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This article argues that Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) is being redesigned based on quality reform discourse with references to global knowledge economy across the Nordic countries and the EU. This takes place in policy processes that extend from transnational agents like the OECD and the EU to national governments, local municipalities and ECEC institutions. Drawing on theoretical insights from Foucauldian genealogy, Laclau and others, the article explores how these policy processes reconfigure what counts as quality in ECEC in a Danish context. It is substantiated how the

Danish government promotes governance structures among municipalities and professionals that pull ECEC into comprehensive educational strategies. This process draws on policy advice from the OECD and the EU. Quality reform thus changes in fundamental ways the organisation and content of ECEC. In discourse, learning displaces playing, and the learning pre-school child emerges. Put together, this situation represents a paradigmatic challenge to professionals and the struggle about their autonomy and discretion..

**Keywords:** quality reform · early childhood education · discourse · professional development

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# Quality Reform and «the learning pre-school child» in the making

## *Potential implications for Danish pre-school teachers*

JOHN B. KREJSLER

The professional status of pedagogues (pre-school teachers)<sup>1</sup> is being profoundly challenged by the current restructuring of public services. The floating signifier *quality* tops the agenda of key players in society who strive to prepare the nation for a so-called competitive global knowledge economy. Knowledge economy and quality reform discourses conjure up visions of making more efficient use of human resources. By soliciting knowledge, education and innovation as key elements in securing economic growth, these discourses contribute to bringing Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) into comprehensive strategies comprising primary, secondary and tertiary education.

Lifelong and life-wide learning have long been mainstay aspects of national and transnational agendas (Nóvoa & Lawn, 2002; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). This situation represents a pervasive policy trend across OECD and EU member states by

means of ECEC-strategies that emphatically employ quality reform discourse (e.g. Dahler-Larsen, 2008; Henry, Lingard, Rizvi & Taylor, 2001; Larner & Walters, 2004; Mooney & Munton, 1998; Moss & Dahlberg, 2008; Munton, Mooney & Rowland, 1995). At a transnational level, the OECD seeks to further this process by drawing up country reports and establishing emerging standards for quality or improvement measures within the framework of projects like Starting Strong 1+2 and Babies & Bosses among other initiatives (e.g. Bennett, 2003; OECD, 2001, 2006, 2007, 2009). UNESCO and the EU are equally active (e.g. Blackburn, 2006; European commission on Childcare and Other Measures, 1996). Here the Scandinavian countries are considered to constitute the prime benchmark due to the widespread diffusion of day care facilities, professional structure and content of activities, enrolment figures and so forth (e.g. OECD, 2001, 2006, 2007)

This article positions the profession of pedagogues in Denmark in relation to quality reform discourse<sup>2</sup>. What counted as quality concerning day care facilities and their projects with children's lives in a Danish context used to be left largely to pedagogues, in terms of organisation as well as content. Now it is increasingly becoming part of comprehensive national educational strategies for making Denmark competitive in a global knowledge economy (e.g. Regeringen, 2006). This means more focus on strengthening continuity between day care facilities and school and, consequently, a stronger focus on learning in day care facilities. In relation to quality and quality reform playing is thus increasingly being replaced by learning as the dominant keyword guiding the purpose of ECEC (Bayer & Langsted, 2001).

The learning pre-school child emerges as a new dominant subject position in discourses that deal with ECEC. Furthermore it

means a restructuring of governance and leadership in and around day care facilities as well as schools (Andersen, Hjort & Schmidt, 2008; Hjort, 2001; Moos, 2003). These processes of change draw heavily on the above-mentioned transnational sources in the form of policy advice, access to compelling and/or convenient terminology and social technologies. This affects how ECEC may be conceived as well as what purpose its professionals may pursue. It indicates furthermore that the issues dealt with in the Danish case represent tendencies that transcend national borders and are of relevance to other Nordic countries as well as across the EU and beyond (e.g. Blackburn, 2006; Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2009; Myndigheten för Skolutveckling, 2007; Skolverket, 2005).

### **Analytical strategy for mapping quality reform discourse in ECEC**

Drawing on insights from Foucauldian genealogy among other sources this article identifies major threads that have coalesced into making quality reform discourse an increasingly dominant voice in managing ECEC and its professionals. Or formulated in a Foucauldian genealogical vein: how has it come about that researchers, policymakers and practitioners today make ECEC and pedagogues problematic in terms of *quality reform* and *knowledge economy* discursive strategies (Foucault, 1997)?

Quality reform discourse constitutes a regime of truth with an expressed desire to reform. It enables some ways of speaking and acting and excludes others (Foucault, 1971). Like other discourses, it constitutes a pattern of interconnected statements that refer to one another, thereby continually reinforcing the totality of the discourse. The internal order of the discourse forces people into the

subject positions provided by the discourse. One must subject oneself to the discourse in question in order to be included as a legitimate subject within its regime.

Within modern liberal democracies, dominant regimes of truth often employ so-called floating signifiers, i.e. a discursive technology that plays on words that are not fixed by prior meanings (e.g. Laclau, 1993, pp. 335). Much like excellence, evidence and accountability, quality is a prime example of a term that cannot be objected to in a general sense. The inherent openness thus makes a floating signifier very useful in protracted policymaking processes. It must leave room for various interpretations to reflect the plurality of stakeholders with diverging interests.

However, as quality becomes defined in a specific policymaking context, it usually becomes the object of heated debate and struggles as will be demonstrated in this article. The success criteria for a floating signifier thus depend upon its ability to form a consensus among dominant discourses within the field in question and ultimately in society at large. In our case this means a consensus around quality reform among stakeholders in ECEC. This resonates with Foucault's argument that a regime of truth, a discourse, must be measured by the extent to which it matches and mirrors the dominant configuration of discourses that set the boundaries for how individuals can think and act at a given time and in a given space in history (Foucault, 1993, 1997).

Quality as a floating signifier is in its current use indebted to the turn it took alongside post-WW2 industrial expansion and the rising need for quality assurance standards made operational in objective quantifiable and measurable terms (e.g. Dahler-Larsen, 2008). With the advent of New Public Management in the 1980s and onwards, a similar understanding of quality is applied to public

services and products to supposedly get more quality for less money (e.g. Hood, 1995; Sahlin-Andersson, 2000). Now quality reform discourse is increasingly interwoven with the emerging dominant knowledge economy discourse. Knowledge economy discourse has its focus on the increased use of knowledge technologies to produce economic benefits and create jobs, which implies innovation, lifelong learning, competency-oriented learning and so forth (Drucker, 1969; Henry et al., 2001; OECD, 1996; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Robertson, 2005). It motivates by (supposedly) preparing nations to get a share of an ever more competitive global marketplace.

This was echoed by EU heads of state and governments who committed to the so-called Lisbon Agenda in March 2000 to making Europe «the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010» (EurActiv, 2004/2007) and was reiterated by the European Commission less ambitiously in the so-called Europe 2020 targets (European Commission, 2010). At a national level the Danish government followed suit by committing to making Denmark a leading knowledge-based society to ensure that Denmark remains «one of the most prosperous and best countries to live in» (Regeringen, 2006, p. 6 ff.; italics in original, translation J.B.K.).

Within this analytical framework the success of the quality reform discourse within Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) and education at large can be seen to represent a bio-political regime to optimize populations and their resources in light of an imagined global challenge (e.g. Dean, 2007). As shall be argued, this regime of truth has gained dominance and is spreading from the OECD and the EU via national governments to municipal administrations and specific organizations, including day care facilities for children. Therefore, pedagogues and

other stakeholders can hardly reject the quality reform discourse without risking self-exclusion in relation to dominant public debate, impact on resource allocation and strategies for ECEC.

### **Pedagogues: professionalism and the challenges of quality reform**

The complex issue of introducing the quality reform discourse with its connections to knowledge economy and New Public Management discourses into education and simultaneously introducing ECEC into the education discourse raises crucial strategic questions for the profession of pedagogues: as shall be seen this quality reform discourse is highly coded by external stakeholders. It introduces hierarchical leadership structures. It links ECEC explicitly to the agendas of knowledge economy and lifelong learning in the form of comprehensive national educational strategies. It represents quality in ECEC in words and deeds that challenge pedagogues and their professional values on major issues. Hitherto, pedagogues have thus largely represented their practice through images of the day care facility as being different from school with more room for play and spontaneity, and less adult direction; in short, with more room for child-initiated activity (e.g. Bayer & Langsted, 2001; Nørregård-Nielsen, 2005).

In order to appreciate the breadth of these issues, one needs to understand some aspects of the developments that have led pedagogues to where they are today. In Scandinavian countries the work of pedagogues acquired professional features during the rapid expansion of the welfare state during the 1960s (Mortensen, 2010; Nørregård-Nielsen, 2005). Caretaking and developmental opportunities were needed for 0–6 year olds as women increasingly entered the

labor market. It is still, however, contestable whether a career as a pedagogue can reasonably be labeled a profession. Like teachers, social workers and nurses, the work of pedagogues seems to fit into the category that Parsons and functionalist sociology of professions call semi-professions, due to a vague delimitation of the field of work, a weak scientific knowledge base and questionable autonomy (Due & Madsen, 1990; Krejsler, 2005; Parsons, 1968). It has been suggested that these occupational groups should be labeled *welfare professions* (e.g. Hjort, 2004; Hoel, 1997; Selander, 1989). Others have suggested the term *relations professions* as their work consists of holistic relational work with clients, which presupposes the integration of cross-disciplinary knowledge with general and personal competencies (e.g. Krejsler, 2005; Moos, Krejsler & Fibæk Laursen, 2004).

This emerging occupational group thus struggles hard to gain public recognition of its status (Nørregård-Nielsen, 2005). Pedagogues perform work that many believe could be done by any attentive parent, i.e. the task of taking care of children. Many unskilled pedagogue assistants thus work side by side with educated pedagogues, although the latter definitely hold a more privileged status within the hierarchy of ECEC.

In Denmark, the occupational field has been under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Social Affairs although its tasks were being increasingly linked to the educational system. Then, in October 2011, finally incorporated in the Ministry of Children and Education as a newly elected Socialdemocrat-led government took office. In legal terms the field was subordinate to the *Social Assistance Act* (Bistandsloven) from 1975 to 1998 and subsequently the *Service Act* (Serviceloven) and the very general regulations of these legal acts that covered a wide array of different service areas. It was not until the

passing of the *Day Care Facility Act* (Dagtilbudsloven) in 2007 that a comprehensive legal framework and delimitation of purpose was made specifically for day care facilities. The recently promulgated acts on *Educational Curricula*, *Language Assessments* and *Child Environment Mapping* likewise represent increasing external demands for a particular understanding of quality in relation to ECEC, i.e. increased attention to the educational, learning and documentation aspects of activities in day care facilities. Previously, pedagogues and pedagogue training colleges (pædagog-seminarier) were largely in charge of defining what counted as quality in day care facilities.

The regime of truth that links quality reform and knowledge economy discourses may also be seen as a pro-active response to curb the costs of the rapid expansion of public services in the welfare state during the 1960s and 1970s (Mortensen, 2010). Pedagogues and day care facilities emerged as a welfare solution to childcare, a demand that arose from women's large-scale entrance to the labour and education markets. By 1980, however, many welfare states had become haunted by large public deficits and were looking for tools to make public services more efficient and to prioritize limited tax revenue. *Quality*, *efficiency* and *accountability* emerged among a cluster of new signifiers designed to help policymakers achieve these ends (e.g. Andersen et al., 2008; Hjort, 2001).

Consequently, the work of pedagogues is subject to increased demands to be made visible in compliance with the emerging quality reform discourse (e.g. Jørgensen, 1996). This means devolution with increased responsibility for the individual day care facility in line with core New Public Management policy. This devolution must comply with the growing number of criteria for accountability and documentation set by the new municipal and national quality reform

regimes. It furthermore means transition to more hierarchic strategic leadership in day care institutions where the leader, as a rule, had hitherto been viewed as a *primus inter pares* in an organization with little, if any, hierarchy (e.g. Moos, 2003; Nørregård-Nielsen, 2005).

Quality in this new situation thus entails that the public organization builds up reflexive capacity, a quality assurance culture, to permit a continuous self-appraisal of its services and products that matches the discursive standards of recurring external appraisals. This constitutes a basis for making decisions about future resource allocations. *Quality* in New Public Management terms means more public service for less money by means of management tools borrowed from private sector practice (e.g. Hughes, 2003; Klausen, 2001; Sahlin-Andersson, 2000). This requires setting up accountability or quality assurance systems by means of new national standards of control, evaluations, performance indicators and benchmarking. Such technologies consist of a mix of self- and external appraisals intended to make public services measurable and comparable according to objective standards.

Until now, pedagogues have largely developed a practical mastery, i.e. a mastery that is mostly expressed as tacit knowledge or in everyday language (e.g. Nørregård-Nielsen, 2005; Polanyi, 1967). However, knowledge, skills and values must increasingly be made explicit and documented orally and in writing and be discursively in line with current quality assurance technologies. This requires pedagogues to develop symbolic mastery and competencies to document that what they do is quality. Pedagogues must, consequently, develop further and more explicitly their own professional discourse about quality in ECEC. Inversely, they risk losing their professional autonomy, because external stakeholders increasingly define what counts

as quality for pedagogues and their practice in non-pedagogue discourse.

BUPL (the Danish National Federation of Early Childhood Teachers and Youth Educators) appears to be highly aware of these challenges. As shall be elaborated in more detail, BUPL has since long entered into struggles and negotiations with ministries, municipalities and other stakeholders to influence the new landscape for conducting child care facilities in ways that reflect the values and interests of the profession of pedagogues. As stated in its *Pedagogical Profile* BUPL's arguments for retaining the term *pedagogue* serve to explicitly articulate a professional discourse, its ideas and values:

We have decided to use the concept «Pedagogue» in order to maintain the specific values and attitudes of this Danish pedagogical profession for the overall development, learning and formation of children, young people and adults. Danish child care provision is an integral and independent part of the Danish welfare society and should not be mixed up with the school system and formal teaching (Danish National Federation of Early Childhood Teachers and Youth Educators [BUPL], 2002).

### **Quality reform discourse and the policy chain of transnational, national and local players**

The challenges posed to pedagogues by quality reform discourse thus result from complex transnational, national and local policy processes that can be traced in current legislation, social technologies and implementation practices. At transnational level the OECD is becoming increasingly involved in setting targets for children from birth to the start of school by means of statistics and evaluations that facilitate comparisons of member states (e.g. OECD, 2009).

This is included in the policy area of ECEC which, like PISA, is part of the OECD Directorate of Education, sub-group Pre-school and school<sup>3</sup>.

Up until today the two key Research & Development initiatives within ECEC have been *Starting Strong 1 + 2* (OECD, 2001, 2006) and *Babies and Bosses* (OECD, 2007). *Starting Strong* as well as *Babies and Bosses* reveal that the themes scrutinized are given a largely economic twist. It becomes a matter of establishing structures and a supply of services within the public sector that contribute to creating harmonic economic growth by facilitating families' and particularly women's opportunities in the labor market, turning around low fertility rates, ensuring coherence between work and family life, securing harmony and learning during children's early years and securing smooth transition to school.

These initiatives are moulded according to the well-known OECD template, including a mix of statistical surveys covering most member states and a number of more in-depth country reports on selected countries. This template claims to facilitate comparisons of member states' initiatives and results within the field, albeit with due reservations. This strategy sets up a framework for competitive efforts among member states through peer pressure, the exchange of strategy formats, concerns over national placements in ranking lists and imagined consequences for future competitiveness in the global market place. This is often called the OECD model or the Open Method of Coordination (OMC; e.g. Moutsios, 2010; Olsson, Petersson & Krejsler, 2011).

Furthermore the quality reform discourse cannot be dissociated from the so-called Lisbon Agenda, designed to make the EU «the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world» and recently re-iterated in the more humble «Europe

2020» vision. Concerning education, the Bologna Process and the aims of establishing a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) are frequently linked to the Lisbon Agenda using the terminology of quality reform (Olsson et al., 2011). This process includes the pre-service education of pedagogues in the form of a so-called professional bachelor degree.

One could argue that the 0–6 years age group still occupies an uncertain position in relation to the education system and its link to discourses about competitiveness in the so-called global knowledge economy. Nonetheless, pre-schools, day care centers and nurseries for infants are increasingly drawn into the orbit of a learning discourse that links these fields closer to school and its mission. Of particular importance, the former EU Commission Childcare Network should be mentioned (1986–1996). This network dealt with formulating targets for coherence and continuity in ECEC (e.g. Andersen et al., 2008, p.15; European Commission Network on Childcare and Other Measures to Reconcile the Employment and Family Responsibilities of Men and Women, 1996).

Danish national policymaking draws heavily on the above-mentioned transnational sources in the form of policy advice, access to compelling and/or convenient terminology and social technologies. In recent years one would mention, drawing on the OECD as an example, the PISA reports as well as the influential evaluations of Danish primary and lower secondary school and the evaluation of Danish educational research (Ekholm, Mortimore, Maria, Laukkanen & Valijarvi, 2004; OECD/CERI, 2004). Similar references could be made with regard to the EU, the Bologna Process, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) that conducts the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), the Trends in Interna-

tional Mathematics & Science Study (TIMSS), the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) and other transnational agencies and associations.

Transnational policy influences have been pervasive since the 1980s concerning the restructuring of governance (organisation, leadership, accountability measures and so forth) in public organisations (e.g. Mortensen, 2010). From 2001 till 2011 the Danish Liberal-Conservative government considerably tightened the New Public Management and quality reform policies of the previous Social Democrat led government of the 1990s. A so-called contractual politics between the state, municipalities and citizens has been established. This constitutes the basis for the comprehensive *Quality Reform*<sup>4</sup>, which is a vision and targets for how the public services should develop in the years to come. Quality is associated with words like better services, more user/consumer satisfaction, better work places and more in-service qualification of staff.

«Citizen at the center» has become the motto of the reform. Quality indicators shall ensure that enhanced quality is documented. By means of the so-called Three Party Agreement (Regeringen, 2007) the national government, Local Government Denmark (i.e. the federation of Danish municipalities (KL)), Danish Regions and the large Confederation of Professionals in Denmark (FTF) agreed on a sum of money to provide staff with in-service education and training to ensure that the intentions of the quality reform are met. In 2008 Local Government Denmark (i.e. the federation of Danish municipalities) followed suit and launched the comprehensive *Inter-Municipal Quality Project* in a bid to implement the government's quality reform (Det Fælleskommunale Kvalitetsprojekt)<sup>5</sup>.

Municipal quality reports have already been introduced concerning comprehensive

schools. Considering the momentum of learning discourse and the growing expectations that ECEC prepare children for school, it is not unlikely that ECEC will soon be linked to this production of quality reports. Legislation already requires that the staff of day care centers for children (0–6) produce knowledge and documentation in writing to make their practice sufficiently comparable in quality terms. Educational Curricula in writing thus became mandatory for all day care centers for children (0–6) from 2004. In 2007 it became mandatory for day care centers (0–6) to offer parents the opportunity to have their children's verbal competencies assessed (Language Assessment). Since 2006 all day care centers (0–6) have been required to perform written Child Environment Mapping.

Even the follow-up research designed to speak the truth about the effects of this quality reform regime is kept within a controlled process of institutionalization. Here one should mention in particular the government initiative that led to the establishment in 1999 of the Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA). The institute describes its purpose as follows:

The Danish Evaluation Institute, EVA, explores and develops the quality of day care centres, schools and educational programmes. We provide usable knowledge at all levels – from local institutions to ministries»<sup>6</sup>.

EVA is organized in five units. One of these units is labelled *Early Childhood Education* while the other four refer to the rest of the educational system. Reports from EVA produce a considerable part of the truths about what works in ECEC in Denmark. The Early Childhood Education unit has so far issued reports on *Efforts to counter the vicious circle of social deprivation* (2009), *Language assessments of three year olds* (2009), *Municipalities'*

*handling of the evaluation of educational curricula* (2009) among other topics.

By their inclusion in EVA, day care facilities for children have been explicitly placed in the educational system. This is not the case for care facilities for elderly citizen. This appears odd as both facilities for 0–6-year olds and facilities for elderly citizens were until recently under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior and Social Affairs under the sub-section of Social Issues. This underlines the gradual discursive absorption of day care facilities for children into a coherent national education strategy, which was completed by its integration into the Ministry of Children and Education in October 2011.

We may conclude that the politically ordained framework for thinking and practicing ECEC in Denmark has been tightened considerably, largely by means of floating signifiers like quality. Here the OECD, the European Commission and other transnational players increasingly set agendas for ECEC that influence policymaking at national level. The momentum of the knowledge economy discourse thus necessitates increasing links between economic growth, school and ECEC. As I shall develop further, this is explicitly manifest in the displacement of playing by learning as the dominant keyword concerning children's development in ECEC. One can observe a distinct discursive move away from the playing kindergarten child towards the learning pre-school child as the dominant subject position to be dealt with in ECEC.

### **Pedagogues, municipalities and the struggle about «quality»**

The Government's *Quality Reform*, Local Government Denmark's comprehensive *Inter-Municipal Quality Project* and the so-called *Three Party Agreement* (Trepartsaftale) for al-

locating resources sets the Danish context for the quality reform regime. In addition, social technologies have been launched that specify procedures for the legitimate implementation and assessment of quality: municipalities are required to formulate a *Policy for Children* and are recommended to develop *Educational Tool Kits*. Municipalities are required to develop *Quality Reports* for schools, which most likely will inspire the development of more learning-oriented day care facilities for children. Under legislation *educational curricula*, *language assessment* offers and *child environment mapping* have been made mandatory. This extensive coding of the space for thinking and acting ECEC legitimately brings us to consider how the profession of pedagogues responds to the challenges of this vast incursion by external stakeholders into their field.

The Danish National Federation of Early Childhood Teachers and Youth Educators (BUPL) acknowledges that pedagogues must acquire competences in explaining and documenting their practice in quality terms. This is clearly expressed in its so-called *Pedagogical Profile*:

It is important that pedagogues are able to describe their practices in writing as well as orally, and that they develop a common language enabling them to describe their competences, actions and intentions /.../ Increasingly, local administrations, parents and other professional groups require of pedagogues that they motivate their pedagogical aims, priorities and actions. (Danish National Federation of Early Childhood Teachers and Youth Educators [BUPL], 2002)

Further, BUPL entered the struggle to give direction to the quality reform discourse when, in 2003, the union joined the so-called KiD-collaboration with the Ministry of Social Affairs, Local Government Denmark (KL), and later, even the Confedera-

tion of Professionals in Denmark (FTE, of which BUPL itself is a constituent member). KiD is an acronym in Danish for Quality in Day-Care Facilities. Within the KiD framework for 2003/2004, 25 million DKr (3 million Euros) from the Ministry's so-called rate adjustment pool (satspuljer) was distributed to projects that dealt with developing quality in day care facilities. Descriptions and the results of the large number of projects were gathered, summarized and re-written into recommendations and inspirational material in the so-called *Silver Guide*, *Gold Mine* and *Gold Guide*. Learning Lab Denmark at the present Danish School of Education, Aarhus University, was commissioned to be in charge of the elaboration and publication of these guides (Learning Lab Denmark, 2003, 2005). The criteria for obtaining resources from the rate adjustment pool (satspuljer) particularly emphasized projects that paid attention to learning and educational content.

The preface to the *Silver Guide* thus states how learning has become indispensable as a keyword for understanding Quality in Day-Care Facilities (KiD) and consequently indispensable for pedagogues. On the other hand, learning is represented as a floating signifier that can mean many things and be appropriated, at least partially, by pedagogues:

Learning has become a key concept in debates about education. And it is a concept that more or less all participants in the debate can make use of for different purposes... There is no one answer telling us what learning is or should be ... In the years to come we shall investigate how attention to learning has meaning for children and professionals... As a rule it is called something other than learning today... The big question is whether something else or more should be learnt than today... many parents and pedagogues distance themselves from learning. Simultaneously, however, they wish for the best development for the

children. We shall have to see what the difference really is between the words «development» and «learning». (Learning Lab Denmark, 2003)

The concept of learning cannot be omitted. More goal-orientation and demands for documentation of what works have been initiated. Simultaneously, however, the quality reform discourse still allows room for maneuver in the struggles between municipal administrators, institutional management and professional pedagogues. When writing in the manifesto-like pamphlet *Better quality – municipalities show the way* (part of the Inter-Municipal Quality Project) Local Government Denmark (KL) thus extends an invitation to bring into play a diversity of interpretations:

36 municipalities and Local Government Denmark (KL) have entered into a 2-year partnership agreement that commits to mutual collaboration in order to fix attention on educational practice and in order to systematically develop quality in day care facilities... How much are the children supposed to learn? Should we set up targets for the individual child? How should we organize the partnership with parents? What particular educational competencies are needed?...Municipal leadership and educational consultants gather in seminars to discuss what makes up good quality ...As an element in the project Local Government Denmark (KL) invites all pedagogues and leaders to an educational gathering. Here day care facilities across the country will share experience and ideas about good educational practice and work around children's well-being, development and learning. This constitutes an important element of the partnerships' work to disseminate partnership results among the remaining municipalities in the country. (KL, 2008, p. 24)

This probably comes closest to an authoritative statement of Local Government Denmark's (KL) thinking as far as the govern-

ment's Quality Reform is concerned. The resounding emphasis on education and learning in relation to developing quality in day care facilities is remarkable. Deliberations between municipal leaders and educational consultants are prioritized concerning the overarching work on quality; professional pedagogues and institutional leadership must make do with an invitation to an educational gathering. This work should be viewed in light of the recent changes in ECEC policies and legislation. It serves to satisfy demands that children acquire more learning competencies in day care facilities that prepare them for school in a more goal-oriented manner. Local Government Denmark's understanding of learning has thus been aligned with the categories stated in the Act on Educational Curricula (KL, 2008, p. 25), as the formulation of key areas of intervention clearly indicate:

- Children's development along the lines of the themes in Educational Curricula: The child's diversified personal development, social competencies, language, body awareness and movement, nature and natural phenomena, cultural forms of expression and values
- Leadership
- Facilitating learning and development environments as well as staff's professional competencies.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that Denmark has a long-standing tradition of municipal autonomy. This means that there is considerable variation in how different municipalities handle areas like day care facilities and school (e.g. Andersen et al., 2008). One may conclude, nonetheless, that the Quality Reform and associated initiatives have reconfigured and considerably increased governance of ECEC from national to municipal levels by means of legislation,

demands for documentation, new social technologies and practices for obtaining financing. One may further conclude that these policy processes have been led by other stakeholders than the profession of pedagogues.

### Concluding discussion

This article has posed the question about how extended transnational, national and local policymaking processes of quality reform reconfigure the landscape of ECEC and consequently challenge conceptions of professional work. The case of Denmark has been used to document how quality, understood as a floating signifier, has considerably reconfigured what can legitimately be said and done in Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC). Quality reform discourse is visibly shaped by and linked to policymaking networks that transcend national borders. National governments increasingly align their policies with transnational agendas and political technologies developed at a supranational level to enable comparisons, benchmarking and ranking. ECEC is thus becoming an important policy field for transnational policy-shaping agents like the OECD and the European Commission, which traditionally have paid most attention to what creates economic growth (e.g. Henry et al., 2001; OECD, 2009).

Using the case of Denmark, this article has shown how the policy field of ECEC extends from the OECD and investigations like *Starting Strong* and *Babies and Bosses*, over the EU to the national Danish government's extensive Quality Reform initiative for the public sector. This policymaking chain is linked to the overarching EU Lisbon Agenda (2000) and its recent and more humble reiteration in *Europe 2020*, which commit member states to making the European Union dynamic, competitive, smart, sustainable

and inclusive on a global scale among knowledge-based economies. Local Government Denmark (i.e. the federation of Danish municipalities) has played key role in anchoring these processes in local Danish municipalities. Relations between municipal administrators, institutional leaders and professional pedagogues are thus being re-coded in the wake of quality reform discourse and mandatory social technologies that follow such as educational curricula, child environment mapping and language assessment.

Pedagogues and the Danish National Federation of Early Childhood Teachers and Youth Educators (BUPL) have committed to collaborating with Local Government Denmark (KL) and other key stakeholders in various arenas such as the extensive KiD project (KiD = Quality in Day-Care Facilities). However, the direction of the Quality Reform and its reconfiguration of public services appears to challenge pedagogues and their professional values on major issues. Hitherto, pedagogues have largely represented their practice through discursive images of the day care facility as being different from school with more room for play and spontaneity, and less adult direction; in short, with more room for the child. The displacement in recent years of playing by learning as the guiding keyword for day care facility/kindergarten practice has thus been a sensitive issue for many pedagogues. They fear that ECEC risks losing its unique features and adapts too extensively to the criteria of school. They express concern that increased goal-orientation of pre-school children's lives means less child initiated activity, less play and so forth.

Certainly, one may conclude that the playing kindergarten child has lost considerable ground to the learning pre-school child as the dominant subject position in ECEC relevant discourses. How learning will end up being defined is still, nonetheless, an

open question with much room for interpretation. The arguments in this article show that learning still has the features of a floating signifier that may be captured by kindergarten as well as school and other discourses. The current uses of the term learning still contain a large discursive space between play redefined as social competences, development and creativity and learning in a more traditional school-oriented definition of the term. Further, one may conclude that the profession of pedagogues has lost ground to a number of external stakeholders in defining day care centers, their organization and content. The profession is now only one among many stakeholders in policy processes where they do not take the lead.

Inversely, however, one could ask whether the increased attention to the importance of what happens in ECEC could not be seized as an opportunity by pedagogues to raise their professional status in relation to the national and municipal administration, parents and the greater public. In line with the increased focus on education, the Danish government has thus recently upgraded pedagogues by restructuring their education into a so-called professional bachelor education along with those of teachers, nurses and other so-called semi-professionals. In 2008, these educations were gathered into University Colleges (Professionshøjskoler). These colleges are intended to strengthen disciplinary knowledge in larger and stronger units that will enable them to benefit from scientific research done at universities. Following the argument of this article, this is in line with the transnational policy advice and peer pressure that Denmark submits to by participating in and complying with the European Bologna Process.

This article thus argues that a new dominant configuration of knowledge and power relations has emerged in relation to the making of day care facilities and the learning pre-

school child as a new inevitable subject position. This new dominant configuration profoundly challenges a previously dominant professions discourse that is being dislodged and pedagogues whose subject positions are being redefined. Consequently, two pertinent questions emerge to be reflected on: (i) Are pedagogues moving in the direction of gradual de-professionalization as external stakeholders take over and define the purpose and goals of ECEC? Or did they ever qualify as a profession? (ii) Or inversely, is a unique opportunity emerging for pedagogues to become truly professional as ECEC shifts from care-taking to the center of comprehensive educational strategies in the wake of knowledge economy, lifelong learning and competence discourses? Indeed, ECEC appears to be gaining higher status via the learning signifier that connects the field to lifelong learning and thus prosperity in an emerging global knowledge economy.

Ultimately, one may even ponder whether the developments scrutinized in this article actually point to the gradual demise of professions. Are we leaving the age of national professions for the benefit of a society that requires competency profiles that differ fundamentally from the more unified systems that professional discourse could warrant? Are we entering an era in which global interdependency curtails strictly national solutions and creates an increasingly contingent, diverse and unstable environment for policymaking? This would likely warrant giving increasing importance to cross- or trans-disciplinary knowledge, experience and skills in order to manage diverse and changing contexts. It would confirm the already emerging situation that employees commit more to the organization where they are currently employed than to a national profession (e.g. debates in Aili, Nilsson, Svensson & Denicolo, 2007; Moos, Krejsler & Kofod, 2007). This assumption

appears to gather support from the fact that ECEC leaders are increasingly becoming strategic leaders within organizations that have their own specific profiles and are thereby tending to distance themselves from the national profession of pedagogues. It has been argued elsewhere that the issue may be clarified by introducing a distinction between the professional and the competence nomad (Krejler, 2006).

This article shows that when dominant regimes of truth change, new strategic spaces for what can be legitimately said and done arise. This creates new conditions for being a legitimate subject within an organization – *in casu* being a pedagogue ... and a child... within an ECEC facility. Failure to adapt, reflect and act appropriately to such changes in circumstances is most likely to be fatal to any occupation. Yet these changes do, inversely, present new opportunities!

## Notes

**1** The concept of *pedagogue* is specific to Denmark, and is in many aspects comparable to *pre-school teachers* in other countries (see [http://www.bupl.dk/english/pedagogy\\_in\\_dk?OpenDocument](http://www.bupl.dk/english/pedagogy_in_dk?OpenDocument) (2010-09-07)). I shall use the terms *pedagogue* and *pedagogue training college*. The terms, however, are contested, and are translated elsewhere as *social educators* and *national institute for social educators* <http://www.iu.dk/publikationer/dansk-engelsk-uddannelsesterminologi/termrapport.pdf> (2011-02-17)

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- 3** <http://www.oecd.org/edu/earlychildhood> (2012-03-21)  
**4** <http://www.kvalitetsreform.dk> (2012-03-21)  
**5** <http://www.kl.dk/> (2012-03-21)  
**6** <http://www.eva.dk> (2010-09-08)

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