Child well-being in early childhood education and care during COVID-19: Child sensitivity in small, fixed groups

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Abstract
The article explores child well-being in Danish early childhood education and care (ECEC) during the time of COVID-19. A phased reopening of Denmark occurred in spring 2020 under strict health guidelines. Two ECEC institutions were followed first-hand to observe the impact of the pandemic on pedagogy and child well-being. Observations and interviews were conducted with follow-up interviews and an online survey a year later. The findings suggest that the pandemic caused pedagogues to work in a more child-sensitive way with elevated staff/child ratios and children in small, fixed groups; however, child well-being was not negatively affected, despite the acute situation.

KEYWORDS
child sensitivity, child well-being, COVID-19, ECEC pedagogy, small groups

INTRODUCTION
Child well-being in Danish early childhood education and care (ECEC) provision has been intensively studied and debated since 2007, when well-being was incorporated into the Danish Act on ECEC stating that the overall aim with ECEC should be to promote children's well-being in line with learning, development and formation (Ministry of Children and Education, 2020).
Well-being ties in with local and situated understandings and ideals about a good life and of what it means to fare well (Ben-Arieh & Frønes, 2011), and Danish professionals are guided by an ideal of a happy, active and attuned child in their sensory orientations towards individual children's well-being (Koch, 2012). During the last 14 years, child well-being has been increasingly approached as a phenomenon to be documented and acted upon. State-implemented tools have been introduced to systematically assess and categorise the state of well-being of all children, though critics point to the tensions involved in applying standardised, individualised and decontextualised approaches that translate a professional's lived experiences and sensory orientations into abstract facts (Houmøller, 2018).

This article explores subjective child well-being in Danish ECEC during the time of COVID-19, with a focus on adult sensations of child well-being as embodied and phenomenological knowledge (Koch, 2012, 2018) and with reference to ideals of a good life in ECEC as expressed in the strengthened pedagogical curriculum (Ministry of Children and Education, 2020).

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic. The same day, Denmark announced the closure of all day care facilities and educational institutions. Denmark was one of the first countries in Europe to announce a lockdown, but was also the first to reopen its childcare—probably because nearly all children attend an ECEC setting, and most parents with a child under 6 years of age are employed outside the home.1

A phased reopening of Denmark after the first wave of the pandemic began on 15 April 2020 through guidelines that prioritised ECEC, special education and school-leaving examination candidates.2 Children (3–6 years old) were encouraged to return to ECEC institutions on 15 April, and children (0–2 years old) on 16 April. Throughout Denmark, the children who arrived at ECEC were met by a very different daily schedule than the one they left behind. The reopening was announced by the government a week before it became a reality. Over the long Easter weekend, all Danish ECEC institutions made the necessary logistical and physical preparations. The usual pedagogical routines and practices had to be immediately set on standby. Guidelines from the Danish Health Authority required ECEC settings to reconsider the usual pedagogical practices to reduce social contacts and control the spread of infection. Thus, in all Danish institutions, the standards of hygiene were increased, handwashing and cleaning intensified, elements that could present a challenge to daily cleaning were removed and the selection of toys was reduced. Parents were no longer allowed physical access to the institutions and had to drop off their children at the gate. Children had to be organised into small, fixed groups of 3–6 under the supervision of the same few professionals. The institutions had to employ more staff members and allocate pedagogical activities to separate zones, preferably in an outdoor environment. This allowed staff to move their small groups of children between spaces without excessive exposure. The Danish COVID-19 guidelines were continuously updated according to the situation and the latest knowledge (Sundhedsstyrelsen, 2021).

Before the reopening, child experts and parents showed great scepticism.3 The concerns included whether the pedagogues would be able to secure the children's subjective well-being and whether the children would suffer harm either due to the risk of infection or to the human consequences of the strict rules. The pedagogical staff was also worried about the outcome of the preparations and were anxious to see what would happen when the children arrived and noticed the changed daily practice.4 The present study was initiated to follow the reopening first-hand and investigate whether the reality lived up to the negative expectations. The aim of the study was to explore how the pandemic affected pedagogical practice and child well-being in Danish ECEC after the first wave of COVID-19. Danish pedagogues had to manoeuvre between the strict guidelines and the needs of the children. They were involuntarily forced to rethink pedagogical
routines and their clarity. Against expectations, it seems that the acute circumstances characterised by uncertainty and increased external control did not negatively affect the pedagogy or child well-being. This paper contributes knowledge about how it is possible to practice ECEC during a pandemic without compromising child well-being.

BACKGROUND

Theoretical framework

Child well-being in ECEC

This study considers well-being as a multidimensional and holistic concept that can refer to both subjective feelings and experiences as well as to living conditions. Well-being is related to the fulfilment of desires, to the balance of pleasure and pain and to self-fulfilment and development. It can refer to individuals as well as to societies and to trends as well as to states (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014). Child well-being can be studied from many different angles (e.g. Ben-Arieh et al., 2014; Koch, 2012; Manning-Morton, 2014). Well-being ties in with local and situated understandings and ideals about a good life and what it means to farewell (Ben-Arieh & Frønes, 2011). Danish ideals about a good life in ECEC can be recognised in the strengthened pedagogical curriculum introduced in Denmark in 2020 (Ministry of Children and Education, 2020), which mentions well-being 63 times in connection with key elements such as play, communities of children, parent cooperation, happiness, safety, intimacy, appreciative relationships and children’s perspectives as a point of departure. The special interest of this paper is to approach child well-being in ECEC through adult approximations and sensations of the subjective well-being of children as embodied and phenomenological knowledge (Austin & Halpin, 1988; Koch, 2018). Knowledge can be gained from reading children’s bodies by bringing all forms of cognition with refined sensitivity towards a child’s bodily signals (sensations, moods and emotions), which contribute insight into how a child experiences the world (Koch, 2012, 2018).

Research on COVID-19 in ECEC

All around the world, the COVID-19 outbreak has led to the closure or restricted opening of societal and EC services. Authorities, parents and childhood professionals have responded to the COVID-19 challenges of social distancing and increased hygiene in different ways: by transitioning to online education or distance teaching, by preparing government pandemic guidelines and national crisis action plans, by sending staff to infection control courses and by producing local disinfection protocols (Atiles et al., 2021; Barnett et al., 2021; Campos and Vieira, 2021; Samuelsson et al., 2020). Children in many countries were deprived of the ability to meet and play with friends, were isolated in their homes and were exposed to home schooling and parental distress (Mochida et al., 2021; O’Keeffe & McNally, 2021). The pandemic was found to have a wide variety of consequences for children’s well-being, education and care (Campos and Vieira, 2021; Heikkilä et al., 2020). The children’s own experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown were studied through a variety of methods, such as online family questionnaires, child interviews and children’s narratives. These studies point to stress, anxiety and impaired learning in the wake of the pandemic, but also focused on unexpected positive
yields, such as improved family relationships, child adaptiveness, child autonomy and parent-to-parent solidarity (Børns Vilkår, 2020; Heikkilä et al., 2020; Mantovani et al., 2021; Pascal & Bertram, 2021).

In Denmark, several studies were initiated to examine the COVID-19 situation in public ECEC institutions, collecting data either through a questionnaire survey or by interviews with informants (see Ellegaard & Bayer, 2021). Some of the investigations have been reported on organisational websites or in dissemination articles, primarily in the Danish language (Børns Vilkår, 2020; EVA, 2020; Hirani et al., 2020; Koch, 2020; Qvortrup et al., 2020). The studies describe the consequences of COVID-19 in Danish ECEC settings from the perspectives of professionals, leaders, families or children—pointing to several pedagogical challenges but also to protective factors and positive aspects discovered during the crisis. The addition of the present article provides a first-hand report from the initial days of reopening and a return visit a year later, supplemented with an attempt to compile and elaborate on some of the Danish insights reported elsewhere in the hope of contributing to similar discussions within the international research community.

General characteristics of Danish ECEC

Almost 60% of Danish ECEC staff are educated pedagogues with BA degrees (Jensen, 2017). The pedagogues are also the leaders of ECEC centres, which are characterised by a relatively flat leadership structure (Jensen, 2018). The Danish/Nordic ECEC tradition is strongly inspired by the German philosopher Friedrich Fröbel (1782–1852), who worked with young children and was well known for his work in promoting early development through play. Some key characteristics of the Danish/Nordic ECEC culture are a homelike atmosphere, informality, a personal relationship between the pedagogues and children, the children’s freedom to play and influence everyday life and a positive attitude towards all kinds of outdoor activities. A central value is an informal collaboration with parents, who are expected to spend time and engage in informal dialogue upon the delivery and collection of children at the school, which helps in supporting a positive transition between the home and day care setting (Ringsmose & Kragh-Müller, 2017).

The organisation of Danish ECEC settings vary, but under normal circumstances (pre-COVID-19), an average nursery group consists of 13 children aged 0–2 years. The average kindergarten group comprises 20.9 children aged 3–5 years. In most ECEC institutions, the children are divided into smaller groups for an average of 1.5 h during the morning, but not during the afternoon. Most kindergarten children spend the afternoon on the outdoor playground. Eight out of 10 staff members reported that before COVID-19 in February 2020, they were not responsible for a specific group during outdoor playtime. Pedagogical staff also reported being only partly able to follow the well-being of the children from their own group during outdoor playtime before COVID-19 (Glavind & Pade, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

Two municipal ECEC institutions situated in the suburbs of a major Danish city agreed to participate in the study. Both were age-integrated centres for children just over 6 months up to school entry age, which is the most common type of provision, accounting for just over 63% of all centre-based settings in Denmark (Schreyer & Oberhuemer, 2017).
The inquiry was framed as ethnographic fieldwork (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995) with reference to phenomenology and reflective lifeworld research (Dahlberg et al., 2008). The empirical data originate from participant observations, three qualitative semi-structured interviews performed with two pedagogues and three pedagogical leaders in two ECEC institutions (phase 1) and two follow-up interviews again a year later (phase 2). Two researchers followed the nursery departments from 16 April 2020 with a special focus on the reception of children (0–3 years old). Fieldwork continued for 6 days in total during the first 2 weeks of the reopening, preferably outdoors: 2 days in one ECEC setting and 4 days in another. A semi-structured qualitative interview was performed with one leader in the second week and a qualitative focus group interview with two leaders in the third week. A focus group interview was performed with two pedagogues on 18 May, exactly 4 weeks and 2 days after the reopening. A year later, in April 2021, two pedagogues were interviewed again.

Participant observations were done while they were participating in daily activities in the two ECEC institutions, preferably on the playground, but also occasionally in the classrooms, on excursions and in other activities that took place during the day. During fieldwork, we paid special attention to interactions between professionals and children, child–child interactions and signs of child well-being, such as smiles, laughter, openness, self-confidence, enjoyment, vitality, participation and play (Koch, 2012; Laevers et al., 2012).

Informers were interviewed in a semi-structured manner using an interview guide with descriptive questions about changes in pedagogical practice and management, children’s immediate responses to reopening, parental cooperation and reactions among the staff—while encouraging the informers to provide narratives from their practice to support their answers. Also, reflective questions were asked about children’s well-being, play, friendships, child perspectives on the change of routines, inequality among children, future wishes and potential learnings from the COVID-19 experiment.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed into written text. At the end of each day, field notes were expanded in the process of transferring them from handwriting to digital form (Emerson et al., 2011).

When data collection in phase 1 had formally ended, a content analysis was performed to deduce core themes, consistencies and meanings in the qualitative material and identify patterns and themes in the collected data (Patton, 2002). The interview transcripts and field notes from phases 1 and 2 were all coded and assigned to one of four categories (entry, organisation, pedagogy and parents), distinguishing whether they were primarily concerned with the arrival and reception of the children at the beginning of the day, the new and unfamiliar organisation of the children in small groups and the fixed zoned space, the significance of the different situation to the pedagogy and learning activities and implications of the reopening restrictions to the collaboration with parents, respectively.

Two sensitising concepts (Hoornaard, 1997) were derived using the participants’ or researchers’ first-hand language to guide further analysis as interpretive devices. The sensitising concepts were child sensitivity and small groups. The first kept reappearing in the researcher’s field notes. The second was mentioned repeatedly by the informants as a special feature of the reopening. The sensitising concepts were later unfolded with reference to theory regarding the importance of child-sensitive interactions and small-group pedagogy to child well-being, using theory as inspiration (metaphorically, a can opener) to understand the empirical data (Høyer, 2007).

In March–April 2021, a follow-up online survey was distributed through a social media platform to evaluate how ECEC staff members throughout Denmark would describe and value the changes in ECEC practice during the previous 11 months in relation to each of the four categories.
A total of 232 ECEC staff members, primarily pedagogues with BA degrees, responded to the online questionnaire and shared some of the professional insights they had gained during the first year of the pandemic. Their answers supported the findings from the qualitative study.

**Ethical considerations**

The study was performed in compliance with ethical standards and data anonymization. The pedagogical staff provided informed consent to the participant observations and interviews. As the studied children were minors, informed consent was obtained from their parents.

**FINDINGS**

**Reopening spring 2020**

Field notes and interviews emphasised that the first days of the reopening were characterised by uncertainty and adjustments, but also how the pedagogues and children seemed genuinely happy to meet again. To the observers, the staff members appeared ready to face the challenges and create security and well-being for the children in the changed contextual setting. The children showed signs of joy being reunited with both the pedagogues and their friends. One boy explained, *'When I was at home, I watched so many films. I watched films, and films and films ... here in my kindergarten, I can play with Laura, John, David and Julia ... and we are allowed to hug each other, if we are in the same group, also the pedagogue ... if otherwise, one gets corona.'* The children were quick to decode and accept the new system of *how to go to kindergarten*. Extra staff members provided plenty of hands to maintain the group restrictions and approached children and parents with added attention to hygiene and infection control and their normal attention to the children’s comfort and social well-being. The pedagogues’ usual routines of ongoing collegial sparring throughout the day changed. Staff meetings and shared lunch breaks were cancelled to avoid close physical contact among individuals. Nevertheless, creativity seemed to flourish: *'One Friday, all the small groups met in the woods. We had been practising singing the same song, and we created a big choir singing out the song together while keeping the physical distance between groups. I felt that it strengthened our sense of belonging to a big important community despite COVID-19’* (quote from interview).

Four different categories of findings relating to *entry, organisation, pedagogy or parents* are presented in the following section.

**Parents**

We have gained more peace in our work from the fact that the parents do not enter the institution. Under usual circumstances, it is not possible to control when parents enter the cloakroom. It can be very disturbing to stop and talk if you are busy with something else. Now, under reopening, we know roughly when parents arrive, and we might start getting the child ready and prepare ourselves regarding what messages to give. Under normal circumstances, you may not have been in contact with
that child all day and are not able to answer the simple question: How has my child been today? But now we know 100% about the entire day. We can tell much more. The parents I have been in contact with, they have probably received 20 times as much information about their children's everyday life as they would normally get ... and all sorts of funny stories about what we've made.

(Pedagogue interviewed about reopening experiences)

Before reopening, the pedagogues told us that many parents had been extremely worried about sending their children back into ECEC settings. The fact that they would not be allowed to enter the institution made them fear that they would not be able to feel the atmosphere in the ECEC setting and experience their child's mood and commitment while in day care. Some parents sent their children to day care right away—according to the pedagogues, this could either be because they were not especially anxious or they upheld a critical societal function and needed to go to work no matter what. Other parents tried in many ways to manage childcare privately to keep their children away. An ECEC leader explained how the pedagogues started contacting parents by telephone to convince them that everything was under control. They managed to calm down parents who were either very worried or did not show up and convinced most of them to bring their children back to the ECEC institution:

All the fuss about having to start up again has not been the children's drama ... not at all. The kindergarten children have been SO excited to come back after reopening. There has been a form of social hunger that manifested itself in many of them. They are mega-happy to get back to their friends in an ECEC setting they are comfortable with.

(Pedagogue interviewed about reopening after COVID-19)

Pedagogy

If I think back to an ordinary morning, then I had to be in control of all sorts of things at the same time. I usually initiated several play activities here and there, but when a parent entered the room, I had to move my focus to talk to him. Then a colleague would arrive from the nursery to deliver a message; thus, my attention was all the time—up, down, up, down. But now, after reopening, I arrive at work. Then I know I have my own group of children, and we stay in this zone. And the children can reach me every time they need anything, and I am able to interact and be at the forefront to avoid a potential conflict. We can practice pedagogy in an entirely different way, because now we observe everything. We can improvise learning activities that connect directly to the children's initiatives or attention now, and we have time for contemplation together with the children. We can translate the rules of games to those who might otherwise have a hard time finding their way into a game. We can avert conflicts before they even start.

(Pedagogue interviewed about reopening experiences)

The COVID-19 restrictions were found to affect pedagogy in several unexpected ways. Grouping the children into small units resulted in more concentration and the retention of children with
outward attention: ‘We discovered that pedagogically, the fixed grouping led some children to react like: ‘I do not want to stay here’. But yes, you’re here, and you MUST be with this group of children. And those children who usually refuse and just leave when they meet a social challenge, they must stay no matter what. They do not necessarily have to play, but they have to stay in the zone, instead of disturbing another best friend in his/her play somewhere else’ (quote from interview). Another significance of the different situation for pedagogy and learning activities was that a greater number of staff members in combination with continuity throughout the week from the same pedagogues working with the same 3–5 children allowed for a unique sensitivity towards the children’s initiatives and experiences. The pedagogues told how they were no longer disturbed by a wide variety of other inputs from colleagues and parents, but were together with the same few children throughout the day and were therefore able to practice pedagogy in a much more focused and child-centred way.

Organisation

John (three years of age) lies in the sand in the sun and looks under the red-and-white plastic strip into the zone next to his, where the youngest nursery children are playing. Then he crawls under the strip on his stomach. His pedagogue Noah calls him back. “John, you must stay in here!” Noah is close by, and John tacitly accepts and finds his way back into his own zone. A little later, he lies on the “right side” and looks underneath the strip. Noah says, “So what, John? Are you enjoying yourself in the sun?”

(Field note from the second day of reopening)

Not only were parents no longer allowed to walk their children through the kindergarten door, but social distancing also recommended a two-metre space between each individual when seated, and in ECEC settings, the recommended floor space was doubled. This meant that institutions could only accept half of the children indoors, whereas outdoor spaces were used more intensively. In the two field institutions, plastic tape, fences or ropes with festival flags were used to block off inside and outdoor spaces into smaller, more manageable areas to help control how many children were gathered at any given time. The children accepted the different organisation after only a few days: ‘You are allowed to stay here, and you are allowed to play with these three or four children ... in a couple of days, the children just accepted the new situation. You enter a room with three, not 20, possible choices, and it helped many children to focus and start to play right away. Also, they took advantage of the few toys that were there to the extreme. The first day, one child wanted to play with a friend in another zone, and he immediately became a little upset by realising that he was not allowed. But apart from a few exceptions, the children were quick to adjust’ (quote from interview).

Many activities now took place in an outdoor environment, either at the playground or on trips away from the institutional setting. The pedagogues explained how the excursions were different from before the lockdown. Rather than taking trips in huge groups heading towards a predefined site, they now did more informal trips with smaller groups of children. The time schedule was loose with plenty of time to stop, watch and discuss things along the way; a pedagogue explained: ‘Now, a trip with only five children feels completely different. It can take forever to walk the 500 metres down to the wood because we stop all the time. We have to look at everything, and we have all the
time we could ever want in the whole world ... maybe four hours until we are heading back home ... which makes it very easy to follow the children's initiatives throughout the day.’

Entry

Outside the institution, a woman approaches the gate with a toddler on her hip. Another woman leaves a car together with a girl about three years of age. Upon seeing each other, they stop, keep their distance and line up, patiently waiting. A pedagogue approaches the gate to welcome the newcomers one at a time. The girl presses her body against her mother to signal that she is not ready to say goodbye. The pedagogue walks away and sits down on a bench. Then, after a short while, the pedagogue extends her hand towards the girl, who immediately crosses the gate towards the pedagogue to go sit on her lap. They sit together and chat. The mother participates in a short dialogue across the fence until she waves goodbye. The pedagogue and the girl walk into the building. I hear them talk about going to wash their hands.

(Field note from the first day of reopening)

The informers narrated that, to their surprise, it was not especially stressful for the children to enter the institution without their parents. The children did not seem unsatisfied with being dropped off by the gate; a pedagogue narrated: ‘Actually, there seems to be less crying than before, and if children cry, it is those who arrive with a pacifier in their mouth and always experience a hard time during transition.’ The children appeared to take more responsibility when they were not accompanied by a parent. There seemed to be less fuss saying goodbye, a pedagogue explained, ‘I saw this little boy, three years of age, arrive with his small backpack. He says goodbye to his parents at the gate, is escorted into the institution by the gatekeeper and now he stands there at the corridor waiting for his own pedagogue to pick him up. But then he starts by himself. He opens the refrigerator door, though he can barely reach. He struggles to balance his lunchbox onto a shelf. He knows the routine; now he is the one to do it, and there is no one to disturb or take over.’

A general perception is that the non-negotiable COVID-19 structure provided more predictability and a greater sense of security for many children upon arrival than previously. The children were met by a pedagogue; they were guided into the institution and past a sink to wash their hands while singing a ‘washing hands’ song. Their pedagogue then tells them where to play and with whom: ‘The child is no longer in a limbo of ‘What should I do today?’ because the structure is very clear, and you HAVE said goodbye. You’re not sad that you must wave goodbye again and again. The children show an independence I did not imagine. It’s MY kindergarten. It’s ME who attends the kindergarten, and it is the parents’ need that the children wave goodbye’ (quote from interview).

Spring 2021—1 year later

A year later, in spring 2021, the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic was fading out in Denmark. Since April 2020, all ECEC institutions had been exempted from lockdown and continued to practice under slightly changed restrictions from the health authorities than in the
previous year. In some regions of the country, everyday life in ECEC institutions was almost back to normal. In other regions, ECEC restrictions were temporarily tightened depending on the local infection rate. In all Danish ECEC institutions, increased hygiene standards and physical distancing were included as a natural routine. In many ECEC settings, the adult/child rate approached the same levels as before COVID-19.

In April 2021, a total of 232 ECEC staff members throughout Denmark, primarily pedagogues with BA degrees, responded to an online questionnaire regarding their experiences working under COVID-19 conditions during the previous year. Most of the respondents answered positively when asked how they liked working in small groups of 1–12 children rather than the usual 12–24 children in a group. They mentioned mental presence, more time, better provision of care, stronger adult–child relationships, more calmness and immersion as experienced consequences of the smaller group size. About 83% stated that they had been far more mentally present while working with children in smaller groups. Also, 79.9% answered that the small group organisation led to better quality pedagogical work in providing care and supporting child well-being. At the same time, the answers pointed to a disadvantage of working in small groups was more vulnerability to pressure. It was not easy to perform well unless you had a high staff/child ratio, and it was necessary to find a clever way to compensate for less contact between colleagues in providing the professional reflection and sparing needed to practice well. The responses also showed how parental cooperation was challenged under COVID-19. About 60% answered that the quality of their parental cooperation had been negatively affected by a lack of daily contact. Especially in relation to new parents, 59.6% reported that the relationship with parents had remained unchanged, and approximately 65% reported that the changed conditions for parental cooperation did not impact the children in a negative way. The responses also indicated that creating new ways of involving parents may continue after COVID-19. A total of 65.5% stated that they had gained experience during COVID-19 that will be considered in future parent collaboration—for example, in the form of text messaging and online meetings, as well as changes in general delivery and collection routines.

The answers from the questionnaires were further emphasised and confirmed in re-interviews with two pedagogues, pointing to what experiences they wanted to bring forward in future ECEC pedagogy. The organisation of children in smaller groups was noted as an important point: ‘We will try to hold on to the small groups in some form and take turns with a small group, while the rest are together with the remaining children once in a while ... but of course, it is a bigger challenge than a year ago.’ They also unanimously pointed to the advantage of keeping the organisation in separate zones: ‘We will keep the division of the playground and have decided to no longer stay all together in the big common room as we used to do. It was really a screaming chaos, so I hope for us to bring this awareness into the future.’

CHILD WELL-BEING IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

Throughout the analytical processing, two interconnected points were constant. One was the benefit of working with children in small, fixed groups for child well-being. The other was the fact that, during the pandemic, the pedagogues experienced far more possibilities in the practice of child-sensitive pedagogy—because of the small groups, there was a higher staff/child ratio and fewer general disturbances. The informants repeatedly reported how the limited contact with parents and colleagues made it easier to interact with the children as individuals, focus on one task at a time and include the children’s preoccupations and initiatives in the pedagogical activities.
Small, fixed groups

Not only this study, but also other COVID-19 research published in the Danish language, point to the fact that experiences in ECEC institutions during the pandemic have led to rethinking the possibilities and challenges of organising children in small, fixed groups (Børns Vilkår, 2020; EVA, 2020; Ellegaard & Bayer, 2021; Mortensen et al., 2020; Petersen, 2021).

A study by Petersen (2021) concluded that the division of children into smaller groups during COVID-19 promotes their emotional and social well-being. The children experienced more space and better relationships with each other, and reluctant children appeared happier in attending the ECEC institution. Also, they found more confidence in inviting other children to play rather than having to wait for an invitation. Children in more vulnerable positions were reported to benefit especially from the changed COVID-19 environment, which was characterised by space, calmness and fewer choices of toys and friends in combination with a smaller number of disturbances and closer contact with the same adult staff members (EVA, 2021; Petersen, 2021). The general advantages of working in small groups in early childhood education are not new. A Danish study argued that quality in ECEC settings depends on staff/child ratio, number of children in a group and the amount of space per child. Many children in a small physical space creates more opportunities for conflicts among them. A low staff/child ratio promotes children to be more socially and positively oriented towards their peers and too many children in a group complicates the development of a positive contact between each child and the pedagogue (Ringsmose & Kragh-Müller, 2015). A Norwegian study supports the idea that behaviour problems and difficulties for children in developing their language occur in large child groups (Skalická et al., 2015). A recent review of the impact of adult/child ratio and group size in ECEC settings summarises that when the adult/child ratio is increased (fewer children per adult) and group sizes are decreased, the number of interactions between each child and an adult increases, and the nature of the exchanges becomes more stimulating and nurturing for the child (Dalgaard et al., 2020).

Child-sensitive pedagogy

In general, pedagogues working with fewer children in a group tend to be more sensitive, responsive, warm and encouraging towards them; the pedagogues in these situations have been found to exhibit more positive affects and provide more varied activities for the children. In contrast, when working with big groups, pedagogues tend to become more focused on managing and controlling the children’s behaviour, exert more negative control and use less dialogue or playful interaction (Dalgaard et al., 2020). The professionals’ degree of openness and sensitive empathy in what the children communicate (verbally and non-verbally) is crucial for including children’s perspectives in pedagogical work, which is considered of great importance according to the Danish Day Care Act. Danish pedagogues, as a professional group, are fundamentally competent in meeting children in a sensitive, responsive and improvising way (Koch & og Jørgensen, 2018). Pedagogues read children’s bodies using what Koch (2012) calls their bodily eye, with reference to the language used by the noted body phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In doing so, the adult brings all forms of cognition into play with refined sensitivity towards a child’s bodily signals (sensations, moods and emotions), which contribute insight into how a child experiences the world. The pedagogue’s own body is used as a reflection base in the interpretation of the children’s bodily signals and makes it possible to put into words some communication processes that otherwise lie as bodily and silent knowledge. Moods, tones and visual impressions are sensed
not only through intellectual interpretation, but also with the whole body’s inherent experience (Koch, 2012). Also, Svinth (2013) describes how competent pedagogues ideally switch continuously back and forth between their own and the child’s perspective to create knowledge about the children’s experiences.

**Child well-being**

The elevated staff/child ratio and organisation in small, fixed groups during the COVID-19 pandemic allowed pedagogues to encounter children in a far more attentive and child-sensitive way than under the usual circumstances, despite the acute situation. During the pandemic, the pedagogical staff experienced the capability of focusing far more on the children’s active participation and individual well-being than previously. The increased external control did not seem to affect the pedagogy in a negative way or the quality of the educational efforts. The parents were no longer physically allowed in the institution; it was not only experienced as a shortcoming because it also provided a calmer environment, with fewer interruptions and closer pedagogue–child interactions. Because the structural changes were not negotiable, the pedagogues reported that it was much easier to concentrate on practising the values that are central to the Nordic ECEC: social learning and growth through relationships, child-centredness, outdoor life and play. The same values are seen again in the strengthened pedagogical curriculum as central to child well-being.

The special interest of this research was to approach child well-being in ECEC through the sensations of the subjective well-being of children as embodied and phenomenological knowledge gained from reading their bodies and bringing all forms of cognition with refined sensitivity towards the child’s bodily signals (sensations, moods and emotions), which contribute insight into how a child experiences the world. This also applies to pedagogues working in ECEC. Manning-Morton (2014) emphasises time, mindfulness and well-being in the here and now as a cross-cutting theme for child well-being in the early years. Based on experiences from the UK LMU/NCB Well-being Project, she argues that an important aspect of listening carefully to young children is to tune in and be sensitive not only to what children say, but also to how they say it. Time and an organisation that allows for peace and contemplation can help adult professionals see what perhaps they might otherwise miss about young children’s well-being (Manning-Morton, 2014, p. 21).

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

The COVID-19 experiences from Danish ECEC settings speak to an ongoing public debate in Denmark about ECEC quality, pedagogue professionalism and politically defined standards for a minimum number of staff members per child.

The study manifests how the core values of Danish early childhood pedagogy remain deeply rooted in a pedagogical culture. In spite of strong political efforts to impose a learning regime on Danish ECEC settings during the last two decades (Jensen et al., 2010), the values that imperceptibly characterise the Danish pedagogy profession persist and trump the school logic and preoccupation with academic skills during an acute situation. The flexibility of the pedagogy, as we experienced during the reopening, was only possible when the professional pedagogues were capable of and allowed to reflect, plan and practice independently and with consideration.
of individual children’s needs. The success reported by our informants depended on a high level of professionalism in order to not only work under the strict regulations prescribed by the health authorities but also to do this without compromising the essence of Nordic ECEC settings: there is no such thing as a ‘one size fits all’ pedagogy; all individual children may learn and develop given that they experience well-being and security (Wall et al., 2015). Nevertheless, the Danish day-care legislation increasingly requires that ECEC professionals implement structured learning approaches and evidence-based programmes in their pedagogical practice (Ministry of Children and Education, 2020), which to some extent challenges the Nordic social learning tradition with its strong emphasis on play, outdoor life, children’s participation, lived democracy and relationships as important values (Ringsmose & Kragh-Müller, 2017). Since the introduction of a mandatory curriculum for children in Danish ECEC settings in 2000, ongoing concerns have been how to combine and balance the two approaches and how to handle the increased schoolification of a pedagogical tradition rooted in social pedagogical ideas (Borchorst, 2009). Political governance is increasing in Denmark through the formulation of more specific curricular themes (Ministry of Children and Education, 2020). Still, it is up to each Danish ECEC setting to decide exactly how to plan its everyday practice and balance the pedagogical cultural heritage with new public management quality parameters and programmes for international student assessment (PISA) efforts. The Danish Day Care Act prescribes that the curriculum be interpreted from the perspective of democracy, as it explicitly specifies that all children are to be given co-determination, co-responsibility and an understanding of democracy in ECEC facilities (Ministry of Children and Education, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, it became evident that the quality of the pedagogical work in an emergency depended on the fact that not only children, but also the pedagogical staff felt competent in taking responsibility and were able to co-determine and plan pedagogical activities with a focus on the children’s active participation, individual learning needs and subjective well-being.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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ENDNOTES
1 In 2015, nearly all the children (97.7%) attended an ECEC setting and just over three-quarters (76.6%) of men and 73.5% of women aged 15–64 were in the labour market. During the same year, more than three-quarters
(77.9%) of mothers and over 90% (92.8%) of fathers with a child under 6 years of age were employed outside the home. Both were among the highest rates in the EU28 (http://www.seepro.eu/ISBN-publication.pdf).

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