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The standard school-ready child: the social organization of ‘school-readiness’

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ABSTRACT

This article offers new insights into our understanding of the formation, textual mediation, and reproduction of perceptions of children’s ‘school readiness’ in kindergarten and its consequences for teachers’ assessment of minority-language children’s ‘readiness’. Building on Danish Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) teachers’ accounts of assessing minority-language children’s ‘lingual readiness’, this current research identifies key characteristics of ‘the standard school-ready child’, which functions as an ideological code and shapes replicable understandings of what constitutes ‘school readiness’ in institutional discourse and assessment materials. This code departs from Danish majority-class culture in its structuring of normalcy and deviance embedded in the language assessment materials issued by the Danish government. By departing from the standard school-ready child in their assessments of minority-language children’s school readiness, ECEC teachers unintentionally reproduce and legitimise stratified educational outcomes for native-majority children and children from disadvantaged and low-income immigrant backgrounds.

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Introduction

This article investigates the social organisation of early childhood education and care (ECEC) teachers’ assessment of minority-language children’s school readiness in high-minority, low-income areas in Copenhagen, Denmark. It highlights the significance of how standardised notions of normalcy and deviance embedded in language assessment materials facilitate and legitimise the social reproduction of unequal educational outcomes for native majority- and minority-language children. Disparities in children’s school readiness are often linked to parents’ socioeconomic backgrounds (Booth and Crouter 2008). An array of scholars, many of whom are in the legacy of Bourdieu (1996, 1984, 2018), have demonstrated how cultural biases favouring majority-class culture in the education system generate desirable educational outcomes for majority children and construct invisible barriers to the educational success of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Griffith and Smith 2005; Khan 2011; Lareau 2011; Vincent and Ball 2007). Children and parents from majority-class positions are likelier to function within the

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education system (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Lareau 2011). Thus, the strong relationship between children's socioeconomic background and their perceived school readiness found in previous studies suggests that children from majority-class positions are likelier to be deemed school ready than their peers from less privileged backgrounds.

An increased political focus on children's pre-academic skills and early interventions alongside growing rates of global migration has changed the character of ECEC teachers' work in preparing children for school transition (Bove and Sharmahd 2020; Brown and Lan 2015). A large body of research indicates a double disadvantage for people with immigrant backgrounds; they are not only often foreign to their new communities, but research also draws strong correlations between immigrant status, low socioeconomic status and child poverty (Borjas 2011; Galloway et al. 2015; Ottesen et al. 2018). Current studies in the Danish context on the long-term educational achievements of children with immigrant backgrounds indicate systematic disparities in educational outcomes between children from different immigrant backgrounds, which have already been observed in the years prior to transition to compulsory schooling (Højen et al. 2019).

There is a broad consensus in the developmental psychology and linguistic research community that immigrant children's second language (L2) pre-literacy and language skills are highly predictive of later educational achievement (see, e.g. Han 2012; Højen et al. 2019; Kieffer 2012). Hence, scholars underline the importance of intensifying efforts to develop children's language proficiency before the school transition, particularly for children with minority-language backgrounds (Han 2012; Højen et al. 2019).

In this vein, kindergarten is broadly perceived as a key strategy to foster pre-literacy skills and integrate children of immigrant descent and socially disadvantaged backgrounds into host communities (Højen et al. 2019; Kimathi and Nilsen 2021; Rydland, Grøver, and Lawrence 2014). Consequently, ECEC teachers are experiencing growing demands for assessing children's language development, preparing them for school on a general level and providing special attention to the needs of an increasing population of children learning a majority language as their second and even third or fourth language.

The context of this current study is Copenhagen, Denmark. 'Children with minority-language backgrounds', or 'minority-language children', are in this context defined as children without a Nordic language, English or German as their first language or are descendants of the indigenous population of the Danish-governed Faroe Islands or Greenland. Thus, this group is primarily comprised of children of parents of immigrant descent. In Denmark, 11 percent of the population are immigrants, while 3 percent are Danish-born with two immigrant parents (Statistics Denmark 2020, 11). Recent Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) results indicate that Denmark and the other Nordic countries have some of the largest discrepancies in national test scores between school children of native and immigrant descent when compared to the other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (Beuchert, Christensen, and Jensen 2018; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)) 2019).

The research questions were: *What constitutes a 'school-ready child'? How do these perceptions shape Danish ECEC teachers' assessments of children with minority-language backgrounds and their 'school readiness in kindergarten'?*

To answer these questions, I first introduce Denmark as the national context of this study. Second, I present institutional ethnography (IE) as the methodological departure for the

study and how ideological codes function as a scheme in the social replication and legitimisation of standardised notions of normalcy and deviance. Third, I unpack and identify what makes up ‘school readiness’ and identify ‘the standard school-ready child’ as an ideological code. I trace how this code shapes ECEC teachers’ work in assessing minority-language children’s school readiness and their work in preparing children for transition to school. I conclude by discussing the cultural bias embedded in assessment materials and how these perceptions shape ECEC teachers’ assessment practices and minority-language children’s school transitions.

When basing their assessments of children’s ‘lingual readiness’ on ‘the standard school-ready child’ in their assessments of minority-language children’s school readiness, I argue that ECEC teachers unintentionally reproduce and legitimise stratified educational outcomes for native-majority children and children from disadvantaged low-income immigrant backgrounds.

The Danish context

The Nordic kindergarten model (age 0–6) is underpinned by the Nordic Welfare Model (Esping-Andersen 1990) and social pedagogical understandings of childhood and teaching (Einarsdottir et al. 2015). Hence, the Nordic ECEC curriculum emphasises *Bildung*¹ and egalitarian values and encourages locally oriented, play-based and child-centred approaches to pedagogy (Einarsdottir et al. 2015; Wagner and Einarsdottir 2008).

Social pedagogy is often contrasted with more centralised and academic approaches to kindergarten curriculum, widely called ‘the ready-for-school approach’ (Einarsdottir et al. 2015). The ready-for-school approach is characterised by a strong focus on developing children’s pre-academic skills and the importance of early interventions to reduce socio-economic disparities in educational outcomes (see, e.g. Havnes and Mogstad 2015 and Højen et al. 2019). This approach has traditionally been associated with French- and English-speaking countries; however, during recent decades, scholars have observed a turn towards an increased focus on pre-academic skills, standardisation, accountability measures and teacher-instructed activities in the Nordic region (see, e.g. Einarsdottir et al. 2015).

In Denmark, public kindergartens (0–6 years) are highly subsidised by the state, and 98 percent of children are enrolled in the last year of kindergarten (Statistics Denmark 2019). Kindergartens are organised and situated separately from formal education and governed under their laws and regulations (The Day Care Act 2018). A day care institution is usually divided into a *nursery* for children aged 0–3 years and *kindergarten* for children aged 3–6 years. Formal primary education in kindergarten class [*Børnehaveklasse*], also called grade 0, usually begins the year a child turns six years old, and this involves changing locations from a day care facility to school premises.

In school, children first attend a reception class, kindergarten class, before enrolling in first grade at age seven. The language assessment materials used in kindergarten and kindergarten classes are issued by the government, named ‘Language assessment 3–6’ [*Sprogvurdering 3–6*]. The children are individually assessed by sitting one-on-one with a teacher in a separate room. The assessment consists of the child being asked to react to a range of standardised questions regarding pictures, either by speaking or by pointing out figures. In the second part of the assessment, the children are shown a handpicked children’s

book accompanied by a range of questions about how to read a book. The questions posed by teachers are closed-ended, with one or a few acceptable answers; the child's ability to answer the question right or wrong can be inputted directly into Copenhagen's dedicated app for tablet and smartphone. In the end, the children's answers are automatically summed up by the app, resulting in a score between 0 and 100 percent.

In the Danish school transition system, 'lingual readiness' is highly associated with school readiness, and the assessment results serve as a key part of the documentation attached to the standardised school transition form in the municipality app. Children's language development is routinely assessed with the same materials in kindergarten, usually one or two times a year at ages three, four and five, and up to four times during the year of kindergarten class (The Day Care Act 2018; The Folkeskole Act 2020, §11). The language-screening manual states, 'The material can be utilised in a similar manner for both monolingual and bilingual children' (Ministry of Children and Education 2017, 6). Hence, no special consideration is given to children without Danish as their first language, even though bilingual children's language tends to contradict monolingual children's language development (Drury 2013; Henry and Thorsen 2018; Hoff 2013).

The Danish Ministry of Children and Education reports that 5.6 percent of all children who entered first grade in 2020 started 'late; [*Startede sent*], and 2.3 percent of the children in a kindergarten class were 'repeaters' [*Omgjængere*] (Ministry of Children and Education 2021). Since a child can be held only one year behind his or her peers, the statistics indicate that more children are held back in kindergarten than are those who repeat kindergarten class.

Neither the Ministry of Children and Education nor Copenhagen's Child and Youth Department reports how many children with immigrant backgrounds are retained from progressing to the first grade. However, results from the Copenhagen Child and Youth departments' quality report for 2018² indicate that 48.3 percent of children in Copenhagen categorised as having a 'non-Western background' [*ikke-vestlig bakgrund*] scored below the assessment's cutoff limit of 15 percent when screened for oral skills. Correspondingly, 34.5 percent scored below the cutoff for pre-literacy skills when assessed in a kindergarten class. In comparison, 11.3 percent of those termed 'Danish' [*Danske*] children scored below the cutoff for oral skills and 10.8 scored below the cutoff for pre-literacy skills in kindergarten class the same year (Child and Youth Department Copenhagen Municipality 2019, 18).

Governmental policy targeting 'parallel societies'

In 2018, the Danish government altered The Day Care Act's language assessment and school transition policy by hindering automatic promotion to first grade in high-minority, low-income areas based on the outcome of the compulsory language screening in a kindergarten class. The Government reasons that a high-stakes assessment is necessary in kindergarten class in these areas as: 'basic language proficiency is vital to be able to follow lectures. A lack in proficiency can therefore suggest a risk of lagging behind academically, something that can pursue you for the rest of your time in school' (Danish Government 2018, 26). This change marks a stricter standard of school readiness for the most disadvantaged. The high-stakes assessment is part of the Danish government's highly contested policy: 'One Denmark without parallel societies—no ghettos by 2030 [*Ét Danmark uden parallelsamfund—Ingen ghettoer i 2030*]'.

The official motivation behind this policy is ‘the government’s desire for a comprehensive Denmark’ in the wake of increased immigration since the 1980s. The government directs particular concern towards immigration from ‘non-Western’ countries and states that ‘Too many immigrants and descendants of immigrants have ended up lacking attachment to their surrounding community. Without education. Without work. And without Danish language proficiency’ (Danish Government 2018, 4). The policy states that schools with an over 30 percent share of children from ‘at-risk neighbourhoods’ shall perform high-stakes assessments in a kindergarten class (Danish Government 2018, 26).

The government distinguishes between ‘at-risk neighbourhoods’ [*udsatte boligområder*] and ‘ghetto areas’ [*ghettoområder*]. To qualify as an ‘at-risk neighbourhood’, an area needs to inhabit at least 1,000 residents and meet at least two out of five criteria:

1. The share of residents who are immigrants or descendants of immigrant parents from non-Western countries comprises over 50 percent.
2. The share of residents between ages 18–64, neither in employment nor pursuing education, comprises over 40 percent.
3. The share of residents with criminal sentences convicted for infractions against penal law, weapons law or drug regulations comprises over 2.7 percent.
4. Over 60 percent of residents have only a primary education.
5. The average gross income for residents between ages 18–64, not including those under education, comprises less than 55 percent of the average gross income for the same group in the respective region. (Danish Government 2018, 11)

Ghetto areas are listed as ‘at-risk neighbourhoods’. However, to qualify as a ghetto area (Danish Government 2018, 11):

1. At least two of the three original ghetto criteria must be met:
 - a. The share of convicts makes up more than 2.7 percent. The share of residents neither in employment nor in education comprises over 40 percent.
 - b. The share of residents who are immigrants or descendants of immigrant parents from non-Western countries comprises over 50 percent.

OR

2. The share of residents who are immigrants or descendants of immigrant parents from non-Western countries comprises over 60 percent. (Danish Government 2018, 11)

This policy has attracted both national and international attention (see, e.g. Perrigo 2018, Quass and Bannor-Kristensen 2019 and O’Sullivan 2020) and has been accused of being racist and breaching the human rights convention, as the law instils harder criminal punishments and forced kindergarten from age one, amongst other strict regulations, but only for immigrant-dense, socially disadvantaged areas (Danish Government 2018). Thus, because of its demographic demarcation, the policy of ‘targeted language assessment’ [*Målrettede sprogprøver*] for ‘lingual readiness’ [*språkparathed*] to determine grade promotion is particularly aimed at children from families with ‘non-Western’, low socioeconomic backgrounds, who are living in what the Danish government categorises as ‘at-risk neighbourhoods’ or ‘ghetto areas’ (Danish Government 2018, 26).

Previous research and analytical perspectives

A large body of research indicates that kindergarten enrolment has a positive effect on promoting ‘school readiness,’ especially among children from disadvantaged social backgrounds (Heckman 2006; Havnes and Mogstad 2011; Zachrisson and Dearing 2015). These findings have resulted in an increased political focus on early intervention and standardisation of children’s earliest years within the education system (Brown and Lan 2015; Fuller 2007; Nilsen 2017).

In a review of the research literature on school transition between 2001 and 2015, Boyle, Grieshaber, and Petriwskyj (2018, 175) presented two main frames for understanding ‘readiness’ in research on school transition: ‘children’s preparedness to commence compulsory schooling’ and ‘readiness of schools and communities. Other scholars refer to these different understandings of readiness as something that is ‘inside the child’ versus ‘outside the child’ or as an ‘empiricist perspective’ versus an ‘interactionist perspective’ (Brown 2013; Meisels 1999). Perceptions have changed from a focus mainly on preparing children socioemotionally for school transition to more time spent developing children’s pre-academic skills (Brown 2013; Brown, Ku, and Barry 2020; Brown and Lan 2015; Grek 2009).

In the wake of policies such as the U.S.’s No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the coinciding ‘PISA shock’³ the same year, several researchers have critically claimed that kindergarten has become the ‘new first grade’ or ‘de facto first grade’ (Akaba et al. 2020; Brown, Ku, and Barry 2020). Standardised and universalised understandings of childhood and school readiness are accused of disembedding historical and local context from kindergarten curriculum and focusing on children’s potential as *human becomings* rather than *human beings* (Fuller 2007; Qvortrup 2009).

Migration has increased globally during the last few decades, but there is a lack of knowledge of the relationship between ECEC and minority-language and/or migrant children and their families (Bove and Sharmahd 2020). Considering the controversial political climate on immigration, standardised assessments and high-stakes tests in ECEC and schools, it is vital to produce knowledge of ECEC teachers’ practical implementation of school-readiness assessment policies and how these policies influence their work with children of immigrant descent—not just at a general level, but also how it specifically influences teachers’ pedagogic work in high-minority, low-income neighbourhoods.

To understand the social organisation of ‘school readiness’ and the construction of ‘the standard school-ready child’, I drew upon analytical tools from IE (Smith 2005). IE is associated with sociologist Dorothy Smith. From a perspective located in people’s experiences, IE aims to trace how people’s everyday doings are part of larger institutional complexes (Griffith and Smith 2005). Hence, the study unit of IE is the institutional *ruling relations*—objectified forms of knowing that people relate to in their everyday work. Such rulings are increasingly embedded in the common technology of surveillance, communication and management, and are mediated by textual technologies such as the internet, print and institutional discourses (Smith and Griffith 2014). In this fashion, texts function as a bridge between the discursive and the factual, between policy and practice (Nilsen 2015).

Smith (1993) coined the term *ideological code* to describe how standardised discursive schema shapes replicable understandings of how knowledge, institutional discourses and texts are produced and understood across different settings. Smith used the example of what she identified as the ‘Standard North American Family’ (SNAF). SNAF refers to a

traditional nuclear family constituted by a married heterosexual couple, where a husband functions as the family breadwinner and a wife who is mainly involved with childcare and household management (Smith 1993). This understanding of a 'normal' family is replicated and embedded in everything from TV commercials to legal jurisdiction. Smith argued that the educational system is implicitly built on an expectation of children's families resembling a 'SNAF family', where a child's timetables and the expectations for parent involvement are based on the mother being a homemaker.

In their study of mothering work, Griffith and Smith (2005) found that the idealisation of the nuclear family as the norm serve as a disadvantage for families that do not fit within the SNAF-family model, such as single-parent families or families with mothers working full time. In this way, an ideological code can shape people's understandings of what is normal while simultaneously defining those deviating from this standard as flawed (Griffith and Smith 2005; Smith 1993).

In this current article, I engage the concept of social organisation and ideological codes to describe how ECEC teachers' assessment work is not isolated to each assessment situation but part of a larger institutional complex of actors, texts and institutions. For simplicity, I use the term 'social organisation' to refer to the broader organisation that goes into ECEC teachers' assessments of and preparation for minority-language children's school transitions. This term includes an investigation into the ruling relations that I, in the forthcoming analysis, identify as the ideological codes textually embedded in ECEC teachers' assessment work. In this sense, the term 'social organisation' is based on a preconceived notion of the presence of ruling relations shaping ECEC teachers' work.

Materials and methods

The analysis presented in this article departs from an IE of ECEC teachers' assessment practices in Danish ECEC institutions (Smith 2005). The analysis is based on interviews with 11 ECEC teachers working in seven public and independent kindergartens⁴ in Copenhagen municipality. The interviews were conducted from May to June 2019. The ECEC teachers work in the inner city and in suburban public kindergartens situated in or near what the Danish government categorises as 'ghetto areas', where children must pass the government's language screening to be directly promoted to first grade (Danish Government 2018). I recruited the teachers working in these neighbourhoods to maximise the utility of information regarding the assessment and school preparation of minority-language children and to investigate the relationship between the Danish government's policy (2018), educational policy and the Danish ECEC teachers' everyday work (Flyvbjerg 2006).

Table 1 presents information about this study's participants. The table indicates which kindergartens the participants worked in, what type of interview they participated in, their years of teaching experience and the kindergartens' ownership structures.

The interviews were explorative in structure, with the aim of unpacking and tracing the social organisation that shapes the local experiences of the ECEC teachers' everyday work of assessing and preparing children with minority-language backgrounds for school transition (DeVault and McCoy 2006). The teachers were asked to provide detailed descriptions of how they support a child's language development from their first day in kindergarten until the school transition. I requested that the teachers bring the materials they use prior, during and after a language assessment, and any other relevant texts that are used in their

Table 1. Characteristics of participants.

Participant	Kindergarten	Interview type	Years of teaching experience	Kindergarten ownership structure
Mona	Sun	Group	25+	Municipal
Edith	Sun	Group	16–20	Municipal
Jakob	Saturn	Individual	6–10	Independent
Aisha	Jupiter	Individual	11–15	Municipal
Merete	Mars	Individual	6–10	Independent
Casper	Venus	Group	25+	Independent
Camilla	Venus	Group	–*	Independent
Elisabeth	Earth	Individual	0–5	Municipal
Patrick	Europa	Group	6–10	Municipal
Karen	Europa	Group	21–25	Municipal
Anne	Europa	Group	0–5	Municipal

*This information is missing.

everyday work of supporting children's language development. During the interviews, I was especially interested in the ECEC teachers' descriptive accounts of interacting with policy documents and assessment materials in practice and how stakeholders such as actors, institutions and texts enter their daily interactions with minority-language children.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The participants' names, the kindergartens and the places appearing throughout this paper are pseudonyms. The study is approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data and complies with the Norwegian National Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences, Humanities, Law and Theology (The Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees (NESH), 2016). The data analysis was inspired by DeVault and McCoy (2006) three-stage analysis for investigating ruling relations.

First, I created inductive codes in *NVivo*, densifying the meaning constructions in the teacher accounts. The first round of coding provided an overview of recurring themes across the data. Second, I utilised recurring themes in the inductive codes from the first stage to construct new codes for the second stage of my analysis. In this stage, I identified institutional processes that shaped the experiences that stood out in the first stage of the analysis. I did so via a round of deductive coding where I focused primarily on the ECEC teachers' work of preparing children for school, looking for which texts, discourses, actors and institutions enter the ECEC teachers' experiences of school preparation, assessment and transition.

The third and final stage was based on the previous stages. Here, I focused on investigating the institutional processes identified in stage two by asking, 'What makes up the standard school-ready child?' to analytically describe how institutional processes operate as grounds of the experiences the ECEC teachers reported in stage one. The three stages are outlined in Table 2.

Findings

In this section, I identify three key characteristics of 'the standard school-ready child': a child who masters the majority culture, a child with strong language proficiency and a child who makes 'the cut'. The descriptive accounts of what makes up a school-ready child are not exhaustive but highlight key tendencies of the perceptions shaping ECEC teachers' work of assessing and preparing minority-language children for school.

Table 2. Stages of the analysis, inspired by DeVault and McCoy (2006, 20).

	Aim	Tools of analysis	Empirical research question
1st stage	Identify experience(s)	Interviews Inductive coding Meaning densification	How do ECEC teachers work on minority language children's language development, from their first day of kindergarten until they leave for school? Which texts are relevant in the ECEC teachers' assessment work? How do the ECEC teachers interpret and interact with the policy documents and assessment materials related to the assessment of 'school-readiness'?
2nd stage	Identify some of the institutional processes that are shaping that/those experience(s)	New round of coding ECEC teachers' work of preparing children for school Identification of texts, actors, discourses, and institutions	Which actors and texts enter the ECEC teachers' accounts of assessing school-readiness and preparing minority language children for school? Which perceptions of school-readiness are present in ECEC teachers' talk of school-readiness and in the texts?
3rd stage	Investigate those processes in order to describe analytically how they operate as grounds of the experience(s)	Perceptions of school-readiness Social inequality Ideological codes Ruling relations	How do perceptions of school-readiness in policy documents shape how the ECEC teachers assess minority language children's 'school-readiness'? What makes up 'the standard school-ready child'?

These perceptions constitute the ideological code of a 'standard school-ready child'. The findings show that regardless of the teachers' critical views of the different aspects of the assessment materials, they nevertheless follow and navigate within the institutional discourse and the system in which they are part.

A child who masters the majority culture

This is the first of three key characteristics that make up the 'standard school-ready child'. Casper and Camilla are two ECEC teachers working in a kindergarten located in what the Danish government considers a 'ghetto area' on the outskirts of Copenhagen. Only a few children with native majority backgrounds are enrolled in their kindergarten, and there are substantial variations in language screening scores between majority and minority children. In this excerpt, the teachers address the striking degree of socioeconomic segregation in the settlement patterns of their area, Bordertown, and talk about the annual language assessments:

Casper: If you walk 200 metres in that direction [points], you are over in the villa area of Bordertown. There, you find some of the most expensive housing in Copenhagen. They [the residents] are highly educated; some of them even have au pairs from Thailand! Lawyers, doctors...the children from that area, they are completely different, right. That little light-haired boy over there, Eric [nods in his direction].

Interviewer: Yes, the one who bumped his head? [I met him when I arrived earlier in the day.]

Casper and Camilla: Yes.

Casper: He scored 90 something when he arrived as a 3-year-old!

Camilla. Yes, very high. Out of a hundred.

Casper: (...) But we have a vast group of children here who score zero when they start here as 3-year-olds.

Stories such as Casper's and Camilla's were frequent among the teachers, indicating a substantial variation between majority and minority children's test scores and the segregated nature of the districts in their city. Casper later told me that children like Eric from the 'villa area' were rare and were usually 'only' enrolled in their kindergarten because some Danish academic parents actively chose their kindergarten based on 'idealistic' motives.

The teachers highlighted that (not) being 'school ready' is unequally distributed between social groups and that the minority-language children are implicitly disfavoured in the language screening tests for not having the same frames of reference as the Danish majority-children. ECEC teacher Aisha noticed that several children with minority-language backgrounds in her kindergarten had difficulties with the numerous questions measuring children's ability to rhyme:

Aisha: [...] and then I say, 'stick, father, wind' [Danish: *pinn, far, vind*], which of these rhymes with another? The child is supposed to exclude this one [far/father], and if they do, then they understand rhyming, but unfortunately, many of our children do not.

Interviewer: Rhyming?

Aisha: Yes, particularly for our minority-language children. They do not have rhyming as part of their everyday routines, and their parents are not as skilled at rhyming with their children as Danish parents are at playing with words [in that manner]. That is why many minority-language children have a hard time with rhyming.

Interviewer: Is it a cultural matter?

Aisha: I also have a minority-language background. We [Arabic speakers] use rhymes but not in the same way. Not with two words resembling each other, like 'stick, wind' [Danish: *pinn, vind*]. We [in Arabic-speaking countries] rhyme with entire sentences, more like poetry [...] a little like in French: '*un ver vert va vers un verre vert*'. It sounds the same, but it means 'a green worm in a green glass.' It's an entire sentence, but it sounds the same.

The language assessment has an entire section dedicated to rhyming, so if the child is unfamiliar or has difficulty with Danish ways of rhyming, they lose a substantial number of points. Consequently, the ECEC teachers spend a lot of time teaching traditional Danish rhymes to children, not only with future screening tests in mind but also because rhyming is an important part of traditional Danish child culture.

Other examples of cultural bias in the material ranged from a picture of a tie ('What is this?') or when the teachers are to present the child with a book page ('In which direction do you read?' (e.g. right to left/left to right)). The teachers were frustrated but also laughed at the absurdity of the disjuncture of references between the everyday world of the multi-cultural neighbourhoods in which the kindergartens were located and the contents of the language assessment materials. Simultaneously, they expressed resignation in terms of the status quo, that the assessment tools 'are what they are' and that none of the teachers had made a formal complaint about this issue.

A child with strong language proficiency

This is the second key characteristic of 'the standard school-ready child'. Although other aspects of a child's development also impact the overall school-readiness assessment, the ECEC teachers reported that a focus on language is especially pressing and so is parent involvement. This is because of the high-stakes assessment of the kindergarten class and the high share of children with minority-language backgrounds in their kindergartens.

Here, Jakob describes his worry about a boy he believes will not be deemed 'lingually ready' [*Sprogparat*] in time for an ordinary school transition.

We can see that this child is not very well versed with letters; [he] does not know the letter, even though [he] is almost six years old. But we can practice with [him]: 'What are the names of the letters? How many letters are there in your name?' Stuff like that. But we are not a school, so we do not sit here and teach them the alphabet; that is not our job. [...] The parents should also do something at home, teach their child about the letters. So, when they arrive here, they know the letters, they can write their name or something [...] talk about the letters of the alphabet or something, without the kindergarten becoming a school where you are taught it.

Jakob underlined the importance of distinguishing 'school preparation activities' from 'school activities'. He does not wish to implement school activities, such as teaching the alphabet, as this contradicts his pedagogical perceptions of 'not being a school', but he is simultaneously worried about the child's future, as he was supposed to start school that year. Ambiguity and ambivalence are present in his description of the child learning the letters and the parents talking with their child about the letters in the way he draws a line between talking and teaching and learning the letters and/or talking about the alphabet.

As Jakob's interview excerpt reveals, the ECEC teachers have an academically oriented approach to preparing children for school, even though they are critical of bringing 'school-like' activities into a kindergarten. The teachers were worried about several of the minority children's language development and some parents' lack of comprehension of the severity of their children's developmental issues and the high stakes of their future language screening. The way Jakob spoke about school readiness displays how important individual readiness is understood by ECEC teachers and how it challenges different social perceptions of school readiness and child development among parents.

In the same manner, as parent involvement [or perceived lack thereof] manifested as a problem and a disadvantage for many minority children, the teachers agreed that 'correct' parent involvement, such as parents supporting their children's language development at home in a manner that aligns with a curriculum, has given native majority-children an advantage when performing the test.

A child who makes 'the cut'

To be deemed 'lingually ready' [*sprogparat*] for school transition, a child residing in what the government deems a 'at-risk neighbourhoods' or a 'ghetto area' must score 15 percent or above on the language screening test. In a group interview, Karen, Patrick and Anne mentioned the problem of context and how the relationship between those who perform a screening, and the child influences the results and the child's interest in the testing situation.

Anne: It [who performs the screening] really affects the outcome.

Patrick: I agree...[...] Previously, there was one woman who performed all language screenings, despite not knowing the children [she was testing]. I was allowed to view some of the screening results, and I thought, 'That is puzzling!' You can always repeat the screening and get a *completely* different result.

Karen: Which staff member performs the language screening matters a lot for the outcome.

The teachers observed that it matters who performs a language assessment and when and where it is conducted. Patrick also mentioned that some children love the attention they receive following the individual screening procedures, a few children even ask the teachers to test them again, while others are less enthusiastic about the screening situation. The teachers tried to account for variations by, for example, avoiding testing children immediately after a long vacation, arranging for children to be tested by the teacher with whom they are most attached or attempting to readminister the test if they felt the child was in a bad mood that day. However, some ECEC teachers are stricter than others when it comes to providing children with second chances or hints during screening tests.

Here is another excerpt from my conversation with Casper and Camilla in which Casper address the disruption that the screening test creates for some minority-language children's transition and how numerous children with migrant backgrounds stand no chance against the government's criteria for 'lingual readiness'.

Especially last year, we had ten [children] who scored below fifteen [percent] [the cutoff limit] when they were supposed to start [school]. That's no good. We are obliged to account for that we actually have [done something]: that we have made a 'plan of action,' and that we have done this and that, right. And then it also depends on ...we have had this discussion with the municipality...that some of the children have not made enough progress... Sometimes, we get five-year-olds directly from Pakistan, and when they start here, they might score zero, and if they score ten the following year when we send them off [to kindergarten class], we think it's fantastic and that we actually have done a really good job. But the municipal administration does not [think so] because they are rigid... You must exceed fifteen [percent].

Kindergartens regularly receive thorough supervision from the pedagogic consultants employed by the municipality. This is when the ECEC teachers' pedagogic practices are assessed. They are observed for several days and need to account for how they have worked towards improving children's development of various skills, particularly children with low test scores.

In the previous excerpt, Casper addressed his frustration with how test scores shift the focus away from children's actual progress, predispositions and the contexts in which the test scores were produced. Regardless of how much progress a child has made, it does not matter to the municipal administration if the child does not make the screening's 15 percent cutoff limit. The discrepancy between everyday life in high-minority, low-income neighbourhoods and 'the standard school-ready child' creates obstacles in the assessment of minority-language children's school readiness and for their future school transition.

Several ECEC teachers described the experiences of teachers from school's leisure activity department or primary school teachers contacting them a few weeks or months after a child

graduated from kindergarten, asking for the kindergarten to take the child back. Frequent problems arise in such cases, including the child's previous placement, potentially already being filled by another child and the child suffering a negative experience of being returned to kindergarten while his or her friends remain in kindergarten class on the school premises.

Children are usually stopped from starting school because of concerns other than language difficulties, such as behavioural issues. Nevertheless, language development is often mentioned by teachers as a part of the issue.

In the next section, Merete addresses the topic of retaining a child in kindergarten:

Interviewer: So, instead of retaking kindergarten class, do you repeat the last year of kindergarten?

Merete: Yes, and some of our children start kindergarten class and do an extra year in kindergarten class. It depends on what the parents choose to do.

Interviewer: Okay, but do you give a recommendation and then they decide whether to [keep the child in kindergarten]?

Merete: Yes, we usually recommend that they allow [the child] to stay here so they can remain with their friends in a familiar environment. And when they are to progress to kindergarten class, then they continue with the children they started school with. If they first start kindergarten class with one group of children and then everyone else goes on, and the child has to stay while everyone else leaves, here [in kindergarten], they are not affected in the same way.

According to government policy, low-scoring children are supposed to be retained in kindergarten classes on school premises (Danish Government 2018). Nevertheless, the ECEC teachers preferred to retain a low-scoring child for an extra year in kindergarten to protect children from the possible negative experiences of rejection and being shuffled between a school and an unfamiliar kindergarten and, consequently, the risk of suffering a negative experience of school transition.

Since it is allowed to retain a child for an extra year in kindergarten, if a child's parents send a formal request, this functions as a strategy to bypass the policy. The ECEC teachers reported that keeping a child in kindergarten for an additional year, results in them being too old for retention in kindergarten classes at a later stage, even if they continued receiving weak scores.

Discussion

In this article, I have investigated the social organisation of ECEC teachers' assessment of minority-language children's 'school readiness' and their pedagogic work in kindergarten in anticipation of children's school transition. Based on Danish ECEC teachers' accounts of working with minority-language children, assessing their language development ('lingual readiness') and school readiness, I identified three key characteristics of 'the standard school-ready child': *A child who masters majority culture, a child with strong language proficiency, and a child that makes the cut.*

This ideological code aligns with dominant-class perceptions and is embedded in the Danish government's assessment materials, reproducing replicable understandings of what

a 'school-ready child' is. To be perceived as school ready, minority-language children must acquire the cultural references of a Danish-born child and preferably follow the language development of a monolingual majority-child. The assessment tools, materials and standardised reports arguably provide the terms under which Danish ECEC teachers become institutionally accountable; hence, the understanding of minority-language children's school readiness is a product of complex social relations.

Despite the complex social organisation involved in a child's school transition, an individualistic understanding of 'school readiness' as something that primarily has to do with each child's 'individual preparedness' shapes ECEC teachers' work. Assessment scores shift focus away from children's progress, predispositions and the contexts in which test scores are produced.

These findings align with previous research on transitions and perceptions of school readiness (Akaba et al. 2020; Boyle, Grieshaber, and Petriwskyj 2018; Brown, Ku, and Barry 2020). Hence, the dominant perception of school readiness is that it is minority-language children who need to be ready for school and less imperative for schools to be ready for minority-language children who struggle with a majority language.

In the case of Denmark, the discrimination against minority-language children in education is systematic on an implicit level, but also made explicit on a policy level by setting stricter standards for 'school readiness' in socially disadvantaged and immigrant-dense neighbourhoods. The first two key characteristics, a child who masters the majority culture and a child with strong language proficiency, are implicitly biased towards monolingual majority-children. The third characteristic, a child who makes 'the cut', is, however, more explicit in its targeting of children with low socioeconomic status and/or immigrant backgrounds.

The ideological code of 'the standard school-ready child', which is embedded in the perceptions of school readiness in policy documents, assessment materials and teachers' everyday talk, constructs boundaries and obstacles for minority-language children's school transitions. These boundaries create tensions for minority-language children's transitions, arguably contradicting the political goal of a more cohesive transition from kindergarten to primary school in Denmark, at least for children from minority backgrounds (Christensen 2019, 2020).

ECEC teachers are unwillingly positioned in an ambivalent role in the reproduction of stratified educational outcomes between minority and majority-children. This current study's findings indicate that even if ECEC teachers are critical of educational and integrational policies, they nevertheless accept and manoeuvre within the school-readiness discourse. Sometimes, teachers strategically and invisibly bend the rules to make them more in line with what they believe is in children's best interests, such as the hidden practice of holding children back from starting kindergarten class as a means to protect them from the negative consequences of not making the 15 percent cut on the high-stakes assessment in kindergarten class. At the same time, ECEC teachers' coping mechanisms could unintentionally support the survival of this policy.

I argue that 'the standard school-ready child' is not solely present in the in the school-readiness assessment of children of immigrant descent and socially disadvantaged backgrounds. This ideological code, which shapes teachers' assessments of school readiness, is logically just as present in the assessments of monolingual majority-children as they are assessed with the same materials as the minority-language children. However, arguably, based on previous research, the presence of the ideological code of 'the standard school-ready child'

would be less conspicuous in these instances, as statistically, majority children experience less friction (an ‘ease’) in contact with cultural bias in the education system compared to children from minority backgrounds (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Khan 2011; Lareau 2011).

Thus, I argue that the ideological code of ‘the standard school-ready child’ becomes visible in situations where the code clearly breaches with the everyday life and cultural references of the local context of a kindergarten, that is, in instances where most of the children in a child group are far from fitting the mould of school-readiness. It is the breaching itself that makes ‘the standard school-ready child’ visible and, consequently, a visibly problematic standard for school-readiness (Garfinkel 1984 [1967]).

Concluding remarks

The increased heterogeneity of a population demands a broader understanding of what constitutes ‘school readiness’ and who needs to be ready for what. This current study’s findings point to an unfortunate consequence of a social integration policy aimed at decreasing segregation between minority and majority groups, which, paradoxically, could be increasing social disparities by setting minority-language children up for failure. By implementing high-stakes entry requirements for starting first grade in high-minority, low-income neighbourhoods, the Danish government’s school-readiness demands challenge the core values of the Danish comprehensive school tradition to act as the primary learning institution for the wider population.

However, my data does not indicate how increased pressure from targeted language assessment might influence teacher–child relationships and consequently whether teachers treat minority-language children differently than their native peers. Thus, it would be valuable to study this further, to develop our understanding of the consequences of high-stakes assessments targeted at socially-disadvantaged children with minority-language backgrounds.

This article contributes to the knowledge of the changing perceptions of school readiness in ECEC by highlighting how school readiness is not only increasingly academically and individually oriented but also aligned with native-majority culture and idealising monolingualism. It not only addresses *which* perceptions of school readiness are shaping Danish ECEC teachers’ assessment work but also trace *how* these perceptions are textually mediated through ideological codes embedded in assessment materials, consequently informing ECEC teachers’ assessment practices.

Notes

1. Originating in the German Humboldt tradition, contemporary understandings of *Bildung* in education emphasizes the importance of character formation, the relationship between individual and community, and the development of critical consciousness through engaging in questions of value, meaning and truth (Sjöström et al. 2017; Vásquez-Levy 2002).
2. The Copenhagen Child and Youth department’s (Child and Youth Department Copenhagen Municipality 2019, 2021) quality report for 2020 does not report screening test results in kindergarten classes by children’s ethnic backgrounds, like the one for 2018. However, the report for 2020 suggests that children’s pre-literacy skills generally have weakened since 2018 (Child and Youth Department Copenhagen Municipality 2021, 5).
3. The ‘PISA shock’ refers to the reactions from many Western countries in the wake of the publication of the first test results from the Program of International Student Assessment

(PISA) in 2000. The ‘shock’ was that many nation states were negatively surprised by their own population’s weak test scores compared to those of other countries (Tveit 2014, 2018).

4. In Denmark, self-owned kindergartens are organized as trusts, managed by a parent board. They are subject to the same regulations as the municipally owned kindergartens, including assessment and documentation routines, according to Bekendtgørelse af lov om dag-, fritids- og klubtilbud m.v. til børn og unge (The Day Care Act 2018).

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