What makes good preschools good for all children
Torben Næsby

Department of Preschool Teacher Education, University College of Northern Denmark, Aalborg, SOE, Denmark

ABSTRACT
The purpose of the study on which this article rests is to supplement ECERS-3 observations of the learning environment \((n = 31)\) for 3–5-year-old children attending preschool activities in Favrskov Municipality, Denmark. The paper gives an in-depth analysis of characteristic features of high-quality preschool activities within the areas of Interaction and Programme Structure with a focus on the interaction between pedagogues and children, illustrating if and how high quality benefits children in vulnerable positions. The purpose of the overall ECERS project is to identify key quality features and practice of Danish preschool settings. The research question is: What makes good preschools good for all children, specifically for children at risk?

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 29 August 2019
Accepted 23 October 2019

KEYWORDS
Interaction; ECERS-3; quality in preschool; early childhood

Children in vulnerable positions
Being disadvantaged or in a vulnerable position in the learning environment is not necessarily a static position. Children may enter a process where they become more vulnerable for a variety of reasons. This process is ultimately shaped by the duration, severity and frequency of the risk factors to which the child is exposed. Specific contexts and events in children’s lives also determine whether they are at risk of being in a vulnerable position; for example, children who grow up in poverty, children who have physical/mental disabilities, or premature children find themselves in at-risk positions. This is also the case for children in grief or who experience a crisis of some sort. Some of these positions are conditioned by certain situations and therefore not necessarily permanent; others involve children being on the edge of or outside the community and may be of longer duration.

Many factors potentially creating vulnerable positions for children are societal and structural, for example, inequality in socio-economic conditions, and cannot be warded off by the pedagogical learning environment. However, their adverse effects may be mitigated by an environment of high quality (Taggart, Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, & Siraj, 2015). Structural factors have an indirect impact on the learning environment (e.g. staff ratio, staff training, etc.), and the child’s home environment creates conditions that affect the child and its opportunities in the preschool learning environment.

In the learning environment, we define such an at-risk position as: ‘The contextual and situated difficulties children may encounter, including the psychosocial dynamics between the child and child’s social contexts’ (Hostrup, 2013, p. 55). Children in these positions are in dire need of close and qualified adult contact in preschool to develop their cognitive, social and emotional competencies. Research shows that they generally benefit from high-quality preschool attendance (Moser, Leseman, Melhuish, Broekhuizen, & Slot, 2017; Taggart et al., 2015). High-quality preschool attendance makes a difference and prevents disadvantaged children (e.g. from lower socio-economic groups) from falling behind (Taggart et al., 2015, p. 17).
Developmental understanding: proximal processes

The basic driving force or mechanism creating human development may be termed proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 2012; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2012). Proximal processes are interaction processes unfolding in the environment and they either support or inhibit the individual’s development. In educational research, these processes are also referred to as process quality. Processes unfolding outside the learning environment also influencing development are called distal processes. They work remotely or indirectly, like the quality of organizational structure.

The form, power, contents and direction of the proximal processes affecting development vary systematically as a joint function of the characteristics of the developing person, the environment – both immediate and more remote – in which the processes are taking place, the nature of the developmental outcomes under consideration, and the social continuities and changes occurring over time through the life course and the historical period during which the person has lived. (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2012, p. 208)

According to Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (2012, p. 120), the proximal processes provide a framework for how the individual child can develop his or her potential and react to external influences through, for example, self-regulation, resilience, learning, developing and maintaining positive relationships with other people. Thus, proximal processes also encompass processes by which the child can create and change his or her own psychic world and develop readiness to interact with his or her outside world.

If the proximal processes are weak, the child’s potential for development is not realized to the same extent as if the proximal processes are stronger and more extensive. Hence, the bio-ecological system theory’s perspective includes both the potential harboured in the genetic dispositions with which we are born – our biological heritage, so to speak – and our interaction with our outside world or environment.

Research shows that environments that are poor in terms of the aforementioned resources and are unstable and unpredictable in terms of relationships and stimuli adversely affect proximal processes so that children’s developmental potential is not realized (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 2012; Werner & Schmidt, 2001).

Quality in preschool

According to current research, preschools activities characterized as being of insufficient quality have highly unstructured, i.e. entirely child-centred, learning environments (Sheridan, Samuelsson, & Johansson, 2009). The pedagogues do not seem to have set specific goals for preschool activities and appear to have withdrawn from the children’s activity. Many tasks in daily life are thus carried out in what the Swedish researchers Sheridan et al. (2009) call separate worlds where the children are not involved, and the staff appear unengaged. In these settings, the proximal processes are quite weak in that they are nourished solely by the current conditions (distal processes), even if structural and economic frameworks are good (Sheridan et al., 2009, p. 241), and by what happens in the children’s own interaction with one another. In these settings, an educational perspective is hardly ever considered, and the pedagogues’ approach seems to be that children’s development occurs and develop by itself (Næsby et al., 2019).

Slightly better but still low quality is seen in preschools where everyday life is structured and controlled entirely by adults. In these environments, pedagogical practice rests on routines and routine activities for children in larger groups. The pedagogues instruct the children and are very controlling (Sheridan et al., 2009). Conflicts and any frustrations in everyday life are attributed to children’s problematic behaviour, poor management or ultimately blamed on external factors. The proximal processes are here stronger, but still not diverse, let alone qualitatively challenging for children, as the unilateral instructional approach does not support children’s own initiatives, curiosity and need for exploration. From an educational perspective, this is a kind of material formation (Bildung), where the approach is that children’s development is regulated and stimulated from the outside (Næsby, 2019).
Good-quality preschools forefront child-initiated activities and games. Children play on their own and have opportunities to develop socially in children’s groups, where staff show commitment and interest in children’s initiatives (Sheridan, 2009; Sheridan et al., 2009, p. 241). Children are involved through negotiation. The learning environment is characterized by dialogue, respect for children’s initiatives – with children’s activities and play at the centre. This environment is characterized by cooperation and openness and adopts educational approach with a formal educational perspective. The proximal processes are relatively strong, as the children’s motivation and desire to learn and develop are supported by their involvement, recognition of their initiatives and followed up by pedagogues, e.g. participating in activities with the children.

According to current research, preschools with high quality have learning environments characterized by good interaction, communication with and challenges for children. The staff have defined clear goals for the activities with clear developmental perspectives, but they design the activities in collaboration with the children. Children form groups of varying sizes and with a view to providing care, creating space for play and learning opportunities based on curriculum themes; proximal processes are strong, allowing for progression in children’s learning and development (Sheridan et al., 2009, p. 243).

High-quality preschool learning environments are rich in terms of materials, stimuli and challenges. The staff meet children with educational awareness, knowledge and insight into their development, intentions and interests; they are curious about children’s questions and even ask open-ended questions to sustain children’s expressions. Thus, they are both caring and learning-oriented in their approach to the children (Taggart et al., 2015). From an educational perspective, education is categorical in the sense that pedagogues decide what experiences, contents and activities are important for children’s learning and development, while at the same time being able to seize the day and thus spontaneously follow up on the children’s own initiatives (Næsby, 2019; Sheridan et al., 2009, p. 244).

As a hallmark of high-quality learning environment, research unequivocally points to the ability of educational staff to establish positive relationships with children by showing responsiveness and sensitivity and having a positive effect on children’s social, linguistic and other cognitive development (Melhuish et al., 2015).

Several studies also show that the positive effect of a high-quality learning environment is not only limited to children from stimulating homes but also applies to children in socially vulnerable positions (Melhuish et al., 2015; Moser et al., 2017; Taggart et al., 2015). Good practice is thus characterized by high-quality interactions, i.e.:

- Positive interaction (the children are met with sensitivity and are offered emotional support, care and security).
- Good organization with a clear structure to sustain children’s self-regulation (structure and scaffolding).
- Inclusion, i.e. the children are given opportunities to be part of communities and develop their own learning potential (communication and language support and learning and development support) (Moser et al., 2017).

**Methods**

The theoretical framework of the present study is based on a previous literature study of the effects of intervention with the International Child Development Programme (ICDP), which is supplemented with a review of the theoretical basis for ICDP (Næsby, Rasmussen, & Holm, 2016; Bach, 2010; Hundeide, 2004, 2014). This literature transforms and explains the ICDP interaction themes so that they can be empirically observed. The literature also defines and describes three forms of dialogue (emotional, mediating and meaning-making) and shows how interaction with children can be managed pedagogically and how the sensitivity of the professional pedagogue can be developed (Hundeide, 2004, 2014).
Furthermore, the analysis more heavily draws on the Curriculum Quality Analysis and Impact Review of European ECEC (CARE) project (Moser et al., 2017), which identified indicators of well-being and quality (44 in total at different system levels or dimensions classified according to Urie Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological systems paradigm (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 2012)). In the present analysis, we use the 4 indicators that are most readily comparable to the ECERS principles (from process and curriculum quality, indicators 29, 32, 37 and 42). These indicators, which can be seen as evidence-based recommendations for ways of creating high-quality practices (Moser et al., 2017, p. 5), are chosen because they have been developed, among other things, through intensive studies and reviews and based on inspiration from indicators used in recognized measurement tools (e.g. CLASS and ECERS) (see Moser et al., 2017, p. 34). Hence, they correlate with the ECERS-3 (Næsby et al., 2019).

The 4 themes are:

1. The educators are aware of and sensitive to individual children’s needs, respond to these needs, and react promptly and adequately to signs of distress and insecurity of individual children. Educators engage with all children in a manner appropriate to the children’s developmental level, interests and capabilities, while avoiding stigmatization (excerpt. Moser et al., 2017, p. 34).
2. The educators are sensitive to the needs of the whole group of children, are able to provide the group with developmentally appropriate collaborative activities, to ensure engagement of all children in the group’s activities, and to strengthen feelings of belongingness to the group of all children (excerpt. Moser et al., 2017, p. 35).
3. The educators introduce the developmentally appropriate rich, diverse and complex language, introducing subject-specific terminology, when dealing with topics in the curriculum and in everyday conversations (excerpt. Moser et al., 2017, p. 37).
4. Each child enjoys being in the centre and has positive affectionate relationships with the educators and other children. The child feels respected and valued with regard to his or her own abilities, ideas and backgrounds. The child feels heard by the educators, and his or her ideas are taken into consideration. The child experiences social-emotional safety, competence, agency and belongingness, and feels free to express his or her emotions (excerpt. Moser et al., 2017, p. 38).

The empirical material used in the present analysis is data used for appraising quality in preschool activities using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, version 3 (ECERS-3) in Favrskov Municipality (Næsby et al., 2019). Overall, the strength of the ECERS-3 is that it measures the ability of the learning environment and interactions within this environment to support children’s cognitive, linguistic and social development (Sylva et al., 2006, p. 87). Quality measurement at the ECERS point level elucidates whether the quality is sufficiently high to make a positive difference for children, for example by demonstrating if children’s communication skills are enhanced. Subscale scores and the overall mean score show more pervasively whether the quality is high enough for all children to develop self-regulation, problem-solving ability, memory, etc. (executive functions) (Beloutskaia & Veraksa, 2019; Sylva et al., 2006). These competencies are described under 35 items and 365 statements of quality, which shows the measurement tool’s value in describing the quality of the learning environment and the degree to which it supports:

- Children’s right to safety and care
- Children’s right to positive relationships and interactions
- Children’s right to learn and develop (Clifford, Reszka, & Rossbach, 2010).

The ECERS-3 primarily measures process quality and structural and orientation quality. The national economy, social security, values, interests and the way preschools are organized form the conditions for and the opportunities given by society to children, as Esping-Andersen (2008) states
This is reflected in the mean scores observed across countries and socio-cultural contexts. When there is no privacy, no materials for free play or no books to read, scores will be low even when there are excellent interactions and interplay (Vermeer, IJzendoorn, Cárcamo, & Harrison, 2016).

Previous statistical analyses of the ECERS-R have yielded a three-factor model that is described as (1) learning (cognition), with indicators from the space and furnishings, learning activities and organization subscales; (2) interactions (socio-emotional) and language, with indicators from the interaction, language and literacy subscales and (3) health and safety (Clifford et al., 2010; Gordon et al., 2015; Mayer & Beckh, 2016).

These domains are also covered by the ECERS-3 (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2015). This comprehensive assessment tool measures both environmental provisions and teacher–child interactions affecting young children’s broad developmental needs, including the following dimensions: cognitive; social-emotional; physical; health and safety. In preliminary research on the ECERS-3, Sideris, Early, and Neitzel (2017) found that the reliability of the ECERS as a single factor was very high (n = 1,063; Cronbach’s alpha = 0.93) and that a four-factor solution might be proposed that included the potential for learning, gross motor skills, interactions and math. Additional items added in the current version (3) include assessment of developmentally appropriate literacy and math activities for children from 3 through 5 years of age.

The ECERS-3 has been compared to other instruments (i.e. the CLASS) and can – to a certain degree – predict children’s outcomes (Sideris et al., 2017), as well as the effects of preschool attendance on children’s development (Taggart et al., 2015; Vermeer et al., 2016).

The ECERS-3 ‘emphasizes the role of the teacher in creating an environment conducive to developmental gains and it is designed to predict child outcomes more accurately and with greater precision’ (www.ersi.info). Suitable for use in inclusive and culturally diverse programmes, the ECERS-3 subscales evaluate: Space and furnishings, Personal care routines, Language and literacy, Learning activities, Interaction and Programme structure (Harms et al., 2015).

In the ICDP assessment, focus is on supporting the pedagogues and the learning environment to enhance children’s emotional, social and communicative development and well-being. The ECERS primarily measures global quality and it may be instrumental, as shown by other studies, in reducing the number of themes in relation to use and purpose (Gordon et al., 2015; Mayer & Beckh, 2016) or supplement a given study with domain-specific themes and scales (La Paro, Hamre, & Pianta, 2011; Sheridan, 2009; Sylva et al., 2006). In order to measure specific qualities (or other qualities than those measured in the ECERS) and specific local qualities, other tools must also be used (Gordon et al., 2015; Hofer, 2010). Also, conceptions of quality depend on national curricula and cultural priorities. In Denmark academic achievement is valued at the start of school, even if the cultural context of preschool considers the development of social skills more important (Naesby et al., 2019). Older instruments like ECERS-R would not capture these different qualities as would the newest version ECERS-3 (Harms et al., 2015; Sylva et al., 2006).

Data collection

Observations with the ECERS-3 were made in many preschools (n = 31), among which two classrooms were selected because they scored very high on the quality of the Interaction and Programme Structure subscales. From these two preschools, we obtained 4 × 10-minute video recordings (using iPad) during the morning sessions (8.45–12.45 AM) of each group of children with pedagogues/staff present.

According to Helmerhorst, Riksen-Walraven, Vermeer, Fukkink, and Tavecchio (2014) recording in this time–space creates validity and reliability to shape a Caregiver Interaction Profile (CIP) of the present pedagogue’s approach to children. Saturation is reached with the number of participants and recordings, but still the analysis is very limited as it is not CIP but depends on a total of 24 video clips being analysed according to only four general themes: Sensitivity and emotional
support, Structure and scaffolding, Communication and language support, and Learning and development support.

These themes are not adequate for describing children’s development (The CARE project consists of 44 indicators) but cover the basic developmental areas as described in the ICDP programme (Hundeide, 2004, 2014). Moreover, recent research has identified these themes as central to children’s well-being, learning, development and formation (e.g. Moser et al., 2017; Siraj, Kingston, & Melhuish, 2015).

Parents and staff consented to video footage, and the videos feature no children who did not want to be filmed (for further discussion of ethical considerations, see, for example, Larsson, Williams, & Zetterqvist, 2019).

Analysis: four themes of good practice

Sensitivity and emotional support

This theme covers relationships between pedagogues and children characterized by closeness, attachment and inter-subjectivity showing that staff are responsive and sensitive to the children (Moser et al., 2017).

In practice, being sensitive to a child’s initiative and activities implies that we take the time to share experience, convey meaning and expand the themes the child brings up. In this way, when we participate in the child’s activities and guide and help the child carry out its projects as well as describe and explain what it experiences, then we convey and enrich the child’s experience. (Hundeide, 2004, p. 79)

Through emotional dialogue and support, the pedagogue shows that she is fond of the children. This makes them feel valued (Bach, 2010). By following the children’s initiative, the pedagogue recognizes the children’s attempts to master a situation. This affects children’s self-perception, stimulates attachment and makes them want to stay in and extend contact with the pedagogue (Rye, 2001; Trevathan, 2011).

When you talk to a child about the things that concern it, the child develops the sense of being important, being someone who knows something, is someone, wants something and is worth being with. This stimulates the development of trust (Bach, 2010). By recognizing the child for the person, it is, the child experiences that it masters its own existence, and it gains the belief that even stressful situations can be overcome. The child develops confidence in itself and others (Bach, 2010).

The pedagogue shows recognition and respect by encouraging children to do things on their own and to make choices themselves by expressing the children’s perspective (‘Yes, you think it is interesting, right?’). By appreciating their ideas (‘Yes, it works as well’) and by letting the children negotiate their wishes (‘Okay, but first you have to …’) (Helmerhorst et al., 2014). Responding to children in a respectful way is also reflected in asking children for cooperation (‘Would you be sweet and give me a pair of scissors’) (‘Will you please hand me a spoon’) instead of issuing orders.

The pedagogue explicitly recognizes children’s individuality by stimulating them to carry out tasks and activities themselves and making their own choices as much as possible. She also respects their choices, so that the children become responsible for the day-to-day activities. She shows that she also has her own ideas, motives and perspectives, which she expects children to respect and sometimes accept – but she never does this in an intrusive way and never without acknowledging the children’s perspective (Helmerhorst et al., 2014; Moser et al., 2017, p. 35).

Case 1

A child ‘B’ (4 years old) gets upset as it sits at the table with the other children and a pedagogue ‘P’ and they have found the packed lunches.

P: What’s up with you? Don’t you just want to sit here with me?
B: I want chocolate spread on my bread!
P: Would you like chocolate spread? I don’t think you got that. May I have a look in the lunch box? I’m just looking at what’s in it.

P: Let’s just see, maybe it’s something to be warmed up. Okay, it looks delicious

B: No …

P: Do you want this heated? You can just ask me. Come on, then we go out and heat it. Do you want to?

B: No …

P: So, go and pick up your fruit bag if you’d rather.

P: Do you want this heated? You can just ask me. Come on, then we go out and heat it. Do you want to?

B: (Cries and sits on a couch next to where the others eat. P2 gets up and sits down and takes the child on her lap.)

P 2: Try to come here, do you want to sit with me for a bit? (She comforts the child.) Do you want to go to the table?

B: No, they tease me. They’re looking at me. (The child goes to the table.)

P 2: No, they don’t, they just want to help. Do you know why they’re watching? They can’t understand why you’re upset.

B: They’re looking at me.

P 2: Never mind. Do you want to sit here with me? Do you want to sit here while I eat? Is it OK? See the food here, is it your dad who made it?

B: I don’t mind. (Kicking a chair.)

P 2: No, don’t kick the chair, it’s not nice for the other kids. It’s ok you’re sorry, but not that you get mad and kick.

P 2: In a moment I’ll tell you, you must sit on the couch. I don’t bother sitting with you when you sit and kick and get so frustrated and angry.

P 2: (Talking to some of the other kids and B is at ease.)

B: (Cries and sits on a couch next to where the others eat. P2 gets up and sits down and takes the child on her lap.)

P 2: Try to come here, do you want to sit with me for a bit? (She comforts the child.) Do you want to go to the table?

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P 2: (Talking to some of the other kids and B is at ease.)

(Transcription of video observation in Favrskov Municipality, April 2019).

Children (typically from 1 to 1½ years) develop qualified emotional expressions that they use throughout childhood (e.g. early social smile, laughter, anger, surprise, sadness, fear); and onward from about age 2, shame, pride, and envy, guilt and embarrassment (Siraj et al., 2015). In preschool age, children from the age of 3 typically control these emotional expressions and are learning how to regulate their interactions with the other children and adults in the preschool setting.

It is sometimes difficult to interpret and understand why a child suddenly gets upset for no plausible or apparent reason (such as something happening in the environment like another child teasing, a routine or instruction from a pedagogue, and disappointment over the lunch box as seen in the ‘there is no chocolate spread’ case or similar cases). Is the child tired, getting sick, or frustrated by the lack of chocolate spread?

The child’s emotional expression seems to arise spontaneously. Importantly, after being comforted and being helped through the situation, the child discovers that the other children are (naturally) watching the situation and seeing how the child is crying, being comforted by the pedagogue. This makes the child ashamed. The child exclaims: ‘They look at me; I don’t want them to look at me’ and hides his face in his hands.

This can be interpreted as a sign that the child understands and is learning the rules that determine which emotions are appropriate to express in a situation in that socio-cultural environment. Children need to learn ‘what feelings to express when, as well as learn to read other children’s emotional expressions accurately’ (Siraj et al., 2015, p. 51). The example shows how the child learns to regulate itself through sensitive and emotional communication.

The preschool’s score on the ECERS observation on the Interaction scale is 6.4, and four out of five points score 7. These are indications of very high quality. The scores show that the staff are respectful of the children and guide them positively, recognize them and show them that they are valuable (Harms et al., 2015, p. 83).

The staff (case 1) are supportive and create security for the child who is upset. The interaction between the children is also positive. None of the children react negatively to the crying child. As
the pedagogue says, ‘They are just trying to help you’. The crying child can learn to read other children’s behaviour as an expression of acceptance and support. That it is ok to show emotions.

The example also shows how the children’s group tries to make room for a child who needs a little privacy, which requires a great deal of mastery on the part of the children’s group. The pedagogue is sensitive and supports and regulates both the child and the children’s group.

From an inclusion perspective, there are clear signs, both physically and socially, that the child is included. The child’s frustration is expressed, and the child is comforted and supported through physical contact. It can be discussed whether the attempt to offer the child to come into the kitchen or sit on the couch periodically excludes the child from the group or whether the child is offered space for privacy (ECERS-3 item 4) as a possible solution to the problem. The child chooses to stay in the living room and tries to deal with the dilemma with the experience of being excluded through the exposure of his emotional expression and is included through the comfort and care of the pedagogue and the acceptance of the other children. The child is not immediately in an at-risk position. There can be cause for concern only if this and similar situations occur again and/or frequently and only if the child is also considered to be exposed to other risk factors at the same time. The situation resolves in an educational and satisfactory way for the child, which testifies to the effect of the good interaction – viz. the high quality of interactions.

In the same way, the pedagogue supports the children’s sensation of their own feelings and knowledge of their body by explaining the connection between something that happens and something that can simultaneously be felt. In the example below (Case 2), repeating the morning greeting routine is also an example of how repetition and practice reinforce the proximal process.

**Case 2**

Children and adults are sitting in a circle on the floor ready for their morning gathering.

The pedagogue says, ‘Good morning friends’; there are scattered answers.

‘Hey’, the pedagogue continues, ‘what do you say if someone says good morning to you?’

More children respond with a good morning.

‘Okay, so I’ll try again. Good morning friends! All the children respond in chorus.

‘Wow’, says the pedagogue with a big smile and stays on his stomach, ‘Do you know what, I can feel it down my stomach, then I will actually be happy, because I get a “good morning”.

Do you feel that you will be happy down in your stomach if there is someone saying good morning to you when you come to kindergarten?’

Several children respond in the affirmative.

The pedagogue: ‘It’s feels nice in the stomach and then you start to smile, too’ (pointing to her face, smiling).

**Structure and scaffolding**

Through guided engagement, the pedagogue helps the child to connect meaning to their experiences in and with the outside world. Such dialogues are important for the development of cognitive competencies, learning and internalization of the cultural world (Vygotsky, 1978). Just as the child is a co-creator in its own life, so is life a co-creator in the child’s life (Bach, 2010). The pedagogue helps the child to create an overview, develop action strategies and to learn to control himself (Bach, 2010; Hundeide, 2004; Hundeide, 2014). The pedagogue scaffolds the child to develop appropriate behaviour patterns aligned with the situation the child is in – also known as situational regulation. When the pedagogue guides the child in this way, planning with the child and possibly showing positive alternatives to actions, she helps the child control its emotions and make sense of itself. The child ‘learns to learn’ as a basis for, among other things, being able to interact well with other children (Bach, 2010; Suleymanov, 2015).

When the pedagogue guides the child and tells it what it may, should and can do, and gives the child explanations and corrects it (depending on its age and development), the child experiences this as a positive boundary-setting phrase. This approach targets children’s internal self-regulation, and it
provides the child with contradictions and development opportunities in relation to what the child would like to do for itself (Moser et al., 2017, p. 37; Stern, 2010).

The child in case 1 above receives clear support for demarcation and scaffolding, helping it to regulate itself. The pedagogue helps the child control its emotions as she takes the child on her lap and says, ‘Try to come here, will you sit with me for a bit?’ And the pedagogue scaffolds the child by explaining and being clear about her own perspective: ‘No, don’t kick the chair, it’s not nice for the other kids. It’s ok you’re upset, but not that you get mad and kick. In a little while, I will say you must sit down on the couch.’

**Communication and language support**

To illustrate developmental interaction with young children, the terms ‘serve and return’ ([www.developingchild.harvard.edu](http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu)) are often used. The child is the ‘server’; that is the child’s initiative is the point of departure for interaction and its action is captured in expression, behaviour and needs. The adult catches up and ‘returns’ with a fast, adapted, good response (Drugli, 2015). The interaction continues in a circular process, two to three to five times, depending on the child’s age and individual development. The child even gives the attentive pedagogue a signal to stop, e.g. by turning his head away.

Participation in social practice is the best means of stimulating children’s communication and social development (Hundeide, 2004; Nielsen, 2013). Children are social beings from birth, and they understand themselves as social beings already at 6–9 months of age. Their opportunities for learning and development depend on the quality of and communication about their social interaction.

High-quality results when pedagogues, through body language or words, indicate that they understand children’s emotions and respond to their expressions and meet their needs (Harms et al., 2015; Nielsen, Tiftikci, & Søgaard Larsen, 2013). In ECERS-3, high quality is seen when the pedagogue explains to the children what is going to happen and what expectations she has for their contribution and behaviour. As in the ICDP, the pedagogue listens and responds to children’s questions and expresses the children’s intentions and emotions in words if they are not (yet) able to do so themselves. The pedagogue not only talks much with the children, her verbal interactions focus on the children’s condition and is based on their interest and level of understanding, i.e. she aims for inter-subjectivity (Bach, 2013; Hundeide & Armstrong, 2011; Nielsen, 2013).

The pedagogue speaks mainly with the children and not to the children; the nature of the interaction is that of a dialogue, a conversation where the pedagogue creates a balance between listening and speaking. The pedagogue uses interactions to communicate to stimulate children’s use of language and language comprehension, vocabulary development, etc. (Hansen, 2013; Harms et al., 2015). She encourages children to express their thoughts and feelings with language and offers them the opportunity to expand their vocabulary (Helmerhorst et al., 2014; Moser et al., 2017, p. 37).

Case 1 shows how the pedagogue is scaffolding the child who is comforted and guides it into problem-solving. In case 2, the children’s understanding of emotions is stimulated by repeated attention to welcome greetings and verbal explanations.

**Learning and development support**

As a basis for learning, it is important that pedagogues meet the children with respect and create a safe atmosphere (Nielsen et al., 2013). When interaction is safe and trusting, the child can be helped to process its awareness of the shared experience or events in the outside world. By describing what is experienced jointly, by showing feelings and commitment to the interaction, the pedagogue makes sense of the children’s experiences (Hundeide, 2004).

The pedagogue expands the children’s knowledge and understanding of events and things in their lives and the outside world, for example, by adding more difficult words, asking for children’s ideas or asking questions that motivate the children to explain. When this is done in recognition
of the norms and culture that characterize the child’s immediate circumstances, and the child thus feels met and understood, the child becomes better able at handling breaks, shifts and stressors (Bach, 2010; Hundeide, 2004).

Such a practice will also influence and promote positive interaction between peers. High quality characterizes situations where the pedagogue consistently reacts positively to positive interaction between the children and promote interaction by creating situations that elicit positive reactions or by encouraging the children to initiate positive interactions (e.g. praising children who help others: ‘Look, he gives you the bricks. He is a good friend’). The pedagogue must also organize and offer opportunities for the children to work together on projects or in games (Harms et al., 2015) and support any collaborations the children establish on their own.

Positive relationships and thus high quality in the interaction between adults and children give children positively charged experiences and promotes emotional development (Hundeide, 2014), language and communication (Hansen, 2013), well-being and learning (Drugli, 2015; Moser et al., 2017, p. 38). These positive effects may remain till the age of 15; 16; 27 (Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart, 1993; Taggart et al., 2015), indeed, into adulthood (Christoffersen, Højen-Sørensen, & Laugeersen, 2014).

**Case 3**

During the morning session, a song and movement play is initiated, which is about travelling with different means of transport and moving in many ways. ‘The journey goes via Copenhagen to Africa’. Four children do not want to participate and are allowed to sit in the periphery and play with cars. The activity is led by two pedagogues (pedagogue 1 and pedagogue 2) and an assistant (3). A child shows interest in joining and is quickly taken care of and sits down next to pedagogue 2 and is included in the activity where they sit in a circle and ‘travel’.

After a ‘journey’, pedagogue 2 draws attention to the three children who do not participate. The pedagogue guides the assistant to make room for one child, while pedagogue 2 herself contacts the other children:

> Do you know what? I really want to take you to Africa. Maybe you want to come. Come on friends. You must go out and experience something. You may want to bring the cars along … Should we put it (the car) in your pocket? No, look here, then the elephant must also come along (The child has a print of animals on his blouse).

The two children are assigned space in the ‘train’ that is going to drive. ‘That was good. Well done X’. All children are now actively participating.

Later, when the ‘journey’ is over, pedagogue 1 summons all the children who have animals/prints on their blouses or anything else that can be related to the trip to Africa. The child X becomes the object of mutual attention, because he has elephants on his blouse, which he proudly shows. Other children also show their prints.

The case establishes inclusion where children can be allowed to watch if they do not want to participate straight away; moreover, they are involved by pedagogue 2, responding appropriately and getting the children involved in the play. No children are forced to attend. The staff show that they treat everyone with the same respect, kindness and attention as they would give their own friends; they accept the children as they are and also show that they are important (‘I really want to bring you to Africa’) (High quality for Interactions, according to Harms et al., 2015, p. 83). Guidance of the four children is adapted to each individual child and takes place during the activity/play (High quality for Individualized guidance and learning, according to Harms et al., 2015, p. 81), so that all the children are included. The child showing his blouse even shows clear signs of experienced (social and mental) inclusion.

**A balanced practice**

Research in general shows that day care programmes that have the highest quality and strongest impact on children’s development are those where learning environment activities are initiated by
the children, by the educational staff and by children and adults jointly in an equal relationship (Taggart et al., 2015). Empirical studies of such balanced practice show that activities undertaken on children’s own initiative take approx. 2/3 of the time in daily life in high-quality day care settings. About half of the activities are characterized by interventions by educational staff expanding and enriching children’s thinking, for example, by asking open-ended questions that encourage children to reflect and experiment (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010), for example:

An adult asks a child sitting and painting, ‘What are you painting? Wow, now you mix it with black – what happens then?’ The child mixes the colours. ‘What colour do you get when you mix black in?’ (Observation in Favrskov Municipality, Næsby, 2019).

This way of having conversations characterizes high-quality settings (Taggart et al., 2015). In this way, the educational staff seeks to realize ideals and goals in a curriculum-based pedagogy, while always trying to see the children’s perspective.

The educational staff must strike the right balance between making themselves available to the children’s play and presenting appropriate challenges in the play or activity without seizing the initiative (Taggart, 2019; Taggart et al., 2015). They can extend the quality of the play, for example by participating and promoting the children’s communicative skills using a large vocabulary for example (Bodrova & Leong, 2007).

In Swedish pedagogy, researchers discuss how it is possible to distinguish between conversations about the ‘what is’ (knowledge) and the contents of ‘as if’ (imagination) based on children’s questions and attention to the contents of the play, (Magnusson & Pramling Samuelsson, 2019; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008). Making this distinction, the educational staff can investigate which elements of learning emerge in games and activities. An example might demonstrate this:

**Case 4**

The children and the adult build an ice cream shop of large bricks and start drawing bank notes and ice cream for play.

V: ‘We need some money so we can buy ice cream in the store. We’re drawing some’.
B: ‘Do we get them? We need a lot of money!’
V: ‘Here is 5 kroner, which you can use. Here it says “5”, can you see it (points to the 5’s)? But first you have to make the money.’
B: ‘How? I do not have any’.
V: ‘By working. If you had a job, what would it be?’
B: ‘Then I want to be a lorry driver’.
V: ‘A lorry driver (repeating the word clearly)? Like your dad? What is a lorry driver doing?’
B: ‘Running around with stuff. And ice cream’.
V: ‘Yes, then you are him, then you are the lorry driver who brings the ice’.
B: ‘Well, yes’ (Gets the banknote, goes away happy and to line up to buy ice cream).

In the ice cream shop, several children are employed as ‘grocers’ and other children ‘stand in line and buy ice cream’. Some of the kids who have already bought ice cream pretend to eat them and rush to ‘make more money’. Some of the smallest kids lick the ‘ice cream’. Later roles shift so that the ‘grocers’ also have to find a job so that they can make money for buying ice cream.

(Transcription of video observation in Favrskov Municipality, April 2019).

In case (4) above, linguistic expressions and symbols come into play when drawing money. The process is accompanied by a conversation where money as a symbol and the number 5 are named and designated (‘as is’), the banknote is handed out (‘as if’), and the conversation is extended to about ‘having a job’ (‘which is’ and ‘as if’), after which the child enters into the role of ‘someone who is going to buy ice cream’ or ‘is a lorry driver’ (role play / ‘as if’).

The example shows how the symbols of language are introduced into the play, are given meaning and become associated with the play (the material), while the children’s ideas are incorporated and expanded (the formal). Written linguistic expressions become important for how the play continues and develops. The conversation and play are enhanced by the adult grasping the child’s utterances,
confirming them and adding knowledge (‘which is’: a lorry driver) and new content to the process (‘as if’: ‘then you are the lorry driver who brings ice’). The development and formation process that appears has a dual aim; the children should become ‘someone’ and they should become someone who knows and is ‘capable of doing something’. A special feature of this play is that the written language symbols are not imposed on children if they are not ready for that; rather they form part of the balanced communication about the play and its contents. Both contents and behaviour are initiated jointly by the pedagogue and the children.

The pedagogue introduces a developmentally appropriate, varied language and introduces new words and concepts into the conversation in the activity. Through the conversation, she scaffolds the children and adapts to the children’s zone for proximal development by communicating with the child who talks about being a lorry driver, connecting the child’s immediate experience (playing ‘get a job so that money can be made for ice’) with the child’s wider world (the child’s father is a lorry driver).

**Discussion**

When evaluating pedagogical work, observations like the ones presented above may illustrate how pedagogical staff continuously relate to their work in a reflexive and critical way.

Short-term effects, for example, the inclusion of the children as illustrated in the cases, can be registered when the child participates in preschool activities; and this may be followed up by paying continuous attention to whether the child participates in subsequent joint preschool activities. However, high-quality effects may not always materialize only during preschool. For example, the English EPPSE study shows that for children the effects of high-quality preschool activities are greater at the age of 16 than just after the preschool years (Taggart, 2019; Taggart et al., 2015).

The SEED project (Study of Early Education and Development, Melhuish & Gardner, 2018) shows that staff training (and continuing education) is the most important structural factor influencing quality. The highest quality is achieved in municipal preschools with around 60 children, with a high proportion of educated staff and good professional management. The staff–child ratio has implications for the possibility of organizing activities for children in smaller groups. In other words, structural quality mediates process quality.

The number of children in the group is also important as evidenced by empirical research which shows that there is a weak correlation between group size and effect. Fewer than nine children in a group give the best effects; with 9–18 children in the group, quality starts to decline; and with more than 19–20 children in a group, the quality is low. The strongest correlation between group size and quality is seen for language and literacy (Shiyan et al., 2019). The more children in the group, the lower the score for quality, measured with the ECERS, and the lower the effect on children’s language development.

As seen in the above cases shown, these fundamental aspects have a greater effect than special educational measures (Nielsen et al., 2013). In case 4, words and concepts, such as numbers and money, are introduced, and mathematical materials (banknotes) used in the game are made. Several numbers are available, and the pedagogue tells about their importance. (Understanding Numbers and Mathematics in Everyday Life, Harms et al., 2015, pp. 69–73). High-quality results when an educational learning environment characterized by a developmentally appropriate, rich, varied and complex language introduces specialized terminology in relation to a particular theme (Nature/Science in case 4) that is part of its curriculum and when the pedagogue scaffolds children and adapts to the children’s zone for proximal development (Harms et al., 2015; Moser et al., 2017). High quality is also characterized by the pedagogue’s conversation relating to the child’s immediate experiences and his social context. High quality even has a positive effect on socially or otherwise challenged children whose developmental needs are not duly catered for in their family settings (Taggart et al., 2015).
Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore what characterizes high-quality preschools in the areas of Interaction and Organizational Structure in general and in the interaction between pedagogues and children. Special attention was devoted to the perspective of inclusion, notably how and whether high quality benefits children in at-risk positions. High quality was analytically identified through four themes: Sensitivity and emotional support, Structure and positive boundary, Communication and language support, and Learning and development support.

International research shows that preschool activities have the potential to reduce learning inequalities. High-quality preschool settings promote well-being, learning, development and education for all children and for disadvantaged children (Christoffersen et al., 2014). The effect of high quality exceeds that of special educational services (where effects can be detected only in areas of special language stimulation).

Universal preschool services of high basic quality minimize the need for special and specialized educational efforts (Esping-Andersen, 2008; Schweinhart et al., 1993), as also supported by the present study.

Good structural conditions such as a high level of staff education, thorough organization and age-appropriate materials affect process quality by raising the quality of interactions between children and staff so that children enjoy and learn more. (Heckman, 2019).

According to Moser et al. (2017) the example from the qualitative observation in case 1 (transcript of video recordings) shows professionally competent pedagogues who are sensitive and provide the child with the necessary emotional support for self-regulation. Also, according to ECERS-3 the situations are well organized for instance in case 4, where developmentally appropriate materials are available, and the pedagogue supervises the children’s play and has conversations with the children. In this way, structural quality moderates process quality, mediated by the pedagogue. Likewise, the example in case 3 shows how to guide and support children communicatively so that all children understand what is going to happen and manage the task in a calm and comfortable atmosphere. The children are scaffolded in their immediate development zone – or comfort zone – with the goal of trying to exceed their own comfort zone and solve the task they are facing.

In case 2, we see how the pedagogue creates a foundation for children’s self-regulation which is further developed through interaction and allows all children to be included in the play. According to the four analytic themes chosen for this study, all cases show high-quality practices that benefit the well-being, learning, development and education of all children, and which prevent children from being excluded and being at risk of falling behind.

Even if recent research has identified the themes used in the analysis as central to children’s well-being, learning, development and formation (e.g. Moser et al., 2017; Siraj et al., 2015) they are neither enough nor adequate for describing children’s development, or pedagogical practice of high quality in a broader sense. Through the cases, we get a glimpse of what process quality looks like. Identifying the overall quality of preschool is much more complicated – the CARE project identifies 44 indicators, ECERS-3 uses 35 items, and so on. Further research is warranted to get a more complete picture and understanding that could bring research a step beyond and maybe even be helpful for pedagogues in reflecting what it is they are doing to make preschools good for all children. Future research in Danish context could also be conducted through stronger theoretical and methodological frameworks using acknowledged tools such as CIP or the SSTEW-scale and taking cultural and socio-demographic features in a larger sample into account.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.
Notes on contributor

Torben Næsby is associate professor at the University College of Northern Denmark in Aalborg and Ph.D. in educational research. Recent years his main interest is research in and measurement of the quality of ECEC from different perspectives and with the use of environment rating scales.

ORCID

Torben Næsby http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3385-702X

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