

# NERA synopsis

## **Shape sorters and intuitive dances – professional enactments of a national early childhood curriculum.**

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In 2004, Denmark introduced the first early childhood education (ECE) curriculum, the so-call 'learning plan', sparking much debate in and around the field. The debate centered mainly around 2 issues, namely whether the learning plan would strengthen or weaken pedagogues' professionalism, and whether the learning plan would raise the quality of ECE centers or contribute to a schoolification that undermined Danish traditions for play and child-centeredness. The learning plan has been revised a number of times since, and the most recent version has been generally interpreted as giving more space for children's play and pedagogues' professional discretion (Togsverd & Stanek 2021). This paper challenges that analysis and investigates the different ways the learning plan is implemented and interpreted in different ECE practices.

The paper builds on empirical material from a research project on pedagogues' work with equality in Danish ECE centers. Qualitative group interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann 2015) were carried out with professionals from 13 centers, and ethnographic field work (Hammersley & Atkinson 2019, Emerson et al. 2011, Pink & Morgan 2013) was carried out in 5 of the ECE centers. Combining these methods, we aimed to gain knowledge about pedagogues' understandings and practices of equality (Fischer 2010, Padovan-Özedmir & Hamilton 2020) and how their work and pedagogical ambitions was shaped by other pedagogical ambitions and by the conditions of their work (Hellman 2010). Our findings show that the learning plan seems to play a key role in legitimizing pedagogues' understanding of their work and their definition of equality, but that the learning plan is interpreted and performed in very different ways in different ECE practices.

In our paper, we present findings from 2 ECE centers that represent very different understandings and performances of the learning plan. One ECE center (in a deprived area) presented very structured, restricted, adult-controlled practices, metaphorically resembling a *shape sorter*; another ECE center (in a privileged area) presented more open, playful, child-controlled practices, metaphorically resembling an *intuitive dance*. Our findings contribute to the understanding of curriculum as negotiated and pedagogues' professionalism as complex policy-production rather than passive implementers of curriculum (Evetts 2010, Lipsky 1980, Aabro 2021, Apple 2006). Also, our findings suggest that interpretations of the learning plan differ depending on the ECE centers demographic composition, resulting in more restricted curriculum and equality work for children from deprived areas (cf. Thingstrup 2015, Gillborn 2002). This raises important questions to the Nordic pedagogical field about the role of ECE centers in creating societal equality and about the critical potential of the professionalism of pedagogues.