

# Silence, resistance, and acceptance? An analysis of early childhood education and care policy in Norway

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## ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this article is to explore and develop a basic understanding of a new formulation of children's learning within ECEC policies in Norway. In the Nordic Countries, one question of importance is the shift in ECEC policy from a social-pedagogical approach and a holistic perspective on children's learning towards a heavier emphasis on school readiness, mathematics, and linguistic skills. And it is this latter approach which is our topic here. The research question is as follows: What transformations can be identified in learning discourses in the Norwegian government's White papers? Analysing political reports will help us identify discourses, including the power and resistance of the ECEC professionals. For this purpose, Fairclough's three-dimensional analysis model is an appropriate way to analyse dynamic processes of recontextualization and reconceptualization. His analysis includes three levels: social structure, social practices and social events, with the aim being to discover how the existing order of discourse is being reproduced or reconstructed. Further, the concept of interdiscursivity describes how texts draw on previous and existing discourses. The article identifies movements and complexity both in policies and among professionals. The learning discourses are strongly influenced by New Public Management in the way of individualization, assessment and accountability. There are signs of silence and acceptance, but resistance and countermovements are also present in the field of ECEC.

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## Introduction

In this article, drawing from historical and contemporary perspectives on early childhood and care policy, knowledge is understood as a phenomenon that is discursively created and understood. By extension, what should be regarded from a historical standpoint as legitimate knowledge of early childhood education and care (ECEC) and how it should be interpreted and understood are embedded in society's discourse on contemporary knowledge, learning, education, power, and a variety of other phenomena. Phenomena within ECEC depend on time and place, which implies that they have to be understood based on their context (Hammer, 2017).

It is important to note that, in the history of the Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden – several common cultural values have developed in light of the existence of the Nordic welfare states and their perspectives on childhood (Andresen et al., 2011). The establishment of welfare services for families and children and the Nordic countries' egalitarian systems both represent cultural values derived from a common history. The same goes for the collectivistic and democratic values such as solidarity and equal rights for all inhabitants

common in the Nordic countries. Likewise, the five countries have strong egalitarian traditions, and their welfare policies are universal in orientation, meaning that they are available to all inhabitants. The principle of universalism also includes equal rights to education and to ECEC institutions. Nevertheless, the five welfare states in the Nordic countries have a diverse history regarding what ECEC means.

However, due to globalization and the priorities of new education policy (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Moss, 2020), elements from new public management (NPM) have emerged in ECEC policy that have resulted in shifts towards individualization, assessment, and accountability in ECEC in Scandinavian and Nordic countries (cf., Alasuutari et al., 2014; Korsvold, 2014). In light of those trends, in this article we elaborate on how certain traditions, including socio-pedagogical ones, are being challenged by policy that emphasizes assessment, readiness for school, and specific instead of general skills. Furthermore, we argue that, in Norway, those changes have been met with silence as well as acceptance, while contemporary ECEC policy has been met with resistance as well as countermovements (Korsvold, 2018; Nygård, 2018; Pettersvold & Østrem, 2018; Seland, 2020). In the spring of 2016, for example,

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in response to part of a governmental report, a countermovement against such policy surfaced, the content of which is detailed later in the article. Of particular interest to us is illuminating how such silence or acceptance – or, in the mentioned case, resistance – unfolds and presents options of restoring traditions and a holistic learning perspective to ECEC and prioritizing socio-pedagogical traditions stressing children's well-being and their right to be treated as grown-ups.

Given that focus, we have analysed learning discourses in two white papers as both investigative and advisory documents, discussed those discourses, and examined how they have been met by professionals in the field. Inspired by Fairclough's (1992, 2003, 2015) theoretical and analytical framework, we have relied upon concepts such as recontextualisation, intertextuality, and interdiscursivity to discuss the movements and dynamics within social practices and social structures. The guiding question of our research was as follows: *What transformations can be identified in learning discourses in governmental white papers in Norway?*

### **NPM and the state of current research on the reception of policy**

As mentioned, due to globalization and the priorities of new education policy (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Moss, 2020), an ongoing shift has emerged in Norway such that elements of NPM are now represented in ECEC policy. Within that shift, neoliberalism has promoted a new managerial system in the public sector referred to as NPM, a set of ideas for increased efficiency in the public sector by using principles from the private sector as a model (Clarke, 2004; Clarke & Newman, 1997). In this article, we understand neoliberalism to be an ideology in which the economic value of education occupies a strong position.

Clarke and Newman (1997, p. 100) have described three variants of NPM: an efficiency-oriented element (i.e. stressing productivity and managerial control), a market-oriented element (i.e. stressing competition and contracting), and a user-oriented element (i.e. stressing service quality and responsiveness). NPM is both a set of economically oriented ideas about reform in which market principles are prominent and a system of management principles that highlight cost-efficiency, productivity, consumer-centeredness, goal achievement, professional management, and an orientation towards results. Other central ideas in NPM include decentralization, deregulation, privatization, individualism, competition, and freedom of choice. NPM's ideas are now prominent in education and education policy, given the globalization of education and knowledge's increasingly intricate

connections to the economy and the optimization of human capital (Apple, 2006; Clarke & Newman, 1997).

Owing to marketization, the competing markets of profit and non-profit welfare services, for example, have become the topics of an increasingly politicized discussion. Another highly discussed topic, *schoolification*, meaning an emphasis on specific skills such as mathematics, reading, and writing in ECEC institutions, has been an ongoing policy movement that has raised a variety of issues. Schoolification has been described as a process of transitioning from traditional tasks featuring play, care, and learning within an all-around-pedagogy discourse to a learning discourse that focuses on learning outcomes as a hallmark of quality (e.g. Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Nygård, 2015).

In light of those trends, one question is to what extent early childhood interventions can decrease inequality in economic opportunity and provide all children with a high-quality environment for learning and development (Leseman & Slot, 2020). Another important question is what the shift in ECEC policy from a socio-pedagogical approach towards a more traditional individual academic approach with learning outcomes implies in Norway.

In particular, the latter shift has brought learning into the foreground, with a heavier emphasis on school readiness, mathematics, and linguistic skills (e.g. Nygård, 2017b), which is the topic of this article. To contextualize our research, we briefly introduce the ECEC welfare model followed in the Nordic countries and present the theoretical and analytical framework that we followed in our study. Our research's aim was to identify hegemonic discourses for children's learning outcomes in two white papers. In this article, those learning discourses are discussed in light of Fairclough's concept of recontextualisation and in relation to whether elements from NPM are visible in Norwegian ECEC policy and, if so, in what ways.

An important topic of research is the public debate about ECEC and, by extension, silence regarding those changing processes from the perspectives of both the education profession and the public (Gustafsson Nyckel, 2019). Accordingly, the next section presents our study, one in which we analysed resistance against a Norwegian policy that aims to change traditions in ECEC pedagogy, especially the socio-pedagogical tradition and the holistic learning perspective. The section after that elaborates on several new aspects of quality in ECEC and the learning discourses to gain an understanding of how discourses transform, shift, and interact. Later, the final section of the article addresses some of those transformations while drawing on critical discourse analyses of two white papers on ECEC in Norway. The

concept of *recontextualisation*, referring to movements of, for example, texts from one context to another (Fairclough, 2015), illuminates hegemonic discourses and ideologies and how they are disseminated through, in our case, policy documents. In those transformations, will assessment, school readiness, and specific skills gain a hegemonic position, and what social consequences might that have? In that context, we argue that agents are crucial. In Norway, such political changes have been met with silence as well as acceptance, with resistance as well as countermovements.

### Education and care in the Nordic welfare state

For a backdrop, this section describes the Nordic welfare state, how the relationship between the state, family, and work has been organized in Norway, and how childcare was reconstructed in the first phase of the welfare state. Again, it is important to underscore the close connection between the welfare state and ECEC. The histories of the Nordic welfare states and the ECEC sector are bound together and closely linked to the welfare state's processes and the development of collective welfare programmes. In the first phase of the Nordic welfare state, collectivism was an especially central component.<sup>1</sup>

Overall, the Nordic countries have developed policies for universally available ECEC institutions and that support family–work balance, gender equality, and social equity. Spanning the period from one year of age to primary schooling, children are integrated into full-day services. Owing to the principle of universalism and the long history of egalitarian systems in the Nordic countries, their states are active with welfare programmes and services for children, as reflected in the high level of political commitment to establishing and supporting such services, combined with a general concern for legislation that protects children (Esping-Andersen et al., 2002; Korsvold, 2017). The outcome is that nearly all children in the Nordic countries attend ECEC, which, on the one hand, has been described as a result of both parents' participation in the labour market (Ellingsaeter & Wiederberg, 2012). On the other, as mentioned, it also reflects the environment where children grow, which recognizes their need to make friends, their right to attend ECEC institutions, and new demands related to their learning.

In past studies, we have analysed political documents regulating the Norwegian ECEC sector, starting with the period from 1945 to 1990 and following up over the decades since (Korsvold, 1997, 2008). In particular, white papers and governmental reports issued from the 1970s to 2015 that focus on learning discourses within ECEC have been examined in detail (Nygård, 2015, 2016, p. 2017). Those previous studies

focused on analysing components and tendencies of Norwegian ECEC over time in order to understand how they transform, shift, interact, and produce new policies for children's learning within ECEC settings (Nygård, 2017b). The studies are both background knowledge for understanding past learning discourses and resources for use in discussing contemporary learning discourses in ECEC policy documents.

This article is based on analyses of two recent policy documents issued by Norway's Department of Education termed *white papers*. As mentioned, by virtue of being investigative and advisory documents, white papers provide guidelines for further policy – for example, new framework plans or new legislation – and are relevant examples of ongoing policy movements and political priorities and visions. The first white paper, Meld. St. 19 (2015–2016), titled *Tid for lek og læring – Bedre innhold i barnehagen (Time for Play and Learning: Better Content in Kindergarten)*, was written in preparation for a new framework plan for ECEC institutions (Time for Play and Learning 2016). In the second, Meld. St. 6 (2019–2020), titled *Tett paa – Tidlig innsats og inkluderende fellesskap i barnehage, skole og SFO (Close Up: Early Efforts and Inclusive Communities in ECEC and After-School Activities)*, new measures for higher-quality ECEC institutions are promoted (Close Up 2019). Whereas the first white paper created noise and resistance, the second was met with silence. Inspired by Fairclough's (2003) three-dimensional model, we have analysed learning discourses in the two white papers and in doing so, we have understood the white papers as being social events within social practice, focused on learning discourses represented in the papers, and considered the social consequences of the promoted policy.

### Theoretical and analytical framework

In this section, we present an analysis of the two white papers. We focus on political expectations for children's learning outcomes in ECEC institutions by analysing measures and assessments for children's learning promoted in the papers. Our analysis addresses three levels of three-dimensional model: social events, social practices, and social structures.

A *social event* refers to the textual level within a particular social practice and requires identifying both the forms and meaning of language (Fairclough, 2015, p. 74). According to Fairclough (2003, p. 11), 'Meaning-making depends upon not only what is explicit in a text but also what is implied – what is assumed'. In our understanding, texts can perform ideological work by making *assumptions*, defined as 'belonging to particular discourses' (Fairclough, 2003, p. 58). For example, a neoliberal discourse assumes



that ‘anything which enhances “efficiency and adaptability” is desirable’. In our analysis, we focused on identifying meaning by analysing the political visions and assumptions regarding children’s learning in ECEC institutions. In our case, what is desirable (Fairclough, 2003) for children’s learning in ECEC institutions was crucial, and the white papers were thus analysed as social events within a social practice. At the same time, the way in which aspects of meaning construct social practice (Fairclough, 2016) was also central in our work.

According to Fairclough (2003), *social practices* refer to rules and structures that influence human actions and interactions within a context. Social practices represent genres, styles, and discourses that can be used to promote utterances and examine the process through which the production, distribution, and consumption of texts come into being. Although discourse can be understood in different ways and at different levels, in this article we define *discourses* as ‘ways of representing part of the world’ (Fairclough, 2003, p. 26) – more specifically, how the concept of learning is represented in the white papers and what kind of structural possibilities the learning discourses promote.

Social practices can also be regarded as links between social events and social structures and as a way of controlling the selection of some structural possibilities and the exclusion of others. In that context, both intertextuality and interdiscursivity are relevant concepts. *Intertextuality* implies that a text can be interpreted according to its connection to other texts. Fairclough (1992, pp. 102–103), ‘Intertextual allusions and links may render texts opaque and inaccessible to certain addressees, thus establishing relations of power among interlocutors’. Intertextuality illuminates the productivity of texts and how texts can transform and restructure existing conventions to form new ones. In that sense, it is a way to analyse dynamic processes of recontextualisation and reconceptualization. In a more concrete sense, intertextuality manifests in the ‘presence of actual elements of other texts within a text’ (Fairclough, 2003, p. 39), whether in quotations or other elements of texts that can be present in less obvious ways.

By contrast, interdiscursivity describes how texts draw on previous and existing discourses. Fairclough (1993, p. 138) has defined *interdiscursivity* as the ‘constitution of a text from diverse discourses and genres’. Texts can establish dialogical relationships ‘between their “own” discourses and discourses of others’ (Fairclough, 2003, p. 128). In white papers, discourses may be related to each other, to previous policy, and to contemporary state ideological positions within a social structure. In this article, we describe how learning discourses draw on previous

discourses presented in earlier studies and, in a broader context, how they can influence children’s learning within ECEC and what social consequences they might have.

Another vital concept to understand is *recontextualisation*, which refers to the movement of parts or elements of interactions and texts from their original context into a different context (Fairclough, 2015). Recontextualisation manifests in the intertextuality and interdiscursivity of texts and can even be understood as ‘intertextuality and interdiscursivity in progress’ (Fairclough, 2015, p. 38). It illuminates hegemonic discourses and dominant ideologies and how they are disseminated through, for example, policy documents.

Recontextualisation also illustrates how new social practices begin to dominate over other practices (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). The forms of intertextuality and interdiscursivity reproduced in political documents, at least from our understanding, can contribute to the recontextualisation of social practices. In that light, principles from NPM may be recontextualised as part of learning discourses in ECEC. NPM and globalization are thus examples of the third level of three-dimensional model, *social structures*, which define possibilities but are not deterministic. The relationship between structures and events are complex, for events are ‘not in any simple or direct way the effects of abstract social structures’ (Fairclough, 2003, p. 23). In fact, their relationship is mediated by social practices – for instance, teaching practices in ECEC institutions or managerial practices in institutions of education. Later in this article, we discuss learning discourses in the two white papers and consider the presented policy in light of a NPM regime.

### The socio-pedagogical tradition and a holistic learning perspective

Of special historical interest to our work is the socio-pedagogical tradition, especially its emphasis on collectivistic and democratic values such as solidarity. The tradition has roots in the 1930s, when Swedish social pedagogue Alva Myrdal, a Swedish Social Democratic politician, minister, and diplomat, established a pedagogical seminar in Stockholm in 1936. Myrdal’s socio-pedagogical model addressed both the child and society and the individual within the collective. Her efforts were transformative for social policy, the role of the state in education, and socio-pedagogical concepts (Hatje, 1999; Korsvold, 2008).

Myrdal’s vision and belief maintained that all children could benefit from institutional socio-pedagogical care. Even in the 1930s, she argued that raising children was too difficult for parents to do on their own and that they needed public support. In her

view, parental care within the home was important but was also not enough, for children need to develop skills for their futures, and the best possible place to achieve that goal, according to Myrdal, was all-day childcare. In her work, the socio-pedagogical model encompassed both the child and society and the individual within the collective (Hatje, 1999). Equally important, her approach to learning was a holistic one oriented towards the group as a means to socialize children, a point that we return to shortly.

According to Myrdal, the state can take greater responsibility for children's learning and well-being by creating settings in the form of full-day kindergarten classrooms designed not only to shape their development but also to do so while practising a new pedagogy. In sum, she maintained that children need not only their families but also opportunities to enjoy time with other children in a socio-pedagogical institution offering professional care and supervision. At the time, amongst mothers, preschool teachers, and other women, Myrdal's vision represented a collective movement for the humanitarian treatment of children, one with a socio-pedagogical dimension for all the youngest members of society (Hatje, 1999). Later, in the Nordic countries, ECEC became a field at the forefront of social policy and eventually the responsibility of the state.

The second dimension (Hatje, 1999), the holistic learning perspective, is another characteristic of ECEC in the Nordic countries. In Myrdal's day, children's play, interactions, and learning in kindergarten and day nurseries were largely linked to a holistic view or better put, a holistic learning perspective that drew on the traditions of the German founder of kindergarten, Friedrich Fröbel, as well as Myrdal and other pedagogues who were responsible for reforming the concept.

Later, other fundamental shifts took place in Norway and the other Nordic countries, including the creation of the modern concept of the 'public childcare child' in the 1970s. As in several other European countries, in the Nordic countries a new understanding of education as an economic resource, one able to stimulate the labour supply and thereby economic growth, influenced childcare reforms but still placed greater weight on the collective than on the individual (Korsvold, 2008). The new construction of childhood, holding that children should stay partly at home and partly in day nurseries, better suited the new conditions of the labour market and the demand for more employment and the new gender-contract.

In time, the result was that nearly all children in those countries attended ECEC institutions, which, on the one hand, can be described in light of the participation of both parents in the labour market. On the other, it can be viewed as the fulfilment of

children's right to meet peers and socialize with them in ECEC settings (Korsvold, 2008). In sum, in the Nordic welfare states, an active interventionist model was used that sought to regulate mothers' and fathers' time for work and childcare as well as for children and family services. The aims were to meet children's needs for care and play and to promote a holistic learning perspective and formative development as a basis for the all-around development of all children while maintaining a socio-pedagogical tradition.

## **NPM, learning discourses, and reception**

In the past three decades, ECEC, in the form of institutions for education and welfare, has undergone several policy reforms. In Norway, those reforms within the new welfare regime have been characterized by increased degrees of individualization, assessment, and market adaptations (Dahle, 2020; Pettersvold & Østrem, 2018; Seland, 2020), as illustrated in what follows.

Broadly speaking, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) warrants mention as a global policy actor in education that produces global educational policy discourse, including on school readiness, within ECEC. Since 1997, lifelong learning has been a component of ECEC, one with the aim of pairing early childhood education policy and primary education policy to improve learning outcomes and the quality of learning and to create opportunities for lifelong learning for all citizens. As a result, accountability (Apple, 2006; Cerny, 1997; Clarke & Newman, 1997), weighted towards goal attainment and the responsibility of professionals to achieve specific results, has become a central element of the new welfare regime and within ECEC, one that implies a stronger emphasis on the efficiency, measurability, and documentation of learning outcomes. The OECD's documents highlight the need for a stronger, equal partnership between those two forms of education, one that links ECEC to the primary school curriculum in diverse nationwide directions (Nygård, 2015). Owing to new transformations and NPM, globalization and learning outcomes are dimensions that have influenced all Nordic countries, albeit in diverse ways. In this article, we focus exclusively on Norway.

### ***Children's linguistic skills and school readiness***

In this section, we present the learning discourses in the white paper no. 19 (2015–2016), *Time for Play and Learning: Better Content in Kindergarten*, after which we detail the reception afforded to the policy in the paper. We have, as mentioned, analysed both white papers as social events within a social practice and identified learning discourses in the documents,

namely by focusing on ways in which learning concepts are represented therein (Fairclough, 2003) and by identifying meaning in political visions and assumptions regarding children's learning in ECEC institutions.

Issued in the mid-2010s, the white paper *Time for Play and Learning* introduced learning goals in ECEC institutions that suggested mapping children's linguistic and preliteracy skills. In particular, it advised ECEC institutions to 'develop an indicative norm for linguistic skills that children should bring with them from kindergarten' (p. 11). Another purpose of the proposal was to increase children's readiness for school and better prepare them to adapt to ways of teaching practised in schools (pp. 10, 61–62). The white paper directly linked children's Norwegian language skills to consequences for their opportunities, or lack thereof, in future processes of education, as adults in the labour market, and throughout their working lives (p. 7). What the white paper clearly highlights is a clear vision of children's learning and how that vision relates to childhood as a future investment.

The visions and assumptions of children's learning in *Time for Play and Learning* indicate that children are conceptualized as future investments for society and the sustainability of the welfare state. The paper stresses that children should bring linguistic skills from ECEC settings with them to school, for example, and that their school readiness should be increased. Children's language skills also are linked directly to their future opportunities in education and the labour market. Those ideas, however, contrast the holistic approach to learning and the once-prevalent understanding of learning. Now, knowledge to a greater extent represents something given, universal, and predetermined.

The learning discourses in the white paper also demonstrate interdiscursivity (Fairclough, 1992) by closely connecting them to discourses in the NPM regime in which ideas of assessment, children as future investments, and accountability dominate. As mentioned, social practices can be 'thought of ways of controlling the selection of certain structural possibilities and the exclusion of others' (Fairclough, 2003, p. 23). In Norway, the social consequences of those discourses would have been major.

### 2016: A year of resistance

The proposal made in *Time for Play and Learning*, especially about mapping children's linguistic skills, provoked a 'kindergarten protest' in Norway that arose due to resistance to a more detail-driven, individualistic learning-oriented approach promoted in the white paper. The protest, taking place primarily on social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and

Twitter, focused on the government's newly proposed kindergarten legislation with particular scrutiny.

Before the white paper was approved by Parliament on 7 June 2016, about 100 posts from readers, blog posts, and other forms of expression were published. In addition, more than 7000 signatures were collected via social media to advocate stronger state-imposed instructions regarding individual descriptions of children's linguistic skills in ECEC (Pettersvold & Østrem, 2018). Beyond that, the content of the proposal was criticized for attempting to reshape ECEC as a tool merely for attaining the desired goal, and thereby changing children's everyday lives in ECEC institutions.

Parents, practitioners, students in training, teacher educators, researchers, trade union representatives, and central figures within the profession all criticized the new proposals. The protests were advanced by professionals in the field using, for example, the journal *Forste steg* of the trade union Utdanningsforbundet, the website of Private Barnehagers Landsforbund, a prominent organizer and owner of non-governmental ECEC institutions (barnehage.no), and the website of Barnehageforum, a well-known organization founded by education professionals (barnehagefolk.no). Critical posts spread via social media were typically brief, clear, against mapping children's linguistic skills, and in favour of children's right to play.

The protest illustrated that the ability of agents to resist power is negotiated (Fairclough, 1992), and that by resisting they can contribute to changing social structures. As an outcome of the protests, the proposal to map children's linguistic and preliteracy skills was not included in Norway's Framework Plan for Kindergartens. That outcome can be understood as both the acceptance and continuation of pedagogy with a holistic, child-centred approach to learning and as a recontextualisation of discourses of the social democratic welfare model (Fairclough, 2015). Children's self-worth and a holistic view of learning remained central to the design of Norwegian ECEC, however, as expressed in the Framework Plan and the Kindergarten Act.

At the same time, assumptions about and the vision for children's learning in ECEC institutions and as childhood as an investment in the future remained ongoing topics in the political sphere. In November 2019, a new white paper, Meld. St. 6 (2019–2020), *Close Up: Early Efforts and Inclusive Communities in ECEC and After-School Activities*, was introduced. The white paper provided even more detail than *Time for Play and Learning* regarding the vision for children's learning.

According to *Close Up*, early efforts in ECEC in Norway prioritized children's linguistic skills, mathematics, and self-regulation (pp. 6, 28, 30, 31, 38).



According to the text, ‘The government aims to introduce a duty for the municipality to assess all children before school starts for the purpose of identifying children in need of further mapping of their Norwegian language skills’ (p. 30). The paper also draws lines between children’s competence in linguistic skills, mathematics, and self-regulation in ECEC institutions and their results on future national tests in primary school.

Introducing the duty for municipalities to assess all children’s learning indicates a clear political vision to control learning outcomes in ECEC institutions. If that discourse acquires a hegemonic position (Fairclough, 2003), then it may cause a break with the socio-pedagogical tradition in Norway’s ECEC institutions. Furthermore, when lines are drawn between children’s competence in linguistic skills, mathematics, and self-regulation and their results on national tests in primary school, desirable assumptions (Fairclough, 2003, p. 210) emerge for children’s learning outcomes both in ECEC institutions and in school. Assumptions that, according to our research, create a more dominant ideological position for learning as a predetermined, standardized, and universal concept.

### After the protest

In 2006, an earlier white paper, Meld St. No. 16 (... *And No One Left Behind: Early Intervention for Lifelong Learning*), advocated developing mapping tools and even to make mapping tools obligatory in all ECEC institutions to ensure that learning outcomes in all ECEC institutions were satisfactory (... *No One Left Behind* 2016). Later, the white paper *Time for Play and Learning*, as mentioned, promoted the mapping of specific skills as top political priorities. The white papers thus sustain a dialogue about such political priorities, both amongst each other and with OECD policy documents, by referencing each other. Such interdiscursivity (Fairclough, 2015) becomes visible in the strong links to learning discourses in the NPM regime and to transnational policy discourses.

With stronger emphasis on learning outcomes and assumptions of what is important for children’s future academic achievement and professional possibilities, social practice may create certain opportunities for children’s learning in ECEC institutions and exclude others by normalizing standardized learning and learning outcomes. Textual processes of meaning-making are important in political processes of ‘seeking to achieve hegemony for neoliberalism’ (Fairclough, 2003, p. 102). According to Fairclough, efficiency in policy processes is not guaranteed, however, because it takes place within a conflict for meaning. Moreover, to our

understanding, a struggle over meaning can change hegemonic positions. Whereas political priorities led the kindergarten protest after *Time for Play and Learning* was published, they remained silent as *Close Up*, the second white paper, was promoted. Against that background, the following section discusses whether that development will have social consequences for children’s learning in ECEC institutions in Norway.

### Discussion

From a long-term perspective, ECEC in Norway since the turn of the millennium has become a far more political field than in previous decades. Growing political interest in ECEC reflects a stronger focus on early childhood as a valuable, important period in life. Even so, childhood was previously recognized as an important life stage to a greater extent than in recent decades. For its part, the profession had early on emphasized the intrinsic value of childhood and children’s lives in the here and now, a holistic learning perspective, and the value of play as the most important element of day care (Greve et al., 2013; Johansson, 2020; Korsvold, 2005). For decades, play, friendship, and children’s well-being have been pervasive themes in political documents related to ECEC and its development within the Norwegian welfare state (Korsvold, 2005, 2008, 2018). Today, moreover, being mindful of childhood’s intrinsic value is included in Section 1 of the Kindergarten Act.

Although the white papers that we analysed were not directly linked to a political decision on regulations for ECEC institutions, their messages nevertheless illustrate what should be given political priority in the institutions of the future. Even though a white paper is not a regulative document, the new meaning of learning discourse therein is to a certain extent reconstructed as a result of changed political priorities. The standardization of knowledge through the documentation of specific knowledge and skills at certain ages can contribute to an understanding of knowledge as a concept without a context. Furthermore, children’s and adults’ explorations and interactions with their environments may be at risk of being downgraded in favour of streamlined actions that aim to achieve certain goals based on accountability. By extension, increased focus on financial returns, the measurement of knowledge, and the standardization of the content in ECEC risk cultivating a universal approach to learning that ignores children’s subjective learning processes (Nygård, 2017b).

From a professional perspective, the white paper *Time for Play and Learning* was interpreted as narrowing children’s learning and promoting distance from a more traditional understanding of a holistic

approach to learning within ECEC. Studies have documented how ECEC professionals and other agents in the field expressed both criticism of and resistance to new managerial trends materializing, for instance, through the increasingly detailed management of children's everyday activities (Pettersvold & Østrem, 2018). That trend may result in the detailed management of early childhood pedagogy and its methods, which in the white paper were interpreted as narrowing professionals' scope and the exercise of their professional practice and discretion in ECEC institutions.

In the kindergarten protest, ECEC professionals advocated greater professional responsibility, with more empowerment of their work in ECEC practice and with the profession's knowledge, for example, of the ability to exercise professional judgement. In the protest, professional ECEC educators did not only passively receive new forms of governance from the state but also remained active agents and created resistance to concepts that they considered to be unhelpful (Nygård, 2018). The ECEC professionals and other agents in the field expressed both criticism and resistance to new managerial trends, or what has been referred to as the increasingly detailed management of children's everyday activities (Nygård, 2018). In particular, that measurement apply to the increasing detailed management of early childhood pedagogy and its methods, motions interpreted as narrowing professionals' scope and their exercise of professional practice and discretion in ECEC institutions (Pettersvold & Østrem, 2018).

As mentioned, the Norwegian government failed to secure a majority in Parliament for the new proposals in June 2016. However, the political pressure mounted, often expressed via news media (e.g. *Dagbladet.no*, 2017 and *Aftenposten.no*, 2019),<sup>2,3</sup> especially regarding children's linguistic skills and the mapping of their learning outcomes. The symbolic power of utterances manifested in how politicians talked about children's learning in the media and how they described their expectations of ECEC institutions. In that way, politicians have legitimized what sort of knowledge is prioritized (Bernstein, 2000) and placed pressure on ECEC content. Making political priorities visible and available to the public can cause silence, acceptance, or resistance, however. In 2016, political priorities caused resistance, but four years later, that resistance has diminished.

### **2020: Silence or acceptance?**

Any given discourse becomes transformed during several stages of development and is created through time, text, and space. Each time that a discourse shifts from one position to another, space is liberated for

ideologies, and the discourse is ideologically transformed as a result (Bernstein, 2000). Therefore, changes are not unavoidable products of economic and political forces (Clarke & Newman, 1997), but depend on context for the transmission of a discourse and the meaning that it creates over time. Text and space have consequences for approaches to play, care, and learning, children's development in ECEC institutions, and what knowledge children should possess at certain ages. In that light, we found complex transformations woven throughout these processes and we would like to highlight particular ones.

In 2020, the proposals that were rejected as a result of the 2016 protest were promoted by the same Parliament in *Close Up*. Again, it is important to state that changes are not unavoidable products of economic and political forces (Clarke & Newman, 1997); even so, changing political discourses paint a picture of what kind of knowledge the state legitimizes. In processes of reform, ideologies come into play, and discourse can be transformed as a result (Bernstein, 2000). Although the state has regulative power, regulations are maintained by the acceptance of that power by agents (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2012).

Whereas the white paper *Time for Play and Learning* resulted in a protest four years prior, ECEC professionals and other agents in the field have so far been quiet following the release of the white paper *Close Up*. Despite protest in connection with the staffing norm, using the hashtag *#uforsvarlig* ('#indefensible'), less resistance has been voiced regarding the suggestion to map children's skills. Corroborating that interpretation, Gustafsson Nyckel (2019) has observed the lack of public debate and even silence regarding changing processes in education policy. The state's expansion of power to ECEC institutions will have social consequences (Fairclough, 2013), for changes in learning discourse will likely narrow the holistic learning perspective to a greater extent and, in turn, pose new implications for the construction of the ideals of childhood and children's lives in ECEC institutions.

### **Recontextualisation and a new ECEC policy?**

Exploring the roots of ECEC, childcare, childhood services, and childcare facilities, along with analysing political reports focusing on assumptions and ideologically based meanings of children's learning in ECEC institutions, can help to elucidate several discursive transformations within neoliberal welfare regimes. In Norway's case, the country currently faces a new learning discourse that influences ECEC pedagogy and notions of childhood in new ways, and it has raised questions about what the future should be for young children and the lessons that they will learn.

In this article, we have highlighted and discussed how the NPM regime within Norway's new



globalized educational model has greatly influenced Norwegian ECEC policy by fostering changes in learning discourses and impacting holistic approaches to learning and the socio-pedagogical tradition. Interdiscursivity emerges when policy reproduces discourses closely connected to discourses related to NPM, and children's learning is articulated differently relative to previous cases, which we understand to constitute an ideological turn towards a more neoliberal learning discourse.

Furthermore, the trends illustrate a recontextualisation in which social practices begin to dominate over previous practices (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). In that context, it may mean that principles from an NPM management ideology are recontextualised as part of the discourses on learning and quality in ECEC. One question to ask is whether the socio-pedagogical tradition is being challenged due to a policy that emphasizes individualization, assessment, and school readiness. When those discourses, identified as neoliberal discourses, take a hegemonic position, other discourses characterizing the social democratic welfare regime become less visible.

### Concluding remarks

Within the NPM regime, ongoing policy movements and complexity have surfaced both in politics and among professionals. There are signs of silence and tacit acceptance, but there are also signs of resistance and countermovements. As mentioned, resistance to learning outcomes within ECEC in Norway were clearly visible in 2016. The contents of the white paper *Time for Play and Learning* (2015–2016) were modified after a broad protest from early childhood educators, the early childhood teacher union, and practitioners. Their arguments were that exploration, curiosity, and the desire to play and learn should continue to be the foundation of ECEC, or else that education in ECEC settings should still be characterized by care, development, and learning and should form a unit or, better yet, a holistic learning approach. Above all, they argued, education should cater to children's needs, experiences, and interests. To that end, early efforts, inclusion, belonging, and integration should still depend on traditions from both a socio-pedagogical and holistic perspective.

Furthermore, discourse on the quality of education is closely interwoven with learning and learning outcomes. The two white papers analysed in this article indicate not only intertextuality in white papers published since 2006 but also increased interdiscursivity, which indicates external discourses internalized within a social structure (Fairclough, 2015). Although future policy will reflect future priorities, if neoliberal discourses

become stable in ECEC policy, then they will likely become normalized, interdiscursivity will be more stabilized, and the discourses may be colonized in social practice. Will future educational policy restore the holistic and collective perspective or reinforce that individualistic perspective? We will likely confront a composite of both strains.

### Limitations and implications for policy

Our study had some limitations, including that it focused solely on governmental reports, particularly selected white papers produced by Norwegian authorities. To be sure, future studies will need to extend both the data used – for example, by analysing other political documents – and adopt new perspectives. For now, what our research has clarified is how ECEC in the Nordic countries, as our study on Norway has shown, may deal with ways to modernize ECEC while maintaining a holistic perspective on children's learning and development and promoting a knowledge-oriented approach.

### Notes

1. *Early childhood education and care institutions* is an umbrella term for all types of settings for children 1–5 years old or before beginning compulsory primary school. We have identified variants of such settings for children that have a long, diverse history due to each Nordic country's unique national history.
2. <https://www.dagbladet.no/nyheter/hoyre-vil-ha-norskundervisning-i-barnehagenefor-mange-barn-kan-ikke-norsk-forste-skoledag/67542060>
3. <https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/i/P9EV6z/hoyre-vil-kartlegge-barnehagebarn-sv-byraad-mener-de-bommer-med-tiltaket?>

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