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The Monocultural Agenda: How Denmark's Culture of Assimilation Undermines the Benefits of Child-Centered Practice for Minority Children

Eva C. Jensby
Bard College

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The Monocultural Agenda: How Denmark's Culture of Assimilation Undermines the Benefits of

Child-Centered Practice for Minority Children

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by

Eva Jensby

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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For my parents, who gave me everything I needed to make it this far.

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Introduction

In Denmark, there is near universal enrollment of children aged 0-6 in an Early

Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) institution. Affordable day care is available from the age

of one, and 97% of 3-5 year olds are in full time care (Ringsmose & Bogaard-Clausen, 2017;

The Ministry of Children and Education, 2018). Such widespread enrollment is attributable to

Denmark's comprehensive welfare system. A welfare state is one in which government funds,

usually derived from high income taxes, are used to support well-being and an adequate standard

of living for all through the provision of universal services such as education, healthcare,

unemployment and disability benefits, and pension plans at no further cost to the individual.

What sets the Danish welfare state apart from other welfare systems is its public funding and

extensive coverage. High accessibility and the relative uniformity of ECEC settings are strong

benefits of the Danish system. In this project, I will present the specific developmental benefits

of the Danish ECEC pedagogy before exploring how they may be thwarted by the Danish

inclination to maintain a dominant culture as opposed to supporting the development of a

multicultural society.

Social Pedagogy vs. School Readiness

Danish ECEC philosophy has been greatly influenced by the German educator Friedrich

Fröbel, who during the 1830s and 40s developed the concept of "kindergarten" ("garden of

children"). Fröbel believed prescribed learning is detrimental to human health because children

are natural learners whose self-activation (i.e. natural curiosity and inclination to learn) is a

prerequisite for the development of cognitive and social skills, which should be the primary goal

of early education (Kragh-Müller, 2017; Passe, 2010). According to Fröbel, the role of the

teacher is to support the child in their own experiences of the world, and give them access to

more creative content involving nature, music, and stories. Much of his theory (and thus Danish

ECEC) was influenced by the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who described childhood as a

valuable period of life that should be enjoyed for what it is, rather than being used as preparation

for adulthood. Other influences include developmental psychologists such as Vygotsky and

Piaget, who emphasized the importance of play in early childhood (Kragh-Müller, 2017). These

influences together form the Danish pedagogy, which is classified under the larger tradition of

social pedagogy and characterized by a broad, holistic approach to the early years. Priority is

given to play and the child's natural ways of learning through exploration and experience, the

formation of good relationships, and children's influence over their lives (A.S. Jensen, 2018;

OECD, 2006; Ringsmose, 2017).

　　　　Social pedagogy is contrasted by the "readiness for school" tradition of France and the

English-speaking world. The school readiness approach emphasizes cognitive development by

way of knowledge and skill acquisition in classroom-like settings (OECD, 2006), and has been

criticized for the way it sets expectations of academic achievement on increasingly younger

groups of children. Those who oppose school readiness explain that the problem here is not the

setting of expectations altogether, but rather that standards have not historically been supported

by developmental research and are inappropriately imposed on children who are simply too

young to employ the necessary skills (Carlsson-Paige et al., 2015; Elkind, 1987). Practices that

were previously introduced in the early grades are now being extended to kindergarten

classrooms (Stipek et al., 1995). For example, symbolic understanding (i.e. using symbols to

represent objects and concepts) is now expected of children who still learn primarily through direct experience and manual manipulation (Elkind, 1987).

Standards that ignore developmental theory and research are to the detriment of children's success in school long-term. Children who attend academically-oriented programs in early childhood *do* tend to show greater strides, specifically in reading skills, but any significant differences between them and children who attend child-oriented programs do not seem to last long-term (Carlsson-Paige et al., 2015; Stipek et al., 1995). A leveling is observed, where the latter quickly catch up in the early grades. Opponents of school readiness also suggest that limited teaching styles can lead to a fixation on a particular method of learning, promote simple responses rather than real understanding and problem-solving, and foster a dependence on adults (Elkind, 1987; Stipek et al., 1995). Thus the momentary benefits of early instruction seem unlikely to outweigh its associated risks (e.g. heightened anxiety).

According to Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, there are distinct periods of development characterized by specific conflicts; if the conflict is effectively resolved (i.e. the individual is not overwhelmed with negative experiences, but balance is found between strengths and setbacks), skills will have been gained that support a strong sense of self for life. In the fourth stage, a sense of industry and competence is at odds with feelings of inferiority and helplessness. Erikson argued that the expectation of children to accomplish tasks that they are not developmentally capable of leads to excessive failures, which in turn cause feelings of frustration, shame, and doubt in their abilities, all of which undermine a sense of competence, which Erikson identified as a contributor to lifelong well-being. A higher sense of inferiority is

associated with later academic difficulty, aggression, and a lower likelihood of retention in school (Elkind, 1987).

Young children are naturally enthusiastic about learning in a broad sense, but they generally show little interest in the mechanics of reading and mathematics, or the specifics of scientific processes until later in childhood (Elkind, 1987). Their intrinsic motivation is immediately disrupted when they are introduced to teacher-directed instruction. The limited scope of a formal lesson does not cater to the way children's minds are naturally inclined to participate in interdisciplinary exploration; their minds do not operate in fixed categories (Elkind, 1987), and a lack of acknowledgement for the connections between the present subject and other areas of interest can affect their motivation and self-esteem. In a study by Stipek et al. (1995), children in child-centered programs scored higher on motivation-related measures than children in didactic programs. They rated their abilities higher and had greater expectations for success; self-selected activities of higher difficulty level; depended on the guidance of adults less; worried about school less; and showed more pride in their accomplishments.

Social-Emotional and Cognitive Interdependence

It has been the tradition of educational research and practice to dichotomize cognitive and social-emotional skills as spheres of influence entirely separate from one another (Jones et al., 2020). However, a growing body of research indicates that they are, on the contrary, highly interdependent facets of development (Blair & Raver, 2015; Jones et al., 2020). Social and emotional skills underlie later growth and development. National surveys in the United States reveal that an overwhelming majority (95%) of educators recognize these skills as teachable, and

most (97%) believe prioritizing their development is important and beneficial for all students, regardless of background (Bridgeland et al., 2013). Inadequate social and emotional competencies are identified by educators as the primary contributors to children's difficulties adjusting to classroom settings (Joy, 2015).

Successful (meaning in adherence to the expectations determined by social values) participation in a classroom requires the presence of a number of regulatory abilities, both cognitive and emotional. Cognitively, the development of executive functions is critical to progress in learning environments. These include the ability to focus, maintain, and shift attention; working memory, or the ability to retain information in a "mental workspace", where it is processed and manipulated in order to reason and act accordingly (Chai et al., 2018); and the ability to inhibit automatic responses (Blair & Raver, 2015). Learning environments also call for the capacity to identify goals, create plans to reach them, monitor the success of efforts towards them, redirect approaches where necessary, and evaluate the extent of their achievements (Berk, 2013; Durlak et al., 2011). Emotionally, classroom settings necessitate the ability to recognize one's emotions and employ regulatory strategies to reduce emotional intensity (i.e. stress) to levels under which goals can still be carried out (Berk, 2013; Blair & Raver, 2015; Booth et al., 2019; Durlak et al., 2011). They also require participation in positive social interactions, which is supported by the abilities to consider the perspectives of others, and cooperate and respectfully negotiate with others (Durlak et al., 2011; Thompson, 2001). These are all effortful processes, especially for young children.

Evidence suggests that a focus on social-emotional development in the early childhood years leading up to school entry does not detract from the development of content specific

understanding, but rather facilitates the process of teaching those skills by providing children

opportunities to practice a broad array of supportive functions (Blair & Raver, 2015). In short,

self-regulation supports school readiness (Booth et al., 2019). Providing children with the social

and emotional tools they need to be successful socially and academically may be particularly

impactful by way of bolstering positive self concepts.

Self concept can be broadly defined as the individual's perception of themselves,

including beliefs about their ability to execute specific behaviors in order to reach achievements

(i.e. self-efficacy), and the degree to which they perceive their personal qualities to be positive

(i.e. self-esteem) (Polat & Askin, 2015), with a high self-concept categorized as both realistic

and maintaining an attitude of self-acceptance and self-respect (Berk, 2013). The development of

self concept is relevant and important because an individual's self-perception influences their

future behavior and their emotional experience of an environment (Berk, 2013). If the child

believes they are competent, they are more likely to feel intrinsically motivated to pursue a task

and persevere in the face of obstacles; alternatively, if the child believes they are incompetent,

they are more likely to feel disengaged from the task and unwilling to exert additional efforts

towards its completion (Guay et al., 2010).

Self-concept is learned. Children generally start with an overoptimistic self-concept

(Dapp & Roebers, 2018). Their self-perceptions slowly start to align with reality, but they are not

immediately able to distinguish between internal and external causes of their successes and

failures and they overestimate their responsibility for all outcomes (Stipek et al., 1995). This

suggests, in alignment with Erikson's hypothesis, that before children are able to distinguish

between ability, effort, and external variables to explain performance, excessive failures could be particularly detrimental to the development of their self-concept.

The Danish Pedagogical Curriculum

The social pedagogical tradition reflects a number of longstanding sociocultural values that were evident in Danish ECEC practice from its conception:

1. Childhood is a valuable period in itself. The child has a right to "be" in the present moment, without the pressure of making progress towards "becoming" a successful adult (Kragh-Müller, 2017).

2. Children are competent individuals whose perspectives should be considered and respected. They are active participants in their lives, and have a right to influence their everyday experiences. A major overarching goal of education is to develop individuals who are ready to participate in a democracy, and the best way to support the making of a democratic subject is to allow them to engage in democratic life (A. S. Jensen, 2018; Kragh-Müller, 2017).

3. Play, especially free play, is a valuable developmental tool.

4. Community is essential (MinED, 2018).

5. Learning should be understood broadly, with emphasis placed on children's development through interactions with the real world (A. S. Jensen, 2018). The curricular undertakings of ECEC institutions should not be isolated in their implementation, but should rather appear in interaction with one another and be interdisciplinarily evident (BUPL, 2006).

6. The children's environment should be approached with physical, psychological, and
   aesthetic considerations (MinED, 2018).

The child-centered practice is longstanding, but more recent developments in policy have

helped illuminate its express ambitions. ECEC is an independent part of the Danish social

welfare state; it is not considered a part of the larger school system, which includes primary and

secondary education. This means that it is influenced by a unique legislation, separate from that

of the "formal teaching" years (BUPL, 2006). In 2004, a law was passed which obligated Danish

ECEC settings to organize their practices in accordance with new, centrally established

pedagogical objectives and themes (MinED, 2018). Although rather broadly defined originally,

these have become more specifically constructed over the years, and the most recent framework

was established in 2018. The six curricular themes of the pedagogical curriculum, as identified

by the Ministry of Education (2018), are:

1. **Comprehensive personal development**: The pedagogical environment aims to
   encourage the development of personal commitments to the ECEC setting, through
   respectful and personal relationships with adults and by allowing children to explore their
   interests. The development of social competence is supported by creating settings where
   children can experience different social roles, learn to be attentive to the perspectives of
   others, and approach conflict appropriately.

2. **Social development:** Pedagogues should facilitate the formation of skills children will
   need to successfully participate in communities as adults. A sense of belonging and
   influence in an inclusive community supports positive development, and children should

be provided with opportunities to naturally discover the formal and informal rules of social interaction.

3. **Communication and language**: Beyond modeling the rules of dialogue, pedagogues should engage in conversations about children's interests. A pedagogical attentiveness to children's perspectives requires empathy, curiosity, and an openness to learning new things and having personal perspectives challenged (Svinth, 2017).

4. **Body, senses, and motion**: The formation of the child's bodily identity should be supported. The bodily identity encompasses an understanding of the body's physical functions and signals and an awareness of the body as a means through which we experience the world around us. The environment should create space for many types of bodily experience, where creativity and playfulness are key components.

5. **Outdoor life and natural phenomena**: Nature is recognized as a space which provides a wealth of developmental opportunities. Outdoors, children are granted sensory experiences, a place to be creative and imaginative, and the chance to experiment with questions of space, quantity, and shape. Personal connections to the environment can also foster an early commitment to sustainability.

6. **Culture, aesthetics, and community**: The ECEC setting should give children experiences with traditions and values of their own cultural background and those of others. Pedagogues should communicate the joyful nature of creative activities, both in the way of impression (i.e. encounters with different art forms such as painting, music, etc.) and expression (i.e. personal, experimental practice). The environment should foster a democratic community, where children have influence in decision making.

Not all of these values are unique to Denmark, but their assemblance in a curriculum that ECEC settings are required to consider in their daily organization is novel. It is important to note that the pedagogical curriculum does not entail the creation of a universal and specific educational program (MinED, 2018). How it is to be implemented practically is determined at the municipal level or by the pedagogues of individual ECEC institutions. The local preparation of specific measures to be used in reaching the goals of the pedagogical curriculum has been intentionally chosen over a set of nationally mandated approaches in order to account for regional differences in group demographics (i.e. gender, cultural differences, disabilities, etc.) and geographic location (i.e. access to nature, cultural experiences, etc.) (MinED, 2018). This organizational choice is also defended by the presumption that the greater degree of freedom granted to pedagogues will result in increased job satisfaction, in turn benefiting the way pedagogues interact with children (Kragh-Müller, 2017).

Pedagogues: Roles and Perspectives

Pedagogues are broadly qualified by a professional bachelor's degree to work in geriatric-, disability-, and childcare-services, among others (BUPL, 2006). Contrary to how the word "pedagogue" is used in English (often negatively, to describe strict academic instruction), in the Danish context it refers to a person trained in matters of social and emotional upbringing and development (Jackson, 2005). Training in social pedagogy, which typically spans 3.5 years, involves learning about behavioral sciences, self-esteem-, and community-building. All heads of Danish ECEC institutions and 60% of the overall staff are qualified at the degree level to work in early childhood settings (Ringsmose & Bogaard-Clausen, 2017).

These are the individuals responsible for the alignment of the day-to-day organization of the ECEC environment with the requirements of the central curriculum, and there are some common beliefs and perspectives shared among them across institutions. Perhaps most important is the general discomfort among Danish pedagogues with the term "teaching" and the label of "teacher". Learning is understood as a continuous process that starts with the child, and instead of being the source of information, pedagogues designate themselves the indirect role of organizers- those who create space and opportunities to enhance the learning that children actively strive towards, beginning with the areas of interest the children seem naturally inclined to explore (A. S. Jensen, 2018). The goal of the pedagogue is not to adhere to a strict standard of academic performance, but rather to support the holistic development of the child; to foster self-sufficiency, social competence, and develop an individual who is ultimately ready and capable of participating in democratic society. This is thought to be achieved in an environment closely resembling the home; homely furnishings (e.g. sofas, tea lights) and an informal atmosphere are employed as strategies to make children feel as secure and comfortable in the ECEC setting as they do at home (Kragh-Müller, 2017). Forming close relationships with children is considered crucial for their self- and social-development.

The Benefits Undermined

Thus far, I have presented an argument towards the benefits of the social pedagogical tradition. High accessibility, relative uniformity as supported by a central pedagogical curriculum that reflects strong cultural values, and the prioritization of socioemotional development over academic assessment in early childhood all suggest significant longitudinal benefits for children

in Denmark, particularly through the development of positive self-concept. The creation of a

lived democracy promotes the development of self-esteem and a sense of belonging, which will

later facilitate academic performance and the formation of strong social relationships. Lived

democracy can be thought of as the *experience* of democracy. Instead of simply introducing the

concept theoretically, Danish ECEC settings strive to create environments in which children

actively participate in a democratic community. This means giving children influence in their

everyday lives. The democratic environment is achieved through equal relationships between

pedagogues and children where there are high levels of trust, demonstrated by children's freedom

from excessive supervision and the value placed on children's influence in decision-making. The

kinds of autonomous activity children engage in naturally introduce them to the rules of social

interaction and strengthen their independence and self-worth.

　　　Next, I will present two significant characteristics of life in Danish ECEC and identify

more specific developmental outcomes that illustrate how social pedagogy can support children's

transition to the classroom. Play and time in nature were chosen because they encompass several

significant values of Danish pedagogy, including holistic development, autonomy and trust,

democratic processes, and social cohesion. Evidence of developmental progress demonstrates

that children are not wasting time but are gaining skills that are essential for successful

participation in classrooms. Allowing time for these skills to develop is protective of student's

self-concept because (1) they are allowed to practice and gain confidence in low-risk scenarios,

and (2) a focus on building relationships with peers provides practice for collaboration and

negotiation of conflict.

Finally, I will explore the Danish orientation to difference and theorize the impact on the development of positive self-concept in minority children. In theory, Denmark's welfare system extends the same opportunities and produces the same outcomes for everyone, so all children in ECEC should make equal strides. One could assume that the social pedagogical model, which emphasizes egalitarianism, democracy, and self-expression would create an inclusive environment. However, the homogeneity of Danish society, widespread animosity towards the Muslim population, the promotion of assimilation to Danish traditions and norms, and the lack of governmental regulation of attitudes towards "outsiders" in Danish ECEC settings likely limit the benefits experienced by ethnic-minority children and disrupt the development of their sense of belonging and self-concept.

There is considerable potential for the assimilationist culture to undermine the benefits of the social pedagogical tradition for minority children. However, little research addressing the question has been conducted. I propose such research is necessary to catalyze change, and justify this approach by its relevance to important influencers of policy.

It is widely recognized that children who have a strong start in quality ECEC services are likely to have better educational outcomes as they age (OECD, 2021). The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is an economic organization with 38 member nations which produces statistics and analyses across various indicators (e.g. education, health, environment) for the purpose of providing evidence-based policy suggestions to improve well-being around the world. The OECD has published much research about the economic implications of ECEC for society in their annual "Education at a Glance" report. The report outlines the structure of education systems around the world, how they are financed, and how

they perform in relation to their international counterparts, with the ultimate goal of providing

policy suggestions and suggesting a set of international-standards. Expectedly, an emphasis lies

on the economic implications (e.g. employment, lifetime earnings) of early childhood

experiences in education and care, and on the contributions of ECEC to the "public good"

(OECD, 2006). Positive experiences have a number of benefits, including better academic

achievement and improved social, emotional, and relational competences (Kamerman &

Gatenio-Gabel, 2007; Kragh-Müller, 2017), which ultimately contribute to productivity in

adulthood (i.e. professional performance and labor market participation) (Kamerman &

Gatenio-Gabel, 2007; OECD, 2006). ECEC systems have the potential to improve economic

conditions; there is greater retention of students who have good experiences in early childhood,

and as adults they are more likely to complete higher education, be employed, and earn more,

leading to greater financial returns to society (OECD, 2006).

      Identifying such financial impacts of ECEC is beneficial to their further development

because it draws attention from governments and policymakers, who wish to support measures

that sustain and improve their effects; it is understood that the period of early childhood

"provides an unequaled opportunity for investment in human capital" (OECD, 2006). However,

due to increased international competition, the focus of political involvement is largely placed on

academic performance (Ringsmose & Bogaard-Clausen, 2017). While 'personal benefits' (e.g.

social and emotional well-being) are mentioned throughout the report, the mechanisms through

which these developments are achieved are not explored in any depth. Future research should

rectify this, as such personal experiences are just as predictive of future outcomes.

Chapter 1: Play

In Danish ECEC, play is highly valued. At the typical day care institution, at least half of the day is reserved for play, and pedagogue-directed activity is minimal (Winther-Lindqvist, 2017). The allocation of time for free play is deeply connected to cultural values that emphasize children's status as individuals with unique interests and desires that deserve attention and respect. Play is also recognized as a mechanism through which skills that are critical for social cohesion are formed; in such activity, children learn to communicate and negotiate with each other.

The Function of Play: Theoretical Perspectives

Various theories about the purpose of play have been presented. While several of the classic perspectives on the function of play compliment each other, central theorists placed particular emphasis on different benefits that play may offer a child.

Freud centered his theory on the therapeutic qualities of play. He believed play serves "a conflict-processing function", wherein children are able to recreate, and *manipulate,* scenarios that have impacted their lives in their play (Winther-Lindqvist, 2013). Play allows for the reimagining of a situation that has previously or is currently unfolding in real life. The child can envision a variation of events, perhaps where they maintain control or negotiate matters differently- each version leading to alternative outcomes. Play provides a safe space to experiment with scenarios involving fears, anxieties, and negative emotions (Berk et al., 2006). It is a space to unravel the intricacies of the big world they must confront; a space that allows for some semblance of control over realities that may be overwhelming (Singer, 2006).

Contemporary research supports this theory. Studies indicate that children do use play as a way to work through their emotions; and children who play more are found to show less anxiety in stressful situations (Golinkoff et al., 2006). Such practice with emotional processing may be a protective experience when it comes time to make the transition to the classroom. Entering a more academically oriented environment comes with a host of new challenges: adjusting to a more rigid schedule, encountering more challenging material, generally being expected to live up to higher expectations, and meeting new peers. Children who were allowed extensive play time will have discovered different ways to navigate their emotions, adjust their perspective and behavior in difficult situations, and will continue to have the tool of play to use as an outlet.

Piaget reasoned that children's play is a form of wish fulfillment (Berk et al., 2006). As imagined scenes are the only realms over which a child can exercise complete control, play becomes the activity where they can adapt reality to wholly suit their desires (Schousboe & Winther-Lindqvist, 2013). Erikson similarly recognized play as a space for children to experiment with control over reality (Schousboe & Winther-Lindqvist, 2013). Underlying all three of these explanations of the importance of play is the idea that at its center, play is a mechanism through which children can reflect on their experience and the degree of influence they hold in everyday life; and through which they can experiment with various approaches to scenarios in the "real world", even before having encountered them personally.

Vygotsky introduced an additional function of play. He argued that play presents a challenge for children, in that it creates a tension between the desire to act in accordance with one's own desires (wish-fulfillment) and the requirement of adhering to the rules of role play

(Schousboe & Winther-Lindqvist, 2013). In this sense, play is suggested as a potential landscape

for the development of self-regulatory abilities. Vygotsky particularly emphasized the

importance of *mature* forms of *make-believe* play in building necessary skills for academics

(Bodrova, 2008). Mature play is characterized by a number of specific abilities:

> " [1] the use of object-substitutes that bear little resemblance to the object they
> symbolize… [2] the ability to take on and sustain a specific role by consistently engaging
> in pretend actions, speech, and interactions fitting the character… [3] the ability to follow
> the rules associated with the pretend scenario and chosen character…[4] play scenarios
> that integrate many themes and span several days or weeks… [5] progress from extended
> acting and rudimentary planning to extended planning and rudimentary acting-out."
> (Bodrova & Leong, 2018).

Vygotsky's belief that play propels development is supported by research that shows new

developmental accomplishments occurring in play far earlier than they do in other activities

(Berk et al., 2006; Bodrova, 2008).

For the purpose of this project I will use the following definition of play: "an engaging

and demanding activity, which is undertaken for its own sake, in the sense that it is not strictly

goal oriented" (Schousboe & Winther-Lindqvist, 2013). I will specifically explore play that

resembles, or is at the beginning of the development of mature play as defined by Vygotsky. This

form of play is emphasized because it represents a shift to more complicated patterns of thought,

where advanced cognitive, social, and emotional skills are acquired.

Play as the Propeller: Setting the Stage for Cognitive and Socio-Emotional Growth

Theory of Mind

Theory of mind (ToM) refers to the ability to attribute mental states (i.e. thoughts, desires, beliefs, intentions) to oneself and others, understanding that behavior is driven by these mental states and that your own may differ from those of others. Across individualistic cultures, children typically come to understandings of the mind in a predictable sequence: they realize that people can have (1) diverse desires, (2) diverse beliefs, (3) differential access to knowledge, (4) false beliefs, and that people can (5) refrain from expressing their true emotions (i.e. hidden emotion understanding) (Etel & Yagmurlu, 2015; Kuntoro et al., 2013).

At around 18 months, children begin to understand that others can have different attitudes towards objects than they do (Gopnik et al., 1999). For example, in an experimental task, as described by Liu et al. (2009), children are told a story about a character (e.g. Anne) who has a choice of a cookie or a carrot for snack. They are asked which snack they themselves would prefer (typically: cookie). They are then told that Anne prefers the snack that they did not choose (typically: carrot), and asked which snack they think Anne would choose. The developmental milestone is marked by the child's ability to choose a snack for Anne based on *her* desires as opposed to their own. This represents a transition away from an assumed universality between people's mental states, and is one of the first manifestations of executive functions in that the child must inhibit their own automatic response and make an effort to evaluate the inner states of another person. Shortly following an initial understanding of diverse desires come the "terrible twos", a period in which children begin systematically testing the boundaries produced by conflict in their desires and the desires of others (Gopnik et al., 1999). Your two year old is not

intentionally tormenting you, but actively trying to determine the limits in exercising their desires while still maintaining positive social relationships.

Next, children begin to understand that people can hold different beliefs. In an experimental task (Liu et al., 2009), children are told a story about a character (e.g. James) who is looking for his cat. He has the choice of looking under the porch or in the garage. The child is asked where *they* think the cat is (e.g. the garage), and then they are told that *James* thinks the cat is in the other location (e.g. under the porch). The child is then asked to predict where James will choose to look for the cat. Correctly determining that James will look under the porch illustrates an understanding that people act on the basis of their personal beliefs.

The third milestone on the developmental trajectory is recognizing that people may have differential access to knowledge based on their visual input; if someone hasn't seen something, they may need extra information to reach the same understanding as someone who *can* see the object. This is closely related to the traditional tasks that measure children's understanding that people can hold false beliefs. In a false belief task, the child must recognize that another person does not possess the same information that they do, and infer how that person would react in a scenario given their state of knowledge (even though the child knows that their action will lead to a wrong, or undesirable outcome). In the traditional false belief task developed by Wimmer & Perner (1983), a child is presented with a narrative along these lines: *Maxi helps his mother put some chocolate into the Blue kitchen cupboard. Maxi then leaves the kitchen. While he is gone, his mother uses some of the chocolate and puts the rest in the Green cupboard instead of back in the blue. Maxi's mom leaves, and then Maxi comes back inside and wants to have some chocolate as a snack.*

At the baseline, we are interested in knowing where the child says Maxi will look for the chocolate. If they answer the blue cupboard then they have passed, because they recognize that Maxi has a different set of information than they do, and acknowledge that despite the fact that *they* know Maxi is wrong, *he* will act based on his current knowledge. Wimmer and Perner (1983) further developed the task by presenting children with one of two variations:

1. *Maxi's grandfather enters the kitchen, and Maxi, who cannot reach the cupboard by himself, asks for his help.*

2. *Maxi's brother enters the kitchen. He is also looking for chocolate. Maxi is afraid his brother will eat it all, and he doesn't want to share the real location of the chocolate.*

In either case, the child is asked where Maxi will say the chocolate is. Here we are interested in the child's ability to infer intention in Maxi's action. In scenario one, where he wants help reaching the chocolate, Maxi's intention is to tell his grandfather the *correct* location. The child must choose an answer that represents what Maxi believes to be true. The right answer in this case is that Maxi will tell his grandfather the chocolate is in the *Blue* cupboard (where he saw it was placed, and thus believes it to be). In the second scenario, where his intention is to mislead his brother, the desired answer is that Maxi will tell his brother the chocolate is in the *Green* cupboard (which he believes to be false).

Lastly on the developmental trajectory, children become aware that people can hide their emotions, feeling differently inside (real emotion) than what you would infer from the emotions they display (apparent emotion). In an experimental task measuring this ability, the child may be

presented with a scenario, familiar to them in the sense that they would be able to draw

conclusions about how one might feel if placed in the situation themselves. For example, they

are told a story about a boy who is being teased by his classmates; they are then asked to indicate

how the boy really feels (e.g. sad) and how he makes his face look (e.g. happy, okay, or

unbothered) (Kunturo et al., 2013).

All of these skills garnered with the development of ToM are essential to prosocial

functioning in group activities, including participation in the classroom and collaboration with

peers. Understanding that people have different desires and beliefs is the core of perspective

taking- being able to accurately interpret the behavior of others and anticipate their next actions

(Wimmer & Perner, 1983). Being able to identify the underlying intentions of an action- in other

words, being able to separate the outcome of an action from the intentions of its agent- is

necessary for the development of joint action (Korkmaz, 2011). False belief understanding has

been related to achievements in literacy (i.e. phonemic awareness, narrative comprehension),

mathematics, and emotional well-being in school (Cavadel & Frye, 2017). It has also been

suggested that an understanding of sources of knowledge, and an awareness of one's own

knowledge, is an important component of academic learning (Cavadel & Frye, 2017).

As some of these abilities are still being solidified, and others are just emerging

altogether at the time a child enters daycare or preschool, space to practice applying and

consolidating new knowledge is critical. Pretend play has been shown to significantly facilitate

ToM development (Korkmaz, 2011). It promotes perspective taking, both in the form of

assuming roles in play scenarios that are outside of personal experiences in everyday life

(Golinkoff et al., 2006), and in the form of recognizing a playmate's desires and intentions for

the scene. It requires cooperation in creating a proposed play scenario, communication about the

roles and rules of the play scenario, and negotiation and conflict-resolution in instances of

differing desires or interpretations (Coolahan et al., 2000; Korkmaz, 2011).

Self Regulation

In its early stages, self-regulation is closely related to language development. Young

children frequently talk out loud to themselves while playing and exploring. This tendency was

first referred to as "egocentric speech", called so by Piaget due to his belief that it was purely a

manifestation of preschool aged children's inability to center the perspectives of others (Berk,

2013). Vygotsky disagreed with this explanation, renamed the phenomenon "private speech", and

viewed it as the foundation for higher cognitive processes. Studies, conducted over many

decades, have consistently supported Vygotsky's conclusions over Piaget's with regard to private

speech (Berk, 2013). He deduced that private speech is a mechanism through which children

actively work through challenges, be it emotional or logistical. It can be used to plan, guide, and

monitor behavior in order to solve a problem and/or achieve a goal (Astington, 1993; Day &

Smith, 2013). It can also be used as a way to manage emotions, particularly in frustrating

scenarios. Private speech signifies a transition from relying on support provided by others, to the

use of self-guided behavior through language as thought (Berk et al., 2006; Day & Smith, 2013).

After its peak around the ages of 4-6, private speech is gradually replaced by silent inner speech.

Studies have indicated that play elicits private speech, and that use in play scenarios is

positively correlated with its use in real-world situations; children who engage in more

make-believe play have been found to use higher rates of private speech to guide their behavior

in realistic tasks (Berk et al., 2006). Private speech is a self-regulatory practice, and it is a

mechanism that is brought out in play. Allowing children space to play is allowing them space to

learn how to navigate challenges independently, a skill that will be important for them in the

classroom, where they are expected to assume more responsibility.

Vygotsky also realized that pretend play involves rules. The roles that children assume in

play each come with their own set of behavioral guidelines- the "mommy", "baby", or "robber"

cannot act in any way possible (i.e. they must abide by some conventional rules of behavior),

which means children are consistently engaged in the practice of inhibitory control during

pretend play (Bodrova, 2008; Golinkoff et al., 2006; Winther-Lindqvist, 2017). To some extent,

collaboration with others in crafting a play scenario also involves the suppression of automatic

responses. Creative play provides opportunities for children to identify certain rules of social

behavior, practice adhering to them, and apply them to new situations (Guirguis, 2018). Thus,

play encourages the development of important self-regulation skills, which may be especially

beneficial in the transition to school life, where children are expected to follow the agenda of the

school as opposed to one tailored to their own desires (Bodrova, 2008).

Symbolic Thought

According to Piaget's stages of cognitive development, ages 2-7 are defined as the

preoperational stage. In this stage (which encompasses the years of early childhood education

and care), the ability to engage in symbolic play emerges. Functional play, or play with objects

that reflects their intended functions (e.g. using a hairbrush to brush a doll's hair), is increasingly

substituted for play where an object can be attributed new meaning, and can be used to represent

another object (e.g. using a banana as a phone) (Winther-Lindqvist, 2013; Zigler & Bishop-Josef,

2006). The cornerstone of symbolic play is representational thought, or the ability to represent

the external reality (e.g. physical objects) in one's thoughts, through the use of symbols such as

language and images. Children can use one object to represent another because they can now

imagine objects, rather than having to rely on their concrete presence. As this imaginative ability

is practiced and strengthened, play becomes progressively more oriented around "internalized

representation[s] as opposed to external realit[ies]" (Bodrova, 2008). That is, play evolves to

include hypothetical and wishful thinking, evident in explorations of possibility in setting and

role-play: "What if this room was a jungle? What if I was a tiger?" (Winther-Lundqvist, 2013, p.

31). Now that they can imagine objects, children can act as if their environment has been

transformed into a lively scene.

    Engagement in symbolic play represents the emergence of abstract thinking (Bodrova,

2008; Whitebread et al., 2009), and such thinking is the foundation of literacy and mathematical

understanding (Zigler & Bishop-Joseph, 2006). As pretend play becomes increasingly social, it

also necessitates the development of language, as children must be able to convey the "direction

and meaning of their symbolic play to others" (Christie & Roskos, 2006). The development of

such oral language skills set the stage for literacy, as children experiment with how words

convey meaning. Furthermore, letters, words, numbers, and mathematical notation are all

representational systems we use to symbolize objects and events. Children must have an

understanding of what symbolic representations are in order to grasp those concepts, and the way

their representational abilities develop through play- gradually shifting from dependence on

physical cues to internalized imagery- support this realization. Through play, children are

embarking on an expedition into increasingly complex territories; they are actively developing an

entirely new set of cognitive skills which facilitate everyday interactions. Before representational

thinking emerges, introduction to material that requires such conceptual understanding is simply

beyond the cognitive capacity of the child and is unnecessarily detrimental to their sense of

competence.

A Note on the Significance of Play for School

Perhaps most important is the motivational quality of play. It is an activity that children

are naturally inclined to participate in, and thus a perfect place to learn, as they are motivated to

grapple with skills that are necessary for successful engagement- skills that are also necessary for

success in school (Golinkoff et al., 2006). Play is also multidisciplinary (Karaoglu, 2020). The

development of symbolic thought sets the foundation for thinking across multiple fields of study,

and because play content is unrestricted, it creates special moments of interconnectivity between

subjects. Finally, play promotes creativity, which "facilitates divergent thinking" (i.e. problem

solving through a variety of pathways) (Cecchin, 2013).

Play and Social Identity

The form of play that becomes prominent around age four is social and cooperative. In

socio-dramatic play, children share the project of building and maintaining a play scenario under

a common set of goals (Golinkoff et al., 2006; Svinth, 2013; D. A. Winther-Lindqvist, 2017).

During such activities, children are actively learning how to work together. The play space is a

unique environment for exploring interactive skills because children (theoretically) maintain

equal amounts of power over a scenario. In discourse between adult and child, the adult is

awarded the ultimate authority, and there is a limit to the room children have for negotiation; but

the "horizontal" relationship between peers creates space for children to learn how to truly

negotiate and compromise (Mathieson & Banerjee, 2010). Capitulation to others' desires

becomes less forced and more rooted in an effort to work together, which is greatly facilitated by

the development of theory of mind (i.e. being able to evaluate another's perspective and

intention).

As previously described, certain rules of social behavior are applied to role-play (see

page 23). There are of course instances where these rules are violated. As Vygotsky supposed,

there can be a point of tension between the rules of play and the desire to use the play space as a

mechanism for wish fulfillment. Children may wish to experiment with the consequences of

crossing particular boundaries in play, where 'undesirable' behaviors may reap less severe

repercussions. Or, perhaps a breach of the social contract doesn't represent the individual child's

true desires, but reflects how play can be a space for children to explore "feared, mean, and

morally dismissed and curious roles" (Winther-Lindqvist, 2013). In that exploration, children can

determine where the needle of their own moral compasses rests with regard to certain pro- and

anti-social acts (Schousboe, 2013). The collaborative nature of sociodramatic play additionally

fosters a sense of social responsibility; as children develop an understanding of justice, they can

also practice care for the wellbeing of others (Svinth, 2013).

As children increasingly integrate peer interactions into play it begins to provide a

remarkable realm for the formation of identity. At the same time that they are transitioning from

more independent forms of play, they are, according to Erikson, entering the third stage of

psychosocial development. In this stage, the tension experienced is between initiative and guilt.

Planning activities and making up games- behaviors affecting the direction of an activity-

develops a sense that you are capable of leading others, but guilt arises when your actions

negatively impacts another person or results in punishment (Cross & Cross, 2017). The

interactions that occur between peers in play are the primary stage upon which this crisis may be

resolved. It is a safe environment in which boundaries can be tested and established, and in

which a child can practice asserting their agency.

　　　　Furthermore, the dynamics of play arrangement can indicate the degree to which one is

valued in a group of people (Winther-Lindqvist, 2017). Researchers have found that children

come to identify "hierarchical position" (i.e. central or peripheral) of the roles they are assigned

in play scenarios (Winther-Lindqvist, 2013). The distribution of roles is representative of how

much status an individual has in the group outside of the immediate play scenario. Negative

cultural perceptions of a particular group may lead to children of that group being assigned

inferior positions in play scenes. The messages received through the process of role designation

are carried over and applied to the real-life environment, and those acquired identities "shape

expectation patterns that guide behaviors and influence self- and other- concepts"

(Winther-Lindqvist, 2013).

The Cultural Construction of Play Space

　　　　The ethics of play are determined by the ethics of the surrounding culture. When creating

play scenarios, children draw on their personal experiences, all of which are determined by the

"rules, conventions, and models of cooperation" (Berk et al., 2006) of their environment.

Children from the same cultural background operate under "share[d] knowledge of how the

world works" (Winther-Lindqvist, 2013) and their play scripts reflect this knowledge. The

organization of life in play reflects the organization of life in the real world; "how objects are

used…what the roles and relations are between two sexes…how holidays [and other special

events are structured]" (Winther-Lindqvist, 2013)- all of this cultural knowledge informs

children's interests, and how scenarios unfold in play.

What happens when there is difference or discrepancy between cultural narratives?

Unfamiliarity with the social codes that shape play spaces might result in the marginalization of

minority children. After observing pedagogical activities in Danish preschools over an 11 month

period, Svinth (2013) found that children in "peripheral positions" (i.e. children from non-Danish

cultural backgrounds; children with limited Danish language skills), experience limited

collaborative encounters with their peers. Minority children could be missing out on invaluable

opportunities to develop theory of mind, self regulatory abilities, and representational thought

because their backgrounds are not prominent resources in the construction of play scenes, and

inaccessible play scenes reduce their ability to form strong play partners who engage in the target

developmental processes with them. I will further explore processes of marginalization that

potentially undermine benefits of Danish ECEC in Chapter 3.

Chapter 2: Nature

The previous chapter outlined developmental gains afforded by play, specifically in its sociodramatic and make-believe form. The goal of that chapter was to identify play as an integral mechanism for growth. It is not a waste of time, or a distraction from the important work of preparing children for school, as critics of extended play time imply. Rather, in play space children are actively engaging in self-regulatory behavior and becoming familiar with how to identify alternative perspectives and motivations, which are all skills that are essential in a classroom environment. This chapter will explore the impact of a particular environment where the benefits of play may be amplified: Nature.

In his book, *The Last Child in the Woods,* Richard Louv presents the theory of Nature Deficit Disorder (coined so to indicate the urgency of the issue, not for use as a medical diagnosis). The theory describes the detrimental consequences of increased alienation from nature, "among them: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illness" (Louv, 2005), and emphasizes the seriousness of this problem for children currently growing up. Empirical research has supported this theory of human cost, indicating that high levels of stress hormones over extended periods of time- as have become common and are induced by the accelerated pace of life in urban environments- increase the likelihood of experiencing mental illness (e.g. anxiety and depression), "and can have a lasting effect on the development of children's brains" (Abbott, 2012). Louv's book inspired international movements to reconnect people to nature, and in this chapter I will elaborate on the ways in which a sustained connection to nature can support the developmental processes that occur in early childhood.

Nature is widely recognized as a source of positive and therapeutic experiences for adults. The benefits of time spent in nature include better sleep, stress reduction (measured by self-report and physiological assessments), higher estimates of subjective well-being (in part derived from a sense of meaning and purpose), and greater social cohesion (Bratman et al., 2019). Proximity to green (woods, meadows, parks) and blue (oceans, rivers, lakes) space is one variable associated with the psychological well-being of a population (Bratman et al., 2019). Some researchers attribute the empirical data that indicates people have strong positive reactions to being in nature to a biological explanation (i.e. biophilia theory) which states that we as a species have an innate attachment to the natural world; evolutionarily speaking, we are wired for an "agrarian, nature-oriented existence", and our neurological capacities are not intended for the incredibly fast paced, over-stimulating environments that humans have created over time (Louv, 2008).

Progress towards industrialization and urbanization has raised some barriers to spending time outdoors. The rapid expansion of cities has reduced the amount of natural space that is easily accessible, and growing safety concerns (e.g. traffic; stranger danger) have driven people indoors (Charles & Louv, 2009). Families face increasing time pressures (Louv, 2005): parents work longer hours and work doesn't just stay at work, a courtesy of great technological advances that allow tasks to be carried home. New technologies have also created sources of entertainment that can be enjoyed from the comfort of the home, further stifling the compulsion to partake in activities outdoors. There is also immense pressure for parents to set their children up for success, an accomplishment that has been increasingly measured by the amount of time children spend in structured extracurricular activities (e.g. sports, music lessons), to the detriment of their

free time. Such demands have become so integral to the structure of societies today that it has reached a point "where [many parents] consider relaxation and leisure, for themselves or their children, a self-indulgent luxury" (Louv, 2005).

Yet play in natural environments provides opportunities for growth in all developmental domains (Wilson, 2008). Firstly, natural spaces offer some of the richest opportunities with regard to the development of physical activity. Extended sections of open space, the availability of moving parts and a diverse range of topographical features work together to support the advancement of locomotor skills (e.g. walking and running), non-locomotor skills (e.g. bending and turning), manipulative skills (e.g. throwing and catching), perceptual competence (e.g. understanding shape, size, and depth), spatial awareness and balance, and overall fitness (particularly cardiovascular strength, which has been positively associated with academic performance) (Children and Nature Network, 2020; Kuo, 2019; Louv, 2005; Wilson, 2008).

In nature, all of the senses (i.e. visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, kinesthetic, and gustatory) are stimulated. Natural features such as bodies of water (i.e. creeks, rivers, ponds), flora, and fauna yield aesthetically pleasing experiences and moments of hands-on experimentation with materials of different textures and bearing various patterns. The slower rhythm of activity in nature, and experiencing distance from the high-pressure environments of everyday life can alleviate anxiety, and create feelings of comfort and peace (Louv, 2005; Wilson, 2008). Similarly to the activity of play, spending time in nature provides a space for reflection and perspective regarding difficult life situations (Louv, 2005).

Children feel that experiences in nature are meaningful. Thus, natural environments may be purposefully used to develop an intrinsic interest in learning (Children & Nature Network,

2020; Kuo et al., 2019), and to support the development of language, as children encounter

materials and experiences that they feel are worth sharing with others (Wilson, 2008). There is

also ample opportunity for independent exploration, in which challenging endeavors are faced

and a sense of self-efficacy is built (Wilson; 2008).

Nature in The Danish Context

Experience in nature is highly valued in the Nordic countries, and many people spend a

significant amount of their spare time outdoors (Sandseter & Lysklett, 2017). The capital city of

Copenhagen offers a number of parks for strolling, picnicking or playing field games, and an

impressive canal system with water clean enough to swim in runs through the city center. As of

2014, 96% of Copenhagen residents lived "within 15 minutes walking distance of a larger green

or blue area" (The European Commission, 2014, p. 3). Copenhagen public health policy

recognizes the importance of access to green (e.g. parks, forests) and blue (e.g. canals, lakes)

spaces, and even after the achievement of such a remarkable feat, efforts to incorporate more of

such spaces in future city planning continues (Thomas, 2015). The municipality cites the

promotion of healthy, active lifestyles and the enhancement of social life in the city as a few

motivators for these projects (Thomas, 2015).

In Nordic ECEC institutions, children spend "30-70% of their day outdoors" (Sandseter

& Lysklett, p. 120). Denmark in particular was a leading figure in the incorporation of nature in

ECEC settings; it was the first country in which an institution that centered outdoor life was

established (circa 1952) (Sandseter & Lysklett, 2017). There are now more than 500 "forest

schools" in Denmark, where most hours are spent outside and the natural world is used as the

"pedagogical fundament for activity" (Sandseter & Lysklett, 2017, p. 121). Even in more typical

institutions, children spend a significant number of hours outside every day- and weather is no

obstacle. The pedagogical values that are reflected in outdoor play are autonomy, trust, and

participation in democratic processes.

Pretend Play

The most dominant form of play in natural environments is pretend play (Wilson, 2008).

As described in the previous chapter, pretend play is important for the development of theory of

mind (the ability to identify the mental states- desires, beliefs, intentions- of others), which is

necessary for social cohesion; and representational (symbolic) thought, which is the foundation

of literacy and mathematical understanding. Nature may be an even more lucrative environment

for play; play in nature has been found to last longer and be more continuous, meaning play

scenarios are carried over longer periods of time- across days and even weeks (Wilson, 2008).

Due to its unstructured quality and the abundance of manipulable variables (i.e. loose parts),

nature especially promotes creativity (Louv, 2005; Wilson, 2008); "studies indicate that

undesignated play spaces tend to encourage… [a] greater variety of play themes…more object

transformations (using one object to represent something else)...and more problem-solving skills

than do traditional play-grounds or indoor play spaces" (Wilson, 2008, p. 81).

Risky Play

One especially unique facet of Danish pedagogy is its orientation toward risk. In contrast to the United States, where legislation regarding playground structure (i.e. what equipment is allowed and what materials are used to build them) and practice (i.e. how children are allowed to play) has become increasingly strict due to fear of injury (and liability), the Danish philosophy is rather relaxed. Opportunities to engage with risks are considered necessary because they allow children to test the limits of their capabilities and to learn from their mistakes (Wilson, 2008)- risk carries opportunities for learning and development. There is an important distinction to be made between a *risk* and a *hazard.* A risk is a challenge in the environment that is easily identifiable by adults *and* children; a risk is something one chooses to engage with, and it is manageable- there are things that can be done in the environment to make risks more acceptable (e.g. how high you climb the tree). A hazard is simply dangerous; it is unpredictable and unmanageable (e.g. a fragile branch).

The dominant perspective in Denmark is that children are *going* to encounter risky materials at some point in their lives, and early exposure is best because it prepares them for challenges in the future by giving them experience in making healthy decisions. It is the Danish pedagogical experience that children who are given opportunities to confront and manage risks independently subsequently show improved risk assessment and mitigation (ABC Science, 2019; Sandseter & Lysklett, 2017; Vox, 2019).

Indoors, risky play may look like a room that is designated to unsupervised rough and tumble play, a relatively common feature of Danish ECEC institutions (Kragh-Müller, 2017). Outdoors, it looks like climbing trees and other challenging topographical features (e.g. slopes

and trenches), playing near hazardous elements (e.g. flora, fauna, water), playing with loose parts

(e.g. large sticks), and being allowed to break from the larger group. Some Danish preschools use

"invisible borders", spots that are not marked by structures such as fences but are verbally agreed

upon by adults and children to be uncrossable boundaries (Sandseter & Lysklett, 2017). These

may surround the institution itself, or be assigned in outdoor locations that are frequently visited

such as local forests.

The Danish pedagogical attitudes toward risk reflect a great deal of trust between

pedagogues and children- trust that children will heed their guidance even in their absence and

that, when given the opportunity, children will find it in themselves to make responsible choices

regarding their safety. Natural environments provide a great number of novel experiences with

risk, and their independent navigation contributes to the development of autonomy, which

Erikson believed important for the development of positive self-concept; the more independent a

child is allowed to be, the more confident they may grow in their ability to survive (McLeod,

2018). Importantly, it is not just the "successful" navigation of a risky scenario that is beneficial;

resulting injuries or otherwise undesirable outcomes equally contribute to a sense of self-efficacy

by providing a learning outcome to be taken into future circumstances.

Environmental Stewardship

Another benefit of interacting with nature in early childhood is its potential to foster a

sense of environmental stewardship (Kuo et al., 2019; Wilson, 2008). The best way to promote

sustainability is to provide children with firsthand, positive experiences in natural environments

(Louv, 2005; Wilson, 2008). It is no coincidence, then, that Denmark, whose ECEC system

prioritizes such experiences in nature, is one of the leading nations in sustainability efforts and that a great proportion of the population is conscious of the challenges facing the coming generations, and of their responsibilities in interrupting the corrosive effects of human activity on the planet.

It seems plausible that a connection to, and a feeling of responsibility for nature would support the development of positive self-concepts in young children. To believe that you are doing something meaningful by caring for the earth, and to contribute to an effort that benefits all of the people around you might promote confidence in one's leadership abilities, a sense of purpose, and feelings of being valuable in greater society. Furthermore, it gives children a tool for coping with the stresses of everyday life; it is likely that those who build an appreciation for nature in their early life are more likely to seek its comforts in times of hardship in the future and reap the abundant benefits, both physical and psychological, that it offers.

Leveling the Field

There are many benefits to providing children with early experiences in nature. Children who spend time in nature are more physically active; participate in more pretend play, which facilitates the development of several social emotional capacities; engage in more risky play, which allows them to practice employing their autonomy and in turn builds confidence in their abilities to assess and attack challenges; are more likely to develop an emotional connection to nature that promotes a sense of responsibility and purpose in environmental stewardship; and feel less stressed and are equipped with a coping tool for the future. Nature creates a state of being that facilitates the process of learning; the learner is likely to use more self-regulatory

strategies, be more attentive, less stressed, and more intrinsically motivated (Kuo et al., 2019).

Essentially, children who spend time in nature are being given time to develop the necessary

skills for successful academic participation. A positive relationship has also been found between

children's access to nature and their academic performance.

The children who stand to gain the most from spending time in nature are those who face

the greatest number of stressful life circumstances. In an interview with the Children & Nature

Network (2020), of which she is a consulting research director, Dr. Cathy Jordan identifies nature

as an equigenic environment. Equigenesis, or "leveling", is when an aspect of the environment

"disrupts the usual relationship between economic disadvantage and a poor health outcome"

(Children & Nature Network, 2020). This is to say that the natural environment seems especially

protective for people within risk categories for poor mental and physical health, as well as for

poor social and educational outcomes (Children & Nature Network, 2020; Louv, 2005). While

the theory of equigenesis refers to limitations of financial resources, I will consider minority

status as an alternative risk factor (independent of its relationship to economic disadvantage).

Minority children face the unique stressor of fitting in with the dominant Danish culture,

and as a result of conflicting values may find themselves isolated from the larger community.

Perhaps the leveling quality of nature extends to disparities related to minority identity. Firstly,

nature is the most neutral environment in that it is not intentionally constructed and thus removed

from the cultural influences of planning (i.e. the physical layout of the indoor space; what

materials are available for use). Secondly, while cultural codes will still be carried into the

natural environment, the expansion of creative play may limit the extent to which they are

involved in children's peer interactions. If anything, nature can provide an emotional reprieve

from this stress, and become a tool for coping.

Chapter 3: Marginalization in ECEC

The Cultural Background

The Danish Self-Image

Denmark is one of the most ethnically homogeneous countries in the world, which makes it "an important location to study the expectations of citizenship and the construction of identity" (Hodes, 2020, p. 6). The prevailing notion of "Danishness" is that it upholds open-minded, progressive values; Danes understand themselves to be trusting, tolerant people with respect for individual rights (Hodes, 2020; T. F. Jensen et al., 2017). The welfare state, and by extension the social welfare program of child care, are intended as equalizing forces. The dominant educational discourse, uniform across the country, commits itself to inclusivity and egalitarianism (Pihl et al., 2018). Theoretically, all children should have access to identical facilities and possibilities. However, the "rosy picture of the inclusive [Danish] character…has been seriously challenged in recent years" (Andersen et al., 2009, p. 1). Opinion polls demonstrate high levels of intolerance in Danes, particularly towards religious minorities (Hussain, 2007), whose populations have grown in past decades through immigration.

A (Brief) History of Immigration in Denmark

Prior to the First World War, there was relatively little immigration to Denmark, and those who did arrive came from other Nordic or Western countries, primarily as farmers or unskilled workers (Hedetoft, 2006a). In the 20th century, the two world wars displaced waves of refugees consisting of Jews, Germans, and Eastern Europeans fleeing violence, and many found

their way to Denmark (T. F. Jensen et al., 2017). A few decades later, rapid economic growth

produced a labor shortage which led to many "guest-workers" being brought to Denmark in the

late 1960s; these workers were primarily men from Turkey and Yugoslavia, though a small

number also came from other countries, namely Pakistan and Morocco (Hedetoft, 2006a;

Hussain, 2007). The 1970s and '80s then saw a great increase in the number of refugees moving

to Denmark, first from Chile and Vietnam and later from predominantly Muslim countries of the

Middle East and Africa (Iran, Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, Somalia) (Hedetoft, 2006a; Hussain,

2007). In the later half of the 20th century there was also an incline in immigration by family

members of refugees and guest workers, which significantly increased the number of immigrants

residing in Denmark. Despite the influx of recent immigrants, Denmark remains extraordinarily

homogenous. In a population of 5.8 million, an estimated 86% are ethnically Danish (Statistics

Denmark, 2021).

Immigration Policy

Danish immigration policy was extremely welcoming until the late 1980s, notably

following the rise of immigrants from non-European countries (Hedetoft, 2006a). Since then, the

Danish parliament has continued to introduce increasingly restrictive legislation that makes

obtaining citizenship, reuniting families, and accessing social assistance difficult (Andersen et

al., 2009; BBC News, 2021a; Edward Delman, 2016). The anti-immigration Danish People's

Party (established 1995) became one of Denmark's largest political parties in 2015 (T. F. Jensen

et al., 2017). Its members declare in no uncertain terms that they wish to discourage refugees

from seeking asylum in Denmark (Hedetoft, 2006a), and they are succeeding. There has been a

steady decline in the number of asylum applicants in Denmark, settling at a record low of just

over 1,500 in 2020- this in comparison to a peak of 21,000 in 2015 (Reuters in Copenhagen,

2021; The Local, 2021). The current Prime Minister, Mette Frederiksen (a member of the liberal

Social Democratic Party), hopes to reduce the number of applicants to zero (The Local, 2021),

and Denmark now "maintains one of Europe's harshest stances on immigration" (Reuters in

Copenhagen, 2021). These policies indicate the lack of governmental support minority

populations receive, and make clear to those who do make it to Denmark their undesirability.

Defining "Foreign"

In Denmark, the "registration of citizens on the basis of their religion and ethnicity" is

prohibited by law (Hussain, 2007). To compensate for this missing block of data, alternative

categories such as immigration status are used "as substitutes for the notion of race" (T. F. Jensen

et al., 2017). Official demographic data divides the population into three categories based on

"origin": (1) Danes, who are born to at least one parent who is a Danish citizen born in Denmark,

(2) Immigrants, who are born abroad and whose parents are not Danish Citizens, and (3)

Descendants, who are born in Denmark but neither of whose parents are Danish citizens or were

born in Denmark (Danmarks Statistik, 2021). Immigrants and Descendants are further divided

into those from Western countries and those from Non-Western countries (Danmarks Statistik,

2021).

The Cultural Denial of Racism

"Fundamentally there are no structures in Denmark that are discriminatory. Individual people or actions may be discriminatory, but we do not have a discriminatory education system, for instance."

The above quote- from a representative of the Ministry of Refugees, Immigrants and Integration, via the Documentary and Advisory Center on Racial Discrimination (2004, p. 4)- reflects the popular belief in Denmark: racism is rare in the public sphere and nonexistent at the institutional level. Where it does exist it is the product of an individual's prejudice, which materialized in a vacuum and cannot be attributed to influences in the larger environment. There is little reference to domestic discrimination and racism in news media- stories are written about a narrow selection of historical or international occurences, primarily concerning Black people in the United States. This reflects the common conceptualization of racism as a distant phenomenon, "isolated and exceptional, concerning certain ethnic groups, geographical places, and historical times" (Jacobsen et al., 2012, p. 69). Denmark's own colonialist history is neglected (Jacobsen et al., 2012) and replaced with a narrative that declares a longstanding cultural tradition of acceptance and harmony. Such attitudes serve to perpetuate inequality, for one cannot approach a problem they cannot see.

The Monocultural Agenda

"I could never under any circumstances live with (the idea of) a multicultural society in which the cultures are positioned equally."

- Karen Jespersen, former Minister of Integration, via Hussain, 2007, p. 36

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Despite a consistent denial of xenophobia in Denmark, most of the nation's leading

politicians, "from *all* agenda-setting parties" (emphasis mine), are starkly opposed to the

development of a multicultural society (Hedetoft, 2006b). The multiethnic composition of the

population is generally recognized and seemingly accepted in the political discourse- the

problem is not the *presence* of non-ethnic Danes, but the threat of their traditions infiltrating

Danish spaces. Implied is the perception of Danish culture as superior to others. Thus,

integration must logically be equated to the adoption of Danish values and conformation to its

norms. The goal of assimilation is reflected in Danish immigration policy: immigrants face a

three year "integration period" during which they are expected to learn Danish and "familiarize

themselves with Danish history, culture, and society" (Hedetoft, 2006a). While Denmark remains

multiethnic, there is every intention, reflected both in popular discourse and governmental

policy, to ensure that it does not become multicultural. This means that cultures are not regarded

equally, there is little dialogue between ethnic groups, and minority backgrounds are not valued

as a resource to society.

The Media's Construction of Muslims and Islam: How "Foreign" Came to Equal
"Muslim" and "Muslim" came to oppose "Danish"

The majority of non-Western immigrants and their descendants are Muslim, and they

constitute the largest of all minority faith communities in Denmark (Hussain, 2007). Research

indicates that, in Danish discourse, the terms "'ethnic minorities' and 'immigrants' are

unconsciously associated with Muslims", and that the Muslim identity is generally perceived as

directly opposing the typical self-image of "Danishness" (Hussain, 2007, p. 5). This

dichotomization between the Muslim and Danish identities may be attributable to high rates of

secularization in Denmark, which contribute to a general "skepticism towards religious practice"

(Hussain, 2007, p. 45). No matter the origin, it is a narrative that continues to be circulated and is

emboldened by the Danish media's representation of Muslim communities.

In a case study of Muslims and Islam in the Danish media, Jacobsen et al. (2012)

monitored four of Denmark's largest-selling newspapers, which varied in political and

ideological orientation, over a period of two months. 58% of the articles they studied "negatively

framed" Muslims and Islam and were "categorized as contributing to shaping hostility" (p. 61).

Across numerous studies of Danish media, researchers have found that "newsworthy" topics

regarding the Muslim community have been restricted to reports of criminality (Andreassen,

2005; Hussain, 2007), extremism (Jacobsen et al., 2012), and oppression (particularly of Muslim

women) (Andreassen, 2005; Jacobsen et al., 2012); claims of their being an economic burden

and threat to the welfare state (Andersen et al., 2009; T. F. Jensen et al., 2017); and assertions of

Islam endangering Democracy (Jacobsen et al., 2012). In 75% of the case study articles, Muslim

voices were entirely absent. From this, Jacobsen et al. (2012) gleaned that reporting

overwhelmingly consisted of imposed interpretations *about* the community, as opposed to

engaged dialogue *with* the community.

The Danish political discourse reflects that of the media. Discussions about how to

navigate cultural and religious differences "dominate the Danish political agenda" (Hedetoft,

2006a). Such debates were catalyzed by a particular controversy that erupted in the fall of 2005,

when the Danish Newspaper, Jyllands-Posten, published a series of cartoons depicting the

Prophet Muhammad. The cartoons were met with outrage, firstly because in the religion of Islam

it is considered blashphemous to visually depict the Prophet, and because they were brimming

with otherwise insulting content- one image showed the Prophet with a bomb in his turban (BBC

News, 2021b). The Danish government refused to take action, citing an inability to interfere with

the freedom of the press. Likewise, on the part of the Danish public, the scandal was received as

a threat to free speech (Hedetoft, 2006a), and their indignation came to overshadow the offense

perpetrated against the Muslim community.

A general perception of cultural incompatibility has emerged over decades (Hussain,

2007; T. F. Jensen et al., 2017) and created a unique opposition to Muslims out of all minority

groups in Denmark.

> An early indication of the ways in which prejudice about migrants has focused on
> Muslims came in 1995, with the publication of results from a national survey that found
> that over a third (37 per cent) of Danes did not want a Muslim for a neighbour and nearly
> two-thirds (64 per cent) did not want a close family member to marry a Muslim. When
> the adjective "Muslim" was replaced by the generalised expression "a person from
> another race" in these questions, the results changed significantly. Only 18 per cent of
> Danes were reluctant to have neighbours "from another race" and 36 per cent did not
> want to see a "person from another race" marry into their nearest family. (Hussain, 2007,
> p. 44).

The media is a significant player in the perpetuation of negative attitudes and stereotypes. It

presents the Muslim community as a homogenous entity, disregarding many cultural variations

(Andreassen, 2005; Hussain, 2007), and characterizes them as violent and oppressive (or

oppressed) people taking advantage of Danish resources. Considering the significant ethnic

homogeneity of Danish society, the media is an important source of information for many

individuals- it is how they come to construct an understanding of people that they do not socially

interact with or are not frequently exposed to, and in this case the media is "contribut[ing] to a

climate of intolerance and discrimination" and "legitimizing a prejudiced discourse" (Jacobsen et

al., 2012) which presents cultural differences as the primary obstacle to integration (Ter Wal, 2002).

The Education Sector

Pedagogical practice is constructed from the surrounding cultural values and attitudes. The background presented, regarding the perceptions of minority populations in Danish society, is necessary to understand the cultural processes that shape the structure of ECEC settings and to identify the obstacles for inclusive practice.

Defining "Foreign" in the Educational Context

As previously mentioned, the lack of available data regarding race and ethnicity in Denmark has led to the use of "proxy indicators" (Open Society Foundations, 2011), or indirect measures that are assumed to be representative of a variable that cannot be directly assessed. In the case of demographic data collection, the proxy indicator for race is country of origin. In the realm of education, the primary proxy indicator for minority children is language. In educational discourse, a dichotomy exists between "bilingual pupils" and "Danish pupils", where bilingual is primarily understood to mean: of Middle Eastern origin (Bundgaard & Gulløv, 2006)**.**

Minority Achievement

Contrary to the assumption that the Danish welfare state produces equal outcomes for all students, the statistical evidence has consistently suggested that Muslim students are encountering some obstacle(s) along the way. The OECD PISA survey (a comparative international assessment that measures student performance in reading, mathematics, and

science) has repeatedly reported lower levels of achievement for ethnic minority students as

compared to their Danish counterparts (Open Society Foundations, 2011); immigrants and

descendants have been found to drop out of school at higher rates; and they have the most

difficulty establishing themselves in the labor market (Hussain, 2007). Importantly, children born

and raised in Denmark (descendants) do not seem to be faring any better than the generation of

immigrants before them (Documentary and Advisory Center on Racial Discrimination, 2004). It

is important to determine the kinds of obstacles that minority individuals encounter and when

they first appear. Identifying barriers to achievement in early childhood and ways to mitigate

their impact might be protective of future development.

Decentralization

At the level of national educational policy, interculturalism (i.e. cross-cultural dialogue)

and diversity are not identified goals (Documentary & Advisory Center on Racial

Discrimination, 2004), and discrimination and racism are not addressed (T. G. Jensen et al.,

2012). Just as municipalities have reserved the right to determine how the central curriculum is

implemented in their institutions, they are left with the responsibility of determining if and how

to address educational disparities (Documentary & Advisory Center on Racial Discrimination,

2004). Initiatives are not centrally mandated, and thus the degree to which institutions actively

value diversity and are dedicated to diminishing inequality varies.

Early Childhood Education and Care: The Civilization Project

There is a dearth of data measuring discrimination and racism in Danish ECEC. The majority of existing research and discourse surrounding inclusion centers on grade school and higher education (Warming, 2011), and even these studies rest primarily on observations of "individual actors" as opposed to substantial collection of data (Documentary & Advisory Center on Racial Discrimination, 2004). The establishments of early childhood are important sites to study because they are typically a child's first encounter with social institutions, and they set the stage for future experiences. They are particularly significant for the study of identity construction because, as they enforce the standards of the dominant culture through processes of socialization (Gulløv, 2011) during momentous periods of development in young children.

Institutions mirror the society in which they are located (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2017). The goal of ECEC environments is to raise children who blend seamlessly into the normative patterns of society as adults. In other words, their work is that of ensuring the proper "civilization" of the next generation. The architects of these environments hold the power to "defin[e] and uphold…a culturally specific understanding of what constitutes [appropriate] behavior" (Bundgaard & Gulløv, 2006). Thus, by studying the arrangements of early childhood institutions, one can determine "the dominant cultural priorities and hoped-for outcomes" (Gulløv, 2011).

In the Danish context, the most highly prioritized outcome is arguably social coherence (Gulløv, 2011). Culturally, equality is roughly equated to sameness, and pedagogues actively attempt to minimize differences between children in order to avoid "divi[sion]" or "polariz[ation]" among the group (Gilliam, 2014). Difference is associated with conflict,

particularly in the case of Muslim identity, which is deemed inferior (as evidenced in the above

section: The Media's Construction of Muslims and Islam). As a result, diversity is stifled, and the

minority are expected to adapt to new values which reflect the social codes of a specific subset of

the population (i.e. Danes). Children whose families are from a different cultural background

may have trouble understanding the dominant social codes (Ringsmose et al., 2013), and/or must

contend with conflicting expectations between the ECEC institution and their homes (Gilliam &

Gulløv, 2017). The extent to which a child is able to adjust to unfamiliar codes directly

influences how socially competent they are perceived to be (Warming, 2011), and the high level

of trust and respect between pedagogues and children (a prominent feature of the Danish

pedagogical philosophy) depends on the child's ability to behave in "socially sanctioned" ways

(Gulløv, 2011). In this way, pedagogues' perceptions and strategies risk perpetuating social

inequality in the ECEC institution (B. Jensen, 2009), which carries important implications for the

development of positive self-concept in minority children.

Mother-tongue Education

A primary example of the Danish education system's ambition to socialize minority

children to "become Danish" is their promotion of the Danish language (Gulløv, 2011; Jakobsen,

2001; Open Society Foundations, 2011). The provision of mother-tongue education had been

required since the 1970s (Open Society Foundations, 2011). This changed in 2002, when the

provision of mother-tongue education for students from non-EU/EEA-countries was rendered

optional for municipalities (Horst & Gitz-Johansen, 2010; Hussain, 2007).

> In the explanatory memorandum to the law it is stated: The bill is a part of the
> government's object about all students getting the maximum professional and social
> benefit by the education in the Folkeskole [primary and lower secondary school]. Good

> Danish skills at the beginning of school is a condition for achieving this goal and with the bill the government wishes to *move the focus from mother tongue teaching to an intensified language stimulation in the pre-school age* [emphasis mine]. (Documentary and Advisory Center on Racial Discrimination, 2004, p. 11)

This policy change was clearly differentially impactful, as encouragement and financial support from the government was only withdrawn for the teaching of non-Western national languages. The abolition of the right to mother-tongue education is not supported by extensive international and domestic research, which indicates that "a strong mother tongue is the basis of a strong second language" (Documentary and Advisory Center on Racial Discrimination, 2004). This reality, compounded by the policy's narrow exclusion of specific language groups, makes clear the intention behind the legislation: to target a particular set of children who "need" extra guidance. T. G. Jensen et al (2012) argue that the categorization of "bilingual" students transforms sizable differences between children into a "technical problem" that can be "fixed"- the underlying goal being to dissolve the social category of "bilingual" altogether (Nielsen, 2021).

The Deprivation Paradigm

The most prevalent paradigm in Danish daycare centers, most often referred to as the deprivation paradigm, attributes difficulties of inclusion to "individual deficiencies among ethnic minorities" (e.g. language competence, knowledge of Danish culture and values, parents' upbringing of their children) (Hodes, 2020; Open Society Foundations, 2011). Minority children are thought of as "lacking" skills- as a result of "inferior cultural norms and values"- which they must be compensated for (Bundgaard & Gulløv, 2006; B. Jensen, 2009). In popular educational

discourse, difficulties concerning inclusion are attributed to 'problem behaviors' by individual children (Warming, 2011) who are misguided by culturally deprived parents. Cultural differences have been identified as a frustration to caretakers, who explain that they create barriers to efficient and effective communication with children and their parents (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2017; Warming, 2011).

Conversations with pedagogues illustrate an assumed collectivity among minority families, not dissimilar to the media's construction of the homogenous Muslim identity. In fact, most pedagogues do not have personal experiences of interaction with minority communities outside of work; they do not live in the same neighborhoods or encounter minority students and their families on informal bases (e.g. at the supermarket), which makes the "striking correlation" between their descriptions and the media's descriptions of minority community members especially notable (Bundgaard & Gulløv, 2006). Their perceptions, acquired primarily through media consumption, lead them to interpret children's behavior in a manner that aligns with the generalized portrayal of their community (e.g. a result of an aggressive temperament) and to assume a permanence to their identities. Contrarily, the behavior of Danish children is afforded explanations which reference the individual, temporally specific circumstances of their families (Bundgaard & Gulløv, 2006). To reduce explanations of discord to a generalized, stereotypical identity presumed accurate for an entire minority population, and to place the responsibility of reestablishing harmony on the minority individual blatantly ignores the "structural and interactional shaping of identity and behavior" (Warming, 2011, p. 10)- namely the labyrinth of social codes that children who straddle two worlds must navigate, their value in society all the while hanging in the balance.

Representation in ECEC Institutions

Deeply ingrained in the Danish social code is the concept of Janteloven (the Law of Jante), which, simply put, condemns the celebration of individual characteristics and achievements in favor of emphasizing collective prosperity. The first of the ten rules of Jante, originally consolidated in a novel by Danish-Norwegian author Aksel Sandemose (1933), reads: "Do not think you are anything special". The longstanding social contract prioritizes conformity and discourages individuals from putting themselves above others. Consistent with such an understanding of what ethical conduct entails is the correspondence of equality to uniformity, and thus the practice of minimizing differences between individuals is reinforced.

In ECEC institutions this manifests in a lack of representation of minority cultures in daily life. The curricula heavily accentuate Danish history and traditions, and excluded are the history and traditions of other cultures (Gilliam, 2014; Pihl et al., 2018).

> Despite the multitude of experiences present in the institution, activities do not focus on or make use of the vast resources several children have to offer in terms of knowledge of other languages, impressions from long holidays in their parents' country of origin, family networks in several countries and participation in festivals relating to other than the Christian religion. In general, then, the cultural, linguistic or religious experiences of the children are neither a theme in conversations or ad hoc activities, nor are they integrated as part of the educational programme. (Bundgaard & Gulløv, 2006, p. 152)

A Sense of Belonging and Social Worthiness

> "Children learn no matter what situation they are in, but the question is just what do they learn and what do they take with them from everyday pedagogical situations?"

> - Bente Jensen, 2008, p. 22

What I have described above are exclusionary mechanisms at work in the Danish ECEC system. The message children are receiving when (1) their mother-tongue is discarded, and (2) their culture is not represented in daily activity or conversation is that their stories are not interesting or valuable. When they are (3) regarded as deficient and (4) held to unfamiliar standards they learn that they are not good enough. The formation of warm, supportive relationships is undermined by a pedagogue's negative beliefs about a child's cultural background; and difficulty adapting to the social codes interferes with a child's ability to form positive, meaningful relationships with their peers (B. Jensen, 2008).

I argue that early experiences that yield low feelings of acceptance and respect have the potential to spiral into negative outcomes in future endeavors. For example, such experiences could induce the psychological phenomenon of self-fulfilling prophecy, in which low expectations from the environment are realized because the individual comes to align their behavior with an internalized negative belief. In other words, scarce optimism from their environment adversely influences one's self-expectation and motivation (Open Society Foundations, 2011; B. Jensen, 2008). The benefit of the social pedagogical tradition is that it arms children with social-emotional and regulatory tools that are necessary for success in academic settings; what it generally allows for is encounters with personal successes, failures and social negotiations which lead to a sense of competence in one's ability to navigate the world as an autonomous individual. However, when a core identity is protested, is it not logical to assume that one's self-concept is negatively swayed? Ultimately, marginalization negatively impacts self-esteem, motivation, and further social and cognitive development (B. Jensen, 2008).

Conclusion

The two major camps of educational philosophy in early childhood are (1) school readiness, which supports early instruction and the explicit development of academic skills in preparation for classroom environments and (2) social pedagogy, which maintains the best way to support positive academic and life outcomes is to prioritize holistic development and place greater emphasis on children's social and emotional wellbeing. Research has increasingly dismissed the validity of stark dichotomization between the two traditions, instead indicating a profound interconnection between socioemotional development and academic performance. This project argues that the social pedagogical approach to early childhood is ultimately supportive of academic achievement because it allows children space to develop the skills that are necessary for successful classroom participation and increases the likelihood of their being motivated to earnestly engage in academics by instilling positive self-concepts.

Danish ECEC is a prime example of the social pedagogical approach. A central pedagogical curriculum identifies the values which are fundamental to the configuration of Denmark's ECEC institutions, namely: democracy, autonomy, trust, and community. Free play and time in nature were chosen for exploration as two central characteristics of life in a Danish establishment because together they reflect all of the curricular goals and illustrate the benefits that can be drawn from this pedagogical method. Through free play, children practice inhibiting their automatic impulses, develop an awareness of others' perspectives, and learn the boundaries of productive social interaction. Play scenes can also be safe spaces where children can process major life events and experiment with alternative outcomes. Likewise, distancing oneself from the hustle and bustle of urban life in nature provides a calming space of reflection. Nature also

provides opportunities for children to exercise autonomy that supports the development of responsible risk assessment and management. Most importantly is the apparent ability of nature to level the playing field for children who are disadvantaged in the institutional setting.

The Danish educational system and the welfare state as a whole are widely celebrated for their attention to individual wellbeing. The expectation is that Denmark's extensive welfare system has successfully leveled the playing field and cultivated equal opportunities and outcomes for all. While many do enjoy a relief from anxieties as the majority of their needs are taken care of, many others live uneasily- disadvantaged academically, economically and professionally, and uncomfortable socially. The demographic makeup of Danish society allows for the study of how high levels of ethnic homogeneity *uniquely* and *systematically* produce inequality between ethnic groups.

Culturally, instances of racism and discrimination, assumed to be rare, are construed as acts of individual malice that have nothing to do with the larger structure of society. However, the reality is that one minority group is severely marginalized in Danish society. To be Muslim has come to be understood as being in direct opposition of Danish values. This perception is bolstered by prejudiced media coverage and rests on stereotypes of cultural deprivation. The cultural equivalence of equality to sameness, coupled with a superiority complex propels Danes to demand that it be their ways that are adopted by others. Such narratives have been built over several decades, and as such have become deeply ingrained and accepted in Danish society as truths. Pedagogues then, consciously or unconsciously, carry these cultural beliefs to work with them, where they affect their interactions and relationships with children. Minority children are perceived as culturally deprived and are expected to conform to dominant social codes.

Presumably, social pedagogy would be highly effective in promoting inclusivity in a multicultural society because the philosophy values the interests and development of the individual child. However, the benefits of the social pedagogical tradition are likely undermined for minority children in Denmark by the culture of assimilation. Children who have difficulty adapting to unfamiliar social codes have trouble creating meaningful relationships with peers and are reprimanded by the authoritative figures of the ECEC establishment (i.e. pedagogues). Additionally, children whose cultural backgrounds go unrepresented in life at ECEC institutions are not seeing their identities valued as a resource. These are obstacles to feelings of competence, worthiness, acceptance and belonging to the greater community, all of which may influence their willingness to exert effort in future environments similarly dominated by the majority culture.

The first step to solving a problem is recognizing and acknowledging its existence. Thus, it will take an immense cultural shift to begin addressing discrimination in Danish institutions. One way to get people's attention is to provide substantial empirical evidence of the phenomenon. This strategy could especially draw the attention of policy makers who are invested in international competition. If the benefits of the system are being undermined, it will be reflected in the country's comparative rankings on scales such as those produced by the OECD. Knowledge of where economic growth is stifled and how it may be prevented is extremely valuable and may kickstart demands for change from the most influential powers.

Most existing studies are based on subjective reports from very small samples that do not center minority voices, and research is particularly scarce in early childhood settings. Early childhood is important because it sets the tone for future development. Experiences with majority-dominated practices in ECEC will impact a child's perception of other institutional

environments (e.g. a classroom) before they even experience them and influence their motivation to learn and participate in such environments.

This project described how larger cultural beliefs contribute to marginalization in ECEC settings (i.e. lack of representation; perceived incompetence). These are processes that have been identified in existing research, and they should continue to be explored in order to evidence replication across larger scales. Future research should also strive to answer the following questions: how does marginalization in early childhood affect a child's perception of themselves? Does it change the way they interact with their environment- are they less inclined to participate, socially and academically? Are these impacts long-lasting? International theory and research suggests the answers to these questions are that children do internalize negative beliefs about themselves, leading to diminished motivation and lower levels of comfortability in their environment. The longitudinal angle is important because it can indicate if early prevention is more substantially protective against future disadvantage. The lack of recognition of exclusionary practices at all levels of society severely impedes progress. Hopefully, more extensive research can illuminate how preposterous the cultural denial of marginalization is. The consideration of discriminatory mechanisms in future reviews of pedagogical practice is a necessary first step to change.

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