Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/csje20

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To cite this article: Hanne Kvilhaugsvik, Helene Marie Kjærgård Eide, Hilde Danielsen & Svein Ole Sataøen (01 Jul 2024): Standardisation and diversification – policy tools to govern early childhood education and care, Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, DOI: 10.1080/00313831.2024.2369864

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2024.2369864

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Published online: 01 Jul 2024.

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SCANDINAVIAN JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH
https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2024.2369864

Standardisation and diversification – policy tools to govern early childhood education and care

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ABSTRACT

Policy tools have become widespread in education, which indicates efforts to standardise content and professional practices. However, such standardisation might be in contrast to Nordic early childhood education and care (ECEC) traditions of diversity and local variation. We therefore study the distributors and enactment of policy tools in ECEC in light of content regulations and calls for evidence-based practices in ECEC through comparative case studies of 14 Norwegian centres. We identify the tools that are used in ECEC centres and analyse how they are enacted by staff. The material consists of documents from ECEC centres and semi-structured interviews with heads and staff. By employing a theoretical framework based on discursive institutionalism, we find that efforts are being made to standardise didactical practices. The tools are distributed by a range of actors, but our analysis reveals that staff shape and develop tools through coordinative discourses.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 24 May 2023
Accepted 2 June 2024

KEYWORDS
Early childhood education and care; policy tools; policy enactment; discursive institutionalism

Introduction

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a field in transformation, with rapidly increasing enrolment in the past decades (OECD, 2021). The high number of children enrolled makes ECEC a public service with distinctly broad coverage (Børhaug et al., 2013, p. 142), a significant institution for children and their caregivers, as well as an important public policy concern. As such, ECEC has become linked to a variety of policy goals (White, 2011) such as early intervention, social inclusion, full employment, and national competitiveness (e.g. OECD, 2018). This also entails increased attention to professional practices, ECEC governance and the quality of services (OECD, 2018; Vermeer et al., 2016). A current topic is the push for standardisation of content and practices through national regulations, curricula, and policy tools. Formal curricula and regulations of content and professional practices in ECEC have been developed and widespread globally, which can be linked to governing by objectives, international trends of standardisation, and professionalisation throughout the education system (Ottesen et al., 2013; Røvik et al., 2014; Sahlberg, 2011). Thus, professionals in ECEC centres and schools now face an abundance of policy tools including guidelines, methods, manuals, programmes, and standards offered by different actors (see Pettersvold &

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Østrem, 2019). Crucially, these policy tools can be considered part of calls for professionalisation and evidence-based policies and practices (Segerholm et al., 2021), as well as policies to improve children's learning outcomes (Skarpenes & Nilsen, 2014). This tendency might be a challenge to traditions for local variation and understandings of childhood embedded in ECEC professionalism in the Nordic kindergarten tradition (Karila, 2012; Ringsmose, 2017).

In this article, we ask which policy tools can be found in ECEC centres in Norway and how they are enacted by staff. Thus, we aim to elaborate on research identifying efforts for standardisation in education, by studying policy tools. Studies of policy tools in ECEC governance tend to focus either on the content and pedagogical basis of the tools or on the outcomes of implementation and intervention. In this article, we pursue a different approach, and we study the myriad of programmes, interventions, and methods as *policy tools* that are used by different actors to fulfil policy goals for ECEC. To do so, we use a theoretical framework building on discursive institutionalism, which allows us to study the spread of policy tools through ideas, solutions, and discourses (Schmidt, 2008, 2010). This approach has similarities to translation theory but highlights ideas and discourses on different levels more extensively, rather than tracing changes and outcomes of specific tools. Discursive institutionalism also sees ideas and norms as dynamic and subject to change by a range of actors in several arenas (Schmidt, 2008). Our framework is also informed by a discursive policy approach (Ball, 2000), entailing that we study policy tools in ECEC as embedded in multiple forms of regulation and levels of governance.

The rest of the article is organised as follows. First, we consider the literature on ECEC governance and policy tools followed by a short section on the empirical context of our study. Next, we present the theoretical framework. Thereafter, we discuss the methods and empirical material. Our findings section begins with a discussion of the mapping of policy tools and their distributors before we illuminate staff's enactment of policy tools and the ideas and discourses related to their use. In the concluding section, we discuss some implications for ECEC professionalism and governance.

Literature review

Recent studies comparing European and Anglo-Saxon countries highlight differences in who provides, funds, and regulates ECEC services (e.g. León et al., 2019). Still, a commonality is the emergence of formal curricula and other regulations of content (e.g. European Commission, 2014), which shows increasing politicisation and standardisation of services.

These developments are often studied in light of global reforms and trends (see Ball, 2021). International organisations such as the EU, the OECD, and UNESCO are all active in ECEC and education policy development, and the recommendations from such organisations are often studied in terms of neoliberalism and human capital development (White, 2011) or evidence-based practices (Krejsler, 2013). White argues that other "policy frames" are also present in these organisations' recommendations, particularly social pedagogic norms and ensuring children's rights and parents' employment (White, 2011, pp. 285–286). These contributions imply that ECEC is paramount for education, labour, and social policy, which can explain the increased attention to both reform and standardise content and quality.

Other branches of studies evaluate specific programmes and initiatives that aim to improve the quality of education. Some of these programmes target ECEC specifically, while others are used in schools as well.[1] In this article, we refer to these programmes as policy tools. Quality and its assessment in ECEC services are complex, as explored by numerous researchers (e.g. Garvis & Taguchi, 2016; Ishimine & Tayler, 2014; Sheridan, 2009). White et al. (2015) reviewed studies on the effect of

[1]ECEC centres and schools differ in several important aspects, but we include studies from both contexts here because many programmes are promoted as universal solutions.

different ECEC services and called for more systematic studies of policy tools and interventions. Systematic literature reviews of the effects of various policy tools (Brunsek et al., 2020; Peleman et al., 2018), as well as studies analysing particular policy tools (Aasheim et al., 2019; Berggren et al., 2021; Hutchings et al., 2012) have also been conducted. Gotvassli and Vannebo studied quality in ECEC as a master idea in Norway and found a profusion of "quality tools", including didactical tools and programmes (Gotvassli & Vannebo, 2016, p. 28). The authors also found that policy tools are often translated by centre heads (2016, p. 29), which suggests variation in interpretation and enactment.

However, several influential policy tools have also faced heavy criticism (e.g. Pettersvold & Østrem, 2019; Seland, 2020). Pettersvold and Østrem (2019) criticise the many "manuals and methods" in ECEC, schools, and child welfare services, which are promoted as universal interventions. On a similar note, Seland has recently shed light on the use of "The Incredible Years®" in Norwegian ECEC (Seland, 2020). Other writers, such as Buus (2019, 2021) and Dannesboe and colleagues (1999) have studied policy tools for teaching social skills, with criticism of the promotion of standardised, simplified procedures. Contributors in this strand of the literature also voice concerns about restrictions to professionalism, the commercialisation of ECEC, and the prescription of tools that are not in line with the Nordic tradition.

There are also defences to the use of policy tools and evidence-based practices in education. For instance, Bøyum (2013) presents a "philosophical defence" of evidence-based teaching (2013, pp. 70, our translation). Other writers, such as Buus, nuance the use of evidence-based policy tools in ECEC (Buus, 2019), arguing that such tools may be compatible with staff's "ideals of relations, community, and inclusion" (2019, p. 249, our translation). A report on the previous Norwegian framework plan for ECEC also finds several benefits of using policy tools, for instance, that they can provide "a common understanding of concepts" and "a common language" (Ljunggren et al., 2017, p. 111, our translation).

This review indicates increasing standardisation, through an abundance of policy tools to improve services and ensure equivalence. However, most studies focus on specific tools, the effects of their use, or general reform developments. As such, there is a need to improve our understanding of what policy tools are actually used in ECEC and how they are enacted at the micro level. To fill this gap in the literature we explore the following research questions: (1) Which policy tools can be found at Norwegian ECE centres, and (2) Who distributes them, and (3) How are they enacted by ECE staff? Recent heated debates about both the framework plan and policy tools make Norway a purposeful case to study standardisation efforts and associated challenges for staff in complex governance structures.

Discursive institutionalism

In our analysis, we utilise a theoretical perspective based on discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008, 2010). Discursive institutionalism focuses on ideas, actors who carry ideas, and a dynamic understanding of institutions and change (Peters, 2019). Schmidt argues that discursive institutionalists study institutions both as "structures that constrain actors and as constructs created and changed by those actors" (Schmidt, 2008, p. 314). This interconnectedness is highly relevant to our study because the previous sections have illustrated changes and international influences in ECEC.

Discursive institutionalism differentiates between ideas at three levels, namely policies, programmes, and philosophies (Schmidt, 2008, p. 306). Ideas can also be cognitive or normative, with the former referring to methods and solutions to problems, while the latter concerns values and legitimation of policies (Schmidt, 2008, p. 307). Furthermore, discourse is, unsurprisingly, the central concept used to analyse relationships between ideas and practices. Schmidt defines discourse as "the interactive process of conveying ideas" (Schmidt, 2008, p. 303) or simply "talking about one's ideas" (Schmidt, 2008, p. 305). These conceptualisations are helpful to study policy

tools – as cognitive ideas – in light of interconnected ideas and levels. Furthermore, the approach contrasts much of the existing literature on policy tools which has focused on categorisation schemes (Bemelmans-Videc et al., 2011) and a more or less explicit top-down approach with an emphasis on results. Based on discursive institutionalism, we will examine the distributors and enactment of policy tools at ECEC centres.

Discursive institutionalism has been utilised in the literature on education policy, for instance, in a study of curriculum reform in Sweden (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2018). Wahlström and Sundberg argue that a framework building on discursive institutionalism, as well as curriculum theory, can be well-suited to study the interdependence between transnational ideas, policy developments, and local enactment (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2018, p. 172). Wahlström and Sundberg focus on the "coordinative discourses" that concern the use and enactment of ideas and tools at the local level (Schmidt, 2008; Wahlström & Sundberg, 2018). We follow this approach to study staff's enactment and discourses at Norwegian ECEC centres.

Discursive institutionalism emphasises agency, with an interest in actors' room to influence institutions and to initiate changes (Schmidt, 2008, p. 322). Here, we emphasise that actors such as professionals coordinate and transform external policy initiatives (Ball et al., 2011). We therefore study how heads and staff in ECEC centres participate in coordinative discourse in their enactment of policy tools. Staff may have substantial room to do so because national curricula can accommodate a wide range of tools and practices. Furthermore, national regulations do not necessarily specify *how* centres are to fulfil goals or which tools are suitable.

ECEC professionalism in the Nordic context might best be described as burgeoning, which can have implications for the enactment of tools. ECEC staff have varied qualifications and practices are characterised by shared work, and thus some researchers have argued that the specialisation is too weak to indicate professionalisation (Smeby, 2011). This could suggest opportunities for ECEC centre heads and owners, and even external actors, to initiate common guidelines and practices through tools. On a similar note, tools could be used to develop the knowledge basis for professional practices (Woods, 2011). Still, the sector is also shaped by a strong ECEC tradition, with an emphasis on play and social didactic norms, and resistance against unsuitable practices such as "school-like" approaches (cf. Furenes et al., 2021). This suggests that the staff still have a common knowledge basis that can influence their enactment of tools.

The empirical context

ECEC has broad coverage in Norway, and most children – even those 1–3 years old – are enrolled (OECD, 2021). At the national level, ECEC is regulated through the Kindergarten Act, the Framework Plan, and supplementing regulations. ECEC is integrated into the Ministry of Education and Research and is regulated through the Directorate for Education and Training, which resembles developments in other countries (see Cohen et al., 2021; Kaga et al., 2010). However, ECEC governance is also decentralised as municipalities own around half of the centres (Directorate of Education and Training, 2021). Municipalities are also responsible for the approval and supervision of centres (Kindergarten Act, 2000), which entails some ambiguity in their role (see Børhaug, 2021). Norwegian ECEC has been characterised by variation in ownership and structure (Børhaug, 2021; Børhaug et al., 2013), as mentioned earlier, and both public and private centre owners differ in terms of governance capacity (Homme, Danielsen & Ludvigsen, 2021). Studies have also shown the development of stronger state control over ECEC (Nygård, 2017) and increased governance capacity for some centre owners (Borgund & Børhaug, 2016; Børhaug, 2021). There is also variation concerning staff and qualifications, as a 3-year kindergarten teacher education at the tertiary level is only required for heads and for pedagogical leaders (Kindergarten Act, 2000). Still, over 60% of staff have relevant education from the secondary or tertiary level (Directorate of Education and Training, 2021).

Methods

The article is based on a comparative case study (Yin, 2018) of 14 ECEC centres and their use of policy tools within a broader research project on the Norwegian ECEC[2] (Homme et al., 2021). Case studies allow us to study a phenomenon in-depth, at the same time that they allow for comparison. As the intent of the study is to analyse the distributors and enactment of policy tools, case studies were a preferred method since they allow for concept validity (Yin, 2018). The material studied in this article was collected for analysing distributors and the use of policy tools at centres. Our analysis is also informed by the project's material on processes at the national level, as well as material on owners' and municipalities' work on the framework plan and policy tools. Norwegian ECEC is governed through a framework plan for contents and tasks (Directorate of Education and Training, 2017) that seeks to improve the quality and equivalence of services. The ECEC centres vary both in ownership and organisation (Directorate of Education and Training, 2021), and both public and private centre owners have introduced policy tools to improve quality and equivalence. Our cases should therefore allow for some analytical generalisation beyond the Nordic ECEC.

The case selection for this article includes 14 centres, which are shown in Table 1, where we also summarise number of policy tools and distributors. We selected cases strategically with an aim for diversity in ownership (public and private), size (number of children), and location (urban or rural) which we expected to influence who distributes and how policy tools are enacted in centres. Most of the centres we included could be considered "common" cases (Yin, 2018). Norwegian centres have almost fifty-fifty private and public owners, and most centres are small or mid-size – and only a few centres enrol more than 100 children (Directorate of Education and Training, 2021). As such, a few of our centres are more "unusual" cases (Yin, 2018), particularly Centre 10, as the number of small centres is dwindling (Directorate of Education and Training, 2021).

The empirical material includes documents from the 14 centres, as well as background material from the national level. At the micro level, we collected activity plans from the 14 centres for 2019–2020. Yearly plans are legally required (Kindergarten Act, 2000) in order to operationalise and document centres' work on the framework plan and owners' aims and tools. Some centres also distribute monthly activity plans, newsletters, and guidelines to parents, as well as progress plans, which we included in our material. Additionally, we visited the centres' webpages and resources and webpages for specific tools and those who distribute them We will elaborate on aspects of the distributors in the findings section.

The project group carried out semi-structured interviews with 71 staff members at the centres between autumn 2019 and autumn 2020. The staff members included heads, who were interviewed alone, as well as teachers, skilled staff members, and assistants, most of whom were interviewed in focus groups with 2–4 colleagues. Besides the current position, no personal information about the participants was registered. The interviews were based on separate interview guides for heads and for teachers and skilled staff members. The guides included questions about the process of introducing the framework plan, the relationship with owners and authorities, the centre's priority areas, and the centre's tools, routines, working methods, and projects. Informants were also asked about who distributed the specific policy tools that were mentioned. The duration of the interviews was between 30 and 90 minutes, and the interviews were recorded and transcribed. In line with the national ethical guidelines[3], all interviewees were given information about the project, and they gave individual written or oral consent to participate in the study. Centres, informants, distributors, and tools have been anonymised.

[2]The project is a national formative dialogue research study consisting of two national surveys to ECEC centres and municipalities, interviews with public and private centre owners, interviews with central national actors in the ECEC field, and field studies in ECEC centres.

[3]Following the Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities.

Table 1. Selection of centres and summarized number of tools and distributors.

Centre	Ownership	Size	Policy tools for management and leadership practices	Didactical policy tools	Distributors of policy tools to the centre
Bear	Public	50–100 children	3	8	Directorate Guidance and supervisory authority Head/centre leadership Network/NGO*s (2) Public owner
Tuft	Private (independent)	0–50 children	1	2	Directorate Guidance and supervisory authority
Owl	Private (large owner)	50–100 children	2	4	Guidance and supervisory authority Private owner chain Network/NGO
Trail	Public	50–100 children	1	3	Directorate Network/NGOs (2) Public owner
Swift	Public	0–50 children	0	2	Directorate The centre distributes tool to other centres
Snow	Private (independent)	50–100 children	2	1	Directorate Guidance and supervisory authority Head/centre leadership Network/NGO
Lynx	Public	50–100 children	1	3	Directorate Network/NGOs (2) Public owner
Air	Public	50–100 children	1	2	Directorate Public owner NGOs (2)
Seagull	Private (independent)	50–100 children	3	8	Guidance and supervisory authority Head/centre leadership Network/NGOs (3) Small centre owner
Knoll	Private (independent)	0–50 children	0	3	Guidance and supervisory authority Network/NGOs (2)
Kestrel	Public	>100 children	0	1	Public owner and network
Elk	Private (large owner)	>100 children	3	4	Directorate Guidance and supervisory authority Head/centre leadership Private owner chain Network/non-governmental organisations (2)
Fjord	Public	>100 children	1	5	Head/centre leadership Public owner (2 levels) Network/NGO
Vole	Private (independent)	0–50 children	3	4	Guidance and supervisory authority Head/centre leadership Network/NGOs (4)

*NGO: Non-governmental organization.

Our analysis is informed by a reflexive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2020), which can be understood as an abductive process. We began the analysis with a mapping of policy tools in each of the 14 centres in order to generate themes (Braun & Clarke, 2020). All tools mentioned by staff in interviews and in the individual centres' sample documents and webpages were mapped and

categorised according to the distributors and the main purpose of the policy tools. We were interested in policy tools that were mentioned in descriptions of centres' profiles and daily work, so our mapping is not necessarily exhaustive. Then, in the second step of analysis, we did a cross-case synthesis of the material (Yin, 2018). Through several readings, we developed two main categories, namely policy tools for management and leadership purposes and policy tools for didactical purposes. These categories helped us to explicate how policy tools seek to standardise both structure (management) and value-based content (didactics), which influence different aspects of professional practices. We proceeded to use the mapping as an analytical tool in further analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020) in order to identify purposes, distributors, and enactment. Both the individual and the cross-case analysis were discussed among the authors and were validated by other researchers within the broader research project. As a qualitative case study, the opportunities for generalization are limited, but we will discuss possibilities for analytical generalization and implications for practitioners.

In the following sections, we will present the findings as a cross-case analysis. Due to considerations for anonymisation, we will not provide individual case presentations. First, we present the main categories of policy tools that we found before we consider staff's enactment of these tools, by exemplifying the ideas and discourses the tools can be associated with at different levels.

Categories of policy tools

Through our mapping, we found extensive use of policy tools in the ECEC centres, which are summarized in Table 1. As mentioned in the methods section, we developed two main categories for analytical purposes, namely policy tools for management and leadership practices, and didactical policy tools. The first category mainly includes policy tools that target heads and pedagogical leaders, such as evaluations, standards, strategies, and quality procedures. These policy tools are displayed in Figure 1.

As Figure 1 shows, there are differing relationships between distributors and centres. Here, we find that the directorate, at the national level, provides policy tools to centres via the local level, while private owner chains, networks, and non-governmental organisations distribute tools directly

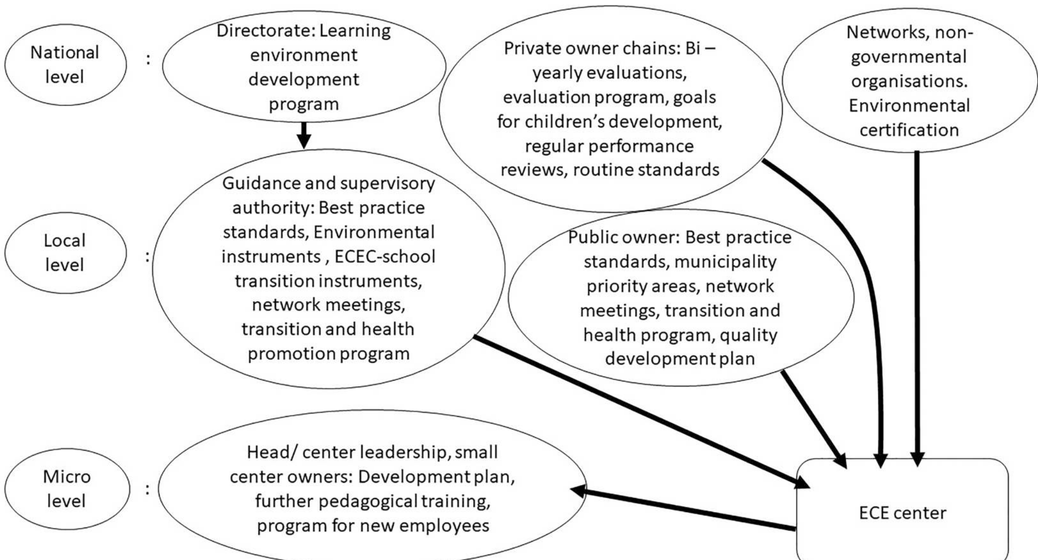

Figure 1. Policy tools for management and leadership practices.

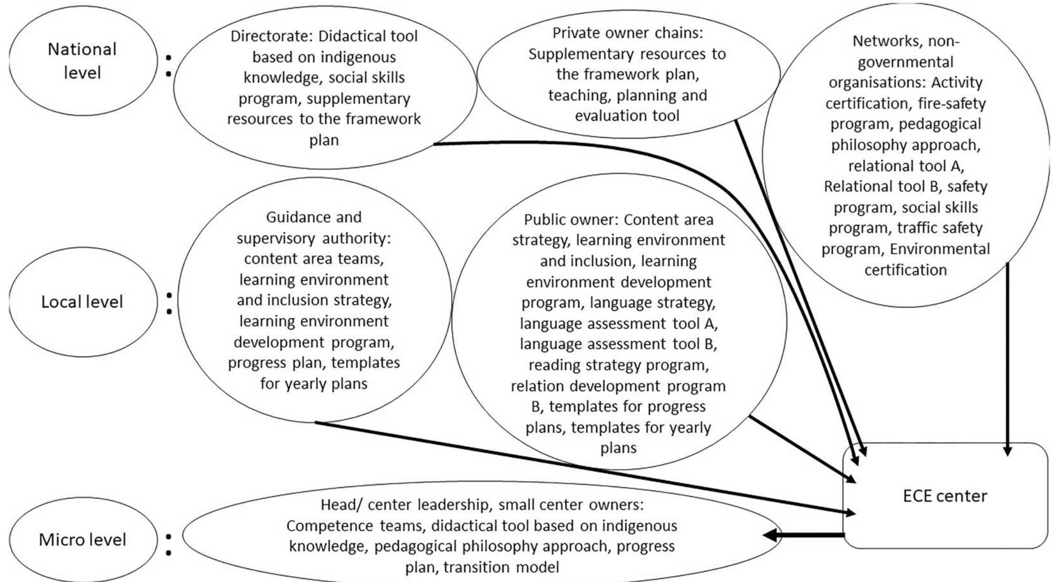

Figure 2. Didactical policy tools.

to centres. We also find that the centres and staff themselves shape – and in some cases develop – policy tools at the micro level.

On the other hand, we identify didactical policy tools, which are shown in Figure 2. These concern activities, content, and didactical practices. As such, this category includes a range of themes, from small activity packages to comprehensive tools for language development and the promotion of socio-emotional skills. What these tools have in common is that they target heads and staff and aim to standardise didactical practices.

Figure 2 illustrates relations between distributors and centres for didactical policy tools, with similarities to the managerial tools shown in Figure 1. However, some important differences emerge. When we look at the strategy of the directorate at the national level, we find two noteworthy differences. First, the number of policy tools for didactical purposes developed by the directorate is more extensive compared to those for managerial purposes, and the number is still increasing (cf. Homme et al., 2021). Second, these tools are distributed directly to centres. At the local level, the differences in the number of policy tools targeting didactical practices compared to management are quite striking. Our analysis reveals that public owners take on a far more progressive role in developing didactical practices. At the micro level – the centres –, we note that centres develop formalised practices that serve the distinctive needs of individual centres, which leads us to characterise such practices as didactical policy tools.

As both Table 1 and Figures 1 and 2 show, we found an abundance of policy tools. It is important to note that some policy tools have both managerial and didactical purposes. For instance, the "learning environment development programme", developed by the directorate, focuses on routines to secure the rights of the individual child *and* to enhance the knowledge base and quality of ECEC services. Furthermore, some policy tools have similar purposes; for instance, we found several tools that aim to improve social skills. In line with our theoretical framework, these findings could suggest that these areas are understood as being at the heart of centres' work or that emotional and social skills have been insufficiently addressed. We will return to this point in the discussion.

Several of the policy tools are portrayed, both by the ECEC centres and the distributors of the tools, as "knowledge-based" or "evidence-based". Policy tools also often involve certifications,

teaching material, and further training, which can be understood in light of discourses on professional development and quality in ECEC. However, our material suggests that distributors – including public owners – provide limited elaborations on policy tools' theoretical assumptions and knowledge basis, which enables staff to connect tools to different, and sometimes incompatible, discourses and philosophies. As we discussed in the literature review, several influential policy tools have been criticised for promoting neoliberal or psychometric principles, which were heavily criticised in the recent "Kindergarten uproar" prior to the implementation of the framework plan (Homme et al., 2021). Thus, it is interesting to note that all tools in our material were described as connected to the framework plan.

Distributors of policy tools

To understand the spread of policy tools it is necessary to identify where they come from (Schmidt, 2008; Wahlström & Sundberg, 2018). As Table 1 and Figures 1 and 2 illustrate, the policy tools are associated with several different distributors. We identified three main distributors at the national level, namely the Directorate of Education and Training, large private centre owners, and non-governmental organisations and networks. These distributors have different implications for standardisation and governance of centres. The directorate distributes policy tools in both main categories. These tools are used widely, but participation and enactment are up to municipalities or centres. Large private centre owners (chains) also distribute several policy tools, which are mandatory for their centres. Some private owners have come under scrutiny recently due to their policies to standardise practices (see Dahle, 2023). In our material, we found more examples of policy tools for management purposes than didactical purposes in centres with large private owners, particularly evaluation tools. However, cautious interpretation is necessary here because our selection is limited to two such centre owners. Finally, we found that several networks, non-governmental organisations, and non-profits distribute policy tools, including several widely used didactical policy tools. Some of these are specialised and only used periodically, while others are described by our informants as integral practices at centres. Some of these policy tools are also distributed via owners and networks.

At the local level, municipalities hold an active role as distributors of policy tools in both main categories. In fact, municipalities were referred to in all centres in our study. Here is an example, as explained by a pedagogical leader at Bear centre:

> Some themes are specific to our centre; some are common within the whole municipality. For instance, the theme "language" has been enhanced and integrated in this municipality's work toward all centres [both public and private].

There is ambiguity in municipalities' work because they have mixed functions as authorities, owners, and network facilitators. This implies that tools can have different implications for the centres, i.e., they may be mandatory for publicly owned centres but voluntary for private centres. Furthermore, we found that centres have different responses to municipalities' tools. The head of Snow centre explained their situation:

> […] and then all of a sudden, the municipality introduced the theme "inclusive kindergarten[4]", and we experienced it as a top-down initiative. Or at least I experienced it like that, as we are a private centre who are not involved in all of the meetings and dialogues with the municipality.

Although the head here articulates some scepticism toward municipal policy tools, we found that most heads were positive to both main categories of tools. Heads of several centres use policy tools voluntarily, including those distributed by municipal networks and non-governmental organisations. Several common phrasings in the interview material suggest that policy tools have become institutionalised into centres' work. For instance, the head of Owl centre said, "We have started

[4]Specific tools have been given fictional titles to ensure anonymity.

with active parental involvement already, based on the Jinx model", and the pedagogical leaders at Bear centre said, "We have developed this [referring to a specific tool] further within our pedagogical leader group." This institutionalisation also illustrates interconnections between the national and micro levels as well as between the regional and micro levels.

Overall, this variation in the distribution of tools illustrates the complex governance of ECEC, with aspects of hierarchical steering, networks, and local initiatives. Our findings here also illustrate interdependencies and similar discourses on different levels of governance.

Enactment of policy tools

All 14 centres mention the use of at least one policy tool, but we found many variations both in the scope and staff's interpretation and enactment of policy tools. Some policy tools are used by all our centres, whereas others only feature once. Our informants also highlighted the importance of policy tools to standardise certain practices. For instance, the head of Owl centre said, "You can't work with everything at the same time, but some things have helped us systematise our work". This could indicate that policy tools also can be used to strengthen professionalism. As Ljunggren et al. (2017) have pointed out, standardisation can be helpful because ECEC staff have different formal qualifications. We found several examples of tools to standardise practices in our material, from extensive evaluations to specialised didactical tools for fire and traffic safety. The latter two tools are distributed nation-wide, indicating that these areas have become particularly uniform.

However, we also find variations in the enactment of policy tools. While some policy tools can be considered institutionalised, many were initiated only recently. In the interviews, several staff members described frequent changes in policy tools as an integrated part of their daily work. Several of the policy tools are intended for use in fixed periods, for instance as part of municipalities' development programmes and strategies or as research project interventions. Still, many centres continue to use policy tools after such initiatives are concluded, often in combination with new tools. In the following quotation, two skilled staff members from the Tuft centre explain how they continued to use a policy tool after participating in a research project:

> "S1: You have the Lemur law, from 'Come along'. It touches on how the kids behave towards each other, and the role and responsibility of the staff.
>
> S2: And that is at least as important as the knowledge areas we have listed here [in the annual plan]."
>
> S1: You work continuously with how you behave, talk to each other.
>
> S2: Care, acknowledgement, everything.

This example shows how policy tools and ideas can resonate with staff and continue to be used voluntarily to ensure quality in core tasks. However, centres face several policy tools and, accordingly, many standards. Being able to sort, as a joint force, is therefore emphasised. A quotation from the head of Air centre illustrates this aspect:

> [Mentions several tools.] So, in a way, you can pick and choose. There are so many of them, all of these things have good aspects that you can use. And I think that [using] one of them does not rule out the others, but it is good to have some things to focus on.

The head's description also highlights compatibility between policy tools. Furthermore, the quotation can illustrate how centres and staff interpret policy tools and coordinate discourses. The head's phrasing "pick and choose" could exemplify coordinative discourses, where different solutions are interpreted and enacted into a common understanding at the centres. This could also nuance the understanding of the implications of policy tools distributed by authorities and owners because centres might combine tools in unintended ways. The use of tools can also be disrupted. As an assistant at Snow centre explained: "But it drifts apart", when they described their

practices and the multitude of tools. This illustrates that not all circulating ideas succeed (cf. Schmidt, 2008).

While most policy tools are distributed by external actors, an interesting finding is that many centres also develop policy tools themselves. Sometimes these are inspired by ideas in external policy tools. For instance, Bear centre was inspired by a policy tool distributed by the municipality and proceeded to develop quite extensive standards for both managerial and didactical routines and activities such as relational quality, language development, and facilitation of children's play. One pedagogical leader explained how they developed their own policy tools:

> All of the staff joined in on developing our standards and decided how we were going to work towards them. And I think that has been very purposeful, as it is something that we work on together … everyone brings yellow tags where they can write their suggestions. (Pedagogical leader at Bear centre)

In this example the staff at the centre collaborated to standardise their practices. This collaboration was further underscored as important for professional development by the skilled workers and assistants at the centre:

> S1: I actually noticed quite a change after we started working with best practice standards, at least it has helped me a lot.
>
> I: Can you tell us a bit more about what that is?
>
> S1: For instance, the first standard we worked on was the dialogue [with parents] when the children arrive in the morning. We sat down in each department and pointed out what we should do, simple goals, such as greeting the children, showing that both parents and children were seen.
>
> S2: And then we went on to all the different areas, such as children's play, meals, outdoor playing, indoor playing …
>
> S3: The physical environment.
>
> S2: It helps us in a way, to see the importance of each area. (Skilled workers at Bear centre)

The excerpts illuminate coordinative discourses where actors articulate and make sense of and strengthen professional standards and discourses. We argue that this discursive practice also entails the internal development of policy tools. In this particular case, the centre even produced physical copies of their own "best practice standards" and made them available for staff, substitutes, parents, and other stakeholders. In this way policy tools can be developed and distributed by centres to other actors, hence empowering the profession.

Discussion

Our study has shown extensive distribution and enactment of policy tools in Norwegian ECEC. In this section, we will first discuss how the extent of policy tools might increase standardisation of ECEC. Thereafter, we move on to consider enactment at centres and policy tools' impact on professionalism.

Our analysis revealed influential policy tools that may force standardisation in ECEC. Reflected by the myriad of tools, our two main categories highlight efforts to standardise both management and leadership practices and didactical practices, including content and values. The vast number of tools may be interpreted in light of broader discourses on quality in education (OECD, 2018). Although the distinction between our two categories is not clear-cut, our findings suggest more standardisation of the latter category. Here we highlight the multitude of didactical policy tools to promote children's language, emotional, and social skills as well as specialised safety programmes. Based on our theoretical framework, this could indicate that these aspects are considered "problems" in ECEC that entail a need for cognitive ideas to solve them (Schmidt, 2008). Some of the didactical policy tools covered in this study are also used beyond the Norwegian ECEC context, which can illustrate commonalities across levels and countries. As such, our findings may inform

standardisation processes beyond the Nordic countries. However, we must remark that several management procedures have already been established through regulations in Norway, while there is less formal regulation of content and teaching practices. Consequently, our findings here suggest that standardisation of such aspects may be driven in parallel with curricula regulations.

The emphasis on language and social skills may be interpreted in light of ideas at different levels, as highlighted in theories of discursive institutionalism. Wahlström and Sundberg's combination of levels in discursive institutionalism and curriculum theory suggests that cognitive ideas enacted in the local context should be understood in light of ideas and discourses on transnational and national policy arenas (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2018). In our study, discourses on early intervention and skills in ECEC may be interpreted as part of the broader discourse of the knowledge economy (Ball, 2021).

Still, our analysis reveals complexity in ECEC governance, with several actors distributing policy tools across levels. This entails that implications for practitioners vary. On the one hand, we find a tendency to standardise practices, particularly by owners and municipalities. This suggests that practices in centres within a municipality or with the same private owner may become more similar. For the ECEC sector, this could entail a variety of standards distributed by different actors rather than standardisation per se. We expect such developments to have implications for burgeoning professionalism and to restrict the room for centre's own initiatives. On the other hand, policy tools differ in their extent and target. For instance, specialised traffic safety programmes will have different implications compared to comprehensive relational and social skills tools.

In addition to the range of policy tools, our analysis also uncovers different enactments and discourses. The interviews with staff show that policy tools are subject to new interpretations and combined with other tools. Our findings suggest that staff experience a need to make new interpretations, for instance, because of the abundance of tools in use. The many distributors of policy tools also means that centres use tools with different origins and aims. Differences in enactment could also suggest variation in the understanding of "problems" at centres, or even diverging understandings of what types of policy tools are suitable for ECEC (Ball et al., 2011). These aspects might be considered a contrast to policy tools prescribing standardised procedures, and our findings here illustrate the complexity of introducing new tools.

The enactment of policy tools could be analysed as examples of coordinative discourses, where actors coordinate agreement on ideas and problems in their policy context (Schmidt, 2008, 2010). For instance, we found that centres may combine transnational ideas and discourses about evidence-based practices and early intervention with norms and ideals from the Nordic ECEC tradition. In discursive institutionalism this might be understood as developing discourses that combine cognitive and normative ideas in ECEC.

Furthermore, our findings suggest that policy tools have implications for professionalism, and we found several examples of how tools were used to express and emphasise staff's professional work (cf. Ball, 2021). Here, discursive institutionalism suggests that the enactment of policy tools is related to discourses on the policy level, such as the need to develop professionalism and use evidence-based practices to improve the quality of professional work (Bøyum, 2013). Many policy tools also entail participation in networks and organisations, which could allow for professional development. Still, questions could be raised about the lack of transparent knowledge foundations in some tools and whether implementing dubious knowledge contributes to professional development (Woods, 2011).

In addition, aspects of professionalism must be understood in light of the revised Norwegian framework plan from 2017, which prescribes professionals to work on a variety of goals and areas. Our material suggests that policy tools may help professionals to fulfil such complex demands, as well as to formalise, plan, and document their work (Ljunggren et al., 2017; Østrem et al., 2009). At the same time, the framework plan leaves room for interpretation by both centres

and staff, so policy tools can be helpful for professionals in the hectic everyday life in ECEC (Ljunggren et al., 2017).

Furthermore, policy tools should be understood in light of their cultural and historical context (Ball, 2000; Ball et al., 2011; Wahlström & Sundberg, 2018). They are also shaped and negotiated according to the resources available to actors. Equality and holistic practices are important ideals in the Nordic ECEC tradition (Directorate of Education and Training, 2017; Seland, 2020), which suggests that tools intended to help all children thrive may be more well-received by staff than specialised policy tools that differentiate between children based on skills or development. Although several prominent policy tools have been widely criticised (Pettersvold & Østrem, 2019), our analysis suggests that professionals' enactment and coordinative discourses mediate the tools with regard to both content and impact.

Concluding remarks

Through our study of policy tools and their enactment in ECEC, we have found a profusion of tools in a dynamic ECEC sector, with several different ideas and discourses. As such, our analysis confirms previously identified curriculum developments in Europe and globally (Ball, 2021). On the one hand, the number of tools may illustrate how different actors within the educational sector attempt to answer calls for evidence-based practices and the framing of ECEC as crucial for the knowledge economy. Thus, the standardisation of ECEC is strengthened. On the other hand, the policy tools identified in our study are interpreted and enacted by professionals. Hence, the tools are shaped through coordinative discourses embedded in a Nordic ECEC context and tradition. Still, the profusion of policy tools is not particular to the Norwegian context but must be understood as part of transnational discourses and ideas in ECEC.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by Utdanningsdirektoratet and Utdannningsdirektoratet.

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