

## Danish University Colleges

### Peer Review on "Furthering quality and flexibility of Early Childhood Education and Care" - Host Country Discussion Paper

Quality in the light of the strengthened pedagogical curriculum – preparation, content and implementation

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# **Peer Review on "Furthering quality and flexibility of Early Childhood Education and Care"**

**Host Country Discussion Paper - Denmark  
Quality in the light of the strengthened  
pedagogical curriculum – preparation,  
content and implementation**

**Copenhagen, Denmark, 13-14 December 2018**

**DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion**

Written by Andreas Rasch-Christensen, Maja Raaschou and Martin Dueholm Bech

December, 2018



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## 1 Introduction

In this Host Country Discussion Paper, the field of Early Childhood Education and Care or "day-care" in Denmark is described both in the context of its traditional values underpinning the system as well as in light of the more recent policy aims focusing on strengthening the pedagogical curriculum and providing high-quality ECEC. The Danish ECEC system provides the framework for children's well-being, learning, development and 'bildung'<sup>1</sup> in which the notion of play is at its core.

This paper describes the process of the preparation, development and implementation of a new curriculum in which the involvement of a wide range of key professional staff in the ECEC field is emphasised. In addition to this, the paper discusses the content of the curriculum, including the pedagogical learning environment and six curriculum themes. Furthermore, the paper highlights the EU's Quality Framework. This framework exemplifies the development of quality in the ECEC field at a European level which Denmark also engages in. Finally, the paper touches upon Danish policy measures that aim to provide families with children aged zero to six years old with increased flexibility and the ability to choose a specific ECEC facility.

### 1.1 The Nordic ECEC tradition

In Denmark, virtually all children aged zero to six years old participate in some form of ECEC on a daily basis for five to seven hours in either childminding, nursery or kindergarten<sup>2</sup>. The ECEC system is considered a unique opportunity to support all children's general well-being, learning, development and 'bildung'. Supporting this view, research also points out that high quality ECEC facilities have a significant positive impact, especially on children from disadvantaged and vulnerable homes<sup>3</sup>. Good quality ECEC facilities therefore enable more children to pursue their goals and dreams in life.

The Nordic ECEC tradition is based on the principle that children have a right to be children. The pedagogical practice must constitute a safe framework for children's natural curiosity and appetite for life. They must be allowed to explore the world together with other children. This approach can be very challenging for the pedagogical staff, as there are many key pedagogical decisions that have to accommodate play or make guidance to allow play to move in new directions.

Since 2004, all ECEC facilities in Denmark have had to base children's learning on a pedagogical curriculum specified to the age of the children in question. As part of the pedagogical curriculum, ECEC facilities have had to set goals for children's learning according to six nationally defined curriculum themes. Before 2004, the regulatory framework regarding the learning and development of children aged zero to six was relatively undefined.

The 1998 Act on Social Services already had some minimum requirements for ECEC institutions; however, the introduction of a mandatory curriculum of 2004 was the first time that the political system signalled specific expectations from the Danish ECEC

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<sup>1</sup> *Bildung* refers to the German tradition of self-cultivation (as related to the German word for: creation, image, shape), in which philosophy and education are linked in a manner that refers to a process of both personal and cultural maturation. This maturation is described as a harmonization of the individual's mind and heart and in a unification of selfhood and identity within the broader society, as evidenced with the literary tradition of *Bildungsroman*.

<sup>2</sup> Childminding, nursery or kindergarten are all specific types of child-care, whereas "day-care facilities" or "early childhood education and care" (ECEC) are both collective names for all of these types of child-care.

<sup>3</sup>

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/291970194\\_A\\_review\\_of\\_research\\_on\\_the\\_effects\\_of\\_early\\_childhood\\_Education\\_and\\_Care\\_ECEC\\_upon\\_child\\_development\\_CARE\\_project](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/291970194_A_review_of_research_on_the_effects_of_early_childhood_Education_and_Care_ECEC_upon_child_development_CARE_project)

facilities. Concepts such as learning, competencies and methods became key elements. Nonetheless, the curriculum was not equally well received in the beginning because parts of the pedagogical staff feared that play would be pushed aside in favour of an increasingly strict focus on developing children's learning and skill-set. Others were more confident in the development of a pedagogical curriculum because it could help express the professionalism that the pedagogical staff exercise each day in their interaction with children<sup>4</sup>.

The same divergent views within the research communities came into play during the assessment of the first curriculum. Some researchers criticised the curriculum and argued that it focused too narrowly on learning and competencies. Others welcomed this focus, as they argued it could become a useful tool for the pedagogical staff when reflecting on their own pedagogical practices<sup>5</sup>.

Therefore, the curriculum of 2004 was not entirely welcomed with open arms<sup>6</sup>. Although the curriculum eventually became part of the daily practices of ECEC facilities, some of these discussions currently take place within the ECEC field and have had an impact on the process and the content of the 2018 strengthened pedagogical curriculum.

## 2 The ECEC agreement

### 2.1 Legislative framework – the background to the pedagogical curriculum

The Danish government passed a political agreement on June 9<sup>th</sup> 2017 with the support of the Danish People's Party, The Social Democratic Party, The Danish Social Liberal Party and Socialist People's Party. The agreement aimed at increasing the quality of ECEC facilities and was entitled '*Strong ECEC – all children should be included in communities*'<sup>7</sup>. It focused, amongst other things, on:

- Increasing the quality of ECEC facilities so that all children thrive and learn through the provision of a strengthened pedagogical curriculum, through less but meaningful documentation<sup>8</sup>, enhanced efforts for children from vulnerable homes and through facilitating better transitions in children's lives.
- Strengthening professionalism and clear leadership - through focus on supporting the pedagogical staff and leaders and hereby ensuring that the strengthened pedagogical curriculum is put into practice.

The political agreement to increase the quality of ECEC facilities through a strengthened pedagogical curriculum required legislative changes. Therefore, Parliament (Folketinget) adopted an amendment of The Day-Care Facilities Act in May

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<sup>4</sup> Else Marie Andersen, *Læreplaner - Glem ikke barnet* i Børn & Unge 2004 nr. 13

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Ellegaard & Anja Stanek, *Læreplaner I børnehaven: baggrund og perspektiver* Roskilde Universitetsforlag, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Danmarks Evalueringsinstitut, *Læreplaner i praksis. Daginstitutioners arbejde med pædagogiske læreplaner*, 2012

<sup>7</sup> *Aftale mellem regeringen, (Venstre, Liberal Alliance og Konservative) og Dansk Folkeparti, Socialdemokratiet og Radikale Venstre om "Stærke dagtilbud – alle børn skal med i fællesskabet"* <https://www.regeringen.dk/media/3528/aftaletekst-staerke-dagtilbud.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Overall, the purpose of "less but meaningful documentation" is first of all to limit documentation requirements in order to release resources for interactions between children and pedagogical staff. Secondly, the concept puts an enhanced focus on collecting valid data regarding quality.



2018, which, inter alia, provides for a new legislative framework for the pedagogical curriculum. The Act came into force on the 1st of July 2018<sup>9</sup>.

Box 1 below presents the central elements of the amendments of the Act.

**Box 1: New and central elements of the amendment**

*Changing the objects clause regarding ECEC facilities in the Day-Care Facilities Act<sup>10</sup>:*

Section 7:

- 1) ECEC facilities shall promote the well-being, learning and development of children through safe and pedagogical learning environments, in which the notion of play is at its core, and the view of children is foundation.
- 5) ECEC facilities shall cooperate with parents on ensuring that children have a coherent transition between home and ECEC facility. Furthermore, ECEC facilities shall cooperate with parents and the school on ensuring that children experience a coherent transition between ECEC facilities and between ECEC facilities and after-school and school. By developing and supporting children's fundamental competencies and desire to learn.

*The objects clause regarding the overall Day-Care Facilities Act*

Section 1:

- 1) promote the well-being, development and learning of children and young people through ECEC, after-school and club facilities and other socio-pedagogic after-school facilities;
- 2) provide the family with flexibility and options regarding different types of facilities and subsidies so that families can, as far as possible, organize family and work life according to family needs and wishes;
- 3) prevent the vicious circle of deprivation and exclusion by making the pedagogic measures an integral part of both the local authority's overall and general offer to children and young people and the preventive and supportive activities aimed at children and young people requiring special support, including children and young people with diminished mental and physical capacity; and
- 4) create coherence and continuity between facilities and make transitions between facilities coherent and age-appropriately challenging for the children.

*Changes to the framework for the pedagogical curriculum, include:*

- A common pedagogical foundation that is continuous throughout the child's day in ECEC consisting of, among other things, elements such as the view of children, 'bildung', children's perspective, play, children's communities and pedagogical learning environments, which constitute

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<sup>9</sup> LBK 1214 af 11/10 2018, *Bekendtgørelse af lov om dag-, fritids- og klubtilbud m.v. til børn og unge (dagtilbudsloven)* <https://www.retsinformation.dk/Forms/R0710.aspx?id=202833>

<sup>10</sup> Subsection 1) and 5) are new, which is why they are mentioned here.

the understanding and approach to the work with children's well-being, learning, development and 'bildung' in ECEC.

- Descriptions of the six curriculum themes as well as two new broad pedagogical objectives ensuring the link between the learning environment and children's learning within each curriculum theme.
- Establishing a pedagogical learning environment throughout the day, including during routine situations, planned activities and children-initiated play.
- The pedagogical curriculum must take into account the needs of children in vulnerable positions, cooperation with parents on children's learning, coherence with preschool class as well as cooperation with the surrounding community.
- Developing a culture of evaluation in ECEC.

*Pedagogical learning environment:*

- The pedagogical learning environment provides a framework for children's well-being and learning and is central when working with the pedagogical curriculum.
- From the pedagogical curriculum it needs to be stipulated how the individual ECEC facility will establish a pedagogical learning environment in which play, planned activities, spontaneous activities, children-initiated activities and daily routines will give children the opportunity to thrive, learn, develop and be formed.
- The pedagogical learning environment must be organized to include consideration for the children's perspective and participation, the children's community, the composition of a children's group and the different conditions and qualifications of children.

Both the agreement on ECEC and the legislative framework are the result of a long-lasting and engaging process in which the various stakeholders consisting of pedagogical staff, assistants, childminders, teachers and researchers contributed continuously. This approach was the result of past experiences with the implementation of major policy reforms in the area of children and youth, where reforms have faced lack of support and opposition. The process was therefore focused on early and continuous involvement of stakeholders in the field of ECEC. This ensured the qualification and joint ownership of the new and strengthened pedagogical curriculum.

In the following section, we will briefly elaborate on the process that led to the agreement on the strengthened pedagogical curriculum.

*The process*

In the process of elaborating the new curriculum of 2018, the ambition was to involve a large number of key actors in the field of ECEC.

The former minister for Children, Education and Equal Opportunities established a master working group for a strengthened pedagogical curriculum in early 2016. The master working group consisted of a wide range of stakeholders, including representatives of the municipalities, the pedagogical staff and leaders, parents, researchers etc.

The master working group worked on describing a master framework for a strengthened pedagogical curriculum from February to May 2016. This process is illustrated in Box 2 below. The first step was the formulation of a pedagogical foundation upon which the work with the curriculum themes would stand. Thus, the process did not begin with formulating specific goals, but with the actual purpose of Danish ECEC.

Based on the introductory presentation of the master working group, six sub-working groups - corresponding to the six curriculum themes - worked continuously from June to October 2016 on the development and qualification of the curriculum themes. Furthermore, the working groups formulated broad pedagogical objectives for each theme. These pedagogical objectives all set a direction for the pedagogical work. Their work and descriptions have been the basis of the thematic descriptions and goals that are currently stipulated in a Consolidation Act<sup>11</sup>.

The involvement of key stakeholders remained the focus throughout the qualification of the proposal for a strengthened pedagogical curriculum. This resulted in regional discussion meetings throughout September 2016, in which about 800 practitioners from the ECEC field participated. Furthermore, the practitioners were invited to submit proposals etc. regarding the strengthened pedagogical curriculum to the ministry website through a mailbox. During the regional meetings, the content of the master framework was presented, and practitioners were invited to discuss and bring forward input regarding the content of the curriculum as well as input concerning the implementation of the curriculum. All of this was communicated to the six sub-working groups.

Thus, the new the pedagogical curriculum is indeed a result of this process as well as of the content presented in *Master of a Strengthened Pedagogical Curriculum*. It is also a result of the contributions from the sub-working groups and the input from the discussions raised by the ECEC sector as part of the initial work.

### Box 2: The process in a time perspective



The revised rules came into force on July 1<sup>st</sup> 2018 and are firmly rooted in the Danish ECEC tradition, and thus embraced by many people in the ECEC practice. Much of what is contained in the strengthened curriculum is already being carried out at the local level in several ECEC facilities though for some, many elements are new. However, in order to meet the differences and due to all the new legislative elements, the strengthened pedagogical curriculum will be fully implemented over a two-year period. That is, municipalities and ECEC facilities are obligated to fully implement all the elements of the strengthened pedagogical curriculum by July 1st 2020.

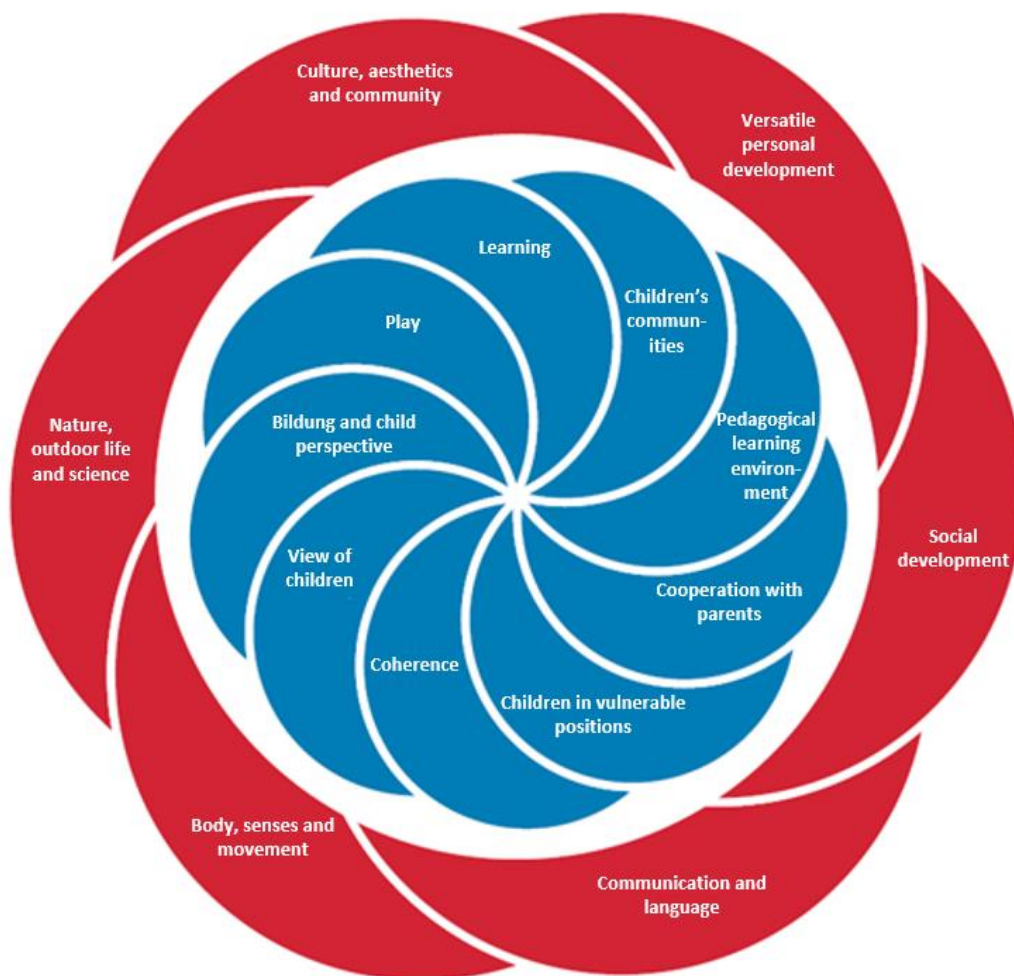
## 2.2 Content of the strengthened pedagogical curriculum

The strengthened curriculum consists of nine elements forming the common pedagogical foundation and six curriculum themes. Below (figure 1) is a graphic

<sup>11</sup> BEK nr. 968 af 28/6 2018. *Bekendtgørelse om pædagogiske mål og indhold i seks læreplanstemaer* <https://www.retsinformation.dk/Forms/R0710.aspx?id=202350>

illustration of the strengthened curriculum. The different elements and themes are explained in further detail below.

**Figure 1: The common pedagogical foundation and the six curriculum themes**



Source: *The Strengthened Pedagogical Curriculum - Framework and Content, Ministry for Children and Social Affairs, 2018*

### *The common pedagogical foundation*

The common pedagogical foundation reflects the traditions of Danish ECEC and the pedagogical work that takes place in many Danish ECEC facilities. What is new is the detailed description in the Day-Care Facilities Act of specific elements such as "play", "a broad concept of learning" and "the view of children". The pedagogical staff of all Danish ECEC facilities must consider whether the pedagogical foundation is reflected in their pedagogical work as a consequence of this development.

Apart from its strong foundation in the tradition of Danish ECEC (which ensures the support from various stakeholders), the pedagogical foundation was among other things also influenced by evaluation, the degree to which it can be used etc. Furthermore, the development of curricula involves complex processes with many stakeholders involved. The focus on reaching a result consisting of a curriculum in 2018, reflecting the interests and values of most of the key stakeholders, added to the already existing complexity. The pedagogical foundation, including the pedagogical values, balances the various positions among the participating stakeholders in many ways.

Thus, the pedagogical foundation consists of a number of common key elements that will characterise the understanding and approach of working with children's well-being, learning, development and 'bildung' in Danish ECEC. Some elements, e.g. the view of children, must always be present in the pedagogical learning environment. Other elements, such as the cooperation with parents and the efforts towards creating coherence with children's preschool may be present in some but not all situations.

The law provides that all elements of the pedagogical foundation must be the starting point for working with the pedagogical curriculum. In addition, the Day-Care Facilities Act provides that it must be stated in the curriculum:

- How the pedagogical learning environment will take into account children in vulnerable positions in order to ensure their well-being, learning, development and 'bildung'.
- How ECEC facilities will cooperate with parents on the well-being, learning, development and 'bildung' of children.
- How ECEC facilities will involve the local community in establishing a pedagogical learning environment for children.
- How the pedagogical learning environment facilitates a coherent transition to preschool during the last period of time for children in ECEC.

One can of course discuss the basis of research, the sources of inspiration from an international level, the national evaluations and the stipulated pedagogical foundation. That is why we in the following sections will describe the basis and context of the concepts, as expressed in the working process towards the elaboration of the framework of the strengthened pedagogical curriculum.

The foundation rests upon a *view of children* that being a child is a value in itself and a good interaction between the pedagogical staff and children is essential to ensure children's well-being, learning, development and 'bildung'. This is well supported by research, e.g. the extensive British study (EPPSE<sup>12</sup>). The study finds that good quality ECEC institutions is characterised – from a child's perspective – by the persistent interaction between children themselves and between children and adults. Furthermore, the foundation rests upon the belief that children should be co-creators of their own development within a framework for which adults are responsible<sup>13</sup>. As such, the view of children in the curriculum is also based on those values, as touched upon in the introduction.

The view of children in the pedagogical foundation of the curriculum has a number of implications for the remaining concepts.

The pedagogical foundation refers to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Furthermore, '*Bildung*' contains a number of social norms and values. However, 'bildung' is not only purpose and content. The concept also refers to the way in which adults and children interact, and how adults allow children to participate in decision-making processes. Children should experience festive celebrations and in that way, make 'bildung' a part of life in ECEC facilities.

Similar considerations are behind the concept of *play*. This concept has a diverse set of meanings. Through play, children get an understanding of numbers and letters; they develop social relationships and enhance motor skills. Furthermore, children create meaning in their lives if they are free to play within a world of their own<sup>14</sup>. For

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/research-projects/2018/oct/effective-pre-school-primary-and-secondary-education-project-eppse>

<sup>13</sup> Kathy Sylva et al, *The Effective Provision of pre-School Education (EPPE)* London University 2004

<sup>14</sup> Ezequiel Di Paolo, Marieke Rohde & Hanne De Jaegher, H. *Horizons for the enactive mind: values, social interaction, and play*. MIT Press 2010

example, snow can become food, and based on this, suddenly a grocery store is created where children put on different roles. Thus, play has a value in itself. It does not only consist of its derived meanings.

The view of children, play, learning and 'bildung' must, according to the pedagogical curriculum, unfold within children's communities. The aforementioned EPPSE study finds that the pedagogical staff should try to establish communities with and between the children, for example when children play together or discuss an activity that helps to expand their understanding. The interaction and dialogue between adults and children in these types of communities contribute to the children's development<sup>15</sup>. Children's communities are also at the same time essential in the Danish ECEC facilities, where children interact with other children, from whom they may differ. Establishing good relationships in-between children and between children and adults are of great importance – especially for groups of children in vulnerable positions who do not necessarily experience these relationships at home.

Learning is not just a matter of e.g. children's cognitive development on the one hand or social development on the other hand. It is important that children get stimulated, for example, regarding language, but it is equally important to support their social and emotional development. This view on children's development characterises the understanding of learning in the strengthened pedagogical curriculum and the pedagogical learning environment. The common pedagogical foundation views the learning environment as an interaction in ECEC facilities between:

- structure - number of staff members, their competencies, the physical environment;
- processes - how do the pedagogical activities actually take place, such as play, interaction and communication, cooperation with parents etc., and
- well-being, learning, development and 'bildung' of children.

Thus, does *the learning environment* not only constitute planned activities. It can, according to the view of children and the significance of play, also be created by spontaneous situations and routines during e.g. during lunch or children getting dressed. This means that there must be a pedagogical component at all times – regardless of the situation (play, routine, planned activity, etc.).

The focus on the pedagogical learning environments is one of the central and pivotal elements of the strengthened curriculum. This focus ensures its relevance and that the curriculum can be used. One of the guidelines for the working group that defined the common pedagogical foundation was that well-being, learning, development and 'bildung' are not present in the individual child itself. Rather, the pedagogical learning environment surrounding the child stimulates and creates it. Therefore, the curriculum should ideally also be used by the pedagogical staff for evaluation and development of the learning environment in the future, and subsequently, as a tool for dialogue between ECEC facilities and the local administration.

Continuing dialogue with parents is a necessary step towards ensuring that the curriculum remains relevant and beneficial. No matter how many resources we invest in improving quality in ECEC, the home remains a crucial context for children's development. *Cooperation with parents* in a Danish context also refers to an extensive wish to involve the parents in dialogues about the impact of the ECEC learning environment on children. Not only through the formal parental boards, but also in the daily dialogues between parents and the pedagogical staff. Dialogue with parents is of key importance for families in vulnerable positions in particular. Like the previous

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<sup>15</sup>. Kathy Sylva et al *The Effective Provision of pre-School Education (EPPE)* London University 2004

concepts, vulnerability also has an overall focus within the strengthened curriculum. In this regard, it is important to stress that vulnerability is a dynamic concept. Children may be vulnerable cognitively or socially, and this may change throughout the daily practice. Some children are vulnerable in many situations and positions. Precisely because parents as well as children are different, the dialogue and cooperation with them should ideally also be differentiated.

Finally, the curriculum focuses on the *coherence* of children's schooling. In a Danish context, there has been an ongoing discussion about transitions to school from ECEC facilities. It was argued that the ECEC facilities should prepare children for the transition to school. It remains an important task, but schools can learn from ECEC and vice versa. Therefore, instead of "transition", the concept of "coherence" is more comprehensive as a link to the school field.

Below is a presentation of the six curriculum themes. The concepts and context have been influenced by a number of things, e.g. evaluations, research, values, and the way the concepts can be used. In addition, many different positions were presented in the sub-working groups. Although this presentation is characterised by a certain consensus, the process has been complicated, and many challenges are still ahead regarding the implementation of the curriculum. Still, the starting point and the overall process can be characterised by the support from key stakeholders. This also characterises the pedagogical foundation that bounds together the work with the curriculum themes.

#### *The six curriculum themes*

The Consolidation Act provides that the curriculum must state how the pedagogical learning environment supports the broader learning of children within and across six curriculum themes. These are:

- Versatile personal development
- Social development
- Communication and language
- Body, senses and movement
- Nature, outdoor life and science
- Culture, aesthetics and community

The six curriculum themes interconnect in order to ensure that the pedagogical practice, from a child's perspective, does not appear disconnected and divided into six distinct themes but rather ensure a broad understanding of learning and a focus on different key elements in children's learning and development. The Consolidation Act provides a description of each curriculum theme, as mentioned above. Furthermore, there are two pedagogical objectives established for each curriculum theme. The pedagogical curriculum must be developed within the context of the theme descriptions and the pedagogical objectives.

### **2.3 Implementation of the strengthened pedagogical curriculum**

The implementation (the word "realisation" is also being used in Denmark) and thus practical application of the strengthened curriculum can be regarded as a dynamic process in which content and knowledge are developed, spread and mobilized in the pedagogical sector in several ways and fora. The focus remains on the actual practice and the implementation process is continuously tested and adapted to local needs. Therefore, there has been a great deal of awareness on keeping a common direction supported by coordination and coherence between initiatives. Furthermore, a focus on how knowledge is translated into practice and from practice and being used in order to strengthen professionalism and leadership.

A solid professionalism of the pedagogical staff as well as a sound and clear professional leadership are key elements for realising the ambitions of the strengthened curriculum. Thus, these things are therefore essential to the range of initiatives launched to support the implementation.

A wide-ranging partnership – consisting of key representatives from the field of early childhood education and care – has therefore been established in order to ensure a broad and coherent improvement of professionalism and leadership. Moreover, to create a common understanding of the purpose and direction of steps to be taken that will contribute to the change. This entails e.g. continuous education of staff, materials for inspiration and guidance, a website containing knowledge, external practice consultants from the National Board of Social Services, etc.

The partnership has defined overall guides for implementation and contributed to coordination and qualification of specific initiatives in the political agreement mentioned above. These initiatives focus on development of competences of staff and the translation of knowledge into practice. Thus, the implementation of initiatives is based on a framework that is defined in the document, *Partnership for Development of Competence and Knowledge in Practice*<sup>16</sup>.

The strengthened pedagogical curriculum must also be implemented in colleges through for example a revision of relevant modules of the pedagogical education, skill set development of teachers of the pedagogical education, the development of new teaching materials and through general information and dialogue. At the same time, one must consider the implementation of similar measures for the education of pedagogical assistants (PAU).

From a financial and human resource perspective, the implementation of the curriculum is also supported by providing additional training of childminders, pedagogical leaders, professional leaders in ECEC facilities and of the municipal administrations. This is financed by 165 million DKK and two funds. One funding stream consists of 83 million DKK annually for more pedagogical staff in ECEC facilities with many children in vulnerable positions. Municipalities can apply for additional pedagogical staff to the facilities that meet the criteria for the funding stream. The second funding stream is targeting specific areas. In the second quarter of 2018, 58 million DKK was allocated for this purpose.

The implementation of the strengthened pedagogical curriculum in practice is also supported by different kinds of materials which have been adapted to specific target groups. The primary target group is professional leaders and specific pedagogical staff, and the secondary target group constitutes the administration in the municipalities and other employees connected to the ECEC field.

Three general materials have been developed: 1) The main publication *The Strengthened Pedagogical Curriculum - Frameworks and Content*<sup>17</sup>, that collects and communicates the regulations and remarks of the law regarding the strengthened pedagogical curriculum; 2) Tools for self-assessment; and 3) Tools to support the work of rooting the changes in the pedagogical practice.

In addition, 10 to 12 packages of educational material will be developed by 2020. Each educational material package covers a specific theme from the pedagogical foundation as shown above in figure 1. An initial mapping of research is presented in the package material and, in addition, various materials are included such as:

- Notes on professional knowledge

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<sup>16</sup> <https://socialministeriet.dk/media/18854/kommissorium-for-partnerskab-om-kompetenceudvikling.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.emu.dk/sites/default/files/7044%20EVA%20SPL%20Publikation\\_web.pdf](https://www.emu.dk/sites/default/files/7044%20EVA%20SPL%20Publikation_web.pdf)



- Dialogue material
- Educational film
- Pedagogical courses of long duration

Educational material packages such as *Interaction and Relations in the Pedagogical Learning Environment*<sup>18</sup> and *Evaluative Pedagogical Practice*<sup>19</sup>, together with the main publication, *The Strengthened Pedagogical Curriculum - Frameworks and Content* and the two other general tools have been forwarded to all municipalities in Denmark immediately following the coming into force of the Day-Care Facilities Act.

Finally, a corps of external practice consultants has been established, a website containing professional knowledge ([www.emu.dk](http://www.emu.dk)) and a professional unit, all of which are situated in the National Board of Social Services. Practice consultants and professional units collaborate, among other things, to support the implementation of the pedagogical curriculum and the continuous development of quality in ECEC.

**Box 3: Below the box provides a summary of the various newly developed initiatives for the implementation of the strengthened curriculum.**

- **Partnership for development of competence and knowledge in practice to strengthen professionalism and leadership.** It ensures coordination and common direction across all initiatives of realization.
- **Education of pedagogues.** The strengthened pedagogical curriculum is implemented in the education through, inter alia, revision of relevant modules and skill set development of teachers of the pedagogical education and development of new teaching materials.
- **Education of Pedagogical Assistants (PAU).** The strengthened pedagogical curriculum is stipulated in e.g. the Consolidation Act on Education as well as in relevant subject descriptions.
- **Additional education.** From the fund for additional professional training and training for leaders, 164.2 million DKK have been allocated to the municipalities to be spent on development of competence. Both diploma modules and competence development courses are available.
- **Packages of educational material.** Packages of educational and inspirational material are being continuously developed for the work on the various elements of the strengthened pedagogical curriculum.
- **Guidance through practice consultants.** Provision of advice and guidance to municipalities and ECEC facilities for the purpose of, among other things, improving quality.
- **EMU.dk.** Knowledge and inspiration for the work on the strengthened pedagogical curriculum is continuously communicated on a website for educational material (EMU).
- **A special unit with professional knowledge in the National Board of Social Services.** Collaboration with the practice consultants.

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<sup>18</sup><https://www.emu.dk/modul/samspil-og-relationer-i-det-p%C3%A6dagogiske-l%C3%A6ringsmilj%C3%B8>

<sup>19</sup><https://www.emu.dk/modul/evaluerende-p%C3%A6dagogisk-praksis-0>

### **3 The EU's Quality Framework for ECEC and the Danish context.**

#### **3.1 Background and purpose**

Quality in ECEC is something that is currently also being addressed at the EU level and reflects the developments taking place in Denmark. The European Commission has submitted a proposal on May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2018 for a Council Recommendation on high quality ECEC<sup>20</sup>.

The Recommendation will not be legally binding on the Member States, which can independently determine how to make the best use of EU guidance in accordance with their national circumstances and strategies.

The Recommendation proposal includes a presentation of key elements that constitute a quality framework for the ECEC area. The aim is to discuss and frame a common understanding of quality in ECEC at EU level and develop tools and examples of actions that can support Member States in improving access to and quality of ECEC. The ambition is that all children in Europe get a good start in life through access to high quality ECEC. The quality framework should serve as a management tool to help guide the development of quality in the ECEC area.

Denmark is ambitious in the field of ECEC as shown in the previous sections. However, we also participate in the development of ECEC e.g. at the EU level, which is reflected in the EU quality framework.

#### **3.2 Recommendations from the ECEC thematic working group of experts for the EU Quality Framework**

The EU Quality Framework includes a number of key principles which have been based on an assessment of good practices in the EU countries as well as research. More specifically, in 2012 a thematic working group was established to address the two-fold challenge of providing access to ECEC as well as increase the quality of ECEC provision. This thematic working group consisted of ECEC experts and policy makers from 25 Member States, including Denmark. The thematic working group identified and proposed a range of key principles for a quality framework for ECEC published in a report in 2014<sup>21</sup>. In continuation of this, the experts, of which some are from Denmark, met in September and December 2017. Here, they formulated statements/focus areas/benchmarks and identified 22 indicators of quality for ECEC<sup>22</sup>.

#### **3.3 EU ECEC Quality Framework**

The principles of the EU Quality Framework in ECEC are formulated in the form of *ten quality statements* structured around *five broad quality dimensions: Access, workforce, curriculum, evaluation & monitoring, as well as governance & funding* (figure 2 below). The aim is to describe, based on ten statements, the main characteristics of quality in ECEC. In addition, for each statement, two indicators are

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<sup>20</sup>[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/docs\\_autres\\_institutions/commission\\_europeenne/com/2018/0271/COM\\_COM\(2018\)0271\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/docs_autres_institutions/commission_europeenne/com/2018/0271/COM_COM(2018)0271_EN.pdf)

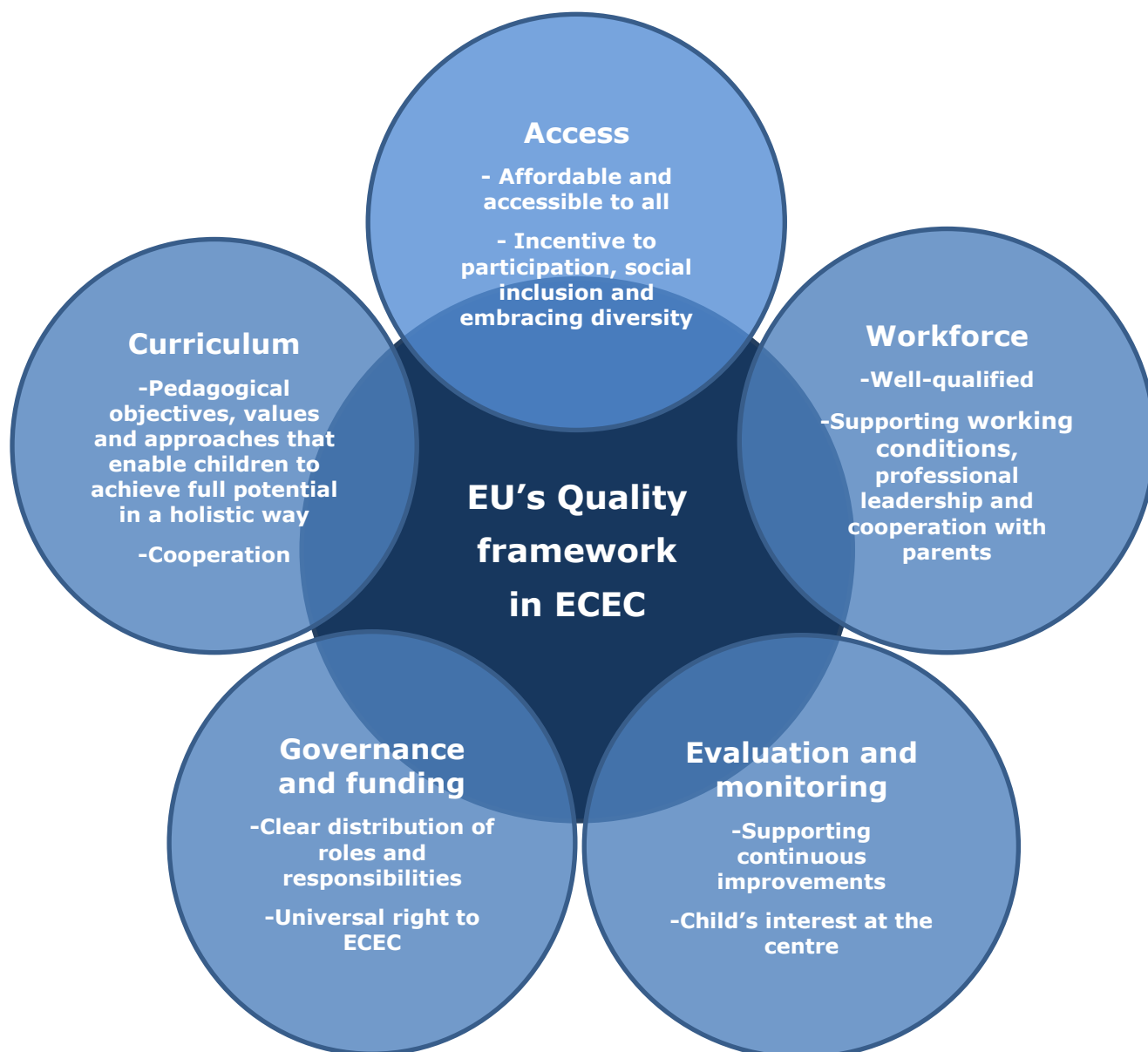
<sup>21</sup>*Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care*. Report of the Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care under the auspices of the European Commission, Oct. 2014, [http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/documents/ecec-quality-framework\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/documents/ecec-quality-framework_en.pdf)

<sup>22</sup>*Monitoring the Quality of Early Childhood Educations and Care – Complementing the 2014 ECEC Quality Framework proposal with indicators*. Recommendations from ECEC experts – Feb. 2018, <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/825252b4-3ec6-11e8-b5fe-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF>

connected, which can be used nationally and locally for specific reflection and evaluation, etc. of quality.

The quality framework is explained in further detail in the Thematic Paper produced by Tine Rostgaard entitled "The policy road to better and more affordable care for all?". In this paper we concentrate on statement 5 and 6 and the related indicators as explained below.

**Figure 2: Five dimensions of the quality framework and ten quality statements**



*Statement 5 and indicators 12 and 13*

The 5th statement of the quality framework above underlines the importance of a pedagogical framework, drawing a parallel to the Danish work with the strengthened pedagogical curriculum. The pedagogical curriculum is defined as a framework

containing values, principles, and guidelines that form the basis of the pedagogical activities for children in ECEC facilities. Thus, the curriculum must be based on a pedagogical foundation that enables children to reach their full potential in a holistic sense. The holistic approach keeps in mind all aspects of the development of a child. This includes a child's well-being and needs of learning – as well as its social, emotional, physical, linguistic and cognitive development. Children's experience, active participation and learning through play are also emphasised as important.

Two indicators are formulated in relation to the 5th statement. These can be used to evaluate the statement. One is focusing on the actual existence of an official, acknowledged and compulsory curriculum in ECEC facilities to work with. The second indicator focuses on the number of ECEC facilities, whose work is based on a pedagogical curriculum. These indicators are obviously closely linked, and together they can provide a cross-country picture of the variation in requirements for ECEC and age groups regarding the existence of a pedagogical curriculum and to use it as a tool of pedagogical work.

As shown in section 2, these principles largely reflect the work that is already taking place in Denmark these years regarding the work on developing the strengthened pedagogical curriculum.

#### *Statement 6 and indicators 14 and 15*

The 6th statement emphasises working on a curriculum that promotes a common understanding and trust between children, parents and the pedagogical staff. Emphasised is an approach in the national curricula that focuses on the need for the pedagogical staff to collaborate with each other as well as with children and parents. It also entails that the staff should be able to analyse and reflect on their own practices, thereby identifying what works and what does not, with the aim of raising the quality of ECEC facilities and finding out what contributes to children's well-being, learning, development and 'bildung'.

Similarly, two indicators have been formulated in relation to this statement. One is about having requirements and expectations in the curriculum in terms of using the feedback from children, parents and colleagues in order to systematically improve the pedagogical practice. This is based on an expectation that the quality will improve in practice when there are clear expectations for the readiness and opportunity of the pedagogical staff to change. The second indicator focuses on the coherence between ECEC and school. The importance of children experiencing a coherent and smooth transition is emphasised in relation to children's learning and development. This can be achieved by requiring that primary schools continue to build on the experiences and activities that the children bring along from ECEC. The indicator measures the percentage share of schools covered by such an obligation.

This principle of cooperation and feedback can be found in the legislative framework (box 1, above) in which it says that the pedagogical activities and the organization of the learning environment are based, inter alia, on the children's perspective.

### **3.4 EU Quality Framework and the Danish context**

As previously described, the importance of quality in ECEC facilities is highly embedded in the strengthened pedagogical curriculum, and the quality of the pedagogical learning environment is important for children's well-being, learning, development and 'bildung'. This focus on curriculum is also reflected in the EU Quality Framework.

The remaining statements – or focus areas – of the EU Quality Framework are similarly reflected in the ECEC field in Denmark, e.g. in relation to access to ECEC, social inclusion, well-qualified pedagogical staff, etc. Denmark focuses on establishing an evaluation culture in ECEC, meaning that staff and leadership should continuously relate to and reflect on their own practices. The range of measures in the ECEC field in

Denmark already largely captures the elements that are part of the EU Quality Framework. However, it is debatable whether the EU Quality Framework accommodates the differences of ECEC across the Member States. The ambition to formulate a common understanding of quality in ECEC at the European level is complicated further by the different challenges faced by different Member States. On the other hand, the EU Quality Framework may provide a benchmark for evaluation and inspiration. Because each ECEC system is different, it requires a certain degree of national adaptation and interpretation in order to become meaningful.

However, the EU's Quality Framework can be a supplementary contribution that can inform and improve the debate and the work on quality in Denmark.

#### **4 Increased flexibility and free choice for families with children**

The previous sections, we have emphasised aspects of quality, as it affects many elements of the pedagogical work.

However, there has also been a political intention to support and strengthen the flexibility of ECEC to accommodate family life. Families are very different and have different needs and wishes - for example when it comes to work-life balance. Thus, the political agreement of the 9<sup>th</sup> of June 2017, as mentioned above, and the following legislative framework that came into force on the 1st of July 2018, also contained a number of measures aimed at improving the flexibility of ECEC for families. Families will hereby have more freedom in terms of care needs, they can choose to spend more time together and achieve a better balance between family and work life. At the same time, however it must be clearer to parents which ECEC facilities are available to them, and what these specific facilities can offer.

One of the measures of flexibility targets parents who work outside the normal opening hours of ECEC facilities and who may find it difficult to find care for their children while they are at work. Therefore, more parents with unusual working hours receive the opportunity to choose a so-called "combined ECEC" option. A combined ECEC option consists of a part-time enrolment in an ECEC facility combined with a grant from the municipality. The family can use this grant to hire a flexible caretaker, for example, in the evening, at night or during the weekends at home in a safe environment while the parents are at work. In order to gain access to this type of ECEC combination, parents must be able to document a work-related need for care outside the ordinary opening hours of ECEC facilities. The municipality must conduct an inspection of those families that make use of combined ECEC.

Two years after the law has come into force, an evaluation will be carried out. The evaluation will document the degree to which combined ECEC has been used. The evaluation will also document the characteristics of the caretaker and the duration of the different caretaking arrangements, as well as the results of municipal inspection etc.

Another measure focuses on strengthening parents' right to choose a particular ECEC facility or childminder. Parents' right to choose an ECEC facility or to be waitlisted for a specific ECEC will therefore apply to all types of ECEC facilities in the municipality, and not just the ECEC facilities with available capacity. Furthermore, parents will also enjoy the right to stay on the waiting list for a specific ECEC facility, even if their child is enrolled elsewhere. This initiative also reflects the political intention to address the fact that families are different and value different things. For example, exercise and outdoor life may be important to some families, while for example being able to choose a specific childminder in the local area is more important to others.

## 5 Conclusions

The ECEC field in Denmark has a long-standing and strong tradition. The fact that ECEC has evolved from a social measure of security for care to an institution focusing on the importance of play, well-being, learning, development and 'bildung' of children emphasises the need to develop high-quality ECEC.

As demonstrated in the previous sections, the development of quality in ECEC facilities in previous years is largely linked to the strengthening of a curriculum, especially through the recent political agreement intended to increase the quality of ECEC, so that all children can thrive and learn through a revised and strengthened pedagogical curriculum. There is a specific focus on children in vulnerable positions, improving professionalism and clear leadership in ECEC, and on formulating a common pedagogical foundation, including a pedagogical learning environment throughout the child's day in ECEC.

Researchers, experts, stakeholders and the ECEC sector have been widely involved in the process based on previous experiences with reforms affecting children and youth. They have in this process contributed to shape the content continuously. A master working group was established, regional dialogue meetings were held, and sub-working groups were established, all to ensure qualification and joint ownership of the curriculum.

The strengthened content of the curriculum demonstrates a complicated process involving many participants. At the same time, however, this process ensured a result that balances the different positions and views of relevant stakeholders. The key point is that the curriculum in ECEC should show how the pedagogical learning environment supports the well-being, learning, development and 'bildung' of children within and across the six curriculum themes. Especially, the learning environment is an important focal point of the curriculum, as it constitutes the basic understanding that well-being, learning, development and 'bildung' are elements that are created in the learning environment surrounding the child and in children's communities.

The development of the pedagogical curriculum is a process that reflects the implementation and realisation, as the latter process also involves the ECEC sector, among others. It is essential that the starting point and foundation is in the actual practice, and that the implementation can be continuously adjusted along the way in relation to local needs. At the same time, the implementation focuses on how knowledge is translated into and from practice and applied in order to strengthen professionalism and leadership which is crucial for achieving the ambitions of the strengthened pedagogical curriculum. This is further supported by the initiatives that have been launched to support implementation. It has also resulted in establishing a partnership in the ECEC field, with the aim of supporting improvement and additional training of professionalism and leadership. The partnership has contributed to the qualification of specific initiatives on development of competence and knowledge translated into practice. Finally, different supporting materials primarily targeting the pedagogical leaders and staff are being implemented, the establishment of a special unit with professional knowledge, a website containing knowledge and inspiration is being developed and the establishment of external practice consultants from the National Board of Social Services.

Since 2014, the EU has worked towards developing a quality framework. The framework contains 10 statements/focus areas or benchmarks and 22 indicators of quality. The purpose of the framework is to place ECEC quality on the agenda in Europe and to provide the individual Member States with tools that can help initiate a development of quality in ECEC and create a direction for the work nationally. Thus, Denmark is also participating in the development of quality of ECEC at the European level. It greatly contributes to mutual inspiration and development.

Furthermore, two measures aimed at supporting and strengthening the flexibility of ECEC for families are described.

In this paper it has been demonstrated that with the strengthened pedagogical curriculum, the pedagogical staff has a new and improved framework for the promotion of the quality of Danish ECEC. The process has been inclusive in both the preparation, development and implementation of the curriculum. Moreover, an increased focus on quality is also reflected at the European level.

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