrounds, most likely outweighs the economic costs and negative consequences associated with child poverty in the long term. The statistical reduction of disparities in educational outcomes is highly associated with universal childcare, and, in turn, the reduction of disparities in educational outcomes promotes the highest economic returns for each nation-state.

In their study of educational stakeholders in the United States, Brown et al. (2021) found that recent changes in the ECEC sector and the increasing focus on early intervention and investment return have resulted in an increased future orientation in ECEC and a growing concern of educational stakeholders to implement early intervention programmes in ECEC. Moreover, studies from Norway suggests that the increasing emphasis on the importance of risk management and early intervention in kindergarten are increasingly shaping how ECEC teachers perform their work and their relationships to children (Kimathi & Nilsen, 2021;

[8] When the OECD published its first report based on the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) national assessments, comparing school children's test results across the OECD countries, the media, general public, and policymakers in several countries, including Norway and Denmark, were reportedly "shocked" by their student population's comparatively low or mediocre test scores (Tveit, 2014, 2018).

[9] Although early intervention is a comparatively new phenomenon in Nordic ECEC policy context, policy changes in the Nordic region must be understood as part of a longer historical international development. Policies such as the *No Child Left Behind Act* were, for example, a result of a longer historic investment in early intervention starting in the United States in the 1960s and with the Head Start programme implemented in the 1980s (Fuller, 2007).

Nilsen, 2017a). In this thesis, I propose that this future orientation and the enhanced focus on risk, early intervention, school readiness, and increasing expectations of parent involvement can be viewed in light of modern sociological theory. Giddens (1994) and Beck (1992) famously argued that the increasing emphasis on risk is one of the most prominent consequences of modern life. In the wake of the Chernobyl catastrophe and the Cold War in the 1980s and the early 1990s, Giddens and Beck both observed that the global society was progressively focusing on preparing for future risks generally and new types of risk in particular. Giddens (1990) notes that while people living in pre-modern societies were mostly concerned with natural disasters produced by external factors (*external risks*), modern people are mostly worried about man-made disasters, such as airplane crashes and nuclear disasters (*manufactured risks*). As such, modern people are involved in both the production and reduction of risk, contrary to people living in pre-modern societies, who had little to no agency over the surrounding external risks. In turn, modern people are increasingly inventing technologies to predict future risks and searching for ways to control and minimise the risk of unwanted future outcomes. Ball et al. (2011) argue that new types of policy reform create a demand for new types of policy technologies. In the context of this thesis study, standardised assessments can be viewed as a policy technology that are implemented as a means to promote children's school readiness and reduce children's risk of future educational "failure".

Recent policy developments in the ECEC field towards an increasing focus on children's school readiness, their academic skills, assessment, and performativity can be viewed in light of the rising societal *trust in numbers* (Porter, 1995) and a trend whereby quantitative reasoning has gained large traction within social research communities and with national and local policymakers. In the ECEC policy field, such types of quantitative reasoning arguably refer to the rising popularity of early intervention as a leading policy of action to prevent the negative effects of social inequality. Simultaneously, as ECEC is increasingly viewed by economy scholars and policymakers as an effective tool to overcome the negative consequences of inequality in childhood, scholars from the education field have found that the emerging strategy of using kindergarten as an effective space for policy intervention and the increasing trust in numbers and standardised forms of assessment are increasingly reshaping the relationship between ECEC and formal education—causing an "accountability shove down" from schools to ECEC and the "schoolification" of ECEC curricula (Bassok et al., 2016; Brown et al., 2019; Gunnarsdottir, 2014; Hustedt et al., 2018). Moreover, scholars have identified negative implications of these developments, which are that society generally, and teachers specifically, perceive children and parents, particularly

those living under disadvantaged life circumstances and those with migrant backgrounds, through a lens of "deficiency" and as "at risk" (Fuller, 2007; Kimathi & Nilsen; Nilsen, 2017a; Pierlejewski, 2020). In Articles 1 and 4, I present a more in-depth introduction and discussion on the topic of the national variations in curriculum development, competing and opposing discourses, and approaches to readying children for school, along with their implications for ECEC teachers' perceptions and practices.

3.2. Previous Empirical Research Investigating ECEC Teachers' Enactment of Language Assessment Policies

Previous research suggests that the enhanced political focus on teacher accountability and performativity is reshaping teacher professionalism and teachers' interpersonal relationships (Ball, 2003; Mausethagen, 2013a; 2013b). In her PhD dissertation, Mausethagen (2013a) identifies that the perceptions of schoolteachers' professionalism in policy documents have undergone a conceptual turn, from professionalism being something teachers "have" towards something that teachers "show" through student results—reflecting a more competence- and outcome-based professionalism than before. Policymakers' increasing trust in standardised assessment in ECEC has resulted in ECEC teachers spending more time on "managing categories" (Kimathi & Nilsen) and feeling pressured to meet increasing expectations concerning children's "academic readiness" (Kinkead-Clark, 2021).

In the research review in Article 4, I focus more generally on the relational aspects shaping ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness. In the following small research review, I direct a narrow focus to another closely related line of research, namely ECEC teachers' enactment of policies associated with enhancing children's school readiness—particularly on studies foregrounding the assessment of children's oral language and literacy skills. This small review study aims to scope this particular line of research and sketch out what we already know about how ECEC teachers enact language assessment policies.

3.2.1. Selection

To discover relevant peer-reviewed journal articles, I used combinations of phrases and Boolean operators.[10] The searches were not confined to a specific time period due to the scarce number of relevant scholarly contributions fitting the scope of my inquiry. I searched

[10] ((Literac* OR language* OR liguistic* OR oral* OR "pre-literac*") NEAR/2 (assessment* OR test* OR evaluat*)), *I also alternatively used* ((Literac* OR language* OR liguistic* OR oral* OR "pre-literac*") N2 (assessment* OR test* OR evaluat*)), polic*, teacher* *and* (Preschool OR Kindergarten OR "Early Childhood Education" OR "Early Childhood Education and Care" ECEC OR ECE OR "Nursery school" OR "Pre-K" OR K1 OR K2 OR K3).The searches were undertaken in December 2021.

in EBSCO host, ERIC, and Web of Science (title, abstracts, and keywords specifically), resulting in, respectively, 603, 48, and 20 hits. I also conducted Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish language word searches in the Nordic language databases Oria and Swepub,[11] and in Google Scholar, resulting in three more articles. A few additional studies were selected by thread searches of reference lists and citing lists, as well as from new searches performed throughout the research process. See, *Table 3. Overview of Selection Criteria for Literature Review in* Appendix C for an overview of the selection criteria.

The strategy surfaced nine articles fitting the scope of this review. In *Appendix D: Overview of Previous Studies* you find the structured form used to extract information from the articles based on their research questions, theoretical concepts, research design, study population, national context, and findings. I later categorised teachers' language assessment practices, what type of sources they use for language assessment and subsequent data use, as well as teachers' perceptions of the intentions behind language assessment policies. The findings are presented in the following section.

3.2.2. Findings

In this section I present findings in four steps. I *first* describe some of the overall patterns identified in the previous studies. *Second,* I present what previous studies suggests regarding teachers' use of sources and data in their language assessment practises. *Third,* I describe what the previous studies suggest about how ECEC teachers navigate particular concerns related to assessing the language development of children with bilingual, minority-language, and migrant backgrounds. *Fourth,* I end this section by reflecting on the findings of the small research review. *Last,* I zoom out of the small research review and end the literature review chapter by summarising some key points from this chapter and make some overall concluding remarks on how the current study contributes to filling some of the identified gaps in the existing body of scholarly literature.

3.2.2.1. Overall Patterns

The studies range from 2012 to 2021. The study locations are divided between Denmark (2), Norway (2), Australia (2), the Netherlands (1), the United States (1), and Finland (1). The two Norwegian contributions are written by the same author, departing from the same research project, using the same data material and methods (Vik, 2018, 2019). The

[11] Here, I used combinations of search words, such as Sprogvurdering, Språkkartlegging, Sprogtest, Sprogscreening TRAS, Barnehagelærer, Pædagog, Förskollärare,Førskolelærer, Lærer, Pedagog, Børnehave Daginstitution, Förskola, Barnehage, Vuggestue, and Dagtilbud.

contributions from Finland, the United States, Australia, and the Netherlands are written in English (Bromley et al., 2019; Frans et al., 2020; Keary & Kirkby, 2017; Korkeamäki & Dreher, 2012; Schachter & Piasta, 2022), while the contributions from Norway and Denmark are written in Norwegian (Vik, 2018; 2019) and Danish, respectively (Holm, 2015; Slingerland, 2017). I searched with English, Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish search words, in International, Nordic, Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish databases. I would probably have identified even more relevant studies if I had searched for journal articles written in other languages. For similar reasons, the articles written in Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish might be overrepresented. However, since Norway and Denmark are the national research contexts of the thesis study, these studies arguably provide important insight into some of the most relevant empirical contributions to the current empirical study.

One of the chosen criteria was that the studies needed to include teachers as part of the study populations; however, several of the studies included other actors in addition to the teachers, including care coordinators (Frans et al., 2020), teaching assistants (Slingerland, 2017), managers (Keary & Kirkby, 2017), children (Holm, 2015; Slingerland, 2017; Vik, 2018, 2019), school leaders, and teacher leaders (Bromley et al., 2019). Here, I have mainly focused on the findings related to the teachers' perspectives.

Most studies have a study population ranging between four and 20 participants; however, one mixed-methods study involved 97 participants (Frans et al., 2020). Most studies depart from a qualitative research design. Out of these, three studies rely on a combination of observation and interviews (Schachter & Piasta, 2022; Slingerland, 2017; Vik, 2018, 2019), two studies depart solely from observations of teacher-child interactions (Holm, 2015; Korkeamäki & Dreher, 2012), and one study uses a combination of interviews and document analysis (Bromley et al., 2019). One study applies a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews (Frans et al., 2020).

3.2.2.2. Teachers' Language Assessment Practices, Sources, and Data Use

The findings of the reviewed studies suggest that teachers use different types of sources to produce data about children's language development, and teachers also use the data resulting from the assessments in a variety of ways. The teachers in the Schachter and Piasta (2022) study reported that they produced data through informal noticing, documented observations, and formal assessments. However, Schachter and Piasta (2022) noticed an interesting disconnect between the teachers' understandings of what knowledge constitutes *data* and their (the researchers) own. Schachter and Piasta initially assumed that the teachers,

like them, understood data as information strictly considering children's developmental progress. However, the teachers held a broader view than the researchers, considering data as any information they obtained about children, which was not constrained strictly to formal assessment data but included information such as children's personal interests. Although all the teachers in Schachter and Piasta's study gathered data from both documented observations and formal assessments, the authors found that these types of data did not inform instruction to a significant degree for most teachers (See, Schachter and Piasta (2022) to read more about the three types of data use). Holm (2015) and Slingerland (2017) identified that the standardised assessment tools seemed to draw the teachers' attention to children's *receptive knowledge* of language, a passive display of language comprehension. Vik (2018, 2019), Slingerland (2017), and Holm (2015) reported that the assessment tools were primarily used by the teachers to detect "deficits" in children's developmental process rather than looking for children's capabilities. The three authors also noted that this deficit focus on what children are "lacking" according to the test baseline also, in turn, negatively affected the daily interaction between teachers and children.

Bromley et al. (2019) observed that teachers seemed "disempowered in their decision-making in regard to literacy curriculum" (p.163). Bromley et al. (2019) and Keary and Kirkby (2017) noted that teachers seemingly used the test to inform their instruction and, in turn, used it as a guideline for "teaching to the test". Frans et al. (2020) observed similar patterns in which teachers were using the tests' achievement levels as a guidelines for their teaching and to confirm if they were teaching children the right things to ensure they were placed in the right groups, and to check whether their own evaluation of children's skill levels were "accurate" according to the test results. Frans et al. (2020) also found that how teachers experienced using standardised assessment tools and receiving the results were associated with what kind of child group they were responsible for. Teachers working primarily with child groups that consistently received high scores reported mostly positive experiences using the standardised assessment materials, with some informants reportingly calling it a "pleasant confirmation of their work" (p.101). On the other hand, teachers working with groups of children receiving comparatively weak scores according to the standardised norms reported that they felt discouraged. They also experienced that the scoring system did not do justice to the progress they noticed in the children. *How* assessment data is used by teachers can also be viewed in relation to teachers' perceptions of what types of *intentions* are driving policymakers' and leaders' decisions to implement formal standardised language assessment (Holm, 2015). The teachers in Frans et al.'s (2020) study recognised several different

purposes for standardised language assessment, including as a way of confirming one's own judgement, of evaluating children's skills, as guidelines for what children are expected to learn and what teachers are expected to teach, as a means to decide whether children shall repeat or skip grades, or to evaluate teachers' pedagogic abilities. Considering the last point, the teachers in Frans et al.'s (2020) study were also worried that others were using the test as a way of "double-checking" their work (p. 97). In this sense, the teachers viewed the imposed assessment policy as a threat to their room for professional agency and discretion.

3.2.2.3. Children with Migrant or Minority-Language Backgrounds

Five out of the nine studies specifically emphasise the particular considerations and conundrums that teachers experience when enacting language assessment policies in kindergartens where a significant number of children have bilingual, minority-language, and/or migrant backgrounds (Frans et al., 2020; Holm, 2015; Slingerland, 2017; Vik, 2018, 2019). Interestingly, the topic of language assessment of children with minority-language backgrounds was a prominent focus in the articles written in the Norwegian (Vik, 2018, 2019), Danish (Holm, 2015; Slingerland, 2017), and Dutch contexts (Frans et al., 2020). However, children with minority-language backgrounds were not explicitly mentioned in the contributions describing teachers' practices in other national contexts. Yet, the sample of nine articles does not provide a wide enough sample to suggest why this is.

These studies were particularly focused on the negative aspects of using standardised language assessment tools initially developed to assess the language development of monolinguals to measure the language development of children with minority-language backgrounds. The teachers in Frans et al.'s (2020) study who were responsible for child groups in which a majority have immigrant backgrounds reported more negative experiences in using the assessment material than those who were not, as the teachers experienced that the children continuously received weak scores and that the assessment materials did not do justice to the children's actual progress. Vik's (2018, 2019) studies suggest that the teacher's language assessment practices seemed to reproduce and enhance dominant representations of the relationship between majority and minority children and the notion of "us" and "them", wherein children with minority-language backgrounds represented "the others". Slingerland (2017) addressed the practical problems and implications associated with drawing categorical lines between who is ethnically Danish and who is not, and subsequently, who is considered bilingual and who is not. Slingerland found that some children were not treated as bilingual if one of their parents are native-born; however, many children did not hear or speak the native

language at home regardless, indicating that the relationship between family dynamics and language use often is more complex than what is observed through given standard categories of native/immigrant and monolingual/bilingual.

3.2.3 Some Final Reflections on the Small Research Review

Teachers from a broad range of national contexts seem to all struggle in various ways with enacting language assessment policies. The empirical review identifies a lack of scholarly attention to ECEC teachers' experiences of enacting of language assessment policies generally and their assessment of children with minority-language and migrant backgrounds in particular. Generally, the reviewed studies mostly focus on how the relationship between the current policy changes are impacting teachers' pedagogic practices and their relations to the children in their care. If we take a close look at how the different authors portray ECEC teacher professionalism, few contributions elucidate and discuss how the changing policy climate also could shape the organisational dimensions[12] of ECEC teachers' work, such as ECEC teachers' professional status and work conditions[13]. I find that few of the reviewed studies problematise how the increasing policy focus on standardised testing and accountability can create tensions in ECEC teachers' professional role from an organisational perspective, such as, for example, challenges to teachers' professional status and professional autonomy. As such, the reviewed studies mirror a somewhat one-dimensional portrayal of ECEC teacher professionalism, as they mainly zoom in on the performative aspects of ECEC teachers' work and consequences.

Previous research from the school field shows how the increasing emphasis on accountability and standardised assessment in educational policy also impacts other aspects of teachers' work besides the factors associated with pedagogic concerns, such as their relationship with their colleagues (Mausethagen, 2013a). As such, the findings from this small review indicate a need for more empirical research investigating how the organisational concerns of professionalism are shaping ECEC teachers' perceptions of current political changes and, in turn, their policy enactment.

12 How professions are understood and portrayed in research can be understood along both a *performative* and an *organisational* dimensions (Hermansen et al., 2018; Terum & Molander, 2008). While performative dimension refers widely to the professional actors' practice and the character of their work, while the organisational dimension points to the steering of professionals' work, such as professional status and professional autonomy (Hermansen et al., 2018).

13 However, Frans et al.'s (2020) study elucidate important organisational implications of standardised language assessment policies, such as teachers' reports of being surveyed and sanctioned by leaders based on the outcomes of the assessments and that these standardised assessment regimes push them to "teach to the test".

3.3 Summary and Concluding Remarks on the Chapter

The review of existing research elucidates how different ways of understanding school readiness constructs different images of ECEC teachers' work, their responsibilities, the challenges they face, and possible solutions. Throughout this chapter, by identifying the various aspects that implicate changes in ECEC teachers' work and the opposing constructions of school readiness, I have also elucidated some of the main ruling relations shaping ECEC teachers' work.

My study contributes to filling some of the research gaps identified in this chapter, as I focus on developing understandings about how ECEC teachers "do" policy enactment and connect teachers' local experiences to different processes that take place on different levels. Moreover, the study contributes to expand our scarce knowledge of how the increasing emphasis on school readiness is impacting the relational aspects of teachers' work, both on an organisational level and teachers' interpersonal relationships. The present study emphasises the importance of context and how research and findings vary across national contexts and develop new insights of how the increasing emphasis on school readiness is shaping ECEC teachers' work with children and families of minority-language backgrounds. In the next chapter, I foreground the theoretical perspectives that, in combination, offered me useful tools for investigating these topics.

4. Theoretical Perspectives

This thesis can be described as a sociological study of the social organisation of ECEC teachers' work under an increasing policy emphasis on children's school readiness. Primarily, the thesis rests on the theoretical underpinnings of Institutional ethnography (Smith, 2005). The methodological and ontological perspectives from Institutional ethnography are, in turn, combined with theoretical perspectives from the sociology of professions and the sociology of social inequality in order to analytically describe the empirical findings emerging from the initial stages of the analysis. Hence, in the current thesis, the relationship between data and theory must be understood as abductive, where insights from different methodological and theoretical perspectives are used in a creative systematic discovery to unpack the complexity of ECEC teachers' work (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). The institutional processes countering or reproducing social inequality in the education system are not studied separately from teachers' policy enactment but rather are analytically viewed as parts of the ruling relations. In the following sections, I introduce the three key theoretical perspectives and foreground how they have informed the analysis. I also elucidate the analytical concepts that have proven most useful for my analysis and discussion of the findings.

4.1. Institutional Ethnography

Inspired by Marx's materialist ontology, Dorothy Smith (2005) established Institutional ethnography as a method for systematic investigation of the ruling relations that are present in people's lives but that are not always easily noticeable in their abstract trans-local forms (Griffith & Smith, 2014). *Ruling relations* can be understood broadly as objectified knowledge systems that shape people's consciousness and that emerge through people's coordinated actions (Nilsen, 2017a). Currently wide spreading forms of ruling relations are those increasingly embedded in the common technology of surveillance, communication, and management, organising people's ways of thinking and acting (Smith, 2005; Smith & Griffith, 2014). This type of steering is mediated through textual technologies, such as the internet, apps, print, film, audio, etc. (Griffith & Smith, 2005). The available ruling categories for assessing normality and deviance shape how we think of ourselves and others, and essentially, how we live our lives and interact with other people. Examples of this are how we evaluate a person's characteristics, skills, and performance, but they are also reflected as the dominating standard notions of family, childhood—and particularly relevant for this thesis—what it means to be school ready.

Inspired by Smith's Institutional ethnography,[14] I decided to make the ruling relations shaping ECEC teachers' work of preparing children for school transition the research object of the study. When speaking of teachers' *work*, I am drawing on Smith's broad notion of the concept, referring to everything that the teachers in my study do in the course of their job, not only restricted to the performance of their given tasks, but *all* their activities, emotional, physical, and psychological. An example from the present study is teachers' work of assessing children's language proficiency, in relation to which I am not only interested in, for instance, what the teachers do in the time it takes to perform a language screening but also in unpacking the organisational work involved in coordinating the screening; how it is planned, documented, presented, and followed up on by the teachers, and which actors are implicitly or explicitly involved in these activities. This particular interest in unpacking the details of teachers' work and my pursuit of identifying the ruling relations that shape this organisation is also reflected in the way I performed the interviews (Read more about this topic under *5.3. The Interviews*- See also, *Appendix I: Interview Guide*).

What arguably distinguishes Institutional ethnography from many other approaches to social research are its ontological and epistemological views on knowledge production. Smith (2005) underlines the importance of avoiding mainly reconfirming and reproducing societal orders and ideology by giving agency to categories and allowing these categories to structure the data collection through predetermined schema. Instead, she puts forward an approach to knowledge production wherein the ruling relations serve as the unit of investigatory interest rather than the informants themselves (Lund & Nilsen, 2020; Smith, 1990). As such, the relationship between people's everyday doings and their ways of partaking in the trans-local ruling relations emerges as the unit of analytical interest. Explicitly choosing the ruling relations as my main research object helped me to narrow my focus and to continually remind myself to direct, and sometimes redirect, my analytical attention towards the relational aspects of ECEC teachers' work and to identify the institutional processes shaping the everyday lives inside kindergartens.

4.1.1. The Textual Mediation of Ruling

To investigate the relationship between teachers' doings and the ruling relations, it was useful to study teachers' descriptions of their interactions with the texts coordinating their

[14] Smith interprets the term *ethnography* in a broad sense, where the term ethnography is understood as a study where the central aim is to develop knowledge of the world from a specific standpoint and understand its social relations through a wide array of different scientific methods. This means that she also refers to studies which are "only" based on interview data or text analysis as "Institutional ethnographies".

work. In this context, *texts* refer to words, discourses, pictures, or sounds that are manifested in a form that allows them to be read, seen, or heard across local contexts. Texts have the ability to reduce people's local experiences to standardised schemes, including institutional discourses shaping how people think, act, and relate to their surroundings. As such, these qualities enable texts to coordinate people's activities and consciousnesses.

In his book *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990), Giddens explains how people's emerging use of textual technologies after the introduction of the printing press marks one of the most significant characteristics of modern life and serves as one of the pivotal distinctions between *pre-modern oral cultures* and *modern societies*. According to Giddens (1990), *abstract systems* and *expert technology*, such as texts, have the power to disembed local face-to-face interactions by "lifting out" social relations from the local contexts of interaction and restructuring the interactions between people across indefinite spans of time and space. In their study of New Public Management (NPM), Smith and Griffith (2014), similarly to Giddens, foreground how the textual mediation of ruling is incremental for the existence of transnational organisations and serves as a key characteristic and necessity for the emergence and endurance of NPM as the leading approach to management in the public sector (Smith & Griffith, 2014). Modern textual technologies allow for the standardisation and coordination of people's work on a large scale, through the production and distribution of texts (Smith & Griffith, 2014). The faceless character of the textually mediated ruling obscures power and enables the possibility of an infinite replication of texts that present endless possibilities of rulings across time and space.

Disembedding people's interactions from face-to-face conversations in situ to face-less, possibly unpersonal interchanges and distributions of information, has altered human communication in a radical way. While spoken conversations take place as each speaker responds to the other *in situ* and in real-time, *the text-reader conversations*, e.g., when someone reads, views, or listens to instructions, are characterised by one side being fixed and non-responsive, whereas the reader interprets and acts from the written word. However, although one-sided, the text-reader conversation is not passive. When a reader interacts with a text, the text is activated in what DeVault describes as the reader "taking up its framing and searching for its sense" (2021, p. 25). However, the reader also reacts to the text by, for example, talking about it, passing it on, or using it to develop a new text in response to the original text (DeVault, 2021). As such, the reader has the ability to interact with the text and shape its content. The texts can also be strategically utilised by actors to activate certain standardised responses from other actors (Nilsen, 2017b). In this manner, an Institutional

ethnographic understanding of the ruling potential of text allows for studying actors' agency and responses to rulings, not only how they are "ruled". Unpacking teachers' *text-reader-conversations* and their use of the ruling texts organising their work offered me the possibility to analytically trace how the texts were coordinating teachers' doings, and to describe teachers' reactions to what they read and which implications the texts have for their work. Moreover, in the present study, the ruling texts were approached as an entry point for attaching local experiences to more general institutional processes (Liodden, 2017), and, in turn, for producing transferrable knowledge of the trans-local ruling relations shaping the various aspects of teachers' work. As such, investigating the teachers' interactions with texts was used as a means to unpack the relationship between discourse and everyday practice.

Importantly, ruling texts function within a hierarchy (Smith, 2005). *Boss texts*, developed at a higher level of institutional decision-making, such as *the Kindergarten Act (2005)* or *The Day Care Act (2018)*, construct regulatory frames and contexts for the development of *lower-order texts* that direct front-line work, such as Copenhagen's kindergarten app *Cph children* and *The Oslo standard for cooperation and coherence between kindergarten, school and the school leisure activity department* (Marjorie L. DeVault, 2021; Oslo City Council Section for Childhood and Education, 2020). Standardisation can, as such, be used strategically by authorities as a regulatory frame for controlling the activities of people working on other institutional levels. Moreover, standardisation can also be used as a means to construct new representations of people and their work; by removing people's everyday doings from their local contexts, other actors can construct new replicable representations of people's everyday lives, mirroring external ideals for how things should be done.

4.1.2. The Importance of Standpoint

An institutional map is never neutral; it is always drawn from a position within or outside. People's feelings, experiences, and activities are linked to extended social relations and are always located in a specific temporal and spatial site (Smith, 1992). Hence, it matters whether researchers start their inquiry from a front-line bureaucrat's, client's, or leader's standpoint, as the institution will appear different from different places, all equally valid. Thus, when pursuing an investigation of an institution's ruling relations, it is important to choose a specific point of entry that supports the purpose of answering one's research questions. In the present study, I chose to investigate the social organisation of school readiness from the standpoint of ECEC teachers who routinely perform standardised language

assessments. I further discuss the limitations this creates for the scope of this study under *5.8. Limitations* and in Articles 1–3. Based on my interviews with the ECEC teachers, I drew a map of the textual landscape, which can be found in *Appendix A: Map of the Textual Landscape from the ECEC Teachers' Standpoint*. This map provides a visual representation of the texts and actors involved in ECEC teachers' work, from the ECEC teachers' standpoint.

Given the impossibility of viewing an institution without a particular standpoint and producing objective knowledge from this account, a potential mistake for a researcher is to claim to depart from a "neutral standpoint". Potential risks in doing so could be that the researcher unintentionally takes on an "all-knowing God's perspective" of the institution or automatically chooses the position of leadership, viewing the institution "top-down" at the same time as claiming an objective position, without making their positioning explicit to the readership or maybe even themselves. This can result in a false sense of "neutrality", veiling the complexity of how the social organisation of an institution inevitably is perceived differently depending on where one is situated within or outside it. If we consider some examples from previous research contributions, the importance of standpoint becomes obvious. For instance, the social organisation of an asylum-seeking process is experienced differently by those seeking asylum and the bureaucrats deciding who is deserving of protection (Liodden, 2017). Similarly, new managerial forms in academia are perceived differently depending on one's positioning within the university hierarchy e.g., whether one is a female junior researcher or a tenured male professor (Lund, 2015). Moreover, the explicit focus on standpoint is imperative for ensuring an intentional relationship with the kind of knowledge a researcher is seeking to develop. However, it is possible to study an institution from several standpoints within the same research project. This can be very fruitful as long as it is made explicit that the different standpoints produce different types of data regarding the ruling relations within the institution under study. The data produced from different standpoints can be interesting to compare analytically, and/or used to draw an even more complex picture of the institution, allowing for understandings of the ruling relations that could not have been developed otherwise.

Institutional ethnography plays an explicit or implicit role across all articles, as it represents the underlying method of inquiry, serving as the backbone of the research design and the departure of my investigatory analysis. In this thesis, the use of concepts and perspectives from Institutional ethnography are arguably most explicit in Articles 1 and 2, in which I actively foreground and use conceptual terms deriving from Institutional ethnography in the analysis. In Article 3, although referencing Institutional ethnography scholars' work

(Griffith & Smith, 2005; Smith, 2005), the Institutional ethnographic perspectives are less evident for the reader, although the focus is still on the social relations. The main theoretical focus in the analysis is placed on the intersecting lines between theories on parent involvement, the reproduction of social inequality, and traditions for curriculum development in ECEC. In this article I borrow concepts from Lareau (2011) and Hays (1996), who have built their conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between parenting, economy, social inequality, social class distinctions, and specific characteristics of modern life. I also use Bennet's (2005) concepts referring to the two main traditions for curriculum development in ECEC, *the readiness for school tradition* and *the social policy pedagogical tradition,* for unpacking teachers' descriptive accounts of mismatching expectations of pedagogy and the social mandate of kindergartens between teachers and parents in kindergarten. In Article 4, I focus on the relational aspects of ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness, drawing on an Institutional ethnographic understandings of relations, and the social organisation of work. In this article, teachers' *relations* alludes both to the relationship between discursive constructions of school readiness embedded in scholarly and policy discourse that shape ECEC teachers' perceptions on the one side and ECEC teachers' interpersonal relationships with other actors in the course of their work on the other (Smith & Griffith, 2014).

4.2. The Role of the Education System in the Reproduction of Social Privileges

In recent years, scholars studying social inequality have reported an international trend towards the increasing social inequality between people in privileged and underprivileged societal positions (See, for example Piketty, 2014). Although this is a study of the relationship between ECEC teachers' everyday work and policy, sociological theory on social inequality offers a valuable prism for understanding the contextual backdrop of this thesis and several of the prominent tensions found in ECEC teachers' descriptions of their work. All four articles, implicitly or explicitly, shed light on different aspects of the relationship between assessment, standardisation, school readiness, and the reproduction of social inequality between people belonging to majority and minority groups.

The concept of school readiness raises political questions relating to social inequality in increasingly pluralistic and multicultural societies, such as who gets to decide what children should be learning and whose interests are being advanced by different educational standards (Fuller, 2007). Despite the education system's broad mandate of "closing the

achievement gap" and ensuring equal opportunities for the general population, several international scholars have critiqued the education system for allowing middle-class values to permeate school curricula, which acts as a masked form of *symbolic violence* towards those not born into privileged class positions (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Lareau & Weininger, 2008; Vincent & Ball, 2007). Such patterns have also been observed by scholars empirically studying the Nordic context (Jarness & Strømme; Jæger, 2009; Stefansen & Skogen, 2010). In practice, this means, for example, that school curricula mirror the cultural tastes and preferences of the middle class, such as what types of literature are on the curriculum, and also that the education system is organised around a certain type of intensive parent involvement associated with middle-class values (Griffith & Smith, 2005; Hays, 1996; Lareau, 2011; Stefansen & Skogen, 2010).

Following Bourdieu's lead, Lareau (2011) expanded on these ideas by revealing how parenting strategies and home-learning environments typical of middle-class families are more efficient at strengthening children's language skills than those associated with working-class families. This is reflected, for example, in how parents involve themselves in their children's schooling, how children communicate with their teachers, and how teachers assess children's characteristics and capabilities (Lareau, 2011). Distinctive traits associated with the dominant-class culture are often misrecognised as brilliance (Bourdieu, 1996; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Khan, 2011), and studies suggest that the assessment of students' oral language is comparatively more susceptible to cultural bias than e.g., the assessment of mathematical skills (See, for example, Jarness & Strømme, 2021). People's modes of communication, range of vocabulary, and overall language proficiency are some of the most conspicuous distinctive markers of a person's social background and standing (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984). Therefore, studying how teachers approach policies that use children's language skills in the majority language as an indicator of school readiness (such as Danish government, 2018) offer a possibility to study some of the reproductive processes in the education system.

Arguably, combining Institutional ethnographic methodology and sociological perspectives on the reproduction of social inequality offers a fruitful approach to studying ECEC teachers' assessments of the skills of children of minority-language backgrounds, as this combination provides an avenue for dynamically investigating the ruling relations involved in such processes. In Articles 1-3, I combine the perspectives from Institutional ethnography with social class theory. In Article 3, like I previously mentioned the findings are interpreted in terms of the multifaceted interplay between social class relations, culture,

migration and hegemonic ideals of intensive parenting and concerted cultivation. In this article, I primarily draw on theoretical perspectives from Lareau (2011) and Hays (1996) to analyse findings initially emerging as a result of unpacking the ruling relations (Smith, 2005) shaping teachers' expectations of parents' involvement and their experiences of tensions. In Article 2, and partly in Article 1, I study the formation, textual mediation, and reproduction of perceptions of children's school readiness in kindergarten and the consequences for teachers' assessment of the school readiness of children with minority-language backgrounds. Here, I draw mainly on Smith's concept of ideological codes to identify the characteristics that constitutes "the standard school-ready child". Additionally, particularly in the discussion section in Article 2, I draw on theoretical perspectives describing cultural bias towards the majority culture in education (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Khan, 2011; Lareau, 2011) to further unpack the formation of "the standard school-ready child" within the broader social context, and the possible following implications.

4.3. Teachers as Professionals and Policy Enactors

Closely related to ECEC teachers' *work* (Smith, 2005) are their roles as professionals and their crucial positions as enactors of educational policy. Furthermore, understanding ECEC teachers' positioning as professionals and as policy enactors is an important backdrop for analytically understanding their reactions to the rulings with which they are faced in the course of their work. Ball et al. (2011) describes the teacher subject as being "constructed in a network of social practices which are infused with power relations" (p. 611). The relationship between professional actors, citizens, authorities, unions, the private market, and the institutions offering professional qualifications is inherently permeated by political struggles and tensions (Lipsky, 1980; Terum & Molander, 2008). Power is usually yielded from the state to specific professional groups on the condition that they will offer the welfare goods within the mandate they are given (Terum & Molander, 2008). As such, certain professional groups, such as teachers, have gained a monopoly on performing certain tasks, but their professional freedom is also restricted by close political supervision and control from the authorities (Terum & Molander, 2008). The relationship between teachers' everyday practices and students' assessment results can be viewed as both the centre of political and scholarly attention in the public debate and as one of the most visible empirical outcomes of various policy interventions. Indeed, ECEC teachers' policy enactment and negotiation of such demands from "above" is arguably, combined with children's educational outcomes, the product of the policy interventions, and therefore served as a fruitful entry for my

investigation into the ruling relations shaping teachers' work. In this thesis, I particularly zoom in on the scholarly perspectives seeking to describe teachers' relations to educational policy, and more specifically, teachers' roles as policy enactors (Ball, 2003). Discussions concerning ECEC teachers' roles as professionals and as enactors of policy are most present in the "kappe" section of this thesis and are more implicitly addressed throughout the articles. Yet, I also touch on these topics in Article 1.

In the present study, policy enactment is understood as an ongoing social practice, and I am particularly interested in examining how teachers "do" policy in practice (Ball et al., 2011; Mausethagen, 2013b). Importantly, teachers do not merely enact policy by strictly mirroring the intentions of policymakers. On the contrary, one essential requirement of teachers' work is that they make adjustments to local circumstances. Thus, teachers arguably have no other choice than to actively negotiate policies in practice (Ball et al., 2011). Because of the intrinsic necessity for local adjustment and discretion, the ECEC teachers in this study are positioned in the policy implementation chain as what Lipsky (1980) famously coins *street-level bureaucrats*. This concept refers to public service workers whose professional position encompasses direct interactions with citizens, which demand a substantial degree of discretion in the course of their work (Lipsky, 1980). Importantly, what ECEC teachers and all street-level bureaucrats have in common, whether they are police officers, social workers, or teachers, is that they are, in Lipsky's words, "embodying an essential paradox that plays out in a variety of ways" (1980, p. xii). This implies that, on the one side, their everyday work is often highly scripted to achieve political aims that have their own origins in political processes, such as preparing children for school to ensure they have attained certain skills and behaviours prior to school transition by using standardised assessment tools and pedagogic programmes. On the other side, the job demands the professional to be responsive to the individual case, and, as such, there is an unavoidable element of improvisation and discretion needed to perform the work in a sufficient manner (Lipsky, 1980). Thus, ECEC teachers have a strong influence over how a political initiative shall take form in practice, as well as how ECEC, as a public welfare good, shall be offered to citizens, in this case, parents and children. Because of their central positioning and large influence over the public kindergarten services, it is vital to understand what kinds of actors and values influence ECEC teachers' work, and what kinds of relations teachers have with other stakeholders, such as the government, children, colleagues, parents, and their work organisation (Børhaug & Bøe, 2022). Arguably, all of these relations shape ECEC teachers' everyday work—and notably, the *de facto* public ECEC services offered to public citizens.

Because of street-level bureaucrats' major practical influence over policy outcomes, government authorities have a large interest in controlling the professionals assuming such public positions. Since the millennial turn, policymakers have increasingly used control mechanisms borrowed from the private sector to hold public employees accountable for policy outputs. Following global developments, Nordic educational authorities have become increasingly attracted to using accountability systems to control teachers' work (Mausethagen, 2013b). Accountability as a theory of policy action in educational policy is associated with new governance control systems, where the overall logic is that one can enhance students' educational outcomes by holding municipalities, teachers, and schools accountable for students' performance (Mausethagen, 2013b). This logic rests on the assumption that students' educational outcomes will improve if municipalities, schools, ECEC, and teachers are incentivised by rewards and punishment, such as monetary bonuses or the public recognition (or possible contrition) following public rankings. To produce comparable results, standardised national tests for high-stakes purposes have become a widespread measure to promote quality in public education. These new accountability mechanisms create demands for data that categorically represent students' skill levels and a subsequent need for standards for producing easily comparable data and for using the data in order to efficiently compare and predict the results on individual and group levels. Several scholars have critically referred to the increasing rate of accountability reforms as an "educational policy epidemic" spreading across the globe, perpetrated by highly influential agents, such as the OECD and the World Bank (Ball, 2003; Levin, 1998). Similar initiatives are progressively "trickling" down to the ECEC sector, in a process critically referred to as "accountability shove down" (See, for example, Hatch, 2002).

Internationally, scholars report that new forms of management are challenging more traditional forms of teacher professionalism (Ball, 2003; Mausethagen, 2013b), and neoliberal forms of accountability systems arguably are reshaping teachers' professionalism, from the traditional forms characterised by care and autonomy to compliance, competition, and regulation (Keddie, 2017). Historically, educational curriculum development in Norway and Denmark have been more focused on social pedagogic approaches to child development and broad developmental learning goals (Bennett, 2005). Yet, scholars have reported an expansion of these ideas to the Nordic countries following the policy developments of nations traditionally more focused on accountability and performativity, such as the United States and the UK (Gunnarsdottir, 2014). Thus, an increasing focus on performativity and accountability in educational policy are challenging the professional autonomy historically enjoyed by

Nordic ECEC teachers (Børhaug, 2022). Importantly, this means that although scholars internationally report an increasing focus on performativity and autonomy and that this decreases teachers' autonomy, teachers historically have had different rooms for autonomy in different national contexts. It also implies that the decrease in professional autonomy and current international developments must be seen in relation to national traditions for curriculum development (I also discuss these issues in Article 4).

Different policy discourses produce different narratives of what it means to be a teacher and an educator, as well as to be educated. In turn, different kinds of policies position and shape teachers as different types of *policy subjects* (Ball, 2003, Ball et al., 2011). New types of educational policy require teachers to increasingly organise their work in response to indicators, evaluations, and targets (Ball, 2003). Embedded within current policy reforms are the requirements for new teacher identities, teacher values, and ways of interacting, and, as such, the reforms change the essence of what it means to be a teacher. The introduction and implementation of educational reforms[15] focusing on accountability and performativity thus represents a disruptive intervention, challenging traditional representations of teachers' professionalism and reshaping both the performative and organisational aspects of teachers' work (Ball, 2003; Mausethagen, 2013b). Theoretical perspectives on teachers' policy enactment and their roles within the changing educational system have been vital for analytically unpacking the empirical findings from Articles 1–3 and the research review in Article 4, including the contextual preconditions for the current relationship between educational policy and teachers' work.

4.4. Summary

As demonstrated in the articles and the forthcoming discussion in Chapter 7, *Discussion*, the three theoretical perspectives in combination offer a unique prism for studying the ruling relations shaping ruling constructs of school readiness and ECEC teachers' professional practices of constructing school-ready children. Institutional ethnography offered me the analytical tools to identify how teachers "do" the enactment of policy and school preparation work and trace teachers' doings to some of the ruling relations shaping their work. Drawing on scholarly perspectives on teacher professionalism and social inequality helped me analytically unpack why actors in the educational space do what they do, the institutional

[15] In the introductory chapter of this thesis, I outline some of the international and national initiatives that have shaped kindergarten and school-transition policy in recent years.

processes that are at play, and the potential implications of the study's findings. Together, they proved to be a productive approach for unpacking and answering the research questions of this thesis, as they drew attention to different aspects of the ruling relations that are present but not always clearly visible in teachers' day-to-day work.

5. Data and Methods

In this chapter, I offer an elaborate description of the research design, the research process, my knowledge development, and the analytical process. Since the research design and analytical process of the research review study is presented in detail in Article 4, I choose foremost to focus my attention on describing the interview study. First, I describe the research design, participant selection, recruitment strategy, interviews, and analysis. At the end of the chapter, I reflect on the comparative aspects of the research design, what ethics has implied for the study, the limitations of the research context, and the research design, as well as discuss the validity and reliability of the study findings.

5.1. Research Design

The thesis rests on a qualitative research design focused on identifying and unpacking the ruling relations shaping ECEC teachers' work. Methodologically, the study is underpinned by an Institutional Ethnographic method of inquiry (Smith, 2005), which focused my analytical attention on investigating the ruling relations shaping ECEC teachers' doings and the relational aspects of their work. I chose semi-structured interviews with ECEC teachers as my main method for data development (Articles 1–3) as I wanted to unpack the teachers' experiences of their work, in their own words, in order to understand how they perceive and partake in the ruling relations that shape the conditions for their work.

Different analytical prisms and angles were used to elucidate the ruling relations of school readiness. You can find an overview of the research questions, key concepts, empirical data, and main findings across the four articles in *Table 1. Overview of Articles, Research Questions, Key Concepts, Empirical Data, and Main Findings*. In the first article, I unpack the ruling relations by investigating how ECEC teachers approach the language assessment of children with minority-language backgrounds, and focus specifically on teachers' ambivalence towards state and municipally mandated language assessment policies. In the second article, I zoom in on the interview data from the Danish context, exploring the social organisation of ECEC teachers' assessment of children with minority-language backgrounds' school readiness, focusing on identifying what makes up "the standard school-ready child". In the third article, I investigate the ruling relations by analytically unpacking teachers' expectations of immigrant parents' involvement in kindergarten. In doing so, I seek to elucidate what this can tell us about the ruling constructs of "good parenting" and the ruling ways of preparing a child for school. In the fourth article, I lift my gaze from of the Nordic

context and conduct a systematic configurative review of the current empirical research on ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness. Here, I examine what previous research can tell us about the relational aspects of ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness, how ECEC teachers across national contexts and curriculum traditions perceive school readiness within the current policy changes in the ECEC sector, and whether and how the changing policy climate has impacted ECEC teachers' work.

5.2. Selection and Recruitment Strategy

The same selection and recruitment strategy was used for recruiting study participants in both Oslo and Copenhagen. When recruiting ECEC teachers for the interviews, I started by first listing all self-owned[16] and municipally owned kindergartens in Copenhagen and municipally owned kindergartens in Oslo[17] in an Excel spreadsheet. I limited the sample to ECEC teachers working in these sectors since they are the group who are arguably most impacted by public policies. I narrowed the list down to areas in both cities where the share of residents with immigrant backgrounds is comparatively high (Skifter Andersen et al., 2016; Wessel, 2017). In both localities, I recruited teachers working in both urban and suburban areas. In Copenhagen, I was specifically interested in recruiting teachers working in kindergartens residing in or close by neighbourhoods listed as *at-risk-neighbourhoods* and *ghetto areas* by the Danish Government (2018). I sought to interview ECEC teachers working in areas with a high share of residents with immigrant backgrounds in particular, as several Danish and Norwegian language assessment policies are implicitly or explicitly targeted at reaching children with minority-language backgrounds and children of immigrant parents. With an increasing share of the population having a minority-language background, there are rising political concerns regarding children with minority-language backgrounds' [18] language proficiency in the respective majority languages. To ensure that all children are able to communicate in the majority language when starting first grade, increased responsibilities are appointed to kindergartens to detect and initiate action for children with weak language

[16] In Denmark, self-owned kindergartens are organised as trusts that are managed by a parent board. In Copenhagen, the self-owned kindergartens are subject to the same regulations as the municipally owned kindergartens considering language assessment and documentation. The Norwegian counterpart to self-owned kindergartens, the "ideal kindergartens", are, on the other hand, not obliged to follow Oslo's language assessment policies.

[17] I utilised Copenhagen's and Oslo's home page overviews of the municipal ECEC offer. https://pasningogskole.kk.dk/børnehaver and https://www.oslo.kommune.no/barnehage/finn-barnehage-i-oslo/#gref

[18] The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training defines *minority-language children* as "both the child and the child's parents have a first language other than Norwegian, Sami, Swedish, Danish or English" (2018a).

development in the majority language compared to the given standards.

After listing the kindergartens alphabetically, I sent out interview invitations, including an attached information letter, by e-mail (See *Appendix H: Standard Information Letter*). I received a few answers this way, but in most instances, I needed to call each kindergarten, present myself and the project, and ask if any ECEC teachers were interested in partaking in the interview study. Several times, I was informed that the e-mail had not reached the right person, and I was asked to re-send it to another address or to call back later to speak to another colleague. I used the Excel spreadsheet to keep track of the kindergartens' names, telephone numbers, e-mail addresses, contact persons, and information concerning when to call, whether they were interested in partaking in the study or had declined, and dates of planned interviews. However, surprisingly, in Copenhagen, my biggest challenge turned out to be making myself understood, since a considerable amount of the kindergarten staff answering the phone could not understand what I was saying. I had not considered this beforehand, as Danish and Norwegian are, in theory, quite similar languages. Nevertheless, my impression after my approximately two-month stay in Copenhagen was that many young Danes had significant difficulties understanding, at least my Norwegian accent, which is my first language. The older staff, however, usually seemed to have an easier time understanding what I was saying. During these initial calls, I often switched to English, but the unexpected language barriers sometimes made the conversation so awkward that at times I felt it made the recipient more likely to deny my request. At one point, I even considered hiring a Danish research assistant to help me book the interviews. However, after days and weeks of tedious calling and modifying my pitch in Norwegian/English, as well as learning a few new Danish words and pronunciations, I ended up with a satisfactory sample of informants. Later, during the interviews, it was easier to communicate face-to-face, both since the interviews were quite long and we could use the time to check that we understood each other, and also since they were the ones who did most of the talking (during one interview, I spoke in English, and the interview participant responded in Danish). The recruiting process went more quickly in Norway, as the informants probably were more at ease receiving my cold calls in Norwegian than some of their Danish colleagues. I also experienced similar issues here, with wrong e-mail addresses and such. Nevertheless, I was pleased with the knowledge production and empirical material from the interviews at the end of both interview rounds. The data production had arguably reached a certain point of saturation, on which I will shortly elaborate. Different qualitative approaches demand different indicators for quality assurance, and, in this sense, not every approach needs to use saturation as a benchmark for sample size

adequacy (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). I agree that the point of saturation is not necessarily a sufficient measure for sample size adequacy in all cases. On the other hand, I would argue that the point of saturation is an adequate measure in the current study, where informants are viewed as experts, and the study unit are the ruling relations of an institution and not the informants themselves. Besides, and most importantly, an adequate sample size is one that satisfactorily answers the research questions (Marshall, 1996). In January 2020 I came to the conclusion that I had accumulated enough knowledge from the conversations with the ECEC teachers to proceed with my investigation of the ruling relations and from there answer the research questions. In hindsight, it was fortunate that I arrived at this conclusion at this point in time, as two months later the Covid-19 pandemic hit the Nordic region, and all kindergartens in the region closed from the larger public from one day to another on March 12, 2020.

5.3. The Interviews

I conducted interviews with 11 ECEC teachers in Copenhagen and 11 in Oslo. The teachers worked in 14 different kindergartens, in five different city districts in both urban and suburban areas in Copenhagen and Oslo. See *Appendix E: Characteristics of Informants and Kindergartens* for an overview of the city districts and an outline of the study participants.

I additionally interviewed a pedagogic consultant, a speech therapist, and a kindergarten district leader in Copenhagen, as well as a representative from Oslo municipality's Pedagogic-Psychological Services (PPT) belonging to two additional low-income and high-minority city districts in the respective municipalities. These interviews were planned and organised separately from the interviews with the ECEC teachers and were used to further understand the broader institutional context of the social organisation of the teachers' language assessment, documentation, and reporting practices. Although I recorded and transcribed most of the interviews with the other actors, I did not include these perspectives in the main data material. The interviews could, as such, be understood in the term of *first* and *second order data* (Campbell & Gregor, 2002). The first order data describe individual experiences at a local level within an institution. Importantly, this data is produced from the experiences of people occupying the chosen standpoint for studying the ruling relations, ECEC teachers in this case. For this reason, this type of data is also referred to as *entry-level data*. Second order data, in this case interviews such as the one with the pedagogic consultant or the speech therapist, refer to data that describe what goes on beyond the experiential accounts of the ECEC teachers in order to expand on the findings in the entry-

level data (Campbell & Gregor, 2002). The interviews lasted between 1 hour and 2.5 hours, with a typical interview lasting 1.5 hours. I did both one-on-one and group interviews with teachers, as each form of interview contributed to the empirical material in different ways. During the one-on-one interviews, it was easier to lead the conversation and get into the topics that I wanted to explore, while I often struggled to "control the conversation" when there were two or three participants. On the other hand, this was what made the group interviews so useful, as the ECEC teachers often felt at ease discussing topics with their colleagues and sometimes disclosed more new information (to me) and ambivalent feelings than in the sometimes more "to the point" one-on-one interviews. With the exception of one pedagogic consultant,[19] all the other participants invited me to interview them at the kindergarten where they work. I typically arrived at the interview appointment 15 minutes early and usually waited for the ECEC teachers to get ready for the interview, which was often scheduled during their lunchtime or after they finished their shift. This extra time allowed me to speak to other employees and to the children who often came up to me asking who I was, and I was able to explore the premises and form an impression of the kindergarten space and the people in it. When the teacher came to greet me, I usually got an introductory tour of each kindergarten, which was helpful as a common reference to people and places during the interviews.

Prior to my visit, I requested that the teachers brought with them the materials they use when assessing a child's language proficiency and other texts relevant to this work. The Norwegian teachers usually brought the TRAS language assessment materials (and a few brought the SPROFF assessment materials), the framework plan, and *the Oslo standard for systematic monitoring of children's language development*, and its successor *the Oslo standard for inclusive play and language environments* (Oslo City Council Section for Childhood and Education, 2013; 2015; 2019). The Danish teachers brought with them the Ministry's official language assessment materials *Language assessment 3–6*, the *Early detection and intervention [TOPI] assessment materials* for the assessment of children's wellbeing, and the standard school transition forms from Copenhagen municipality either in paper form or on an iPad (Ministry of Children and Education, 2017). The texts also included app versions of the assessment tools on mobile phones and iPads, language games, posters, laws, regulations, and other documentation that the teachers use for their work.

To investigate and identify the ruling relations, I used the ECEC teachers' everyday

[19] This was a pedagogical consultant employed by Copenhagen municipality, who was interviewed in her home.

experiences as an entry to trace how their doings fit into the larger institutional complexes of ruling relations (Smith, 2005). I brought with me a semi-structured interview guide, which mostly worked as a checklist during the interviews, to assure that I had covered the most central topics needed for further analysis. I started most interviews by presenting the research project as a whole, including Institutional ethnography as a method of inquiry, the project aims, and the teachers' right to withdraw their participation in the project at any time before the publishing of the articles and this thesis. I did this to be transparent, to illustrate what kind of data I sought to produce with them during the interviews, and to inform them of their rights to the ownership of their data following the GDPR laws and regulations. From there, I posed all informants with variations of the same two open-ended questions: "How do you work with children's language development in this kindergarten?" and "How do you work with a child with a minority-language background, from their first step inside the kindergarten until they leave to start school?". I was especially interested in the teachers' descriptions of how they read and use policy documents and assessment materials in practice, and how different actors, institutions, and texts enter into their daily interactions with children of minority-language backgrounds and their parents. Larger parts of the interviews consisted of the ECEC teachers providing a detailed run-through of the assessment materials and how they apply them in practice, as if they were teaching me how to use the materials myself, supplemented by stories of their experiences with different parts of the assessments and their interactions with children and their families, schools, speech therapists, and other actors inside and outside the kindergarten. I underlined the importance of the teachers' providing as detailed descriptions as possible since I wanted to closely investigate how they organise and conduct language assessments, what happens afterwards, and how they prepare children for school transition. In these instances, it probably helped that I am a sociologist and not a trained ECEC teacher, as the teachers already knew that I was not familiar with the institutional discourse or the practicalities of day-to-day life in kindergarten. Therefore, it felt commonplace to ask them to elaborate on what certain terms or actions imply for their everyday work. I focused on continuously unpacking the professional discourse with the informants during the interviews, to avoid being "captured" by the institutional discourse and potentially losing some of the actual meaning behind the teachers' descriptions (Nilsen, 2021). Along these lines, I made a point of not taking for granted that what one teacher implied by using a term would resonate completely with what another teacher meant using the same term. Some common words I asked the teachers to further describe were *assessment*, *adequate language development*, and *language difficulties*.

The open-ended, explorative form of the interviews allowed me to follow along as the teachers described the details of their everyday lives. I let them speak freely, and I sought to not interrupt their train of thought except by asking for their definitions of different terms or to, for example, question which actors or texts are involved in the different stages of an assessment. After each interview, I quickly noted my general impressions of my experience with the specific interviews and the circumstances leading up to and after the interview. Interviews with other stakeholders had a similar style as those with the teachers but were structured by other questions regarding the political and administrative context of language assessment in kindergarten in respective countries and municipalities. The interviewees usually interrupted themselves at least once during the interview, asking me if they had drifted too far off topic, or if what they were saying was too detailed and tedious. I always downplayed these worries, assuring the informants that this level of detail is what I wanted out of the interviews. I let them speak for as long as they wanted and had time for. This resulted in several hours of taped conversations that required me to use months to transcribe the interviews, resulting in 543 Word pages (Times New Roman, font size 12, 1.5-point line spacing) of transcribed material. However, it was well worth it, as I experienced that the teachers did not feel rushed and that it allowed them the time to reflect and elaborate thoroughly on what their work entails on an everyday basis. Table 4 which can be found in Appendix E offers an overview of the characteristics of the ECEC teachers participating in this study and the kindergartens where they work.

5.4. Analysis

The analysis was guided by the objective of unpacking what the ECEC teachers' experiences of enacting language assessment policies and preparing children for school could tell us about the ruling relations shaping their pedagogic practices. The analytical strategy was inspired by DeVault and McCoy's (2006) three-stage analysis for investigating ruling relations: 1. Identify an experience you want to use as your point of departure for further investigation, 2. Identify and trace the ruling relations shaping the experience, and 3. Investigate the processes involved in the mediation of the ruling relations in order to analytically describe how these processes are linked to the teachers' experience. I have, however, combined DeVault and McCoy's strategic analysis with other theoretical concepts in the third stage of the analytical process. This is further elaborated below under the subheading "Third Stage".

5.4.1. Abduction

The Institutional ethnographic mode of inquiry reflects an abductive approach to data production and analysis (Mathiesen & Volckmar-Eeg, 2022). Abduction can be described as a mode of inquiry that starts in theory, moves into observations in the search for interesting or surprising findings, and subsequently analyses these findings against a variety of existing theories (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 167). The explorative nature embedded in the method of data production and analysis presented by DeVault and McCoy (2006) arguably fits well within the broad scope of an abductive approach. However, in my articles, I do not mention abduction explicitly, but rather describe how I switch between induction and deduction, although this "switching" manoeuvre could have been described better as abductive—an epiphany that emerged in hindsight in conversation with my supervisors and other scholars. Nevertheless, in practice, this distinction between an inductive-deductive combinational approach and an abductive approach did not influence my analytical process. However, the term abduction provides a better prism for describing my research design and analytical process.

5.4.2. Three Stages of Analysis

In this section, I describe my analytical approach to the analysis of the interview material, inspired by DeVault and McCoy's (2006) three stages.

5.4.2.1. First Stage

During the interviews, I focused on tracing the textual mediation of the ruling relations present in the teachers' everyday work, and invited the teachers to partake in this exercise. In this sense, the analysis started during the interviews, also because I had built the interview guide based on my analytical strategy. By transcribing the interviews myself, I developed an in-depth familiarity with the data material. This allowed me to annotate the transcriptions with as much situational detail as I needed to remind myself of the context of the informants' utterances. More specifically, for example, I noted where the teachers were joking, interrupting each other, saying something with a sarcastic tone of voice or altering it to mimic a conversation they previously had with someone else. I also marked other details such as long silences, if someone knocked on the door, or when the teachers did not finish their sentences.

During the transcribing process, I also started to form some initial reflections regarding reoccurring themes spiking my analytical interest. For the transcription, I used a pedal and the software f4transcript. After finishing the transcription process, I proceeded to

organise the material in NVivo 12. During the first data-driven coding of the interviews, I densified what the teachers were saying into smaller sections by briefly describing what was said in the respective segment in a new code, using the teachers' own lay terms. This practice resulted in several unique codes for each interview transcript. Afterwards, I categorised the different stages of a language assessment and a child's "kindergarten career"—from their first day of kindergarten until they leave for school. I also noted which actors, texts, and institutions partake in each stage. These stages were the teachers' first meeting with children and parents, the preparation for the language assessment, and the presentation of the language results to parents. The different stages of performing a language assessment and the children's "kindergarten career" were not decided prior to coding but were produced continually, following the terminology of the ECEC teachers' descriptive accounts.

5.4.2.2. Second Stage

Here, I listed the codes produced through the data-driven coding of the first stage of analysis and my categorisations of the different stages of a language assessment using NVivo 12. I identified recurring topics in teachers' experiences, and noted which of these particularly spiked my interest. The analysis further progressed to tracing how institutional and political discourse shaped some of these experiences and teachers' reactions. I was, for example, "stricken" by the conspicuous similarities in teachers' descriptions across local contexts and national borders in my analysis of the interview data, and by the unintended practical consequences of educational policies that were particularly evident in the findings from the Danish context (Article 2). In line with Institutional ethnographic methodology, I was particularly interested in the reoccurring descriptions of the teachers' experiences of disjunctures between their pedagogic understandings and everyday lives inside their kindergarten and by the textual representations of their work in ruling texts such as assessment materials and standardised forms. Similarly, I became interested in teachers' reoccurring talk of experiences of tensions as a results of themselves and other actors (such as parents and municipal administrators) having mismatching expectations of each other, teachers' work and responsibilities, what school readiness is and the social mandate of kindergarten. I identified which texts, institutional discourses, and institutional processes were shaping the teachers' experiences of disjunctures. I simultaneously searched for national variation between the teachers' accounts in Denmark and Norway.

5.4.2.3. Third Stage

During the last stage, based on the findings from the initial stages. I progressed to a more theoretically driven focus, where I combined Institutional ethnographic perspectives with theoretical perspectives on teacher professionalism, educational policy theory, and sociological theory on the reproduction of social inequality. I sought to identify how I could analytically unpack the tensions, disjunctures, and mismatching expectations by testing different theoretical lenses to understand the ruling relations shaping ECEC teachers' work. This stage of the analytical process allowed greater room for analytical creativity in my search to unpack the empirical findings. Here, sharing my findings with other researchers was also useful for discovering theoretical concepts and prisms for making sense of reoccurring topics.

5.5. Comparative Aspects

Although I did not perform an *international comparative study* in the established use of the term (Afdal, 2019), the research design of the thesis study has several comparative components, as I sought to investigate the similarities and differences in the relationship between educational policy and ECEC teachers' practice in Norway and Denmark (Articles 1 and 3) and teachers' perceptions of school readiness across multiple national contexts (Article 4). In social research, comparison arguably represents both anything and everything, as it is traditionally intrinsically linked to how researchers within these scholarly lines of research methodologically and analytically approach the study of social phenomena (Leseth & Tellmann, 2014). As such, the term *comparison* is arguably vague and, thus, what the term means for the present study needs some further explanation.

The study's research design and aims presented some limitations to what kind of comparison I could, and sought to, conduct in the analysis. Following my research interest of investigating the ruling relations, I aimed to identify and compare how ruling relations are shaping various dimensions of ECEC teachers' work and their relations to other actors, and if and how the findings in this regard vary within and across national contexts (Smith, 2005; Smith & Griffith, 2014). Although comparison often revolves around identifying differences, I found the similarities in the Norwegian and Danish teachers' experiences most interesting, as their stories of their everyday work and tensions drew a strikingly similar picture despite some of the political variations. Importantly, as I also mentioned in the introductory chapter, it is central to recognise that although Norway and Denmark are two independent nation-states today, the two countries share a common history, a geographical boarder, and shared historical origins for the establishment and organisation of public kindergartens and ECEC

teacher education (Korsvold, 2005). This is probably why, during the analysis, I found it more fruitful to compare the findings from Norway and Denmark as representative of the Nordic region and social pedagogy to the research findings from countries that historically have adapted more academic approaches to curriculum development and more school-like approaches to pedagogy in ECEC, such as the United States and the UK.

In Article 4, with a specific focus on relational aspects, I zoom out of the Nordic context and draft an overview of how global policy changes have shaped ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness across various national contexts. In this article, I use Bennet's (2005) conceptualisations of national variations in curriculum development again to unpack some of differences and similarities in the reviewed studies but also to shed light on some of the ambiguities that challenges the study of teachers' perceptions, *schoolification* processes, and the importance of context for understanding the formation of ECEC teachers' perceptions. In Article 4, I also compare how the authors of the reviewed studies present and investigate changes in views on child development and school readiness and the implications this has on teachers' perceptions. Another form of comparison present in the four articles is that between policy and practice, and I analytically question whether there are disjunctures between what policy documents and other ruling texts say about school readiness and what is expected of children at certain ages, and ECEC teachers' local experiences of working in high-minority and low-income areas. See, Table 5 in Appendix F, for an overview of the various types of comparison that are performed in the analysis of the articles.

5.5.1. Similarities and Differences Between the Two Contexts

Despite finding more similarities than differences in the teachers' descriptive accounts, there were two particularly important differences between the findings from the two contexts presented in Articles 1 and 2: (1) *the structure, contents, and status of the most-used assessment tools in decision-making,* and (2) *retainment policy and practice.* The teachers' assessment practices in Copenhagen differed from that of their Oslo colleagues. The Danish ECEC teachers were equipped with the Danish Ministry of Children and Social Affairs' (2019) language screening tool, a screening test with closed-ended questions meant to discover potential language development issues in all children, regardless of children's prerequisite knowledge of the Danish language or their potential bilingual status (Ministry of Children and Education, 2017). On the other hand, the ECEC teachers in Norway were usually required to utilise the TRAS-tool (Espenakk et al., 2011), an observation-based language-mapping material with open-ended question, to document and report children's

language development, and to detect which specific language areas children might struggle with. This tool has its own version for bilinguals, although it is the same tool, with the same questions, just without the age-determined categories found in the original. Although Copenhagen municipality does not mandate that all children be screened with the government's language assessment tool in kindergarten, all the Copenhagen kindergartens in my sample routinely screened all children in their kindergarten with the language assessment tool, from age 3. This decision was usually taken at the city district level. After children transition from kindergarten to the intermediate pre-school class, kindergarten class, on the primary school's premises, they all undertake a mandatory language screening, as required by Danish law (The Day Care Act, 2018). In Oslo, a child is usually assessed with TRAS as part of the documentation required in order to apply for a child to be further examined by the Educational and Psychological Counselling Service [PPT], if needed, and to receive extra resources for the child, based on an ECEC teachers' concerns prior to the assessment itself.

The most widely adapted and prominent language assessment materials in each country (TRAS and Sprogvudering 3–6) differed in status and importance in the teachers' assessment work. The Danish Ministry of Children and Education's (2017) material for the assessment of lingual readiness, Sprogvurdering 3–6, has a comparatively more pervasive influence over Copenhagen-based ECEC teachers' assessment work and subsequent data use than TRAS has in Oslo. This Danish screening test narrowed the teachers' room for professional discretion by asking closed-ended questions with only one or a few correct answers. The screening results were also used to make high-stakes decisions, such as a child being retained in the intermediate kindergarten class on the school's premises (See Article 2). In Norway, on the other hand, kindergarten retainment is not common, or easy to attain. As such, the Oslo study context can be described as low-stakes compared to the more high-stakes Danish contexts, where the study was performed in or near the *at-risk-neighbourhoods* and *ghetto areas* in Copenhagen that are governed under its own special laws and regulations. The Oslo-based teachers' assessment of whether children have an "adequate language development" as part of filling in the transition form, was usually based on their own discretion, but if they were unsure, they used TRAS to make their decision. However, the teachers told me that they usually know whether a child is struggling with their proficiency in Norwegian years and months before filling in the municipal kindergarten-school transition scheme. Yet, children's level of language proficiency was never used alone to decide whether a child should start kindergarten class or not. In contrast to the screening tool Sprogvurdering

3–6, the Oslo-based teachers reported that TRAS is primarily used to document and report, but also to identify certain specific language developmental issues in the case where teachers and parents want to apply for supplementary language resources from the city district. As such, the data produced from the assessments were mainly used for different purposes in the two cities, although both practices were initiated based on a belief in early intervention.

Nevertheless, the Oslo-based teachers also reported instances where they had been either negatively or positively surprised by unexpected results from a language assessment that sometimes reveal disjunctures between their own presumptions of a child's language proficiency and the results (See Article 1). Other topics implicitly related to the teachers' language assessment and work of preparing children for school transition bore a striking resemblance between the two national contexts. A key example is the ECEC teachers' experiences of tensions in their interactions with parents (See, Article 3). Tensions were particularly evident in instances where the teachers were concerned about a child's seemingly irregular or slow language development and experienced that the children's parents expressed a lower level of concern than the ECEC teachers would expect in the situation.

In Article 2, I chose to zoom in on the Danish context. For this article, I focused singularly on Danish teachers' accounts of enacting language assessment policies and preparing children for school transition, as Denmark and Copenhagen offer a particularly controversial policy climate in regard to immigration, and integration policy, and the intersecting lines between the governments' "anti-segregation policies" and educational policies. Moreover, considering the word count restraints of a journal article, I sought to use this restricted space to unpack teachers' complex processes of categorising children's school readiness and how ideal standards for "the school-ready child" shape ECEC teachers' work with children's school transitions. Nevertheless, based on my data, it is also possible to identify similar tendencies in the Norwegian material, particularly the part of the interviews in which ECEC teachers describe the work of filling in Oslo municipality's standardised form, *Information about the child*, which, at the end, requires an answer as to whether the child has an *adequate* understanding of the Norwegian language *["Har barnet en adekvat norskspråklig forståelse?"]* and whether the child has an *adequate* oral proficiency in Norwegian *["Har barnet adekvat talespråk på norsk?"]* (Oslo Municipality, 2013, p. 3).[20] Several ECEC teachers reported that these arguably ambiguous questions often served as a

[20] This standard has later been updated and now includes a new "transition form" (Oslo City Council Section for Childhood and Education, 2020).

tension between schoolteachers and ECEC teachers (See also Article 1). Notably, the ideological code of *the standard school-ready child* was also identified in the data material from the Norwegian interview, and the identification of this ideological code, as such, represents a similarity and not a difference between the findings from the two contexts—although I singularly foreground the Danish context in Article 2.

5.6. Reflexivity

In this section, I reflect on my role as a researcher in the development of research data and in the analysis. I discuss the challenges and solutions regarding the combining of Institutional ethnography with perspectives from other research traditions. I then discuss the validity, reliability, and transferability of the data and findings. Lastly, I reflect on the importance of incorporating reflexivity as an intellectual practice.

5.6.1. Challenges of Combining Different Analytical Perspectives

Combining concepts with different theoretical underpinnings can be rewarding, but also challenging, as it is important to avoid forcing a synthesis that results in ontological or epistemological inconsistencies (DeVault, 2021). To avoid such inconsistencies in the analysis, it was important for me to demonstrate a sensitivity and an awareness of the ontological and epistemological departure of the perspectives I was seeking to combine in the respective studies (See, Table 1 for an overview of the key analytical concepts identified in the analysis). Combining institutional ethnographic methodology with the analytical tools and concepts from other theoretical traditions[21] has been one of the most demanding challenges of my work on this project. In the best of ways, it has required me to tread lightly and concentrate deeply on semiotics and methodological implications when performing and discussing my analysis. There are two aspects in particular that have been important for me to consider while combining Institutional ethnography with sociological theory on the reproduction of social inequality in this thesis: *the relationship between theory and data* and avoiding the use of *nominalisation*.

First, a prerequisite for using Institutional ethnography as an ontological and epistemological prism is that the researcher is interested in making the ruling relations the study's main research unit and that there is a form of abductive relationship between data and

[21] Lund and Nilsen (2020) and DeVault (2021) denote that *hybridising* Institutional ethnography with other theoretical perspectives has become a popular mode of Institutional Ethnographic inquiry in the Nordic region; yet, it is still uncommon in other parts of the world.

theory. Smith describes this as "to begin with the categories is to begin in discourse" (1992, p. 90). She warns that by starting with categories instead of in people's experiences, the researcher can, in the worst case, end up merely reproducing ruling categorical understandings of people and social phenomena. Following this logic, it would be epistemologically inconsistent with Institutional ethnographic methodology to perform a study departing from a research design built on deductive analysis, where the researcher seeks, for example, to test a hypothesis. However, one can use Bourdieu's or Lareau's concepts to understand the empirical findings emerging from a methodological inquiry primarily resting on Institutional ethnography. Yet, it is essential that social class analysis and class categories are not the points of departure for an Institutional ethnographic research design, but that they are rather used as analytical concepts to further unpack the findings after the initial stages of analysis.

Second, Lareau's (2011) conceptual pairing (*concerted cultivation* and *the accomplishment of natural growth*) expands on the scholarly work of Bourdieu, whose theoretical concepts and ideas have been widely taken up within the sociology of education as a staple vernacular for describing the conflicts and reproduction of social inequality. Smith and others have criticised Bourdieu's work and the contemporary studies performed in the Bourdieusian tradition of taking a reductionistic and deterministic approach to the study of inequality or forcing theory on empirical data.[22] It is widely agreed upon within most social research communities that when using any form of conceptual framework or analytical tools, it is important to not give agency to categories, what Smith refers to as *nominalisation*. For example, in the present study, a hypothetical outcome of nominalisation in the analytical process could have been "low socioeconomic status causes weak education outcomes" or "the accomplishment of natural growth as a childrearing practise produces weak educational outcomes", creating the impression that it is, for example, the category low socioeconomic status that causes weak educational outcomes. Such analytical research practises arguably veil the relational aspects of social reproduction and that it is people who act and not the categories that are used to describe them. Another important concern regarding nominalisation is the possible unwanted outcome of the analysis contributing to reproduce ideological understandings of social phenomena. A solution is to move beyond and objectify

[22] However, scholars have also called for critics to discern between Bourdieu's arguably reflexive sociology (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) and reductionistic presentations of Bourdieu's theories or newer canonisations of his famous work (See, for example, Winzler (2021) for a discussion concerning this topic). See also Widerberg (2021) for a discussion concerning the relationship between Bourdieu's and Smith's work.

these ideological understandings, seeking to grasp the relational aspects making up the social phenomena. In the present study, this means that since we assume that categories do not produce categories, it is important to critically unpack the institutional processes that shape ECEC teachers' work and stratified educational outcomes between certain groups of people on an aggregated level.

However, this being said, I do not believe that there exist infinite rules regarding which concepts can be combined or not with Institutional ethnographic methodology, but that it always depends on *how* it is done.

5.6.2. Validity

A significant concern for all research is to ensure that the findings, the researchers' argumentation, and the conclusions can be considered valid. Validity should not be understood solely as an abstract concept, but rather as part of the craftsmanship of scientific research (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Hence, validation does not belong to separate stages of an investigation but is something that should permeate the entire research process. In the planning stage, this involved ensuring that my research design and methods were aligned with the purpose of the study and that the data I wanted to produce were aligned with my research question and analytical strategy. Throughout the interview process, ensuring validity meant that I continually checked that I understood what the ECEC teachers meant when using institutional discourse and ambiguous terms, intentionally seeking to avoid what Smith (2005) refers to as *institutional capture* (See Nilsen (2021) for a discussion on *institutional jargon* and *institutional capture*). The transcription from oral to written language will necessarily involve a reduction of the meaning construction produced from the time and space of the interaction between myself and the informants. Moreover, my translation from Norwegian/Danish to English in the articles contributes a further distance between the spontaneous interview situation and its presentation. With these preconditions in mind, I sought to avoid taking the teachers' utterances out of context. Furthermore, I sought to keep the translation as close to the original content as possible and to explain the circumstances leading up to the short citations of our conversations when presenting interview excerpts in the articles.

5.6.3. Reliability and Transferability

Reliability in social research refers to the trustworthiness and consistency of the research findings. Moreover, the degree of research reliability is based on whether the data material and analytical approaches are appropriate for answering the research questions

(Kvale & Brinkmann, 2012; Silverman, 2006). I pursued developing reliable descriptions of ECEC teachers' everyday work by being as open as possible with the informants regarding both the empirical data I wanted to produce with them during the interviews and how I intended to use these data for future analysis. This was also ensured by describing this information in the letter I sent to prospective informants (See, *Appendix H: Standard Information Letter*).

Another aspect of research reliability often mentioned is the question of the generalisability of findings. It is almost impossible to imagine any human behaviour that is not highly influenced by the context people are acting within. Along these lines, Guba and Lincon (1981) argue that generalisations that are aimed towards being context-free will be of little use for describing and analysing human behaviour. As a solution, they propose that we should rather speak of *transferability*; whether findings, or as they call them, *working hypotheses*, are applicable in another situation is dependent on the similarity between contexts, what they refer to as *fittingness*. To clarify, a context-free generalisation is impossible, but the transferability of findings can be possible depending on the contextual similarity. Hence, it is up to the readers to decide whether findings or theories are applicable from one study to another (Guba & Lincoln, 1982).

Hence, following this reasoning and aligning these perspectives with Institutional ethnographic methodology, the aim of this study was not to generalise about the group of ECEC teachers interviewed, but to identify how teachers' work is shaped by institutional processes that possibly have transferrable value across similar contexts (DeVault & McCoy, 2006; Guba & Lincoln, 1981), since similar contexts may shape similar frames of people's experiences.[23] Yet, I argue that the disjunctures and breaching patterns found between the ideological code of the standard-school ready child in Article 2 and immigrant parents' involvement breaching with teachers' expectations in Article 3 reveal ruling constructs of school readiness and parent involvement that transcend the contextual frame of low-income, high-minority neighbourhoods. However, these contexts made it easier to identify and reveal the taken-for- granted ideals that became visible because of the breaching that emerged as a consequence of the large disjuncture between local particularities and the ruling constructs.

I have placed great effort in providing a detailed description of the data development process both for the research participants and the readers of the articles and this thesis. As such, I sought to create transparency surrounding every stage of the research process,

[23] Smith refers to a similar logic when arguing for the "generalising potential" of identifying ruling relations (Read more about the generalising potential of studying ruling relations in Smith (2005)).

allowing for readers to both scrutinise and compare their own findings to the ones presented from this specific data material. The findings of this study have the potential of being transferrable to similar contexts but can also potentially be used to contrast the findings in studies of comparatively different contexts in order to examine to which degree various contexts shape different conditions for ECEC teachers' work. Moreover, I argue that the concept analytically developed in Article 2, "the standard school-ready child" may be utilised in future research as a tool for examining which characteristics make up the ideal student and identifying cultural or psychological traits breaching with these standardised, often implicit, ideals ingrained in assessment materials and practice.

5.6.4. Reflecting Inwards and Outwards on My Role as a Researcher

As previously mentioned under *4.5.1. Challenges of Combining Different Methodological and Theoretical Perspectives*, the ability to scrutinise and identify the limitations of one's own assumptions is vital to ensure the quality of one's craftsmanship as a researcher. Along these lines, scholars have emphasised the importance of incorporating reflexivity as an intellectual practice (See, for example, Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In this section, I reflect briefly on my role as a researcher in the data production and analysis.

First, qualitative research can be thought of as "second-order meaning-making" (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014), meaning that it is constituted by researchers making meaning about people acting upon the meanings in their daily lives and that the researchers' meaning-making, in a sense, serves as second order in relation to the informants' initial meaning-making. This is an obvious but complex epistemological relationship. As such, qualitative data analysis can be referred to as a meaning-making process in itself. To tackle these issues, I have sought to focus on facilitating a reflexive, mindful, and transparent research strategy that thoughtfully corresponds to the study's data production process. I also made a similar point while describing the research design. This means that I cannot, and do not want to, avoid second-order meaning-making, yet I can and should be as transparent as possible with *how* I am doing *what* and *why*.

Second, along similar lines, I was mindful of how the theoretical concepts and categories I was using shaped the "research object", in what Bourdieu (1992, p. 248) refers to as "the double bind". It is therefore essential that researchers are critical of the possibilities and limitations of the restrictive frames of understanding each theoretical perspective provides. Arguably, analytical assumptions are intrinsic to the formation of a research project and thus not something that should be avoided. However, it is important to have a reflexive

understanding of the analytical assumptions underpinning a study. I have therefore explicated and reflected upon the analytical assumptions following the use of Institutional ethnography as my methodological departure. Institutional ethnographic methodology inspired and shaped most steps of the research process, from the interview guide to the analysis of findings, with the aim of producing data for an analysis of the ruling relations shaping teachers' work.

In doing so, the teachers and I together produced data about their professional work practices that were intended for a certain form of analysis, knowingly limiting the scope of my study to producing and examining this type of data. As such, a foundational assumption underpinning this study is the epistemological framework of Institutional ethnography. Thereby I, *a priori*, accept the claims that one can gain knowledge of institutional relations and processes shaping people's work by asking people about their everyday doings. Moreover, I assumed that by examining ECEC teachers' descriptions and interactions with texts, I could access some of their "text-reader-conversations" with the ruling texts and thereby understand some of the teachers' relationships to the institutional discourses embedded in the standardised materials they implicitly or explicitly interact with on a daily basis.

Third, I sought to actively challenge myself to fully comprehend the reasoning behind the arguments from the different sides of the public debates on "school readiness" and "language assessment" as a means to enhance the nuance and reflexivity of my analysis. Studies from the research traditions I have situated my study within (See *Chapter 4, Theoretical Perspectives*) often depart from a desire to critically examine and "unmask" naturalised hegemonic beliefs. The sociological interest in identifying and examining social problems can be criticised for enhancing problems by focusing mostly on pursuing questions and findings that elucidate mainly the problematic aspects of the topic under study. Because of the controversies in the political and scholarly fields, it was important for me to unpack the complexity of the relationship between policy and ECEC teachers' practices and to draw a multifaceted picture of the complex nature of their work. In the analysis, I sought to identify, unpack, and communicate the reasons for teachers' complex reactions and ambivalent feelings towards the changing demands from the state and municipality. After initially reading mostly about the negative consequences of *the academisation* and *schoolification* tendencies in ECEC prior to this project, I needed to challenge myself a bit to fully comprehend the strong incentives behind the assessment policies and educational reforms that several policymakers, researchers, stakeholders, and partly the teachers were seemingly somewhat positive towards, or at least accepted. I initially found it easier to scrutinise the motivation

behind such policies than to unpack the complexity of the teachers' experiences. Yet, I increasingly understood how the severity of the rising inequality in the Nordics, but also globally, as well as the rising notion of emergent risk, was strongly affecting the teachers' everyday work and how many teachers and public stakeholders were quite desperate to change the undesirable trend of the growing rate of socially stratified educational outcomes between children from different social backgrounds, and particularly between children from the ethnic majority population and children of immigrant descent.

Fourth, throughout the project, I sought to provide a fair representation of the ECEC teachers. I wanted to unpack the complexity of their work lives and their relations to their human and material surroundings while concurrently not forgetting to elucidate the strong professional integrity that I noted during interviews. Their reactions were complex and sometimes ambiguous: several were resistant to the "schoolification" of kindergarten curriculum while, at the same time, wanting to prepare the children for what lies ahead, even if the values of the school system might not agree with their pedagogic beliefs. Moreover, the findings show that teachers primarily perceive the children in their care and their parents as individuals with whom they seek to have a close relationship with. The relationship between an ECEC teacher and a child cannot be compared to a typical professional-client or patient-relationship, such the relations between e.g., a surgeon and a patient. However, when you go from empirical descriptions to theorisation, some of the complexity may be lost along the way—the ambivalence, the self-contradictions, and the humanity that are, at times, inconsistent and messy. It can be challenging to present these aspects at the same time as not "confusing" the message in a short text, such as a journal article. I have, however, striven to unpack some of this complexity in tandem with keeping sight of the close interpersonal and emotional sensitivity that is intertwined in all professional aspects of teachers' work and relationships.

5.6.5. Other Ethical Considerations

The research study is approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) (2020) and complies with the Norwegian National Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences, Humanities, Law and Theology (NESH, 2016) (See the research approval letter form NSD in *Appendix G: Research Approval NSD*). The names of the people and places have been anonymised, and during the interviews, the teachers concealed the names of the children when presenting me with examples of children's assessment results and transition reports, etc. Before the interviews, I sent out a standard consent form, and at the start of the

interviews, the teachers and other informants were also informed about their rights to withdraw from the study at any point and provided with my contact information to do so if needed. No one ended up doing so. This could have to do with the topic of our conversation not having the character of a particularly sensitive matter. I also focused on facilitating a comfortable interview experience, and I did not intentionally pursue sensitive topics.

I aimed to avoid objectifying the study informants, and focused mainly on directing a critical gaze towards institutional ruling relations (Smith, 2005). Arguably, this objective aligns with the ethical considerations of "doing no harm" and the intention of leaving participants with a positive experience of participating in the project. I also hope this rings true for the teachers and other informants that were part of this study. Some of the informants, particularly those who were interviewed in groups of two and three with their colleagues, shared that they found it surprisingly interesting to reflect on these topics through a new lens. I have presented my work at numerous international and national conferences, seminars, and meetings with research groups. I also presented my project to several ECEC teachers and held a lecture based on the findings in my first article for the participants of a master's course in school leadership for ECEC teachers and schoolteachers at a Norwegian university.

Sharing my work in this way has resulted in many interesting discussions, and it has also provided some reassurance that my portrayal of everyday practices and tensions were recognisable to ECEC teachers working in kindergartens and primary school teachers welcoming children transitioning from kindergarten to school. Some of these teachers also worked in other parts of Norway, outside the Oslo region. These interactions functioned as a form of *communicative validity*—a way of testing the validity of my findings, analytical assumptions, and arguments in communication with others (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). In this vein, I sent a finished article draft to one of the informants upon publication, following her special interest in the topic. I was relieved when she said she could relate to my portrayal of ECEC teachers' work and thought it was interesting to view her everyday experiences through a different lens[24].

5.8. Limitations

Finally, I would like to mention three limitations associated with my choice of methodical approach and what these choices enabled me to do and not.

First, when recruiting ECEC teachers for the study, I had no other inclusion criteria than in which area they worked, the ownership structure of the kindergarten, that the

[24] Although, I am of course aware that this might not be the reaction of all participants.

participants needed to have an ECEC teachers' degree, and that they had experience with performing language assessments. Only one of the teacher informants in my study had a minority-language background. *Aisha*, as I call her, shared several of the same experiences as the other teachers, and her descriptive accounts did not contradict the descriptive accounts of the rest of the teachers in this study. However, this interview yielded many interesting perspectives, some that were only accessible from someone who shared the same first language as many of the children and parents and had privileged access to both references from the majority culture and first-hand knowledge of many of the migrant families' home cultures. It would have been valuable to interview more teachers with immigrant and/or minority-language backgrounds, but I did not manage to recruit more teachers from these groups.

Second, this study is limited to describing the ruling relations from the standpoint of ECEC teachers. Interviews offers the possibility to produce knowledge of how ECEC teachers reflect on their everyday work. Yet, this also means that the study is limited to describing the institutional relations from the standpoint of ECEC teachers. In practice, this implies that when the teachers speak of encounters with other actors, such as parents, I do not have the observation data to describe these encounters from my "researcher's perspective", and I have not interviewed children, parents, or schoolteachers concerning their perspectives on the interactions, or whether they agree or disagree on the teachers' descriptions of their relationship. Thus, I can only draw conclusions concerning how the ECEC teachers describe and experience these interactions and how they negotiate what they experience as the tensions resulting from these interactions. This implies that when I discuss how ECEC teachers negotiate tensions, I am referring to how teachers describe their own experiences of handling discursive tensions (such as opposing understandings of school readiness) and what they experience as tensions. I do not, however, have the empirical data to suggest how, for example, parents experience governing expectations of "school readiness", if they experience tensions in their interactions with teachers, or how school representatives experience their interactions with ECEC teachers when collaborating on children's school transitions. I can, however, and I have, discussed what previous study findings suggest about parents' and schoolteachers' perspectives on their relationship to ECEC teachers, and I view these findings in light of the findings of the current study.

Third, the context of the empirical part of the present study limits me to describing ECEC teachers' work in low-income, high-minority, and urban areas in Denmark and Norway. Similarly, the data are mainly limited to describing teachers' expectations of parents

with immigrant status residing in these geographical areas. However, teachers' expectations and perceptions of immigrant parents' involvement in these neighbourhoods are arguably linked to ruling constructs of school readiness and parent involvement, as well as competing curricular traditions transcending the particularities of the local contexts of this current study. I discuss these limitations and their implications more in depth in Articles 2 and 3. The findings and discussions in Article 4 further zoom out of the local contexts of existing empirical research, investigating how the increasing policy emphasis on children's school readiness is impacting the relational aspects involved in the formation of ECEC teachers' perceptions of readiness *across* numerous national contexts and curriculum traditions.

6. Summary of the Articles

In this chapter, I summarise the four articles produced in the context of this thesis. I mainly concentrate on the findings, as the methodological and analytical perspectives have been elaborated on in the previous chapters. I particularly focus on describing how the four articles emphasise different aspects of the ruling relations shaping ECEC teachers' work and how they contribute to answering the overall research questions presented in the introduction. I specifically foreground some of the main contributions made in each article, although each article can be said to explicitly or implicitly contribute to answering most questions (See, *Table 2, Overview of Which Articles Contribute to Answering What Overall Research Questions* in *Appendix B*). Together, the articles paint a larger picture advancing our knowledge of the ways in which the increased policy emphasis on school readiness shapes teachers' work and how their experiences are linked to institutional processes both working against the reproduction of social inequality, but also serves to legitimise socially unequal outcomes between privileged and underprivileged groups in society.

6.1. Article 1

Josefine Jahreie. (2021). The ambivalence of assessment: Language assessment of minority-language children in early childhood education and care. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 29*(5), 715–732. https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2021.1968459

In the first article, I investigate how ECEC teachers describe their language assessment practises and how their everyday experiences are part of institutional relations and processes that transcend the local lives inside each kindergarten. The findings of this article particularly contribute to illuminating teachers' reactions and responses to the increasing policy emphasis on children's language skills. Based on an analysis of interviews with ECEC teachers in Copenhagen and Oslo municipalities, I found that the teachers mostly displayed a pragmatic approach to enacting language assessment policies issued by local and state authorities. Yet, the findings also suggest that ECEC teachers experience ambivalence in their work of enacting language assessment policies targeted foremost at children with minority-language backgrounds. In the analysis, I identify three sources of ambivalence that were prominent in the ECEC teachers' descriptive accounts: (1) ambivalence towards the ready-for-school discourse, (2) ambivalence towards professional autonomy and the use of discretion, and (3)

ambivalence towards integration policy and the ideological code of "the standard child".[25] I find that teachers' ambivalence relates not only to their own discretion but also to the antagonistic discourse on the social mandate of kindergartens in changing political climate. The types of ambivalence are partly linked to different actors: researchers in the field, the ECEC teacher profession, and politicians. The findings relating to teachers' ambivalence towards integration policy and standard constructs of school readiness, described as an ideological code, sparked my analytical interest, and led me to conduct the analysis presented Article 2.

6.2. Article 2

Josefine Jahreie. (2022). The standard school-ready child: The social organization of "school-readiness". *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 43*(5), 661–679. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2022.2038542

In the second article, I investigate the social organisation of school readiness by asking: *What constitutes a "school-ready child?",* and *How do these perceptions shape Danish ECEC teachers' assessments of children with minority-language backgrounds and their "school readiness" in kindergarten?* The article offers new insights to our understanding of the formation, textual mediation, and reproduction of perceptions of children's "school readiness" in kindergarten and its consequences for teachers' assessment of children with minority-language backgrounds' "readiness" for transition to compulsory schooling. Building on Danish ECEC teachers' descriptive accounts of assessing these children's so-called *lingual readiness*, I identify key characteristics of *the standard school-ready child*. This term functions as an ideological code and shapes replicable understandings of what constitutes school readiness in institutional discourse and assessment materials. This code departs from Danish majority-class culture in its structuring of normalcy and deviance embedded in the language assessment materials issued by the Danish government. By departing from the standard school-ready child in their assessments of children with minority-language backgrounds' school readiness, ECEC teachers might unintentionally reproduce and legitimise stratified educational outcomes between children from Danish majority

[25] I am aware that I present the term *the standard child* in Article 1, and that I present another similar term referring to a similar ideological code in Article 2, *the standard school-ready child*. The latter term emerged out of a later strain of my analysis where I focused my attention towards the social organisation of school readiness, presented in Article 2. The articles are written and published chronologically; hence, Article 2 was written after Article 1. In hindsight, I believe that *the standard school-ready child* is the term that best fits for describing the ideological code shaping the textual mediation of the ECEC teachers' work in the current study. However, I had not yet fully performed the analysis presented in Article 2 when Article 1 was published.

backgrounds and disadvantaged and low-income immigrant backgrounds. The findings presented in this article directly touch on some of the core aspects of the main research question and increase our knowledge of how the increasing emphasis on school readiness shapes ECEC teachers' experiences of their work and impacts their assessment of school readiness and children's school transition.

6.3. Article 3

Josefine Jahreie. (2022). Towards a renewed understanding of barriers to immigrant parents' involvement in education. *Acta Sociologica, Advanced online publication*. https://doi.org/10.1177/00016993221110870

The third article investigates Danish and Norwegian ECEC teachers' expectations of immigrant parents' involvement in kindergarten. It highlights how competing discourses on school readiness shape ECEC teachers' experiences of their work and their relations to other actors. This includes how teachers' experience the negotiation of their own and the parents' roles and responsibilities, along with the social mandate of kindergarten, in their daily interactions with parents. The findings are interpreted in terms of the multifaceted interplay between social class relations, culture, migration, and ruling ideals of intensive parenting and concerted cultivation. By taking the ECEC teachers' standpoint, the article contributes a renewed understanding of the previous reports of barriers to immigrant parents' involvement in their children's education. Based on the ECEC teachers' accounts, I identify three key tensions: *(1) conflicting perceptions of responsibility*, *(2) conflicting perceptions of children's roles and how to communicate with children*, and *(3) conflicting perceptions of what kindergarten is and what constitutes valuable knowledge*. The findings suggest the existence of a distinct Nordic adaptation to intensive parenting. This Nordic adaptation contradicts parts of the ruling understandings of concerted cultivation found in more school-oriented curricular contexts such as parents' extensive focus helping young children learn to read and write at a young age, while still maintaining the original key characteristics of concerted cultivation such as the modes of communication between parent and child and children's roles in the family.

The article's focus on the ECEC teachers' standpoint helps to expand our knowledge of the complex relationship between teachers and immigrant parents by illuminating the comparatively under-researched perspective of ECEC teachers' expectations of, and reactions to, immigrant parents' involvement in kindergarten, instead of focusing primarily on the

parents' experiences. This point is important, as parents and ECEC teachers do not necessarily interpret each other's actions as intended. Prior studies departing from the parents' perspective suggest that parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to both trust and rely more on professionals' knowledge than parents from privileged social positions, believing that teachers will know and do what is in their child's best interest. The findings of the present study suggests that this delegation of responsibility from parent to teacher can potentially be misunderstood by teachers as parents "not caring" about their children's education rather than a possible humble gesture on the parents' part. The findings highlight the need for culturally sensitive policies and practices that can broaden the existing patterns of parental behaviours and facilitate more successful cooperation between ECEC teachers and immigrant families. Given the broad ambition to improve cooperation between ECEC teachers and immigrant parents, it is vital to further investigate ECEC teachers' perspectives.

6.4. Article 4

Josefine Jahreie. (2022). A research review of the relational aspects of Early Childhood Education and Care teachers' perceptions of school-readiness. *Revised and resubmitted to Educational Research Review.*

The fourth article offers a systematic configurative review of current empirical studies on ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness. It particularly contributes to the scholarly knowledge of what characterises the ruling perceptions of school readiness in previous research and amongst groups of ECEC teachers. The 19 quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods studies selected for this review suggest that despite the increasing policy emphasis on the importance of developing young children's academic skills, most ECEC teachers seem to perceive non-academic skills, such as self-sufficiency and social skills, as more important for children's school readiness. Foregrounding the relational aspects of ECEC teachers' perceptions, the review contributes much-needed insights into how teachers' perceptions vary across national contexts, revealing a multifaceted interplay between local perceptions of school readiness, national traditions for curriculum development, and the globalisation of people and ideas about readiness.

In this article I present some of the most widely established perceptions of school readiness in the existing scholarly literature. The analysis of previous studies suggests that dominant perceptions of school readiness might be changing on policy level, but that these developments are not necessarily impacting ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness to a large extent, at least outside the US context. Yet, the review shows that opposing

constructions of school readiness and child development underpin tensions in ECEC teachers' work and their relations with other actors. Moreover, standard notions of school readiness possibly create unrealistic and damaging expectations for children with bilingual, migrant, and minority-language backgrounds.

Yet, the analysis shows that studying teachers' perceptions are a complex endeavour and that it is not easy to reveal teachers' "real" perceptions and distinguish these from the expectations of children's school readiness according to local and national curricula and what ECEC teachers think are the school's expectations, and everything in between. These differing questions and answers can be overlapping in practice; however, the authors in the reviewed studies often point to tensions that can occur if there are large disparities between teachers' perceptions of the appropriate goals and approaches for readying young children in ECEC for school and the expectations of external actors. Moreover, the review elucidates the contextually relative nature of the authors' descriptions of schoolification and school readiness and how this shapes the formation of teachers' perceptions and research on teachers' perceptions, as well as complicates the comparison of empirical studies across national borders.

7. Discussion

The previous chapters have laid the foundation for the forthcoming discussion. In this chapter, I continue where I started in the introduction, by answering the main question of this thesis: How does the increasing emphasis on school readiness shape ECEC teachers' experiences of their work and their relations to other actors? To help answer the main question, I asked three supporting questions: (1) What characterises ruling constructs of school readiness in previous research and amongst groups of ECEC teachers? (2) What tensions are created, and what can these tensions tell us about the ruling relations shaping ECEC teachers' work, particularly ECEC teachers working in low-income, high-minority neighbourhoods? (3) In which ways could language assessment policies and the changing policy expectations of school readiness possibly influence ruling perceptions of the social mandate of kindergartens and the ECEC teacher role?

The concept of *school readiness* triggers deep existential questions of what the purpose of ECEC and the education system is, and what the role of ECEC teachers should be within a changing education system. Questions concerning school readiness in many ways reveal what kinds of knowledge and what types of cultures are valued in the education system and in society as a whole. Perceptions of school readiness also mirrors the current changing demands from labour markets and national states for certain competencies and skills from their populations to ensure economic growth. In this sense, school readiness essentially boils down to what kinds of skills and knowledge one is perceived to need in order to succeed in society on an individual level and what kind of citizens the education system is required to "produce" on a societal level. In Table 6, I present the different aspects of school readiness examined in the articles.

Table 6

Aspects of School Readiness Examined in the Articles

	Which aspects of school readiness are examined?
Article 1	Teachers' experiences of enacting language assessment policies, and how it influences their work of preparing children for school transition
Article 2	Ideological codes reproducing ideal constructs of school readiness and how they shape teachers' work
Article 3	Teachers' expectations of how parents should involve themselves in their work of preparing children for school transition

The thesis draws a complex picture of school readiness as a conceptual and relational space infused with tensions both between the actors in the education field and between competing constructs of school readiness and teachers' practises. Together, the findings presented in the articles reveal multifaceted relationships between the increased "schoolification" of pre-primary education, the reproduction of stratified socially unequal educational outcomes, and ECEC teachers' work. In the following, I answer and discuss the three supporting research questions based on the findings presented across the four articles.

7.1. Ruling Constructs of School Readiness in Previous Research and Amongst Groups of ECEC Teachers

What characterises ruling constructs of school readiness in previous research and amongst groups of ECEC teachers? The articles point to different ways in which the increasing emphasis on children's academic performance and particularly their language skills are impacting ECEC teachers' relationships with other actors, such as schoolteachers and parents, and how these developments are shaping their perceptions of school readiness and their assessment practices.

In Article 4, I show how educational scholars often frame their studies of ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness within a context where the ruling perceptions of school readiness have changed over time. These changes are often presented by using dichotomous pairs, where one concept refers to notions of the past, while another refers to current perceptions of school readiness. The authors of the included studies display an analytical distance to these dichotomous conceptual representations of school readiness and the concepts are presented as a reduction of a complex reality. The authors generally use the concepts either to describe the context of their study, to analytically unpack teachers' perceptions of school readiness, or both. In the article I categories these concepts into notions of *before* and *now*. *Before* generally refers to perceptions of school readiness that are underpinned by a trust in children's biological maturation, wherein school readiness is perceived as something that develops *within* the child, mostly separately from external influences. Following this reasoning, children can become ready if they are given "the gift of

time" (Gesell, 1928). Likewise, social pedagogic approaches to curriculum development are also often depicted in the existing research as associated with past notions of school readiness, together with Fröbel's kindergarten pedagogy and play-based approaches to learning. Scholars' representations of the current dominant perceptions of school readiness (what I refer to as *now*), on the other hand, often refer to characteristics that are somewhat opposite to the ones associated with *before*, underpinned by an assumption that children can be "made ready" by intervention and that children's level of school readiness is primarily determined by *external* factors such as the efforts of teachers and parents. Notably, representations of contemporary ruling perceptions of school readiness also include a turn towards a stronger emphasis on young children's academic skills and specified learning goals. (See *Table 3. Conceptualisations of Changing Perceptions of School Readiness* in Article 4 (p. 16) for an overview of how these notions of before and now are presented in the studies.)

Although several influential studies, from the United States in particular, suggest an increase in the number of ECEC teachers who perceive academic skills such as reading and writing to be important indicators for children's school readiness (Bassok et al., 2016; Brown & Lan, 2015; Hustedt et al., 2018), the findings from the research review and the interview study suggest that most ECEC teachers (still) rank children's socio-emotional skills as more important than academic skills. Yet, although most teachers do not deem academic skills as *more* important than non-academic skills, this does not mean that ECEC teachers generally do not perceive academic skills as more important now than compared to before. Interestingly, when Bassok et al. (2016) studied changes in U.S. teachers' perceptions of school readiness over time, they found that when teachers were asked what importance various specific skills have for children's school readiness, they found that the importance teachers gave to children's skills had risen across *all* domains, both academic and non-academic, from 1998 to 2010 (Bassok et al., 2016). These findings suggest that in recent years, more ECEC teachers than before believe that young children's performativity is important for their future educational success compared to the late 1990s (Bassok et al., 2016). However, these findings pertain to the U.S. kindergarten grade (K1) specifically, and a similar study from the Nordic region is lacking. It is also important to note, as I do in Article 4, that it can be hard to compare and unpack the complexity of teachers' perceptions, and to make a distinction between what teachers perceive are appropriate learning approaches and goals for young children, and what they think children need to be able to do in order to assimilate into a formal school environment. This arguably poses some methodological issues and complicates

the studies of teachers' perceptions and comparing study findings, both within and across national borders.

7.2. Prominent Tensions

What tensions are created, and what can these tensions tell us about the ruling relations shaping ECEC teachers' work, particularly ECEC teachers working in low-income, high-minority neighbourhoods? Each of the four articles points to various tensions that emerge as implicit consequences of the disjuncture between the local everyday lives of the ECEC institutions, such as the Norwegian and Danish kindergartens, and ruling constructs of school readiness. Table 7 presents the prominent tensions identified and examined in the articles.

Table 7

Prominent Tensions Identified and Examined in the Articles

Article 1	Tensions between competing discourses, tensions between standardisation and professional autonomy, tensions related to ruling constructs of school readiness, and tensions related to social inequality.
Article 2	Tensions emerging as a consequence of disjunctures between ruling constructs of school readiness and what prerequisites children with migrant and minority-language backgrounds have for meeting these expectations.
Article 3	Tensions in teachers' descriptions of disjunctures between their expectations of parent involvement and the expectations and modes of involvement they experience in practice from many parents of immigrant descent.
Article 4	Tensions between perceptions of school readiness associated with *before* and *now* and ECEC teachers' perceptions of readiness, tensions between different national traditions for curriculum development and teachers' perceptions of readiness, and tensions between teachers, parents, and other actors in the education field.

The prominent tensions presented in the articles can be viewed as expressions of a cross-pressure between competing constructs of school readiness, child development (Articles 1, 2, and 4), and parent involvement (Article 3). The underlying notions of future risks makes these disjunctures particularly anxiety-inducing for ECEC teachers working in kindergartens

where they report that a large share of children and families do not statistically fit within the ruling constructs of school readiness and their expectations of parent involvement. Arguably, teachers' work to include parents in their pedagogic work (Article 3), and to prepare children for school transition becomes a high-stakes endeavour. I elaborate further on risk under the following headline *7.3.1. Underlying Notions of Risk.* The findings show that in order to prepare children for school, ECEC teachers expect certain modes of parental involvement that are largely associated with the majority middle-class culture and Nordic traditions for curriculum development. Tensions emerge also as a consequence of the cross-pressures created by opposing and competing discourses on school readiness rooted in different interpretations of children's development, the social mandate of kindergartens, traditions for curriculum development in ECEC, and pedagogic approaches (Articles 1 and 4).

Sometimes, what can be as interesting as what was found in a study is what was *not found*. Based on the enduring polarised debates in Norwegian and Danish academia and mainstream media (See, for example, Holm, 2017; Pettersvold & Østrem, 2012, 2019; Sæther, 2021), I initially expected the ECEC teachers to express resistance to current policy changes. Yet, the study participants in both national contexts described their policy enactment as what can be understood as mostly pragmatic, and I did not find much explicit resistance in teachers' descriptive accounts of their work. The findings show that teachers' perceptions of and reactions to the increasing policy emphasis on young children's academic skills are complex, and most teachers displayed a degree of ambivalence in the face of the increasing emphasis on school readiness, and the standard notions of what it means to be school ready, particularly for children with migrant, and minority-language backgrounds. Instead of criticising policy reforms explicitly, the ECEC teachers expressed the most concern with their particular child group and the children's families, and many viewed the rapid policy reforms as something happening "out there". The findings suggest that teachers use considerable time and effort interpreting and adjusting to external policy demands and expectations by interpreting and adjusting new programmes, standards, and tools in a way that makes the changes fit into the everyday rhythms of kindergarten, without displaying much visible resistance to the changes from "above". However, the findings also suggests that large disjunctions between textual representations of school readiness and the local everyday life in kindergartens can make teachers' work of adapting new programmes, tools, and reforms challenging. I found that teachers went far in their pursuit to compensate for these disjunctions and to reduce the achievement gaps between native-born monolingual children and children with minority-language backgrounds. As such, my pursuit to find notable acts of

resistance led me to the discovery of a "non-finding" in the sense that teachers displayed far less visible acts of resistance than what could have been assumed. Yet, on another note, one could alternatively interpret most teachers' enduring belief in social pedagogic values as an implicit act of resistance and an implicit refusal to fully accept the emerging representations of school readiness embedded in policy texts, such as the ideological code for the standard school-ready child.

Although I was initially surprised by this "lack of resistance", previous studies of the relationship between teachers and policy reveal that the tensions that emerge due to conflicting discursive struggles over policy reform can be less present locally than those expressed on a collective level (Ball, 2003; Mausethagen, 2013b). Ball et al. (2011) argue that this is because "teachers move unreflexively between contrasting subject positions […] because there is neither time nor space for most teachers to reflect on the contradictions" (Ball et al., 2011, p. 616). Mausethagen (2013), argues that this also can be an expression of a heterogeneity within teacher populations in that some teachers more than others support the rising focus on performativity and accountability and view it as sign of increasing professionalism rather than only being an act of de-professionalisation from above.[26]

7.3. The Social Mandate of Kindergartens and the ECEC Teacher Role

In which ways could language assessment policies and the changing policy expectations of school readiness possibly influence ruling perceptions of the social mandate of kindergartens and the ECEC teacher role? The social mandate of kindergarten and the public expectations and demands of ECEC teachers are arguably intrinsically linked in a symbiotic relationship such that a change in one will more or less create an impact on the other. A timely question following the wide international reports of the changing nature of ECEC from an insular pedagogic space to a school preparation arena (Russell, 2011) is whether the ECEC teacher role is changing as a consequence. The findings of the four articles suggest that the increasing emphasis on the importance of children's school readiness and the changing perceptions of what it means to be "ready" create new responsibilities for Norwegian and Danish teachers in kindergartens (Articles 1–3) and for ECEC teachers

[26] Yet, it is important to note that Ball et al.'s (2011) and Mausethagen's (2013b) scholarly work are based on studies performed in the UK and Norway contexts, respectively, and that the educational policy field in these two contexts are quite different in the sense that there has historically been a stronger policy emphasis on performativity and accountability in Anglo-American contexts, such as the UK, compared to Norway (Skedsmo & Mausethagen, 2016).

internationally (Article 4). In this section, I further discuss how the underlying notions of risk influence teachers' work and how the changes observed in the Nordic region can be understood within an international context.

7.3.1. Underlying Notions of Risk

When the teachers in the present study described their language assessment practices and how they assess and support children's development in kindergarten, I was initially struck by how future-oriented the ECEC teachers were in the way they spoke about their work. I found that, although I mainly interviewed ECEC teachers regarding the work they do to assess and support children's language development *in* kindergarten, the thought of school transition was seemingly at the back of the teachers' minds when assessing children's language development informally through noticing or formally using assessment tools from the children's first day of kindergarten. The findings demonstrate how the character of ECEC teachers' work, and their responsibilities are changing as ECEC is increasingly reconstructed as a space for risk reduction and school preparation. Several of the prominent tensions identified in both the empirical Articles 1–3 and the research review in Article 4 can be understood as expressions of the underlying collective anxiety surrounding future risks embedded in institutional discourse and the fact that ECEC teachers are held increasingly accountable for children's future outcomes.

Norwegian and Danish populations are becoming increasingly heterogenous simultaneously as kindergarten enrolment and public subsidies for kindergarten in these countries have risen during the last years. In the wake of these developments, it is becoming more and more important for policymakers to ensure their national citizens that all children are offered the same high-quality kindergarten programmes across all regions. Thus, leading to an increasing focus on standardisation and early intervention. To an increasing extent, ECEC teachers are held explicitly responsible and accountable by governing authorities for short-term risks, such as the risk of children not being school ready, and implicitly for long-term risks, such as future school dropout and unemployment. Following an investment return logic (Heckman, 2006), it is assumed that if ECEC teachers, parents, and other professionals do not prepare children enough for school, it can lead to undesirable future outcomes for the individual child and society as a whole in the long term. The current study shows that the severity of this responsibility is increasingly weighing on ECEC teachers, shaping new tensions and challenges in performing their work. Notions of risk previously reserved for predicting and controlling the risk of something occurring on an aggregated state level can

now be said to have trickled down to how we as a society seek to support children's development and prevent the risk of educational "failure" on an individual level. In the study's policy context, failure would be considered an "unready" child, deemed unfit for school transition, as unready children are predicted to have trouble assimilating into formal school environments based on their current behaviour and skill levels.

Contrary to past notions of children developing as a result of internal maturation, empiricist interpretations of readiness (Meisels, 1999) and *early intervention* reasoning have opened up the possibility of human agency as a factor in ensuring children's readiness. Indeed, human investment theory opens up new avenues of almost infinite possibilities for optimising children's development. Following this reasoning, children's maturation is not something that should be waited for. On the contrary, children's development must be stimulated, and if it is not, children could be at risk of future academic failure. Yet, this logic implies that teachers might never know if they did enough for a child before it was too late for them to avoid future "failure". In turn, future academic failure for certain groups of the population and growing social inequality are statistically linked to social and economic issues on the state level. Yet, new assessment technologies offer possibilities to hold actors accountable for a child's educational failure or success and predict if the parents and professionals invested enough effort into preparing a child for school. The growing and changing expectations of what it means to be school ready from state and local authorities, parents, and schools seem to be reshaping the social mandate of kindergartens into a school preparation institution and consequently influencing how ECEC teachers work to prepare children for school transition. This growing policy focus on accountability and increasing use of standardised forms of language assessment arguably represents a disruptive change to the social mandate of kindergartens and ECEC teachers' professionalism, challenging the traditional representations of what kindergarten is, as well as what ECEC teachers' work and responsibilities are. Nordic kindergartens have traditionally been pedagogic learning institutions aiming to compensate for the social inequality between children from privileged and underprivileged families (Børhaug & Bøe, 2022; Korsvold, 2005). Yet, new policy technologies, such as digital standardised assessment tools and early intervention programmes, have provided municipal administrators and ECEC teachers with tools that claim to help control and decrease the risk of future educational problems. Arguably, such new technologies combined with a wide array of studies suggesting that school readiness is both measurable and predictable, position ECEC teachers as accountable for children's educational outcomes. These tendencies can be viewed in light of Ball's (2003) and Ball et

al.'s (2011) studies, suggesting that the new types of educational policies introduced into the ECEC field require ECEC teachers to organise their work in new ways to align their pedagogic practices with the expectations of governing authorities, schoolteachers, and parents.

7.3.2. Understanding Regional Changes Within a Larger International Context

The Nordic kindergarten model mostly reflects a perception of school readiness and tradition for curriculum development that is internationally associated with how ECEC was *before* (See, Article 4). Arguably, social pedagogy primarily reflects a *maturationalist* interpretation of child development and approaches for preparing children for school—where children should flourish like flowers in a garden and where the pace and path of children's development is largely decided by the biological internal factors in each child. The pre-primary tradition of curriculum development, on the other hand, mirrors what is largely associated by educational scholars as current ruling constructs of school readiness. Such current constructs rest on an early interventionist interpretations of readiness where children's development, their pace of development, and their level of school readiness are perceived as something that is largely decided by external environmental factors *outside* the child. Quite interestingly, these differences can also be linked to class-based notions of "good parenting" and parent involvement in education, in that poor and working class parents' reliance on children's accomplishment of natural growth can be seen as related to past notions of internal maturation and the importance of giving children "the gift of time". While the intensive parenting ideal is aligned with the increasing policy emphasis on the importance of early intervention, in many ways, this parent ideal is underpinned by the notion of risk and guided by the fear of the potential negative consequences of not intervening early enough in a child's life and not doing enough to ensure their future academic success. The current study's findings suggest that the relationship between parenting ideals, policy demands, and national traditions for curriculum development is increasingly complicated by the increasing heterogeneity in the global populations in that parents from different national and socioeconomic backgrounds bring different expectations of what ECEC is and what preparing children for school entails, and as such, might challenge the local, established ways of understanding ECEC, "desirable" parent involvement, and teachers' and parents' responsibilities and roles. The study also suggests that this relationship is challenged by the increasing policy emphasis on the importance of children's academic school readiness.

Importantly, there are good reasons to be careful when comparing studies on changes in ECEC teachers' work conditions, their perceptions of school readiness, their roles, and ECEC teacher professionalism with studies from other national contexts. In Denmark and Norway, social pedagogy and broad developmental goals have had a particularly strong influence on learning approaches and curriculum compared to other regions such as the United States, France, and the United Kingdom (Bennett, 2005). In Denmark and Norway, ECEC teachers have also historically enjoyed a large space for professional autonomy, and kindergartens in the Nordic countries have traditionally been viewed as pedagogic institutions functioning on their own terms, separate from formal schooling (Bennett, 2005; Børhaug & Bøe, 2022; Pettersvold & Østrem, 2018). As such, these two countries' kindergarten systems both offer study contexts in which the traditional models for curriculum development and the ECEC teacher profession are strongly challenged by current international policy influences. Thus, studies from Denmark and Norway and the Nordic context generally might need to be read somewhat differently than studies on similar topics from contexts with longer traditions for "pre-primary" approaches to curriculum development in ECEC and where ECEC teachers traditionally have had a comparatively weaker status.

In the next and final chapter, I identify in what ways this study has contributed to the scholarly research on ECEC teachers' policy enactment and professionalism, reflect on the study's possible implications as well as its limitations, and suggest avenues for future research.

8. Concluding Remarks

This study has contributed to the scholarly knowledge of what constitutes the ruling constructs of school readiness, how teachers "do" policy enactment, and how the increasing emphasis on school readiness shapes ECEC teachers' work and their relations to other actors. I have directed a specific focus on the intersecting lines between competing constructs and perceptions of school readiness, immigration policy, language assessment policies, and ECEC teachers' everyday work with children and families with minority-language backgrounds. The findings of this thesis have contributed to contemporary scholarly debates on school readiness, the changing social mandate of kindergarten, ECEC teachers' professionalism, and ECEC teachers' work with children of minority-language backgrounds and their families. In this chapter, I first identify the study's empirical, theoretical, and methodological contributions, and then reflect on the study's limitations. Lastly, I finish the chapter and this thesis by discussing the possible implications of the study and briefly draft some avenues for future research.

8.1. Empirical Contributions

The empirical findings suggest that ECEC teachers are ambivalent about the increasing emphasis on school readiness in kindergarten and how it shapes their work and their interactions with children, parents, and other actors in the education field. The study confirms previous empirical studies suggesting that teachers' professional values are often not necessarily completely aligned with the ruling constructs of school readiness (Brooks & Murray, 2018; Kinkead-Clark, 2021; Hustedt et al., 2012; Shemesh & Golden, 2022; Stein et al., 2019). Moreover, the study adds to previous scholarly knowledge of how the reproduction of socially stratified unequal outcomes can be viewed as a consequence of the implicit idealisation of the majority, middle-class culture in the education system (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1977; Lareau, 2011). I expand on the existing scholarly knowledge by further investigating teachers' descriptions of how they "do" policy enactment and navigate tensions emerging as a consequence of disjunctures between the textual representations of school readiness and the local particularities of everyday life in kindergartens and local communities. This thesis contributes much-needed insight into the experiences of ECEC teachers' working in neighbourhoods that are recurrently the focus of public concern and intervention, yet their experiences are seldom asked for or considered. By unpacking how their everyday work is linked to various constructions of school readiness in policy discourse, embedded and

mediated by policy texts, I reveal how teachers' work of preparing children with minority-language backgrounds for school transition is hooked into larger international processes and political movements, transgressing the local particularities of each kindergarten.

Articles 1–4 also elucidate particular prominent tensions that emerge in instances where there is a mismatch between the ruling constructs of school readiness, the expectations of teachers and children of minority-language backgrounds, and their parents' preconditions and resources, or willingness for meeting these expectations. The findings elucidate how and why the ruling constructs of school readiness can be at odds with the social demography of local communities as well as children's—particularly those with minority-language or migrant backgrounds—varying preconditions for meeting the policy expectations of school readiness. However, tensions emerging because of such disjunctures between local lives and ruling constructions of what it means to be ready for school are arguably not a completely new phenomenon, at least not in contexts such as the United States (For example, Graue's (1992) seminal study). Yet, there are reasons to believe that such tensions might become increasingly common following international reports of a global rise in social inequality (Piketty, 2014), the increasing rates of families migrating because of choice or necessity (United Nations, 2020), and the high rates of child poverty amongst families with migrant backgrounds in the Nordic region (Galloway, 2015).

All four articles demonstrate how current changes to ECEC curriculum and pedagogic approaches challenge the traditional social mandates of ECEC and established ECEC teachers' roles, underpinning several tensions and uncertainties for teachers' professional assessment practices, their work, and their everyday interactions with children, parents, and schoolteachers, in particular. What is most interesting is how the current empirical findings from around the world (Article 4) draw a somewhat similar picture of the prominent tensions I identified in the Norwegian and Danish contexts (Articles 1–3). These empirical findings support previous reports of how the globalisation and unification of ideas concerning quality in curriculum development from agencies such as the OECD is constructing a trend towards an international unification of child culture, ECEC, and the institutionalisation of childhood (Fuller, 2007; Gulløv, 2009). In turn, this could be an expression of the "the generalising potential" of using Institutional ethnography to study the textual mediation of ruling and how texts coordinate people's work and their relations to others, in that similar ruling relations shape similar rooms for the agency and discretion of people within similar institutional settings (Smith, 1992). As such, the globalisation of similar, standardised ideas about school readiness, the social mandate of kindergarten, ECEC curriculum, and ECEC teacher roles can

underpin similar experiences of disjunctures between standardised textual representations of children, families, and teachers' work and their local everyday realities. Yet, it is important to note that these disjunctures and their implications may vary to a large extent based on factors such as the socio-demographical, political, historical, and cultural characteristics of the local context.

8.2. Theoretical and Methodological Contributions

I have expanded on and contributed to the scholarly knowledge of ECEC teacher professionalism, school readiness, and social inequality. Combining Institutional ethnography (Smith, 2005) with theoretical perspectives on social inequality (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1977; Lareau, 2011), teacher professionalism (Ball, 2003; Ball et al., 2011), and educational policy theory (Bennet, 2005) contributes a unique prism for investigating the ruling constructs of school readiness that offers new ways of interpreting how ECEC teachers enact language assessment policies and for unpacking the ruling relations shaping their work and interpersonal relationships. This combination of perspectives also provides methodological tools for investigating teachers' doings and how they can be traced to ruling relations far beyond the walls of each individual kindergarten. In turn, the quite unusual combination of theory on teacher professionalism and reproduction of social inequality provides possible interpretations of ECEC teachers descriptive accounts of disjunctions between textual representations of school readiness and their everyday work in their local communities, as well as tensions in their relations to other actors in the education field.

The concept of ideological codes has been useful for identifying ruling constructs of school readiness. Combining the theoretical perspectives on parent involvement and the reproduction of social inequality from social class theory allowed me to unpack the tensions and broken expectations in teachers' descriptions of their interactions with parents that were discovered in the first stages of analysis. While studies of parent involvement usually departs from the standpoint of parents, the standpoint of ECEC teachers offered a unique insights into how parent involvement is perceived by other actors from the "outside". Moreover, combining educational policy theory, theories concerning the different traditions of curriculum development in ECEC, and social class theory offered an interesting prism for unpacking the complex tensions in ECEC teachers' interpersonal relationships. Likewise, educational policy theory was useful for investigating how empirical studies of ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness vary between studies and across national borders and national contexts. Bennetts (2005) concepts offered an analytical prisms for interpretating

how study authors interpret their findings, revealing what I refer to as *the relative nature of schoolification*. By this I mean that international scholarly reports regarding the schoolification of ECEC and changes to ECEC teachers' work and their professional roles must be understood relatively to the national context and the curriculum traditions of the study context.

8.3. Limitations

I have already laid out some of the limitations, particularly concerning the data and methods, in *Chapter 5, Data and Methods*. Here, I will reflect further on two of the overall limitations shaping the possible implications of this study: *standpoint* and *context.*

First, in the current study, the teachers' collective anxiety about several children's school transitions was particularly coloured by the social demography of the local communities. Although, the Danish government's anti-segregation measures have been an ongoing political controversy since the early 2000s, the implementation of the targeted language assessment in "at-risk-areas" and "ghetto areas" in Denmark was introduced in 2018. As such, it was a relatively new policy that was under implementation at the time of the interviews. That means that we still need to observe what the long-term consequences of this policy will have for ECEC teachers' work in kindergarten and for children with minority-language background's school transition. The Covid-19 pandemic has also impacted children's school transition in more ways than one in the last two years, but the current study cannot provide any insights into how this has influenced the implementation of this policy or children's school transition generally.

Second, choosing a standpoint when performing research arguably serves as a limiting action in and of itself. I could potentially have produced different sets of knowledge about the social organisation of language assessment and ruling constructs of school readiness depending on my choice of standpoint within the kindergarten sector. If I had started my inquiry from the perspective of the children's parents, for example, I would have dealt with another set of experiences and a different set of texts, yet many would also be the same. Likewise, the knowledge production would correspondingly have been affected in another direction if I had started my inquiry from the position of policymakers or by interviewing ECEC teachers working in more affluent neighbourhoods. Although it would have been the same institution I was studying, people's experiences within it would likely differ, partly because people positioned in different places within the institution are intertwined in different sets of ruling relations. In this project specifically, different standpoints within and outside the

institution made social integration policies more or less relevant to the everyday work and social relations of the ECEC teachers, as the geographical position of kindergartens activates different policy regulations, particularly in Copenhagen. Arguably, the research participants' role as ECEC teachers also provided other professionally specific moral dilemmas than, for example, a policymaker or a parent would encounter.

8.4. Possible Implications for Policymakers

I have aimed to uphold a mainly descriptive view of the ruling constructs of school readiness, and how they shape the social mandate of kindergarten, ECEC teachers' work, their roles, and their relations to other actors throughout the thesis. This has been particularly important since the public and scholarly debates on standardised assessment, social inequality, accountability, and teachers' professional autonomy are often ideologically laden. In this section, I particularly reflect on three possible implications for policymakers working in the ECEC field concerning the emerging trust in quantitative reasoning in policy development, the growing heterogeneity in global societies, and alternative ways of managing ECEC teachers.

Despite the broad agreement concerning the positive effect of early intervention on children's future outcomes, scholars have warned against the strong appeal of numbers and how quantitative reasoning and statistical results might appear more objective and legitimate than other types of information about children's development and teacher performativity (Kimathi & Nilsen, 2021; Nilsen, 2017; Porter, 1995). Scholars studying the consequences of early intervention policies warn policymakers, scholars, and teachers against focusing too intensely on quantitative reasoning and performativity, as they could lead to an excessive focus on children's deficits (Nilsen, 2017; Pierlejewski, 2020) and an undermining of the importance of play in kindergarten (Pettersvold & Østrem, 2012).

What makes up school readiness is not a solid structure, but a changeable construct, reflective of current ruling political, cultural, historical, and scholarly perceptions about education, childhood, and "normal" development. Hence, what makes up the ideal school-ready child, or what I refer to as *the standard school-ready child*, can never represent a neutral position and should thus be viewed as possible grounds for scholarly and political controversy. The findings suggest that ruling constructs of school readiness, such as classifications indicating degrees of school readiness, mirror the values and characteristics of groups representing dominant class culture. Consequently, when standard constructs of school readiness are embedded in the assessment tools and used to classify the language development

and school readiness of children, the assessment processes have the potential of reproducing and legitimising ruling constructs of child development that misrepresent or exclude characteristics associated with less advantaged groups in society. Hence, the findings of this thesis support previous study findings (See, for example, Fuller, 2007 and Nilsen, 2017b), and elucidates the importance of taking into account the increasing heterogeneity of people and families in modern societies when developing educational policy, and how changing population composition demands renewed understandings of what constitutes school readiness and *who* should be held accountable for *what*.

There is a possible tension between policymakers implementing standardised assessment procedures as a means of control over the work that is done in kindergarten and the increasing responsibility that ECEC teachers have in meeting the increasing expectations of children starting school "ready". An alternative to the increasing use of surveillance, accountability measures, and standardised assessment as a means to ensure that all children receive appropriate support and stimulation could be for policymakers to invest more strongly in advanced training and continuing education for ECEC teachers. An increasing investment in continuing education for ECEC teacher professionals could increase ECEC teachers' capacity to meet the growing complexity of the challenges they encounter in their course of their work. As such, increasing ECEC teachers' competence could reduce the need for external control of their work. In the Nordic countries, such alternative policy initiatives are usually referred to as "trust reforms" [*tillitsreformer*].

8.5. Possible Implications for the ECEC Teacher Profession and ECEC Teacher Education

Traditionally, ECEC teachers have enjoyed a large degree of professional autonomy in their work (Børhaug & Bøe, 2022). However, concurrently, as ECEC teachers have been given greater responsibility for preparing children for school, they are given less autonomy to decide *how* and *with what methods* they would like to perform their work. By reducing ECEC teachers' assessment practices to standardised processes with little room for discretion, policymakers are arguably challenging the status of ECEC teachers' professional knowledge and, in turn, their professional status (Terum & Molander, 2008). Since professional autonomy is an important argument for the production and maintenance of professional status (Terum & Molander, 2008), blurring the lines between the work of ECEC teachers, assistants, and other professional groups can threaten the future prosperity of the ECEC profession and

their nearly monopolistic professional claim to leadership positions in Danish and Norwegian kindergartens.

In the wake of current changes in the ECEC field, the ECEC teacher educators have a large responsibility in preparing prospective ECEC teachers to navigate the demands from governing authorities and other actors. For this purpose, it can be useful for teacher educators to use the tensions I have identified and examined in this study to reflect with ECEC teacher students on potential conflicts and tensions they may meet in practice. Talking about these possible tensions with ECEC teacher students can provide them practice in critically reflecting on their own perceptions, their practice, the potential dilemmas they may meet in the course of their work, the ECEC teacher role, educational policy, social inequality, and their relation to other actors in the field.

The ECEC teacher professions in Norway and Denmark have been facing problems with recruitment to the profession during the last years. Norwegian and Danish media and representatives from the teachers' union refer to the dramatic fall in the number of applicants to ECEC teacher education in 2022 by, respectively, 26 and 18 percentage points from the preceding year as "shocking" and "deeply worrying" (Mainz, 2022; Tresse, 2022). A downward trend in applicants for ECEC teacher education could indicate that the profession is losing some of its attraction for prospective students. Why this is so is hard to say. Yet, there are reasons to believe that national and local contextual factors, such as teachers' room for professional discretion, the social demographic context, and organisational concerns, such as teachers' status and salaries, could impact the recruitment to the ECEC teacher profession. Hence, peoples' declining interest in becoming ECEC teachers in Denmark and Norway could possibly be a consequence of a combination of the changes to ECEC teachers' work and the ECEC teacher role that have been elucidated throughout this thesis.

8.6. Avenues for Future Research

At the end of this thesis, I would like to foreground three important avenues for future research. *First,* as the global population is rapidly changing, we need to expand our knowledge of how ECEC teachers experience, perceive, and respond to the increasing policy emphasis on school readiness, and how ECEC as part of the education system can play a role in the implicit reproduction of social privileges for those who master dominant culture and fit within the ruling constructs of school readiness. *Second,* it is vital to further empirically study how the changing policy climate is impacting not only performative aspects of ECEC teachers' work but also the organisational aspects of ECEC teacher professionalism, such as

their work conditions and professional status. *Third*, there is a significant need for more context-sensitive, empirical studies of how school readiness is perceived in different national contexts and on different levels in order to develop successful educational policies in the future.

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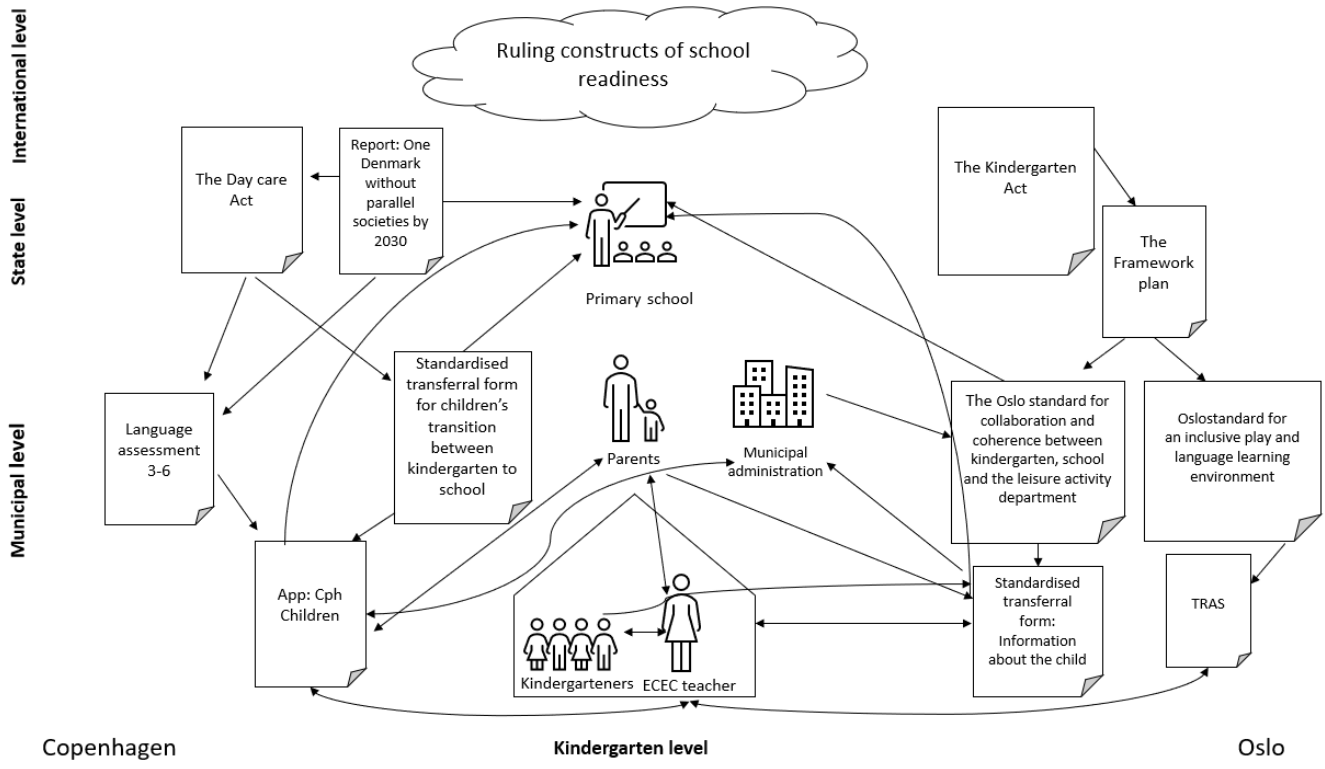
Appendices

The following nine appendices include a map of the textual landscape, an overview of which articles contribute to answering what overall questions, an overview of the selection criteria for the literature review, a structured form over previous empirical research investigating ECEC teachers' enactment of language assessment policies, an overview of the characteristics of study informants and kindergartens, an overview of the different types of comparison performed across the four articles, the approval letter from the Data Protection Official for Research (NSD), the standard information letter, and the interview guide.

Appendix A: Map of the Textual Landscape from the ECEC Teachers' Standpoint



Appendix B: Overview of Which Articles Contribute to Answering What Overall Research Questions

Table 2

Overview of Which Articles Contribute to Answering What Overall Research Questions

	Article 1	Article 2	Article 3	Article 4
How does the increasing emphasis on school readiness shape ECEC teachers' experiences of their work and their relations to other actors?	x	x	x	x
1. What characterises ruling constructs of school readiness in previous research and amongst groups of ECEC teachers?		x		x
2. What tensions are created, and what can these tensions tell us about the ruling relations shaping ECEC teachers' work, particularly ECEC teachers working in low-income, high-minority neighbourhoods?	x	x	x	x
3. In which ways could language assessment policies and the changing policy expectations of school readiness possibly influence ruling perceptions of the social mandate of kindergartens and the ECEC teacher role?	x	x	x	x

Appendix C: Overview of Selection Criteria for Literature Review

Table 3.

Overview of Selection Criteria for Literature Review

	I utilized the following criteria in the selection process:
(1)	I selected articles explicitly fixated on language assessment by teachers working within ECEC, and how teachers utilize standardised language assessment as a means to document, report and/or determine children's language development as part of a policy initiative. The journal articles needed to have a specific policy focus. Articles that address teachers' language assessment practices but did not explicitly study the relationship between language assessment policy and teachers' practices were not included. This is because I sought to investigate the relationship between policy and teachers' practice.
(2)	I only included peer-reviewed empirical journal articles studying the perspective of ECEC teachers. I did not include implementation studies that were testing the efficiency of certain assessment tools, to maintain consistency with the focus on teachers' policy enactment and their professional practices.
(3)	I only included studies addressing teachers' language assessment practises, I excluded studies primarily considering the assessment of children's numeracy, motor skills or socio-emotional development. I also excluded studies of teachers working in primary education to maintain focus on the pre-primary context. I also excluded several studies where teachers' perceptions of a children's language developmental level were compared with assessment results—measuring teachers' "assessment literacy".

Appendix D: Overview of Previous Studies

Author (year of publication)	Purpose of the study	Methodology (N=)	Study context	Main findings
Bromley et al. (2019)	To study the enactment of literacy curriculum policy by early childhood teachers	Qualitative case study using interviews and document analysis. N= Four early childhood teachers, two school leaders and two teacher leaders	Australia	In both case study schools, the data-driven literacy curriculum gave rise to explicit teaching of literacy and a de-emphasis of play-based pedagogy to which the early childhood teachers "actually" subscribed to. This change was described by teachers as a "push down" of curriculum into ECEC.
Essahli Vik (2018)	To investigate if and how language assessment practices can contribute to social inclusion or exclusion of children with multilingual backgrounds	Qualitative observations of language assessment situations involving five children and five teachers. The five teachers were also interviewed.	Norway	The findings show that an instrumental and standardized use of mapping tools leads to passivity of the children and lack of dialogue. It also shows that the way multilingual children are represented can reflect what Edward Said refer to as *Orientalism*—a stereotypical representation of «the others».
Essahli Vik (2019)	To investigate how the language assessment of children with multilingual backgrounds affects teachers and their pedagogic practices.	The same as above.	Norway	(The study is based on an analysis of the same empirical data as the above-mentioned article). The analysis shows that the teachers' attitudes are rooted in discourses about the Norwegian kindergarten model. Simultaneously the teachers report that they are positive to standardised language assessment policies. The social interplay between teachers and children were characterised by Little dialogue and many teachers seem to disregard their professional discretion when using standardised assessment materials.
Frans et al. (2020)	To study how teachers view "norm-referenced tests", and analytically explore their differing experiences of standardised testing.	Mixed methods. Qualitative semi-structured interviews and quantitative survey. 97 Educator answered the questionnaire. Based on their responses, a selection of six preschool/kindergarten teachers participated in a series of semi structured interviews.	The Netherlands	The analyses of the questionnaires and the interviews suggested that the teachers' conceptions of the tests were influenced by the classroom population, the management team, and the ascribed purpose of the test. The teachers did not view the tests solely as instruments for accountability or improvement. While some teachers viewed the test results as pleasant confirmation, others perceived the results as negative opposition to their own observations.
Holm (2015)	The article investigates how	Qualitative. Ethnographic field	Denmark	The author identifies that views of language,

	local actors in a kindergarten constitute children's level of language proficiency, and which norms, values relations and processes that are involved in the use of certain assessment tools.	study of teachers' language assessment practises in two kindergartens (0-6).		measurement and knowledge embedded in the language test results shapes institutional practices where the teachers focus mainly on children's receptive knowledge of structural components of language. The author suggests that these views and practises veil creative and interactionist aspects of children's language production.
Kirkby et al. (2018)	To study the impact of Australian policy shifts on early childhood teachers' understandings of intentional teaching	Qualitative semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews. N= Five early childhood practitioners and two teacher-managers	Australia	The findings suggests that limited professional knowledge can lead teachers to perform a reductionist or minimal reading of policy documents, limiting the guidelines to a set of discrete skills for children to master.
Korkeamäki & Dreher (2012)	To examine teachers' enactment of Finnish preschool and early childhood core curricula and their literacy-related practices	Qualitative. Field observations of teacher-child interactions. N=10 Teachers working in one kindergarten and the children they interact with.	Finland	The findings indicate that the curricula were only partly implemented by the teachers. Although teachers adapted several aspects of the curricula, authors describe that this was often done on an ad hoc basis, due to the unstructured format of the curriculum. According to the authors this practise allowed teachers to implement the curricula in a friendly and relaxed atmosphere, while concentrating foremost on securing children's wellbeing.
Schachter & Piasta (2022)	To develop a theoretical framework for understanding preschool teachers' data practices in relation to supporting children's language and literacy outcomes	Qualitative. Teachers participated in a series of three observations, interviews, and stimulated recall interviews. N= 20 teachers.	USA	The authors discern that the teachers in the study could be characterized into three data use profiles: data gatherers, in-the-moment data users, and integrated data users.
Slingerland (2017)	To analyse how results from standardised language assessments are used by ECEC staff, and what implications the results have for	Qualitative. Ethnographic field study and interviews	Denmark	The author finds that teachers' informal language assessment practises seem to be adjusted to the results from the previously performed standardised language assessment. The findings also suggests that the structural focus of the standardised language assessments can shift teachers' focus away from socio-cultural aspects of children's language production and development.

Teachers' pedagogic practises.

Appendix E: Characteristics of Informants and Kindergartens

Table 4

Characteristics of Informants and Kindergartens

Informants		Kindergarten	Type of interview	Kindergarten ownership	Kindergarten size by enrolled children	Years of experience	Country	Urban or suburban city areas
1	Mona	Sun	Group	Municipal	50–99	25+	Denmark	Urban
2	Edith	Sun	Group	Municipal	50–99	16–20	Denmark	Urban
3	Jakob	Saturn	Individual	Independent	50–99	6–10	Denmark	Suburban
4	Aisha	Jupiter	Individual	Municipal	19–50	11–15	Denmark	Suburban
5	Merete	Mars	Individual	Independent	50–99	6–10	Denmark	Suburban
6	Casper	Venus	Group	Independent	50–99	25+	Denmark	Suburban
7	Camilla	Venus	Group	Independent	50–99	*	Denmark	Suburban
8	Elisabeth	Earth	Individual	Municipal	19–50	0–5	Denmark	Urban
9	Patrick	Europa	Group	Municipal	50–99	6–10	Denmark	Suburban
10	Karen	Europa	Group	Municipal	50–99	21–25	Denmark	Suburban
11	Anne	Europa	Group	Municipal	50–99	0–5	Denmark	Suburban
12	Caroline	Moon	Individual	Municipal	50–99	16–20	Norway	Urban
13	Roger	Neptune	Group	Municipal	50–99	*	Norway	Suburban
14	Ruth	Neptune	Group	Municipal	50–99	21–25	Norway	Suburban
15	Christina	Neptune	Group	Municipal	50–99	11–15	Norway	Suburban
16	Tone	Uranus	Individual	Municipal	50–99	16–20	Norway	Suburban
17	Michael	Uranus	Individual	Municipal	50–99	25+	Norway	Suburban
18	Eric	Uranus	Individual	Municipal	50–99	0–5	Norway	Suburban
19	Harald	Pluto	Individual	Municipal	50–99	25+	Norway	Suburban
20	Marie[27] Emilie	Mercury	Individual	Municipal	50–99	6–10	Norway	Suburban
21	Peter	Ceres	Individual	Municipal	50–99	6–10	Norway	Urban
22	Turid	Eris	Individual	Municipal	50–99	25+	Norway	Suburban

*This information is missing

[27] In Article 1, I referred to this informant under the pseudonyms Marie and Emilie, because I ended up changing her name and forgot to change the pseudonym accurately in both places. She had worked in kindergarten for 6–10 years, not 16–20 years as stated in the table presented in Article 1.

Appendix F: Types of Comparison Performed Across the Articles

Table 5

Types of Comparison Performed Across the Articles

	Research questions	What is compared
Article 1	How do Norwegian and Danish ECEC teachers approach language assessment policies in practice?	Education policy and teachers' practice. Norwegian and Danish teachers' experiences of language assessment
Article 2	What constitutes a "school-ready child"? How do these perceptions shape Danish ECEC teachers' assessments of children with minority-language backgrounds and their school readiness in kindergarten?	Education and integration policy and teachers' practice
Article 3	What type of parental involvement do ECEC teachers expect from immigrant parents? How do teachers react if immigrant parents do not act in accordance with their expectations?	Teachers' expectations of parents' involvement and their experiences of parents' expectations of kindergarten and of them as teachers.
Article 4	What characterises the existing empirical research on ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness? In what ways and to what extent does the increased emphasis on children's "school readiness" shape ECEC teachers' perceptions of what it means to prepare children for school, and does this impact their relations with other actors? If and how do ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness vary across national contexts?	Study characteristics and findings of existing studies produced across multiple national contexts

Appendix G: Research Approval NSD

NSD NORSK SENTER FOR FORSKNINGSDATA

NSD sin vurdering

Prosjekttittel

Norsk og dansk språktestingspolicy i praksis – Barnehagelæreres profesjonelle skjønnsutøvelse i det hverdagslige arbeidet med minoritetsspråklige barn

Referansenummer

804753

Registrert

24.03.2019 av Josefine Jahreie - josefin@oslomet.no

Behandlingsansvarlig institusjon

OsloMet – storbyuniversitetet / Senter/forskningsprogrammer / Senter for profesjonsstudier

Prosjektansvarlig (vitenskapelig ansatt/veileder eller stipendiat)

Josefine Bergene Jahreie, josefin@oslomet.no, tlf: 92608932

Type prosjekt

Forskerprosjekt

Prosjektperiode

03.04.2018 - 01.02.2023

Status

06.04.2020 - Vurdert

Vurdering (2)

06.04.2020 - Vurdert

NSD har vurdert endringen registrert 03.04.2020.

Ny dato for prosjektslutt er satt til 01.02.2023.

Det er vår vurdering at behandlingen av personopplysninger i prosjektet vil være i samsvar med personvernlovgivningen så fremt den gjennomføres i tråd med det som er dokumentert i meldeskjemaet med vedlegg den 06.04.2020. Behandlingen kan fortsette.

OPPFØLGING AV PROSJEKTET
NSD vil følge opp underveis (hvert annet år) og ved planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet/pågår i tråd med den behandlingen som er dokumentert.

Lykke til med prosjektet!

Kontaktperson hos NSD: Karin Lillevold
Tlf. Personverntjenester: 55 58 21 17 (tast 1)

02.05.2019 - Vurdert

Det er vår vurdering at behandlingen av personopplysninger i prosjektet vil være i samsvar med personvernlovgivningen så fremt den gjennomføres i tråd med det som er dokumentert i meldeskjemaet med vedlegg den 02.05.2019, samt i meldingsdialogen mellom innmelder og NSD. Behandlingen kan starte.

MELD VESENTLIGE ENDRINGER
Dersom det skjer vesentlige endringer i behandlingen av personopplysninger, kan det være nødvendig å melde dette til NSD ved å oppdatere meldeskjemaet. Før du melder inn en endring, oppfordrer vi deg til å lese om hvilke type endringer det er nødvendig å melde:

https://nsd.no/personvernombud/meld_prosjekt/meld_endringer.html

Du må vente på svar fra NSD før endringen gjennomføres.

TYPE OPPLYSNINGER OG VARIGHET
Prosjektet vil behandle alminnelige kategorier av personopplysninger frem til 03.04.2020.

LOVLIG GRUNNLAG
Prosjektet vil innhente samtykke fra de registrerte til behandlingen av personopplysninger. Vår vurdering er at prosjektet legger opp til et samtykke i samsvar med kravene i art. 4 og 7, ved at det er en frivillig, spesifikk, informert og utvetydig bekreftelse som kan dokumenteres, og som den registrerte kan trekke tilbake. Lovlig grunnlag for behandlingen vil dermed være den registrertes samtykke, jf. personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 bokstav a.

PERSONVERNPRINSIPPER
NSD vurderer at den planlagte behandlingen av personopplysninger vil følge prinsippene i personvernforordningen om:

- lovlighet, rettferdighet og åpenhet (art. 5.1 a), ved at de registrerte får tilfredsstillende informasjon om og samtykker til behandlingen
- formålsbegrensning (art. 5.1 b), ved at personopplysninger samles inn for spesifikke, uttrykkelig angitte og berettigede formål, og ikke behandles til nye, uforenlige formål
- dataminimering (art. 5.1 c), ved at det kun behandles opplysninger som er adekvate, relevante og nødvendige for formålet med prosjektet
- lagringsbegrensning (art. 5.1 e), ved at personopplysningene ikke lagres lengre enn nødvendig for å oppfylle formålet

DE REGISTRERTES RETTIGHETER
Så lenge de registrerte kan identifiseres i datamaterialet vil de ha følgende rettigheter: åpenhet (art. 12), informasjon (art. 13), innsyn (art. 15), retting (art. 16), sletting (art. 17), begrensning (art. 18), underretning (art. 19), dataportabilitet (art. 20).

NSD vurderer at informasjonen om behandlingen som de registrerte vil motta oppfyller lovens krav til form og innhold, jf. art. 12.1 og art. 13.

Vi minner om at hvis en registrert tar kontakt om sine rettigheter, har behandlingsansvarlig institusjon plikt til å svare innen en måned.

FØLG DIN INSTITUSJONS RETNINGSLINJER
NSD legger til grunn at behandlingen oppfyller kravene i personvernforordningen om riktighet (art. 5.1 d), integritet og konfidensialitet (art. 5.1. f) og sikkerhet (art. 32).

For å forsikre dere om at kravene oppfylles, må dere følge interne retningslinjer og/eller rådføre dere med

behandlingsansvarlig institusjon.

OPPFØLGING AV PROSJEKTET
NSD vil følge opp ved planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet.

Lykke til med prosjektet!

Kontaktperson hos NSD: Karin Lillevold
Tlf. Personverntjenester: 55 58 21 17 (tast 1)

Appendix H: Standard Information Letter

Vil du delta i forskningsprosjektet

”Norsk og dansk språktestingspolicy i praksis”?

Dette er et spørsmål til deg om å delta i et forskningsprosjekt hvor formålet er å utforske norske og danske barnehagelæreres/pædagogers erfaringer med å arbeide med språktesting av minoritetsspråklige barn, med spesielt fokus på hvilke tekster og institusjoner som inngår i prosessen.
I dette skrivet gir jeg informasjon om målene for prosjektet og hva deltakelse vil innebære for deg.

Formål

Studiet er en del av mitt doktorgradsstudie der jeg søker å belyse institusjonen for språktesting fra barnehagelærnes/pædagagenes perspektiv, og beskrive hvordan språktesting ser ut i praksis. Jeg har som mål å kunne beskrive hvordan den faktiske arbeidshverdagen ser ut fra barnehagelærernes ståsted og beskrive kompleksiteten av språktestingen ved å tegne kart over forbindelsene mellom ulike aktører, tekster og institusjoner som er knyttet til språktestingsarbeidet i barnehagen. Jeg deretter å gjøre en sammenlikning av hvordan institusjonen for språktesting ser ut i Oslo og København kommune.

Følgende problemstillinger skal drøftes underveis:
1) Hvilke styringstekster er tilknyttet norske og danske barnehagelæreres/pædagogers språkarbeid med minoritetsspråklige barn? Hvordan ser de tekstuelle hierarkiene i feltet for språktesting i barnehagen ut i de ulike landene? Hvordan ser de ulike landenes tekstuelle hierarkiene ut sammenliknet med hverandre?

2) Hvordan arbeider barnehagelærere/pædagoger med minoritetsspråklige barn i praksis? Hvilken rolle spiller tekster, institusjoner og andre aktører i det daglige språkarbeidet med minoritetsspråklige barn? Hvordan ser det hverdagslige språkarbeidet i norske og danske barnehager ut sammenliknet med hverandre?

3) Mestringsstrategier: Opplever barnehagelærerne/pædagogene krysspress fra ulike aktører i feltet for språktesting i barnehagen? Eventuelt, hvilke mestringsstrategier benytter barnehagelærerne for å manøvrere krysspress i forbindelse med språktesting i arbeidshverdagen?

Hvem er ansvarlig for forskningsprosjektet?

Senter for profesjonsstudier ved OsloMet – Storbyuniversitetet er ansvarlig for prosjektet.

Hvorfor får du spørsmål om å delta?

Jeg har valgt å kontakte deg da du er utdannet barnehagelærer og arbeider i en kommunal barnehage i Oslo eller København, kommuner der det det eksisterer ulike politiske språktesting/språkkartelggingskrav.

Hva innebærer det for deg å delta?

Hvis du velger å delta i prosjektet, innebærer det at du blir intervjuet av meg, enten ansikt-til-ansikt, på telefon eller Skype på et tidspunkt som passer deg – jeg er svært fleksibel her. Det vil ta deg ca. 45 minutter. Intervjuguiden inneholder først og fremst spørsmål om hvordan du arbeider med språk/språktesting i hverdagen – da spesielt med tanke på språktesting av barn med minoritetsspråklig bakgrunn, tidligere erfaringer, samt hvilke tekster, aktører og institusjoner som er involvert i arbeidet med språktesting.

Det er frivillig å delta
Det er frivillig å delta i prosjektet. Hvis du velger å delta, kan du når som helst trekke samtykke tilbake uten å oppgi noen grunn. Alle opplysninger om deg vil da bli anonymisert. Det vil ikke ha noen negative konsekvenser for deg hvis du ikke vil delta eller senere velger å trekke deg.

Ditt personvern – hvordan vi oppbevarer og bruker dine opplysninger
Jeg vil bare bruke opplysningene om deg til formålene jeg har fortalt om i dette skrivet. Jeg behandler opplysningene konfidensielt og i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

- *Anonymisert datamateriale vil kun bli delt med prosjektgruppe og veiledere.*

- *Navnet og kontaktopplysningene dine vil jeg erstatte med en kode som lagres på egen navneliste adskilt fra øvrige data, datamaterialet lagres på , innelåst/kryptert forskningsserver ved OsloMet.*

Du som deltaker vil ikke kunne gjenkjennes i framtidige publikasjon.

Hva skjer med opplysningene dine når vi avslutter forskningsprosjektet?
Prosjektet skal etter planen avsluttes 03.04.2022. *Datamaterialet skal anonymiseres helt*.

Dine rettigheter
Så lenge du kan identifiseres i datamaterialet, har du rett til:

- innsyn i hvilke personopplysninger som er registrert om deg,
- å få rettet personopplysninger om deg,
- få slettet personopplysninger om deg,
- få utlevert en kopi av dine personopplysninger (dataportabilitet), og
- å sende klage til personvernombudet eller Datatilsynet om behandlingen av dine personopplysninger.

Hva gir oss rett til å behandle personopplysninger om deg?
Vi behandler opplysninger om deg basert på ditt samtykke.

På oppdrag fra *Senter for profesjonsstudier* har NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS vurdert at behandlingen av personopplysninger i dette prosjektet er i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

Hvor kan jeg finne ut mer?
Hvis du har spørsmål til studien, eller ønsker å benytte deg av dine rettigheter, ta kontakt med:

- *Senter for profesjonsstudier* ved meg, *Josefine Jahreie (tlf: +47 926 08 932, e-post: josefin@oslomet.no).*

- Vårt personvernombud: *Andrew John Feltham (tlf: 905 20 426, e-post: andrew-john.feltham@oslomet.no)*
- NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS, på epost (personverntjenester@nsd.no) eller telefon: +47 55 58 21 17.

Med vennlig hilsen

Josefine Jahreie

Prosjektansvarlig
(Forsker)

Samtykkeerklæring

Jeg har mottatt og forstått informasjon om prosjektet *Norsk og dansk språktestingspolicy i praksis – Barnehagelæreres profesjonelle skjønnsutøvelse i det hverdagslige arbeidet med minoritetsspråklige barn*, og har fått anledning til å stille spørsmål. Jeg samtykker til:

☐ å delta i intervju

Jeg samtykker til at mine opplysninger behandles frem til prosjektet er avsluttet, ca. 03.04.2022

(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)

Appendix I: Interview Guide

Interview Guide[i]

Thank you for participating in this study. First, I would like to inform you about this project, in addition to the information you already received in the information letter. In this project I investigate how Norwegian and Danish Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) teachers approach language assessment and pedagogical language work in practice. I will ask you about your thoughts and experiences related to these activities, to understand how language assessment is perceive from your professional standpoint as an ECEC teacher. The aim of this interview is to, with your help, map out which institutions, texts and people that you engage with in your everyday work as an ECEC teacher, to illustrate how the ruling relations of kindergarten is perceived from your point of view.

Informed Consent

I am going to audio record this conversation, and subsequently transcribe the recordings. Both audio recordings and the transcribed interviews will be deleted when the project is completed. I have a duty of confidentiality, and all identifiable information, such as the names of people, places and kindergartens, will be anonymized in the study. You can withdraw your participation from this study at any time, and if you do, I will immediately delete all data material linked to you. Does this sound ok?

Do you have any questions before we start?

Background Information

How old are you?

How long have you worked in kindergarten?

How long have you been an ECEC teacher?

Everyday Work

How many divisions are there in the kindergarten where you work?

What kind of division do you work in?

How does the distribution between majority- and minority language children in your kindergarten look like in your division?

What are your responsibilities in your division?

How does a normal workday look like for you?

What do you think are the most important tasks of an ECEC teacher?

Was the job as an ECEC teacher like you expected?

Language Assessment

How do you follow up on the language development of the children in the kindergarten where you work?

(more specifically) how do you work with supporting the language development of a child with minority language background, from their first step inside the kindergarten until they start school?

(Follow up: If they mention language assessment)

How do you perform a language assessment? (Follow up: Can you describe the process in detail?) (Follow up: Which role does texts, institutions and other actors have for your daily work with minority language children's language assessment?)

Who are responsible for language assessment in your kindergarten? (Follow up: what does it imply to "assess children's language development" and/or "observe children's language development")

How do you delegate the responsibility of assessing and supporting a child's language development in this kindergarten?

Do you use assessment materials? (Follow up: If yes which?)

What does it take for you to become worried for a child's language development?

Do you use any specialized assessment materials for assessing the language development of minority language children?

How do you use the results from the assessments?

What do you think is the purpose behind language assessment in kindergarten?

Is there anything you would do differently? (Follow up: Alternatively: Can you think of any positive or negative aspects of language assessment policies and practise in Oslo/Copenhagen)

Potential Conflicts

Have you ever experienced any conflicts between you own professional judgement of a child's language development and language assessment/screening processes? (If yes: Follow up: Do you remember a specific episode? What did you do in this situation/such situations?)

To which degree do you experience that you have the possibility of influencing how you work on children's language development in your kindergarten?

Who do you discuss professional issues with (if there are any)?

Who do you contact if you experience any conflict in your work situation?

Finishing Conversation:

Are there anything that you would like to add to our conversation?

Do you know any other ECEC teachers that you think could be interested in participating in this project?

Thank you for setting off time to participate in this study, I really appreciate the information you have shared with me.

[i] This is a translated version of the original interview guide in Norwegian.

Article 1

Jahreie, J. (2021). The ambivalence of assessment: Language assessment of minority-language children in early childhood education and care. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, *29*(5), 715–732. https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2021.1968459

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The ambivalence of assessment — Language assessment of minority-language children in early childhood education and care

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ABSTRACT

Language development in early childhood education and care (ECEC) has received increased policy attention in the past 20 years. Yet, few empirical studies have explored language assessment from the standpoint of ECEC teachers. Transnational organizations, such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), have increased their influence over national ECEC curriculums, stressing early intervention/readiness-for-school approaches to assist vulnerable groups in society. In contrast, the Nordic social pedagogy field perceives early intervention policies a threat to child-centered, playful approaches to learning. Based on interviews with 11 Danish and 11 Norwegian ECEC teachers in Copenhagen and Oslo municipalities, three main forms of ambivalence are identified: (1) ambivalence toward the 'ready-for-school' discourse, (2) ambivalence toward professional autonomy and discretion, and (3) ambivalence toward integration policy and the ideological code of 'the standard child.' The study recommends a more inclusive understanding of the implications of 'adequate language proficiency' and 'school readiness.'

KEYWORDS

Early childhood education and care; ECEC; kindergarten; language assessment; minority-language children; school readiness; social pedagogy

Introduction

This article addresses how Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) teachers[1] approach the language assessment of minority-language children and how their everyday experiences are part of institutional relations and processes that transcend their local contexts. Immigrant and refugee families are increasing internationally, leading to a growing number of bilingual and/or minority-language children attending kindergartens (Castro and Prishker 2018). Concurrently, as Scandinavian populations have become more diverse societies, the kindergarten[2] has become a highly important integration arena for the youngest minority children (Tobin 2020; Bove and Sharmahd 2020). However, the recent Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) results raise concern, as Norway and Denmark (and the other Nordic countries) are among

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries with 'the largest differences in favor of native-born students, after accounting for students and schools' socio-economic profile' (OECD 2019, 185). Early intervention and accountability have thus become central concepts in the policy field of ECEC. Although numerous studies have found that participation in ECEC is especially enriching for children from disadvantaged and/or minority families (Bakken, Brown, and Downing 2017; Vandenbroeck and Lazzari 2013), few have examined the integration of children from migrant backgrounds into ECEC (Bove and Sharmahd 2020) or ECEC teachers' approaches to the language assessment of such children in practice.

During the past two decades, political interest in the transition from ECEC to primary school education has increased, and more responsibility for school preparation has been delegated to ECEC institutions, such as kindergartens (Blossing, Imsen, and Moos 2014; Imsen, Blossing, and Moos 2017; Christensen 2019). Thus, ECEC teachers have been given increased responsibility to detect and initiate special support for children with 'inadequate' development in the majority language.[3] However, paradoxically, ECEC teachers play a minor role in the construction of professional standards (Havnes 2018). It is important to study these changes empirically, as the debates surrounding integration and standardized assessment policies are often politicized (Mausethagen, Prøitz, and Skedsmo 2018, 12).

The Norwegian and Danish ECEC sectors provide an interesting empirical comparison, as they have similar governance structures, as well as common pedagogical and historical origins in the 'Nordic Model' (Hännikäinen 2016, 1001; Mahon 2010), often contrasted with the more school-oriented Anglo-American preschool tradition (Hännikäinen 2016; Einarsdottir et al. 2015). The two countries resisted national standardized testing in education until the new millennium, disrupted by the 'PISA shock'[4] of 2001 (Tveit 2014, 2018). Therefore, language assessment in ECEC, primary, and secondary education is a relatively new phenomenon in Norway and Denmark (in contrast to countries such as Sweden).

However, in recent years, the two countries have taken different approaches to immigration and integration. While Denmark has Scandinavia's most restrictive immigration policies, Norway has adopted an arguably more moderate approach (Hagelund 2020). This has strengthened the focus on standardized assessments of children's language proficiency in Danish ECEC and on stricter language admission requirements for school entry in areas with high proportions of people from immigrant backgrounds (Danish Government 2018, 26). There are interesting differences between the two rather similar countries in terms of the standardized assessment in ECEC and the intersection between policies on integration and education. For instance, in 2018, Denmark implemented a high-stakes language screening test in immigrant dense and/or low socio-economic neighborhoods. Children living in what the government deems 'ghetto areas' must pass a Danish language screening test to enter the first grade, or they are retained for a maximum of one year in a 'kindergarten class' on the school's premises (Danish Government 2018, 26). Although Norway has no equivalent policy, both countries promote the use of standardized language assessment materials (TRAS (2011) and 'Language assessment 3-6' (2017)), which are designed primarily for monolingual Danish and Norwegian children, without considering appropriate measures for children with bilingual or multilingual backgrounds.[5] This approach is contrary to government

reports (Ministry of Education 2011) and international research on bilingualism and multilingualism, which are critical toward assessments that compare bilingual speakers against monolingual ideals (referred to as 'a monolingual view of bilingualism'), as bilingual children's language acquisition tends to develop differently from monolinguals (Drury 2013; Grosjean 1992; Henry and Thorsen 2018).

In this article, I ask: *How do Norwegian and Danish ECEC teachers approach language assessment policies in practice?* To answer this question, I present findings from interviews with 11 Danish and 11 Norwegian ECEC teachers concerning language testing policies in their everyday work with minority-language children. I find that ECEC teachers are ambivalent toward standardized testing in ECEC and argue that this relates not only to their own discretion in this area but also to an antagonistic discourse on the social mandate of kindergartens under changing political circumstances.

Literature review

Language assessment in ECEC is situated amid a scientific controversy between the supporters and opponents of standardized assessment practices (Vik 2017; Klem and Hagtvet 2018). The OECD has named these conflicting positions the 'ready-for-school approach' and the 'social pedagogy approach' (OECD 2006, 13;125). Variations of these terms have widely been taken up in research to describe the divide between the two approaches to curriculum development (Mahon 2010, 59; Einarsdottir et al. 2015; Wagner and Einarsdottir 2008). The ready-for-school approach has its roots in France and in English-speaking countries and stresses the importance of early intervention, academic skills, and measurable outputs, while the social pedagogy [*Sozialpädagogik*] tradition originated in the German *Bildung* pedagogy and is often associated with the Nordic region (Einarsdottir et al. 2015; Blossing, Imsen, and Moos 2014; Imsen, Blossing, and Moos 2017).

Research derived from the ready-for-school approach tends to stress early intervention to reduce socioeconomic disparities in educational outcomes and is dominated by contributions from economics and developmental psychology (Rege et al. 2018; Havnes and Mogstad 2011; Duncan et al. 2007). This tradition has a strong research focus on identifying which skills predict academic achievement and designing programs to enhance children's development in these specific skill sets (Rege et al. 2018, 230; Havnes and Mogstad 2011; Mistry et al. 2010; Magnuson, Lahaie, and Waldfogel 2006; Rege et al. 2018, 230). Standardized assessment and documentation practices are valued as solutions to social inequality by ensuring equal quality across ECEC institutions and preventing local variations (Rege et al. 2018). The ready-for-school focus on children in ECEC is often positioned as conflicting with the Nordic ideals of holistic learning, child-centered perspectives, and child-initiated play (Børhaug et al. 2018; Hennum, Pettersvold, and Østrem 2015; Pettersvold and Østrem 2012; Blossing, Imsen, and Moos 2014; Imsen, Blossing, and Moos 2017).

In contrast, the social pedagogy research community has mainly focused on the harms of categorization (Pettersvold and Østrem 2012; Holm 2017; Houmøller 2018; Nilsen 2017a; Sjöberg 2014; Ehn and Petersen 2006; Klitmøller and Sommer 2015). A common criticism of standardized language assessment tools is that they generally reflect white middle-class values, which are presented as neutral norms of reference

and place minority children at an unfair disadvantage (Nilsen 2017a, 60; Ehn and Petersen 2006; Palludan 2005; Houmøller 2018; Gulløv 2009; Slingerland 2017). Standardized assessment policies are also criticized for having an instrumental attention to children and childhood, implicitly focusing on children's potential as *human becomings* rather than as *human beings* (Pettersvold and Østrem 2012; Qvortrup 1994).

Previous empirical research shows that political decisions at the transnational and national levels are increasingly intervening in the everyday work of ECEC teachers (Moss 2016; Nygård 2017; Christensen 2019; Kim 2018; Nilsen 2017b; Einarsdottir et al. 2015; Wagner and Einarsdottir 2008). Standardized materials, forms, and practices affect not only how teachers organize their everyday work with children but also how they view and relate to them in practice through the categorization in the materials (Nilsen 2017b; Houmøller 2018; Schmidt 2014; Vik 2018). However, few studies have empirically explored the standpoints of ECEC teachers, their approaches to language assessment, or how they navigate between the polarized ready-for-school and social pedagogy discourses.

Analytical perspectives

The analytical approach in this article is inspired by institutional ethnography (IE), a method of inquiry associated with the Canadian sociologist Dorothy Smith (2005). In IE, the researcher is especially interested in how people's everyday doings are textually coordinated by others and how texts act as mediators of ruling. Hence, the 'ruling relations' between the actors in an institution are of primary interest. Through unpacking people's interactions with texts in 'text-reader conversations,' the researcher can explore how ruling relations coordinate the social relations and activities in peoples' everyday lives (Smith 2001). Large organizations are completely dependent on the infinite capacity of texts to copy and distribute the same message in local settings (Smith 2001, 165). Moreover, texts have the power to coordinate people's activities by rewriting the local particularities of people into standardized, generalized representations of their work (Campbell 2006, 94). IE urges us to 'set our predefined theories, concepts and understandings aside to avoid reproducing what we already know' (Nilsen 2017b, 922). The actors interfering in people's everyday activities are often concealed within texts, ideological codes, and institutional discourses, thus rendering the structures 'faceless.' An 'ideological code' can be understood as a schematic and replicable understanding that is incorporated into texts and discourses. An example is Smith and Griffith's study of how the American education system was built on the ideological code of 'the standard North American family' or 'the nuclear family' and how this negatively affected the relationship between schools and parents in family constellations that did not fit the standard (Smith 1999, 159; Griffith and Smith 2005). The ideological codes in texts can thus reinforce narrow understandings of normalcy and deviance.

Materials and methods

This article draws on interview data from a study conducted in Copenhagen and Oslo from May 2019 until January 2020 and is part of an institutional ethnography of language assessment policies and practices in Norwegian and Danish ECEC. The teachers

participating in the interviews were recruited from independent (*selvejede*) and municipal kindergartens in Copenhagen and Oslo. I interviewed 11 ECEC teachers in Copenhagen and 11 in Oslo from 14 different kindergartens: seven in Copenhagen and seven in Oslo. (For more information, please see Table 1. Characteristics of Participants) The informants work in kindergartens located in predominantly immigrant neighborhoods in both the inner city and suburban areas in Oslo and Copenhagen. I conducted all the interviews at the ECEC teachers' workplaces; they all gave me a tour of the premises and let me introduce myself to the children and staff. Four out of the 18 interviews were group interviews (two with two informants and two with three). Both types of interviews contribute to the empirical material in different ways. During the one-on-one interviews, it was easier to lead the conversations and explore the topics I wanted to touch on, while the conversations more often drifted thematically when there were two or three participants. On the other hand, this was what made the group interviews so useful, as the ECEC teachers often felt at ease discussing topics with their colleagues and sometimes disclosed more new information and ambivalent feelings than in the sometimes more 'to the point' one-on-one interviews.

During the interviews, the ECEC teachers were asked about their approach to language work and assessment in their everyday interactions, especially in relation to minority-language children (their 'work knowledge'). They were encouraged to elaborate on their practices and experiences and to provide detailed explanations. I only recruited ECEC teachers from independent (*selvejede*) kindergartens in Copenhagen as these are subject to the same language assessment regulations as the municipal ones. The Norwegian counterpart of independent kindergartens – called 'ideal kindergartens' – are not obliged to follow Oslo's language assessment policies and were therefore not included in the study.

Table 1. Characteristics of participants.

Informants		Kindergarten	Type of interview	Kindergarten ownership	Kindergarten size by enrolled children	Years of experience	Country
1	Mona	Sun	Group	Municipal	50–99	25+	Denmark
2	Edith	Sun	Group	Municipal	50–99	16–20	Denmark
3	Jakob	Saturn	Individual	Independent	50–99	6–10	Denmark
4	Aisha	Jupiter	Individual	Municipal	19–50	11–15	Denmark
5	Merete	Mars	Individual	Independent	50–99	6–10	Denmark
6	Casper	Venus	Group	Independent	50–99	25+	Denmark
7	Camilla	Venus	Group	Independent	50–99	-	Denmark
8	Elisabeth	Earth	Individual	Municipal	19–50	0–5	Denmark
9	Patrick	Europa	Group	Municipal	50–99	6–10	Denmark
10	Karen	Europa	Group	Municipal	50–99	21–25	Denmark
11	Anne	Europa	Group	Municipal	50–99	0–5	Denmark
12	Caroline	Moon	Individual	Municipal	50–99	16–20	Norway
13	Roger	Neptune	Group	Municipal	50–99	-	Norway
14	Ruth	Neptune	Group	Municipal	50–99	21–25	Norway
15	Christina	Neptune	Group	Municipal	50–99	11–15	Norway
16	Tone	Uranus	Individual	Municipal	50–99	16–20	Norway
17	Michael	Uranus	Individual	Municipal	50–99	25+	Norway
18	Eric	Uranus	Individual	Municipal	50–99	0–5	Norway
19	Harald	Pluto	Individual	Municipal	50–99	25+	Norway
20	Marie	Mercury	Individual	Municipal	50–99	16–20	Norway
21	Peter	Ceres	Individual	Municipal	50–99	6–10	Norway
22	Turid	Eris	Individual	Municipal	50–99	25+	Norway

The study has been approved by the Norwegian Center for Research Data (2020) and complies with the Norwegian National Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences, Humanities, Law and Theology (2016). The names of the people and places have been anonymized. I transcribed the sound recordings from the interviews verbatim and coded the material sentence by sentence using Nvivo. I first coded the material inductively by densifying the meaning construction within each paragraph, followed by a deductive phase in which I focused on the new codes that emerged from my analysis of the codes from the first phase, such as 'ambivalence' and the ECEC teachers' pragmatic approach to language assessment (Tjora 2012). Furthermore, I coded the material by formal and informal stopping points in an assessment process, from a child entering kindergarten until leaving for school. Moreover, I coded the institutions, texts, and actors involved at each stopping point. A stopping point could be a meeting with parents or completing an application for extra resources for a child.

The ECEC teachers' work knowledge directed me to the institutions, discourses, and values shaping their everyday interactions with minority-language children and their families. My analysis was inspired by DeVault and McCoy's three-stage process for investigating ruling relations. *First*, I identified an experience, such as a majority of ECEC teachers experiencing ambivalence toward performing language assessments because several minority-language children in their kindergarten had failed test questions referring to cultural expressions they did not recognize (contrary to children with monolingual Danish or Norwegian backgrounds). *Second*, I identified the institutional processes that shaped that experience, such as assessment policies, discourses, and ideological codes. *Third*, I investigated those processes more closely to analyze how they influenced the experience (DeVault and McCoy 2006, 20).

Copenhagen and Oslo were chosen as the starting points for this inquiry, as policy implementation in these capital cities is highly influential in the respective national contexts.[6] The Copenhagen municipality does not mandate that all children be screened for language proficiency, but the Day Care Act states that all three-year-olds should receive a language assessment 'in cases where there are linguistic, behavioral or other circumstances that require the child to receive language stimulation' [my translation] (The Day-Care Act 2018, §11). The testing of all children in an area is decided at a higher administrative level of the city district to which the kindergarten belongs. In practice, all children enrolled in the Danish kindergartens in my study were to be screened with the ministry's own 'Language assessment 3-6' *[Sprogvurdering 3-6]* (The Ministry of Children and Education 2017). In Oslo, 'the Oslo standard' requires all children to be 'systematically observed,' but does not specify how (Oslo City Council Administration 2019). No Oslo kindergarten in my study screened all children, but the *Resource Centers* in their local city districts require them to use 'TRAS'[7] (Espenakk et al. 2011) to assess children's language development for specialist referrals or applications for extra resources.

Results

The majority of the ECEC teachers participating in this study were mostly practically oriented, and the most common objections to assessment policies concerned the lack of time and resources. The ECEC teachers espoused a pragmatic approach and an ambivalent attitude toward assessment in their comments on everyday practices and adjustments to

their work to meet managerial demands. They all strongly valued 'early intervention' and spoke of the importance of starting ECEC at an early age at the same time as advocating for the social pedagogic approach of child-centered activities and play-based learning. Both Danish and Norwegian ECEC teachers continually switched between both the social pedagogy and ready-for-school discourses in their approach to language work, even though these are portrayed as opposing traditions in the research literature. In both countries, the ECEC teachers emphasized that *how* the assessments were conducted was more important than whether all children's language was assessed or not.

The Danish and Norwegian ECEC teachers had quite similar experiences of working with minority-language children and their families. The largest difference was the status of the assessment tools in the two countries. In Norway, the freedom of method was interpreted in practice to mean that only children with suspected learning difficulties or other diagnoses should be assessed. In Denmark, the assessment materials formed a screening test integrated into the municipality's apps – *Copenhagen Children* and *Copenhagen Parents* – and hence were interpreted in practice as meant for all children.

I apply the term *ambivalence* to describe the ECEC teachers' experiences, as they continuously navigate uncertainty caused by conflicting values and messages from various actors and discourses as well as uncertainty regarding their own professional discretion. In the following sections, I present the three most prominent types of ambivalence amongst the ECEC teachers: ambivalence toward the work of assuring school readiness, ambivalence toward professional autonomy and using discretion, and ambivalence toward integration policy and the ideological code of 'the standard child.'

Some ECEC teachers were more ambivalent than others concerning all three aspects, but they usually had the main tendencies in common. The forthcoming sections focus on the similarities between the Danish and Norwegian ECEC teachers' approach to assessment, as these similarities were striking despite different political and national contexts.

Ambivalence toward the work of assuring school readiness

This type of ambivalence is associated with research from the ready-for-school tradition and the influence of international organizations, such as the OECD, on the ECEC curriculum. The governance of the accountability system of ECEC allows schools to determine what is 'adequate,' and kindergartens are held accountable for the school's assessment of children's 'school readiness.' The sanctions for the lack of school readiness vary between countries. In Norway, it is vastly uncommon to hold children back in kindergarten or have them repeat grades. In contrast, Danish children deemed 'unready for school' are regularly retained in kindergarten or must repeat preschool. All the Danish ECEC teachers reported schools requesting that they 'take a child back'; however, this is not always possible, as the child's previous place in the kindergarten may already be filled. This left the Danish ECEC teachers especially worried that their children's language development would be ruled 'inadequate.' At the same time, both Norwegian and Danish ECEC teachers reported that school and kindergarten institutions had conflicting expectations concerning school readiness and adequate language proficiency.

Despite this, the teachers pragmatically accepted the schools' academic standards for school readiness, but at a professional level, they disagreed to some extent about what school readiness should entail, as the ECEC teachers were more focused on practical

independence skills than the schoolteachers were. The kindergartens in both the Oslo and Copenhagen municipalities are obliged to submit a standardized transition form prior to a child starting school, in which they have to account for the child's language proficiency in Norwegian or Danish, respectively (Child and Youth Department Copenhagen Municpality 2020; Oslo City Council Section for Childhood and Education 2020). The Oslo-based ECEC teachers (Terum and Molander 2008) reported that schools hold the kindergartens responsible for reporting language proficiency 'accurately' (i.e. according to the school definition) when children transition to school. Below, 'Emilie' recounts an experience of communication with the local school in relation to school transition:

> We received an anonymized list (from the school) of children arriving from this kindergarten that ended up needing 'specific language support' [in the first grade]. [The list identified] whether we had marked them as needing special language support or not [in the transition forms], and whether they had passed the NISK test (the school's language proficiency test). We were additionally asked to provide documentation on why we had not reported on all the children [who later failed the school's test] and later had been granted special education. Emilie, 27, Pedagogic Leader, Oslo.

This was not a unique incident. Other ECEC teachers that I interviewed in Oslo reported similar experiences of schools contacting them to complain about kindergarten documentation and 'underreporting' of children with 'inadequate language development.' The ECEC teachers often commented that they did not see the children's language development as inadequate in the sense that the child needed special pedagogic help; rather, they often thought that the child needed more language stimulation in Norwegian. However, the ECEC teachers in both countries also agreed that the standardized assessments made it easier to communicate concerns regarding children's language development to schools, other institutions, and parents. Standardized assessment and documentation could thus relieve the ECEC teachers in the sense that everything was documented in a way that demanded attention from other actors.

> (…) sometimes, if we don't have it on paper … for example, if I just go and tell mom or dad that 'your child lacks some words and we should do this or that … ' [She gesticulates that the parents just wave her away and laugh at her] [The parents answer:] 'No, he will learn in due time. It will resolve itself with time.' But when I have it on paper and they can see the red color, then it gets serious; then it is important. And it is actually good to have it, so they can see … And it is the same with the municipality. Because when you send it, it's official. Aisha, 47. Pedagogue, Copenhagen.

The ECEC teachers in both countries said that the results from the standardized assessments were especially useful when they had difficulty convincing parents to take their concerns seriously. Hence, the texts can be utilized to ensure that a child receives the help the ECEC teachers believe is needed.

Ambivalence toward professional autonomy and using discretion

Ambivalence toward professional autonomy is related to the ECEC teachers' experiences of their discretion to decide whether a child has adequate language development. The struggle for professional autonomy concerns politics, as autonomy is important for protecting professional status, but also to ensure pedagogical quality by providing teachers the agency to adjust their practice to meet the needs of individual children and contexts (Pettersvold and

Østrem 2018b; Terum and Molander 2008; Mausethagen and Mølstad 2015). This ambivalence was most prominent among the Norwegian ECEC teachers, as their Danish counterparts relied heavily on screening devices, somewhat relieving their uncertainty over determining children's language proficiency. However, the assessments could not relieve the ECEC teachers' concern over whether inadequate language proficiency was caused by a lack of stimulation in the majority language or by a learning difficulty.

When I asked how the ECEC teachers determined adequate language proficiency for standardized forms for transition from kindergarten to school,[8] many Norwegian teachers claimed that 'it is just something you know.' Most Norwegian teacher-based concerns over a child's language development stem from factors other than assessment results, indicating that the teachers trust their professional discretion without assistive devices. They only assessed children when they were already concerned. At the same time, many Oslo-based ECEC teachers reported frustrating experiences of determining adequacy without assessment tools. Turid was worried about the consequences of heightened segregation in the Oslo municipality and the related effects on her and her colleagues' discretionary abilities:

> I have said it the entire time to the managers here: I think many of the children we send to the schools have too poor Norwegian skills. (…) I wish that I had more Norwegian children here, so you could compare more, because we have become blind here (in this kindergarten) since we have so few (majority language-speaking children) to compare with. Turid, 55. Pedagogic leader, Oslo.

The problem of determining 'adequate language proficiency' was also recognized by the ECEC teachers in the Neptune kindergarten. In the following excerpt, Ruth and Christina discuss their shock when visiting another kindergarten and realizing that they had completely different perceptions of what adequate language proficiency was, compared to the staff at a neighboring kindergarten. This became apparent when two children from different kindergartens were compared to one another during a visit:

> Ruth: You're in this [your own kindergarten] all day. And it is pretty frightening, because you assume that the language development level [of the children in your own kindergarten] … when you hear them speak, you think 'Oh, this is good,' but it's not.
>
> Christina: You kind of 'hear yourself blind,' you get so used to … We discussed this: 'God, how actually proficient are the children we regard as [adequate] in our kindergarten … how well do they actually speak?' […] It was quite an epiphany 'How well does this child do … who we think is a good language speaker, how good is she actually compared to where she is supposed to be?' And then you really see the discrepancy, two children the same age, one was actually older, [who was] considerably worse at language comprehension and oral presentation, when we actually [previously] thought the child had 'adequate proficiency.' Ruth, 55. Manager, and Christina, 36. Pedagogic leader, Oslo.

Thus, basing determinations of language development solely on discretion creates variations in the ways Oslo kindergartens determine adequate language proficiency and when to raise concern. Several teachers noticed that every kindergarten constructs a local definition of adequacy based on its own group of children. These findings suggest a tendency toward the child with the strongest language proficiency anchors the standard of adequacy for the remaining children (Kahneman 2011). Both the Danish and Norwegian ECEC teachers also reported that they were sometimes surprised

by the results of language assessments. For example, an outspoken child might be mistaken as having a stronger language proficiency than was the case or an introverted child as having poorer language development.

Ambivalence toward integration policy and the ideological code of 'the standard child'

This form of ambivalence relates to the political debate over immigration, integration, and the hierarchical relations between the majority and minority groups in society. Despite different national strategies on language assessment and immigration, both the Norwegian and Danish ECEC teachers experienced conflicting feelings regarding the role of kindergartens as integration arenas and which values were represented in the assessment/screening tools and materials. The teachers from both countries all underlined the importance of focusing on the positive aspects of multiculturalism[9] in the daily life of the kindergarten. They sang popular children's songs in the children's home languages, decorated the kindergarten's interior with words in the children's home languages, and involved parents in finding music to play during their daily activities to foster a sense of belonging and pride amongst the children. The minority-language children attending ECEC and their families are often already in a vulnerable social position because of the intersectionality between immigrant background and low socioeconomic status (Thorsen 2021; Galloway et al. 2015; Ottesen et al. 2018). Moreover, the turbulent political climate over immigration and integration in the Nordic countries makes the topic of the integration and assessment of minority-language children rather sensitive.

Both the Norwegian and Danish ECEC teachers pointed out several examples of assessment materials based on the notion of the 'standard child' from the majority group, as monolingual, white, and middle class. This is an excerpt from an interview with the Danish pedagogue Mona, 45. I have named the predominantly immigrant area in Copenhagen 'Broen' and the predominantly white middle-class area 'Borgen.'

Mona:	(Silently showing me a picture in the testing material, pretending playfully that I am the child being tested).
Interviewer:	It's a tie, right?
Mona:	Yes, it's a tie. There are no children here that (answer that question correctly). We are situated in Broen … I live in Borgen, where they know what it is. Because dad uses a tie and works in a bank, (the children) know well what it is, right. But here, no child has ever answered that one correctly. They don't know what it is (…), so you lose some points here (on the tie question) if you live in Broen. But you don't if you live in Borgen.

The second example comes from Norway. Tone was working with a tool called SPROFF, through which both the minority-language children's language development is assessed and an intensive standardized course built around different topics is followed each week.

> I remember we had the topic of camping, and there were tents, sleeping bags, a cabin and mountaintops, and none of these children had any relationship to any of it. Tone, 63. ECEC teacher, Oslo.

Both the question about the tie and the references to sleeping bags and cabins in the mountains reflect Nordic culture and/or middle-class culture, instances in which the

children's inability to answer possibly has just as much to do with their lack of knowledge of Nordic culture as their language development (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Nilsen 2008).

Despite the ECEC teachers' frustration with the materials, their concerns for the minority children's life chances exceeded those about the negative effects of standardized assessment. They were more concerned that the school's heightened academic focus and Oslo and Copenhagen's increasing segregation impaired the minority children's chances of keeping up with their monolingual majority peers when starting school. The minority-language children often started kindergarten at a later age than the majority children, and the teachers underlined the importance of early intervention:

> We have a girl in my division; she came right before she turned three years old. When she came, she was at the level of a one-and-a-half year old in motor skills, socially, and in every other aspect … and if she had attended nursery from when she was one, she would have come a bit further … at a developmental level, in both motor and linguistic skills. Merete, 40. Pedagogue, Copenhagen.

This was a common perception amongst both Norwegian and Danish ECEC teachers. Many teachers wanted kindergarten to be compulsory from the age of one year and for the municipalities to remove the free choice of kindergarten to prevent the growing segregation. Simultaneously, the ECEC teachers felt ambivalent toward these types of policies as they are usually associated with other more restrictive immigration and integration policies that they do not support.

Discussion and conclusion

In this article, I asked the following research question: *How do Norwegian and Danish ECEC teachers approach language assessment policies in practice?*

I found that ECEC teachers were mostly pragmatic in their approach to language assessment, but they were ambivalent in relation to language work and the assessment of minority-language children. These are important topics to discuss critically as they can renew and differentiate our understanding of ECEC teachers' standpoints and approaches.

I identified three sources of ambivalence that are most prominent among the ECEC teachers: (1) ambivalence toward the ready-for-school discourse, (2) ambivalence toward professional autonomy and the use of discretion, and (3) ambivalence toward integration policy and the ideological code of 'the standard child.' Their ambivalence relates not only to their own discretion but also toward an antagonistic discourse on the social mandate of kindergartens under changing political circumstances. The types of ambivalence relate partly to different actors: researchers in the field, professionals, and politicians.

The findings in this article differ somewhat from those in the previous research, which has focused more on the tension between professional ethos and neoliberal discourse (Hennum, Pettersvold, and Østrem 2015; Pettersvold and Østrem 2018a, 2012) and less on ECEC teachers' ambivalence toward the social pedagogic rejection of standardized assessment and documentation policies. As the previous research shows, the ECEC teachers from both countries underline that *how* and *why* standardized language assessments are performed are the most important factors (Klem and Hagtvet 2018; Vik 2018). Their

practical and pragmatic orientation toward assessment is congruent with previous research on ECEC and secondary school teachers' approaches to standardized assessment policies in practice (Nilsen 2017a; Mausethagen, Prøitz, and Skedsmo 2018, 2021).

Similar to the previous research findings, not only is language assessment being standardized but also other pedagogical everyday practices of ECEC staff (Christensen 2019; Houmøller 2018; Nilsen 2017a), such as teachers' interactions with parents, their views on children's language proficiency, and their efforts to achieve school readiness. Despite the Danish and Norwegian ECEC teachers' rather similar approaches to assessment and everyday language work, the standardized assessments materials received a higher status in Copenhagen than in Oslo.

In Copenhagen, the government's language assessment was designed as a screening tool, and since it was integrated into the municipality's mandatory kindergarten app, it received a higher status in the Danish ECEC teachers' everyday work. While in Oslo, the most common assessment material (TRAS) is constructed as a form that can be completed by ECEC teachers without the children's presence (nevertheless, the ECEC teachers often test children face-to-face if they are unsure).

Furthermore, based on the findings concerning the ECEC teachers' approach to language assessment, I discussed *how transnational discourses and agencies are involved in their language assessments of minority-language children*. The problem of determining school readiness and whether a child has adequate language development is linked to translocal discourses such as *ready for school* and *early intervention*, which are produced by international interest organizations, such as the OECD (2006, 2018), and dominant research on ECEC in economics and developmental psychology (Havnes and Mogstad 2011; Bettinger, Hægeland, and Rege 2014). The ECEC teachers' experiences of ambivalence are connected to a larger discussion regarding the social mandate of kindergartens in changing the political circumstances of integration in the Nordic countries. However, there is also a struggle between ECEC and the teaching profession to determine responsibility and accountability for minority-language children's language proficiency. The ECEC teachers' concern about the minority-language children's school readiness is related to the education system being based on the perception of the standard child as monolingual and belonging to the majority culture (Gulløv 2009; Sønsthagen 2020; Grosjean 1992). This perception can also be referred to as an *ideological code* (Smith 1999).

Although the findings are not generalizable in a quantitative sense, they have transferrable value as they touch upon topics that transcend national borders. They illustrate blind spots in the assumptions of integration and professional discretion on which assessment tools and policies are built. The simplified worldview presented by both the *ready-for-school* and *social pedagogy* discourses hides the complexity of the everyday activities and relations that structure ECEC teachers' language work with minority-language children and their families. Without understanding this complexity, it is difficult for policy makers to provide integration and assessment policies that meet the needs of minority-language children.

Implications

The risk of assessment materials being based on the ideological code of a majority standard child not only weakens the reliability of the assessment tools themselves, but the neutralization of 'the standard child' as 'the school-ready child' can have more serious

implications. When the testing materials are given the status of an objective measure, they can recreate and reinforce social inequality between minority and majority children in ECEC and society as such (Nilsen 2017b). However, standardized assessment and documentation practices can also help to prevent cognitive bias (see, for example, Kahneman (2011) for an introduction to the literature on heuristics and biases) and provide a more effective way of legitimizing and communicating concerns about a child between the ECEC institution and other actors. Therefore, the discussion regarding language assessment in ECEC should not center on 'either/or' but rather consider and reflect on the knowledge and values on which the materials are founded. It should move toward a more inclusive understanding of the implications of the terms 'adequate language proficiency' and 'school readiness' as well as the implementation of assessment and documentation in ECEC for both majority- and minority-language-speaking children.

Notes

1. The term 'ECEC teacher' refers to professionals with either Danish pedagogical training or Norwegian kindergarten teacher training.
2. I apply the term 'kindergarten' to refer explicitly to the characteristics of the Nordic model of early childhood education and care, in which the Fröbel tradition is prominent. This is the terminology used by ECEC teachers themselves to describe their workplace ('Børnehave'/'Barnehage' in Danish and Norwegian, respectively).
3. Research suggests that children from bilingual backgrounds tend to be overidentified with language development issues due to educators' lack of appropriate developmental expectations (Bedore and Peña 2008)
4. The 'PISA shock' refers to reactions in the wake of the publication of the first test results from the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2000. The 'shock' was that many national states were negatively surprised by their own population's low test scores compared with other countries(Tveit 2014, 2018).
5. TRAS was not developed with bilingual children in mind, but it was later added a similar assessment scheme, in which the only difference is the removal of the age indications present in the coloring scheme for monolingual children(Espenakk et al. 2011).
6. Norway and Denmark have highly subsidized ECEC, and in the age group 3 to 5, 97.1% of Norwegian children and 88.6% of Danish children are enrolled in kindergarten (Drange and Telle 2018; Glavind and Pade 2018).
7. 'TRAS' stands for 'Tidlig Registrering av Språkutvikling' in Norwegian, meaning 'Early Registration of Language Developement' (Espenakk et al. 2011).
8. The yes/no question of whether 'the child has adequate language proficiency' has since been removed in the revised edition (May 2020) of the *Oslo standard* (Oslo City Council Section for Childhood and Education 2020).
9. Multiculturalism can very simply be understood as 'a generic term for the ensemble of policies introduced with the combined goals of recognizing diversity, fostering integration and producing/maintaining equality' (Taylor 2012, 415).

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The standard school-ready child: the social organization of 'school-readiness'

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ABSTRACT

This article offers new insights into our understanding of the formation, textual mediation, and reproduction of perceptions of children's 'school readiness' in kindergarten and its consequences for teachers' assessment of minority-language children's 'readiness'. Building on Danish Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) teachers' accounts of assessing minority-language children's 'lingual readiness', this current research identify key characteristics of 'the standard school-ready child', which functions as an ideological code and shapes replicable understandings of what constitutes 'school readiness' in institutional discourse and assessment materials. This code departs from Danish majority-class culture in its structuring of normalcy and deviance embedded in the language assessment materials issued by the Danish government. By departing from the standard school-ready child in their assessments of minority-language children's school readiness, ECEC teachers unintentionally reproduce and legitimise stratified educational outcomes for native-majority children and children from disadvantaged and low-income immigrant backgrounds.

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Introduction

This article investigates the social organisation of early childhood education and care (ECEC) teachers' assessment of minority-language children's school readiness in high-minority, low-income areas in Copenhagen, Denmark. It highlights the significance of how standardised notions of normalcy and deviance embedded in language assessment materials facilitate and legitimise the social reproduction of unequal educational outcomes for native majority- and minority-language children. Disparities in children's school readiness are often linked to parents' socioeconomic backgrounds (Booth and Crouter 2008). An array of scholars, many of whom are in the legacy of Bourdieu (1996, 1984, 2018), have demonstrated how cultural biases favouring majority-class culture in the education system generate desirable educational outcomes for majority children and construct invisible barriers to the educational success of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Griffith and Smith 2005; Khan 2011; Lareau 2011; Vincent and Ball 2007). Children and parents from majority-class positions are likelier to function within the

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education system (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Lareau 2011). Thus, the strong relationship between children's socioeconomic background and their perceived school readiness found in previous studies suggests that children from majority-class positions are likelier to be deemed school ready than their peers from less privileged backgrounds.

An increased political focus on children's pre-academic skills and early interventions alongside growing rates of global migration has changed the character of ECEC teachers' work in preparing children for school transition (Bove and Sharmahd 2020; Brown and Lan 2015). A large body of research indicates a double disadvantage for people with immigrant backgrounds; they are not only often foreign to their new communities, but research also draws strong correlations between immigrant status, low socioeconomic status and child poverty (Borjas 2011; Galloway et al. 2015; Ottesen et al. 2018). Current studies in the Danish context on the long-term educational achievements of children with immigrant backgrounds indicate systematic disparities in educational outcomes between children from different immigrant backgrounds, which have already been observed in the years prior to transition to compulsory schooling (Højen et al. 2019).

There is a broad consensus in the developmental psychology and linguistic research community that immigrant children's second language (L2) pre-literacy and language skills are highly predictive of later educational achievement (see, e.g. Han 2012; Højen et al. 2019; Kieffer 2012). Hence, scholars underline the importance of intensifying efforts to develop children's language proficiency before the school transition, particularly for children with minority-language backgrounds (Han 2012; Højen et al. 2019).

In this vein, kindergarten is broadly perceived as a key strategy to foster pre-literacy skills and integrate children of immigrant descent and socially disadvantaged backgrounds into host communities (Højen et al. 2019; Kimathi and Nilsen 2021; Rydland, Grøver, and Lawrence 2014). Consequently, ECEC teachers are experiencing growing demands for assessing children's language development, preparing them for school on a general level and providing special attention to the needs of an increasing population of children learning a majority language as their second and even third or fourth language.

The context of this current study is Copenhagen, Denmark. 'Children with minority-language backgrounds', or 'minority-language children', are in this context defined as children without a Nordic language, English or German as their first language or are descendants of the indigenous population of the Danish-governed Faroe Islands or Greenland. Thus, this group is primarily comprised of children of parents of immigrant descent. In Denmark, 11 percent of the population are immigrants, while 3 percent are Danish-born with two immigrant parents (Statistics Denmark 2020, 11). Recent Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) results indicate that Denmark and the other Nordic countries have some of the largest discrepancies in national test scores between school children of native and immigrant descent when compared to the other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (Beuchert, Christensen, and Jensen 2018; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)) 2019).

The research questions were: *What constitutes a 'school-ready child'? How do these perceptions shape Danish ECEC teachers' assessments of children with minority-language backgrounds and their 'school readiness in kindergarten?*

To answer these questions, I first introduce Denmark as the national context of this study. Second, I present institutional ethnography (IE) as the methodological departure for the

study and how ideological codes function as a scheme in the social replication and legitimisation of standardised notions of normalcy and deviance. Third, I unpack and identify what makes up 'school readiness' and identify 'the standard school-ready child' as an ideological code. I trace how this code shapes ECEC teachers' work in assessing minority-language children's school readiness and their work in preparing children for transition to school. I conclude by discussing the cultural bias embedded in assessment materials and how these perceptions shape ECEC teachers' assessment practices and minority-language children's school transitions.

When basing their assessments of children's 'lingual readiness' on 'the standard school-ready child' in their assessments of minority-language children's school readiness, I argue that ECEC teachers unintentionally reproduce and legitimise stratified educational outcomes for native-majority children and children from disadvantaged low-income immigrant backgrounds.

The Danish context

The Nordic kindergarten model (age 0–6) is underpinned by the Nordic Welfare Model (Esping-Andersen 1990) and social pedagogical understandings of childhood and teaching (Einarsdottir et al. 2015). Hence, the Nordic ECEC curriculum emphasises *Bildung*[1] and egalitarian values and encourages locally oriented, play-based and child-centred approaches to pedagogy (Einarsdottir et al. 2015; Wagner and Einarsdottir 2008).

Social pedagogy is often contrasted with more centralised and academic approaches to kindergarten curriculum, widely called 'the ready-for-school approach' (Einarsdottir et al. 2015). The ready-for-school approach is characterised by a strong focus on developing children's pre-academic skills and the importance of early interventions to reduce socio-economic disparities in educational outcomes (see, e.g. Havnes and Mogstad 2015 and Højen et al. 2019). This approach has traditionally been associated with French- and English-speaking countries; however, during recent decades, scholars have observed a turn towards an increased focus on pre-academic skills, standardisation, accountability measures and teacher-instructed activities in the Nordic region (see, e.g. Einarsdottir et al. 2015).

In Denmark, public kindergartens (0–6 years) are highly subsidised by the state, and 98 percent of children are enrolled in the last year of kindergarten (Statistics Denmark 2019). Kindergartens are organised and situated separately from formal education and governed under their laws and regulations (The Day Care Act 2018). A day care institution is usually divided into a *nursery* for children aged 0–3 years and *kindergarten* for children aged 3–6 years. Formal primary education in kindergarten class [*Børnehaveklasse*], also called grade 0, usually begins the year a child turns six years old, and this involves changing locations from a day care facility to school premises.

In school, children first attend a reception class, kindergarten class, before enrolling in first grade at age seven. The language assessment materials used in kindergarten and kindergarten classes are issued by the government, named 'Language assessment 3–6′ [*Sprogvurdering 3–6*]. The children are individually assessed by sitting one-on-one with a teacher in a separate room. The assessment consists of the child being asked to react to a range of standardised questions regarding pictures, either by speaking or by pointing out figures. In the second part of the assessment, the children are shown a handpicked children's

book accompanied by a range of questions about how to read a book. The questions posed by teachers are closed-ended, with one or a few acceptable answers; the child's ability to answer the question right or wrong can be inputted directly into Copenhagen's dedicated app for tablet and smartphone. In the end, the children's answers are automatically summed up by the app, resulting in a score between 0 and 100 percent.

In the Danish school transition system, 'lingual readiness' is highly associated with school readiness, and the assessment results serve as a key part of the documentation attached to the standardised school transition form in the municipality app. Children's language development is routinely assessed with the same materials in kindergarten, usually one or two times a year at ages three, four and five, and up to four times during the year of kindergarten class (The Day Care Act 2018; The Folkeskole Act 2020, §11). The language-screening manual states, 'The material can be utilised in a similar manner for both monolingual and bilingual children' (Ministry of Children and Education 2017, 6). Hence, no special consideration is given to children without Danish as their first language, even though bilingual children's language tends to contradict monolingual children's language development (Drury 2013; Henry and Thorsen 2018; Hoff 2013).

The Danish Ministry of Children and Education reports that 5.6 percent of all children who entered first grade in 2020 started 'late; [*Startede sent*], and 2.3 percent of the children in a kindergarten class were 'repeaters' [*Omgjængere*] (Ministry of Children and Education 2021). Since a child can be held only one year behind his or her peers, the statistics indicate that more children are held back in kindergarten than are those who repeat kindergarten class.

Neither the Ministry of Children and Education nor Copenhagen's Child and Youth Department reports how many children with immigrant backgrounds are retained from progressing to the first grade. However, results from the Copenhagen Child and Youth departments' quality report for 2018[2] indicate that 48.3 percent of children in Copenhagen categorised as having a 'non-Western background' [*ikke-vestlig bakgrund*] scored below the assessment's cutoff limit of 15 percent when screened for oral skills. Correspondingly, 34.5 percent scored below the cutoff for pre-literacy skills when assessed in a kindergarten class. In comparison, 11.3 percent of those termed 'Danish' [*Danske*] children scored below the cutoff for oral skills and 10.8 scored below the cutoff for pre-literacy skills in kindergarten class the same year (Child and Youth Department Copenhagen Municipality 2019, 18).

Governmental policy targeting 'parallel societies'

In 2018, the Danish government altered The Day Care Act's language assessment and school transition policy by hindering automatic promotion to first grade in high-minority, low-income areas based on the outcome of the compulsory language screening in a kindergarten class. The Government reasons that a high-stakes assessment is necessary in kindergarten class in these areas as: 'basic language proficiency is vital to be able to follow lectures. A lack in proficiency can therefore suggest a risk of lagging behind academically, something that can pursue you for the rest of your time in school' (Danish Government 2018, 26). This change marks a stricter standard of school readiness for the most disadvantaged. The high-stakes assessment is part of the Danish government's highly contested policy: 'One Denmark without parallel societies—no ghettos by 2030 [*Ét Danmark uden parallelsamfund—Ingen ghettoer i 2030'*].

The official motivation behind this policy is 'the government's desire for a comprehensive Denmark' in the wake of increased immigration since the 1980s. The government directs particular concern towards immigration from 'non-Western' countries and states that 'Too many immigrants and descendants of immigrants have ended up lacking attachment to their surrounding community. Without education. Without work. And without Danish language proficiency' (Danish Government 2018, 4). The policy states that schools with an over 30 percent share of children from 'at-risk neighbourhoods' shall perform high-stakes assessments in a kindergarten class (Danish Government 2018, 26).

The government distinguishes between 'at-risk neighbourhoods' [*udsatte boligområder*] and 'ghetto areas' [*ghettoområder*]. To qualify as an 'at-risk neighbourhood', an area needs to inhabit at least 1,000 residents and meet at least two out of five criteria:

1. The share of residents who are immigrants or descendants of immigrant parents from non-Western countries comprises over 50 percent.
2. The share of residents between ages 18–64, neither in employment nor pursuing education, comprises over 40 percent.
3. The share of residents with criminal sentences convicted for infractions against penal law, weapons law or drug regulations comprises over 2.7 percent.
4. Over 60 percent of residents have only a primary education.
5. The average gross income for residents between ages 18–64, not including those under education, comprises less than 55 percent of the average gross income for the same group in the respective region. (Danish Government 2018, 11)

Ghetto areas are listed as 'at-risk neighbourhoods'. However, to qualify as a ghetto area (Danish Government 2018, 11):

1. At least two of the three original ghetto criteria must be met:
    a. The share of convicts makes up more than 2.7 percent. The share of residents neither in employment nor in education comprises over 40 percent.
    b. The share of residents who are immigrants or descendants of immigrant parents from non-Western countries comprises over 50 percent.

OR

2. The share of residents who are immigrants or descendants of immigrant parents from non-Western countries comprises over 60 percent. (Danish Government 2018, 11)

This policy has attracted both national and international attention (see, e.g. Perrigo 2018, Quass and Bannor-Kristensen 2019 and O'Sullivan 2020) and has been accused of being racist and breaching the human rights convention, as the law instils harder criminal punishments and forced kindergarten from age one, amongst other strict regulations, but only for immigrant-dense, socially disadvantaged areas (Danish Government 2018). Thus, because of its demographic demarcation, the policy of 'targeted language assessment' [*Målrettede sprogprøver*] for 'lingual readiness' [*språkparathet*] to determine grade promotion is particularly aimed at children from families with 'non-Western', low socioeconomic backgrounds, who are living in what the Danish government categorises as 'at-risk neighbourhoods' or 'ghetto areas' (Danish Government 2018, 26).

Previous research and analytical perspectives

A large body of research indicates that kindergarten enrolment has a positive effect on promoting 'school readiness,' especially among children from disadvantaged social backgrounds (Heckman 2006; Havnes and Mogstad 2011; Zachrisson and Dearing 2015). These findings have resulted in an increased political focus on early intervention and standardisation of children's earliest years within the education system (Brown and Lan 2015; Fuller 2007; Nilsen 2017).

In a review of the research literature on school transition between 2001 and 2015, Boyle, Grieshaber, and Petriwskyj (2018, 175) presented two main frames for understanding 'readiness' in research on school transition: 'children's preparedness to commence compulsory schooling' and 'readiness of schools and communities. Other scholars refer to these different understandings of readiness as something that is 'inside the child' versus 'outside the child' or as an 'empiricist perspective' versus an 'interactionist perspective' (Brown 2013; Meisels 1999). Perceptions have changed from a focus mainly on preparing children socioemotionally for school transition to more time spent developing children's pre-academic skills (Brown 2013; Brown, Ku, and Barry 2020; Brown and Lan 2015; Grek 2009).

In the wake of policies such as the U.S.'s No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the coinciding 'PISA shock'[3] the same year, several researchers have critically claimed that kindergarten has become the 'new first grade' or 'de facto first grade' (Akaba et al. 2020; Brown, Ku, and Barry 2020). Standardised and universalised understandings of childhood and school readiness are accused of disembedding historical and local context from kindergarten curriculum and focusing on children's potential as *human becomings* rather than *human beings* (Fuller 2007; Qvortrup 2009).

Migration has increased globally during the last few decades, but there is a lack of knowledge of the relationship between ECEC and minority-language and/or migrant children and their families (Bove and Sharmahd 2020). Considering the controversial political climate on immigration, standardised assessments and high-stakes tests in ECEC and schools, it is vital to produce knowledge of ECEC teachers' practical implementation of school-readiness assessment policies and how these policies influence their work with children of immigrant descent—not just at a general level, but also how it specifically influences teachers' pedagogic work in high-minority, low-income neighbourhoods.

To understand the social organisation of 'school readiness' and the construction of 'the standard school-ready child', I drew upon analytical tools from IE (Smith 2005). IE is associated with sociologist Dorothy Smith. From a perspective located in people's experiences, IE aims to trace how people's everyday doings are part of larger institutional complexes (Griffith and Smith 2005). Hence, the study unit of IE is the institutional *ruling relations*—objectified forms of knowing that people relate to in their everyday work. Such rulings are increasingly embedded in the common technology of surveillance, communication and management, and are mediated by textual technologies such as the internet, print and institutional discourses (Smith and Griffith 2014). In this fashion, texts function as a bridge between the discursive and the factual, between policy and practice (Nilsen 2015).

Smith (1993) coined the term *ideological code* to describe how standardised discursive schema shapes replicable understandings of how knowledge, institutional discourses and texts are produced and understood across different settings. Smith used the example of what she identified as the 'Standard North American Family' (SNAF). SNAF refers to a

traditional nuclear family constituted by a married heterosexual couple, where a husband functions as the family breadwinner and a wife who is mainly involved with childcare and household management (Smith 1993). This understanding of a 'normal' family is replicated and embedded in everything from TV commercials to legal jurisdiction. Smith argued that the educational system is implicitly built on an expectation of children's families resembling a 'SNAF family', where a child's timetables and the expectations for parent involvement are based on the mother being a homemaker.

In their study of mothering work, Griffith and Smith (2005) found that the idealisation of the nuclear family as the norm serve as a disadvantage for families that do not fit within the SNAF-family model, such as single-parent families or families with mothers working full time. In this way, an ideological code can shape people's understandings of what is normal while simultaneously defining those deviating from this standard as flawed (Griffith and Smith 2005; Smith 1993).

In this current article, I engage the concept of social organisation and ideological codes to describe how ECEC teachers' assessment work is not isolated to each assessment situation but part of a larger institutional complex of actors, texts and institutions. For simplicity, I use the term 'social organisation' to refer to the broader organisation that goes into ECEC teachers' assessments of and preparation for minority-language children's school transitions. This term includes an investigation into the ruling relations that I, in the forthcoming analysis, identify as the ideological codes textually embedded in ECEC teachers' assessment work. In this sense, the term 'social organisation' is based on a preconceived notion of the presence of ruling relations shaping ECEC teachers' work.

Materials and methods

The analysis presented in this article departs from an IE of ECEC teachers' assessment practices in Danish ECEC institutions (Smith 2005). The analysis is based on interviews with 11 ECEC teachers working in seven public and independent kindergartens[4] in Copenhagen municipality. The interviews were conducted from May to June 2019. The ECEC teachers work in the inner city and in suburban public kindergartens situated in or near what the Danish government categorises as 'ghetto areas', where children must pass the government's language screening to be directly promoted to first grade (Danish Government 2018). I recruited the teachers working in these neighbourhoods to maximise the utility of information regarding the assessment and school preparation of minority-language children and to investigate the relationship between the Danish government's policy (2018), educational policy and the Danish ECEC teachers' everyday work (Flyvbjerg 2006).

Table 1 presents information about this study's participants. The table indicates which kindergartens the participants worked in, what type of interview they participated in, their years of teaching experience and the kindergartens' ownership structures.

The interviews were explorative in structure, with the aim of unpacking and tracing the social organisation that shapes the local experiences of the ECEC teachers' everyday work of assessing and preparing children with minority-language backgrounds for school transition (DeVault and McCoy 2006). The teachers were asked to provide detailed descriptions of how they support a child's language development from their first day in kindergarten until the school transition. I requested that the teachers bring the materials they use prior, during and after a language assessment, and any other relevant texts that are used in their

Table 1. Characteristics of participants.

Participant	Kindergarten	Interview type	Years of teaching experience	Kindergarten ownership structure
Mona	Sun	Group	25+	Municipal
Edith	Sun	Group	16–20	Municipal
Jakob	Saturn	Individual	6–10	Independent
Aisha	Jupiter	Individual	11–15	Municipal
Merete	Mars	Individual	6–10	Independent
Casper	Venus	Group	25+	Independent
Camilla	Venus	Group	-*	Independent
Elisabeth	Earth	Individual	0–5	Municipal
Patrick	Europa	Group	6–10	Municipal
Karen	Europa	Group	21–25	Municipal
Anne	Europa	Group	0–5	Municipal

*This information is missing.

everyday work of supporting children's language development. During the interviews, I was especially interested in the ECEC teachers' descriptive accounts of interacting with policy documents and assessment materials in practice and how stakeholders such as actors, institutions and texts enter their daily interactions with minority-language children.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The participants' names, the kindergartens and the places appearing throughout this paper are pseudonyms. The study is approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data and complies with the Norwegian National Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences, Humanities, Law and Theology (The Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees (NESH), 2016). The data analysis was inspired by DeVault and McCoy (2006) three-stage analysis for investigating ruling relations.

First, I created inductive codes in *NVivo*, densifying the meaning constructions in the teacher accounts. The first round of coding provided an overview of recurring themes across the data. Second, I utilised recurring themes in the inductive codes from the first stage to construct new codes for the second stage of my analysis. In this stage, I identified institutional processes that shaped the experiences that stood out in the first stage of the analysis. I did so via a round of deductive coding where I focused primarily on the ECEC teachers' work of preparing children for school, looking for which texts, discourses, actors and institutions enter the ECEC teachers' experiences of school preparation, assessment and transition.

The third and final stage was based on the previous stages. Here, I focused on investigating the institutional processes identified in stage two by asking, 'What makes up the standard school-ready child?' to analytically describe how institutional processes operate as grounds of the experiences the ECEC teachers reported in stage one. The three stages are outlined in Table 2.

Findings

In this section, I identify three key characteristics of 'the standard school-ready child': a child who masters the majority culture, a child with strong language proficiency and a child who makes 'the cut'. The descriptive accounts of what makes up a school-ready child are not exhaustive but highlight key tendencies of the perceptions shaping ECEC teachers' work of assessing and preparing minority-language children for school.

Table 2. Stages of the analysis, inspired by DeVault and McCoy (2006, 20).

	Aim	Tools of analysis	Empirical research question
1st stage	Identify experience(s)	Interviews Inductive coding Meaning densification	How do ECEC teachers work on minority language children's language development, from their first day of kindergarten until they leave for school? Which texts are relevant in the ECEC teachers' assessment work? How do the ECEC teachers interpret and interact with the policy documents and assessment materials related to the assessment of 'school-readiness'?
2nd stage	Identify some of the institutional processes that are shaping that/those experience(s)	New round of coding ECEC teachers' work of preparing children for school Identification of texts, actors, discourses, and institutions	Which actors and texts enter the ECEC teachers' accounts of assessing school-readiness and preparing minority language children for school? Which perceptions of school-readiness are present in ECEC teachers' talk of school-readiness and in the texts?
3rd stage	Investigate those processes in order to describe analytically how they operate as grounds of the experience(s)	Perceptions of school-readiness Social inequality Ideological codes Ruling relations	How do perceptions of school-readiness in policy documents shape how the ECEC teachers assess minority language children's 'school-readiness'? What makes up 'the standard school-ready child?'

These perceptions constitute the ideological code of a 'standard school-ready child'. The findings show that regardless of the teachers' critical views of the different aspects of the assessment materials, they nevertheless follow and navigate within the institutional discourse and the system in which they are part.

A child who masters the majority culture

This is the first of three key characteristics that make up the 'standard school-ready child'. Casper and Camilla are two ECEC teachers working in a kindergarten located in what the Danish government considers a 'ghetto area' on the outskirts of Copenhagen. Only a few children with native majority backgrounds are enrolled in their kindergarten, and there are substantial variations in language screening scores between majority and minority children. In this excerpt, the teachers address the striking degree of socioeconomic segregation in the settlement patterns of their area, Bordertown, and talk about the annual language assessments:

> Casper: If you walk 200 metres in that direction [points], you are over in the villa area of Bordertown. There, you find some of the most expensive housing in Copenhagen. They [the residents] are highly educated; some of them even have au pairs from Thailand! Lawyers, doctors…the children from that area, they are completely different, right. That little light-haired boy over there, Eric [nods in his direction].
>
> Interviewer: Yes, the one who bumped his head? [I met him when I arrived earlier in the day.]
>
> Casper and Camilla: Yes.

Casper: He scored 90 something when he arrived as a 3-year-old!

Camilla. Yes, very high. Out of a hundred.

Casper: (…) But we have a vast group of children here who score zero when they start here as 3-year-olds.

Stories such as Casper's and Camilla's were frequent among the teachers, indicating a substantial variation between majority and minority children's test scores and the segregated nature of the districts in their city. Casper later told me that children like Eric from the 'villa area' were rare and were usually 'only' enrolled in their kindergarten because some Danish academic parents actively chose their kindergarten based on 'idealistic' motives.

The teachers highlighted that (not) being 'school ready' is unequally distributed between social groups and that the minority-language children are implicitly disfavoured in the language screening tests for not having the same frames of reference as the Danish majority-children. ECEC teacher Aisha noticed that several children with minority-language backgrounds in her kindergarten had difficulties with the numerous questions measuring children's ability to rhyme:

Aisha: […] and then I say, 'stick, father, wind' [Danish: *pinn, far*, *vind*], which of these rhymes with another? The child is supposed to exclude this one [far/father], and if they do, then they understand rhyming, but unfortunately, many of our children do not.

Interviewer: Rhyming?

Aisha: Yes, particularly for our minority-language children. They do not have rhyming as part of their everyday routines, and their parents are not as skilled at rhyming with their children as Danish parents are at playing with words [in that manner]. That is why many minority-language children have a hard time with rhyming.

Interviewer: Is it a cultural matter?

Aisha: I also have a minority-language background. We [Arabic speakers] use rhymes but not in the same way. Not with two words resembling each other, like 'stick, wind' [Danish: *pinn*, *vind]*. We [in Arabic-speaking countries] rhyme with entire sentences, more like poetry […] a little like in French: '*un ver vert va vers un verre vert*'. It sounds the same, but it means 'a green worm in a green glass.' It's an entire sentence, but it sounds the same.

The language assessment has an entire section dedicated to rhyming, so if the child is unfamiliar or has difficulty with Danish ways of rhyming, they lose a substantial number of points. Consequently, the ECEC teachers spend a lot of time teaching traditional Danish rhymes to children, not only with future screening tests in mind but also because rhyming is an important part of traditional Danish child culture.

Other examples of cultural bias in the material ranged from a picture of a tie ('What is this?') or when the teachers are to present the child with a book page ('In which direction do you read?' (e.g. right to left/left to right). The teachers were frustrated but also laughed at the absurdity of the disjuncture of references between the everyday world of the multicultural neighbourhoods in which the kindergartens were located and the contents of the language assessment materials. Simultaneously, they expressed resignation in terms of the status quo, that the assessment tools 'are what they are' and that none of the teachers had made a formal complaint about this issue.

A child with strong language proficiency

This is the second key characteristic of 'the standard school-ready child'. Although other aspects of a child's development also impact the overall school-readiness assessment, the ECEC teachers reported that a focus on language is especially pressing and so is parent involvement. This is because of the high-stakes assessment of the kindergarten class and the high share of children with minority-language backgrounds in their kindergartens.

Here, Jakob describes his worry about a boy he believes will not be deemed 'lingually ready' [*Sprogparat*] in time for an ordinary school transition.

> We can see that this child is not very well versed with letters; [he] does not know the letter, even though [he] is almost six years old. But we can practice with [him]: 'What are the names of the letters? How many letters are there in your name?' Stuff like that. But we are not a school, so we do not sit here and teach them the alphabet; that is not our job. […] The parents should also do something at home, teach their child about the letters. So, when they arrive here, they know the letters, they can write their name or something […] talk about the letters of the alphabet or something, without the kindergarten becoming a school where you are taught it.

Jakob underlined the importance of distinguishing 'school preparation activities' from 'school activities'. He does not wish to implement school activities, such as teaching the alphabet, as this contradicts his pedagogical perceptions of 'not being a school', but he is simultaneously worried about the child's future, as he was supposed to start school that year. Ambiguity and ambivalence are present in his description of the child learning the letters and the parents talking with their child about the letters in the way he draws a line between talking and teaching and learning the letters and/or talking about the alphabet.

As Jakob's interview excerpt reveals, the ECEC teachers have an academically oriented approach to preparing children for school, even though they are critical of bringing 'school-like' activities into a kindergarten. The teachers were worried about several of the minority children's language development and some parents' lack of comprehension of the severity of their children's developmental issues and the high stakes of their future language screening. The way Jakob spoke about school readiness displays how important individual readiness is understood by ECEC teachers and how it challenges different social perceptions of school readiness and child development among parents.

In the same manner, as parent involvement [or perceived lack thereof] manifested as a problem and a disadvantage for many minority children, the teachers agreed that 'correct' parent involvement, such as parents supporting their children's language development at home in a manner that aligns with a curriculum, has given native majority-children an advantage when performing the test.

A child who makes 'the cut'

To be deemed 'lingually ready' [*sprogparat*] for school transition, a child residing in what the government deems a 'at-risk neighbourhoods' or a 'ghetto area' must score 15 percent or above on the language screening test. In a group interview, Karen, Patrick and Anne mentioned the problem of context and how the relationship between those who perform a screening, and the child influences the results and the child's interest in the testing situation.

Anne: It [who performs the screening] really affects the outcome.

Patrick: I agree…[…] Previously, there was one woman who performed all language screenings, despite not knowing the children [she was testing]. I was allowed to view some of the screening results, and I thought, 'That is puzzling'! You can always repeat the screening and get a *completely* different result.

Karen: Which staff member performs the language screening matters a lot for the outcome.

The teachers observed that it matters who performs a language assessment and when and where it is conducted. Patrick also mentioned that some children love the attention they receive following the individual screening procedures, a few children even ask the teachers to test them again, while others are less enthusiastic about the screening situation. The teachers tried to account for variations by, for example, avoiding testing children immediately after a long vacation, arranging for children to be tested by the teacher with whom they are most attached or attempting to readminister the test if they felt the child was in a bad mood that day. However, some ECEC teachers are stricter than others when it comes to providing children with second chances or hints during screening tests.

Here is another excerpt from my conversation with Casper and Camilla in which Casper address the disruption that the screening test creates for some minority-language children's transition and how numerous children with migrant backgrounds stand no chance against the government's criteria for 'lingual readiness'.

Especially last year, we had ten [children] who scored below fifteen [percent] [the cutoff limit] when they were supposed to start [school]. That's no good. We are obliged to account for that we actually have [done something]: that we have made a 'plan of action,' and that we have done this and that, right. And then it also depends on …we have had this discussion with the municipality…that some of the children have not made enough progress… Sometimes, we get five-year-olds directly from Pakistan, and when they start here, they might score zero, and if they score ten the following year when we send them off [to kindergarten class], we think it's fantastic and that we actually have done a really good job. But the municipal administration does not [think so] because they are rigid…You must exceed fifteen [percent].

Kindergartens regularly receive thorough supervision from the pedagogic consultants employed by the municipality. This is when the ECEC teachers' pedagogic practices are assessed. They are observed for several days and need to account for how they have worked towards improving children's development of various skills, particularly children with low test scores.

In the previous excerpt, Casper addressed his frustration with how test scores shift the focus away from children's actual progress, predispositions and the contexts in which the test scores were produced. Regardless of how much progress a child has made, it does not matter to the municipal administration if the child does not make the screening's 15 percent cutoff limit. The discrepancy between everyday life in high-minority, low-income neighbourhoods and 'the standard school-ready child' creates obstacles in the assessment of minority-language children's school readiness and for their future school transition.

Several ECEC teachers described the experiences of teachers from school's leisure activity department or primary school teachers contacting them a few weeks or months after a child

graduated from kindergarten, asking for the kindergarten to take the child back. Frequent problems arise in such cases, including the child's previous placement, potentially already being filled by another child and the child suffering a negative experience of being returned to kindergarten while his or her friends reimain in kindergarten class on the school premises.

Children are usually stopped from starting school because of concerns other than language difficulties, such as behavioural issues. Nevertheless, language development is often mentioned by teachers as a part of the issue.

> In the next section, Merete addresses the topic of retaining a child in kindergarten:
>
> Interviewer: So, instead of retaking kindergarten class, do you repeat the last year of kindergarten?
>
> Merete: Yes, and some of our children start kindergarten class and do an extra year in kindergarten class. It depends on what the parents choose to do.
>
> Interviewer: Okay, but do you give a recommendation and then they decide whether to [keep the child in kindergarten]?
>
> Merete: Yes, we usually recommend that they allow [the child] to stay here so they can remain with their friends in a familiar environment. And when they are to progress to kindergarten class, then they continue with the children they started school with. If they first start kindergarten class with one group of children and then everyone else goes on, and the child has to stay while everyone else leaves, here [in kindergarten], they are not affected in the same way.

According to government policy, low-scoring children are supposed to be retained in kindergarten classes on school premises (Danish Government 2018). Nevertheless, the ECEC teachers preferred to retain a low-scoring child for an extra year in kindergarten to protect children from the possible negative experiences of rejection and being shuffled between a school and an unfamiliar kindergarten and, consequently, the risk of suffering a negative experience of school transition.

Since it is allowed to retain a child for an extra year in kindergarten, if a child's parents send a formal request, this functions as a strategy to bypass the policy. The ECEC teachers reported that keeping a child in kindergarten for an additional year, results in them being too old for retainment in kindergarten classes at a later stage, even if they continued receiving weak scores.

Discussion

In this article, I have investigated the social organisation of ECEC teachers' assessment of minority-language children's 'school readiness' and their pedagogic work in kindergarten in anticipation of children's school transition. Based on Danish ECEC teachers' accounts of working with minority-language children, assessing their language development ('lingual readiness') and school readiness, I identified three key characteristics of 'the standard school-ready child': *A child who masters majority culture*, *a child with strong language proficiency*, and *a child that makes the cut.*

This ideological code aligns with dominant-class perceptions and is embedded in the Danish government's assessment materials, reproducing replicable understandings of what

a 'school-ready child' is. To be perceived as school ready, minority-language children must acquire the cultural references of a Danish-born child and preferably follow the language development of a monolingual majority-child. The assessment tools, materials and standardised reports arguably provide the terms under which Danish ECEC teachers become institutionally accountable; hence, the understanding of minority-language children's school readiness is a product of complex social relations.

Despite the complex social organisation involved in a child's school transition, an individualistic understanding of 'school readiness' as something that primarily has to do with each child's 'individual preparedness' shapes ECEC teachers' work. Assessment scores shift focus away from children's progress, predispositions and the contexts in which test scores are produced.

These findings align with previous research on transitions and perceptions of school readiness (Akaba et al. 2020; Boyle, Grieshaber, and Petriwskyj 2018; Brown, Ku, and Barry 2020). Hence, the dominant perception of school readiness is that it is minority-language children who need to be ready for school and less imperative for schools to be ready for minority-language children who struggle with a majority language.

In the case of Denmark, the discrimination against minority-language children in education is systematic on an implicit level, but also made explicit on a policy level by setting stricter standards for 'school readiness' in socially disadvantaged and immigrant-dense neighbourhoods. The first two key characteristics, a child who masters the majority culture and a child with strong language proficiency, are implicitly biased towards monolingual majority-children. The third characteristic, a child who makes 'the cut', is, however, more explicit in its targeting of children with low socioeconomic status and/or immigrant backgrounds.

The ideological code of 'the standard school-ready child', which is embedded in the perceptions of school readiness in policy documents, assessment materials and teachers' everyday talk, constructs boundaries and obstacles for minority-language children's school transitions. These boundaries create tensions for minority-language children's transitions, arguably contradicting the political goal of a more cohesive transition from kindergarten to primary school in Denmark, at least for children from minority backgrounds (Christensen 2019, 2020).

ECEC teachers are unwillingly positioned in an ambivalent role in the reproduction of stratified educational outcomes between minority and majority-children. This current study's findings indicate that even if ECEC teachers are critical of educational and integrational policies, they nevertheless accept and manoeuvre within the school-readiness discourse. Sometimes, teachers strategically and invisibly bend the rules to make them more in line with what they believe is in children's best interests, such as the hidden practice of holding children back from starting kindergarten class as a means to protect them from the negative consequences of not making the 15 percent cut on the high-stakes assessment in kindergarten class. At the same time, ECEC teachers' coping mechanisms could unintentionally support the survival of this policy.

I argue that 'the standard school-ready child' is not solely present in the in the school-readiness assessment of children of immigrant descent and socially disadvantaged backgrounds. This ideological code, which shapes teachers' assessments of school readiness, is logically just as present in the assessments of monolingual majority-children as they are assessed with the same materials as the minority-language children. However, arguably, based on previous research, the presence of the ideological code of 'the standard school-ready child'

would be less conspicuous in these instances, as statistically, majority children experience less friction (an 'ease') in contact with cultural bias in the education system compared to children from minority backgrounds (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Khan 2011; Lareau 2011).

Thus, I argue that the ideological code of 'the standard school-ready child' becomes visible in situations where the code clearly breaches with the everyday life and cultural references of the local context of a kindergarten, that is, in instances where most of the children in a child group are far from fitting the mould of school-readiness. It is the breaching itself that makes 'the standard school-ready child' visible and, consequently, a visibly problematic standard for school-readiness (Garfinkel 1984 [1967]).

Concluding remarks

The increased heterogeneity of a population demands a broader understanding of what constitutes 'school readiness' and who needs to be ready for what. This current study's findings point to an unfortunate consequence of a social integration policy aimed at decreasing segregation between minority and majority groups, which, paradoxically, could be increasing social disparities by setting minority-language children up for failure. By implementing high-stakes entry requirements for starting first grade in high-minority, low-income neighbourhoods, the Danish government's school-readiness demands challenge the core values of the Danish comprehensive school tradition to act as the primary learning institution for the wider population.

However, my data does not indicate how increased pressure from targeted language assessment might influence teacher–child relationships and consequently whether teachers treat minority-language children differently than their native peers. Thus, it would be valuable to study this further, to develop our understanding of the consequences of high-stakes assessments targeted at socially-disadvantaged children with minority-language backgrounds.

This article contributes to the knowledge of the changing perceptions of school readiness in ECEC by highlighting how school readiness is not only increasingly academically and individually oriented but also aligned with native-majority culture and idealising monolingualism. It not only addresses *which* perceptions of school readiness are shaping Danish ECEC teachers' assessment work but also trace *how* these perceptions are textually mediated through ideological codes embedded in assessment materials, consequently informing ECEC teachers' assessment practices.

Notes

1. Originating in the German Humboldt tradition, contemporary understandings of Bildung in education emphasizes the importance of character formation, the relationship between individual and community, and the development of critical consciousness through engaging in questions of value, meaning and truth (Sjöström et al. 2017; Vásquez-Levy 2002).
2. The Copenhagen Child and Youth department's (Child and Youth Department Copenhagen Municipality 2019, 2021) quality report for 2020 does not report screening test results in kindergarten classes by children's ethnic backgrounds, like the one for 2018. However, the report for 2020 suggests that children's pre-literacy skills generally have weakened since 2018 (Child and Youth Department Copenhagen Municipality 2021, 5).
3. The 'PISA shock' refers to the reactions from many Western countries in the wake of the publication of the first test results from the Program of International Student Assessment

(PISA) in 2000. The 'shock' was that many nation states were negatively surprised by their own population's weak test scores compared to those of other countries (Tveit 2014, 2018).

4. In Denmark, self-owned kindergartens are organized as trusts, managed by a parent board. They are subject to the same regulations as the municipally owned kindergartens, including assessment and documentation routines, according to Bekendtgørelse af lov om dag-, fritids- og klubtilbud m.v. til børn og unge (The Day Care Act 2018).

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Article 3

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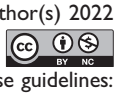

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Towards a renewed understanding of barriers to immigrant parents' involvement in education

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Abstract

This article investigates Danish and Norwegian early childhood education and care teachers' expectations of immigrant parents' involvement in kindergarten. The findings are interpreted in terms of the multifaceted interplay between social class relations, culture, migration and hegemonic ideals of intensive parenting and concerted cultivation. By taking the early childhood education and care teachers' standpoint, the article contributes a renewed understanding of previous reports of barriers to immigrant parents' involvement in their children's education. Based on early childhood education and care teachers' accounts, I identify three key tensions: *(1) conflicting perceptions of responsibility*, *(2) conflicting perceptions of children's roles and how to communicate with children* and *(3) conflicting perceptions of what kindergarten is and what constitutes valuable knowledge*. The findings suggest the existence of a distinct Nordic adaptation to intensive parenting, contradicting parts of the dominant understandings of concerted cultivation found in more school-oriented curricular contexts, such as the UK and France, while still maintaining the original key characteristics of concerted cultivation.

Keywords

Parent involvement, immigrant parents, early childhood education and care teachers, intensive parenting, concerted cultivation

Introduction

This article investigates early childhood education and care (ECEC) teachers' expectations of, and reactions to, immigrant parents' involvement in kindergarten. The Nordic countries are renowned for their low levels of inequality, social democratic welfare states (Esping-Andersen, 1990) and comprehensive education systems (Einarsdottir et al., 2015). However, studies reveal significant socio-economic disparities between native and immigrant populations, and a high degree of immigrant child poverty has been

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described as 'the Achilles heel of the Scandinavian welfare state' (Galloway et al., 2015). There are rising concerns over stratified educational outcomes between students of native and immigrant backgrounds. The recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) report states that the Nordic countries make up five of the eight Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries with the largest differences in educational test scores in favour of native-born students when controlling for socio-economic background (OECD, 2019: 185). Studies suggest that the educational achievement of children generally, and children with immigrant backgrounds particularly, is highly associated with their early majority oral language skills and pre-literacy development (Højen et al., 2019). Norwegian and Danish authorities are increasingly implementing various accountability policies and measures to strengthen children's majority language competency prior to the school transition. These policies are meant to secure equal opportunities and life chances for all children regardless of disparities in individual preconditions, immigrant status and socio-economic status (see, e.g. the Danish government (2018) and the Norwegian Ministry of Education (2020)).

Policymakers and researchers agree that a well-functioning partnership between teachers and parents is a key factor in ensuring children's overall educational success and well-being (Epstein, 2016[2011]; Kindergarten Act, 2005; The Day Care Act, 2018). The term *partnership* is widely used to indicate a tight collaborative effort, in which both parties share joint responsibility for children's educational development and well-being (Epstein, 2016[2011]). However, a growing body of scholarly literature indicates several barriers to the formation and sustenance of positive collaboration between teachers and parents of immigrant descent (Antony-Newman, 2019; Norheim and Moser, 2020). These barriers are widely identified as language barriers, power imbalance, teacher discrimination against immigrant parents and cultural differences between native teachers and parents of immigrant descent (Antony-Newman, 2019; Norheim and Moser, 2020; Huss-Keeler, 1997). However, we know less about ECEC teachers' expectations of, and reactions to, immigrant parents' involvement in kindergarten. Along these lines, the current article is guided by the following research questions: (*1*) *What type of parent involvement do ECEC teachers expect from immigrant parents?* (*2) How do teachers react if immigrant parents do not act in accordance with their expectations?*

Context

Norway and Denmark both have highly subsidised ECEC sectors, in which 97.3% and 84.3% of children aged 3–5 are enrolled in kindergarten, respectively (Glavind and Pade, 2020; Statistics Norway, 2021). Danish ECEC institutions are usually divided into *nurseries* for children aged between 0 and 3 years and *kindergarten* for children 3 and 6. Norwegian kindergartens operate within the same age-determined categories but refer to both age groups as belonging to *kindergarten*. For simplicity, I refer to both administrative structures as *kindergartens*. In both countries, kindergartens are governed under their own laws and regulations, separately from formal education (Kindergarten Act, 2005; The Day Care Act, 2018). However, kindergartens are recognised as educational institutions in both countries and are governed by the Ministry of Education. Formal education in school usually starts the year a child turns six, and starting school involves changing locations from kindergarten facilities to school premises.

The Nordic education system has a long tradition of emphasising democratic values, egalitarianism and social inclusion (Einarsdottir et al., 2015), and the Nordic kindergarten model is often contrasted to more 'school-readiness' oriented traditions (Bennett, 2005). Bennett (2005) identified two dominant traditions for ECEC curriculum development. He discerns between *the readiness for school tradition,* largely associated with Belgium, France, Ireland, the Netherlands and the UK, and *the social policy pedagogical tradition,* linked to the Nordic and central European countries. *The readiness for school tradition* is characterised by a prescribed ministerial curriculum with detailed goals in which learning outcomes and formal assessment are often required, teacher-directed activities, and a particular focus on knowledge and skills 'especially in areas useful for school readiness' (Bennett, 2005: 12). *The social policy pedagogical tradition,* on the other hand, is distinguished by broad curricular guidelines, no formal

assessment, focus on learning through play, following children's own learning strategies, and 'working with the whole child and her family' (Bennett, 2005: 12).

Previous research on the relationship between social class positions, immigrant parents' involvement and teacher–parent partnerships

The education system is widely perceived to play a key role in the reproduction of social class privileges (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Griffith and Smith, 2005; Jæger, 2009), and several scholars have demonstrated how kindergarten and school pedagogy mirror the hegemonic paradigm of middle-class culture (Griffith and Smith, 2005; Lareau et al., 2016; Reay, 1998; Stefansen and Aarseth, 2011; Stefansen and Skogen, 2010). Bourdieu's scholarly work has been at the forefront of a cultural turn for sociological class theory, described as a cultural class analysis, where various methodologies are utilised to investigate how class is 'lived', expressed and reproduced through cultural tastes and preferences (Savage et al., 2013). In this vein, the relationship between parents and children is widely identified as a critical domain for the transmittance of social class privileges, and scholars inspired by Bourdieu have identified relationships between parents' social class positions and different logics of childrearing (Gillies, 2006; Lareau, 2011; Lareau, 2011; Stefansen and Aarseth, 2011; Vincent and Ball, 2007).

The growing rate of migration creates further nuances in the relationship between teachers and parents and for parents' involvement in children's education. In turn, scholars are increasingly interested in studying the links between parents' class background, the globalisation of people and ideas and parent involvement in children's education (Golden et al., 2021). Contemporary studies on teacher–parent relations and immigrant parent involvement indicate that immigrant parents are statistically less involved in their children's schooling and report more barriers to involvement in kindergarten than native-born parents (Antony-Newman, 2019; Norheim and Moser, 2020). Existing research suggests that immigrant parents' modes of involvement are associated with their socio-economic status (Barglowski, 2019, Joiko, 2021), time spent in the host community, and parents' majority language abilities (Turney and Kao, 2009). A range of studies also finds that immigrant parents with foreign cultural and educational backgrounds often have a distinctive set of expectations of the education system potentially misaligning with local schoolteachers' pedagogic approaches and learning goals (Antony-Newman, 2019).

Previous empirical inquiries into the relationship between teachers and immigrant parents typically depart from the parents' perspective, often comparing the association between parents' background characteristics and their experiences interacting with their children's teachers (Antony-Newman, 2019; Norheim and Moser, 2020). Likewise, most research on the relationship between socio-economic class positions and parenting focuses on the discrepancies in the character of the relationships between native-born working-class and middle-class parents and the education system, or between native-born parents from different ethnic backgrounds (see, e.g. Lareau, 2011). Meanwhile, the ECEC teachers' perspective on the relationship between themselves and immigrant parents has received limited research attention (Norheim and Moser, 2020).

An analytical framework for understanding ECEC teachers' expectations of parent involvement

> "Although parenting is a personal, intensive and intuitive experience, it is also infused with class behaviours, values, actions and dispositions" (Vincent and Maxwell, 2016: 270).

Intensive parenting has emerged as a modern Western ideal for how parents, especially mothers, should engage in their children's overall development (Hays, 1996; Shirani et al., 2012). Hays (1996) originally coined the term *intensive mothering*. The use of the term has later been broadened by several scholars to *intensive parenting* as a response to societal changes in perceptions of parenting and family structures

(Shirani et al., 2012). The ideal of intensive parenting demands that parenting should be expert-guided, labour-intensive, emotionally absorbing and child-centred (Hays, 1996). This ideal is closely linked to neoliberal values, whereby the individual parent is held responsible for their child's future outcomes. Since parents' efforts are perceived as decisive for their children's future outcomes, parenting in itself becomes a risk-filled endeavour (Shirani et al., 2012). Along these lines, Lareau (2011), in her seminal study *Unequal Childhoods*, discovered a clear difference in parenting styles between parents from middle-class backgrounds and parents from poor or working-class positions, transcending parents' ethnic and religious backgrounds. Lareau found strong similarities between parents associated with the middle-class on one hand, and the poor and working-class on the other. While the parents belonging to the former category displayed intense engagement in every aspect of their children's everyday lives, including their schooling, the latter were less directly involved in their children's educational development. Rather than systematically cultivating children's social skills and cognitive development, parents from working-class positions relied on their children's natural growth. Lareau (2011) coined these two *cultural logics of child-rearing* as *concerted cultivation* and *the accomplishment of natural growth,* respectively.

Parents from working-class positions often rely on teachers taking responsibility for their child's educational development, while they as parents focus primarily on nurturing their children's physical well-being by ensuring that they are happy, fed, safe and clean (Gillies, 2006; Lareau, 2011; Stefansen and Skogen, 2010). Lareau (2011) described the verbal exchanges of working-class families in her study as mainly a one-sided issue of directives from parents to children. In contrast, she and other scholars have observed that middle-class parents more often engage their children in lengthy discussions, aimed at preparing them for conversing and arguing on their own behalf with professional adults such as teachers (Lareau, 2011; Stefansen and Aarseth, 2011). In this way, parents who master *concerted cultivation* facilitate ease in their own and their children's interactions with school officials (Khan, 2011; Lareau, 2011).

An important point is that working-class parents are just as eager as middle-class parents for their children to achieve educational success (Gillies, 2006). However, modes of childrearing associated with the working class are at odds with the normative ideal of *intensive parenting* and *concerted cultivation* in the education system. Consequently, working-class parents often find it harder than middle-class parents to meet institutional expectations from the education system (Gillies, 2006; Lareau et al., 2016; Stefansen and Skogen, 2010). In contrast, by aligning their parenting style to educational standards, middle-class parents better their chances of securing an advantaged position for their children (Vincent and Ball, 2007).

In the analysis, I draw upon *intensive parenting* (Hays, 1996) and Lareau's (2011) pairing of *concerted cultivation* and *the accomplishment of natural growth* as analytical concepts. Few have applied this lens to investigate how ECEC teachers react to immigrant parents' involvement in kindergarten and how this affects their relationships. Though Bourdieu, Hays and Lareau originally described the social class structures, parenting practices and ideals of French and American societies, their analytical concepts have proven highly relevant across different national and political contexts. Previous empirical research from the Nordic region suggests that their analytical concepts are useful for describing social class relations, even in more egalitarian social democratic welfare states such as Denmark and Norway (Jæger, 2009; Stefansen and Aarseth, 2011; Stefansen and Skogen, 2010).

Study and methods

The article departs from interviews with 22 ECEC teachers in Copenhagen (11) and Oslo (11) from April 2019 to January 2020. The interviews were semi-structured individual and group interviews with ECEC teachers with university bachelor's degrees granting them the status of a professional *pedagogue* (Denmark) or *kindergarten teacher* (Norway).

The original aim of the study was to explore how ECEC teachers work with children of minority language backgrounds' language development from children's first day of kindergarten until they transition to school, focusing primarily on which actors, texts and institutions partake in ECEC teachers' everyday work (Smith, 2005). The teachers were not explicitly questioned about parents' social class positions or parenting practices, nor were they asked to compare native and immigrant parents. However, during the interviews, it quickly became apparent that the teachers viewed the quality of their collaboration with parents as the most deciding and frustrating aspect of their work with children's language development. The relationship between teachers and parents proved deeply intertwined with almost every aspect of the teachers' pedagogic work. This inspired me to initiate a thorough analysis of the teachers' descriptions of their relationships with immigrant parents and how they perceive these parents' involvement in kindergarten.

The ECEC teachers were recruited from publicly subsidised kindergartens in low-income, high-minority neighbourhoods in Oslo and Copenhagen. I recruited participants from these areas for my study to maximise the utility of information concerning the assessment and school preparation of children of minority language backgrounds (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Therefore, when I speak of immigrant parents, I mainly refer to the segment of the immigrant population belonging to poor or working-class backgrounds (Lareau, 2011). The ECEC teachers did not use social class terminology when describing the parents; rather, they categorised the parents of the kindergarteners as immigrant parents, often in disadvantaged life circumstances, indicating that most immigrant parents could be classified as having working-class or poor social positions (Lareau, 2011). The teachers' educational level and teacher status arguably situate the teachers in this study as representatives of the middle-class (Lareau, 2011).

In the *first stage* of the analysis, I transcribed the audio-recorded interviews verbatim. Sections from the interviews were translated into English from Danish and Norwegian. Pseudonyms replaced names of people and places[1]. The data material was later coded in three stages using NVivo12. I started by *first* taking an inductive approach to investigating ECEC teachers' descriptions of their everyday work with minority language children's language development and their accounts of collaborating with immigrant parents. During the *second stage*, I focused further on the ECEC teachers' accounts of parent interactions and their recounting of episodes involving minor or major conflicts over parents' involvement or presumed lack of involvement – a recurring theme during the interviews. When analysing teacher–parent interactions, it became apparent that the teachers' anecdotes bore striking resemblance across the two national contexts. I found these similarities particularly interesting and chose to further investigate the institutional relations shaping these mirroring accounts of tensions in teachers' relationships with immigrant parents.

In the *third stage*, Hay's concept of intensive parenting, alongside Lareau's concepts of the accomplishment of natural growth and concerted cultivation, were applied as an analytical lens to investigate the ECEC teachers' accounts of parents' breaching their expectations of desirable parent involvement. I turned my attention towards the relationship between social class positions, the education system and parenting ideals, and particularly how these institutional relations underpin tensions in ECEC teachers' descriptions of their interactions with immigrant parents.

Based on the ECEC teachers' accounts, I identified three key tensions. The tensions are underpinned by teachers' experiences of themselves and parents having different perceptions, in turn leading to a mismatch in expectations influencing their collaboration. In the forthcoming section, the findings are presented thematically, identifying both the ECEC teachers' expectations, how they respond to immigrant parents' modes of childrearing and the teachers implicitly draw on ideals from *concerted cultivation* in their communication of how parents should involve themselves in their child's language development.

However, while the accomplishment of natural growth and the three key tensions identified in this study must be understood as conceptual lenses to unpack teacher–parent interactions, they should be viewed only as abstractions of the complex reality of this relationship. Since parenting ideals are not a static structure determining parent and teacher behaviour, concepts such as *intensive parenting* should rather be viewed as part of a discourse actively drawn upon in parenting and informing 'ideal' parent

involvement and ECEC teacher–parent relations. The analysis is not meant as a value judgement of various parenting styles but as a descriptive analysis.

Teacher expectations of parent involvement, reactions and experiences of tensions

The teachers partaking in this study generally spoke about immigrant parents during the interviews, primarily due to the low number of children with native backgrounds in their kindergarten. Although the kindergarten facilities are situated in low-income neighbourhoods, it did not necessarily mean that the migrant families living there were unresourceful or that they do not have higher education. Several teachers mentioned that they observed differences in parents' modes of involvement between different groups of immigrant parents, depending on their level of education. The following is an excerpt from my interview with Norwegian ECEC teacher Turid.

> Many of those who live here are refugees with low socioeconomic status […] They may never get a job because they do not have strong enough Norwegian skills. […] I observe that [parents] have different backgrounds, and I see how they are together as a family. […] [The Syrian families] are like a Norwegian family, they do a lot of activities with their children, they care a lot about their children's upbringing, and they talk a lot with [the staff].

Turid noticed that compared to other groups of immigrant parents in their neighbourhood, many comparatively highly educated Syrian parents had quickly entered the labour force, were highly involved in their children's kindergarten and more resembled 'Norwegian families' than other groups. Turid's example of the Syrian families serves as a good example of how social class and migration backgrounds may overlap in identifying people and groups as 'like us' or 'not like us'. Contradictory to the immigrant parents, the 'the Norwegian family' appears class-less in this excerpt. Descriptions of native-born parents were mainly used by teachers as a way of contrasting their experiences with parents of immigrant descent. However, due to my line of questioning mostly revolving around teachers' work with children of minority language backgrounds and the few native-born children enrolled in the kindergartens, actual descriptions of teachers' interactions with native-born parents are far between. The analysis of Danish and Norwegian ECEC teachers' experiences of interacting with parents pointed to several similar matching accounts of breached expectations and tensions in teacher relationships with parents, particularly in instances in which teachers perceive that a child has severe language developmental issues. Most of these tensions can be interpreted as expressions of ECEC teachers' rejection of *the accomplishment of natural growth* (Lareau, 2011), and should be read with this in mind. Additionally, some of the findings indicate that the perceived conflicting understandings in some instances are also underpinned by differing curricular traditions (Bennett, 2005).

Conflicting perceptions of responsibility

The first tension identified in teachers' accounts relates to disagreements over who is responsible for children's language development. The teachers viewed the quality of their collaboration with parents as something that could either benefit or potentially sabotage their pedagogic work. The teachers in both countries shared common frustrations regarding parents who delegate to them full responsibility for their child's language development, as teachers perceived this as a shared responsibility that should be undertaken in close collaboration. An overreaching theme in the interviews with both the Danish and Norwegian teachers was their frustration with parents' seeming conviction that a child's language developmental issue would 'sort itself out in due time' (Danish ECEC teacher Merete). Parents' seeming conviction in non-intervention was perceived by teachers as a detrimental barrier not only for their collaboration with parents but also for children's future educational success.

The ECEC teachers saw it as their responsibility to involve parents in their pedagogic work and expected parents to actively engage in their children's language development. As Christina, a Norwegian teacher, says, 'You don't just work with children, but with families, the parents. It's a package deal.' Along these lines, Danish ECEC teacher Camilla argued that ECEC teachers' pedagogic work in kindergarten could only support children's language development up to a certain point.

> *Camilla*: If we [the ECEC teachers] are to step up [our game], we must activate the parents because we cannot help [the children] just by teaching them more [in kindergarten]. What is missing is the parents' active participation… that they take responsibility for their child's development, right? They can't just drop off their children and expect us to make them "school-ready" and teach them Danish. But the issue is that they need to step out onto the court. They need to speak to their children.

The need to work with 'the entire family' was perceived by Christina, Camilla and the other ECEC teachers as a prerequisite for their job, not a choice per se. Teachers were sympathetic towards parents who were struggling with difficult life circumstances, and teachers in both countries made efforts to help parents to 'do desired involvement' by, for example, inviting parents to come read aloud for the children in their mother tongue. They also made several adjustments for parents who have trouble reading, using pictograms when communicating or informing parents that instead of reading books, they can talk with their children about the pictures. Nonetheless, they strived towards a 'partnership-like' relationship and encouraged the same type of involvement from all parents, regardless of their socio-economic background or immigrant status. The teachers perceived that this type of partnership relationship with parents were most efficient for enhancing children's language development and overall 'school-readiness'. Desired parent involvement was described by teachers as parents taking responsibility for their child's overall development, asking for ECEC teachers' advice, taking ECEC teachers' concerns seriously, reading to their children, engaging in educational play at home, and initiating lengthy everyday conversations with their children. The teachers became frustrated and worried if they experienced that parent dismissed their concerns regarding a child's language development. In this group interview, Danish ECEC teachers Karen and Anne addressed how parents' focus on other aspects of their child's needs, such as their language development, creates tensions in the ECEC teachers' attempts to involve them in their pedagogic work.

> *Karen*: What all our parents have in common, regardless of if they are illiterate, stay at home, unemployed, or if they speak Arabic, Finnish or Danish, is that they are all very concerned about their child's upbringing and wellbeing. The parents express much love when it comes to their child's wellbeing: they make sure that the children have beautiful clothes, et cetera, but what can I say… school and their child's [language] development is seemingly not as highly regarded.

> *Anne*: It's like the parents aren't aware of how much impact it would have [for their children's language development] if they would partake in educational play with their children when they get home from kindergarten. They don't understand, even if you [as an ECEC teacher] tell them. We always have meetings with the parents after the [mandatory biannual] language assessments. We always tell them, "Talk to your children on your way home from school or kindergarten. Take 15 min to look around and talk [about what you see] and read something." Right? But I do not think that they are aware of how much it matters that they as parents partake in *that* work.

Anne and other ECEC teachers were puzzled and frustrated by some parents' refusal to take an active role in their children's language development, despite expressing so much love and care in all other aspects of their children's lives. Therefore, they saw it as their responsibility to encourage parents to initiate enriching activities, such as educational play, at home.

The Norwegian ECEC teachers, such as Turid, voiced similar concerns:

Turid: We are part of [a project] in our city district, where we lend out books to parents and read to the children in kindergarten. We think it is important that the children are read to every day.

Interviewer: At home?

Turid: In kindergarten. It is not easy to control what happens at home, and unfortunately, there is very little borrowing of books from the parents. […] There are just three out of 18 parents who voluntarily borrow books. The others will maybe borrow a book home if we put it directly into their child's backpack, but we never get those books back. So, I do not believe there are many books in the [children's] homes, and, sadly, the language development work [in kindergarten] is not sufficiently followed up at home.

Parents' disinterest in bringing library books home from kindergarten was perceived by Turid and other ECEC teachers as an implicit rejection of the teachers' invitation to participate in their pedagogic work, thus breaching with the type of relationship they sought to have with parents.

Conflicting perceptions of children's roles and how to communicate with children

In this second section, I address teachers' descriptions of themselves and some parents having conflicting perceptions of how to communicate with children. In the first excerpt, the Norwegian ECEC teacher Ruth mentions how she experiences the way in which some parents communicate with their children as sabotaging children's language development.

Ruth: Some [children] struggle even more [than they need to] because their parents speak to them differently at home than we [ECEC teachers] would do. We speak *with* the children; many [parents] speak *to* their children. They are busy, and it is not their fault, because, for some, this is what they are used to.

Several ECEC teachers reported observing that many immigrant parents with low educational backgrounds mainly issue directives to their children rather than initiating more extensive conversations. If we look back at the previous interview excerpts with Camilla ('(…) they need to step out onto the court, they need to speak to their children') and with Karen and Anne ('We always tell them, "Talk with your children on your way home from school or kindergarten"'), the perceived issue of how parents communicate with their children is intertwined and overlapping with the other tensions mentioned. The Danish ECEC teacher Anne described the logic behind the one-sided communication between parent and child as 'children should be seen, but not heard'. Besides struggling with learning the majority language, several teachers observed that many children in kindergarten showed slow development in their first language. The teachers viewed this as a substantial disadvantage for children learning a second language. Aisha and several other ECEC teachers ascribed much of the children's delayed language development to their parents' lack of engagement in daily conversations with their children:

Aisha: We have one girl, soon to be five. She does not speak, only nods and points. Not because she cannot speak but because she sees no reason to. When her parents drop her off in the morning, it is just [mimics a nod from the child's parents], hand her over to an employee and leaves. […] She says *nothing* [throughout the day]. You hope that she at least understands… that she at least hears what you are saying […] It is a bit worrying, since she is supposed to start school next year. Where she will meet demands… There will be teachers who ask her questions, and she is expected to answer, but she does not have the vocabulary, and she is not used to an adult asking her questions and answering back to them.

To address the issue of silent communication, Aisha and a speech therapist arranged a meeting with the girl's parents to convince the father, in particular, to communicate differently with his daughter. However, 'the girl's father did not think it was necessary to talk with her […] "She is only four," he

said' (Aisha). This meeting resulted in Aisha and her colleagues setting rules that pressured him to speak to his daughter:

> He must say "Goodbye," and [the daughter] has to answer him, he must ask her how her day has been, and then she needs to answer. He needs to pressure himself to speak to her. [On their walk home], he should say 'look at that nice car,' 'look at that little man,' or whatever, just so that she can listen [to something].

The ECEC teachers' and some parents' conflicting understandings of what children need and who is responsible for children's language development create tensions in teacher–parent relationships. Several other ECEC teachers told similar stories like those of Aisha, Karen, Anne, Camilla and Ruth of parents loving their children but not speaking enough with them. In the discussion, I further discuss how the issue of communication can be linked to a deeper-rooted ongoing debate concerning children's roles and children's rights.

Conflicting understandings of what kindergarten is and what constitutes valuable knowledge

The ECEC teachers expressed frustration with what they perceived as parents' misunderstandings or failings to recognise what kindergarten *is* in the Nordic context, what children are supposed to learn in kindergarten and *how* they should acquire these skills and knowledge. They also often pointed to how conflicting views regarding what kind of activities are or are not pedagogically enriching could create tension in their collaboration with parents.

Both the Danish and Norwegian teachers presented views of the mandate of kindergarten aligning with the Nordic kindergarten model: valuing learning through play, following children's own learning strategies, and a rejection of implementing 'school-like activities' in kindergarten. However, pre-academic skills such as knowing the alphabet and counting are nevertheless focused upon during the last year of kindergarten. The interviewed ECEC teachers were especially frustrated with parents who focused on enhancing their children's ability to speak English, learning the alphabet or count. Simultaneously, teachers reported that some parents were disappointed with the kindergarten's focus on 'learning through play'. Here, Norwegian teachers Roger and Christina recount interactions with a disappointed mother and eager parents:

> *Roger:* [mimicking the mother] "So what do you do in kindergarten? Nothing?" […] We had a French mother here last semester who said, "Norwegian kindergartens… what are the children learning?" She felt she had to keep her child at home one day each week to focus on school preparation. I have received similar comments from other [parents] from other parts of Europe as well. And then [on the other hand], you have those who think that [kindergarten] is just somewhere to place your child when you're at home or at work. So, there are both.

> *Christina*: When I worked in the nursery department [*småbarnsavdeling*], there were some parent-teacher conferences where I had to explain "this is not a school." This was in the nursery, and the parents were concerned with "a, b, c, 1, 2, 3" and informed us that they were practising this at home.

Conflicting understandings and expectations of what role kindergartens serve and what types of knowledge and skills are useful for children to learn to underpin several of the tensions identified in the teachers' descriptive accounts. Roger and Christina's stories point to an interesting paradox of what makes up 'desired parent involvement'. I received no information concerning the French mother's socio-economic status. Nevertheless, Roger's account of their interaction situates her beliefs within a 'readiness for school' tradition of curricular development often associated with French ECEC curricula (Bennett, 2005). This could indicate that ECEC teachers' and parents', such as the mother's, pedagogic beliefs

draw on two different lines of curricular traditions. In cases such as that of the French mother, the issue was not that she did not involve herself *enough* in her child's language development or that she did not cultivate her child's development at home. Rather, she and other parents were doing it in a manner misaligned with the ECEC teachers' pedagogic approaches and national curriculum. Thus, there was no *lack* of involvement, but what teachers perceived as parents' performing a 'misunderstood' type of involvement.

Moreover, teachers' expressed frustration with several parents' enthusiasm over what they interpret as enriching outcomes from their children's iPad use.

> *Ruth*: There is a lot of iPad use in another language [than Norwegian], and English TV channels, children's shows.
>
> *Christina*: Probably. I think there is some uncertainty or denial [amongst parents]. [The parents] often portray it like, "Oh, he understands so much English [because of the iPad]: Apple, Orange!" The child's response is instant, right, but it's just a form of mimicking. If I were to ask them [in English]: "Could you hand me an orange?", they would not necessarily understand [what I was asking for]. […] They [Parents] claim that "he knows so many English words," but then there's no [actual] comprehension.

In Norway and Denmark, English is a subject taught from primary school, but for children who struggle in their first language and Norwegian/Danish, the ECEC teachers believe that the excessive use of digital screens hinders rather than facilitates a positive learning environment. However, some parents interpret their children's learning outcomes differently from ECEC teachers. These findings were also profound in Denmark:

> *Camilla:* I think a lot of our children are placed with an iPad [at home]. And parents believe, and some Danish parents, too, that it is really enriching for children's development. They think that if a child has the right apps, they will learn [a lot of valuable skills]… but they do not.
>
> *Casper*: Some children here have a very weak vocabulary, both in Danish and in their mother tongue. But when you put on the song… do you know "Baby Shark" [a children's song, sung in English, popular on YouTube]?
>
> *Interviewer:* Yes [mumbles the song].
>
> *Casper:* Precisely! So, when you put that song on, it does not matter if [the children] can speak or not, everyone can sing "baby shark duh duh duh duh duh duh," or the other one, "Johny Johny Yes Papa."
>
> *Camilla*: And everything is from YouTube, right. And at the same time, the child scores 0% [out of a hundred on the annual Danish language assessment].

Camilla underlines that she and her colleagues do not exclusively experience tensions concerning children's 'at-home screen use' with immigrant parents. However, Camilla and Casper perceive excessive YouTube watching as particularly disturbing for minority language children's language development, as they notice that several already have difficulties expressing themselves in both their mother tongue and Danish.

Discussion

The analysis shows how teachers' expectations of parents' involvement are infused with regional and classed understandings of what children should learn in kindergarten and what the division of tasks and responsibilities between teachers and parents should be. ECEC teachers' breached expectations of

immigrant parent involvement can be understood in terms of a complex interplay among social class positions, immigration and the idealisation of intensive parenting and concerted cultivation in the education system (Hays, 1996; Lareau, 2011; Lareau et al., 2016). These powerful institutional relations serve as grounds for ECEC teachers' experience of tensions and a mismatch in pedagogic beliefs and role expectations, implicitly underpinning tensions in teacher–immigrant parent relations in several ways. Based on ECEC teachers' accounts, I identified three interlinked key tensions: *(1) conflicting perceptions of responsibility, (2) conflicting perceptions of children's roles and how to communicate with children and (3) conflicting perceptions of what kindergarten is and what constitutes valuable knowledge.*

An *intensive* parenting ideal shapes how ECEC teachers view responsibility and the parents' role in children's educational development (Hays, 1996), and they expect their relationship with parents to take the form of a close *partnership* (Epstein, 2016[2011]). According to teachers' descriptive accounts, several parents with immigrant backgrounds are not interested in joining a *partnership* on the teachers' terms and might expect another form of relationship with their child's teacher. Thus, the three key tensions can be understood as barriers to the formation of the partnership that the teachers are striving for with parents.

Moreover, the findings suggest that the teachers reject *the accomplishment of natural growth* as an acceptable parenting strategy and perceive this style of parenting as a threat to children's language development (Lareau, 2011). However, the teachers' worries about what they describe as parents' ways of issuing directives to their children, instead of engaging them in discussions, also mirrors current debates within the field of sociology of childhood and the growing focus on children's democratic rights (also mentioned in The Day Care Act (2018) and Kindergarten Act (2005)). Accordingly, the tension of communication may be underpinned by a deeper-rooted conflict concerning views of children's roles and democratic rights – to what degree a child has a right to be heard and how children should be perceived and treated by adults (see also Gulløv and Kampmann (2021)). These findings align with Lareau's (2011) descriptions of children's differing roles in poor/working-class and middle-class families. In Lareau's study, she found that children's meanings were more highly appreciated in middle-class families than in the poor and working-class families, in which children's voices were more often overlooked or ignored as irrelevant. The increasing focus on the topic of children's democratic rights emerged after the original publishing of Lareau's famous study in 2003, arguably *views of children's roles* could thus be introduced as a new dimension to Lareau's original typology of concerted cultivation (See Lareau (2011: 31)), also serving as an interesting avenue for future research.

Lareau (2011) and Hays (1996) note the relationship between economic and historical developments, local culture and parenting ideals in their scholarly work. Scholars have previously called for more research attention to how parents in underprivileged positions approach the educational cultivation of their children, but also how different cultural contexts shape how 'correct educational cultivation' is perceived in different cultivational contexts (Golden et al., 2021). This study serves as an empirical example of this relationship, as the findings suggest that there exists a distinct Nordic adaptation to *intensive parenting*. This adaptation contradicts parts of the dominating understandings of *concerted cultivation* in Anglo-Saxon countries, while still maintaining the same general characteristics of expert guidance, child-centredness and aligning enriching home activities to kindergarten curricula (Hays, 1996; Lareau, 2011; Stefansen and Aarseth, 2011). While the Nordic approach to concerted cultivation arguably aligns with the *social pedagogy policy tradition* of curricular development (Bennett, 2005), previous studies of concerted cultivation in Anglo-Saxon countries seem to mirror types of pedagogic approaches widely associated with the *readiness for school tradition.* For example, Vincent and Ball's (2007) describe how high-end London nurseries offer extra activities such as ballet and French classes or how the middle-class mothers in Reay's (1998) study enrolled their pre-school children in extracurricular mathematics classes. The Danish and Norwegian ECEC teachers in this current study seem to, on the other hand, reject parents' enthusiasm for such types of activities. The ECEC teachers' experience of parents' understanding of concerted cultivation breaching their own becomes particularly evident in instances in which immigrant parents implement concerted cultivation strategies from their home countries and experience friction with ECEC teachers as a consequence. This can be seen in, for example, Christina's emphasis on

communicating to immigrant parents that kindergarten in the Nordics is 'not a school'. In this sense, parents' modes of performing concerted cultivation, and whether these pursuits are successful, are not only dependent on parents' distribution of capital but also mirror dominant pedagogic beliefs in the local context, suggesting there is no single form of concerted cultivation that is applicable to all national contexts, but rather multiple adaptations varying by national traditions for curriculum development. The ECEC teachers' accounts suggest that they believe many immigrant parents do not comprehend what the social mandate of kindergarten are or what is expected of them as parents in their current local communities. If we borrow Lareau's terminology, the teachers seem to indicate that some immigrant parents do not understand the *Nordic rules of the game* (Lareau et al., 2016). It is, however, not a given that parents would automatically accept ECEC teachers' pedagogic beliefs even if they understood what these beliefs entailed.

The article contributes not only to developing our understanding of ECEC teachers' relations with immigrant parents but also ECEC teachers' role in the reproduction of social class privileges and attempts to resist stratified educational outcomes. The article's focus on the ECEC teachers' standpoint helps to develop our understanding of the complex relationship between teachers and parents of immigrant descent by illuminating the comparatively under-researched perspective of ECEC teachers' expectations of, and reaction to, immigrant parents' involvement in kindergarten, instead of focusing primarily on the parents' experiences. This point is important, as parents and ECEC teachers do not necessarily interpret each other's actions as intended. The current study's findings mirror what we already know from previous research – that parents from poor and working-class backgrounds tend to prefer a clear division between what happens at the parents' workplace and in the children's educational institutions and what happens at home (Lareau, 2011). While middle-class parents, on the other hand, are often more willing to blur the lines between home and work/school/kindergarten and foster a sense of continuity between the two spheres by intentionally aligning enriching activities at home with curricular activities of their children's kindergarten/school (Stefansen and Aarseth, 2011; Vincent and Ball, 2007). The teachers in the current studies' accounts of several immigrant parents with poor or working-class backgrounds' reliance on what can be identified as the accomplishment of natural growth, align with Stefansen and Skogen's (2010) findings in their study of Norwegian native-born working-class parents' involvement in kindergarten. As such, several of the tensions that teachers report in the current study, can possibly largely be explained by the parents' social class backgrounds. Prior studies departing from the parents' perspective suggest that this is because parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to both trust and rely more on professionals' knowledge than parents from higher socio-economic class positions, believing that teachers will know and do what is in their child's best interest (Gillies, 2006; Lareau, 2011; Stefansen and Skogen, 2010). This delegation of responsibility from parent to teacher, as the current study findings also indicate, can potentially be misunderstood by teachers as immigrant parents 'not caring' about their children's education instead of a possible humble gesture on the parents' part (Antony-Newman, 2019; Huss-Keeler, 1997). These patterns can evidently have a negative outcome for parents who choose this strategy and their children, in contrast to parents who engage more intensely in their children's language learning, particularly for those of migrant descent. As previously mentioned, it is important to note the variability of characteristics and outcomes among immigrant families. Far from all migrants live in precarious socio-economic circumstances; however, migration may complicate class positions and create situations in which parents must deal with unfamiliar institutional structures, such as kindergarten. Existing empirical research (see, e.g. Barglowski, 2019) and the current study's findings indicate that teachers might cooperate with some migrants better than with others, which may also be an issue of parents' social class positions. The context of the current study limits it to describing ECEC teacher perceptions of immigrant parents residing in low-income, high-minority areas in Denmark and Norway. However, teachers' expectations and perceptions of immigrant parents' involvement in these neighbourhoods are arguably linked to hegemonic beliefs about 'good parenting' and conflicting curricular traditions transcending the particularities of the local contexts of this current study (Bennett, 2005; Hays, 1996; Lareau, 2011).

Concluding remarks

Ideal constructs of what are considered desirable ways of 'doing' intensive parenting and performing concerted cultivation seem to vary by national context and curricular traditions. The increasing global migration of families and the changing contextual circumstances of kindergarten and teacher–parent relationships call for more empirical studies exploring the degree of mismatch between the local expectations of teachers and parents across different migrant groups, both by country of origin and by socioeconomic background. Studying teachers' expectations of parent involvement presents a fruitful opportunity for unpacking ideal constructs of desirable forms of parent involvement, and how the reproduction of stratified educational outcomes is produced and challenged in the complex relationships between teachers, parents and children. Lastly, there is a need for culturally sensitive policies and practices that can broaden the existing patterns of parental behaviours and facilitate more successful cooperation between ECEC teachers and parents of immigrant descent.

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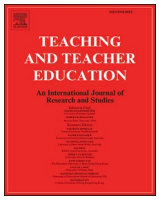

Review article

Early childhood education and care teachers' perceptions of school readiness: A research review

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ABSTRACT

This systematic configurative review investigates how existing empirical research addresses the topic of early childhood education and care (ECEC) teachers' perceptions of school readiness. 27 quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods studies were reviewed. The review suggests that most ECEC teachers perceive non-academic skills to be more deciding than academic skills for children's school readiness across national contexts and curriculum traditions. The review contributes valuable insights into the multifaceted interplay between ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness, local contexts, national traditions for curriculum development, research, and the globalisation of people and ideas about readiness.

1. Introduction

This research review aims to investigate how existing empirical research addresses the topic of ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness. Internationally, policymakers and scholars in a variety of fields are increasingly interested in the topic of *school readiness*, and a range of studies worldwide report that the academisation of ECEC has become a leading policy[1] of action for preparing children for formal schooling (Brown & Lan, 2015; Gunnarsdottir, 2014). Historically, primary education and ECEC have been described as different systems with their respective learning approaches, cultures, and values (Boyle et al., 2018). On the one hand, primary education is generally characterised by a curriculum focusing on enhancing children's academic skills and didactic approaches to teaching. Comparatively, ECEC and ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness have traditionally been more associated with a curriculum centred on developing children's socio-emotional and self-sufficiency skills, using play-based and child-centred learning approaches (Meisels, 1999; Russel, 2011). Educational scholars have argued that a misalignment between the two systems creates challenges for children's transitions between ECEC settings and primary school and have called for a more coherent transition experience for children (Boyle et al., 2018; Jónsdóttir et al., 2023).

In the wake of the persisting calls for more coherence between the two systems, an array of international studies report a global turn towards a *schoolification* of ECEC, meaning that ECEC curriculum is gradually evolving towards learning goals and learning methods traditionally associated with Primary school curriculum (Ackesjö & Persson, 2019). Along the same lines, researchers also report that the growing policy emphasis on early intervention is causing an "accountability shove down" of responsibility for children's future outcomes from schools to ECEC domains (Hatch, 2002).

Research suggests the growing emphasis on accountability, performativity and academic skills in policy and scholarly discourse is reshaping public perceptions of ECEC, ECEC teachers' work and school readiness (Perry et al., 2014). In the wake of these changes, scholars are critical of how the schoolification of ECEC and the changes in dominant

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[1] In the present review educational policy refers to decisions made by bodies with legal and legitimate authority, often constituted as curricula, framework plans, and regulations (Aasen et al., 2014).

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perceptions of school readiness in policy, might negatively affect ECEC teachers' work and the lives of children in ECEC by reinforcing an instrumental and potentially harmful view of childhood, child development and school readiness (Kimathi & Nilsen, 2021; Pierlejewski, 2020). Scholars are also worried that, despite the broad scholarly agreement on the importance of positive collaborations between teachers, parents, and schools[2] for children to experience a successful transition (Epstein, 2018), the increasing focus on children's individual school readiness might make policymakers and other stakeholders disregard the relational aspects of children's development (See for example Graue & Reineke, 2014).

Globally, governing bodies are using large public investments and resources to enhance children's school readiness in ECEC (Perry et al., 2014). The changing policy context has made scholars question to what extent increasing emphasis on young children's academic skills and school readiness has (re)shaped ECEC teachers' perceptions of what it means to prepare children for school and their relations with other actors (Perry et al., 2014). There are good reasons to believe that ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness shape their practice and their interpersonal relationships. Thus, it is important for policymakers and scholars to know more about ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness as ECEC teachers arguably are the ones who in the end decide how children in ECEC are prepared for school transition. Yet, we know little about what characterises the few existing empirical studies on ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness, and how research on ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness varies across different contexts. Although a study might be well executed and reported, the findings of the study could be atypical or highly influenced by local contextual factors and therefore should not be solely relied upon to describe larger international developments (Gough, Oliver, & Thomas, 2017). It is important for both the practise field, the policy field, and the scholarly field that we systematically investigate what we already know about ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness, how this knowledge has come about, and how research design and findings vary across contexts. It is useful to use systematic research reviews to answer these types of research questions, as they are valuable for identifying broader developments in existing lines of research (Gough et al., 2017).

Scholars have previously performed literature reviews investigating how ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness have changed over time within a singular national context (such as Brown & Lan, 2015) and international research reviews on children's transitions to school (Boyle et al., 2018). However, a systematic review of research investigating ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness across national contexts within the changing international policy context is lacking. Variation in research across national contexts is particularly important to keep in mind when considering the increasing popularity of borrowing and lending educational policy from one context to another. Thus, it is important to analytically investigate not only how teachers' perceptions might vary locally and nationally but also how research on ECEC teachers' perceptions varies across studies and national contexts.

In light of current changes in public discourse on early intervention and school readiness, this review study aims to investigate how existing empirical research addresses the topic of ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness. The main research question is:

What characterises existing empirical research on ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness?

Three supporting questions guide the focus of this study.

1) How do researchers conceptualise different perceptions of school readiness?
2) What skills and qualities do ECEC teachers as study participants think are the most deciding for children's school readiness?
3) Does research on ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness vary across national contexts, and if so, how?

2. School readiness

Educational scholars often distinguish between two main ways of understanding school readiness, the "readiness of schools and communities" and "children's preparedness to commence compulsory schooling" (Boyle et al., 2018, p. 175). Yet, as a general concept, school readiness is most commonly used to refer to the latter. The existing body of research is dominated by voices from different fields ranging from developmental psychology and pedagogy to medicine, economics and linguistics, each field studying various perspectives of what it implies for children to be "ready" (or not) to commence formal schooling. Thus, the field of research on school readiness is both vast and complex in its reach, and the concept is arguably vague in nature, as its meaning is intrinsically connected to various research fields, local and national curricula and communities and transnational agencies, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Therefore, the meaning behind the concept varies based on *who* uses it, *how* it is used and in *which setting*.

Several leading scholars have pointed out and problematised the complexity underpinning the idea of school readiness and how stakeholders such as teachers, parents, policymakers and scholars' perceptions of the term, are connected to multiple understandings of the relationship between child development, individuals, and society (See for example Graue & Reineke, 2014; Meisels, 1999; Petriwskyj, 2014). In his seminal study, Meisels (1999) identifies three[2] dominant interpretations of readiness that underpin teachers' methods used to assess and enhance children's learning at the outset of formal schooling. Meisels' first interpretation, *the idealist view*, builds on a notion that school readiness reflects children's biological maturation—that children will become ready if they are given "the gift of time". Following this logic, children's development mirrors internal prescribed stages, and as such environmental inputs have little influence on children's natural unfolding. His second interpretation, *the empiricist view*, reflects an interpretation of school readiness in terms of children's proficiency in specific skillsets and behaviours that can be used as precursors for predicting future school performance. Within this frame of interpretation, environmental inputs play a determinantal role in children's development in that it is maintained that these certain skills and behaviours can be enhanced through the help of outside intervention. In his third interpretation of readiness, *the social constructivist view*, readiness is interpreted in an arbitrary sense, as situationally specific, locally generated, and as such, highly dependent on environmental factors.[2] Meisels' concepts are not only relevant for analytically unpacking teachers' perceptions of school readiness but can also be used by scholars to analytically investigate different constructs of school readiness in scholarly and political discourse.

3. National traditions for curriculum development

What children need to be *ready for* when commencing primary education is arguably a relative question relating to local and national contexts with their own political climate, social demographic characteristics and historical traditions for curriculum development.

[2] Meisels' third interpretation of readiness, the social constructivist view, is inspired by the work of Graue (1993). Meisels (1999) also introduces a fourth interpretation of readiness, *the interactionist*, that he presents as his solution to the issues associated with the three existing dominating interpretations. This last conceptualisation of readiness can be understood in light of Bronfenbrenner's (1989) highly influential bioecological theory. Bronfenbrenner's theory presents children's development as a process that is shaped by a reciprocal relationship between different institutions of various levels such as family, ECEC and school. Thus, this theoretical perspective challenges the notion of readiness as something that develops "inside" each child by re-directing focus to how children's readiness is developed in a social process (Dockett, Petriwskyj, & Perry, 2014).

Internationally, researchers have found that traditions for curriculum development in ECEC can be broadly placed on a continuum between two types of curricular emphasis, *broad developmental goals,* and *focused cognitive goals* (Bennett, 2005). These two types of traditions can respectively be linked to two dominant pedagogic approaches, *the social pedagogical approach* and *the pre-primary approach*. These are, in turn, linked to two broad *curricular traditions* (Bennett, 2005). *The Readiness for school tradition* is primarily associated with countries such as the Netherlands, France, Ireland, Belgium, Mexico, and the UK, while *the Social policy pedagogical tradition* is associated with the Nordic countries and central European countries, such as Hungary, Germany, and Austria. The latter tradition is distinguished by a curriculum characterised by a holistic child-centred focus, broad guidelines, no formal assessment and learning through play. The former is characterised by teacher-directed activities, a prescribed ministerial curriculum with detailed goals and outcomes and a particular focus on knowledge and skills that are "useful for school readiness" (Bennett, 2005, p. 12). Bennett's concepts depart from his work on the OECD's thematic review comparing the ECEC systems of 20 countries volunteering to partake in the study. These are Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Finland, France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Korea, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, the UK, and the US. Thus, Bennett primarily discusses European and North American curriculum policy, which can be viewed as a limitation of the study and the conceptualisation of curriculum traditions. Yet, Bennett's analysis also shows that the identified patterns are arguably recognisable also outside Europe.

The national curricular traditions of the context of ECEC teachers' work represent an integral part of the ruling relations shaping their perceptions of school readiness. Yet, it is important to note that the curriculum tradition of a context does not define the current educational policy of the context. This means that just because a context is associated with a specific tradition, that does not mean that the current ECEC policy completely reflects the values and methods associated with this tradition. On the contrary, research shows that the curriculum traditions of a context might be significantly challenged by current changes to national and local policy (See for example Einarsdottir et al. (2015)). In the review, I use Bennett's (2005) typologies (*The Readiness for school tradition* and *the Social policy pedagogical tradition*) to distinguish between study contexts' differing traditions for curriculum development and pedagogic approaches and discuss how curriculum traditions might influence the formation of ECEC teachers' perceptions, how they approach readying children for school and how the topic has been researched.

4. Methodology and methods

Configurative research reviews can be described as a process where one seeks to construct knowledge based on a configuration of findings from a range of research studies, taking into account the different contexts, methods, and findings of each study (Thomas et al., 2017). The review aims to map existing research on ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness, configure findings from primary research to answer the research questions, and identify central research issues and gaps for future research (Gough et al., 2017; Gough & Thomas, 2017). In this section, I describe the identification, selection, and critical review of the studies.

4.1. Study selection

The review covers empirical peer-reviewed research published between 2012 and 2023. As I am primarily interested in reviewing literature addressing how teachers perceive school readiness in light of the current political climate, I limited the scope of relevant literature to the last 11 years (2012–2023). When comparing studies across national borders in light of current policy developments, it was most fruitful to focus on the most recent studies, as there are good reasons to believe that the time dimension might be just as important as the national context for the formation of teachers' perceptions of readiness. Existing research indicates that ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness have rapidly and significantly changed during the last years, from mainly underlining the importance of preparing children socially and emotionally for school transition towards a heightened focus on enhancing children's academic skills (Bassok et al., 2016; Brown & Lan, 2015; Hustedt et al., 2018). The review of existing research was conducted in February–May 2022. The searches were replicated in June 2023, to include new publications. To discover relevant peer-reviewed journal articles, I used Boolean operators to search databases in *EBSCO host* (including Education Source, ERIC, Information Science Source (LISS), SocINDEX and Teacher Reference Centre) and Web of Science. The key terms that were combined in the searches were "school-readiness", "ECEC", "teacher", and "perception". I also used neighbouring terms, synonyms, and truncations to cast a wide net. The term *teacher* was chosen because I sought to include studies focusing on the perceptions of professionally trained teachers. See Appendix A for an overview of key terms, Boolean operators, and specific search criteria.

I used the following selection criteria.

(1) I included journal articles using *school readiness* or *kindergarten readiness* as a central concept. Both terms refer to children's "readiness" to start the first year of formal schooling, although the entry age for formal schooling varies according to the educational system in each study's context.
(2) The sample was restricted to empirical studies focusing on teachers working within the ECEC sector. Studies were only included if the authors clearly distinguished between responses from ECEC teachers and other actors. In most countries, the year children start compulsory education, and the year children start primary school are the same; however, this is not the case for all countries.
(3) ECEC teachers' perspectives needed to be the focus of analytical interest. I also included studies comparing ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness to the perceptions of teachers working in higher grades or of other actors, such as parents.
4) I only included peer-reviewed articles to ensure the quality of the studies in my sample.

I excluded theoretical studies, studies of first-grade teachers' perceptions of school readiness, studies focused on determining teachers' readiness literacy and studies investigating teachers' expectations for children transitioning to kindergarten or first grade from a home environment. Moreover, I excluded studies examining pre-service teachers' perceptions as I primarily wanted to study teachers with significant experience working on the frontline and bearing the responsibility of being fully trained professionals. Furthermore, I only included studies in English.

Search results were uploaded to the systematic review software *EPPI Reviewer*. In this programme, I started to select studies following the preset inclusion and exclusion criteria listed in the previous section (see F. 1). First, I removed 32 duplicate studies. Second, I included and excluded studies based on a screening of the 114 articles. Next, 93 studies were excluded based on the study's topic after screening on full text, and I discovered one more duplicate. Third, at this point, 20 studies were left, all of which were read in detail. Fourth, the reference lists and citations of the 20 remaining studies were searched, surfacing five more relevant studies. This strategy produced 25 studies. The additional identical searches performed in June 2023 surfaced two more studies fitting the scope of the review leaving the final number of studies at 27. See Appendix B for a flow chart illustrating the searching and selection process.

4.2. Analysis

The reviewed articles were read in full several times. The articles first underwent a data extraction process where the full texts were charted by the author(s), publication year, national study context, the study aims, research design, methodology, study population (N =), and main findings (See Appendix C). I went on to sort materials according to the study participants' perceptions of school readiness, along with key themes and issues emerging from closely reading each article before they were compared across the material with the help of structured schemes and coding reports in EPPI Reviewer. I identified four central issues that I chose to investigate further. These were 1) That authors frame different understandings of school readiness as mainly belonging to either the present or the past. 2) That teachers experience tensions between what they believe are appropriate learning aims and methods for young children and the demands of primary schools and governing bodies. 3) Differences and similarities in perceptions of school readiness between ECEC teachers and other actors in the field. 4) Special considerations and problems associated with assessing the readiness of children with minority backgrounds.

The first stages of the analysis showed that the authors' analysis of their findings and teachers' perceptions seemed to vary across the studies. I also noticed that the authors appeared to take the context of their study somewhat for granted when analysing their findings, such as the curriculum tradition of their study context. I charted how authors conceptualised changes in dominant notions of school readiness (See Table 3). Next, I decided to investigate the ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness in light of the curriculum traditions of each study context. I created a structured overview (See Appendix D) of the study contexts, authors, national traditions for curriculum development in ECEC, starting age for primary education and starting age for compulsory education by extracting data from the reviewed studies and various other sources (European Commission, 2022; Lim, 1998; OECD, 2016, 2020; UNESCO, 2006, 2006a; Zhu, 2009), and used Bennet's (2005) concepts *(The Social policy pedagogical tradition* and *The Readiness for school tradition* to categorise each country's tradition for curriculum development in ECEC. However, Bennet's categories were not fit to describe the curriculum tradition of all studies; therefore, I chose other terms to refer to the curriculum traditions of China *(The Confucian tradition*), Colombia *(Primarily focused on care and less on learning)*, and Nicaragua *(Non-formal in structure and based on the voluntary efforts of often uneducated teachers)*. I used the same concepts when comparing what types of skills ECEC teachers perceived to be most deciding for children's school readiness (*academic* or *non-academic*) by the curriculum tradition of the study's context (See Appendix E).

5. Results

In this section, I organise, summarise, and report results from the analysis and identify research gaps and current issues in the existing literature. *First,* I present the descriptive characteristics of the existing empirical research on ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness to give an overview of the reviewed studies. *Second,* I address how researchers conceptualise different perceptions of school readiness. *Third,* I present what skills and qualities ECEC teachers as study participants think are the most deciding for children's school readiness, and how their perceptions vary across national contexts.

5.1. Descriptive characteristics

In this first section, I start by systematically mapping out and describing some of the key characteristics of the included studies to identify the larger characteristics of this field of research. The tables in Appendix C and D offer overviews of the 27 studies.

5.1.1. Purpose and aims

The reviewed studies pursued different aims, yet, they shared some clear commonalities. In different ways, all the studies seek to understand how teachers rank skills associated with school readiness from least to most important to ensure a positive school transition and future educational success. Several authors included a comparative aspect in their research design. Thirteen studies investigate ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness in light of the perceptions of other actors. Ten studies investigate the relationship between teachers and other professionals. While three studies compare the perceptions of teachers and parents. These comparisons can be found in several different constellations. Altun (2018) compares parents, pre-service teachers, and in-service teachers' views on school-readiness. Rouse, Nicholas, and Garner (2023) compare what early childhood educators and school-age educators believe are the most significant challenges and issues associated with children's transition to school. Jarrett and Coba-Rodriguez (2019) compare the readiness beliefs of preschool teachers, kindergarten teachers, and mothers. Brown, Barry and Ku (2021) investigate how stakeholders make sense of kindergarten readying children for primary schooling. These stakeholders include pre-K and kindergarten teachers, kindergartners, parents, school district and county administrators, state educational administrators, policymakers, lobbyists and what the authors refer to as national participants.

Two studies investigate changes in teachers' perceptions by comparing datasets from different periods (Bassok et al., 2016; Hustedt et al., 2018). Niklas et al. (2018) compare teachers' perceptions of school readiness across six countries. An, Curby, and Xie (2018) discuss their findings from the Chinese context in light of their findings in a similar study in the US context.

5.1.2. Study contexts and research design

The study participants in the reviewed studies work with children ages 0–7. The studies were performed in a broad range of geographical and socioeconomic contexts. 10 of the 27 studies were carried out in the US. Three studies are from Turkey and Australia, two studies each from Denmark, and Jordan, and there was one study from each of these countries: China, England, Estonia, Israel, Jamaica, Singapore, and Slovakia. One study compares teachers' perceptions of school readiness characteristics in six countries—Australia, Austria, Columbia, Germany, Nicaragua, and Slovenia (Niklas et al., 2018). Notably, almost one-third of the included studies are performed in the US context. The review indicates a demand for empirical studies from other parts of the world in general, and from the African, Asian, and South American continents in particular. Thus, the somewhat skewed geographical pattern of study contexts can be viewed as a limitation of the study but also represents an important finding of this review as it demarcates important avenues for future research and says something about some of the main characteristics of this field of research. Using Bennet's (2005) conceptual categories, 19 study contexts can be categorised as belonging to *the Ready for school tradition*, while six studies were performed in contexts historically associated with the *Social policy pedagogical tradition*. The study contexts of An et al.'s (2018) study and two of the study contexts in Niklas et al. 's (2018) study did not fit easily within either tradition. See Appendix D for an overview of the variation in compulsory school age and the age children start first grade across study contexts.

22 of the 27 studies were published between 2018 and 2023, indicating scarce yet increasing scholarly attention on the topic of ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness in later years. Three of the studies are published in journals that are not indexed in the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) or Sherpa/Romeo, which is often used as measures of research quality, which could possibly affect the quality of the published studies but not necessarily (Jarrett & Coba-Rodriguez, 2019; Koçak & Incekara, 2020; Şahin, Sak, & Tuncer, 2013).

The number of research participants in survey studies ranged from three (Puccioni, 2018) to 5200 (Bassok et al., 2016). This broad range is likely due to the large variations in research designs. Ten studies can be

Table 3
Conceptualisations of changing perceptions of school readiness.

Author	Notions of "before"		Notions of "now"		Key cited authors
Akaba et al. (2020)	Developmentally appropriate practice	A focus on children developing social and emotional skills.	"Quality and high returns" early childhood education programs.	An increasing focus on academically oriented teaching, standard-based accountability, and result-orientation.	Bredekamp and Copple (1997) Moss (2014)
Altun (2018)	Maturational approach	Underpinned by the idea that deficits in school readiness lie within the child and the development of children cannot be changed or pushed beyond their biological developmental level by experience and teaching	Early Program Models Contemporary models	Deficits in school readiness can be reduced by focusing on early intervention. Children's development and school readiness policies can be targeted to affect multifaceted and nested environments from family to society	Winter and Kelley (2008)
Bassok et al. (2016)	Broad developmental goals of kindergarten	Learning practices centred around play, exploration and social interactions	Educationalization of early care and education	A heightened focus on highly prescriptive curricula and an explicit focus on academic skill-building and test preparation. Associated with a large increase in time spent on "challenging" topics previously considered outside the scope of kindergarten compared to the past. Kindergarten is thus becoming "the new first grade"	Dombkowski (2001), Hatch (2002), Kagan and Kauerz (2007) an Russell (2011)
Brooks and Murray (2018)	Social pedagogic tradition	The nurturing of young children's development in a broad sense	The schoolified pre-primary model	Emphasis on cognitive skills alongside pre-determined standards and goals dovetailed into compulsory formal schooling	OECD (2006) Kaga et al. (2010)
Brown et al. (2021)	Empiricist view	Readiness [as] something that lies outside the child	Social constructionist view Interactionist view	Frames readiness as a fluid construct defined by the social setting in which the child resides. Frames readiness as a bidirectional concept, where readiness is co-constructed from the child's contributions to the school and the school's contribution to the child.	Meisels (1999)
Hatcher et al. (2012)	Experiential, play-based programs	A developmental "whole child" approach	Academic models	A shift towards a heightened focus on academic skills	Goldstein (2007)
Hustedt et al. (2018)	Child-centred and play-based approaches	Children are ready for kindergarten when they meet the birthdate threshold	Academic model	Increasingly tending towards didactic instruction and the prioritisation of specific academic skills and goals	Hatch (2005) Pyle and Luce-Kapler (2014)
Kinkead-Clark (2021)	Maturational perspectives	Built on an assumption that children reach a state of maturity that enables them to be ready for school	Interventionist perspectives	Built on an assumption that children can be made ready by intervention	Dalton (2005) Graue (1993) Miller & Almon, 2009
Kjær et al. (2020)			Early learning	An increased expectation that pedagogues can mobilise parents to promote school readiness through learning at home and to coordinate this learning with what takes place at the ECEC institution	Dannesboe et al. (2018) Heckman (2008) Juhl (2019)
Miller and Kehl (2019)	Maturationist frame	When children are mature enough, for example by reaching a certain age, they are ready to begin schooling	Interactionist/ constructivist theoretical perspective	Suggests that children possess an innate knowledge that fosters creativity and a desire for problem-solving.	Gesell (1928) Snow (2006) Pianta and Rimm-Kaufman (2006)
Piker and Kimmel (2018)			A "push down" of academic content to kindergarten classrooms	This push-down has led to more time spent on literacy and mathematics in kindergarten classrooms and less time on social skills, science and social studies	Bassok et al. (2016)
Puccioni (2018)	Maturational view of readiness	Children are deemed "ready for school" when reaching a specific chronological age. This view is also associated with postponing children's school entrance.	Complex view of readiness Formalized conceptualisation of school readiness	Suggests that conceptions of school readiness are shaped by social and cultural contexts defined within local communities, schools and families. The identified physical well-being, communication and language usage, social and emotional development, motor development, cognition and general knowledge skills, and particular learning approaches associated with children's readiness.	Graue and DiPerna (2000) Graue (1993) Scott-Little et al. (2006) Smith and Shepard (1988)
Rouse et al. (2023)	The maturationist perspective	Children's school readiness is viewed as a result of biology and that children become ready for school through a process of biological maturation	Schoolification	ECEC settings are adopting pedagogical practices that are usually associated with primary school setting, to enhance children's school readiness	Dockett and Perry (2002; 2009) Snow (2006)
Shemesh and Golden (2022)	Fröbel's kindergarten	The "child's garden" as a protected environment for the appropriate	The global era of schoolification	A shift toward a heightened focus on academic skills	Russel (2011)

(*continued on next page*)

Table 3 (*continued*)

Author	Notions of "before"		Notions of "now"		Key cited authors
		education of young children focusing on play and experiences			
Stein, Veisson, Õun, and Tammemäe (2019)	Developmental stage theories	Age as an indicator of maturity and readiness to learn	Contemporary interpretations of sociocultural theories	Interactions that occur within historical, cultural, and institutional contexts shape children's development and their view of the world.	McGettigan and Gray (2012)

described as quantitative. All these are survey studies asking ECEC teachers and other actors to rank skills and characteristics for preschool-aged children from least to most important for children's school readiness. 12 are based on a qualitative research design. Among these, three are based on interviews, two combine interviews, participant observations and document analysis, one combines observations and interviews, and one is an explorative video-cued multivocal ethnographic (VCME) research study. Last, three studies depart from a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. Two of these studies combine surveys and interviews, and one combines surveys and focus group interviews.

5.2. Researchers' conceptualisations of different perceptions of school readiness

How researchers conceptualise school readiness in research largely influences how they view the world and analyse their findings. 16 study authors situate their studies within a growing trend where academic skills are increasingly privileged at the expense of socio-emotional skills and child-initiated play. Eight authors describe the growing focus on enhancing children's level of school readiness as a consequence of educational policymakers' growing belief in economic theories stating the importance of investment return and early intervention in ECEC to reduce stratified educational outcomes in the future. The cross-pressure between empiricist views associated with early intervention and nurturing children's academic skills on one side and ECEC teachers' traditional focus on child-centred learning approaches and developing children's social and self-sufficiency skills on the other underpins several tensions in ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness. The studies show that it also affects their work of preparing children for school. The cross-pressure is also expressed as internal tensions in ECEC teachers' practice and external tensions between ECEC teachers and other actors in the education system. The authors frequently use conceptual terms, referring to current changes as "schoolification" or an "accountability shove down" of primary school expectations to ECEC settings (see, e.g., Akaba, Peters, Liang, & Graves, 2020; Bassok et al., 2016; Piker & Kimmel, 2018; Shemesh & Golden, 2022). The terms are infused with narrative notions of school readiness *before* and *now* either as a frame for authors to actualise their study, but some also use such terms as analytical tools for unpacking teachers' perceptions in their analysis (such as Altun, 2018; Bassok et al., 2016; Brown, Barry, Ku, & Englehardt, 2021; Hustedt et al., 2018). Two of these authors use these concepts to analyse changing perceptions within groups of ECEC teachers across longer periods by comparing several datasets from different years and decades (Bassok et al., 2016; Hustedt et al., 2018).

The authors' use of the concepts associated with "notions of before" and "now" often suggests the past was better in terms of ECEC teachers being able to perform a type of pedagogy more aligned with their professional values, while the present represents a harsher academised reality where teachers experience cross-pressure between their personal or professional values and policy demands or expectations from other actors. However, this does not mean the authors suggest the changing perceptions should be understood statically as concepts describing notions of school readiness strictly belonging to either the past or present but rather as ideas that have historical roots either in the present or the past. For example, three authors suggest that most teachers in their study seemed to hold perceptions of school readiness that are largely associated with the past. By subscribing to a view of children's school readiness as predominantly a result of children's internal biological maturation the perceptions of the teachers in these studies as interpreted to be outdated (Altun, 2018; Fayez, Ahmad, & Oliemat, 2016; Shemesh & Golden, 2022).

Table 3 presents the key concepts, most often presented as dichotomies, used by study authors to conceptualise the changing approaches to readying children for school and a global turn in dominant perceptions of what it means to be "school ready". Many authors use these concepts to frame the context of their studies.

5.3. The ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness

The authors reported that the ECEC teachers in their study were worried about children's school transition and future educational success. 11 authors describe and problematise a large void between the curriculum and learning environments in ECEC and primary schooling, suggesting a mismatch between ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness and those of policymakers or primary school teachers. Both the study authors and the ECEC teacher research participants often describe ECEC institutions as nurturing play-based learning environments. The school environment, on the other hand, is described as reflecting more "didactic teaching and learning approaches".

Ten studies compare ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness to those of other teachers. Most studies report that ECEC teachers perceive children's socio-emotional and self-sufficiency skills to be more important for children's school readiness than their academic skills, while primary school teachers hold opposite perceptions. Five out of these authors state that the ECEC teachers in their study expressed negative perceptions of the school environment in contrast to the ECEC environment where they work (Altun, 2018; Hatcher et al., 2012; Jahreie, 2022; Miller & Kehl, 2019; Shemesh & Golden).

Study participants—including ECEC teachers and other stakeholders—report that they perceive that ECEC programmes are, together with the children's parents, responsible for developing the skills and dispositions children need to succeed in school (with the exception of the ECEC teachers in Shemesh and Golden's (2022) study). However, this does not mean they agree that a highly academic focus in ECEC is the best pedagogic practice. Yet, ECEC teachers in three studies reported that they "give in to" governing authorities' demands of a heightened focus on developing children's academic skills, because they know that these are the types of expectations that the children will face when starting primary school (Brown, Barry, & Ku, 2021; Jahreie, 2022; Kinkead-Clark, 2021), but also because they know that they and their colleagues are held accountable for children's academic learning outcomes (Kinkead-Clark, 2021). Shemesh and Golden's (2022) study stood out in this regard as the teachers in this study were adamantly protecting kindergarten as an "insular pedagogic space".

5.4. What skills and qualities do ECEC teachers think are most deciding for children's school readiness?

Not all studies investigate what skills and qualities teachers perceive to be more or less deciding for children's school readiness. Yet, seven authors report that most of the ECEC teachers in their study perceive

that children's academic skills are the most important determinants of children's readiness for formal schooling, and 12 studies across national contexts report that ECEC teachers perceive non-academic skills, such as showing empathy towards others, waiting in line, or taking care of their own bathroom needs, as comparatively more deciding than cognitive academic skills for children's school readiness. In Appendix E, you can find an overview of what skills ECEC teachers report that they perceive to be the most deciding for children's school readiness sorted based on the curriculum tradition of the study context. It is important to note that there are markedly fewer studies performed in contexts associated *with the Social policy pedagogical tradition* amongst the reviewed studies (six). This could be explained by the language selection criteria (English) or that the populations and the geography of the countries associated with *the Social policy pedagogical tradition* (such as the Nordic countries) are comparatively small with smaller populations than the ones associated with *The Readiness for school tradition* (such as the UK, France, and the US).

5.4.1. Do teachers' perceptions of school readiness vary across national contexts?

All studies performed in national contexts associated with *the Social policy pedagogical tradition* report that the ECEC teachers perceive non-academic skills as more deciding for children's school readiness than academic skills. Half of the studies performed in a *Readiness for school* context report that ECEC teachers view non-academic skills as more deciding for children's school readiness, than their academic skills. While studies performed in various contexts or contexts that do not fit within this dichotomy (Referred to as "Other") report that ECEC teachers mostly value children's non-academic skills. One might have expected that study findings from contexts traditionally emphasising *focused cognitive goals*, such as the US and the UK (Bennett, 2005), would show that ECEC teachers value children's academic skills to a larger degree than what this review shows and that the study findings from similar contexts would be more conclusive. As such, the review shows that although the review suggests some tendencies, there is no completely clear pattern between teachers' perceptions of school readiness and the curriculum traditions of the study contexts.

Nonetheless, despite the dichotomous presentation of authors' conceptualisations of the changing perceptions of school readiness in Tables 3 and in Tables 4 and 5 in the appendix most of the reviewed studies also show that teachers value skills from all domains as important for children's school readiness. In a similar vein, studies show that teachers are increasingly focused on assessing and enhancing all children's school readiness across all developmental domains compared to previous years, not just in academic skills. Thus, the dichotomous distinction between teachers' focus on either academic skills *or* non-academic skills (e.g. socio-emotional, self-care or motor skills) can seem artificial, as the use of such dichotomies might give an impression of teachers' perceptions being less dynamic and overlapping than what empirical studies show. However, the authors' use of dichotomous pairing underpinned by notions of before and now should probably best be read and interpreted as an analytical reduction made by the authors to elucidate larger developmental features and not to suggest that teachers hold an "either/or" perception of school readiness.

Most authors recognise that school readiness is conceptualised within several different and sometimes opposing theoretical underpinnings in previous research. Seven authors reported that ECEC teachers' professional values were often not completely aligned with the institutional understanding of school readiness or policy. One teacher in Kinkead-Clark's (2021) study described the cross-pressure that occurs due to opposing demands and understandings of readiness like this:

> Teachers are forced to choose. While as an early childhood specialist I understand the importance of play … I know that at the end of the day my school is being judged … I am being judged. No one wants to be called the teacher who is good at letting her children play … you don't get credit for that. I have to give the children the skills they need. To be ready for primary school is not about being good at playing. No … to be ready means the children can write their names, count … (p. 269)

Three authors report that although the teachers in their study might not completely agree with the rising demands for children's academic readiness, they adjust their practice to meet current curriculum standards (Akaba et al., 2020; Jahreie, 2022; Kinkead-Clark, 2021). 15 study authors problematise the equivocal nature of the term "school readiness" and the possible negative effect that "ideological clashes" between different perceptions of school readiness and how understandings of school readiness are constructed. The analysis shows that four authors make distinctions between teachers' "actual" values, mainly referring to "children's developmental demands and capacities" and what teachers think schools and policymakers expect of children. Most teachers in the reviewed studies seem to perceive that, in the end, the schools' expectations of children ultimately define "school readiness". Five studies find that if the ECEC teachers know children will be assessed on certain parameters when they start primary schooling, they wish to prepare them for these tests, regardless of whether they agree these are the most *appropriate* learning goals and strategies for the children in their programme (See for example Jahreie, 2022; Kinkead-Clark, 2021).

Several studies foreground political and scholarly struggles concerning what kinds of skills should be viewed as most deciding for school readiness—social and behavioural skills on one side and academic skills, such as numeracy and literacy, on the other (e.g. Bassok et al., 2016; Kinkead-Clark, 2021; Kjær et al., 2020). The term *academic skills* is mainly used by authors and teachers to broadly describe children's literacy and numeracy skills, such as writing, reading, and counting. However, two authors also refer to children's level of familiarity with school-like activities and school routines, such as homework and working with worksheets, as "academic skills" (Hatcher et al., 2012; Kjær et al., 2020).

Notably, adding a new layer of complexity to the dichotomic relationship between the valuing of academic and non-academic skills, both Kjær et al. (2020) and Brooks and Murray (2018), by using various research methods in their respective studies, found that the combination of methods revealed inconsistencies in teachers' perceptions. The teachers in the Kjær et al. (2020) study explicitly stated that they value promoting children's social skills over academic skills when preparing children for school. However, in practice, the authors observed that the teachers mainly promoted what the authors interpret as academic learning activities. Kjær et al.'s (2020) findings can be contrasted to those of Kinkead-Clark (2021), who found that the Jamaican ECEC teachers in their study felt pressured to implement academic approaches that were at odds with their professional values and perceptions of appropriate pedagogic goals/approaches for young children. Similar to Kinkead-Clark (2021), Stein et al. (2019) found that teachers valued academically preparing children for school mainly *because* of the high expectations they know the children will face. Akaba et al. (2020) and Brooks and Murray (2018) report that the ECEC teachers in their study were inconsistently switching between opposing discourses of readiness when ranking the importance of various skills for children's readiness. The teachers in Brooks and Murray's (2018) study ranked academic skills as the most important in questionnaires but reflected values associated with social pedagogy during interviews. Together, these studies exemplify some of the complexities and methodological issues emerging when seeking to determine teachers' "actual" perceptions.

Moreover, it is important to note that different research methods produce different types of data. How researchers have obtained data concerning ECEC teachers' perceptions largely vary. Thus, it would e.g., be impossible to perform a meta-synthesis based on the findings of the included studies of the present research review as I have not aimed to find studies that are similar in research design. Therefore, regardless of the variation in the data and research design of the studies, the current

review is limited to mapping and analysing what characterises this line of research and describing what existing empirical research says about ECEC teachers' perceptions.

5.4.2. The relationship between ECEC teachers' perceptions and local contextual factors

Not only national contexts matter – the review indicates that local socio-cultural factors influence ECEC teachers' work of preparing children for school and how study authors analyse their data. However, most authors do not foreground the local socioeconomic context of the study, which might be because this is not the primary focus of their study. Yet, the nine ones who do, usually do so in order to address particular issues associated with assessing the school readiness of children from families with low-income or minority backgrounds.

Six studies showed that ECEC teachers were particularly concerned about the school readiness levels of children in their care with multilingual, migrant or minority backgrounds. Two authors also problematise the large discrepancy between majority monolingual ideals of readiness and how it positions children with minority backgrounds with an unfair disadvantage (Jahreie, 2022; Oliveira et al., 2021). These studies suggest that certain forms of tensions between majority ideals of readiness and local contexts seem to become more visible in contexts where more children belong to minority groups. Yet, this is an apparent gap in the research field, and there is a need for more research on these topics. There is additionally a need for more studies on ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness and children's transitions between ECEC and primary school that address the sociocultural study context as an important influence on ECEC teachers' work and their perceptions.

6. Discussion

This review study has aimed to investigate how existing empirical research addresses the topic of ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness. In this section I discuss the findings, the relationship between the findings and researchers' approach to studying the topic, and the possible implications that the findings of this review might have for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners.

The review of existing research elucidates how ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness are infused in power relations reaching far beyond individual ECEC institutions. It reveals a multifaceted interplay between local perceptions of school readiness, national traditions for curriculum development and the globalisation of people and ideas about readiness, thus exposing the relative nature of schoolification and school readiness and how it shapes the formation of ECEC teachers' perceptions. Over the last decades, we have observed a significant international political shift toward a "schoolification" of ECEC curriculum. However, the findings of this review suggest there is still scarce empirical knowledge of how and if this has changed ECEC teachers' perceptions and professional practices, particularly in national contexts outside the US.

The findings indicate that the increasing popularity of learning goals and methods associated with *the Ready for school tradition* seems to be most evident on a policy level and amongst primary school teachers. While ECEC teachers as a profession, on the other hand, seem to more highly value learning goals and methods associated with *the Social policy pedagogical tradition* when we compare research results across international borders and traditions for curriculum development. Suggesting that although the developments in the policy field might mirror the "before" and "now" progression presented in Table 3, ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness do not seem to have followed down the same path or at the same pace. Despite some variations, the reviewed studies indicate a disjuncture between the developments on the international and national policy levels and ECEC teachers' perceptions of what are developmentally appropriate goals and approaches for readying children for formal schooling. However, the review elucidates that many ECEC teachers, regardless of their professional convictions, seem to adjust their goals and approaches to preparing children for school in accordance with what they believe are the future expectations children will meet in formal schooling.

If we view the findings through Meisels' theoretical prism, most teachers seemingly perceive readiness through an *empiricist view* of school readiness. This means that teachers perceive readiness in terms of children's proficiency in specific skillsets and behaviours and that these certain skills and behaviours (non-academic or academic) can be enhanced through pedagogic intervention. These findings support Brown and Lan's (2015) review of US teachers' conceptions of school readiness. Using Meisels' concepts as an analytical prism to review primary research findings from studies of teachers' perceptions of school readiness, they found that teachers' perceptions of school readiness had become more empiricist after the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001. Except for the teachers in the studies by Altun (2018) and Shemesh and Golden (2022), few teachers seemed to primarily rely on approaches associated with a maturational view (giving children "the gift of time") over empiricist views of and interventionist approaches to ensure children's readiness. On the other hand, since there are implemented chronological starting ages for the beginning of compulsory education in the study contexts of the reviewed studies (See Table 4 Appendix D), national policymakers arguably also reflect values associated with *a maturational view* of readiness and children's biological maturation combined with empiricist views in addition to valuing interventionist approaches. Notably, most teachers draw between and combine different perceptions of readiness in the reviewed studies. Yet, they do not necessarily problematise the possible opposing values underpinning the different perceptions and approaches to readiness. However, few studies report that the teachers in their study reflect social constructivist perceptions of readiness. Yet, although the informants in the studies of Akaba et al. (2020), Brown et al. (2021), Jahreie (2022), Oliveira et al. (2021) and Shemesh and Golden (2022) do not appear to mirror social constructivist perceptions of school readiness, the authors of the studies arguably apply analytical approaches aligned to social constructivist interpretations in their analysis of what it means to be "ready" or "unready" in local contexts.

Nonetheless, the analysis of the studies moreover reveals that ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness are complex, exceeding the dichotomic relationship between either valuing *focused cognitive goals* or *broad developmental goals*, *academic skills,* or *non-academic skills* and *maturationalist views*, *empiricist views or social constructivist views* or between *before* and *now*. The analysis shows that different interpretations of readiness more or less need to be understood dynamically as discourses and approaches that teachers actively switch between and not as static structures.

6.1. Implications for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners

The review offers some much-needed insights into how ECEC teachers' perceptions vary *within* and *across* national borders, and it elucidates why it is difficult to compare studies and borrow policies from one context to another. The review findings support that school readiness should be interpreted as *socially constructed* and a concept that is highly relative to environmental factors, such as national and local policy contexts and social demography (Graue, 1993; Meisels, 1999). Furthermore, the review shows the importance of being aware of the possible implications of the opposing discourses on school readiness and "ideological clashes" in ECEC policy and how these can generate worry, confusion and tensions in teachers' perceptions, their work and interpersonal relationships (such as Brooks & Murray, 2018; Hatcher et al., 2012; Kinkead-Clark, 2021; Kjær et al., 2020; Oliveira et al., 2021). The reviewed studies demonstrate that a large divide between what is expected from schools and other actors and what teachers perceive as appropriate learning goals and methods might underpin negative feelings and uncertainty in their everyday work of preparing children for the transition to school. Moreover, the perceived divide between ECEC and

formal educational environments might create situations where ECEC teachers and parents do not look forward to children's transition (See e.g., Hatcher et al., 2012; Miller & Kehl, 2019; Shemesh & Golden, 2022). This could negatively affect children's transition, teachers' work satisfaction and their relationship with other actors within the education system.

Moreover, the review findings have revealed some methodological aspects of existing research that require further discussion. The review shows it is not easy to identify ECEC teachers' perceptions and distinguish these from expectations of children's school readiness according to the local and national curriculum, what ECEC teachers think are the school's expectations, and everything in between. These differing questions and answers can overlap in practice; however, the authors in the reviewed studies often point to tensions that can occur if there are large disparities between ECEC teachers' perceptions of appropriate goals and approaches for readying young children in ECEC for school and the expectations of external actors (Hatcher et al., 2012; Kinkead-Clark, 2021; Kjær et al., 2020; Miller & Kehl, 2019; Shemesh & Golden). Researchers need to be particularly considerate and clear in their analysis and presentation of these distinctions when studying teachers' perceptions of school readiness in the future. These types of questions are probably easier to explore qualitatively, as some of the reviewed studies show that field observations or interviews offer the opportunity for double-checking and unpacking teachers' reflections more in-depth than, for example, a structured questionnaire (Brooks & Murray, 2018; Kjær et al., 2020). These issues also elucidate the need for more research attention to the connection between different policy levels and practices to unpack the nuances in the formation of ECEC teachers' perceptions.

The authors often mention that there has been a turn in ECEC, where the primary focus has generally shifted from *broad developmental goals* to *focused cognitive goals* (See Table 3). Yet, few authors mention the variation in traditions for national curriculum development between countries and how such traditions might influence teachers' perceptions of school readiness. The study context is seemingly often taken for granted by researchers, which might be a consequence of studies being undertaken and written with a national audience in mind. As such, the review identifies the demand for empirical research sensitive to the interplay between national curriculum traditions and teachers' local perceptions of readiness, unpacking what "schoolification" means relative to local contexts and what consequences it has for ECEC teachers' experiences of preparing children for school and their perceptions of school readiness. This lack of knowledge, combined with large national variations in educational systems, traditions for curriculum development and current policies, makes it challenging to compare studies across national contexts. Due to the increasing rate of borrowing of ECEC policy across borders, it would be valuable for future empirical research on school readiness to more explicitly acknowledge and consider the larger international context and how the globalisation of ideas and people is influencing the formation of teachers' perceptions and their interpersonal relationships (like, e.g., Jahreie, 2022, Oliveira et al., 2021; Shemesh & Golden, 2022 does in their study). Moreover, the authors' analysis of findings from eight studies in local contexts characterised by low socioeconomic status and high rate of families with minority backgrounds, suggests there is a need to further view school readiness through a sociocultural lens and question the values and ideals that are underpinning dominant perceptions of school readiness.

Furthermore, it is important to recognise that other published works, including books, book chapters and doctoral dissertations, could have been valuable for this review. Moreover, scholarly work written in languages other than English is not included. Therefore, also considering publication bias, there may be more research that might have significant value for this study. Nevertheless, this review provides a significant contribution to the field of education, as it systematically summarises and critically discusses contemporary empirical studies on ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness performed in a broad range of geographical and curricular contexts, using a variety of methods.

7. Concluding remarks

ECEC and ECEC teachers' work is recurrently the focus of public debate and increasingly becoming a space for policy attention and intervention. ECEC teachers are the ones who work daily on the front line to implement educational policy to enhance children's school readiness, yet, little research attention has been given to studying current changes in the ECEC field from their perspective. I conclude this article by foregrounding three essential takeaways. First, the review suggests that most ECEC teachers perceive non-academic skills to be more deciding than academic skills for children's school readiness across national contexts and curriculum traditions. The review suggests that several learning goals and approaches associated with improving young children's academic school readiness seem to be at odds with what many ECEC teachers perceive to be appropriate learning goals and approaches for young children. There seems to exist a somewhat paradoxical relationship between what ECEC teachers perceive as important for school readiness and what policymakers and school authorities expect of children. The findings raise timely questions such as whether it is appropriate to implement school-like learning methods and goals in ECEC, why children need to become academically ready in ECEC and not in school, and whether this is ECEC teachers' responsibility.

Second, it is integral to acknowledge that researchers' interpretations of ECEC teachers' perceptions of school readiness are linked to national traditions for curriculum development. Moreover, ECEC teachers' perceptions of and reactions to the "schoolification" of the ECEC curriculum must be understood as a product of a complex interplay between international, national, and local relations and processes.

Third, with the increasing heterogeneity of national populations and rising rate of children learning the national majority languages as their second language, there is a need for a broader understanding of school readiness that reflects the changing social demography, and the various preconditions children have for fitting standard notions of school readiness. In the future, there is a need for more scholarly knowledge of the interplay between dominant constructs of school readiness and issues relating to gender, social class, (dis)ability, ethnicity, and migration. Moreover, it is vital to understand how this shapes teachers' perceptions of school readiness, their reactions to current changes in the field of education and their interactions with others.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data is publicly available since the study is a research review.

Appendix A

Overview of Key Terms, Boolean Operators, and Specific Search Criteria.

Table 1
Overview of Key Terms, Boolean Operators, and Specific Search Criteria

Key Term 1		Key term 2		Key term 3		Key term 4
School readiness	**AND**	ECEC	**AND**	Teacher	**AND**	Perceptions
Search terms		**Search terms**		**Search terms**		**Search terms**
OR School-readiness, School readiness		**OR** Preschool, Kindergarten, Early Childhood Education, Early Childhood Education and Care, ECEC, ECE, Nursery school, Pre-K, K1, K2, K3		Teacher*		**OR** Perceive*, Perception*, Belie*, Understand*, View*

Search criteria
Peer-reviewed, 2012–2023, academic journal articles. EBSCO host: Subject terms OR abstract OR title. Web of Science: Topic OR abstract OR title

Appendix B

Flow Chart of the Searching and Selection Process.

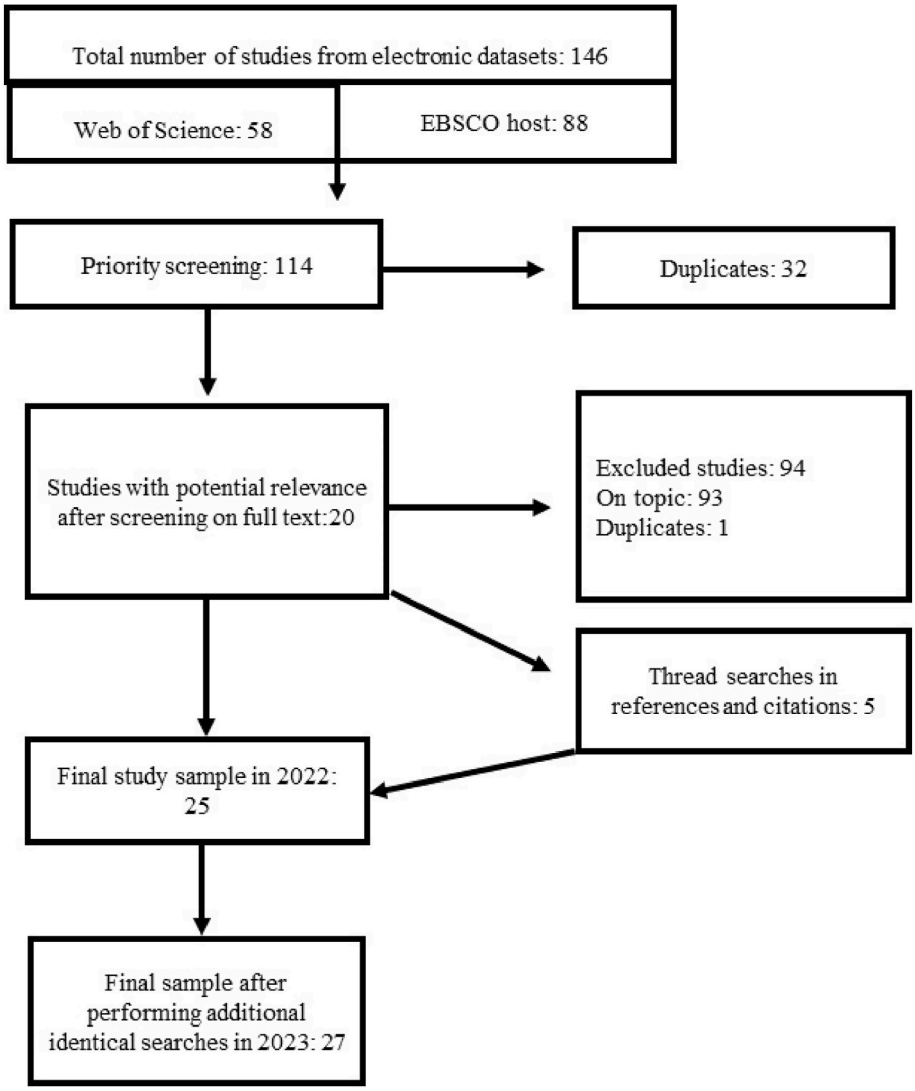

Fig. 1. Flow chart of the search and selection process.

Appendix C

Overview of the Reviewed Studies.

Table 2
Overview of the Reviewed Studies

Author (year) National context	Purpose of the study/ research questions	What age group do the teacher participants primarily work with?	Methodology (N =)	The local socio-economic context of the study	Main findings or the findings that are most important for answering the research questions of the current review
Akaba et al. (2020) US	The study examines universal Pre-Kindergarten teachers' understanding of kindergarten readiness.	The authors do not provide this information. Yet, they disclose that Pre-Kindergarten education in the US refers to the preschool education programme that is usually offered one year before the beginning of the first year of compulsory education called Kindergarten.	Qualitative, interviews (N = 14 Pre-K teachers)	The teachers in the study work in different Pre-K programmes. The authors report that some work in low-resourced communities while others work in high-resource communities.	The Pre-K teachers constantly adjusted their practise to align more with policy expectations and demands for standards-based accountability and kindergarten readiness. Yet, the authors report that the teachers were inconsistent in their description of what they believe kindergarten readiness is.
Altun (2018) Turkey	This study examines and compares parents', pre-service teachers, and in-service teachers' views on school readiness.	The authors do not provide this information. However, they state that the first-grade enrolment age is 5–6 years old.	Qualitative, interviews (50 pre-service teachers, 50 in-service teachers and 50 parents)	The preschool teachers work in public schools. The authors state that parents' monthly household income ranged between 1.250 and 10.500 TL (M = 3.275 TL ~ 856$).	All the participants explained school readiness from a maturationalist perspective. Teachers' perceived academic skills, such as learning to read and write and math, that children acquire in first grade as most important for children's readiness.
An et al. (2018) China	This study examines kindergarten teachers' perceptions of school readiness in China.	The authors do not provide this information. However, the authors state that preschool is primarily for children aged 3–5 and that children transition directly from preschool to primary school. This indicates that children start first grade at age 5–6.	Quantitative, survey of 101 third-year preschool teachers and 160 first-grade teachers in China	This information was not found in the article.	The teachers placed a higher value on socio–emotional skills than academic skills.
Bassok et al. (2016) US	This study investigates systematic changes in teachers' beliefs about school readiness.	The authors do not state this information. However, we know that the teachers work in kindergarten.	Quantitative survey (N = 5200; 2500 teachers in 1998 and 2700 in 2010).	The teachers work in multiple contexts.	Kindergarten teachers in 2010 held markedly higher academic expectations for children both before kindergarten entry and during the kindergarten year than teachers in 1998.
Brooks and Murray (2018) England	This study investigates the beliefs and practices of ECEC practitioners regarding school readiness and listening to children's voices.	0–5 years	Qualitative case study combining the use of questionnaires and interviews (N = 25 ECEC practitioners)	This information was not found in the article.	In survey responses and semi-structured interviews, practitioners indicated they listen to and act on children's voices but are confused about school readiness. Their beliefs and practices align more strongly with social pedagogy than pre-primary schoolification.
Brown et al. (2021) US	This study examines how a range of stakeholders make sense of kindergarten readying children for elementary school.	The authors state that the compulsory school age is 6 in Texas, where the study is undertaken. However, they do not explicitly state the ages that the various teachers are working with or of the children participating in the study.	Qualitative, explorative video-cued multivocal ethnographic (VCME) research study; kindergartners (N = 21); pre-K and kindergarten teachers (N = 26); parents (N = 11); school, district and county administrators (N = 14); state educational administrators and policymakers (N = 16); lobbyists (N = 4); and national participants (N = 15)	This information was not found in the article.	The stakeholders were primarily future-oriented, focusing on ensuring that children will be well enough prepared to be successful in school.
Choy and Karuppiah (2016) Singapore	To investigate preschool teachers, primary schoolteachers, and parents' perceptions and practices of preparing Kindergarten Two (K2) children for Primary One.	The preschool teachers work with children who are between ages 2–6. The primary school teachers work with children who are between ages 6–7.	Mixed methods: semi-structured interviews (nine parents, nine preschool teachers and three primary school teachers) and questionnaires (234	This information was not found in the article.	The study findings indicate that most preschool teachers believed that academic skills were particularly important for a children's school readiness. Primary school teachers on the other hand

(*continued on next page*)

Table 2 (*continued*)

Author (year) National context	Purpose of the study/ research questions	What age group do the teacher participants primarily work with?	Methodology (N =)	The local socio-economic context of the study	Main findings or the findings that are most important for answering the research questions of the current review
			parents, 40 preschool teachers, and 21 primary school teachers)		did not seem to place as much emphasis on academic skills as their teacher colleagues in preschool.
Fayez et al. (2016) Jordan	The purpose of this study is to explore kindergarten and first-grade teachers' perceptions regarding school readiness.	The authors state that children start school the year they turn 6 years old.	Quantitative survey study (N = 155 kindergarten teachers and 134 first-grade teachers)	This information was not found in the article.	The results revealed that kindergarten and first-grade teachers considered all dimensions mentioned in the questionnaire as important to get children ready for school. However, both groups of teachers rated basic academic knowledge as the most important dimension and emphasised it over the other dimensions.
Hatcher et al. (2012) US	This study compares beliefs about kindergarten readiness and the role of preschools in readiness among parents and preschool teachers in three early childhood programs.	0–5 years	Qualitative, interviews (N = 13 teachers and 16 parents)	Three settings (A, B, & C): Program A is a small, university-based lab school in a predominantly rural county of a northeastern state. 21% of the county's children live in poverty Program B serves as a teaching and research laboratory in a southwestern state. 27 per cent of the county's children live in poverty. Program C is a full-day Head Start program. Head Start is intended to serve children from families with incomes below federal poverty guidelines;	Beliefs among parents and teachers were generally consistent within each program. Participants in all programs shared a multidimensional definition of kindergarten readiness, citing social and emotional factors as the core of readiness, combined with perceived academic components, such as literacy skills.
Hustedt et al. (2018) US	This study investigates kindergarten teachers' beliefs related to what entering kindergartners should be able to do and beliefs about using assessment data.	The authors state that children start kindergarten the year they turn 5 years old.	A quantitative survey was distributed to kindergarten teachers in three rounds (N= (Year 2000): 171, (Year 2011): 185, and (Year 2013): 257	The teachers work in multiple contexts.	The findings suggest that although policies promote an academic emphasis in kindergarten, teachers, as policy enactors, take a more nuanced view and continue to recognise non-academic skills as a key component of kindergarten readiness.
Jahreie (2022) Denmark	The study investigates ECEC teachers' assessment of minority-language children's school readiness in high-minority, low-income areas	Children 0-6	Qualitative interviews (N = 11 ECEC teachers)	The study context is described as high-minority, low-income neighbourhoods in Copenhagen	The findings show that the ECEC teachers perceive that the demands held by governing bodies reflect an understanding of school readiness that is disadvantageous for children with minority language backgrounds.
Jarrett & Coba-Rodriguez. (2019) US	The study examines preschool teachers', kindergarten teachers', and mothers' school readiness beliefs.	The authors do not provide this information. Yet, we do know that the teachers work in preschool and kindergarten.	Qualitative interviews (N = 6 preschool teachers, 6 kindergarten teachers, and 14 mothers of preschoolers transitioning to kindergarten)	The study context is one inner-city neighbourhood. The parents in the study are described as low-income African American mothers.	The findings suggest that teachers' beliefs about school readiness are related to school type, curricula, teacher tenure and race. The researchers found that mothers' beliefs about readiness reflected racial background.
Kinkead-Clark (2021) Jamaica	This study investigates how pre-primary and primary school teachers define and perceive school readiness.	The authors do not provide this information directly. However, they state that in Jamaica children attend pre-primary education when they are 3–5 years old. Information from interview excerpts suggests the chronological	Mixed methods, focus groups discussions and questionnaires (N = 18 preschool teachers and 15 first-grade teachers divided into four focus groups)	This information was not found in the article.	The findings suggest that teachers have varying perspectives of readiness and that the tendency to prioritise academic learning predominantly accounts for these differences. The findings also highlight that different teachers' perspectives of children's

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Table 2 (*continued*)

Author (year) National context	Purpose of the study/ research questions	What age group do the teacher participants primarily work with?	Methodology (N =)	The local socio-economic context of the study	Main findings or the findings that are most important for answering the research questions of the current review
		age for attending first grade is 6 years old.			readiness lead to different understandings of how this should be supported.
Kjær et al. (2020) Denmark	This study analyses how ECEC reforms have affected the priorities of parents and pedagogues regarding school readiness.	In the introduction, the authors state that ECEC in Denmark is primarily for children aged 0–5. However, there is no specific information regarding how old the children are other than researchers' particular focus on teachers working with children in the last year before transitioning to primary school.	Qualitative, ethnographic fieldwork (N = fieldwork in three kindergartens; 35 interviews with ECEC teachers and 40 parents)	The authors describe that the three ECEC programmes are located in different socio-economic environments. The first resides in an area where a large proportion of parents are described as well-educated and well-off economically. The second is described as an ethnically and socio-economically diverse neighbourhood in a partly gentrified working-class area. The third ECEC programme is situated in what is referred to as a diverse community.	Parents and staff consider the social aspect the most important thing for kindergarten children to learn and as something the adults must cultivate, often in a disciplinary manner. Meanwhile, parents and pedagogues state that academic competencies are not important to cultivate because an interest in academics will naturally grow.
Koçak and Incekara (2020) Turkey	The study compares preschool teachers' and classroom teachers' opinions on school readiness	The teachers work with children aged 5,5–7.	Qualitative interviews (N = 10 preschool teachers and 15 primary school teachers)	The study only presents teachers' socioeconomic status and does not indicate the socio-economic background of the children enrolled in the programmes and families.	The findings suggest that primary school teachers have higher expectations of children's cognitive development than preschool teachers.
Miller and Kehl (2019) US	This study compares parents' and teachers' rank-ordered importance of early school readiness characteristics.	30–42 months	Quantitative survey study (N = 81 parents and 26 teachers). Some questionnaires were filled in by only one parent, while some were filled in by both parents in a collaborative effort.	The authors describe the parents in the sample as primarily middle to upper class with 71.5% of the sample earning a household income of $60,000 or greater.	The findings indicate that teachers and parents agreed upon the relative importance of early school readiness components. For both groups, being healthy, happy and socially skilled were generally ranked as more important than cognitive abilities in preschool-aged children.
Niklas et al. (2018) Australia, Austria, Colombia, Germany, Nicaragua and Slovenia	This study compares early childhood professionals' perceptions of children's school readiness characteristics in six countries.	The authors do not provide this specific information. However, they specify that the term 'early year professionals' refers to all individuals who are undertaking initial teacher education to work in formal ECEC settings or primary schools or who are already teaching in either setting. The authors also list compulsory school ages and enrolment rates in ECEC in the respective countries, ranging between 5 and 6 years.	Quantitative survey (N = 1198 early years professionals)	The teachers in the study work in multiple contexts across several countries.	Independence, social skills and concentration were reported to be very important. Academic precursors and physical development were reported to be the least important.
Oliveira et al. (2021) US	This study examines how the conceptualisation of school readiness shapes staff perceptions of Brazilian immigrant students.	The authors do not provide this information. We only know that the professionals work with children who attend kindergarten and first grade.	Qualitative interviews (N = 15 school professionals)	The teachers in the study describe that many children in their programme experience living under disadvantaged home conditions, characterised by a generalized sense of instability, also including that their parents have an overly busy work schedules, and a lack of knowledge concerning. how to navigate U.S. public schooling. Many of these children have parents who	According to several of the school professionals in this study, the immigrant parents hindered their children's school readiness due to their busy work schedules, lack of knowledge concerning how to navigate U.S. public schooling and a generalized sense of instability due to their immigration status.

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Table 2 (*continued*)

Author (year) National context	Purpose of the study/ research questions	What age group do the teacher participants primarily work with?	Methodology (N =)	The local socio-economic context of the study	Main findings or the findings that are most important for answering the research questions of the current review
				are born in Brazil and have migrated to the US.	
Piker and Kimmel (2018) US	This study investigates what early childhood teachers in the US believe are the essential characteristics young children and dual language learners (DLL) require to be ready for school.	35 teachers work with children aged 0–5, 15 teach developmental kindergarten through fifth grade and 2 teachers were not in a classroom.	Quantitative survey study (N = 52 teachers)	The teachers in the study work in multiple contexts across the US.	Teachers rank social characteristics as essential over other areas of learning for all children, including children who are dual language learners.
Puccioni (2018) US	The study aims to understand the ways in which teachers' beliefs shape their transition practices	This information is not explicitly stated but we know that teachers work with children in kindergarten.	Qualitative case study. Interviews, field observations, and document analysis. (N = three kindergarten teachers)	The kindergarten programme is located in a public elementary school in a high-poverty community that predominately serves families of colour.	The kindergarten teachers in this study believed that a variety of skills and behavioural attributes are important for children's successful transition to kindergarten. Yet, they believe that children's early literacy skills are most important.
Rouse et al. (2023) Australia	To investigate what educators believe are the most significant challenges and issues associated with children's transition to school	This information is not explicitly stated but we know that most of the educators participating in the study work with preschool children who are starting compulsory schooling the year after	Qualitative survey (N = 3697 early childhood educators and 1322 school-age educators)	The teachers in the study work in a variety of contexts.	The study shows that the early childhood educators' perceptions of school readiness differed from the views of primary school educators. The educators report that these differences pose key challenges for children's school transition.
Şahin et al. (2013) Turkey	To compare preschool teachers' and first-grade teachers' views on school readiness.	The authors do not provide this information. We only know that the teachers work in preschool and first grade.	Qualitative interviews (N = 35 preschool teachers and 35 first-grade teachers)	This information was not found in the article.	The findings show that preschool and first-grade teachers tended to have similar views on school readiness.
Serry et al. (2014) Australia	This study investigates preparatory teachers' perceptions of school readiness.	The authors state that the chronological age for full-time school in Australia is around age 5. The first year of full-time school is called "preparatory class".	Quantitative survey study (N = 153 preparatory teachers)	The teachers in the study work in multiple contexts.	All participants rated emotional, independent self-care, social abilities and language skills as having high importance for experiencing a successful transition to school.
Shemesh and Golden (2022) Israel	This study examines kindergarten teachers' perceptions and practices of school readiness in kindergartens in low socioeconomic status settings in Northern Israel to illuminate the ways in which global educational ideas are appropriated by teachers in their daily work.	The authors state that children in Israel attend kindergarten from age 5, and compulsory schooling starts from age 6.	Qualitative, participatory observation in a kindergarten, interviews with kindergarten teachers and analysis of policy documents (N = 8 kindergarten teachers)	The authors describe the teachers' place of work as a low socioeconomic status settings where many of the children's parents have migrant backgrounds.	The findings revealed that while teachers adopted a holistic approach to academic learning, in the socioemotional sphere they looked to behavioural manifestations. Thus, teachers continued to adhere to a child-centred pedagogy, while also providing tangible measures for assessing school readiness.
Stein et al. (2019) Estonia	This study explores how preschool teachers comprehend their pedagogical activities in supporting children's school readiness.	6–7 years	Qualitative interviews (N = 15 preschool teachers)	This information was not found in the article.	Preschool teachers valued basic reading and social skills as the most important for children's school readiness.
Stillerova, Troxler, Curby, and Roth (2021) Slovakia	The purpose of this study is to understand the perceptions of kindergarten teachers' views of children's readiness, with a focus on the skills teachers see as most important and the difficulties teachers encounter.	3–6 years	Quantitative survey study (N = 182 kindergarten teachers)	The teachers in the study work in multiple contexts.	Teachers place a higher value on socio–emotional skills over academic skills.
Taleb (2013) Jordan	This study examines the necessary levels of children's school readiness skills	The author does not provide this information. We only know that the professionals work with	Quantitative study (N = 347 kindergarten teachers)	The teachers in the study work in multiple contexts.	The teachers expected children to have average readiness skills upon entering kindergarten. Of the different

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Table 2 (*continued*)

Author (year) National context	Purpose of the study/ research questions	What age group do the teacher participants primarily work with?	Methodology (N =)	The local socio-economic context of the study	Main findings or the findings that are most important for answering the research questions of the current review
	according to Jordanian kindergarten teachers.	children who attend kindergarten.			domains, teachers listed physical skills as the most necessary for kindergarten success, while reading skills were perceived as the least necessary.

Appendix D

Overview of the Study Context, Authors, National Traditions for Curriculum Development in ECEC, Starting Age for Primary Education and Starting Age for Compulsory Education.

Table 4
Overview of the Study Context, Authors, National Traditions for Curriculum Development in ECEC, Starting Age for Primary Education and Starting Age for Compulsory Education

Study context	Author(s) (year)	Tradition for curriculum development in ECEC	Starting age of primary education	Starting age of compulsory education
Australia	Hugo (2018) Rouse et al. (2023) Serry et al. (2014)	The Readiness for school tradition	6	6
Australia, Austria, Colombia, Germany, Nicaragua, and Slovenia	Niklas et al. (2018)	The Readiness for school tradition (Australia)	6 (Australia)	6 (Australia)
		The Social policy pedagogical tradition (Austria)	6 (Austria)	5 (Austria)
		Primarily focused on care and less on learning (Colombia)	6 (Colombia)	5 (Colombia)
		The Social policy pedagogical tradition (Germany)	6 (Germany)	6 (Germany, varies by state)
		Non-formal in structure and based on the voluntary efforts of often uneducated teachers (Nicaragua)	7 (Nicaragua)	7 (Nicaragua)
		The Social policy pedagogical tradition (Slovenia)	6 (Slovenia)	6 (Slovenia)
China	An et al. (2018)	The Confucian tradition	6	6
Denmark	Jahreie (2022) Kjær et al. (2020)	The Social policy pedagogical tradition	7	6
England	Brooks and Murray (2018)	The Readiness for school tradition	4–5	4–5
Estonia	Stein et al. (2019)	The Social policy pedagogical tradition	7	7
Israel	Shemesh and Golden (2022)	The Social policy pedagogical tradition	6	3
Jamaica	Kinkead-Clark (2021)	The Social policy pedagogical tradition	6	6
Jordan	Fayez et al. (2016) Taleb (2013)	The Readiness for school tradition	6	6
Singapore	Choy and Karuppiah (2016)	The Readiness for school tradition	6–7	6–7
Slovakia	Stillerova et al. (2021)	The Social policy pedagogical tradition	6	6
Turkey	Altun (2018) Koçak and Incekara (2020) Şahin et al. (2013)	The Readiness for school tradition	6	5–6
US	Akaba et al. (2020) Bassok et al. (2016) Brown et al. (2021) Hatcher et al. (2012) Hustedt et al. (2018) Jarrett and Coba-Rodriguez (2019) Miller and Kehl (2019) Oliveira et al. (2021) Piker and Kimmel (2018) Puccioni (2018)	The Readiness for school tradition	6	4–6 Varies by state

Appendix E

Overview of What Skills and Learning Methods that ECEC Teachers Report That They Perceive to be Most Deciding for Children's School Readiness Based on National Context and Curriculum Tradition.

Table 5
Overview of What Skills and Learning Methods that ECEC Teachers Report That They Perceive to be Most Deciding for Children's School Readiness Based on National Context and Curriculum Tradition

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Table 5 (*continued*)

	Perceive that non-academic skills are more deciding for children's school readiness than academic skills	Perceive that academic skills are more deciding for children's school readiness than non-academic skills
	Perceive that non-academic skills are more deciding for children's school readiness than academic skills	Perceive that academic skills are more deciding for children's school readiness than non-academic skills
National study context associated with the Social policy pedagogical tradition	Jahreie, 2022; Kjær et al., 2020; Shemesh & Golden, 2022; Stillerova et al., 2021	
National study context associated with the Readiness for school tradition	Hustedt et al., 2018; Miller & Kehl, 2019; Piker & Kimmel, 2018; Taleb, 2013; Sahin et al., 2013; Serry et al., 2014;	Bassok et al., 2016; Brown et al., 2021; Choy & Karuppiah, 2016; Fayez et al., 2016; Jarrett & Coba-Rodriguez, 2019; Kinkead-Clark, 2021; Puccioni, 2018; Rouse et al., 2023
Other	An et al., 2018; Niklas et al., 2018;	

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