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Research Article

Teachers' perspectives on optimizing manipulatives in teaching 21st century skills in kindergarten

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Abstract: Kindergarten teachers optimize manipulatives in teaching young children. These manipulatives can be tools in developing essential skills needed to meet the demands of 21st century society. A descriptive mixed method design was employed in this study. Qualitative data were gathered using interviews and classroom observations, while quantitative data were extracted from questionnaire and classroom inventory checklist. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, whereas qualitative data were transcribed, coded, and categorized by themes. Research respondents were the 25 kindergarten teachers from public schools (n=8) and private schools (n=3) in Pulilan, Bulacan. Results showed that teachers use manipulatives in the teaching and learning process as these provide many opportunities for children to learn and acquire different skills. Several manipulatives develop more than one skill, depending on their characteristics and nature. Moreover, skill development varies depending on the activity and type of manipulatives used. The research finds that manipulatives continue to be relevant and can be used to develop 21st century skills in kindergarten. However, teachers need to undergo training on the optimization of manipulatives that are readily available in the kindergarten classroom. Furthermore, there is a need for schools to invest in different manipulatives for use in kindergarten.

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Introduction

The invention of manipulatives or maneuverable objects that appeal to different senses has revolutionized the teaching process. Originally designed for teaching mathematical concepts, manipulatives have advanced into other subjects over the years. In kindergarten, the application of manipulatives in teaching started when Friedrich Wilhelm August Fröbel (1837), known as the "Father of Kindergarten," developed different types of objects to help his kindergarteners recognize patterns and appreciate geometric forms found in nature (Silber, 2015). Manipulatives were further emphasized in the early 1900s when Italian educator Maria Montessori advanced the idea that manipulatives are essential tools in education (Lillard, 2013). She designed many materials to help preschool and elementary school pupils discover and learn basic math and other subjects.

The child's development in mathematics starts at a young age during the child's early years in school. The use of manipulatives in the classroom – such as counters, blocks, geoboards - helps the young learners achieve a greater understanding of mathematical concepts, as indicated by the study of D'Angelo & Iliev (2012). Being able to touch and maneuver manipulatives connects the child's senses and boosts their stronger retention of information. Such experience is related to experiential learning.

Moyer (2001) put a definition of manipulatives when she stated that manipulatives are 3-

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dimensional objects that learners use to increase their understanding of and connection between concepts. With the advent of digital technology, Moyer brought into focus the use of virtual manipulatives as a take-off from traditional manipulatives. Learners can use manipulatives in a hands-on approach to learning (Cockett & Kilgour, 2015; Larbi & Mavis, 2016) as these serve as valuable tools to help students construct an understanding of concepts through meaningful investigation. As we enter modern society, the curriculum is not the only thing that has changed but the intended outcome of what children are expected to know and do. Communication and collaboration, critical and creative thinking, information media and technologies, and lastly, life and career are the skills that the 21st century society would like to impose on every learner (Ross, 2017). These 21st century skills are what the children need to become successful in the global economy – and be prepared for college and eventually for their entry into the labor force.

The active participation of learners through the use of various materials cannot be undermined. Czerkawski (2014) states that deeper learning encourages learners to be active in the learning environment to continuously explore, reflect, and produce information to build complex knowledge structures. It involves the interplay of the cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal skills necessary for the teachers to incorporate into the students' learning experiences.

In the Philippines, the teachings of 21st century skills are strongly emphasized starting at a young age, and laws have been enacted to meet this thrust. The right of all citizens to quality education at all levels is provided by the 1987 Philippine Constitution, where sections 1 and 2 of Article 14 on the Education, Science, and Technology, Arts, Culture and Sports, specifies that the State shall take appropriate steps to make education accessible to all Filipinos. The law also creates an integrated system of education relevant to the needs of the people and society. A system of free public education in the elementary and high school levels is, thus, provided under the Constitution.

To enable the country to become globally competitive, further improvements in the educational system through the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 (Republic Act 10533) were enacted. The law expands primary education from 10 years to 12 years. Before this law, Republic Act 10157 was signed in 2012, institutionalizing kindergarten education into the primary education system. The compulsory kindergarten is in line with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) on achieving Education for All (EFA) by 2015. Thus, the State is committed to make accessible kindergarten education that effectively promotes physical, social, intellectual, emotional, and skills stimulation and values formation to sufficiently prepare young learners for formal elementary schooling (Lewin, 2007; Britto, 2017).

Despite these policies, there have been concerns about the quality of Philippine education. The National Achievement Test (NAT) and the National Career Assessment Examination (NCAE) results in 2014 showed that students' performance in both exams was way below the target mean score. Also, the completion rate for primary school remains low (at around 30%) in such areas as Mindanao and Eastern Visayas. Another challenge faced by the Philippine educational system is budgetary allocation. While the Philippine Constitution mandates the government to allocate the highest proportion of its yearly budget to education, the Philippines has the lowest budget for education among ASEAN countries. Shortage of teachers in kindergarten due to lack of budgetary allocation from the national government for teachers' salary and training and an insufficient allocation for educational materials are also affecting the quality of education, according to a statement by Act Phils (2012).

Rationale of the Study

Over the years, the use of manipulatives in teaching young learners has gained acceptance. The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, the world's most extensive mathematics education organization in the United States, has encouraged the use of manipulatives in teaching a wide variety of topics in mathematics such as in sorting, ordering, distinguishing patterns, recognizing shapes, and understanding relationships among them, making measurements, using both nonstandard and standard units with application to both two and three-dimensional objects, understanding the system, comprehending operations, recognizing the relationships among operations, exploring and describing spatial relationships, identifying and describing different types, among others (Heddens, 1986; Sebesta, &

Martin, 2004; Sulistyaningsih et al., 2017). This has led to manipulatives being introduced to learners as young as those in kindergarten as part of their educational activities.

Nevertheless, the use of manipulatives has also gained acceptance in subjects other than mathematics. For instance, reading-based manipulatives help students learn concepts ranging from letter-sound correspondence to abstract grammatical concepts. In science, manipulatives are being used to make abstract information easier to understand (Berkseth, 2013).

As the world enters the 21st century, specific skills are needed in order for an individual to adapt to the changing socio-economic environment and become globally competitive. Often referred to as 21st century skills, these are specific core competencies such as collaboration, digital literacy, critical thinking, and problem-solving that schools need to teach to help students thrive in today's world (Rich, 2010). The composition of 21st century skills is best summarized by Trilling and Fadel (2009) using the following formula: 3Rs x 7Cs = 21st Century Learning. The more traditionally established skills of "Reading", "wRiting" and "aRithmetic" are represented by the 3Rs, while the modern key component, the 7Cs, stands for:

- Critical thinking and problem solving,
- Communication, information and media literacy,
- Collaboration, teamwork, and leadership,
- Creativity and innovation,
- Career and learning self-reliance,
- Cross-cultural understanding and
- Computer and ICT literacy.

21st century skills aim to create an individual who can contribute and become a productive member of his family, community, and country. This was emphasized by United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2013) when the organization stated that Early Childhood Development is one of the most cost-efficient investments in human capital that leads to a country's sustainable development. Economic analyses from the developed and developing world are converging on a set of conclusions, with the main idea being that investing in the earliest years leads to some of the highest rates of return to families, societies, and countries. As a result, governments started to put early childhood education into their agendas, especially after it was proven that good quality of early education has long-lasting effects on the children's later life productivity for the society.

As stated earlier, Republic Act 10533, or The Enhanced Basic Education Act of May 15, 2013, was enacted in response to the trend of developing skills for Filipinos to become globally competitive. This provision cites that the State shall create a functional basic education system that will develop productive and responsible citizens, equipped with the essential competencies, skills, and values for lifelong learning and employment. According to the Department of Education (2012), the K to 12 frameworks of the program puts in place a curriculum geared towards the development of 21st century skills among the students such as effective communication skills, learning, and innovative skills, information, media, and technology skills and life and career skills.

This study identified the general characteristics of kindergarten pupils and the commonly used manipulatives by teachers in their lessons with a view of relating these to how the 21st century skills can be taught to pupils in kindergarten. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework and variables that were under study.

It is worth noting that the current 21st century learning environment combines physical and digital infrastructures to support learning. The seamless integration of face-to-face and online learning is essential in the present situation where digital technology is rapidly gaining popularity in the educational system. In this scenario, the utilization of manipulatives – both physical and virtual – has been made possible.

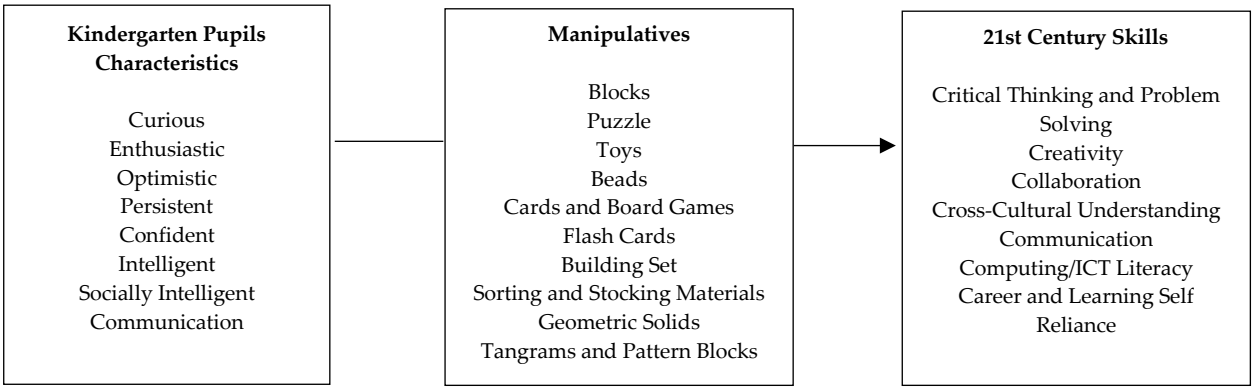

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

However, the study was conducted before the coronavirus pandemic; hence, the results used physical manipulatives while inside the classroom. As stated earlier, the popularity of manipulatives as tools to aid in teaching starting from the earliest years of the child's education has led to various types of manipulatives being present in the classrooms and used by teachers to teach essential skills. Hence, this study aims to identify the manipulatives available in kindergarten classrooms and observe how teachers optimize the use of manipulatives in kindergarten. This study aims to meet the following objectives:

1) Identify the available manipulatives being utilized by teachers in kindergarten classes;

2) Determine how 21st century skills can be developed using the different manipulatives; and

3) Describe how children exhibit the acquisition of 21st century skills through the use of manipulatives.

Methodology

Research Design

A descriptive mixed-method research design was employed in this study using secondary materials as references, while primary data sources included interviews, checklists, and on-site or classroom observation. The design of the study is non-experimental, as factual information is derived from the teachers on the manipulatives they use in teaching pupils in the kindergarten classroom and how these enable the learners to develop 21st century skills.

Sampling Procedure and Participants

The study is participated by 25 kindergarten teachers from selected schools in Pulilan, province of Bulacan. This location is one of the biggest towns in the province, with relatively bigger kindergarten schools. The study also took into account that only few researches were done regarding kindergarten schools in Pulilan. The teachers were selected based on their years of experience in teaching children at the kindergarten level.

The researchers excluded teachers' sex or gender as a consideration because the majority of teachers are female. The 25 teachers/respondents work at 11 schools, eight of which are public schools supervised and funded by the government, and three of which are private schools controlled by private people or businesses. The schools were purposefully chosen depending on the kindergarten enrollment and the accessibility of manipulatives in the classroom. Prior to conducting the study methods, the researchers sought formal approval from the school administration or principal of each school. Kindergarten instructors were informed of the research aims and methods following approval. After being informed of the study's objective, kindergarten instructors volunteered to participate. It was agreed upon confidentiality that no name of the teachers or schools would be made mentioned in the study.

Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers interviewed 25 kindergarten teachers in 11 schools in Pulilan, province of Bulacan, to determine the classroom's availability and commonly used manipulatives.

There were two stages in the data collection:

- The first stage involved distributing a checklist to each of the 25 kindergarten teachers to identify the types of manipulatives they use in their classrooms. After teachers completed the checklist, they were questioned to determine how they use manipulatives in their classrooms and what they believe are the 21st century abilities that can be taught using specific manipulatives. The researchers determine the frequency with which manipulatives are found in the classroom based on the teacher's responses. The mean score was calculated and ranked according to the manipulatives most frequently seen in kindergarten classrooms. Additionally, throughout the interviews, teachers were asked to identify barriers and concerns related to obtaining and utilizing manipulatives in their classrooms. Classification, analysis, comparison, and grouping were utilized to organize the data obtained from the interviews.
- The second stage involved the researchers observing the actual classes to see how the manipulatives are utilized during classes, how the learners behave towards manipulatives and the potential 21st century skills that can be developed. A total of 15 different sessions were observed and after each session, the researchers noted down their observations. The observations were categorized according to the four skills: effective collaboration, learning and innovations, information, media and technology, and life and career. These observations corroborated the replies of the teachers in the interviews conducted.

Results and Discussion

The data gathering process to determine the results led to the research meeting the three objectives of the study, namely: identify the available manipulatives being utilized by teachers in kindergarten classes; determine the 21st century skills that can be developed using the different manipulatives; and describe how children exhibit the acquisition of 21st century skills through the use of manipulatives.

Identification of Available Manipulatives in the Kindergarten Classrooms

From the checklists submitted by the 25 teachers and the results of the interviews conducted, it was found that that there are ten commonly used manipulatives in kindergarten classrooms as listed in Table 1, with blocks being present in all kindergarten classrooms. These blocks are usually made of wood or plastic, provided by the schools or purchased by the teachers. Likewise, these materials are readily available in the market, are inexpensive, and helpful in providing meaningful, relevant, and fun learning. This result was also observed in a study by Moyer (2001), stressing out that manipulatives like blocks can make teaching and learning 'fun' and promote the acquisition of different skills such as mathematics. Moreover, teachers have come to appreciate the learning opportunities that blocks offer, such as cognitive skills, social skills, language skills, and motor skills (Tunks, 2009).

Puzzles and toys ranked next in terms of popularity based on the answers in the checklist distributed and observed during the classroom visit. Toys were acquired through purchase and donations from pupils, parents, or other donors, while puzzles were provided by the Department of Education as part of the budgetary allocation for classroom learning materials. The absence of toys and puzzles in one classroom was due to a lack of supplies and donors. According to the comment of one teacher who participated in this study:

> The Department of Education does not provide any toys to our school. Sometimes, the teachers ask the pupils to bring toys so they will have something to use. However, the problem is that the pupils here belong to low-income families; that is why they could not give any for the school.

Table 1. Available manipulatives in kindergarten classrooms

Top 10 Manipulatives	Frequency	Mean Score	Rank
Blocks (woodblocks, plastic blocks)	25	1	1
Puzzle (jigsaw, wooden)	24	.96	2.5
Toys (stuffed, plastic, dolls, cars, etc.)	24	.96	2.5
Beads (small and big, plastic, wood, paper)	23	.92	5
Card and Board Games (indoor and memory)	23	.92	5
Flash Cards	23	.92	5
Building Set	22	.88	7
Sorting and Stocking Materials	17	.68	8.5
Geometric Solids	17	.68	8.5
Tangrams and Pattern Blocks	15	.60	10

Note: The identification of the top 10 manipulatives was based on the responses of 25 Kindergarten Teachers.

On the other hand, tangrams and pattern blocks were the least available in the classroom. Teachers answered that they are not familiar with tangrams and that tangrams have limited uses, as stated by one teacher, who said,

> In fact, I have seldom seen a school with tangrams. If ever we have, we could not learn how to use it because it does not apply to the lessons that we teach. Moreover, the use of tangrams for kindergarten is time-consuming and complicated.

Determining the 21st Century Skills Developed Using Manipulatives

Table 2 exhibits the 7C's Lifelong skills that Trilling and Fadel (2009) identified, summarizing the 21st century skills that a learner must acquire to be globally competitive. The table shows the tabulation of the submitted checklists and the interviews conducted with the 25 teachers/respondents indicating the different manipulatives available in the kindergarten classrooms and the teachers' perception of the skills acquired by the learner when using each manipulative.

The results in Table 2 show that classroom blocks have the highest potential in developing 21st century skills among kindergartens. Blocks are unstructured manipulative that are diverse in playability, simple in design, and are effective in stimulating and engaging children's imagination and creativity (Clavio and Fajardo, 2008). On the other hand, puzzles are the second most effective manipulatives in helping kindergarten develop the necessary skills for 21st century society. Puzzles can provide many skills and mental learning benefits and opportunities for kindergartens that increase visual-spatial awareness and grasping understanding correspond to cognitive development, problem-solving skills, decision making, and memory. Furthermore, puzzles can promote fine motor development, hand and eye coordination, socialization, self-esteem, and satisfaction (Aral et al., 2012). Observations of the classes where these manipulatives were used indicate the pupils' eagerness to participate in the learning process.

From the results, toys and flashcards ranked next in terms of potential for developing 21st century skills. Toys come in various forms and types and allow children their construction and organization of knowledge and making sense of their world. Toys invite children to create and use their imagination and can be the basis for socializing and establishing friendship. According to a study by Clavio and Fajardo (2008), playing with toys within a group helps children to gain self-confidence, their self-concept, and discover emotion. Flashcards are illustrated materials that can be used to teach various subjects. Beads, geometric solids, and building sets are next to have the potential to impart 21st century skills.

Table 2. Skills developed through the use of manipulatives as identified by the respondents

21st Century Skills	Manipulatives										
	Blocks	Puzzle	Toys	Beads	Cards and Board Games	Flash Cards	Building Set	Sorting and Stacking Materials	Geometric Solids	Tangrams and Patterns	TOTAL
Critical Thinking and Problem Solving	1	1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	9
Creativity	1	1	1	1			1		1	1	7
Career Learning Self-Reliance	1	1	1	1		1	1	1			7
Collaboration	1	1	1		1	1				1	6
Cross-Cultural Understanding	1	1	1		1	1			1		6
Communication	1	1	1		1	1	1				6
Computing/ICT Literacy	1			1				1	1		4

Note: The 7C's Lifelong skills was from Trilling, B., & Fadel, C., 21st Century Skills: Learning for Life in Our Times, 2009.

It is worth noting that all respondents agreed that the available manipulatives could teach 21st century skills identified by Trilling and Fadel (2009). Critical thinking and problem-solving are being developed by 90% of all the manipulatives identified. By using the manipulatives, kindergarten pupils can work independently; hence, their critical thinking and problem-solving skills are enhanced. Creativity and Career Learning/Self-Reliance are 21st century skills that can be developed by 70% of the manipulatives identified, while three skills, namely, Collaboration/Cross-Cultural Understanding and Communication, can be developed by 60% of the manipulatives. The 21st century skills of Computing/ICT Literary are developed by 40% of the manipulatives identified.

Based on the findings of the study, not all manipulatives can develop all skills simultaneously. This is due to the differences in nature and characteristics of the manipulatives resulting in varied competency development. Results of this study can imply that a specific manipulative has its unique focus. Nevertheless, a combination of several manipulatives used by kindergarten pupils in their creative ways can maximize the development of 21st century skills. The results also indicate that kindergarten pupils become more proactive when manipulatives are used during their classes.

Interviews with the teachers also revealed some of their concerns about the use of manipulatives. These include:

- The need for continuous teachers' training on how they can maximize the use of manipulatives in their teaching;
- The availability of new and more advanced manipulatives – both physical and virtual – to meet the changing needs and interest of the young learners;
- Budget allocation for the purchase of modern manipulatives and reference materials on how to properly use these manipulatives in the classroom.

Children Exhibit Acquisition of 21st Century Skills through Manipulatives

The demand of society in developing individuals who are equipped with 21st century skills is very high. Even during the early year of schooling, children are provided with learning experiences that promote these essential skills. Teachers are using different materials, including manipulatives, to help children develop 21st century skills.

Based on the data gathered from the observations, manipulatives help children develop skills in four different skill categories. These are practical collaboration skills, learning and innovation, information, media and technology, and life and career. Under the effective collaboration skills, the highest frequency values were obtained in "develop language and vocabulary" and "enhanced relationship with peers," as

shown in Table 3. These findings reinforce the study of Felix-Aguelo (2017) that indicated collaborative learning improves the following skills of the learners: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. These are manifested when they are talking, asking, sharing thoughts, and working with each other. Meanwhile, "practice negotiation skills and team player" was observed minimally. Most of the classroom lessons and activities that use manipulatives were individualized, and there are very few instances where a child is guided to be a leader.

Table 3. Result on observation for effective communication skills

Specific Skills from using Manipulatives	Frequency	Verbal Interpretation
Develop Language and Vocabulary	0.66	Above average
Enhanced Relationship with Peers	0.80	Above average
Practice Negotiation Skills	0.46	Average
Team Player	0.53	Average

Note: The data was based on the results of classroom observations in 15 different sessions.

In Table 4, the *Learning and Innovation* capabilities developed through the use of manipulatives are shown. Topping the skills are critical thinking, learning through play, and enjoy and arouse interest with very high rating in the Likert Scale Interpretation. Indeed, manipulatives are exciting materials where children learn implicitly while engaged in playing and enjoying themselves. The skills that fall above-average rate are problem-solving, constructing their understanding and observing, questioning, experimenting, & exploring. The average rate is matching, sorting and classifying, team player, and creativity.

Table 4. Results of observation on learning and innovation skills

Specific Skills from using Manipulatives	Frequency	Verbal Interpretation
Critical Thinking	0.86	Very High
Matching, Sorting, and Classifying	0.53	Average
Problem Solving Skills	0.66	Above average
Team Player	0.53	Average
Creativity	0.53	Average
Construct their Own Understanding	0.8	Above average
Enjoy and Arouse Interest	1.00	Very high
Learn Through Play	0.93	Very high
Observing, Questioning, Experimenting, and Exploring	0.80	Above average

Note: The data was based on the results of classroom observations in 15 different sessions.

The skills covered by *Information, Media and Technology* such as critical thinking, learning through play, enjoy and arouse interest, fine and gross motor skills come up with the best result (see Table 5). Fun while playing and learning was viewed during observation. Also, these enhance small and big muscles by just lifting, arranging, and playing with the manipulatives. Meanwhile, eye-hand coordination and problem-solving skills have an above-average rate. From the observation, as pupils use specific materials, they were able to learn through their discovery and solve and finish a given problem by themselves through their way.

Table 5. Results of observation for information and media technology skills

Specific Skills from using Manipulatives	Frequency	Verbal Interpretation
Eye-Hand Coordination	0.8	Above average
Gross and Fine Motor skills	1.00	Very high
Critical Thinking	0.86	Very high
Problem Solving	0.66	Above average
Enjoy and Arouse Interest	1.00	Very high
Creativity	0.53	Average
Learn Through Play	0.93	Very high

Note: The data was based on the results of classroom observations in 15 different sessions.

Last, included in *Life and Career* capabilities as top skills from the use of manipulatives are fine and gross motor skills, helping to clean up, and initiative and self-direction (see Table 6). We observed that,

aside from the cognitive part, the psychomotor domain was also enhanced by manipulatives, through and with the help of the teacher's instruction. The children know what to do with the materials after they finish using them. This provides early training to form the habit of organizing or packing away their stuff correctly after use. The last skill, leadership, has the lowest rating among all the skills as students work alone and do not do much of group or teamwork wherein they can guide and lead a group.

Table 6. Result of observation for life and career skills

Specific Skills from using Manipulatives	Frequency	Verbal Interpretation
Gross and Fine Motor Skills	1.00	Very high
Eye-Hand Coordination	0.80	Above average
Decision Making Skills	0.66	Above average
Self Confidence	0.8	Above average
Help to Clean-up	0.93	Very high
Leadership	0.13	Low
Initiative and Self Direction	0.86	Very high
Productivity	0.80	Above average

Note: The data was based on the results of classroom observations in 15 different sessions.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Manipulatives are today's well-known tools for teaching kindergarten pupils. This study found that there are manipulatives used by kindergarten teachers that are effective tools for teaching and imparting 21st century skills to young learners. The manipulatives are directly applied and used by the pupils and have the potential to raise the level of interest of learners to engage in the lesson. The manipulatives available in kindergarten schools are appropriate in helping 5-year-old children develop the 21st century skills required because they match the child's characteristics.

The type of manipulative aids the teacher in achieving the goal of early childhood education within the 21st century context. There are various types of manipulatives currently being used, and these have provided opportunities for learners to develop one or more skills depending on their characteristics and the functions of the manipulatives. The study also found that skills development may vary depending on the activity and type of manipulatives utilized. However, distinct observation has verified that manipulatives directly contact pupils and give them first-hand learning, leading to the effective development of 21st century skills among kindergarten pupils.

Various types of manipulatives are available today in both private and public schools. However, there is a need for teacher training to optimize manipulatives because not all kindergarten teachers today are Early Childhood Education graduates. Also, this study perceives that not all of the manipulatives are present in kindergarten classrooms. Teachers make improvised materials to achieve the same purpose or rely on donations from their pupils or outside sources.

Based on the results and conclusion of the study, the following recommendations are hereby extended:

The study suggests that teachers be encouraged to promote creative teaching strategies using materials aligned to the philosophy, context, and goals of the K-12 curriculum. These teachers must have access to training to maximize the use of manipulatives and be instructed to let the pupils use the materials instead of keeping the materials inside the cabinet or putting them on display.

This study also recommends for the schools to be allocated with sufficient annual budget to support the acquisition of manipulatives for all kindergarten classrooms. The effective manipulatives found in other countries should also be made available in Philippine schools to implement effective use of teaching materials to achieve efficient learning and holistic development of a growing child in order for him to acquire the 21st century skills needed to bring him at par with his counterparts in other countries.

Declarations

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Research Article

Integration of education for sustainability in the preschool curriculum: A comparative study between the two latest Swedish curricula

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Abstract: The aim of this study is to provide a content analysis of the new Swedish preschool curriculum in comparison with the previous preceding curriculum to investigate how sustainability and education for sustainability (EfS) have been described, and whether there have been any changes in terms of the scope of their inclusion in the new curriculum. The study adopts a holistic view of sustainability, meaning that the environmental dimension, social dimension, and economic dimension, along with a pluralistic and transformative view of EfS, form the analytical framework. Using content analysis, the frequency of explicit and implicit descriptive words for sustainability and EfS in both curricula were investigated. A contextual analysis was also conducted that involved an interpretation of the meaning of the implicit words. Two main findings could be identified in the new curriculum in comparison to the previous curriculum. The first was that the term sustainability is now used from an explicit and holistic perspective that includes all three dimensions. The second was that the new curriculum provides guidance as to how to incorporate EfS where such words as investigating, participation, collaborate and develop are used. Together with the context in which these words appear, a picture forms of a pluralistic teaching tradition in preschool curricula. Overall, the analysis provides a picture of change in the Swedish preschool curriculum that is in line with the intentions of international policy and research relating to a need for increased focus on sustainability and EfS.

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Introduction

On July 1, 2019, a new curriculum for preschool in Sweden (rev. 2018) was introduced that incorporated substantial changes when compared with the previous curriculum (rev. 2016). New to the Swedish curriculum for preschool 2018 are the word *teaching* and the fact that sustainability has been explicitly referred to under the heading "Sustainable Development, Health and Well-Being" (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018, p. 9). Sustainability is also mentioned in other goals that are formulated in the new preschool curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018). These changes make it interesting to study in more detail any possible differences that exist between the new curriculum and the previous curriculum when it comes to sustainability and the way in which education for sustainability (EfS) in preschool is formulated.

EfS is an important part of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations (UN) (2015) that form the basis of Agenda 2030. These global goals provide a roadmap for sustainability efforts until the year 2030 and apply to the countries that signed the agreement, of which Sweden is one. Talk about a holistic view of sustainability refers to the three dimensions that form sustainability: the environment dimension, the economic dimension, and the social dimension. The environment dimension is about the ecosystem and biological diversity, which includes natural resources and the climate. The economic dimension covers the division of human and material resources, while the social dimension refers to human rights, cultural differences, health, and democracy (Atkinson et al., 2007; World Commission on

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Environment and Development [WCED], 1987). The question addressed here is how this holistic approach is apparent in the preschool curriculum.

A specific teaching method, EfS, is presented in both policy (UNESCO, 2005; 2017), practice (Naturskyddsföreningen, 2017), and research (Eilam & Trop, 2010) as a way to develop the competence of school pupils to act in relation to sustainability. The importance of EfS has also been established in preschool teaching because it can affect the development of young children's attitudes and future behaviour relating to sustainability issues (Inoue et al., 2016) and in more recent years has been highlighted as an important aspect of research on preschools (Borg & Gericke, 2021; Gericke et al., 2020). Another question thus raised is whether this teaching perspective is reflected in the new Swedish curriculum.

Previous studies of the presence of sustainability issues in earlier Swedish preschool curricula show that the sustainability perspective has been left out (Elliott et al., 2017; Weldemariam et al., 2017). In this study, a comparison is conducted of the new curriculum (rev. 2018) with the previous curriculum (rev. 2016) to investigate whether there have been any changes when it comes to sustainability and EfS. The absence of sustainability is a shortcoming identified in studies from an international perspective as well; indeed, according to Weldemariam et al. (2017), there is a lack in the curricula of most countries of a broader view of sustainability in terms of how human beings can affect the future of the planet. Weldemariam et al. (2017) argue that curricula need to be analysed to investigate whether there is place for EfS, and they pose this question: "What might an early childhood education curriculum, that manifest explicit language of sustainability, views children as world citizens and portrays a unified world view with entangled human and more-than-human others, look like?" (p. 349). This is an interesting thought, and the question is whether or not Sweden's new curriculum for preschool meets that requirement.

In a previous study, Borg and Pramling Samuelsson (in press) investigated how children's participation and agency in EfS are presented in the new curriculum. They concluded that the new curriculum conveys a perspective of children as competent and active participants in their own learning. The results of the study demonstrate that certain expressions appear that point towards transformative learning, that is to say, learning in which children think, act and learn in relation to sustainability (Borg & Pramling Samuelsson, in press). The picture presented by the study shows there to be a changed perspective of children in the new curriculum compared with that in the previous curriculum. This indicates that one of the criteria that Weldemariam et al. (2017) highlight – the child as a world citizen – is acknowledged in the new curriculum, yet there are no studies on how the terms *sustainability* and *EfS* have changed nor how they are presented in the new curriculum, and this is what this study aims to investigate. Indeed, this study aims to investigate and compare how the different dimensions of sustainability are expressed in the new Swedish preschool curriculum compared with the previous curriculum, and also whether there are any indications as to how EfS can be implemented. The aim of the study is to investigate if the new Swedish curriculum (rev. 2018) provide the incentive needed to stimulate preschool teachers and childcarers to educate for sustainability and in that way make children aware of sustainability related issues.

This study addresses the following questions:

- How do the new Swedish curriculum for preschool (rev. 2018) and the previous curriculum (rev. 2016) differ in terms of their description of the term *sustainability*?
- Does the new Swedish curriculum for preschool describe how EfS can be implemented, and if so, how?

Literature Review – Sustainability in Preschool

Current research on the presence of sustainability and EfS in the Swedish curricula for preschool is limited when it comes to the new curriculum. However, some research, both national and international, presents a picture of the research field that will be addressed in the following sections.

Presence of Sustainability in Curricula and Practice

According to Eidevald and Engdahl (2018), the role of the preschool in terms of a sustainable lifestyle in society has been very significant. According to the previous Swedish curriculum (rev. 2016), children must learn how to look after nature and respect all living things (Pramling Samuelsson & Park, 2017). The environmental dimension of sustainability in the curriculum has, according to Weldemariam et al. (2017), dominated curricula in many countries, something that according to Davis (2009) and Ärlemalm-Hagsér (2017) is evident also in practice, where focus on sustainability has been on ecological sustainability or – as it is termed in everyday talk and in the curriculum – nature and the environment. The strong focus of the preschool on issues relating to nature and the environment have, on the other hand, limited the interest in including other dimensions of sustainability – that is to say, the economic and social dimensions. Outdoor visits in nature, composting and recycling are common activities in most preschools, whereas discussions and activities with a social and economic focus on sustainability are few and far between (Borg et al., 2017; Eidevald & Engdahl, 2018; Engdahl & Ärlemalm-Hagsér, 2014).

An increased presence of sustainability in the curriculum, where a holistic perspective is adopted, is an important way to demonstrate a will to build on EfS in preschool. Elliott and McCrea (2015) state the importance of the inclusion and clarification of the term *sustainability* in the curriculum if the preschool is to develop its education accordingly. To gain an overall view of the place sustainability has in preschool education, studies have been conducted where comparisons are made with the preschool curricula of several countries and where there is a close look at the way in which the issue of sustainability is dealt with (Elliott et al., 2017; Weldemariam et al., 2017). In their study, Weldemariam et al. (2017) examined the curricula of five countries, namely Australia, England, Norway, Sweden, and the USA. These were analysed with a view to four areas of comparison, of which sustainability was one. The countries that featured sustainability most strongly in their curricula were Norway and Australia, followed closely by Sweden with its previous curriculum (rev. 2016). The respective curriculum of the USA and England had limited links to sustainability according to the study. Elliott et al. (2017) interviewed preschool teachers and studied the curricula of four countries: Australia, South Korea, Sweden, and the USA. The results of their study demonstrated that of the three dimensions, sustainability predominantly concerned the environment dimension. They argued that the social and economic dimensions, as well as even the environment dimension, need to be given more focus in the curricula of all the countries. They further identified the need to increase teachers' competence in all the countries when it comes to EfS. When preschool teachers have better knowledge and understanding, then this has been shown to increase opportunities for better understanding among children (Borg, 2017a; Elliott et al., 2017).

EfS in the Curriculum

Teaching methods and the perspective of the child are interdependent because teaching develops according to our view of children (Jonsson et al., 2017). Ärlemalm-Hagsér and Davis (2014) analysed and compared the Swedish curriculum (rev. in 2010) with the Australian curriculum for preschool in terms of their incorporation of the term *sustainability* with focus on three aspects: *recognition of humans' place in nature and environmental stewardships; critical thinking for sustainability; references to children as active agents and citizens for change of the term sustainability.* Their study showed that neither country's curriculum explicitly recognised children as active citizens with the agency to work towards sustainability – that is to say, global citizens. This, they argue, is a failing, adding that preschool teachers and childcarers must involve children's knowledge, questions and thoughts more in their teaching so that children, at a deeper level, can build their understanding of sustainability and thus be able to have a voice on matters concerning it. Further, in their study of the view of the child in the curricula of five countries, Weldemariam et al. (2017) concluded that there were failings in the described view of the child and that the view of the child in the previous Swedish curriculum (rev. 2016) was closest to that of the child as a "global citizen".

According to Borg and Pramling Samuelsson (in press), the new Swedish preschool curriculum includes the child's perspective such as Ärlemalm-Hagsér and Davis (2014) felt was lacking in the previous curriculum, namely the agency of the child. Borg and Pramling Samuelsson (in press) argue that the active

participation and influence of children are evident in the new curriculum, where children are presented as active agents for change in relation to sustainability practices. As well, the issue of global citizenship is identified in the new Swedish curriculum. Borg and Pramling Samuelsson (in press) mention that it is not enough simply to recognise children's agency; rather, there is a need to investigate how children's agency can be developed in relationship to sustainability.

Like Engdahl and Ärlemalm-Hagsér (2014), Pramling Samuelsson and Park (2017) determined that children's participation, knowledge, questions and thoughts are important in EfS. In their analysis of the previous Swedish curriculum (rev. 2010) and UNESCO goals, they concluded that children need to be able to act on their own initiative, to think and to reflect so that they can learn and form a knowledgebase. According to Pramling Samuelsson and Park (2017), first EfS needs to be included in lifelong learning and second staff need to be educated so that they know and understand children, children's learning and sustainability if EfS is to be of any quality in the preschool. For this to be possible, they maintain that the section in the previous Swedish curriculum about sustainability must be revised and improved (Pramling Samuelsson & Park, 2017).

EfS in Preschool Education

Studies show that what children learn remains with them in later years. Quality preschool education has a positive effect on children's well-being, health, and intellectual and social behaviour – especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Muennig et al., 2011; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2008). Preschool education can also greatly affect the development of young children's attitudes and future behaviour in relationship to sustainability issues. Therefore, it is important to integrate EfS into preschool education so that children, the future citizens of this world, are aware of the serious environmental situation currently facing Earth and are prepared to be part of the solution to the problems, which often relate to economic and social issues (Eriksen, 2013; Grindheim et al., 2019; Pramling Samuelsson, 2011).

All in all, it can be argued that the presence of sustainability in Sweden's previous curriculum was weak and that any duty to educate for sustainability was absent. Sustainability in preschool has been about the environment, the result of which has been the lower prioritisation of the other dimensions. Yet the question is whether the new Swedish curriculum presents another picture in which sustainability connected to the three dimensions is evident and whether it supports EfS (this is something that previous curricula did not do according to previous research), and as such whether it can form the sound basis that preschool teachers and childcarers require if it is to be possible to implement EfS in preschool. These questions are explored in this study.

Theoretical Starting Points

This study analyses the curriculum from a holistic perspective on sustainability as well as a pluralistic and transformative view of EfS. To describe these theoretical starting points, an explanation is crucial as to what is meant by a holistic perspective on sustainability and how the human relationship to the holistic perspective. The pluralistic and transformative perspective of EfS has been clarified based on the literature on environmental and sustainability teaching traditions.

Sustainability

The term *sustainability* is used throughout this article as a general term covering similar concepts such as sustainable development; however, the term *sustainable development* is also used in the citations when referencing others who specifically use that term. However, here no distinction has been made between the meaning of these two terms.

According to the literature, sustainability is described as usually consisting of three dimensions: environment, economic and social, all of which are interdependent (Elliott, 2013; Giddings et al., 2002). Often, the relationship between these dimensions is presented in a Venn diagram (Figure 1). The figure shows how all three dimensions together create what is required for sustainability to be achieved, which is what happens where the dimensions (circles) overlap. The dimensions connect to the relationship people

have with nature, themselves and other people.

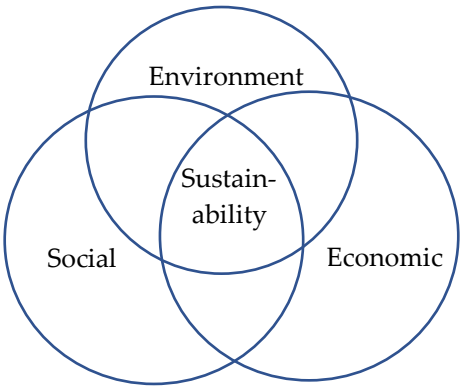

Figure 1. When the three dimensions overlap, sustainability is achieved (Giddings et al., 2002).

One example of how these dimensions come together in questions connected to the relationship of people to nature is the importance of nature on people's health. Nature that is accessible provides us with a place to meet others while having a beneficial effect on our health. Better health means less of a financial burden on healthcare services. The result of this is that money saved in healthcare can contribute to creating and maintaining our natural surroundings, which then become a social arena (Giddings et al., 2002). What this exemplifies is that each dimension affects the other and that all are important for both people and sustainability.

A further example, one in which the different dimensions can conflict with each other, is when a new preschool is built that because of economic factors limits/affects both environmental and social sustainability. Economic resources are not always enough to provide for a good ecological environment and for a safe social environment for children. As such, the model (Figure 1) demonstrates a holistic perspective on sustainability where people are dependent both on each other as well as on nature, and vice versa. Sustainability issues are often complex, and it is difficult to predict how one action within one dimension will affect the outcome in another. Often, conflicts can arise between the interest in preserving and the interest in developing the different aspects within the dimensions (Elliott, 2013; Wals & Corcoran, 2012).

Despite the model (Figure 1) appearing static and not showing how the dimensions vary in terms of participation in different situations, Giddings et al. (2002) maintain that the model provides something to relate to in an understanding of how sustainability arises in collaboration that overlaps between the three dimensions. To achieve a balanced development of sustainability, all dimensions need to be developed together and there needs to be an understanding of how they affect one another (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2010). The discussion between child and adult is an important element of preschool in making children aware of the complexity that comes with sustainability (Borg, 2017a). Therefore, it is important that the curriculum has a holistic view of sustainability and that preschool teachers and childcarers have the knowledge required to have discussions with children about sustainability that lead to an increased understanding of how the dimensions are mutually dependent and this becomes a part of their education.

To know, to do, to live together and to learn to be a human being, according to Lawale and Aline (2010), are the four pillars of EfS. They believe that the synergy between these four, along with EfS, is essential. Here, the role of people in sustainability is evident as is the way people as agents of all the sustainability dimensions are important in the sense that human beings can use their knowledge and actions to work to achieve sustainability. For preschool teachers and childcarers to be able to increase understanding of the importance of EfS in preschool, the curriculum must also demonstrate this (Weldemariam et al., 2017). This is the basis to the choice of categories in this analysis, where it is possible to connect every dimension to people.

The Human Being – Environment Relationship (Environment). The connection between human beings and the environment is important, and the way in which people as individuals can affect the environment is an aspect of the environment dimension. The environment covers both the indoor and the outdoor environment where ecology is an aspect; however, the dimension includes other types of environments influenced by human activities. This relationship includes natural resources, climate change, rural development, sustainable urbanisation, disaster prevention, and mitigation (UNESCO, 2006).

The Human Being – Human Being Relationship (Social). Social sustainability concerns people's lives together and the way in which they are affected by social, cultural and political dissimilarities in society (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2010). This relationship includes human rights, peace and human security, gender equality, cultural diversity, and intercultural understanding and health (UNESCO, 2006).

The Human Being – Resource Relationship (Economic). According to UNESCO (2014), consumption lies closest to children's everyday lives when it comes to economic sustainability. What this means is that an understanding of the value of money and economic value is crucial for children as future consumers (Borg, 2017b). In preschool, recycling and reusing are two important aspects of economic sustainability as are discussions about resources and consumption in relation to the environment and people's different life conditions (Ärlemalm-Hagsér et al., 2018). This relationship includes poverty reduction, corporate responsibility, accountability and market economy (UNESCO, 2006).

Education for Sustainability. Teaching is a new concept in the new Swedish preschool curriculum (rev. 2018) despite the fact it has been included in Swedish education law since 2010 (SFS 2010:800). There has been no prior analysis of the concept of teaching in the preschool curriculum from a sustainability perspective. This study is based on EfS as it is described according to a pluralistic teaching tradition that Öhman and Östman (2001) identified in the Swedish compulsory school curriculum Lpo 94. Öhman and Östman (2001) identified three teaching traditions: fact-based, normative, and pluralistic.

The fact-based teaching tradition conveys prepared facts and concepts that pupils/children are expected to take a position on and act on. The normative teaching tradition has its basis in scientific fact, and this creates norms and affects the attitudes of children, the underlying idea being that this will lead to a change in action. Central to the pluralistic teaching tradition is the participation of children in their learning, where dialogue supports them as they actively and critically evaluate alternatives where various scientific understandings as well as moral and ethical aspects are given place (Öhman & Östman, 2001). The pluralistic teaching tradition has been identified as having a basis in EfS and holistic perspectives on sustainability (Öhman, 2008), which is why this teaching tradition is the starting point of this study of the Swedish preschool curriculum.

Making use of children's knowledge and thoughts through dialogue is what characterises the pluralistic teaching tradition, which has the advantage of highlighting values and avoiding indoctrination by developing different views and perspectives on sustainability issues. Therefore, a pluralistic teaching tradition should be made visible in the curriculum so that preschool teachers and childcarers are able to develop an understanding of EfS, maintains Öhman (2008). Hedefalk (2014), who in contrast to Öhman (2008) has the preschool as her research field, also believes that the pluralistic teaching tradition provides children with the best means to act critically and to develop action competency for sustainability because children themselves must take a position on matters and be given the opportunity to influence their learning. Yet she argues that for pluralistic teaching to work for young preschool children, it needs to include factual knowledge and norms as well (Hedefalk, 2014).

Lijmbach et al. (2002) view social pluralism as a tool with which children can together create facts and norms using each other's experiences and the help of an adult. In child-to-child discussions and child-to-adult discussions, there is an understanding that not everybody thinks the same way; at the same time, children must be able to argue for what they feel is right. Mezirow (1991) terms this reflective learning transformative, which, unlike instrumental and communicative learning, is learning that occurs by way of reflection on experiences that together create new, useful knowledge. This means that it is important to give children time for reflection in preschool, where children's opportunities to reflect on new experiences

also become an important part in their learning, actions and personal well-being. Transformative teaching allows children to reflect and to develop facts and norms by way of their own experiences and those of others, with the support of active preschool teachers and childcarers. This means that facts and norms become a product in the process in which there is a pluralistic teaching tradition. This reasoning strengthens the relationship between EfS and a pluralistic teaching tradition as facts and norms become a tool in the learning process that is created through reflection with others.

In this analysis of EfS, it is assumed that EfS and the pluralistic teaching tradition are closely related, and that transformative learning must be in place for children to increase their awareness of sustainability and how they can be involved and influence. The curriculum is important in terms of how preschool teachers and childcarers relate to EfS, which is why it is important that it relates to the pluralistic teaching tradition.

Methodology

This is a comparative study with a deductive research design, which according to Robson and McCartan (2011) means employing a theory in a new observation. The study used a directed content analysis as its method (Cohen et al., 2018), where categories were created with reference to the three dimensions of sustainability, as well as the term teaching, so as to answer the questions put forward in this study.

For this study, a process of analysis was used in the six steps that according to Cohen et al. (2018) should be followed in a content analysis, such as described below:

1). *Choice of text*: the texts that were analysed in the study were from the previous curriculum (rev. 2016) and the newly revised preschool curriculum (rev. 2018) in Sweden.

2). *Division of text for analysis*: like Elliott and McCrea (2015), this study looked for explicit and implicit descriptions of sustainability and EfS in the curricula for the text analysis. In the analysis, the suggestion by Elliott and McCrea (2015) that in an analysis of policy documents, researchers should study both the direct language use (that is to say, explicit expressions), and the indirect language use (that is to say, implicit expressions), was followed. This analytical approach is important when conducting a comprehensive content analysis of the message of a text (Elliott & McCrea, 2015). The explicit words provide a meaning or a direct connection to the subject/area that is relevant, and the implicit words are directly linked to the explicit words or replace them in the text as concrete examples; furthermore, through the context in which they are included, they can provide a greater understanding of the message the text is trying to relay.

3 and 4). *Suitable categories were selected*, and *category placement*: The explicit terms form a category of their own, whereas the implicit words were categorised according to the context that was identified. The explicit and implicit words were analysed relating to both of the research questions.

Related to the first research question, an inventory of the explicit words that stand for sustainability and its dimensions, i.e. *sustainable development, social, economic, ecologic* and *environment* was established. Ecologic is an explicit word here since in preschool education, it is often used for representing the environment (Elliott et al., 2017)[1]. Implicit words were coded if the meaning of the word by implication includes, or can be traced to, sustainable development and its dimensions.

Related to the second research question, an inventory of the explicit word *teaching* was created, and for the implicit words, verbs indirectly used to describe how teaching is to be conducted in preschool were coded as an indicator of EfS.

After identifying the implicit words, the context in which they appear was analysed related to both research questions, so as to understand the meaning they have in the text. The context allows for a deeper understanding of the curriculum and the way sustainability and EfS are presented.

[1] In the implicit analysis, we view the term ecologic as a part of the environment dimension.

A number of identified implicit words belong in more than one category; however, the most frequently occurring context that the word appears in were reported. Though, words that were categorised according to sustainability (first research question) can also appear in the categories related to EFS (second research question).

For a systematic and valid study, in this analysis an iterative research process was employed, where the selection of implicit words and definitions of contexts were discussed and reanalysed within the research group, first by a researcher and thereafter independently by another researcher. Throughout this process of pinpointing implicit words and the context in which they were found, colour coding was used to show and categorise the words.

5). *Word frequency*: After categorising the words according to whether they were explicitly or implicitly used in the respective curriculum, the frequencies were compiled quantitatively. This also shows how both explicit and implicit words are divided according to the three dimensions of sustainability and those that describe EfS.

6). *Overall Analysis*: This involved conducting a concluding analysis of the text and finding answers to the study's research questions where frequency analysis and context analysis work together and lead to an overall conclusion.

Results

The explicit words are presented first, and after that the implicit words are presented as this allows for a general comparison. Finally, the results are presented in more detail in each respective category, with excerpts from the new curriculum that clarify the results of this study in relation to the context.

Explicit Words Relating to Sustainability and EfS

In the new preschool curriculum (rev. 2018), more explicit words are used than was the case in the previous curriculum. The previous Swedish curriculum (rev. 2016) did not contain the explicit words *sustainable development* or *sustainability*, *economic* and *teaching* at all: these can, however, all be found in the new curriculum (rev. 2018) (see Figure 2). The term *sustainable development*, for example, appears eight times in the new curriculum. The social dimension is the most prominent of the sustainability dimensions in both the new curriculum and the previous curriculum, while the economic dimension is used twice explicitly in the new curriculum (Figure 2).

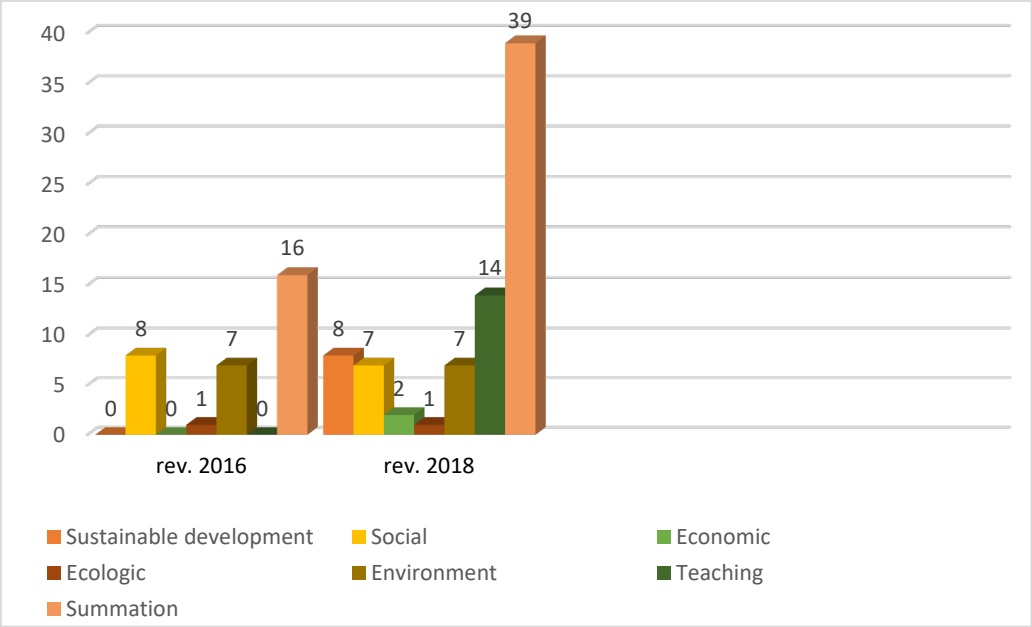

Figure 2. Explicit words for sustainability and EfS in the two curricula rev. 2016 and rev. 2018. In the Swedish preschool curriculum rev. 2018, the word *sustainable development* is used instead of *sustainability*. *Ecologic* is taken as an explicit word here.

Sustainability is often associated with environment and nature, but the new curriculum uses it from a holistic perspective where it describes all dimensions as shown in this quote: "Education should be undertaken in democratic forms and lay the foundation for growing interest and responsibility among children for active participation in civic life and for sustainable development – not only economic, but also social and environmental" (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018, p. 5).

The explicit word that appears most frequently in the new curriculum is the word *teaching*, which was not used in the previous curriculum. This word appears 14 times in the new curriculum.

Implicit Words Relating to Sustainability and EfS

The implicit words are relevant since they provide meaning to the text and are important for a deep analysis of the message in the curriculum when it comes to sustainability and EfS. Besides looking at the presence of words, an analysis was conducted of the context in which they most often appear as this helps with understanding. The context allows for a deeper understanding of the word's meaning in the curriculum and its relation to sustainability and EfS.

Implicit words for sustainability appear in the previous curriculum 302 times and 337 times in the new curriculum (Figure 3), that is to say, there is a slight increase. Here, it is words in the social category that dominate: the difference is 263 times in the previous curriculum and 298 times in the new curriculum. In the other dimension categories, environment and economy – the implicit words – appear the same number of times in both curricula.

The implicit words that dominate in the previously revised curriculum (rev. 2016), and the newly revised curriculum (rev. 2018), are, respectively, *development/develop/be developed* (82/69 times) as well as *learning* (40/47 times). Words that appear more frequently in the new curriculum compared with the previous curriculum are, for example, *health, care, understanding* and *challenge*, all of which may belong to the social category. What this shows is that the new curriculum not only demonstrates a holistic view of sustainability but also gives more room for social perspectives on sustainability.

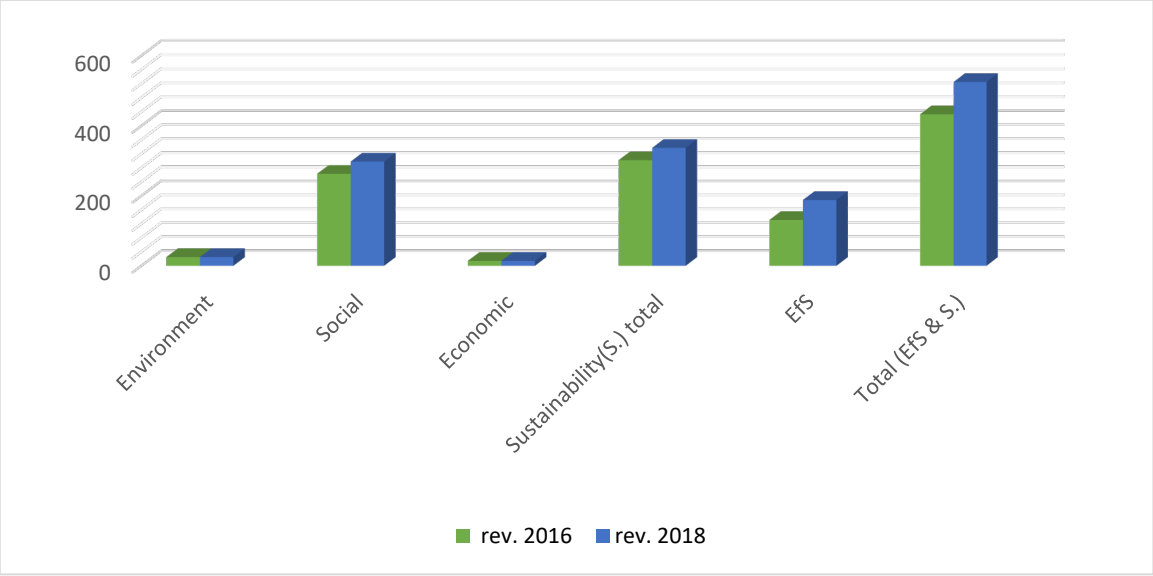

Figure 3. Implicit words for sustainable development divided into the three dimensions and EfS in the respective curriculum and the total.

When it comes to implicit words related to EfS, there is an increase from 131 to 188 in the new curriculum, which demonstrates an increase in the focus on the teaching perspective (Figure 3). The most frequent implicit words that relate to EfS in the new curriculum and that mark the view on learning and teaching are *develop, create* and *promote.* Other implicit words related to EfS that appear often are *challenge* and *understand.* These are words that can be related to the pluralistic teaching tradition in the new curriculum (rev. 2018).

The synthesis of the analysis shows some recurring patterns that the new curriculum reinforces (see Table 1). In both curricula, *social* and environment as explicit words for sustainability dominate; however, in the new curriculum, the holistic term sustainable development and the word *economy* are used as explicit words, something that is new. The implicit words that are most commonly used to express sustainability are similar in both curricula. In the analysis of EfS, *teaching* is a new explicit word in the new curriculum, and new implicit words such as *stimulate*, *promote* and *challenge* have been added in relation to the term *teaching*.

For a broader contextual understanding of how the various explicit and implicit words are used in the new curriculum, every category is exemplified with excerpts in the review below of the categories from the new Swedish curriculum.

Table 1. Synthesis of the explicit and implicit words for sustainability and EfS in both curricula

Areas	**Curriculum**	
	rev. 2016	**rev. 2018**
Sustainability	The explicit words that appear in the previous curriculum are *social* and *environment*, which characterise the preschool culture that has long existed in which care and nature/environment are important elements. The explicit words that do not appear are *sustainability* and *economy*, which demonstrates an absence of a holistic view of sustainability.	Explicit words in the new curriculum are significantly more common than in the previous curriculum and demonstrate a holistic view of sustainability. *Sustainability* and the *social* and *environment* dimensions are the most common explicit words. *Economy* features a couple of times; however, it does not appear to be an area that is prioritised.
EfS	The social dimension features in the previous curriculum, where *development* and *learning* are the implicit words that appear most often. Environment and economy have few implicit words. The explicit word that is looked for here is *teaching*, which never appears in this curriculum. The implicit words for EfS that are most used are *develop, learn, understand, create,* and *investigate.*	The social dimension has place in the new curriculum, where *development* and *learning* are the implicit words that appear most often. Environment and economy continue to have few implicit words. The explicit word that is sought is *teaching,* which is also the explicit word that is used most frequently among all explicit words in the analysis (14 times). The implicit words for EfS that are most used are *develop, create, promote, learn, challenge,* and *stimulate.*

Overall Analysis Relating to Sustainability and EfS

The Environment Dimension

Environment appears as an explicit word seven times in both the previous curriculum and the new curriculum, and is prominent in both. Implicit words for environment do not appear as frequently, although they do appear twenty-five times in each curriculum. Such words as *environment, natural environment, learning environment* and *natural sciences* were included in the analysis. The compound noun *natural sciences* appears four times in both curricula (rev. 2016 and rev. 2018), and in this study it is viewed as a term to indicate that children are made aware of the ecological aspect of environmental sustainability: "an understanding of natural sciences, knowledge of plants and animals, and simple chemical processes and physical phenomena" (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018, p. 15).

The previous curriculum contains words such as *habitat* once and *learning environment* once, but these do not appear in the new curriculum. The perspective of the new curriculum is that different environments create situations for learning. This is a recurring theme that is exemplified by this excerpt: "The environment should be accessible for all children and inspire them to play together and to explore the world around them, and support the children´s development, learning, play and communication" (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018, p. 8).

The Social Dimension

The dimension that the implicit words most frequently refer to is the social dimension. These words appear 298 times in the new curriculum compared with 263 times in the previous curriculum. This demonstrates the increased focus on the social sustainability dimension in the new curriculum. Through the more frequent use of such words as *health, rights, care, well-being* and *understanding*, the new curriculum stresses the role of the social dimension in children's development. The new curriculum also has more focus on children's participation and their own social qualities when it comes to the development of knowledge and skills, as exemplified by this excerpt: "The social development of children presupposes, according to their ability, that they can assume responsibility for their own actions and for the environment in the preschool" (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018, p. 17).

Other words that frequently appear in the social dimension are *norms, games, challenge, development* and *understanding*. These words appear 125 times in the new curriculum. The word *raising* (as of a child) appears four times in the previous curriculum but is completely absent in the new curriculum. The word *care* went from appearing nine times previously to fifteen times in the new curriculum, which indicates a shift in perspective towards greater reciprocity.

The new Swedish preschool curriculum (rev. 2018) also reflects changes taking place in society and talks now more about national minorities. The focus in the curriculum has changed from supporting minority groups – "The preschool can help to ensure that children from national minorities and children with a foreign background receive support in developing a multicultural sense of identity" (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2016, p. 6) to a focus instead on giving all children a basis on which to develop an understanding of minority groups "Education in the preschool should lay the foundation for children´s understanding for different languages and cultures, including the languages and cultures of the national minorities" (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018, p. 6).

The Economic Dimension

The economic dimension is explicitly absent from the previous curriculum but appears twice in the new curriculum, both times in a context where the three dimensions of sustainability are mentioned. "Children should also be given the opportunity to develop knowledge about how the different choices that people make can contribute to sustainable development – not only economic, but also social and environmental" (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018, p. 10). This confirms a more holistic view of sustainability conveyed by the new preschool curriculum (rev. 2018), yet further descriptions are lacking as to how the preschool should relate to the economic dimension. This is apparent in the fact that only fourteen implicit words for the economic dimension of sustainability can be found.

EfS in Preschool

The explicit word for EfS, teaching, that was chosen does not appear at all in the previous curriculum (rev. 2016) but does so 14 times in the new curriculum (rev. 2018). Of the implicit words that were analysed, an increase from 131 in the previous curriculum to 188 in the new curriculum was identified. Aspects of EfS are thus pointed out more frequently in the new curriculum. The implicit words that were identified are verbs that relate to the pluralistic teaching tradition, such as *experience, challenge, stimulate, create, converse, play* and *participate.* It is interesting to note that the word *teaching* does not appear in the form of a verb.

One word that is associated with preschool and the way children learn is *play*, which appears more often in the new curriculum than in the previous curriculum. Twelve of the sixteen implicit words that we analysed in the new curriculum fit within the social category, which shows how children's participation in learning is emphasised. These words can be linked to the pluralistic teaching tradition and transformative learning. When we analyse the frequency of first and foremost all the implicit words for sustainability, they are often words that also describe EfS, which is apparent in the following quotation: "Education should give every child opportunity to explore, ask questions and discuss phenomena and correlations in the world at large and thus challenge and stimulate their interest in health and well-being, and also in

sustainable development" (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018, p. 10). The words *explore, ask questions* and *discuss* demonstrate participation in the view of children's learning in the curriculum. Other formulations that can be linked to EfS in the new curriculum are *democratic forms, active participation in society,* and *create conditions for children to understand how their own actions influence and contribute to sustainable development.*

According to what is written in the curriculum, it is important to divide knowledge into four forms: "Knowledge is expressed in various forms – such as facts, understanding, skill and familiarity – that presuppose and interact with each other" (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018, p. 11). For children to be able to create understanding, the suggestion is that they themselves need to experience and talk about what is relevant for their understanding and creation of a world view, which paints a picture of a pluralistic approach to teaching and transformative learning.

The goals in the curriculum make clear the importance of children's participation, and the curriculum suggests teaching strategies by describing how children should talk about their experiences so that they can create an understanding of society and nature, and how they can be influential in sustainability. The tradition that exists at preschool, where play is central to education, is strengthened in the new curriculum. It is expressed that play is the tool that will challenge and stimulate motor skills, imagination and creativity, and further that it is here that the preschool teacher and childcarer by way of being actively present can teach, as demonstrated in the following quotation: "An approach by everyone who is part of the work team and an environment that encourages play confirm the importance of play for children's development, learning and well-being" (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018, p. 8). The central place that play has in preschool education can thus be understood as also being a tool by which to create understanding of sustainability.

Conclusion and Discussion

In a comparison of the previous curriculum (rev. 2016) with the new curriculum (rev. 2018) for preschool in Sweden, two differences regarding sustainability become apparent. One is that the term sustainability is now used and the other one is that teaching and EfS has now gained a clear place in the preschool curriculum. Compared with studies that analysed the preschool curriculum revised 2016 (Ärlemalm-Hagsér & Davis, 2014; Elliott et al., 2017; Weldemariam et al., 2017), this study shows that sustainability has a greater presence in the new curriculum: not only is it given mention, but it is also included in terms of a holistic view of sustainability where all dimensions have a place and where the teaching perspective and EfS are given place.

Sustainability in the Curriculum

The analysis of explicit and implicit words for sustainability in this study demonstrates an increased presence of sustainability in the new Swedish curriculum (rev. 2018) compared with the previous curriculum (rev. 2016). Compared with previous studies that showed the environment dimension to be the most dominant dimension in preschool (Ärlemalm-Hagsér, 2017; Davis, 2009; Elliott et al., 2017), this study shows that the social dimension is given more place in the new Swedish curriculum. The environment dimension remains among the explicit words in the new curriculum, but an analysis of the implicit words reveals another picture, which is a contribution of this study. The economic dimension is mentioned twice in the new curriculum, and it contributes by the fact its intention is a more holistic view of sustainability in the new curriculum. However, the economic dimension does not appear in any of the goals, and a clear picture is lacking as to what economic sustainability can mean for teaching in preschool.

The presence of sustainability in the new Swedish curriculum means, in concrete terms, that preschool in Sweden has now been tasked with conveying a holistic perspective of sustainability and increasing understanding of how the different dimensions are dependent on each other, which the literature presents as important (Elliott, 2013; Giddings et al., 2002). Engdahl and Ärlemalm-Hagsér (2014) state that sustainability and EfS have been seen as important for the Swedish preschool previously, but that a critical political awareness has been lacking, something that the analysis of this study now indicates has

changed and become clearer by the fact that sustainability is defined and presented more clearly in the new curriculum.

The new Swedish preschool curriculum (rev. 2018) proves that Sweden is a pioneer when it comes to formulating sustainability goals in the preschool curriculum from a holistic perspective. The analyses carried out in the past of the curricula of several countries reveal an absence in terms of sustainability (Weldemariam et al., 2017). What our study shows, however, is that it has now been included in the learning goals in the Swedish curriculum, making it an example for other countries to follow.

The Influence of the Curriculum on Preschool Education

That the sustainability perspective is stronger in the new Swedish curriculum is important for demonstrating the will to strengthen EfS in preschool (Elliott & McCrea, 2015). This study shows that children's participation in preschool is now more clearly expressed in writing than it was in previous curriculum and that children, just as Borg and Pramling Samuelsson (in press) conclude, are now viewed as active citizens with a participatory role. The implicit words for EfS are also dominated by words that belong to the social dimension, which demonstrates a social perspective more than an environment perspective if the whole curriculum is considered and not just the few explicit wordings.

Even if teaching as a term did not appear in the previous curriculum, it has nevertheless, from a preschool perspective, been part of the Swedish preschool in previous years, where children, through participation and discussion, were able to learn and develop according to their circumstances (Hedefalk, 2014). One step in the introduction of EfS in preschool is to make the term *teaching* understood in the context of preschool and to give it meaning in that context too. Jonsson et al. (2017) believe that teaching at preschool has a basis in the discourse on rights for children, wherein play is an important feature and a pluralistic view on teaching prevails. The perspective in the new Swedish curriculum, that the term *teaching* is to be used, serves also to strengthen the inclusion of EfS and the potential of preschool to increase children's awareness of sustainability.

Those changes that have been made in the curriculum when it comes to sustainability do not necessarily mean that preschool teaching will change in practical terms. To implement a curriculum means that it must be translated from text to context and action, which is a complex matter (Ball et al., 2012). For this to happen, the context needs to be right, and there needs to be resources, interest, motivation and time that allow for the curriculum to take effect in teaching in preschool (Ball et al., 2012). Knowledge about sustainability and the way the sustainable dimensions interrelate are not a given component of preschool teacher competence, maintain Elliott et al. (2017). In their study, they establish that the environment dimension is the dimension that until now has dominated preschool, which may mean that preschool teachers' knowledge about the other dimensions, as well as a holistic approach to sustainability, may be lacking (Elliott et al., 2017). This means that preschool teachers can lack both subject knowledge as well as didactic and pedagogical competence that is required to include sustainability issues in their teaching, and that this can prevent the curriculum as it is intended from being realised.

It is not only knowledge about sustainability that may be required but it can also be a question of school culture. Every preschool has a culture and, as Ball et al. (2012) argue, it is the work towards change that dictates and affects how the policy documents are interpreted and implemented. In particular, the school culture can be a hindrance when new teaching practices related to EfS are to be established or changed (Redman et al., 2018), which might be the case here as shown in this study of the new curriculum, which differ regarding EfS from the previous one. One way in which to change a culture of a preschool can be to provide professional development for teachers (Dyment et al., 2014). Professional development on the subject of sustainability as well as EfS can be one way for the intentions of the new Swedish curriculum to be put into practice in preschools.

As such, one implication of this study is that the revised Swedish curriculum should be accompanied by a powerful initiative when it comes to professional development relating to both knowledge about the concept of sustainability and its three dimensions; however, more importantly, EfS

needs to see development at a local preschool level. Previous research has shown that teachers in schools find it difficult to change their teaching practices and to adopt more transformative teaching with links to EfS (Redman et al., 2018). These difficulties are also indicated in Sweden in a review of implementation research on EfS (Gericke et al., 2020). However, few such studies have been within the field of preschool research. A recently published case study, meanwhile, shows that teachers' professional development can have an effect on pluralistic teaching, in particular in connection to the social dimension (Borg, 2019; Borg & Gericke, 2021). For example, children's agency was identified in pluralistic educational activities that supported children's active participation. Moreover, the study found that professional development for teachers had a positive effect in terms of their understanding of the complexity of EfS from a holistic perspective and that the teachers were able to put EfS into practice while connecting to SDGs (Borg & Gericke, 2021). As can be seen from these examples, it is possible to put the more pluralistic and transformative oriented EfS from the new curriculum into practice; however, there is a great need for studies that can investigate this issue further.

The opening section of this article cites the question posed by Weldemariam et al. (2017): "What might an early childhood education curriculum, that manifest explicit language of sustainability, views children as world citizens and portrays a unified world view with entangled human and more-than-human others, look like?" (p. 349). The answer provided by this study demonstrates that the new preschool curriculum (rev. 2018) in Sweden has made good progress in this area. However, as described above, this is but one part of the work that needs to be done. For the curriculum to make real progress in practical terms, the other part is that preschool staff should be made aware of the goals relating to sustainability and receive professional development and resources so that they have the means to work towards them. Here, areas for future research can be identified: for example, studies on how preschool teachers manage to meet the objectives of the new preschool curriculum that relate to EfS in their teaching: this is a very important question to investigate in future studies.

Declarations

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Research Article

Transition to school process of children with disadvantages: A literature review*

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Abstract: Transition to school can be described as an opportunity for children to experience a new social and educational environment. However, it also includes a loss of security area and fear of the journey into the unknown and it can be more difficult for children with disadvantages and their families. It is necessary to address the recent studies conducted on this period, in order to present different perspectives and to determine the tendency of the studies carried out on the transition to primary school in the current literature. In this way, it is possible to look at the transition to school for children with disadvantages from a broad perspective. The aim of this study is to review the research that addresses the transition process of children with disadvantages to primary school. Following the inclusion and exclusion processes carried out in this context, 15 studies related to the subject were examined and the studies were analyzed descriptively. According to the findings, it is seen that the studies mostly focus on revealing the existing situation. The findings of the studies examined in this context are interpreted under the themes of (a) factors affecting the transition of children, (b) problems experienced in the transition, (c) collaboration in the transition, and (d) advices for the process. Findings reveal the importance of each individual in a community at the same risk having their own characteristics, and of considering individual differences while addressing cultural differences. It is thought that new research is needed to improve the transition in terms of inclusivity.

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Introduction

Transition is a process of movement that covers a significant part of life and continues from infancy to adulthood (Rous et al., 2007). The individual is faced with many transition points that take her/him one step further from the existing position. These transition points include the transition of the individual from the starting of the life as the hospital to home until the end of the life. In school environments, transitions can occur in a variety of ways, such as entering school for the first time, transitioning from one school level to another, and transition from one school to another (Ladd & Price, 1987; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008). Additionally, this transition could also be from home to the primary school depending on the access to education within the context (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2010).

Transition to school can be described as an opportunity for children to experience a new social and educational environment. However, this transition also includes a loss of secure area and fear of the journey into the unknown (Visković, 2018). In the first years of school age, there are alterations in philosophical views that make a difference between preschool and primary school. This situation means that the transition to primary school symbolizes a critical period within the child life (Corsaro & Molarini, 2000).

In preschool philosophy, childhood is handled with a more holistic approach based on care and developmental progression with the priority of the child's wellbeing and enjoyment. However, when

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children start primary school they come across with an intense contrast within the traditional education system (Woodhead & Moss, 2007). In several countries such as Sweden, Scotland and New Zeland, there is a tendency to change the traditional system with a more pedagogical approach based on child's wellbeing and creativity instead of competition (Moss & Bennett, 2006). In this respect, in addition to good examples, suggestions in academic studies continue and a "pedagogical meeting place" is emphasized This concept means reflecting and constructing the pedagogical practices together with the democratic and fair participation of the child in the process (Bennett, 2013). Extensively, it is common to find out the approach that underestimated the importance of early childhood education and care and the perception of it is like a preparation for formal schooling (Moss & Bennett, 2006). Play-based methods, which are fundamental in preschool education, turn into large group teaching for specific content areas in primary school (Dahlberg & Taguchi, 1994; Einarsdóttir et al., 2008). Thus, within the current education system, there is a need to conduct more research focused on the organisations, readiness concept for school, child and community and approach to transition and pedagogy in early childhood and primary school settings.

When children develop a positive attitude towards school during the transition to primary school and have the support they need, such as social support, positive improvements will be achieved in their level of school readiness (Becker & Luthar, 2002). School readiness refers to a set of skills or preparation associated with the harmony of child and school systems and it is included the child's and school's readiness for the child (Ahtola et al., 2011). Also, readiness is a fundamental responsibility of the community to reach the rights and equal opportunities within the system (Woodhead & Moss, 2007). Children who are ready for school will show adaptive behaviours that will affect their future academic and social skills instead of reactions such as anxiety, avoidance or negative attitudes towards school (Graue, 2006; Ladd & Price, 1987).

The transition from preschool to primary school is a fundamental process for all families and children, and it can be more difficult for children with disadvantages and their families (Ames, 2012; Pianta et al., 1999). Although disadvantage is quite a relative concept, many factors affect a child's disadvantage. UNESCO (2010) has described individuals with disadvantage under four categories. These are (a) individuals with a low socioeconomic level associated with poverty, (b) individuals with group differences such as ethnicity, religion, and language, (c) those living in rural areas or immigrants, and (d) individuals with special educational needs. This classification provides a framework consistent with the "precarious living conditions" offered by Walper and Riedel (Gambaro et al., 2014) and, in a broader sense, refers to having additional support needs in terms of social and educational aspects. For example, research shows that there is an intersection with poverty in many types of disability and suggests that additional resources and services should be used to address systemic inequalities (Riddell & Weedon, 2016). While the lack of government support and weak regulatory systems create problems for all children, these results are more common for children who need additional support (Gambaro et al., 2014).

When the system for a smooth transition is considered, it is of great significance for children who need additional support to know how this process takes place and to review the work carried out in this regard. Yet there are limited studies that aim to review the research conducted on this period (Petriwskyj et al., 2005). In the study conducted by Petriwskyj et al. (2005), the studies on transition to school between 1990 and 2004 were reviewed. The main purpose of the study was to investigate and interpret the trends in how the concept of transition was created in parallel with the need for publication time. The authors only included studies carried out in three western regions due to the variations of school transition patterns and mostly focused on the construction of transition to school. This study, on the other hand, separated significantly from the previous study with its features such as not having any regional boundaries detailed explanation of the systematic screening process, covering descriptive information that will enable readers to look at the transition to school for children with disadvantages from a broad perspective, and providing the information from up-to-date studies. Therefore, it is necessary to address the recent studies conducted on this period, in order to present different perspectives and to determine the tendency of the studies carried out on the transition to primary school in the current literature. Due to the wide variety of the participant population, studies need to be reviewed more holistically in terms of the interventions and the

processes taking place during the transition period. This review will enable broader decision-making on best practice procedures and regulations for different students and contexts. For this reason, this study aims to review the literature on the transition of children with disadvantages to primary school.

Method

In this section, information about the methodology of the research, electronic screening and coding of the data and reliability are included.

Methodology of the Research

This research is a review of previous studies conducted on the transition to primary school, which is one of the important steps in the transition of children.

Electronic Screening

This review study includes the studies that were published in an international peer-reviewed journal in English or Turkish after 2005 and focused on the transition of children with a disadvantage to primary school. To identify the articles published in English, peer-reviewed academic journals between 2005 and 2020, we searched 11 electronic bibliographic databases: Academic Search Ultimate, Central & Eastern European Academic Source, Directory of Open Access Journals, ERIC, JSTOR Journals, Medline, ScienceDirect, Scopus, Springer Nature Journals, Teacher Reference Center, and The Belt and Road Initiative Reference Source.

Within the scope of this study, the terms "transition to school" OR "transition to elementary" OR "transition to inclusion" OR "transition to primary" were screened in Central Search and Article Linker service within the university library system. The "Also search within the full text of articles" option was used as the expander. In order to limit the studies, the conditions of “being in the library collection”, “being published in a peer-reviewed academic journal” and “being in English” were applied. After the screening according to the determined criteria, 1421 studies were accessed.

In the next stage, the screen was limited to the subjects of “education”, “transition”, “early childhood education”, “children”, “primary education”, “transitional programs”, “elementary education”, “academic achievement”, “schools”, “longitudinal method”, “school children”, “kindergarten”, “students”, “student adjustment”, “formal education”, “school transition”, “elementary schools”, “child development”, “elementary school students”, “school readiness”, “special education”, “transition to school”, “preschool children”, “preschool education” and “transitional programs (education)”. After applying this limitation, 630 studies were accessed. The titles and abstracts of 630 studies were reviewed by two authors independently and simultaneously in line with the criteria determined, and duplicates were excluded. After these procedures, the number of studies decreased to 93.

Selecting criteria are (a) being in the library collection, (b) being published in a peer-reviewed academic journal, (c) in English and (d), at least one participant is a disadvantage. The concept of transition to school is handled in different ways in research (Atkinson et al., 2021; Helm et al., 2019), but in this study, as mentioned in the introduction part, it is considered as Grade 1 since it symbolizes the transition to a formal approach in the current education system. Therefore, pre-school education, or reception class is excluded. In the dimension of disadvantage, since the concept has a broad meaning, no relevant phrase is included in the keywords. After the screening, the topics selected among the available topic options were evaluated within the framework of UNESCO's definition of disadvantage and kept as wide as possible.

It was decided to include only studies after 2005 in order to reach up-to-date data and contribute the literature although the purpose and content of this study are different from Petriwskyj et al. (2005). In this stage, informative articles, articles in which the term “transition to school” refers to preschool education, kindergarten or reception class and articles targeting children who have not any disadvantage that has mentioned in the classification of the UNESCO were left out. The full texts of 93 studies were looked into according to the criteria (a) type of disadvantage, (b) transition to school, and (c) being after 2005, and after

this review, the number was reduced to 13. The bibliographies of the included studies were manually screened and two new studies (McIntyre et al., 2006; Walker et al., 2012) were included. After all the eliminations, 15 articles were reviewed within the scope of this research. The steps followed during the screening process are presented in Figure 1.

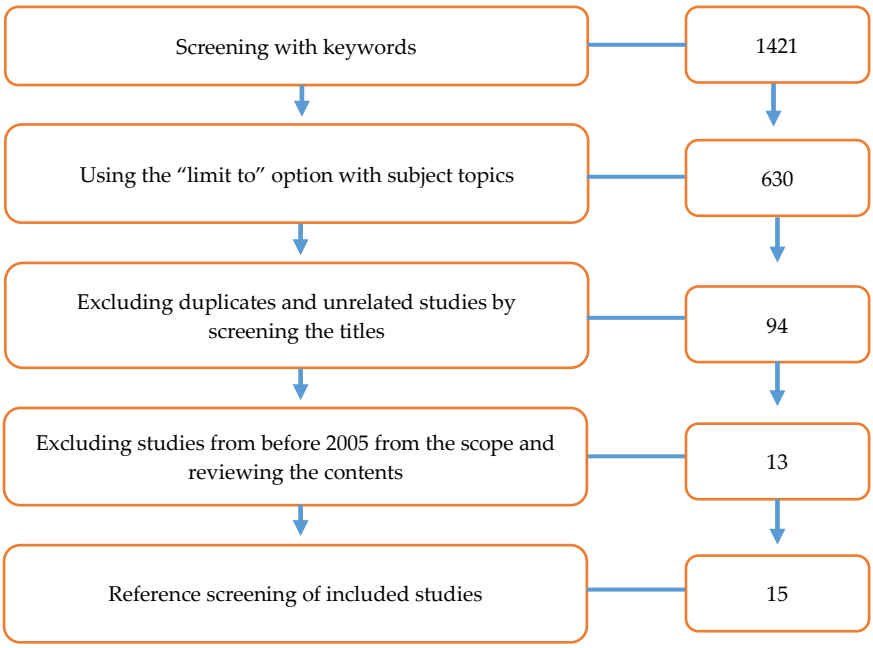

Figure 1. Screening steps

Coding

The variables of 15 studies, which were included in the screening process and thought to be related to the subject, were coded. In order to code the variables, a descriptive analysis table was created and the basic data were presented on this table. These variables were examined under the following headings: (a) year, (b) country, (c) aim of the research, (d) participants, (d) type of disadvantage, (e) research method, (f) data collection techniques, (g) findings, and (h) reliability/trustworthiness. Each study was examined from the first item of the descriptive analysis table to the last item. In addition, the journals in which the researches were published were presented as a list and presented to the reader's information.

Reliability

The electronic screening process of the study was carried out by the first author, and all other stages were carried out independently and simultaneously by the first and second authors. 630 articles were evaluated simultaneously and independently by two researchers during the evaluation phase according to the pre-selection and inclusion criteria of the research. Afterwards, a meeting was held and disagreements were resolved and a consensus was reached. At this stage, it was undecided about the inclusion of food allergies. However, the concept of special educational needs has been included because it requires additional regulation and support rather than the context of disability. In the manual scanning phase, the bibliographies of the articles were reviewed.

In the coding phase of the variables, the researchers created a descriptive analysis table and adopted a common path by holding a meeting on how to fill the table. The researchers read and coded the studies independently of each other as in the other stages. After the coding, the differences of opinion were reviewed and a meeting was held and a consensus was reached on these points. In this step, only corrections were made on issues such as word corrections and clarity.

The first and second authors who took an active role in the review process, proceed with their education as doctoral students in the field of special education and took part in the conduct of the various review, systematic review and meta-analysis studies. In addition, the third author, who works as a

professor in the field of special education, provided supervision during the planning and implementation of the research steps.

Findings and Interpretation

In this section, the main findings and the interpretation of the studies with current literature is included. A summary of the descriptive data including year, country, aim type of disadvantage, methodology, data collection techniques, findings and reliability/trustworthiness is presented in Table 1. Table 2 provides the information of the journals in which the studies were published.

Children with disadvantages may experience additional difficulties in the transition process (Ames, 2012; Sanagavarapu, 2010) and there are different individual decisions and practices depending on the needs of each child. For this reason, the process of transition to school cannot always be interpreted clearly in the studies examined. Looking at how to transition to school is defined in the studies, and it was explained as (a) a long-term process covering the previous and subsequent years in the institution (Bell-Booth et al., 2014; Petriwskyj, 2013; Sanagavarapu, 2010; Sanagavarapu et al., 2016; Schischka et al., 2012; Walker et al., 2012), (b) a shorter-term process that requires a number of preparations (Carmody et al., 2015; Chang et al., 2012; Fontil & Petrakos, 2015; Rogers, 2018; Yıldırım-Hacıibrahimoğlu & Kargın, 2017), and (c) critical moments (Ames, 2012). In the other review study (Petriwskyj et al., 2005), it is seen that there are different definitions such as a school starting process reduced to teacher practice, ensuring continuity from home to school and a multi-layered process. This situation reveals the complexity of the transition process and its unique counterpart.

In terms of geography, eight of the studies were carried out in Australia, three in the USA, one in Canada, one in New Zealand, one in Peru and one in Turkey. Considering that there is considerable differences in legal regulations in these regions, but the current trend in for Australia to have the highest level of research may be related to the existing trend in transition studies (Dockett et al., 2014) and the differences in implementation between regions, despite the existence of legal regulations in Australia (Einarsdóttir et al., 2008). For example, in Queensland, many children with disadvantages attend primary school a few days a week and an intervention class on other days. In the second year, the transition is completed and they start school full-time (Walker et al., 2012). But not all states in Australia have such a process. Moreover, it is possible to see a wide variety of practices in different countries of the world in connection with education policies. For this reason, it is thought that this review will gain a global perspective (Walker et al., 2012). In addition, the fact that studies have been conducted one in each country that Turkey (Yıldırım-Hacıibrahimoğlu & Kargın, 2017), Peru (Ames, 2012), Canada (Fontil and Petrakos, 2015) and New Zealand (Schishka et al., 2012) is a promising situation for the new and developing literature for transition studies.

Aims of the research were to investigate child and their relatives' opinions, experiences and feelings about transition and starting school (n=6), to identify needs of mothers in the transition (n=1), to identify difficulties in the process (n=2), to design and evaluate an effective transition (n=2), to identify key factors in transition (n=2) and to examine the predictive level of child-related variables (n=2) across 15 studies. It is seen that the majority of the studies focus on exploring the current situation, and effectiveness studies are in the minority. Exploratory research is primarily preferred in cases where (a) experimental research on the area is limited, (b) research describing the area is limited, or (c) current developments in the area require new research (Stebbins, 2001). Although the subject of school readiness has existed for many years, the transition point of view that emerged after the modern changes in perspective is considered as a subject area that changes and updates day by day, and it is thought that exploratory studies will contribute significantly to the literature and light up the way for comprehensive research (Babbie, 2004).

Table 1. Studies examining transition to school of children with disadvantage

Author/Year/ Country	Aim	Participant/s	Type of disadvantage	Method	Data collection techniques/ Tools	Findings	Reliability/ Trustworthiness
Sanagavarapu, 2018/ Australia	(1) Identify the experience, anxiety, and support needs of mothers of children with food allergies in the transition to school, (2) Provide advice to families on how to ensure a safe and positive start to school	10 school-age students with food allergies and their mothers	Food allergy	Qualitative	Interview Photo Elicitation Interviews (PEI)	The vast majority of families stated that the transition did not happen as planned, so it was a stressful and challenging time. Mothers stated that systematic follow-up of school nurses with action plans prepared by schools during the transition facilitated the period; lack of communication, failures in the transition plan and family participation made the transition difficult.	Inter-rater reliability
Rogers, 2018/ Australia	Understanding the perspectives of mothers and teachers on family participation during the transition of children who experience difficulties in the time of transitioning to school	21 mothers and 13 primary school teachers	Socio-economic disadvantage	Case study	Observation Interview Document analysis Informal conversation	Mothers mostly participated in their children's education at home, in the context of homework and games and they were looking for regular communication opportunities to share their concerns and talk about their children. Mothers who regularly participated in a weekly transition program before their children started school noted that over time, they formed a collaboration with teacher. Mothers who are unfamiliar with school culture and language found regular interviews and introductory activities useful, but problems with their children's success and happiness continued. Educators found important to participate the information sessions and workshops.	-
Sanagavarapu, 2017/ Australia	Investigate children's capacity to resist allergic food cravings and ask for help, as well as their feelings of starting the school	6 school-age children with food allergies	Food allergy	Qualitative	Interview Photo Elicitation Interviews (PEI)	All of the children involved in this study have an awareness of what they can and cannot eat safely, but it has not been definitively determined whether they recognize foods that are likely to be allergenic for them. Most children stated that when they were offered an allergenic food, they are refusing and telling them "no". All the children indicated that they would first seek help from their teachers when there was an allergic reaction.	-

Yıldırım Hacıibrahimoğlu & Kargın, 2017/ Turkey	Determine the difficulties experienced by students with special needs during the transition from preschool to primary education based on teacher opinions	209 primary school teachers 43 primary school teachers working with first grade	Special educational needs	Mixed method/ Explanatory mixed design	Survey Focus group interview Determining the Difficulties in Transitioning to Primary School (DDTPS) Questions of Focus group interview	At the first stage of the study, the subjects as having the most problems in transition were: Lack of appropriate materials, negative attitude of the classroom teacher, crowded classrooms, lack of support for the teacher and inability of the student to perform their daily life skills independently. The results show that the teacher's gender, level of education, or special educational knowledge did not make a significant difference in responses.	Inter-rater reliability, Participant confirmation
Sanagavarapu et al., 2016/ Australia	Discuss mothers' concerns and feelings about their child's transition to school	10 mothers	Food allergy	Qualitative	Interview Photo Elicitation Interviews (PEI)	Most mothers learned about the school's food allergy management after their children started school. Almost all mothers expressed concern about safe playgrounds and the supervision of risk elements. However, mothers have stated that they are perceived by school staff as being overly protective, that schools are more at risk than pre-school education environments, and that transferring responsibility to school staff is a concern.	Inter-rater reliability
Carmody et al., 2015/ USA	Examine the impact of child, parent, and family relationship factors assessed at kindergarten age on children's emotions/behavior, self-regulation, and social outcomes in primary school first grade	92 children who were physically abused and their primary caregivers	Physical abuse	Quantitative + Longitudinal study	Scales and Observation Kaufman Brief Intelligence Test (KBIT), Brief Symptom Index (BSI), Preschool Parenting Measure (PPM), MacArthur Story Stem Battery, Emotional/Behavioral Problems the Child Behavior Checklist—Teacher Report Form (TRF), The Behavior Rating Inventory of Executive Functioning (BRIEF)	Factors of low IQ score, parental mental health, and family conflict in kindergarten age were found to predict internal problem behaviors that occur in first grade. An association was found between maternal acceptance and internal problem behaviors. A low IQ score and a preschool family Factor were found to predict external problem behaviors. Due to the deterioration of the emotional and cognitive functions of children subjected to abuse in kindergarten, it is argued that this condition may hinder the development of stress and emotion management skills during the transition to first grade, so children subjected to physical abuse need individualized interventions.	Inter-rater reliability (for one scale)

Fontil & Petrakos, 2015/ Canada	Understand the experiences of children of Canadian and immigrant families regarding the transition to elementary school	10 children with autism, including 5 Canadians and 5 immigrants, and their families	Autism, Cultural/ ethnic diversity	Qualitative/ Grounded Theory	Interview The question form of semi-structured interview, Measure of Processes of Care (MPOC-20)	All parents emphasized the importance of school-family communication, which includes empathy and understanding. Most families used various means of support during the transition, while some said they could not find support systems. Some families stated that their children's difficulties during the transition to primary school were due to the lack of support services in the classroom. Both groups of families expressed concern about their children's language and communication skills, while immigrant families expressed concern that their language and communication skills would have a negative impact on school-family cooperation.	Inter-rater reliability, triangulation, participant confirmation, detailed description
Bell-Booth et al., 2014/ Australia	Identify key factors affecting the transition and attendance of Australian Aboriginal and Indigenous children	2 aboriginal students, their families and teachers	Socio-economic disadvantage Cultural/ethnic diversity	Longitudinal study/Case study	Interview and scales Settling into School Scale (SIS), Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)	Participants had no educational experience before starting primary school. The first participant was absent in the first grade 52% of school time. Although the student's language and literacy skills are close to their peers, they are very limited in social skills. As the student's academic skills declined in the second grade and problem behaviors increased, he was referred to a special education class. Second participant established positive social relationships with his friends in the first grade and achieved similar levels with his friends in the academic field. In the second year, he achieved high success with his orientation to sports and loved by the entire school. The main difference affecting success among participants was social support, school practices, family conditions, child's daily experience and child characteristics.	-

Petriwskyj, 2013/ Australia	Identify the factors that teachers considered effective for inclusion during the transition to school, and to examine the influences on their practice	22 students attending kindergarten at three different schools and 11 preschool teachers	Special educational needs Cultural/Ethnic diversity	Case study	Observation and interview Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale Revised ECERS-R, ECERS-E Extension	As schools vary in terms of student characteristics, it wasseen that teacher views were shaped by changing expectations. Professional competence of teachers, continuity of services and individual transition planning are the main elements reflected in the change. However, legal procedures for assessment have not been flexible enough to allow teachers to implement applications for their point of view during the transition.	Inter-observer agreement, Inter-rater reliability
Ames, 2012/ Peru	Examine cultural, linguistic and identity confusion at school in order to understand the 'failures' of Indigenous children in the transition to primary school	2 students entering the first grade, their families and teachers	Cultural/Ethnic diversity	Case study	Observation and interview	First participant he had problems with the transition to primary school and communication with his friends. The reason for family was the differences of language spoken at school and at home, while the student stated that the reason was that he didn't like to write and was subjected to physical punishment that teacher has confirmed. The mother of the second participant found unnecessary for her son to play games outside of school and forced him to go there, while the student stated that the first class was not as fun as he expected. He sometimes ran away from school and played games, and was subjected to physical punishment by his teacher.	-
Chang et al., 2012 / USA	Examine the effects of socio-economic risk and negative emotional state on children's social competence in the transition to primary school	310 students, their families and teachers	Ethnic diversity Socio-economic disadvantage	Longitudinal study	Interview and scales Cumulative risk index, Negative Emotionality questionnaire, Social skills ratings scale	Increases in risk factors for young children lead to less developed emotion regulation ability in preschool children. A relationship was found between low emotion regulation ability and the social inadequacy of children.	-
Schishka et al., 2012/ New Zealand	Examine the transition of young children with special needs to primary school and their processes before and after starting school	17 students, their primary caregivers and teachers	Special educational needs	Qualitative	Interview	Two school preparation practices that parents found useful were identified. These were(1) holding transition meetings and (2) making visits to the school before starting. Most parents and teachers noted that immediately after the transition to school, the children faced difficulties, especially in academic skills, depending on the types of special needs, often overcoming them by making decisions together.	-

Walker et al., 2012/ Australia	Assessing parents and teachers' perceptions of inclusive education, support, and the success of the transition. In addition, to examine the relationship between children's disability level and adult perceptions.	50 parents and 50 teachers	Developmental disabilities	Qualitative and quantitative	Interview Questionnaire	Parents stated that they were satisfied with the support they received from the Prep teacher, and that the teacher was understanding about the disadvantage of their children and family values. They found the transition program for children beneficial as it supports social and school-related skills. Most teachers think that children's transition program is easy and somewhat easy. They find the support provided to them sufficient.	-
Sanagavarapu, 2010/ Australia	Carry out a comprehensive study of the cultural and linguistic needs of Bangladeshi children living in Sydney related to school transition from the perspective of families	10 Bengali parents	Cultural/linguistic/ ethnic diversity	Qualitative/ Phenomenology	Interview	The families listed the abilities of their children to express needs independently and make friends as among the important factors that facilitated the transition to school. The families of children who had difficulty adjusting to school during the transition believed that the main reason was linguistic differences. Some of the parents started learning English in order to make a positive transition, but during the transition, most participants stated that they didn't understand the information provided to them by the school.	-
McIntyre et al., 2006/ USA	To examine the factors associated with the transition to school adjustment in children with and without intellectual disability.	67 children, their mothers and teachers	Intellectual disability	Quantitative	Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales, Social Skills Rating System, Teacher's Report Form (TRF), Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), The Student–Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS)	Teachers reported more problem behaviors and less positive relationship about children with intellectual disability (ID) than typically (TD) developing children. Also, parents, rated children with ID as having significantly fewer social skills than typical children.	-

When the participants are reviewed, it is seen that the studies were conducted with students, teachers and parents. However, one of the striking points may be that specifically boys were determined as participants in the two studies. This situation is explained in two studies as boys exhibit more behavioral problems in this age range (Carmody et al., 2015; Chang et al., 2012). Consistent with this finding Belsky and Beaver (2011) claim that boys can have more behavior problem than girls because of a combination of physiological, biological, and social differences. However, according to data that provided by Wolke et al. (2000), there is not differences in behavior problems based on gender.

Another point is that mothers constitute the majority of parents in participant groups. In this case, it is thought that the roles of men and women in the social structure may have been influential. In Sanagavarapu (2018), it was stated that the invitation was sent to all parents, but only the mothers accepted the interview and this situation could also be seen in different review studies (Vermaes et al., 2005). Finally, taking children's views into account and making their voices heard in the interviews with the photo elicitation technique (Sanagavarapu, 2017; 2018) represents a very critical point in terms of human rights, equality and self-advocacy.

When the research is reviewed in terms of disadvantages, it is seen that six of the studies dealt with cultural-linguistic-ethnic diversity, six in the context of special educational needs, three in the context of socio-economic level, three in food allergies, and one in physical abuse. In some of these studies (e.g. Fontil & Petrakos, 2015) the intersectionality of multiple disadvantages was addressed. Migration movements and intercultural interactions in the world cause changes in the understanding of one single culture (Amelina, 2010) and reveal the need for culturally-sensitive studies (Jackson, 2009) which is considered the ethnic, cultural features, values, background, faith and at the same time their stories while designing and providing the program (Resnicow et al., 2000). Considering these developments, it is expected that the disadvantage situation in the context of culture-language-ethnic origin is at the highest level in the studies reviewed.

When the methods used are examined, it is seen that qualitative research methods were used in most of the studies (n = 10). In them phenomenology (n=1), grounded theory (n=1) and case study (n=3) designs were used. In addition, three of the studies are longitudinal, one quantitative research and one uses both qualitative and quantitative methods. Longitudinal studies are thought to be very useful for the literature, considering that they provide in-depth and comprehensive information through long-term data. It is provided the alterations within the context (Caruana et al., 2015) and allows us to see the differing needs and practices in the transition.

Triangulation is a way to enrich the quality of the study and increase the trustworthiness/reliability (Noble & Heale, 2019). One of the ways to provide triangulation in the scientific research is using a variety of data collection methods (Denzin, 2009). As regards the data collection techniques used in the study, the majority of studies (n=10) used at least one of the data collection methods such as interview, observation, document analysis, and standardized measurement tools, and only the interview technique was used in five of these studies (Sanagavarapu, 2010; 2017; 2018; Sanagavarapu et al., 2016; Schischka et al., 2012). It could be mentioned that the data triangulation is quite limited in these studies, and this situation is thought to create a limitation for the quality of the research. Another important point is that the researchers' reflective journal, which is an important data source in expanding the data in qualitative and mixed method research processes (Slotnick & Janesick, 2011), was not encountered in any of the studies. Lack of reflective journals may have caused data loss, and this situation should be taken into consideration in further studies.

Reliability is used as a framework concept and basically, it is related to credibility. In qualitative and quantitative research designs reliability/trustworthiness can be provided in different ways (Cohen et al., 2018). In the context of reliability/trustworthiness, there are reliability data in six of the studies. In one of these studies (Carmody et al., 2015), the reliability data were collected for only one of the many scales used. In only one study (Fontil & Petrakos, 2015), was there triangulation in reliability/trustworthiness data, inter-coder reliability, data triangulation, participant confirmation and detailed explanation methods were used. Most of the studies (n = 8) were found in journals that publish research on early childhood, and they

were also published in journals that include family studies, child development in society, and psychology.

Table 2. The journals in which the studies were published

Study	Journal
Petriwskyj (2013) Walker et al. (2012) Sanagavarapu (2010) Sanagavarapu et al. (2016) Schischka et al. (2012)	Australasian Journal of Early Childhood
Ames, P. (2012)	International Journal of Educational Development
Bell-Booth et al. (2014)	Children & Society
Carmody et al. (2015)	Journal of Child and Family Studies
McIntyre et al. (2006)	Journal of Intellectual Disability Research
Chang et al. (2012)	Social Development
Fontil & Petrakos (2015)	Psychology in Schools
Rogers (2018)	European Early Childhood Education Research Journal
Sanagavarapu (2017)	Cogent Education
Sanagavarapu (2018)	Early Childhood Education Journal
Yıldırım-Hacıbrahimoğlu & Kargın (2017)	Educational Sciences: Theory & Practice

The journals in which the studies are published are presented in Table 2. A remarkable point is all journals are scanned in Social Science Citation Index which is the fundamental index for social science research. Additionally, five of the studies (Petriwskyj, 2013; Sanagavarapu, 2010; Sanagavarapu et al., 2016; Scischka et al., 2012; Walkers et al., 2012) are published in the same journal. It could be related with the focus topics of the journal and the country where the journal is connected.

The findings of the studies reviewed were interpreted under four headings: (a) factors affecting the transition of children, (b) problems experienced in transition, (c) collaboration in the transition, (d) advices for the process.

Factors Affecting the Transition of Children

The transition is a difficult experience for all individuals. This period is harder to tackle for children with disadvantages (Ames, 2012). Transition is a struggle not only for the children but also for their families and teachers. However, it is not a one-way process and teachers/ school staff cannot expect the child and family to simply adapt to the school. Teachers also need to be sensitive to the diversity of children's adaptation and the diversity of contextual factors that affect the adaptation of children who are new to school (Sanagavarapu, 2010). At the same time, it is necessary to determine the support that teachers and parents need in this period and to offer them through adaptations (Walker et al., 2012).

When the factors affecting the child's adaptation and social competence development was reviewed, it is seen that primarily the characteristics of the child were determinant (Bell-Booth et al., 2014; McIntyre et al., 2006). In the study conducted by Bell-Booth et al. (2014), the transition of two indigenous children was followed for four years. The findings obtained showed that the transition of the two children proceeded differently. Although financial and structural services (e.g., clothing, transportation) support the struggle to access school, it is stated that the differences in the level of participation are due to the difficulties experienced by each child individually. In another study, it is found that adaptive behaviour, self-regulation and social skills have association with a successful transition and school adjustment (McIntyre et al., 2006). In line with the findings of other studies (Correira & Marques-Pinto, 2016; McClelland et al., 2006; O'Kane & Hayes, 2006; Stephen & Cope, 2003), child characteristics and the required skills for learning and adjustment is mentioned and provide a consistency. This reveals the importance of each individual in a community at the same risk having their own characteristics and skills, and of considering individual differences while addressing cultural differences.

While it is always necessary to take into account the individual characteristics of the child, it is

generally accepted that children with disadvantages experience problems during the transition. In the study conducted by Sanagavarapu (2010), it is observed that the most important problem in the transition period of children with cultural-linguistic diversity is the language barrier. This prevents not only children but also parents from accessing information on points such as the school curriculum, the transition to school, and cooperation with teachers. Therefore, school should be prepared for the to meet the cultural and lingusitical needs of children and their families (Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016). In the study conducted by Ames (2012), it was found that daily school experiences contain continuous messages that outrage children's culture, language and identity. In the interviews conducted by Fontil and Petrakos (2015) with the mothers, one of the mothers stated that their child speaks half English and half Romanian at home. They stated that the child spoke Romanian while resting, and while playing, they spoke English because they thought that their toys did not understand Romanian. This situation shows the experience of the child during the period and the impact of the situation of not being understood by their peers on their life. Thus, as well as providing basic services for transition, the transition also requires sensitivity to the language and culture of the child and family in the services provided (Ames, 2012; Fontil & Petrakos, 2015; Sanagavarapu, 2010) and programming the educational services with an inclusive approach can help to provide more balanced experiences for children and their families (Stephen & Cope, 2003).

Problems Experienced in the Transition

When the problems experienced in the transition are reviewed, they are categorized under the headings of family-related, teacher-related, child-related and other problems.

Cooperation between all stakeholders is the key point of the effective transitions (Dockett & Perry, 2004). However, collaboration support level could perceive differently among the stakeholders. In the interviews with teachers, it is often mentioned that the cooperation of the families is quite limited (Bell-Booth et al., 2014; Yıldırım-Hacıibrahimoğlu & Kargın, 2017). In accordance with this finding, a mother stated in an interview with Rogers (2018) that "school work was carried out only at the school". However, in the same study, some mothers stated that, although they wanted to participate in the educational times of their children, they lacked of knowledge and support. Similarly, in the study by Fontil & Petrakos (2015), families stated that they thought they were judged pretty much by the school system. This situation reveals the idea that the transition is perceived differently by parents and teachers (Rogers, 2018).

Considering the problems related to teachers, it is seen that teachers have limited knowledge of the individual educational needs of the child before and during the transition, limited time, insufficient teacher training programs in terms of special education, limited in-service training and inadequate support (Yıldırım-Hacıibrahimoğlu & Kargın, 2017). Also, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] (2002) has expressed the association between the educational systems and consistency of teacher training. In accordance with this view, Sanagavarapu et al. (2016) states that even if teachers receive training, they need additional support in understanding and supporting the psychosocial process experienced by the family. Another important finding is that teachers do not always know in advance that there will be a child who needs additional support in their classrooms (Yıldırım-Hacıibrahimoğlu & Kargın, 2017). Considering the importance of cooperation between stakeholders and institutions in the transition, this lack of knowledge is considered to be a factor that disrupts the entire period and reveals the need for transition staff.

As regards factors related to the child, it is emphasized that the child needs support in social competence and social skills, communication, academic and self-care skills, as well as adaptation problems and anxiety due to separation from the parents (Yıldırım- Hacıibrahimoğlu & Kargın, 2017). When other problems were evaluated, it was stated by teachers that there were problems regarding peer acceptance during the transition period (Yıldırım-Hacıibrahimoğlu & Kargın, 2017), but child, parent, and family factors did not significantly predict peer interactions in the school environment, and long-term observations were needed to determine peer interactions (Carmody et al., 2015). Peer acceptance is one of the most crucial points in starting and pursuing participation to the school system, and also it is helping to forecast the adjustment (Ladd & Price, 1987). There are many factors are affecting the peer acceptance of

the child within the class and one of them is social skills (Silva et al., 2019). Children with disadvantages may have a lack of appropriate social skills for different reasons, such as insufficient experience with their peers (Frostad & Pijl, 2006). Therefore, interventions that address all these factors holistically are needed, and it is thought that it will help reduce the inequality of opportunity created by disadvantages (Seabra-Santos et al., 2021).

In addition, the negative attitudes of the parents of other children, the physical characteristics of the class and the school, the difference between the preschool and the primary school and the cooperation with private supportive education centers were emphasized (Fontil & Petrakos, 2015; Sanagavarapu et al., 2016; Yıldırım-Hacıibrahimoğlu & Kargın, 2017).

Collaboration in the Transition

As in all other transition periods, one of the most important points in the transition to primary school is collaboration (Pianta et al., 2001; Skouteris et al., 2012). Schishka et al. (2012) mention that the most important factor determining school transitions for children with special needs is collaboration. Also, in the study conducted by Fontil and Petrakos (2015), it is argued that the school climate and open communication with cooperation are the most important aspects. Cooperation between families, schools and institutions stands out in this time (Schishka et al., 2012; Walker et al., 2012).

Considering that the transition is important for the family as well as for the child, the participation of the family in this time and its role in cooperation are of great significance. Bell-Booth et al. (2014) state that the factors affecting the maintenance of family participation are providing social support, school activities, including families in practices and positive expectations. Therefore, the role of the school in this period is not only to support the child but also to support the needs of the family (Petrakos & Lehrer, 2011). In the opinions expressed by mothers, it was emphasized that the disadvantage of the child should be taken into account in the transition planning stage, proactive communication and cooperation should be provided, family participation in discussions about the child should be supported holistically, and school policies and processes should be strengthened with knowledge (Sanagavarapu, 2018). In relation to this, parents state that working with school staff who truly care about their children's needs is the main component of communication and cooperation (Fontil & Petrakos, 2015). One of the families stated that they had a sincere relationship with the staff at their child's kindergarten, but that they were more distant during the primary school period. Similarly, in the study conducted by Rogers (2018), mothers mentioned that they wanted the opportunity to share their opinions and concerns with the teacher, to establish a relationship of trust and to establish regular dialogue by developing their relationships outside school hours, rather than occasional meetings. Knopf and Swick (2007) emphasized three points in family involvement due to the changing needs and approaches of parents: (a) creating accessible ways to participate, (b) identifying appropriate ways to support parent involvement, and (c) creating suitable opportunities for parent's strengths and weaknesses. In addition, regarding communication and cooperation, parents stated that they were willing to participate in their children's education but their efforts were limited by lack of knowledge and the feeling that their participation was not valued (Rogers, 2018). They felt supported when teachers shared their knowledge and expertise with them (Fontil & Petrakos, 2015). Walker et al. (2012) emphasize the importance of the support provided by the teacher, who is responsible for the transition process, to family and children (Walker al., 2012). Therefore, in this period, the story of the child should be followed, proactive communication should be established with the parents, and the individual needs and concerns of the parents and children should be listened to and understood (Sanagavarapu et al., 2016).

In a study conducted by Petriwskyj (2013) with a different perspective, the times which were considered to be effective by the school team used by the teachers in a school were carried out under the leadership of both principals and experienced teachers. The education system used to focus on the problems experienced by the child and in-school relationships rather than the strengths of the child and family-society relations. In addition, instead of strengthening the family, only family participation should be respected and choices should be accepted. During the transition, problems were experienced between

special education personnel and classroom teachers in the context of strategies, which were stated to be related to the professional preparation stage. Although the program used does not fully meet the needs of children, it stands out in terms of initiating policy-based support.

Advices for the Process

On examination of the research, it is clear that there is a need to support and strengthen children with disadvantages and their families and to change the school system as a whole (Ames, 2012). During the transition period, the emphasis should be on eliminating situations arising from the disadvantage of the child and establishing relationships of trust. Consistent with the literature (Kırat & Güven, 2021; Petani & Barišić, 2021; Peters, 2010; Sakellariou & Sivropoulou, 2010), it is claimed that the primary requirement for this is cooperation, and in the absence of cooperation and communication, the family is prevented from participating in the transition of the child (Bell-Booth et al., 2014; Sanagavarapu, 2018). As another important point, teachers should face up to and resolve their own bias in terms of disadvantage of the child by giving an example of language, culture, identity and review the way they approach them. In so doing, they should listen to children and evaluate the effects of their practices on children (Ames, 2012). They should set an example to all children in terms of inclusivity of linguistic and cultural diveristy.

The transition, friendships and relationships with teachers will develop with the support of the teacher, and this will facilitate the child's adaptation to school (Sanagavarapu, 2010). An example of transition was presented by Schischka et al. (2012), and it was stated that the teachers' appropriate use of differentiated practices in class after starting school helped children in their transition to school. In order to provide differentiate practices (making the curriculum accesible to all) to be applied, the need to provide teacher training is emphasized in the literature (Bell-Booth et al., 2014; Sanagavarapu, 2017; Sanagavarapu et al., 2016; Yıldırım-Hacıibrahimoğlu & Kargın, 2017). Given that the transition is a collaborative action, families should also be informed about transition and social, emotional and behavioral needs of children by offering training (McIntyre et al., 2006; McTaggart & Sanders, 2003). In addition, peers and other community members should be informed, their awareness raised, and they should be cooperative on specific issues such as food allergies (Sanagavarapu et al., 2016; Sanagavarapu, 2017; Yıldırım-Hacıibrahimoğlu & Kargın, 2017).

Finally, two studies reviewed revealed the importance of minimizing the behavioral problems of the child with a disadvantage by means of preschool programs or early childhood home-based programs. These programs targeting children's language, communication, non-verbal problem-solving skills, and acquisition of self-management skills from early childhood (Sanagavarapu, 2017), to support and direct the child's efforts to these areas (Yıldırım-Hacıibrahimoğlu & Kargın, 2017). The need for a review of inclusion practices and the development of infrastructure in schools was emphasized (Yıldırım-Hacıibrahimoğlu & Kargın, 2017).

Conclusion

Considering the overall dimensions of the research, it is seen that the studies carried out on the school transition of different disadvantage groups that need additional support are starting to stand out in different countries. However, further research is needed in order to comprehensively address the factors affecting the transition.

In the United States, Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004) requires setting transition goals and planning for the transition of children with special needs. Similarly, for all groups with disadvantages, it is important that the planning of this period be mandatory all over the world. In this context, when the communication between the institution to be transferred and the current institution will begin, what kind of practices will be made between the institutions, and what kind of team will be formed for the student are determined. It seems that the overall focus of the existing research in this area is the parent, child and teacher. However, important terms such as transition need to be planned by a team. In academic studies importance of the team for the transition times of individuals with disadvantages could be reinforced in schools, disseminated to ensure social awareness, and reflected in policies. Although

there are practices such as repeating educational assessment and diagnosis in transitions which are legally regulated in Turkey, given the need for measures to ensure student compliance with school and access to education, and to ensure that educational stakeholders are informed, what is known about the impact of these regulations on practice is limited (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı [MEB], 2018).

In light of the studies reviewed above, it is clear that information about who will be involved in the transition team and their responsibilities should be given to all those involved. It is obvious that it is necessary to distinguish between the responsibilities of teachers for the transition of individuals with disadvantages to school and the responsibilities of other stakeholders (e.g., primary caregiver, therapist) in the team, and to emphasize the common denominators. In cases where this distinction is not made, imbalances in workload may occur. In addition, although cooperation has been frequently emphasized in studies, the role of the team in this cooperation seems to be denied. Therefore, studies in which the role of the team is brought to the fore are needed.

Limitations and Recommendations

No country restrictions were applied to the studies included in this study. This situation created an important limitation while presenting the legal framework in the reporting of the research. In each country, the practices affect the transition in different ways, country policies either support the student during the transition or create the need for additional support. It may be recommended to consider this limitation in future studies and to carry out studies by considering country-based policies and their implementation.

In this review study, electronic screening was applied from the Central Search and Article Linker service. Although this system provides access to many databases, the data obtained does not include important platforms such as ResearchGate and Google scholar. It may be recommended to repeat the research by including these channels in future studies. Additionally, it was included only studies after 2005 to screen in order to reach up-to-date data. Future studies may work without time constraints.

Needs in transition to school may vary according to the country and student needs. Therefore, studies involving all stakeholders (e.g., child, primary caregiver, primary school teacher, preschool teacher) who experience the same process can be designed.

Although two studies examined the application of transition strategies, no studies of the effectiveness of the transition process performed or designed by the researchers were found. The development of various methods and programs is therefore recommended for future research, along with a review of their effects and monitoring of the period in order to make comparisons between methods and programs that are found effective. In addition, future action research studies or experimental studies that comprehensively address all aspects of the transition will contribute to the field.

It is recommended to make a transition assessment to practitioners with the findings obtained, to include transition goals based on this assessment in children's plans, to prepare schools for the transition process, and to ensure inter-institutional coordination. In particular, temporary positions such as temporary transition personnel can be created. These staff can act as a bridge between service providers for students who need more support and can make necessary plans by following student progress.

A year includes transition to primary school should be planned for students who are determined to have social or academic difficulties in the preschool period depending on the individual differences of the students, and a gradual transition between the two institutions should be ensured. Otherwise, children may choose to return to preschool after a while after starting primary school (Chun, 2003).

Parents are the stakeholders who spend the most time with their children and have the most comprehensive information. With sufficient knowledge and skills, they can become the most important facilitating factor for their child's transition (Woodhead & Moss, 2007). For this purpose, families with children in early childhood should be informed regularly in order to prepare for the transition.

Steps can be taken to reduce the difference in understanding between the formal school and

kindergarten systems and to continue the holistic approach in primary school.

The following section contains suggestions for the policy.

There are many countries within the scope of the research and each of them has different approaches. In some countries, such as Turkey, the legal basis of the transition process is rather weak. In countries such as America and Australia, there are state-based differences which are regulated by state authority. It is recommended to review existing legal regulations and adopt a research-based way by providing funding for new research to determine the effects of these regulations in practice.

There are country-based changes like Nordic countries in the formal school understanding in the current structure (Bennett, 2013). It is suggested that the development process of this change in understanding should be accelerated in other countries as well.

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Research Article

Children's views on social distancing and playing on an adventure playground

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Abstract: Adventure playgrounds have provided an important play environment for children in the United Kingdom (UK) since the 1940s. Twenty-five children ages from 4 to 13 were asked how they would play if social distancing was introduced on their adventure playground. Using Piagetian classification as a framework, responses from children in the pre-operational stage were compliant, whilst in the operational stage, children were compliant but explained how they would adapt their play. For the formal operational stage, the responses were confrontational. The importance of obtaining children's views challenges the original 'blanket' policy guidance within the UK on social distancing for all children in outdoor environments including an adventure playground and considering how children play when with their peers is more social play.

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Social distancing; Adventure playgrounds; COVID-19, Lockdown, Play

Introduction

Adventure playgrounds are play spaces for children that emerged after the second world war (Newstead, 2019) The idea of the adventure playground, or as it was originally called junk playground, was from architect Carl Theodor Sørensen (1893-1979) where the first junk playground opened in Denmark in 1943 at Emdrup Weg near Copenhagen (Bengtsson, 1972). The idea of junk playgrounds was brou1ht from Denmark to the UK by Lady Allen of Hurtwood (Hurtwood, 1968), where the name changed to adventure playgrounds.

In 1940 Lady Allen of Hurtwood, supported by the National Playing Fields Association (NPFA), now called Fields in Trust (FiT) supported the development of adventure playgrounds in the UK. The first adventure playground recorded was in Mordon (Evening News, 1947) followed by a pilot project being set up in 1948 in Camberwell, London (Kovlosky, 2008; Sutherland, 2014). From these first adventure playgrounds, more permanent adventure playgrounds developed in the 1950s in Crawley, Grimsby, and Liverpool (Cranwell, 2003), and this spread to Bristol, Manchester, Birmingham, and other areas in the Midlands, Sheffield, Newcastle, Cardiff, and Edinburgh (Chilton, 2018). However, Chilton's (2003) account of adventure playgrounds in the last 40 years indicates a decrease in the numbers across the UK due to factors such as health and safety requirements and adult-related agendas such as the need for increased childcare, and educational attainment.

Play has an important role in children's health and development where Whitebread et. al. (2012) identifies five types of play: physical play; play with objects; symbolic play; pretence/socio-dramatic play and games with rules. These five types of play reflect the Piaget (1962) classification of play of Practice Play (linked to the sensorimotor stage); Symbolic Play (linked to the pre-operational and operational stage) and Games with Rules (linked to the concrete operational stage). The wide age range and developmental stages of the children have to be considered in the analysis of the data. Piagetian (1962) theory outlines the different cognitive developmental stages as a stage-like process that still has its critics (Feldman, 2004), particularly as initial observations undertaken by Piaget were on their children. However, there are

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general characteristics of children's play that do reflect the age and stage of development (Garner & Bergen, 2006), and this provided a framework for analysis considering the potential level and quality of the response between children aged 4 years and over 11 years of age.

The adventure playground provides a unique space for children across a wide age range between 5 and 15 years (King, 2021a) to be able to engage in all the five types of play identified by Whitebread and colleagues (2012). This would include climbing and running (physical play), using tools such as hammer and nails to make dens (play with objects), acting out roles (pretence/socio-dramatic play), use the resources in any way they want (symbolic play) or play sports (games with rules). Chilton (2018) provides an overview on the types of play children engage in on an adventure playground and how this type of setting can support children's development.

The last estimated numbers of adventure playgrounds in England was around 180 (Play England (PE), 2011), although this number has decreased with recent closures of adventure playground. There are two adventure playgrounds in Wales and one in Scotland. Adventure playgrounds provide a play environment for children and young people, from as young as 4 and up to 17 years. Adventure playgrounds provide a unique play space for such a wide age range for children and young people to be in the same environment. As well as the UK, there are still adventure playgrounds, for example, in the United States (Almon & Keeler, 2018) and in Japan (Kinoshita, & Woolley, 2015) that provide a space for children and young people to play often in built-up urban environments. Shier (1984) provides a revised description of a typical adventure playground in the UK as:

> …an area fenced off and set aside for children. Within its boundary's children can play freely, in their own way, in their own time. But what is special about an Adventure Playground is that here (and increasingly in contemporary urban society, only here) children can build and shape the environment according to their own creative vision (p. 3).

Adventure playgrounds provide a unique environment where children have ownership of the space (PE, 2017) where they are free to come and go, within what is termed in the UK as an 'open access policy'. Adventure playgrounds provide a wide range of play opportunities such as den building using tools such as hammers, large structures for children to climb and jump from, a fire pit to both keep warm and cook, small and large movable objects, now often categorized as loose parts (Nicholson, 1971) which may include tyres and ropes, or just the open space to play traditional games in the UK such as hide 'n' seek or tag (chase). Some adventure playgrounds may also have access to indoor space where more art and craft-based opportunities of play may occur.

The adventure playground thus serves a wide age range of children and young people to engage and direct a variety of play opportunities. Although adventure playgrounds are not set up for educational attainment (Chilton, 2003), the diverse nature of this type of play provision will support children's development at different stages. For example, for children aged 4 and 5 years the use of objects becomes more functional (Garner & Bergen, 2006) with an increase in fine and gross motor skills (Johnson, 2006) and can be easily observed in den making where wooden structures are built using hammer and nails. Construction and outdoor play have benefits for cognitive learning in areas of math and science (Trawick-Smith et al., 2017). For older children, the play often becomes more complete concerning physical play and social play (Lee Manning, 2006). Although Whitebread and colleagues (2012) refer to socio-dramatic play as one of their five types of play, Hughes's (2002) taxonomy of 16 play types defines social play where "experiences in which the rules and criteria for social engagement and interaction can be revealed, explored and amended" (p. 33). This can be observed with children and young people climbing higher structures and leaping and somersaulting onto large crash mats, or where the fire pit is being prepared, lit and food being cooked which becomes a very socially-based play opportunity. Ward (1961) considered the adventure playground as:

> …a free-society in miniature, with the same tensions and ever-changing harmonies, the same diversity and spontaneity, the same unformed growth of co-operation and release of individual qualities and communal sense, which lie dormant in a society devoted to competition and acquisitiveness (p.201).

Adventure playgrounds often run after school (from 3 pm onwards in the UK) Monday to Friday, during the weekends, and during the day in the school holidays (King, 2021a). It is not uncommon for adventure playgrounds during the evening to have up to 60 children use the provision or during the holidays over 200, although not all at the same time concerning the open access policy of children being able to come and go as they please. Open access refers to children and young people free to enter and leave the adventure playground of their own volition (Welsh Government (WG), 2014). In addition to providing a space to play, adventure playgrounds have also developed other provisional services by acting as a food bank (King, 2021b) and providing a base for children and young people engaged in the alternative curriculum (King, 2020). The alternative curriculum is where school-aged children are not following the national educational curriculum and may spend part of their education outside of the school.

In March 2020, the UK went into lockdown as a response to the increasing spread of the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) which occurs "through contact (via larger droplets and aerosols), and longer-range transmission via aerosols, especially in conditions where ventilation is poor" (Alwan et. al., 2020, p.1). This resulted in all child-related provisions (schools, parks, adventure playgrounds, etc.) being faced with instant closure, and all play-related activities ceased and staff, not all, but most were furloughed (King, 2021a). Where adventure playgrounds were able to run some kind of provision, this continued to be community-based by increasing or developing food bank services or providing a more mobile service delivering resources to children's houses (King, 2020).

The March 2020 lockdown in the United Kingdom lasted for 3 months, and when adventure playgrounds re-opened in July 2020 restrictions about hygiene and social distancing were still in place (UK Governemnt, 2020a; 2020b). However, there was no consistent approach throughout the UK of the "2 meters or 1 meter with risk mitigations (where 2 meters is not viable) are acceptable" (UK Government, 2020a) being applied to all ages (UK Government, 2020b). Whilst England kept the 2-meter distance for all ages, there was leeway put in place for children under the age of 11 years in Northern Ireland (NIDirct, 2020), Scotland (Scottish Government (SG), 2020), and Wales (WG, 2020a; 2020b). Guidance on how adventure playgrounds could operate post-lockdown was developed by London Play (2020) where:

> Social distancing measures should be observed by anyone present who does not need to be in closer contact with the family group – maintaining a 2m physical distance where possible" and "limit the duration of playground stays to an hour at a time (p. 1).

The guidelines produced by London Play indicated parents and carers stay with the children (which would be included in the numbers allowed) where 'bubbles' of groups would have 1-hour time slots. With adventure playgrounds re-opening across the UK, the guidance by London Play reflected the UK Guidance in England where social distancing of at least 1m in England for all children was encouraged. In Scotland and Wales, the respective Governments provided guidance where social distancing for children under the age of 12 was relaxed (e.g. WG, 2020). However, for older children and young people, the social distancing of 1-2 m still applied, as with the adventure playground staff.

Significance and Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study was to obtain a child's perspective on social distancing and play. The significance of the study was measures were being introduced on how children should play in relation to social distancing, however children's views were not included, or considered when play-based settings were to re-open. For example, play is a social activity, for example, pretend play is common with 5-year-olds, chase games with 8-year-olds, and just 'hanging out' with 15 years, all involve close contact. Adventure playgrounds have a wide age range of 5-15 years using the provision. This poses the question of how to socially distance children 12 years and older and who are playing with those 11 years and younger. How possible is it to implement social distancing in children's play?

In the Isle of Man, lockdown finished earlier, and social distancing was abandoned on 15th June (Isle of Man Government (IoMG), 2020a; 2020b). Concerning the adventure playground provision, this meant with necessary hygiene precautions in place (concerning the cleaning of equipment, sanitising hands, etc.) there was no limit to the number attending, no bookable system put in place and the children and young

people who used the provision could play in the way they did as before, not in 'bubbles' or designated age groups.

Children and young people were thus able to return to their unique play environment, not having to worry about playing in close physical contact with both other children and the staff. This provided a unique context to ask children and young people a hypothetical question on how they would be able to play once they were back on their adventure playground if social distancing had to be implemented? The benefit of the hypothetical question is children and young people could respond without these measures being imposed on them, thus responses were based on their anticipated experience, rather than direct experience. This study was undertaken after the first lockdown in March 2020 was relaxed, although in the UK there has been another two lockdowns and one further lockdown in the Isle of Man.

Method

Research with children requires different considerations when compared to adults. This consideration requires what Punch (2002) refers to as using "research-friendly or 'person-friendly techniques" (p. 337). The views of children on their play and social distancing on their adventure playground were collected when the provision reopened on 15th June 2020.

This study provides a historical perspective in one period of time from the end of the first lockdown in March 2020 to re-opening in June 2020 where the study was undertaken. The research study undertaken was granted ethical approval from the ethics committee of the College of Human and Health Science at Swansea University.

Research Design

The research design used video to interview children who attended their adventure playground between the 13th and 23rd July 2020 after the first March 2020 Lockdown had finished in the Isle of Man. Interviews were undertaken using a 'vox pop' approach commonly used in journalism (Beckers, 2019). This involves short interviews that are video recorded (Beckers, 2019). This approach makes the data collection method more playful and less intrusive to children and young people in their play and makes the 'interview' process very informal. As children were returning after a period of lockdown, the interviews did not want to take up too much of their time playing on the adventure playground. Interviews were undertaken between the 13th and the 23rd of July 2020, one month after the adventure playground reopened in June 2020 after the March 2020 lockdown.

Children and young people were recruited from the adventure playground with no social distancing restrictions by an advert put up at the adventure playground explaining the study. The children and young people who were interested in taking part had a signed consent form completed by their parent or carer, as well as it being stressed any participation was voluntary and would be anonymous. Whilst the children and young people were playing, one of the adventure playground staff members went around with a video camera to undertake the short 'vox pop' interviews. The agreed procedure was set out where the purpose of the study would be explained to the child and clarification they were happy to participant. The researcher collecting the data used the same four questions below and all videos recorded were consistent with this approach. It was stressed to all the children any participation was voluntary and would be anonymous and they did not have to answer any of the four questions:

1. How old are you?
2. What is it like being back on the adventure playground?
3. What things do you do on the adventure playground?
4. How would you play if you had to stay 2m apart?

The questions were specific to children who attend the adventure playground and were developed with a member of staff. This considers addressing the aspect of credibility (Shenton, 2004). The questions were broad and open and did not have any COVID-19 or lockdown-specific questions as the focus of the study was on social distancing and play. The impact of COVID-19 can vary from individual to individual

and to keep with the focus of returning to the adventure playground, children were not asking questions that could specifically related to their health and well-being. However, safeguarding procedures were put in place if any responses from the children and young people reflected any concern or distress as a result of COVID-19 or lockdown, and relevant parties would be informed. Although this did not occur, it was important to consider the safeguarding of research participants.

Although issues of 'bias' and 'coercion' always need to be considered in research, the video data were collected by a member of staff could raise issues of bias. However, it was not possible to interview the children and young people by an independent researcher as travel to and from the Isle of Man was prohibited. Other methods of data collection such as recording interviews through platforms like Zoom® were considered but would have been too intrusive as this would have required participants to leave their chosen play activity and be led to a laptop or computer. The use of Zoom for interviews also relies on consistent connectivity. The use of recording the videos on a mobile device worked well. Interviews lasted between 35 seconds to 3.03 minutes and were short enough not to disrupt any children's play more than was needed. Most interviews were done individually, although most had other children and young people around playing, or in three instances, this was done individually but in a group of two or three children. The use of video recording allowed analysis of non-verbal language, location on the adventure playground, and is a naturalistic study, the noise and activities taking place in the background provided a snapshot of how the adventure playground was running with no social distancing needed.

Interviews were all undertaken outside in a range of places including a picnic bench, wheelchair, dens, slides, rope swings, and standing in the grass area of the adventure playground. One interview was undertaken in the indoor space where children also play and socialize. Some participants were holding objects such as hammers so although interrupted in their chosen play, the children and young people were able to return to it relatively quickly.

Participants

The chosen sampling method of inviting children to take part who were already using the adventure playground used voluntary non-probability sampling. However, when children were taking part, this resulted in other children being interested reflecting snowballing sampling in addition. In total twenty-five children and young people took part in the study aged from 4 years up to 13 years.

Table 1. Participants' characteristic

	2-6 years	7-10 years	11+ years
Girls	1 (4 years) 2 (5 year)	2 (8 years)	6 (11 years) 2 (12 years)
Boys	2 (5 years) (6 years)	1 (7 years) 3 (8 years) 1 (9 years) 1 (10 years)	3 (11 years) 1 (13 years)

Analysis

The Piagetian framework provided enabled a content analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 1995) to be undertaken. This enabled responses from the children to be coded (Elo & Kyngas, 2008) within the Piagetian framework. The Piagetian framework had three headings: pre-operational, concrete operational, and formal operational. This was all used to develop a framework to analyse the response and consider the age and developmental state of the children. This is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Analysis framework on Piagetian classification

Piagetian Play (1962)	Pre-operational 2 to 6 years	Concrete Operational 7 to 10 years	Formal Operational 11+ years
	Children are figurative or perception-oriented and play is symbolic and uses creative imagination	Children are capable of thinking logically, but always with a basis in concrete or material things and includes construction games	Children are capable of abstract reasoning

The framework enabled the coding of data to consider how each participant's play preferences and responses reflect their potential age and development. This included both verbal responses transcribed directly to what the children were saying as well as the non-verbal responses. Transcription involved transcribing by hand each interview. This involved watching and re-watching each video. With the interviews being video recorded, non-verbal responses can be considered as "Video offers an open invitation to the researcher to look beyond the spoken word and find meaning from other dimensions of participant activity" (Ramsey et. al., 2016, p. 3) explained as "recursive transcription" (p. 3) where non-verbal responses in conjunction with the spoken (verbal) narrative can include:

> nonverbal, semiotic fields of interest as: gesture and pointing, gaze and attention, body position and movement, touch, tone and inflection, facial expression, and engagement with material objects (Ramsey et. al., 2016, p. 3)

The data collected by the adventure playground staff member was analysed by a second member of the research team who did not know the children. This enabled a separation of data collection and analysis to reduce bias and consider credibility (Shenton, 2004) of the process. When the data was analysed, this was sent back to the staff member to check for accuracy and the confirmability of the results (Shenton, 2004). The aspects of credibility and confirmability relate to trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The responses were discussed between the researcher collecting the data and the second researcher analysing the interviews. It was agreed the use of Piagetian classification reflected the responses, and the content analysis enabled capturing the views of the children.

Findings

Table 3 shows the content analysis using the Piagetian framework to group responses from the different age groups. The Piagetian framework used reflects three of the four stages and these are linked to two of Piaget's classification of play of symbolic play and games with rules. As the questions focused on how children use the adventure playground, the responses were more detailed with the older children, reflecting more cognitive thinking of their responses. This is considered when discussing the results below.

Table 3. Responses within Piagetian classification

	Pre-operational (2-6)	**Concrete Operational (7-10 years)**	**Formal Operational (11+ years)**
Return to Adventure Playground	Good (2)	Fun (6) Weird (2) Good (2) Best Awesome Amazing Great	Fun (8) Good (4) Okay Amazing Happy enjoying Cool
Types of Play	Slides (2) Swings Teddies	Build (5) Play on slides (3) Break stuff (2) Explore (2) Food	Building stuff (9) Play with other people (5) Food (4) Slides (3) Swings
Social Distancing	Line up and take turns (2)	Bring in Nerf guns to play with Only play with people you know Build standing apart Not come in Play carefully Wear masks	Would not be here (3) Would not do it (2) Difficult to implement (2)
Non-Verbal	Smiles	Smiles and gestures	Smiles and more elaborate gestures

When returning to the adventure playground, all the children felt positive with the words fun and good being used the most. For the children 11+ years, their responses were accompanied by elaborate gestures such as giving a thumbs up. The content analysis is discussed about each of the three age groups.

Pre-Operational (2-6) Years

When asked what it was like to return to the adventure playground, single-word answers of "Good"

accompanied by a smile were consistent. When asked how they like to play on the adventure playground, a specific object was stated such as swings and slides. The responses on how they would play if they had to stay 2 m apart, it was clear there was an understanding of the distance, and the replies could be described as 'compliant' where the child demonstrated how turn-taking could be undertaken by queueing as illustrated in this response:

> "I would stand here, and they would be over there and then I would go on the slide and then they would go on the slide" (Girl aged 4 years)

Concrete Operational (7-10 years)

As with the pre-operational responses, when asked what it was like to be back on the adventure playground, single-word answers of "Fun" and "Good" with a smile, where one child said:

> "Really fun, I haven't been here for a whole 3 months and I was sad I could not come" (Boy, aged 7 years)

The types of play included both object play (slides and swings) but also construction play of building dens, forts. This was evident where the children being interviewed had a hammer in their hands whilst answering the questions the responses were more detailed:

> "I like jumping off over there *points to the play storage container*, like having the food here. Have fun with my friends, build and digging" (Boy aged 10 years)

When asked how they would be playing if they had to remain 2m apart, the responses would be described as 'compliant and adaptive' where again acceptance of 2m was reflected in their responses, however, the children would go into more detail on how they would adapt their play to maintain a distance:

> "I would build, but *uses stretched out arm to illustrate* one person would be on one side of the building and other person would be on the other side of the building" (Girl aged 8 years)

Formal Operational (11+ years)

The responses on what it was like to return to the adventure playground were also single words such as 'good' and 'fun' and the use of smiles, however, these words were accompanied with distinct gestures such as a 'thumbs up' and exaggerated hand and arm movements:

> "FUN *wide smile and stretching out their arms* (Girl a, aged 11 years)

The type of play included both objects (swings and slides) and construction (den building) but also specified the social aspect of meeting friends. There was also more emphasis in the answers using head movements and pointing to where the various activities take place:

> "I like hammering, cooking food, starting the fire, helping people out and I like playing" (Girl b, aged 11 years)

When asked how they would play if social distancing had to be adhered to, there was a distinct 'confrontation' in their responses from defiance (not do it) to would not come to the adventure playground. The responses included very clear gestures of shaking heads from side to side, shrugging of shoulders, and widening of eyes or curling of lips:

> "I wouldn't be able to do that, it would be really stressful *shakes head from side to side* (Girl, aged 12 years)

One response around the issues of playing and social distancing was encapsulated in the response below:

> "It would probably feel weird, because you're supposed to help people like, say you're helping someone hammer, you need to hold the nail, but you can't do that social distancing so it's going to be pretty tricky" (Boy, aged 11 years)

What was evident from the video interviews was the snapshot of what happens in the adventure playground to support children's and young people's play. Some of the participants were using the play resources whilst being interviewed, such as hammers or sitting on a slide or swing. For some of the interviews, particularly the 7-10-year age range, there was a playful interchange as often other children would do things like stand behind the interviewee and do 'bunny ears' or when pointing to an activity they like doing, children are making dens, jumping off structures or sitting around chatting. This playful

interchange also included the interviewer who also had 'bunny ears' made behind them, having their hat stolen or children playing with their hair. This was all off-camera but mentioned by the children being interviewed.

When summarizing the results, it was evident all the children were pleased to be back on the adventure playground to engage in their chosen play. The chosen favourite way children played on the adventure playground did reflect the Piaget classification and types of play where pre-operational (4-6 years) were more object play focused. For the operational stage (7-10 years) this involved more construction whilst for the formal operational (11+ years) the responses from the children had more emphasis on the social aspect of play. When asked about social distancing (keeping 2m apart when playing), pre-operational children were more compliant, operational children were adaptive and formal operational were confrontational.

The results will be discussed concerning the unique environment adventure playground provide in meeting the play needs of a wide range of children and consider how applying social distancing, particularly to the formal operational age range of 11+ years may need reconsidering in light of their social needs and expectations.

Discussion

When adventure playgrounds re-opened in July 2020 in the UK, social distancing regulations were placed on all children in England (UK Government, 2020b) and for children aged 12 years or over in years in Northern Ireland (NIDirct, 2020), Scotland (SG, 2020) and Wales (WG, 2020). The restrictions imposed on social distancing and children's play were asked to children and young people who returned to their adventure playground with no social distancing restrictions in place. This provided a unique study where children and young people could hypothesise how they would play if 2m apart, rather than it being imposed and having to do so. The study also provides an important historical context of playwork during the Covid-19 pandemic.

When children were asked about their play and social distancing using a Piaget (1962) developmental classification indicated children's understanding of the world differs between the pre-operational (4-6 years), operational (7-10 years), and formal operational (11+years) stages where children at the pre-operational and operational differ on how they play and respond to questions compared to children in the formal operational stage. Although critics of Piagetian theory exists (Feldman, 2005), the use of pre-operational, and formal operational did provide a framework where the responses on how they play, and how they would play 2m apart did reflect this Piagetian classification. Pre-operational children were more focused on object play, operational children with physical play and formal operational children preferred more social type focused play. A consideration of social play and social interaction reflects Vygotsky's (1978) view of the importance of play in children's development and how this will differ in respect to the different Piagetian stages. For example, for the formal operational (11 years and older) the social aspect may take more priority than what and how children play. For the pre-operational, children will play socially, but the object being played or the activity undertaken may take more priority. The variety of what happens in any play space indicates why adventure playgrounds are important as they do provide varied play spaces for play to meet children's developmental and social needs across a wide age range.

This varied play environment indicates how children's understanding and acceptance of social distancing would be different as indicated in this study where children in the pre-operational stage were more compliant, operational children adaptive and formal operational confrontational about keeping 2m apart when playing. The 'blanket approach' of the social distancing policies of 1m to 2m for children in England (UK Governement, 2020a) would have been met differently by the children in this study dependent on their age. Where in Scotland (SG, 2020) and Wales (WG, 2020a; 2020b) the 2m social distancing only applied to those over 12 years, children within the formal operational stage in this study would have either not attended the adventure playground or ignored the 2m rule. For older children, the

adventure playground would become a less attractive place to meet friends, and thus not be able to use their play environment. Where restrictions were lifted for children under the age of 12 years, this study indicated they would be more compliant in maintaining the 2m rule, although if this was put into practice, this may not be the case when children are playing.

The importance of considering children and young people's views on social distancing and play reflects the wider issue of how play is important and the role of adventure playgrounds in providing space to play. During the March 2020 lockdown, and when adventure playgrounds re-opened, fears expressed in the UK in relation to a reduction to outdoor space have "endangered child health and widened pre-existing disparities" (Editorial, 2020, p. 1). Guan et. al. (2020) stated children "obtain their daily physical activity" (p. 416) through a range of activities including active play. However, how children and young people play the stipulation of social distancing makes interaction with friends in outdoor activities problematic especially in spaces such as adventure playgrounds where children engage in many physical types of play.

Children in this study across the age range clearly expressed their pleasure in being back on the adventure playground, and with no social distancing, this did not restrict numbers or the type of play that engaged in before the March lockdown. Children returning to their adventure playgrounds in July 2020 in the UK social distancing was put in place. However, numbers were reduced and where children did attend, social distancing was difficult to maintain, whatever the age of the child (King, 2021b). As with the views of the children in this study, there had to be some compliance, where for some children they were placed in 'bubbles' and some adaptation of both resources provided and the types of play that was still possible for children to engage in (King, 2021b). However, the enforcement of social distancing became harder to enforce particularly for the older-aged child (King, 2021b). The views of the children from this current study where social distancing was hypothesized reflected what happened with children and young people in adventure playgrounds with limited numbers and social distancing measures that were put in place. This indicates the importance of consulting with children concerning policies that have an impact on their dedicated play space.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

There are limitations to this study that are acknowledged. Firstly, children were asked questions by the adults in the adventure playground which could have influenced or biased their responses. As children were asked during their play, and only lasting between 50 seconds and 3 minutes, this did not take up too much of their time and the responses reflected the enjoyment that could be ascertained in the play activities in the background and the noise of children playing. The responses were reliable and not coerced by the interviewer. The sample of 25 children, although fairly small, was a good sample size for the number of children registered and using the adventure playground, especially as it had only been running for 2 months before the March lockdown.

The third limitation of this study is the children left lockdown earlier in the Isle of Man and with no social distancing compared to England for example. Since the lockdown, when the study was undertaken only one case of COVID-19 on the Isle of Man had been reported and so the views of the children may not represent those who have returned to their adventure playground with social distancing requirements put in place. This would be a relevant follow-up study with children to see if social distancing had been implemented on their adventure playground and what impact did it have on their play.

Conclusion

This study provided a unique opportunity to listen to children's voices on their experience of returning to their play environment after a period of lockdown, and not having to worry about social distancing only hypothesis about it. The study shows how important play is to children and that careful consideration has to be put in place concerning how play environments, designated specifically for children, need to consider their views on social distancing, particularly older children the opportunity to

meet friends and socialise may be impeded if restrictions are put in place.

From this study, children of all ages enjoy and needed the adventure playground post lockdown. For the older child, aged 11 years or over, this social distancing would be 'ignored'. If this is the case, then it has to be considered where will children meet and congregate? At least on specific play provisions for children, such as adventure playgrounds if children are meeting their friends and being able to play outside, it would be easier to track and trace if there are any COVID-19 related infections. Government policy and guidelines need to consider that children do not always diverge into two groups of primary (under 12 years) and secondary (12 years to 18 years), and careful consideration of the risk and benefits of adventure playgrounds as a safe space, away from vulnerable adults that may be more important than before when considering children's health, wellbeing, and development.

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Research Article

Evaluating the practice in Swedish school-age educare: Issues and contradictions

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Abstract: This article reports how teachers in Swedish school-age educare evaluate (SAEC) their practice. The study was conducted within a research- and development programme and is based on 47 teachers' written reflections about performing evaluations. The reflections have been analysed using various neo-institutional logics. The results indicate that the teachers' focus, regarding both the children and the practice, is directed differently when they are guided by different logics. When guided by *the market logic*, teachers focus on customer preferences and customer satisfaction. Guided by *the professional logic*, teachers focus the collective as well as the activities and the organisation around them. Guided by *the bureaucratic and state logics*, the teachers focus on the formal teaching, the individual child, and the school-age educare goal fulfilment. The results also show issues and contradictions concerning how to evaluate, what to evaluate, and when to evaluate. One possible claim is that the learning processes at the school-age educare are broad and complex, and thus difficult to "mould" to fit into evaluation schemes.

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School-age educare; Evaluation; Neo-institutional logics; Teaching; Learning

Introduction

This article focuses on how teachers in the Swedish school-age educare (SAEC) evaluate their practice. The Swedish SAEC offers education and cares for children aged 6-12 years old, before and after school when their parents work or are engaged in studies. SAEC is an institution with more registered pupils than upper secondary school. Approximately 83% of all six to nine-year-olds attend SAEC (The government official investigations, SOU 2020, p. 34). Most countries offer childcare for school children, but the forms and organisation vary. Of the Nordic countries, only Sweden and Denmark employ higher educated staff in SAEC (Dahl, 2014; Pálsdóttir, 2012). Sweden is the only Nordic country with a specialised teacher education programme at the university level aimed at working in SAEC.

Historically, the Swedish SAEC has been based on a *social pedagogical tradition*, largely centred around a care-focused assignment combined with attention to children's fostering and development. This value system is based on the Nordic EduCare model, which emphasises humanistic aspects, such as well-being and social development, volunteering, play and rest (Gustafsson Nyckel, 2020; Johansson, 1984; Pálsdóttir, 2012). However, the mission of the SAEC has changed during the last decades. Since the late 1990s, the Ministry of Education is responsible for the SAEC in Sweden, and this programme is integrated into the school curricula. Since the beginning of the 2010s, more emphasis has been placed on teaching and learning in SAEC, which is related to the global discourse of knowledge efficiency and economic aspects of education (Andersson, 2013; Holmberg, 2018; Swedish School Inspectorate, 2010; 2018). This value system is based on an *educational pedagogical tradition* and can be demonstrated, for example, by the 2010 School Act and the 2016 revision of the current curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2019). In the curriculum, the SAEC teaching assignments have been clarified and highlighted in a specific chapter, in addition to the skills, children are supposed to develop during their time in the SAEC. In terms of ensuring both children's learning and quality instruction, the SAEC teaching must be evaluated. This article concerns how this evaluation is done.

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Global Movements Indicating Change to a More Evaluation-Based Discourse

It is safe to say that the changes in the Swedish SAEC mission and the shift towards an increased focus on knowledge efficiency and teaching can be understood in the light of global movements towards a learnification of education (Biesta, 2009). During the last 20 years, education has become subject to policy overload as a result of 'travelling educational policies' (Ball, 2017). Policy ideas change as they move around the world, which indicates that global and local policy logics are intertwined and entangled to such an extent that it can be difficult to determine where the developments begin or end (Pettersson et al., 2017). OECD is one of the major global policy influencers promoting national policy change through their reviews and recommendations. However, policy ideas change as they spread around the globe, and they take shape in different ways and for various reasons depending on the context. As a result, there will be compromises in balancing global policy with national interests, and historical and contextual traditions (Ackesjö & Persson, 2019; Ball, 2017).

Processes such as decentralisation, deregulation, professional accountability, and marketisation (Nordin, 2012; Wahlström & Sundberg, 2015) are ways to adjust and restructure national to global educational policy (Lindblad & Popkewitz, 2004). This process has been called the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) (Sahlberg, 2016), and it illustrates how countries have changed to a more evaluation-based discourse of governance with an emphasis on monitoring, inspection, and assessment. These changes have created a new evaluation-based educational landscape (Pettersson et al., 2017) and an efficiency discourse that puts results in focus. Biesta (2011; 2017) calls this an era of measurements and warns that this development risks eroding the democratic dimensions of education and pushing professionals into a role of being standards-driven, evidence-based service providers (Biesta, 2017).

Policy Changes at the National and Contextual Levels

Behind the policy changes and reforms concerning the Swedish SAEC aimed at making it more about teaching and learning, there are arguments about increasing all pupils' achievement results in school. References to international knowledge assessments (TIMSS, PISA, PIRLS) motivate these investments and reforms. When the Swedish national results in PISA and other international knowledge assessments fell during the beginning of the 2000s, focus in the educational policy arguments shifted towards knowledge rationality and teaching, knowledge effectiveness, and goal achievement at all levels, namely, preschool, SAEC, and school[1]. The earlier focus on the intertwining of early childhood education and care in preschool and SAEC was transformed into policy discourses where goal-orientation were moved to the foreground (Ackesjö & Persson, 2019). From a political standpoint, there are several reasons to invest in education for young children. These reasons are related to the financial and economic investment paradigm that emphasises the profitability of strengthening education for young children. It is widely held that young children's experiences of participating in early learning environments of high quality influence their chances in life (Heckman, 2004), and research findings suggest that participation in extra-curricular activities, such as the SAEC, is associated with improved academic performance (Guilmette et al., 2019). Increasing children's academic performance and positively influencing children's life chances are the main national political arguments behind the policy changes in SAEC, which come together in the revised curriculum with a clarified teaching mission and prescribed skills that children are supposed to develop. Given this background, the SAEC now has the task to contribute to children's development and learning at a general level (Ludvigsson & Falkner, 2019). These movements illustrate the shift from the historical, social pedagogical tradition of the SAEC to the educational pedagogical tradition and its current focus on learnification.

Due to the global and national policy movements, the teachers in SAEC are positioned in a field of tension between tradition and new educational policy intentions. In the SAEC, children are to be offered meaningful free time before or after school, including care, rest, and creative activities. At the same time,

[1] The Swedish SAEC is included in the school curricula, and in this way becomes a part of the school system, even if parents, based on the family's needs, can choose whether or not their children participate in this educational programme.

the SAEC shall be understood as an educational arena and should be focused on the prescribed skills that children are supposed to develop. Teachers try to navigate between these two different value systems (Ackesjö & Haglund, 2021) as they adapt to the educational policy intentions presented in the revised curriculum, new school law descriptions, and a new teacher education programme (Ackesjö et al., 2020; Andersson, 2013; Gustafsson Nyckel, 2020; Haglund, 2015; 2016; Holmberg, 2018). The time that children spend in the SAEC shall include activities that support their school achievement and complement primary school teaching (Ludvigsson & Falkner, 2019). As a result, children's time in the SAEC seems to have become increasingly institutionalised (Andersson, 2010; Saar et.al., 2012). The same trends are found in Norway and Denmark (Øksnes et al., 2014) as well as in countries outside the Nordic countries and Europe. The development has led to an increased focus on learnification of children's time outside the compulsory teaching, and how this can benefit both learning in general and children's school performance. The challenge is how teachers in the SAEC handle the dilemma between their teaching contributing to goal fulfilment and measurable results, at the same time as it creates meaningful and voluntary activities based on the children's interests and willingness (Ludvigsson & Falkner, 2019).

As the assignment to teach has been added to the SAEC mission during the last years, it can be assumed that the concept of teaching is not yet well established. Research shows that due to the SAEC traditions, SAEC teachers seem to hesitate to absorb and implement the new way of thinking and rather use other concepts to describe what happens in the SAEC (Andersson, 2013; Närvänen & Elvstrand, 2014; Saar et al., 2012). In doing so, teachers also mark the distance to the school ways of teaching and views of knowledge (Haglund, 2016).

It is still uncertain how teaching in the SAEC should and can be conducted. Neither the teaching practice nor the evaluation practice in SAEC is particularly researched. It also seems to be difficult to capture the teaching in the SAEC, since it is dominated by informal learning processes (Boström et al., 2015). The teaching is often embedded in everyday activities, and a common expression among teachers in SAEC is that they "try to catch the learning and teaching situations in the moment," which also means that it only involves the children who happen to be in place at that time. In addition, teaching in SAEC is also complicated by the fact that the SAEC is voluntary for children to participate in. It is therefore not possible to assume that the teaching in the SAEC reaches all, or even the majority, of the children enrolled. This complicates the teachers' teaching assignments (Ackesjö & Haglund, 2021), but also complicates how to evaluate the teaching, if it should be evaluated, and how this can be done.

Teaching in SAEC, as in the compulsory school, is to be considered a goal-oriented process. Being a goal-oriented process, the teaching needs to be evaluated to ensure quality in the children's learning. However, since the concept of teaching in SAEC seems to be undefined, criteria for an evaluation in the SAEC are lacking, and research on this topic is minimal. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate how the evaluation of the teaching in the SAEC is conducted. The research question guiding this study is, *which institutional logics are teachers guided by when evaluating the teaching in the SAEC?*

The Neo-Institutional Perspective

Using a sociological neo-institutional perspective, this study involves an analysis of SAEC teachers' reflections about their work with evaluations. This perspective focuses on how the institutional order affects both actors and organisations and, conversely, how the actors' strategic actions, in turn, affect the institutional order (Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2009). Earlier institutional theoretical perspectives placed greater emphasis on institutionalisation processes at an organisational and societal level, which meant the actor perspective fell into the background and the actors were constructed as passive (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). In the present study, the actors (the teachers) and their stories about their evaluation practice are placed at the centre.

The concept of the institution has been defined in many different ways based on what is considered to be in focus. In this study, the institution is defined as a… "more-or-less taken-for-granted repetitive social behaviour that is underpinned by normative systems and cognitive understandings that give

meaning to social exchange and thus enable self-reproducing social order" (Greenwood et al., 2008, p. 4–5).

Institutions are built by normative and regulatory systems which Scott (2014) defines as the institution's pillars. These pillars make sense and are produced and reproduced in different ways by those working within the institution according to the norms, values and rules on which the institution is based (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton, 2004). Thereby, these pillars form the basis and create stability and meaning in the institutional order (Scott, 2014).

The concept of *logics* has become central to this theory, and logics have been defined as the guiding principle. Actors in an institution meet different and varying requirements, and to deal with these, the actors (consciously or unconsciously) are guided by different logics (Friedland & Alford, 1991). Logics are about rules of action, interpretation, and interaction (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999) and emphasise the importance of social context. Attention to the societal level of institutional orders is necessary to understand individual and organisational behaviour. Logics shape the behaviours of social actors (Friedland & Alford, 1991) and provide conventions for deciding which issues may be important enough to be worth solving. This theory provides tools for analysing how individuals and organisations are affected in an inter-institutional system, such as the institutional order of family, state, market and profession (Thornton et al., 2012). Friedland and Alford (1991) have developed five logics; market, bureaucratic state, democracy, family and Christianity. Thornton (2004) then developed these into six logics; market, state, profession, company, family, and religion. Of particular interest in this paper are *the market logic, the professional logic,* and *the bureaucratic state logic.* All these logics are contained under the umbrella of institutional logic.

Within *the market logic*, free and unregulated competition with consumer preferences and choice are what determine success (Friedson, 2001). This logic has competition and individualisation as means and goals, and schools are seen as parts of a market that competes with students, teacher resources, and academic results. Within this logic, school and education are viewed through a market lens, and a customer-oriented view of the students is visible. It is possible for teachers to regard children and parents as customers, which in turn means that children and parents are given power and influence over pedagogical decisions. The customer or consumer preferences govern what services are available (Fredriksson, 2010). Discourses about efficiency, competition and performance culture may, however, stand in opposition to a profession's freedom of action and its professionalism, as the professionals can take on a controlled, service-oriented role in this market (Lundström & Parding, 2011).

Within *the professional logic*, professionals rely on abstract knowledge to conduct their practice solely or in partnership with others of the same profession. Within the professional logic, it is possible to take control over the content and organisation of the work (Goodrick & Reay, 2011) as the profession "monitors" its professional knowledge both within the profession and vis-à-vis other professions (Brante, 2014; Friedson, 2001). The control is based on teachers' knowledge, judgment, independence, and the pursuit of a certain autonomy springing from jurisdiction. Professionals practise within a framework with a specific scope, norms, and values in their field of work (Brante, 2014). This means that this logic emphasises a bottom-up perspective, as the professionals' experiences and autonomy, as well as their unique knowledge, guide them (Brante, 2014; Friedson, 2001).

Within *the bureaucratic state logic*, the government takes responsibility for professional work as opposed to ratifying professional desires. Hence, professionals are seen as employees of the state, and the state controls the credentials for professional practice and the organisation of their work (Goodrick & Reay, 2011). Focus in the state logic is equivalent education and how the pupils can contribute to the development of society, but it also includes values such as democratic principles, political ideology, welfare, and power (Thornton, 2004) which guide the teachers' work. Teachers' work is politically steered through regulations and instructions stemming from the state control as well as centralised and formalised to ensure standardisation within the institution (Friedson, 2001). The logic implies loyalty to the regulations rather than to the professions (Fredriksson, 2010). This means that this logic emphasises a top-down perspective, as results and documentation shall be delivered "upwards" according to a pre-determined supply chain.

The logics used in the present study are illustrated in Figure 1 below.

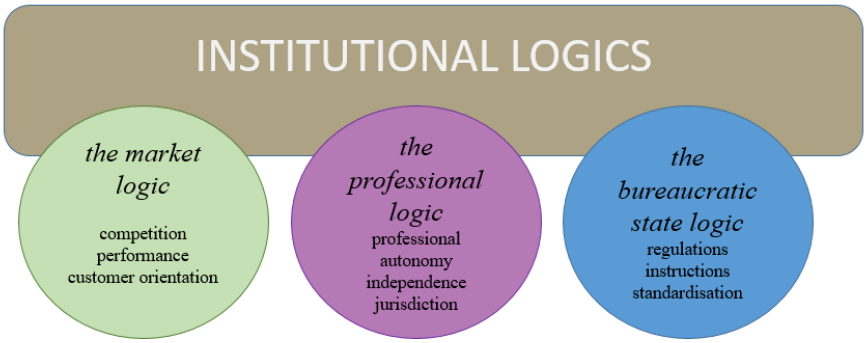

Figure 1. Illustration of the logics used in this study.

Logics are one way of understanding the human organisation, but they do not constitute a direct description of reality. Instead, they are abstract generalisations, refined and modelled in a way to appear precise and contrasting. However, logics can create contradictions and/or be competitive; when guided by logics, professionals are often forced to prioritise. Professionals are likely to identify more strongly with one or more logic in their field of work than with others (Ackesjö, 2021). Logics can also be hybrid, as the professionals are guided by several different logics at the same time in order to maintain the legitimacy of their actions, but also to challenge the institutional order (Scott, 2008). Contradictions within an institution, and the different value bases of these logics, contribute to making different logics predominate in different ways depending on situations and actions as this paper will show.

Method

This study was conducted within the research and development programme entitled *SAEC's pedagogical assignment*[2]. This was a three-year programme which included both SAEC teachers, principals and heads of educational administrations in 31 schools in four different municipalities/districts. The aim of the development part of the programme was to a) increase and develop knowledge about how the SAEC's activities and collaboration with the compulsory school can contribute to good conditions for students' learning, and b) increase knowledge about the principal's responsibility to lead and manage the SAEC. Out from this focus, the aim of the research part of the programme was formulated to describe and define how teaching in the SAEC can be conducted and how the concept of teaching can be understood in relation to the SAEC.

The research and development parts of the programme were intertwined and conducted in close collaboration with the involved SAEC teachers. The work can be described as participant-oriented and was based on Ellström (2010) model on how participant-oriented research becomes relevant to the participants, at the same time as it can contribute to a build-up of research-based knowledge and theory formation and provide a basis for and support development work in the participating schools. Ellström calls it interconnected learning cycles, which consist of a practice system and a research system. Researchers, teachers and principals define problems in a joint process, carry out different activities and jointly try to interpret and understand the results and effects that arise (Ellström, 2010). One such defined problem was how to plan, conduct and evaluate teaching in the SAEC. With support from the researchers, the participating teachers focused on developing their teaching at their schools for a number of weeks until the next meeting in the programme.

As the program lasted for three years (2019-2022), the number of participating teachers varied. When data for this study was gathered, 73 SAEC teachers were involved in the programme. The work experience within the teacher group ranged from a few months (newly graduated SAEC teachers) to several decades

[2] A three-year research and development project funded by IFOUS (Innovation, research and development in school and preschool) 2019-2022.

(SAEC educators with a degree from the 1980s). In the present paper, all respondents are called SAEC teachers, regardless of educational background. The study conforms to the Swedish Research Council ethical principles (2017). The respondents were informed at the start of the research and development programme about the purpose of the research, about the research was going to be published, that confidentiality was guaranteed and that they may refrain from participating.

Since this research and development programme started just before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, only two physical meetings with the participants could be conducted. The rest of the meetings (3-4 per year) were digital. The data used in this study consists of written reflections upon the question: *How do you evaluate learning in the SAEC?* To collect the written reflections in a way where confidentiality was guaranteed, a web-based system was constructed in the Sunet Survey program. By logging in and writing their reflections, teachers gave their consent. The questions were e-mailed to all participants along with an individual login to the system, which was used to enter and write their reflections. After a few reminders, reflections from 47 of the participating teachers were received.

The collected empirical material was handled with confidentiality according to the Swedish Research Council ethical principles (2017). Even though the respondents in this study were predetermined, and the questions were e-mailed to the respondents, I did not know who answered the questions. The data have been stored on the university server and only made available to the researchers in the project through password-protected computers. The raw material was stored digitally and password-protected in the digital system Sunet Survey. All research data has been handled in accordance with the university's guidelines for data management and the GDPS ordinance. Ethical considerations have been present throughout the research process as it has been presented honestly, openly, fairly, completely and in an objective way.

The dataset was analysed as inspired by a combination of what Reay and Jones (2016) call *pattern inducing* and *pattern matching.* First, the empirical data was carefully read through. All individual written reflections were given a number representing the individual teachers (marked with 1-47). Then, with an inductive technique, empirical patterns were identified in the raw data using a bottom-up process (Reay & Jones, 2016). At this stage, patterns such as formal/informal evaluations, evaluation of activities and/or teaching and goal-related evaluations were induced. Thereafter, these identified patterns were matched to the predefined logics described in the theoretical section. For example, the formal/informal evaluations were matched to the market logic based on the focus on customer satisfaction. Thereby, the content in the text segments could be analysed and meanings could be revealed in each logic. In addition, nuances in the local practices can be highlighted, and the results can be visualised (Reay & Jones, 2016) as in the following results section.

Finally, some considerations about this study's validity and reliability. *Internal validity* is concerned about what the researcher can really say something about based on their data. The credibility of the interpretations is all about the researcher's craftsmanship, about critically relating to his interpretations in order to avoid distorting the results (Kvale, 1997). The validity is thus dependent on whether the statements presented hold the test against other alternative statements. The validity in this study has been strengthened by reporting the analysis process as carefully as possible. Elements from the theoretical base and previous research also reappear in the results analysis and discussion, which helps to highlight the new knowledge that has been constructed. *External validity* is concerned about how the results can be generalized to other cases or situations (Schofield, 1993). The aim of this study has been to offer as clear and detailed descriptions as possible so that the reader can determine whether the results can be generalized. I humbly face the fact that the empirical data does not provide a comprehensive picture of evaluation in the SAEC. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the statements described in the study are by no means unique; the reader may find recognition in parts of the data and the results. The selected excerpts have been discussed at a more general and theoretical level, which contributes to that the examples can gain value even outside the described national context.

Findings

The written reflections that have been collected for this study indicate that evaluations do not always take place, since teachers seem to find it difficult to evaluate what is going on in the SAEC. These difficulties may be related to the SAEC's recurring situation-driven informal learning and experience-based activities. There seems to be an ambiguity in how learning at the SAEC can be captured, what it is that actually should be evaluated when this evaluation should take place and how:

> We find it very difficult to evaluate the learning at the SAEC. Should we even evaluate? When should we evaluate? (21)

> We agree that informal learning takes place all the time at the SAEC, but it is more difficult to evaluate than formal learning since the goal is not as clear. (35).

In addition to this, the teachers also seem to be limited in their professional assignment. They often do not have time set aside to evaluate, but rather to look ahead and plan for the coming week. These reflections go in line with previous research (Ackesjö & Haglund, 2021; Boström et al., 2015;) that has shown that the teaching in the SAEC often is not organised, but rather embedded in the everyday life and therefore rather hard to both plan and evaluate.

However, even if there seems to be ambiguity and some confusion about how and what to evaluate, the teachers also describe how they proceed with the evaluation work. The following sections will illustrate the logics these teachers seem to be guided by when evaluating the teaching in the SAEC.

The Market Logic - Customer Satisfaction

One common way to evaluate is to ask the children what they think about the activities in the SAEC. What is evaluated is above all the children's satisfaction and engagement, but not necessarily what they have learned or what development the teaching has contributed to.

In the written reflections, mainly two forms of evaluation appear, informal and formal. A common informal way to evaluate informally is to let the children show whether they liked or disliked an activity with thumbs up/thumbs down:

> We usually do "thumbs up" and "thumbs down" after the activity as we talk about the activity. (44)

> Sometimes, for example, if you have been in the sports hall, you can do a quick check with "thumbs up or down". Then you'll get the children's opinions. (41)

> We ask the children after each activity, listen to them and their views and wishes. (38)

A more formal way of evaluating together with the children is to let them grade the activities and/or fill in questionnaires:

> We usually do simple evaluations together with the children after the activities. They use post-it notes and may give stars or similar things based on certain questions. (31)

> Every week we have a children's council with the whole group. Sometimes we evaluate our activities with them. We have also had small student councils on Fridays with two children from each class. … They have written [aspects of the SAEC activities] in stars that we put up in our hall for all children and parents to see. (27)

The above-described evaluation methods are focused on *children's opinions*, *views*, and *wishes*. Doing an evaluation seems to be about getting information about whether the children thought the activity was fun; a five-star activity is a really fun activity. Embedded in this evaluation work appears to be an underlying ambition to make sure that children are satisfied and also to illustrate performatively and visually to outsiders (parents, other teachers, school management, etc.) what is going on at the SAEC.

These empirical examples illustrate how teachers are guided by the market logic which holds consumer preferences and choice (Friedson, 2001) in the centre. When guided by this logic, teachers hold the process and the customer (child) in focus. If the customer is pleased, all is well. The evaluation can be seen as a way for the teachers to evaluate their contribution in relation to the children's satisfaction and how the children experienced their contribution. The aim here is not to evaluate if any learning took place or to evaluate teaching towards set goals; it is not even certain that the activities have any clear intentions

or learning goals to begin with. Rather, the focus is customer satisfaction.

In addition, when teachers are guided by the market logic, it may be possible to identify the historical, social pedagogic tradition of SAEC, a value system which emphasises aspects such as freedom, well-being, and children's play (Gustafsson Nyckel, 2020; Johansson, 1984; Pálsdóttir,, 2012). Within this logic, individualisation and the individual's free choices are seen as means and goals. Nowadays, the SAEC and the school are parts of a market that competes with resources. Hence, through a market lens, a satisfied customer is preferred.

The Professional Logic - Activities, Not Teaching

Another way to evaluate is through collegial reflections within the work teams. In these conversations, the teachers evaluate the activities that have been carried out in terms of how things worked out:

> In our work teams, we present and discuss what activities we do in our various departments. (31)
>
> During our weekly planning meetings, we evaluate the past week and the activities we have done. (43)
>
> We evaluate when we have our planning meetings. We highlight what is going well and what we can/could develop/have done differently in the different activities. (39)

The focus of these evaluations seems to be to make a situation assessment over the past week. The colleagues give each other feedback on the various initiatives and discuss how the daily work can be built upon. The evaluation of the week thus forms the basis for discussions on how to develop and plan next week's work together.

Notable is how the teachers talk about what is being done during the week. The focus in the evaluation does not seem to be about making the children's learning visible or directing the upcoming activities towards set goals, but rather appears to be about the practical organisation and informing each other about various completed activities and what went well. That the focus is on how teachers themselves have carried out the activities rather than on children's learning is indicated by the use of 'we', *what we can/could develop/have done differently, what activities we do and activities we have done.*

These excerpts can be related to how teachers are guided by professional logic. Guided by this logic, teachers rely on their traditional knowledge about how to conduct their practice with others of the same profession. This logic allows them to take control over the content and organisation of the work (Goodrick & Reay, 2011) based on the pursuit of a certain autonomy. This is implied with the way in which the teachers most frequently describe their work as *activities* and not *teaching*, which lies partly embedded within the norms and values (Friedland & Alford, 1991) in their institutional, social pedagogical tradition and culture in the SAEC. This is also in line with previous research that shows that SAEC teachers' hesitation about the teaching concept is rooted in the traditions and willingness to use other concepts to describe what happens in the SAEC (see Andersson 2013; Närvänen & Elvstrand, 2014; Saar et.al., 2012). This may also be a way to set some distance from the school's teaching and views of knowledge (see Haglund, 2016). SAEC teachers rather seem to use other words based on their specific norms and values from their field of work in describing how they evaluate what happens in the SAEC. In line with the SAEC traditions, norms, and values, they also reflect upon and evaluate practical and organisational aspects of the activities rather than the learning aspects of their teaching.

The Bureaucratic State Logic - Goal-Focused Quality Management

A third way to evaluate is carried out in relation to the set national goals for the SAEC. These evaluations seem also preferably to be made as collegial reflections within the work teams:

> Every week the work team evaluates how we have completed our work before making a new plan. We consider the children's participation and if we saw any visible learning as well as what we can develop and move forward with. We work according to a year cycle of pedagogical plans, so that we can ensure that we cover the skills [the children ought to develop at SAEC] and the Central content [which is prescribed] in the curriculum. (20)

In the evaluations, previous evaluations carried out together with the children can also be included:

> We evaluate the learning process through a clear purpose and set goals. We also document the learning through written notes. We inform the children about the purpose and goals of the activity before the start and tie the knot after the activity by asking what they have done/trained. We also have dialogues with the children during the activity to make the learning visible to the children in order to increase the learning. We then use all this as a basis for assessing learning at the end of each selected focus area. (40)

These reflections indicate how teachers are guided by the bureaucratic state logic, which stresses how the state controls the credentials for professional practice and the organisation of their work (Goodrick & Reay, 2011). Teachers' work is politically steered through regulations and instructions to ensure standardisation and equivalent education within the institution (Friedson, 2001) and the excerpts show how professional desires do not seem to be in focus, rather the fulfilment of the state's national goals set for the SAEC. The teachers describe how they draw guidance and direction from the national governing policy documents when they plan their teaching. It is towards these set goals that the SAEC teaching is evaluated. This indicates goal-focused quality management of the teaching in the SAEC, based on a kind of technical rationality in line with the bureaucratic state logic. The focus in teachers' descriptions, guided by this logic, seems to be centred on children's learning, which is in contrast to the focus on activities when guided by professional logic.

The teachers seem to have developed templates for the plans and the evaluations, templates that are based on the set national goals for the SAEC. This implies that templates and written evaluation documents can be made necessary in order to visualise the learning that takes place at the SAEC. The visualisation seems to be directed both towards the children in order for them to be able to become aware of and increase their learning, and towards the work team in order to illustrate what needs to be developed and further worked on. In addition, guided by the bureaucratic state logic, the templates and visualisation emphasise a top-down perspective, as the results and documentation shall be rendered, as well as the teachers' loyalty, to the state regulations (Fredriksson, 2010).

The analysis shows that the teachers are guided by different logics while performing evaluations in the SAEC. Interesting to note is that the question the teachers were asked to answer was, *How do you evaluate learning in the SAEC?,* but very few answers contained reflections about evaluating *learning*. Instead, the answers focused on evaluating *teaching* or *organisation* (or not evaluating at all). The results are illustrated in Figure 2 below.

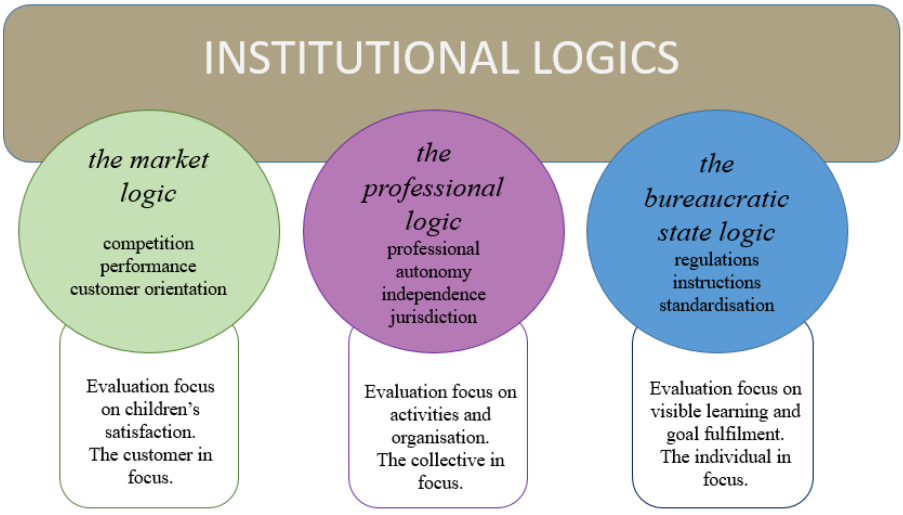

Figure 2. Illustration of the results.

The results show a variation in how the evaluations are done and what they focus on. Guided by *the market logic*, customer preferences and the satisfied customer (child/parent) are in focus. Guided by *the professional logic*, the collective, the group as well as the activities (perhaps based on the SAEC social pedagogical traditions) and the organisation around these are in focus. Guided by *the bureaucratic state logic*,

the formal teaching, the individual child and the learning and development of certain prescribed skills, the child's visible learning and the SAEC's goal fulfilment are in focus.

Thus, the results indicate that teachers' focus, regarding both the children and the practice, is directed differently when they are guided by the different logics. Different logics lead to different evaluation practices since professionals act differently depending on which logic they are predominantly guided by (Friedson, 2001; Goodrick & Reay, 2011; Thornton, 2004). This may not be an issue if the teachers are aware that different logics put different aspects in focus.

Different logics coexist, and some logics dominate others (Ackesjö, 2021; Friedson, 2001; Goodrick & Reay, 2011; Thornton, 2004). It is safe to say that the SAEC teachers are guided by a coexisting mix of logics, which all are based on different values. Logics express and manifest themselves differently and leave different traces in the institution (Thornton, 2004). Teachers' actions are responses to the state's demands, but also to their tradition and culture in the SAEC, at the same time as their actions also are "responses" which produce new conditions. In other words, teachers are institutional actors and contribute to creating institutional logics at the same time as they are created by them (see Ackesjö, 2021).

The analysis also shows that GERM, the Global Education Reform Movement (Sahlberg, 2016) and its worldwide movement of restructuring education, does not dominate the SAEC. Even if some of the teachers, when guided by the bureaucratic state logic, put formal teaching, the child's visible learning, and evaluation of the SAEC goal fulfilment in focus, this does not dominate the teachers' collective descriptions of how they evaluate. Even if the SAEC at the policy level is positioned in an evaluation-based educational landscape where monitoring, assessment, efficiency, and results are central aspects (Biesta, 2011; Pettersson et al., 2017), this seemingly has not changed the practice in the SAEC in a radical way. It still appears to be important to ask for children's opinions, to focus on making children and parents happy and satisfied, to use democratic ways of working involving children, and to maintain the SAEC social pedagogical traditions.

Pedagogical Implications – Issues and Contradictions

The results show that there seems to be ambiguity in how learning at the SAEC can be captured in order to be evaluated, what it is that actually should be evaluated, and when this evaluation should take place and how. The teachers are also apparently limited in time to be able to evaluate. There are no nationally formulated standards to be used in evaluation in SAEC. There are no formulated knowledge requirements for children in the SAEC, only the skills the children should be given *the opportunity* to develop and these are not limited in time, but apply during all the years the children are enrolled in SAEC. This may explain why teachers ask questions about what is to be evaluated and when evaluations should be done. This may also explain why teachers are guided by several different (and maybe contradictory) logics when evaluating. But most of all, these results highlight the need for developing professional knowledge about how to evaluate formal and informal learning at the SAEC.

In addition, there are some notable issues to discuss. For instance, what happens if the SAEC is mainly regarded as a quasi-market where children are customers with the right to choose whether or not they want to be present or not? Based on the market logic, the children thus gain power over the teachers; the focus is to make them satisfied and not change the school or SAEC. If so, there may be a risk that the teachers mainly adapt to the children's wishes, and they downplay quality and professionalism in order to satisfy them (see Lundahl et al., 2014). One risk identified in the results is that customer preferences may govern how the teaching is conducted (see Fredriksson, 2010) and what the teaching should focus on at the SAEC, which could lead to the teachers becoming more service-oriented personnel than professional teachers (see Lundström & Parding, 2011).

Another issue to discuss is the possible need for national evaluation models in the SAEC. Based on the state and bureaucratic logics, it would be natural to consider increased national control of what is to be evaluated and how this is to be done to ensure higher quality in the SAEC. However, one pitfall with national evaluation models is that they tend to become normative glasses, through which all activities will

be filtered. Thus, there would be the risk that both the collegial reflections and the importance of the children's experience, satisfaction, and engagement would be lost if national and normative evaluation models directed towards nationally set standards were implemented. Another risk is if the national evaluation models determine the content of the teaching. Within a bureaucratic state logic, the templates and a top-down perspective with a focus on delivering results (Fredriksson, 2010) are a natural part. But would this benefit the SAEC?

The results highlight contradictions concerning evaluations in the SAEC. It is safe to say that the teachers in SAEC are positioned in a field of tension between tradition and new educational policy intentions. The political reforms have converted the SAEC into a practice that is goal-oriented and voluntary at the same time (Holmberg, 2018). The teachers must conduct a school law-regulated education with goal-directed and planned teaching, while at the same time also offering meaningful free time for the children based on their interests and needs. The practice must be professionally managed, but at the same time be open to the children's interests and suggestions. It is still voluntary for children to participate in the SAEC program. As previous research has shown (Ackesjö et.al., 2020; Ackesjö & Haglund, 2021; Andersson, 2013; Gustavsson Nyckel, 2000; Haglund, 2015; 2016), the teachers try to navigate between these two different value systems as they adapt to the educational policy intentions presented in the revised curriculum, new school law descriptions, and a new teacher education programme. This may explain the ambiguity that teachers expressed in, for example, what concepts to use (activities or teaching?) and what and when to evaluate.

We may need to think differently about evaluation in the SAEC. It could be possible to claim that the learning process that is staged and made visible in the SAEC is broad and complex and cannot be "moulded" to fit into evaluation schemes. At the SAEC, it may not be enough to have the nationally prescribed central content and abilities as the norm for the evaluation. The child at the SAEC develops a number of abilities and skills, both those that are teacher-steered, goal-directed and those that are self-initiated. These may be hard to evaluate. At the SAEC, learning often takes place at the moment, in different rooms, and in various social contexts with or without teachers present or engaged. These learning processes are sometimes both difficult to plan in advance and difficult to capture in an evaluation. Thus, evaluation may take on a different meaning in the SAEC, a meaning that cannot be compared to the goal-rational model that dominates the view of the evaluation-based education that, for example, GERM in the era of measurement proposes.

The results show a variation in how evaluations are done in SAEC and what they focus on, but also that teachers' focus regarding both the children and the practice is directed differently when they are guided by different logics. This creates a variation of evaluation practices with different focus and intentions. Thus, the implications for practice have the urge to continue discussing what evaluation in the SAEC is, how it should be carried out and what should be evaluated. If the SAEC is to be expected to contribute to children's development and learning, these issues must be constantly present and discussed in all work teams.

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Research Article

Preschool staff perceptions of leader capabilities during COVID-19 early stage in Iceland

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Abstract: In mid-March 2020, leaders of Icelandic preschools faced a new reality: the task of leading and keeping their preschools open during the early stages of a pandemic. Suddenly, everything changed, and dystopia became the "new normal". The proximal closeness between unrelated people was forbidden, and everyone was supposed to practice social distancing. This article discusses the attitudes of preschool staff towards their leaders (principals) during that time. How successfully did the leaders handle the first weeks of the pandemic? Data were drawn from an online survey conducted between 8 and 18 April 2020 during a time when feelings were running high. The results showed that staff felt that most of the leaders supported and did their best to take care of their staff members. Leaders established new ways to communicate and get information from both staff and parents. They showed assertiveness and used their former leadership training and skills. However, staff perceived leaders had problems setting boundaries, and their insecurity affected their leadership skills. The unique contribution of this study is that its data were collected during the early stages, which may be helpful for later stages or other crises affecting preschools in the future.

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Introduction

The Icelandic preschools, unlike in many other countries, did not close during the earliest stages of the pandemic (Visnjic-Jevtic et al., 2021), but were kept open for all children, with reduced hours for most students. Unexpectedly, preschools' leaders (principals) and their co-workers were defined as "frontline workers." The leaders were hit with unprecedented situations and decisions to be made, all while simultaneously working to do their best to keep everyone safe and uphold the quality of education. The pandemic changed society's worldview and had a far-reaching impact on communities' infrastructures. Iceland went into its soft lockdown with a public ban on social gatherings on March 16, 2020. This decision immediately affected the nation's schools. In preschools, criteria were set calling for groups to be small and always kept separate from other groups (Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management, 2020). Leaders were given the weekend of 14–15 March to reorganise their facilities based on the new criteria and to ensure that the new requirements for cleaning and daily disinfection were met (Pálsson, 2020). The organisation of preschools and the working conditions of their staff underwent unprecedented changes. Preschool leaders were in a situation that no one could have foreseen or been fully prepared for. They were faced with running schools where they had to regularly review both the daily logistics and the pedagogical work with all children. Both leaders and their staff were under a lot of pressure, and the risk of becoming sick or carrying the infection home was real for most.

On March 23, 2020 the ban on social gatherings was tightened, and again schools had to adapt to new and even more demanding circumstances (Government of Iceland, 2020a). On April 14, 2020, the Government of Iceland issued a statement declaring that all children could be in schools at the same time, beginning on May 4, 2020. On May 19, 2020, schools were exempted from the two-metre distance rule

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between people (Government of Iceland, 2020b).

This article discusses the attitudes of preschool staff towards their leaders. According to their staff, how did leaders manage to navigate between leading and administrating in the weeks after the pandemic hit Iceland? This article is based on data drawn from a larger study conducted between April 8–18, 2020, a time when feelings were running high. The research aimed to examine preschool staffs experiences during the early stages of COVID-19, with special attention paid to their working conditions and well-being. The special contribution of this study is that the data were collected during the early stages of the pandemics and should therefore give a fair representation of the situation in preschools across the country during that time.

Theoretical Framework

According to Farazmand (2007), there are various kinds of crises, such as natural disasters or ones arising from social problems, human-made or otherwise. What they have in common is that "they disrupt the routine events of life and governance, disturb established systems, and cause severe anxieties; they produce dynamics that no one can predict and control" (p. 159). By their nature, they are rarely expected.

Baran and Adelman (2010) note that with the growing need for crisis plans, school leaders have increasingly responded to and prepared schools for unexpected events. Jones and Paterson (1992) point out that it is essential for schools to be well prepared, to have a working response team that has received training and education, and to have response plans available and memos for staff and parents. According to Drake (2018):

> These pre-existing written crisis management plans were universally praised […] as invaluable resources—providing detailed action plans that included specific steps to be taken by particular individuals; when faced with certain conditions during defined types of crisis events. (p. 180).

Jenkins and Goodman (2015) argued that no matter how good a plan is, it is never possible to prepare a school for all the factors that may arise. Schoenberg (2005) points out that, during a crisis, management and leadership skills are a combination of these strengths and are more important than response plans once in action. This view goes hand in hand with Johnson's (2018) writings. He defined crisis leadership as:

> The ability of leaders not to show different leadership competencies but rather to display the same competencies under the extreme pressure that characterise a crisis - namely uncertainty, high levels of emotion, the need for swift decision-making and at times intolerable external scrutiny. It is this that will define success or failure. (p. 15).

From Johnson's (2018) perspective, leaders must be prepared from the beginning with leadership skills that they can apply both in good times and in times of crisis. Leadership skills, by this definition, are tools all school leaders need in their armoury. It is not enough to have a plan to fall back on. Instead, the leader herself needs to be the plan on which she falls back. Johnson (2018) also notes that leaders always need to show exemplary behaviour and establish a positive organisational culture because their followers will look to what they are used to, not what they are doing amid the crisis. Leaders do not act alone during times of crisis; they need to be part of a team yet also able to take control if needed. Johnson (2018) claims that, during a crisis, most organisations need leaders who can apply situational leadership. Part of such leadership during a pandemic could be efforts "to get communities on board to help themselves wherever possible and make people face things that have to be faced, like social distancing and quarantine" (Grint, 2020, p. 2).

Mutch (2020) pointed out that even though schools have made crisis management plans, they often have not been updated or do not fit the crisis in question. She adds that school leaders report that they are not well prepared for crisis management, so they end up letting their instincts rule; while this may turn out to be useful, there are also examples of the contrary. Mutch (2020) reminds us that crises have different stages or processes. In the beginning, there is a lot of solidarity, and everyone is willing to help and make things work. Still, the manager must be visible and able to make straightforward decisions. Mutch (2020) calls this the "honeymoon period".

At the next level, leaders must be able to show empathy, have a broad view of the crisis, and make plans for the next steps. At the same time, leaders must be on their toes and skillfully share power and tasks. Information sent out needs to be tailor-made. For example, parents and staff need different sets of information. When crises are long-lasting, there is a period of fatigue and a risk that it will erode people's solidarity. During this time, the leader must pay special attention to the well-being of staff, but not least to her well-being, which leaders often forget. Finally, Mutch (2020) reminds us:

> Along the recovery journey, the setbacks and secondary stressors wear people down. The goodwill that was seen in the honeymoon period starts to disintegrate. Bureaucracy becomes tedious and interferes with our ideas of a swift and smooth recovery. Tension starts to build as people feel that some individuals or groups are being favoured over others. The social ties that existed before the event have weakened. (p. 6).

Drake's (2018) study found that leaders who successfully dealt with crises were characterised by sharing power, and the most effective way to do this is through communication, competence, credibility, decision-making and planning. Hall (2020) says that employees assess the competence of managers based on five criteria: that the staff know they care, showing social responsibility, aiming for big goals, showing sympathy, and seeing the opportunities in the situation. Yet another study of the same nature identified six themes leaders must address: dealing with the event, planning or preparing, conducting collaboration and communication, whether or team meetings are held and how meetings are conducted (Nelson, 2019).

Boin et al. (2013) determined that leader's performances in times of crisis are often assessed based on weak criteria. Effective crisis management can save lives, protect infrastructure and restore trust in public institutions. They further point out that crisis management is, by definition, about planning, managing and implementing decisions, and the person in charge can be both a leader and a manager, a duality that is well known to school leaders. These are issues that have been under pressure testing during the COVID-19 pandemic in many parts of the world, as has been shown in some leadership research done through the early stages of COVID-19 (Beauchamp et al., 2021; Bush, 2021; Logan et al., 2021; Longmuir, 2021; Thornton, 2021). Logan et al. (2021) argues that leadership approaches that aim to support educator well-being are needed to protect the early childhood sector in the case of crises. Longmuir (2021) declared that the work of leaders was complex and that leaders prioritised compassionate, humanising goals as a grounding for all other actions. They mobilised communication practices that were reassuring, as well as open and honest. Thornton (2021) points out the importance of effective leadership practices that leaders may wish to reflect on during the pandemic, which are relevant during everyday leadership and can strengthen trusting relationships within schools, increasing their ability to recover.

When summarising the results of the above research, it becomes clear that the human factor within leadership is essential—that is, cooperation, communication and information and responsibility, competence, and organisation.

Method

This research builds on an online questionnaire aimed at Icelandic preschool staff working with children. We used a mixed method in which both quantitative and qualitative data are used (Robson, 2002). The quantitative data were used as a backdrop for this study. The qualitative data consisted of open-ended answers to two questions. An analytical grid (see Table 2) was created with categories based on the theoretical data that are summarised and presented in Table 1. The open-ended answers were coded using codes related to the theoretical background of the study by identifying patterns, themes, and similarities (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The questionnaire concerned staff well-being during the pandemic, how they felt, their views on keeping the preschools open, the daily schedule, and the information they received from different authorities. The questions were either open-ended, semi-open-ended, or closed-ended. We asked two open-ended questions to address the aim of this study, which explored preschools' staff members viewed the performance of their leaders during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. The two questions are: "Can you give an example of what you think your leader did well in your preschool during the early stages

of COVID-19?" and "Can you give an example of what your leader could have done better?" Selected members of the preschool community reviewed and commented on the questionnaire as part of the study's preparation phase, as they were considered to have inside knowledge about the mindset of preschool staff.

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Research Question

This study focused on the attitudes and experiences of preschool staff regarding their leaders' efforts during the ban on social gatherings during the early stages of the pandemic. We aimed to answer the following research question: According to their staff, how did preschool leaders perform their work during the early stages of COVID-19 in Iceland?

Data Collection

The survey was conducted using Survey Monkey. It was posted in two private Icelandic-speaking Facebook groups: Play and Preschool and Preschool Teachers Chat. According to a public survey, around 92% of Icelanders over 18 years of age have Facebook accounts (Market and Media Research, 2019). The Play and Preschool had over 5300 members and is accessible to all preschool personnel with Facebook accounts. Preschool Teachers Chat had almost 1800 members and granted membership to those with a teaching licence or in the process of obtaining one. A master of education is required to obtain a teaching licence in Iceland. All responses were anonymous and untraceable. Information concerning the intention of how the data will be used was part of an introduction to the questionnaire. As a limitation, the use of social media to collect answers can be problematic (Tjøndal & Fylling, 2021), as participants are self-selective, and the answers may mirror those interested in the topic.

In all, 658 responses were received; the total number of preschool staff directly educating Iceland's children in 2018 was 5,698 (Statistics Iceland, 2020). The respondents had different backgrounds; the majority had a teaching licence (61% of respondents, which accounted for up to 25% of the population of preschool teachers in Iceland 2018 (Statistics Iceland, 2020)). Others (14.6%) had other university education, 6.9% were educated assistants, and 17.5% were unskilled staff. By age, 16% of the responses came from people under 30 years, 52.3% from people aged 31–50 years, and 31.7% from respondents over 51 years. Overall, 123 respondents identified themselves as leaders/principals of preschools and, therefore, did not answer the questions about the leader's performance. The questionnaire opened on Wednesday, 8 April 2020, in the early stage of the first wave of the pandemic in Iceland. A reminder was sent the following week, and the introductory text was changed to appeal more directly to those without a formal teacher's education based on a lower response rate from that group. This resulted in more than 100 new responses. However, the ratio of those with a teaching licence to those without remained unchanged.

Data Analysis

In total, 464 people responded to the question that is the backbone of this study: Can you give an example of what you think your leader did well in your preschool during the early stages of COVID-19?, and 355 people answered the question, Can you give an example of what your leader could have done better? After cleaning the data, 453 answers (7200 words) remained as responses to the former question, and 233 answers (4132 words) were retrieved as responses to the second question, all of which were subjected to the coding process. The responses were transferred to Excel, read, and reread to identify recurring themes, followed by applying selective coding based on themes and theories.

A theoretical frame based on the relevant literature was established during the analytical process to define and categorise the relevant and different aspects of crisis leadership skills (see categories in Table 1. *Preferable leadership skills during a crisis*).

Table 1. Preferable leadership skills during a crisis

Category	Task – Analytical concepts	Literature
Prioritising reactions	Showing leadership skills and being able to prioritise action and deeds, showing grit	Boin et al. (2013); Drake (2018); Johnson (2018)
Making critical decisions	Being able to make difficult decisions and follow them through	Drake (2018); Mutch (2020)
Trust and solidarity	Showing care; 'We are all in the same boat'; empowerment	Drake (2018); Hall (2020); Mutch (2020)
Coordinating information	Being able to select and give appropriate information when needed	Boin et al. (2013); Mutch (2020)
Communication	Being able to communicate and use different channels of communication	Drake (2018); Mutch (2020); Nelson (2019)
Assertive leaders	Having the self-confidence to stand by their own decisions and follow them through	Johnson (2018); Mutch (2020)

Results

Based on the frame, *Preferable leadership skills during a crisis* (see Table 1), we created an analytical grid which also was partly built on Boin et al. (2013) writings on leadership during a crisis and adapted to this research (see Table 2). The qualitative data were projected into the grid to gain a deeper understanding of the emerging trends in the data. The answers were read and reread to identify patterns and similarities. Special attention was given to quotes concerning how the leaders fared in the early stages of the pandemic—that is, the constraints they encountered and their triumphs. The grid was used to analyse the data, selecting, and marking quotes that were deemed relevant. At this stage, short codes and keywords were selected and placed on the grid. The grid was a helpful tool for forming and deciding how to present the results.

Table 2. Analytical grid showing preferable leadership skills during a crisis and selected quotes from the data

Analytical themes	Triumphs	Constraints
Prioritising reactions **Showing leadership skills and being able to prioritise action and deeds, showing grit**	Boldness and determination. Good organisation, good flow of information, attentive to the staff.	There was lack of cooperation. Management showed powerlessness.
Making critical decisions **Being able to make difficult decisions and follow them through**	Do well, do your best, difficult, miserable conditions.	The administration could do better, show more support and understanding. Instructions from public authorities did not fit the reality of the preschool.
Trust and solidarity **Showing care: 'We are all in the same boat'** **Empowerment**	Listens to staff, creates solidarity Positivity, praise, understanding, support Informed decisions, consideration, trust	The preschool management powerlessness Inform everyone and be careful that information is aimed at all groups of staff The message needed to be clearer and there was a lack of determination
Coordinating information **Being able to select and give appropriate information when needed**	Coordinated decisions and actions Consultation, flexibility Diverse technologies used for communication	Utilising a variety of digital technologies would have been preferrable
Communication **Being able to communicate and use different channels of communication**	Provides information, is good at planning Quality communication	There was chaos in providing information
Assertive leadership **Having the self-confidence to stand by their own decisions and follow them through**	Shows flexibility Makes decisions Strength and balance Takes a stand with the staff A step ahead of the municipalities Shows determination	Lack of making just decisions Be better at addressing the issues that came up Stand firm

The frame in Table 1 and the grid shown in Table 2 were used as tools to narrate a story of how leaders in Icelandic preschools fared through the earliest stage of the pandemic, according to their co-

workers. It helped to identify what stood out as exemplary leadership behaviour, what problems the leaders encountered, and what lessons can be drawn from the experience. Some of the data could fit into more than one category; therefore, we decided where the data fit best to tell a story.

Prioritizing Reactions

The ability to plan and be prepared for different scenarios and to prioritise tasks is always essential for leaders, and even more so during times of crisis. How did the leaders fare? The data showed that most of the leaders acted swiftly and split children and the staff into groups. They made rules about how parents and staff should conduct themselves during arrivals and departures from school, how the schools were sanitised and cleaned, directed teachers to remove some of the learning materials and so on. The staff realised that leadership in these circumstances is different from day-to-day management and requires leaders to make decisions and directives without, for example, consulting others. The leaders needed to show self-confidence and be visible—they had to be the ones who acted. One respondent said, "[I] think they have organised this well! This is good leadership in these circumstances, but not necessarily good leadership when the pedagogy is in focus."

The answers repeatedly stated the importance of careful planning, and 134 specifically mentioned organisation and the importance of reacting quickly in new and unexpended situations. Many said that their leaders were solution-oriented and able to send a clear message to their staff. As one respondent said:

> They have informed us about the situation and acknowledged when they did not have information on some issues. They have tried to support the activities of all classrooms and strive to solve the problems that have arisen. The preschool leader is a real genius in giving words of encouragement to all members of the staff.

The respondents were thankful for many things. One said this about prioritising children's wellbeing at her school:

> We put the children's well-being first. At first, there were few children of frontline workers, so no decision was made regarding them. They mixed with both groups [Groups A and B, which showed up every other day]. We are a small kindergarten with four classrooms, and we divided the children into two groups and took turns working at home. After Easter, some had the idea of putting all the priority children [of frontline parents] in one classroom together. But we decided that the mental wellbeing of the children was more important than the risk of infection. And putting children in a separate classroom away from their friends would not improve the children's mental wellbeing. I am immensely grateful to the leaders who decided this and took care of the mental health of both staff and children at the same time.

The results indicated that employees want school leaders to be firm, bold and determined, "take matters into their own hands immediately" and be "more persistent in decision-making". Even though most leaders appeared capable of this, there was also criticism, especially of local governments, that did not seem to understand both some procedures and feelings among the staff, such as how groups were divided and their fears of infection.

Some suggested that leaders should be persistent with the local governments, for example, "They could have stood firm against their superiors." Another pointed out, "The municipality could have consulted the schools, have a meeting with the leaders and jointly decide what should be done". Another said:

> [The leaders ought to] stand better with us and not sit and stand as the school board wanted us to do. Most people who do not work within preschools do not know what it is like to be on the floor, let alone at times like this. So [they] should listen better.

Here, the schools' unique position within the community crystallises; the leaders represent the local government and are under their authority. Final decisions are not always in their hands, and the staff may become tense when what they think is best clashes with the government's will or decisions.

Making Critical Decisions

Having decision-making power and making the right decisions are not the same. To make decisions in times of crisis, leaders need up-to-date information that is not always available. In these cases, leaders must be able to fall back on their training and decision-making procedures. According to our data, the

national emergency task force lacked sufficient working knowledge of preschools' logistics, which likely made things difficult for the leaders in the preschool. One respondent stated that official directives from the task force were not based on first-hand knowledge of preschools: "[School leaders have] done well in following the instructions from the epidemiologist, which I found completely out of place". Another said:

> [The leader] tried to find a way out of all the vast amount of information received from the task force, [but] that information was often difficult to read and does not apply to all preschools. Everyone is under the same that despite working in different types of buildings and accessibility.

Informed decisions are one of the basics of understanding and being able to cope with a situation. Another respondent wrote:

> I just generally feel that in my school, everything has been done well. If they [leaders] have been asked questions that they cannot answer 100%, they have sought information to answer them. That way, I have 100% confidence in what we are doing and am therefore not nervous or stressed about this situation in general.

These results highlight the aspects of school leadership that worked well early on. As one participant wrote, "Principals have done well, done their best in difficult circumstances."

However, it seems that other aspects of the government did not always perform well. Here is an example of such an experience: "[The leader has] tried to do her best in miserable conditions with little support from the municipality. The education council and the preschool leaders' supervisors have sent unclear messages to parents." Another said, "[School leaders have] stood their ground in organising the schools, and they had to stand their ground against their superiors." In a third example, the respondent said the municipalities could do better and act more swiftly, stating "… [school leaders] take action and plan everything despite the delay by the municipality."

Trust and Solidarity

Building a sense of collective understanding and shared values is vital for every school, and doubly so during a crisis. Keeping people's spirits up and helping them make sense of what is happening can be the difference between success and failure in a crisis. Our results indicate that positivity, trust, encouragement, praise, understanding and support matter most to preschool staff.

Concepts connected to positivity and encouragement appeared more than 70 times in the leadership descriptions. One person described it this way: „My leader has been positive, encouraging and supportive of the staff through this situation. She/they deserve a lot of praise in my opinion." Another said, "[School leaders] were very active in providing information. They show us a lot of understanding. We were often praised for a job well done and regularly reminded of how important we are." Another reported, "Good flow of information, [she] is positive and solution-oriented and tries to make the best of this situation, a lot of praise and encouragement."

Thoughtfulness and understanding were words strongly connected to how the staff felt about the leaders; here is one example:

> [My school leaders are] thoughtful and calm, doing their best to provide important information without creating unnecessary stress, with too many stressful announcements. Encourage staff to be positive, praise them and build good morale.

It is important that leaders manage to create solidarity in times of crisis, and this is evident in the results. School leaders' ability to develop shared values and to reach out to the children's families was important: "Solidarity and that everyone has a voice. We call and take care of our families."

Some respondents mentioned that the leaders cared for their staff's mental health. "[They] encourage and support those who are depressed. […] We had a happy hour on Friday through Zoom." Encouragement and praise also went a long way towards strengthening the work ethic and creating calmness in the group. Let us look at examples: One said, "She has done her best to keep everyone calm and always tell us how best to carry on and does a very good job at it". "[She] provides all information and keeps the staff as calm as possible given the circumstances. It is crucial for the staff that leaders take care of their team and that everyone feels listened to. Understanding the leader's position was also noted among

the answers: "Everyone is doing their best and trying to walk in strange shoes along a footpath that no one has gone before".

Being able to build and maintain morale, culture and trust is essential. Trust is an issue important for staff, and they highlighted positive aspects of school leadership during the earliest stage of the pandemic. One said, "Trusting staff in challenging situations and [being] ready to answer questions that arise about the job." Another put it this way: "Good information flow, good cooperation, all employees are trusted. The leaders understand and take as much care as is possible of everybody's well-being during these times." Being positive and not losing the ability to joke and have good times is also important: "Solidarity, good information, respect for the feelings and wellbeing of employees. Positivity, joy and general jollity to maintain morale."

Not all leaders were up to the job, according to their co-workers. On a more critical note, some pointed out that it is necessary to consider giving necessary information to people in part-time jobs and not to forget that younger people may need more care from the leader than older, more experienced staff. One respondent said:

> It could have been both a more explicit message and confirmed. Too much chaos, unclear decisions, and decisions changed from one hour to the next. Messages on both Facebook (an unprofessional communication platform for decisions) and via e-mail were inconsistent with each other.

A reminder that within the preschool, there may be inequity between members of the staff that leaders must consider.

Coordinating Information

Preschools are complex organisations that require leaders to coordinate and organise people, time, different departments or classrooms and connections with other institutions and local governments. During the soft lockdown, most preschools were divided into quarantine compartments, which people were not supposed to breach. Within each compartment, staff and parents were also supposed to maintain a social distance. This layout required coordination. In some of the preschools on any given day, some of the employees worked from home. Examples of such coordination can be seen here:

> They [the preschool leaders] come into the classrooms every day and hear from all the staff, saying "good morning", which is very positive for the morale. Then, employees get all the information they need through the staff's Facebook group. If you need to talk to or inform someone, they will do so. It is also good that they encourage staff to use the days they are at home to prepare and read academic material, which is then useful in the job. They have also been diligent in encouraging people to continue and thanking us for a job well done, making it clear to everyone that it is vital to come to work and that it is well valued.

It was stated that the staff might also appreciate being involved in decisions when possible, and many mentioned that an understanding leader is important in times like these. "Flexibility" and "listening to staff" came up several times when discussing organisations.

At the beginning of the pandemic, a considerable amount of information was sent to schools from various public institutions, and it was the leader's role to sift out crucial information at any given time. This was a task some leaders were not up to, as reflected in the words of one of the respondents: "Too much information flow has increased the anxiety of some. It's like walking on a tightrope". It was important for the staff to make the flow of information about their work and its organisation manageable, and the leaders needed to be accessible, despite the pandemic. One respondent said:

> We have rapport between groups, so everyone knows how the days are. The leader is in one group, so she only meets half of the staff, but she calls the people in the other group to be able to chat about their well-being and other things.

When respondents answered what could be done better, various things were mentioned. Most commented that the flow of information could have been better. As one said, "Information can always be improved, but it can be difficult if you [as a leader] don't always have the best information yourself", as this coworker understood was often the case. Others said, "More information is needed" or "Information flow could be better". At the same time, some felt it important for staff to receive different information from the parents: "The information flow to parents and staff should not be the same". Or they wanted

information before parents received it. They felt that teachers needed to be particularly well informed and instructions needed to be clear:

> [The leaders needed to] explain better what the staff need to do to ensure better hygiene. There were many examples of inconsistencies between classrooms. Some people used the same toys for two days and then stored them for two days. Others replaced their toys each passing day. Still, others disinfected all toys AND then stored them for two days.

As may be evident, leaders must coordinate the information they give; not doing so can cause insecurity among members of the staff that in the long run can hurt the running of the preschool.

Communication

Breakdowns in the chain of communication during a crisis can be a real threat. It is critical to keep communication paths open and to establish and support communication. It was clear that some leaders had to jump unexpectedly into the 21st century, technology-wise, but luckily others were already there.

Many leaders use a variety of digital technologies to disseminate information or hold meetings. They used technology to strengthen connections with staff or between classrooms and to enhance the school's culture. Participants described different uses of phones and e-mail, as well as teleconferencing software such as Zoom, Skype, Teams and Messenger. Providing everyone with information via Snapchat and private Facebook groups was also mentioned. In some cases, however, the participants reported that leaders could use technology in better ways.

Staff sometimes needed opportunities to meet colleagues who worked in other quarantine units. Then, technology and various methods came in handy: "Video conferences daily for all staff who want to "meet", and there you can discuss issues and see co-workers we are not allowed to see during the day". Another said: "[There are] a lot of phone calls, a lot of talking about our wellbeing, good information about everything, listening to our voices, information about anxiety and insecurity sent to staff, beautiful messages and encouragement on social media".

Very few criticised the use or methods of communication. Most were both thankful and happy for the improvised and creative ways of communicating.

Assertive Leaders and Unruly Parents

Being an assertive leader in a time of crisis is undoubtedly important. Some leaders had problems showing this side, and that irritated some staff members who thought assertiveness was needed in dealing with some parents and staff who had problems following rules. Most parents followed the rules, but there were exceptions. Some parents had problems following directions, and the staff felt that leaders should take such matters seriously. Some were concerned about the risk of infection. Here is an example from one respondent:

> Specific rules were established in the beginning, but they were not enforced and possibly not well enough introduced to staff or parents. Many rules, such as, that parents should not come into the classrooms, were only words on a paper that no one followed. It would have been important for parents to respect these rules, especially the 2 m rule. Great disrespect on the part of parents not respecting her with, staff, as preschools' staff suddenly had to endure being close to many parents daily who do not respect the rules and are therefore at multiple risks of infection.

Lastly, some wanted their leader to address parents who showed up with sick children: "[They] could have taken much better care of children who came again and again with phlegm, cough and sneezing". Those examples shows the difficulty some leaders faced and their powerlessness against the situation they found themselves in.

Discussion

The point of departure was, "How did Icelandic preschool leaders fare in their jobs during the early stages of the pandemic?" According to their co-workers, they seemed to have carried out their jobs professionally and mostly showed good leadership. They stood their ground, gave out information, showed solidarity and care, praised co-workers, and opened new communication lines and not at least they

showed fairness. However, some struggled to set boundaries or were unable to organise or prioritise information, for example. They showed similar character as school leaders in many other countries (Beauchamp et al., 2021; Bush, 2021; Logan et al., 2021; Longmuir, 2021; Thornton, 2021).

Many leaders showed skills that seemed to be an existing part of their professional role; they did not seem to change their leadership behaviours, but instead showed their ability to work under pressure and deliver in a new context, which is a sign of good leadership and professionality according to Johnson (2018). Some leaders skilfully empowered their staff, enlisting them to organise logistics and pedagogy. They were able to listen and show encouragement; they became the rock in a turbulent sea for many, an accomplishment during a pandemic when the leaders had to take care of the well-being of children, parents, the staff and, hopefully, themselves.

Overall, the staff reported that their leaders were considerate and showed solidarity. They were able to show empathy and generally look after their co-workers according to Hall's (2020) definition of good leadership, which is based on the importance of showing concern and empathy to staff. When the results are compared to the analytical table (Table 1), it is apparent that staff members value leaders with the following competencies: being able to carry out critical decisions (Johnson, 2018; Mutch, 2020), being assertive and handling problems promptly (Drake, 2018; Mutch, 2020), and the ability to take good care of their staff and establish trust and solidarity (Drake 2018; Hall, 2020; Mutch, 2020). With that in mind, supporting leaders who struggled is crucial, not only for their welfare but also for the interest of those who work with them and children and families at their preschool. It must be a priority for the municipalities that run the preschools to identify and support leaders that are struggling and supporting them in any way possible. It must however be pointed out that most of the municipality's organisations are under pandemic pressure and identifying those that are struggling not an easy job.

As stated above, this research was carried out in the early stages of the pandemic when the staff members were still in what Mutch (2020) calls the honeymoon period, where unity and friendship run high; however, it was clear and worrisome that some people were becoming exhausted. The question remains: Does the school system, including preschools, have the grit to follow through, or are school communities in danger of becoming fragmented, especially as younger children are getting the disease and becoming carriers of the virus. The next stages of the pandemic will be trying times that reveal leaders' resolve, and some may crumble under pressure if nothing is done. It will ultimately be costly for society if preschool leaders are burnt out or leave their positions because of the unbearable pressure, fatigue and stress associated with it. To prevent this, preschool leaders must practise self-care and learn to prioritise their well-being. However, it is also society's responsibility to offer necessary affordances to leaders, enabling them to practice essential self-care and support them to support others. This study did not ask the leaders themselves about their experiences during this difficult time. However, it is a worthy next step to get their views on how COVID-19 has affected their work, well-being and their takeaways from the situation. It is also worth asking what kind of support the leaders received from their municipalities during the pandemic.

At the time of this study most people hoped that the pandemic would soon be over. However, as history has shown, more was to come, and the long-term effect on the Icelandic preschool system is something that is for later studies.

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