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A Social Investment Success

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Early Childhood Education and Care in Denmark

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Trine P. Larsen and Caroline de la Porte

Introduction

This study examines the success of early childhood education and care policy in Denmark, not only a key pillar in Danish family policy, but also, a remarkable social investment success.¹ Compared to the other Nordics, Denmark was a frontrunner in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), rooted in the 1800s, and with the first comprehensive national legislative framework on ECEC in 1964 (Sipilä 1997; Eydal and Rostgaard 2011; Borchorst 2005). In fact, Danish ECEC is renowned internationally as a flagship for the Nordic welfare model, due to its high volumes of high-quality childcare for the youngest children that is universally available and affordable, with an in-built focus on pedagogy, which enhances children's learning capabilities (Esping-Andersen et al. 2012; Ploug 2012).

What makes Denmark's approach to family policy distinct is the decision to invest heavily in the formal childcare infrastructure for even the youngest children, combined with comparatively long paid parental leave schemes, initially aimed primarily at mothers, notably from the mid-1960s. This contrasts with the other Nordics that invested heavily in parental leave schemes, but less so in the formal childcare for the youngest children (Eydal and Rostgaard 2011; Duvander and Cedstrand, this volume; Arnalds et al. this volume). As a result, Denmark is the leader among the Nordic countries when it comes to childcare provision for children under the age of 3 (Nordic Councils of Ministers 2019). There has also consistently been support for ECEC across the political spectrum and among key stakeholders, especially social partners and parents' organizations (Borchorst 2009). ECEC is not only seen to invest in skills for children—parents would rather

¹ We would like to thank Hanna Kviske for data collection on actors for this chapter.

have their children in childcare than at home—but also to enable both women and men to have gainful employment (Eydal and Rostgaard 2011).

To illuminate how ECEC has developed into such a broad-based success in Denmark, we undertake our analysis by examining the development of ECEC at key moments in time, using the policy success framework. We start with the Danish childcare guarantee, which placed a duty on local governments to provide adequate childcare to assist working parents in 1976, and later, in 2004, extended as a childcare right to all parents (Thorsen 1997). The childcare reforms in 2011 and 2018 are also discussed, as they compelled certain groups of children such as bilingual children and children from socially deprived areas (the Ghetto-list) to attend full-time daycare with financial repercussions for parents failing to adhere to this childcare requirement. We apply the PPPE framework developed in this volume, assessing the Danish ECEC in terms of programmatic, political, policy-making process and endurance success. We argue the Danish ECEC can be regarded as an all-round success, although in recent years, the right to childcare is increasingly tinged by the flavour of the childcare requirement, targeting bilingual children and children from socially deprived areas. What is more, the childcare quality has been challenged during the austerity years, but this has now been rectified with the agreement of minimum staff-to-child ratio in 2019.

The chapter begins by describing the regulatory landscape of Danish ECEC policy, including the key stakeholders, before examining to what extent it can be considered a policy success along the four dimensions of policy success that are central to this volume. Programmatic success is examined by comparing the broad aims of Danish childcare policy and regulation with its implementation. We then examine key stakeholders' approach towards ECEC for children aged 0-3 years to assess its political success, before analysing the features of the policy-making process that continue to contribute to its success. Lastly, we evaluate the endurance of these policies and emerging counterclaims and cracks in the edifice of Danish ECEC. We end by drawing some general conclusions.

Context: Key Actors and Regulatory Landscape

Childcare services are regulated by distinct sets of regulation at different levels of governance, as much service delivery in the Danish welfare state is organized and implemented at the municipal level. It is the individual municipalities that decide on the type of service providers, including their reliance on public-provided and public-procured ECEC as well as cash-for-care schemes/home based care. The central government decides on the regulatory norms (including education level of staff in ECEC, ceiling for childcare fees) and the overall childcare budget, while the 98 local government entities are responsible for the administration and the service delivery (prior to the 2007 amalgamations this task fell to 271 municipalities).

Wages and working conditions of childcare staff are regulated through collective bargaining and labour laws, and pertain to all workers in the sector. The Social Service Act and the Daycare Act outline the overall regulatory framework for service delivery, including the division between central and local government.

The main governmental actors are central government, the individual municipalities and their interest organization KL (Local Government Denmark), representing municipalities collectively in negotiations with central level of government and in collective bargaining with the trade unions BUPL (representing skilled childcare staff) and FOA (representing non-qualified and low-skilled childcare staff). Furthermore, while all political parties support childcare, there is a difference in emphasis between the liberal-leaning parties—Conservative Party (Konservative Folkeparti), the Liberal Party (Venstre), and Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti)—and the left-leaning parties—the Social Democrats (Socialdemokraterne), the Socialist Party (Socialistisk Folkeparti), the Social Liberals (Radikale Venstre) and the Red–Green Alliance (Enhedslisten). Besides municipalities, political parties and social partners, important players in the childcare arena are the interest organization representing parents (FOLA) and the interest organization of private childcare providers (Danish Industry).

It is within this multi-level policy arena and regulatory system that Danish ECEC policies have developed over the years with shifting left- and right-wing governments in power at central and local levels.

A Programmatic Success

We start our analysis by assessing whether ECEC can be considered a programmatic success, by comparing the aims of the Danish childcare policy and regulation with outcome. For assessing outcome, we use a range of well-known proxies from the childcare literature, that is, take-up rate, availability, affordability, social inclusion and staff-to-child ratio.

Denmark has invested in high-quality day care for children under the age of 3 for decades. The expenditure has been remarkably stable since 1990. Childcare expenditure was 1.3 per cent of GDP in 1990 compared to 1.7 per cent in 2010 and 1.2 per cent in 2019 (Eurostat 2021). The overarching aims have remained fairly unchanged over the years, with recent legislation listing four broad aims for Danish ECEC. They state that Danish childcare services should:

1. advance children's well-being and learning;
2. give families the flexibility and options of distinct forms of childcare along with financial support to organize their work–life balance according to their needs;
3. prevent negative social inheritance and social exclusion;

4. ensure that age-appropriate childcare matching children's needs (authors' own translation of the LBK nr 1912 af 06/10/2021:§1).

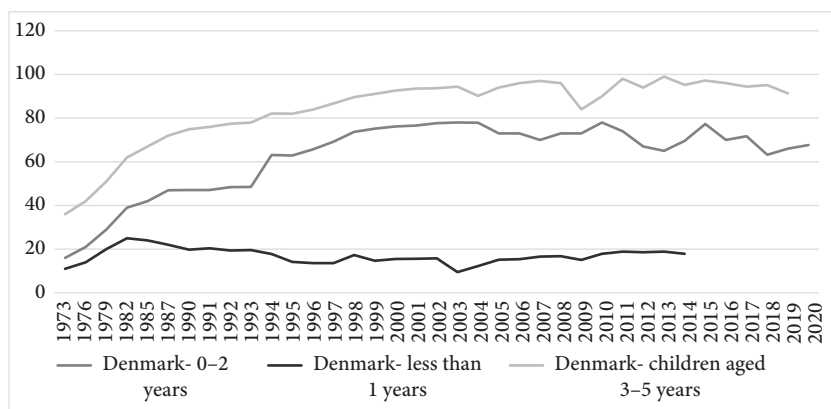


Fig. 4.1 Share of children (different ages) attending formal day care as percentage of all children in the age group in Denmark

Source: Compiled from Nordic Council of Ministers database, Eurostat database, Statistics Denmark (1973–2021)

Danish ECEC can be considered a programmatic success in delivering on these ambitious aims. Since the early 1970s, the share of children under the age of 3 and even below 1 year attending formal childcare has steadily increased. Recent data (see Figure 4.1) suggests that in 2020, 68 per cent of children under the age of 3 attended formal childcare, most on a full-time basis. The rapid expansion of Danish childcare, notably from the mid-1970s with the introduction of the first childcare guarantee (1976) and subsequently the higher take-up of childcare also seems to have successfully enabled more parents, notably mothers, to continue in paid work during periods of childrearing. In 1970, 43 per cent of mothers with children aged 0–2 years and 49 per cent of mothers with children aged 3–6 years worked. By 2020, 75 per cent of Danish mothers with children less than 6 years did so (Kjerkegaard 1976: 136; Eurostat 2021).

Remarkably, Denmark has always scored comparatively highly on these indicators, even among the Nordic countries (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2). In 1972, when ECEC started to be nationally regulated and universally offered, 16 per cent of children under 3 and 11 per cent of those under 1 attended ECEC. The numbers of children in ECEC continued to increase to 45 per cent and 24 per cent, respectively, in 1982. From the mid-1980s, slightly different trends started to emerge between distinct age groups, with the overall use of childcare continuing to increase rapidly, with the exception of the under 1s. The latter can be explained by the expansion of Danish parental leave in 1984 from 14 weeks to 26 weeks, along

with other parental leave reforms extending the leave entitlements and levels of compensation throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.

The continued growth of the overall share of children attending formal childcare over the next three decades (1980s, 1990s and 2000s) was enabled by the large-scale investment in the childcare infrastructure, although there was a shift between left and right governments. Furthermore, this trend of stable spending was maintained and even survived through severe economic recessions that led to financial cutbacks in other areas of welfare expenditure. Thus, parents could feel secure enrolling their children in ECEC (Abrahamson 2010; Borchorst 2009). From the early 1990s, several political parties, social partners and parents increasingly pushed for a childcare guarantee—to be offered to all parents—covering all age groups. By 1998, eight out of 10 Danish municipalities had implemented some form of childcare guarantee, although a nationwide statutory and universal childcare right was not agreed before 2004 (Folketingets Tidende 1998).

Danish parents embraced their newly granted childcare rights by using the childcare facilities that had come into place. Figure 4.2 illustrates that in doing so Danish parents make slightly different choices compared to their counterparts in other Nordic countries: Danish childcare enrolment is consistently much higher, even though numbers have increased in the other Nordics since 2000. For instance, less than 7 per cent of children below 1 year attended ECEC in the other Nordic countries in 2019, which is even lower than the share of Danish children enrolled in formal day care in the early 1970s (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2).

Furthermore, the take-up of childcare has been high across the social spectrum, even among low and high-income earners, and between different ethnic groups. Children from non-Western backgrounds and from socially deprived areas attend ECEC as much as other children. The enrolment gap that existed initially, has been

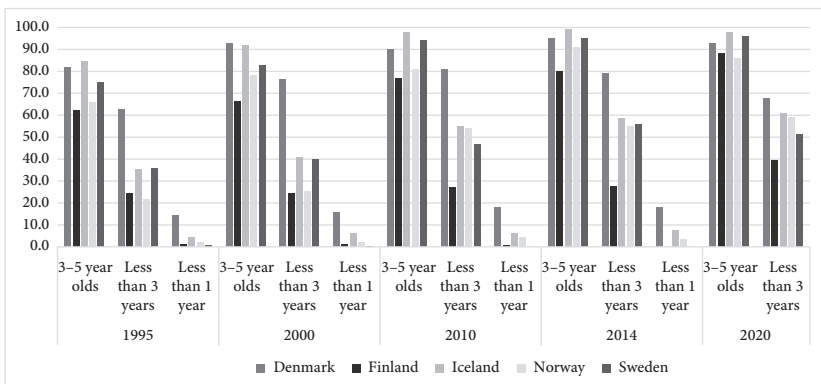


Fig. 4.2 Share of children within different age groups attending formal day care as percentage of all children in the age group in the Nordics

Source: Nordic Council of Minister's database and EU-SILC survey (2021)

steadily shrinking, even if children with migrant backgrounds often commence childcare later (FOA 2019; Ottosen et al. 2018). Additionally, children of single mothers and socially excluded groups have historically been prioritized within the Danish childcare system (Thorsen 1997; Seemann 2021; Borchhorst 2005). The Matthew effect in childcare, which is marked across many advanced economies, is significantly less pronounced in Denmark and other Nordic countries (Pavolini and van Lancker 2018; OECD 2020).

Moreover, ample research relying on large-scale longitudinal surveys suggests that the Danish childcare expansion and its high care quality have had positive causal effects on school performance and, notably for boys and for children from less affluent families (Esping Andersen et al. 2012; Landersø et al. 2020). From a social mobility and learning perspective, Danish childcare can without doubt be qualified as a programmatic success, which was secured through a combination of capping childcare fees and nationwide care requirements and teaching standards, low staff-to-child ratios, and the high levels of educational attainment among childcare staff.

Danish childcare fees are heavily subsidized and are comparatively low, with extra reductions for low-income families (via means-testing), enabling them to use childcare on an equal footing to children from other families (Gromada and Richardson 2021; Esping-Andersen et al. 2012). In 2006, the nationwide ceiling for childcare fees was lowered (parents pay max 25 per cent of total childcare costs, while 74 per cent is covered publicly compared to parents paying 35 per cent in 1976 and 30 per cent prior to the 2006 reform (Rostgaard 2014; Lov nr. 333 af 19/06/1974)). A mere 2 per cent of Danish parents find they cannot afford ECEC (Eurostat 2018). This has ensured that childcare is affordable to all groups, thus making it de facto a universal right, which is central in the Nordic welfare state (Kvist et al. 2012).

From the very beginning of Danish ECEC, there has been a *strong social investment component* building on the German educator Fröbel's pedagogical principles of free play and positive learning processes (Eydal and Rostgaard 2011). Successive childcare reforms have underpinned these social pedagogical principles, with the 1964 Childcare Act being a historical turning point, by introducing the day-care institutions, emphasizing and strengthening these social pedagogical principles. There was special attention given to socially deprived children (Borchhorst 2009). The 1976 childcare guarantee shifted the focus from the socially deprived towards all children: by making childcare widely available, the much needed labour supply would be secured (Thorsen 1997).

The social investment focus re-emerged during the 1990s. By 2004, compulsory teaching plans for toddlers were introduced. There was also a strong emphasis on the skill levels of childcare staff and on staff-to-child ratios (Rostgaard 2015; Bundsgaard and Olwig 2018; Lov nr. 279 af 13/05/1998). Qualified childcare staff are requested to have at least four years of pedagogical training at university level

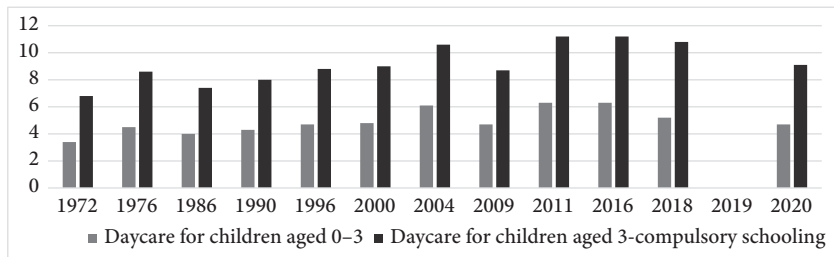


Fig. 4.3 Staff-to-child ratios for children aged 0–3 and 3–5 years in Danish day care for selected years (1972–2020)

Source: Bureau 2020 (2019); FOA (2020b)

and the staff-to-child ratio in Danish ECEC is comparatively high, ensuring time for children with adults. Figure 4.3 illustrates that it has historically been even lower: in 1972, there was one adult per 3.4 children aged 0–2 years, compared to 4 children in 1986 and 5.2 children in 2018.

The high share of skilled staff, combined with a favourable staff-to-child ratio and a strong emphasis on developing children’s social skills rather than traditional educational schooling has not only enabled high female labour-market participation, but has also secured social mobility and social inclusion.

Political Success

A hallmark of Danish ECEC has been a broad political consensus approach towards formal childcare, including for children less than 3 years which is also reflected by all major political parties voting in favour of childcare reforms over the years (Abrahamson 2010; Borchorst 2009). In fact, there has been a long-standing support for publicly funded childcare, where children’s skill development and thus the competencies of teaching staff have been central to all political parties, social partners and other key stakeholders, including parents (de la Porte et al., forthcoming; Folketingetstidende 1974). For example, the unions representing the teaching staff consistently highlight the importance of learning from a young age, citing the ‘Heckman curve’, which refers to the investments in the cognitive capabilities of children being fundamental for learning and adaptability during school and working life (Interview BUPL 2021). Equally, parents see ECEC as important for skills development for their children, and would rather have them in childcare than at home. This is also reflected in recent surveys, where the majority of Danish parents are highly satisfied with childcare provision and less than 10 per cent of Danish parents believe that pre-school children suffer, if their mother is working, suggesting support for the double-earner and double-carer model in the population at large (Gromade and Richardson 2021: 21–22).

To the extent that there is political debate about childcare provision, it is never about its purpose or scope. Social Democrats, left-wing and social liberal parties, along with trade unions and parents' organizations, have historically called for strengthening publicly funded childcare and increases in childcare quality (Eklund Hansen and Petersen 2000; Borchorst 2009). There are, however, critical voices. These critical voices were vocal in the late 1960s and early 1970s—at the time that ECEC started to be universalized—triggering a debate about the role of mothers as homemaker/care-giver vis-à-vis workers (Eklund Hansen and Petersen 2000; Borchorst 2009; Thorsen 1997; Folketingets tidende 1974). These debates were less prominent from the 1980s through to 2010.

In recent years, these discussions have resurfaced, with a slight increase in Danish parents opting for home-based care solutions (although still fairly marginal). There is also a focus on Danish parenthood in conjunction with the recently adopted reform that earmarks two months of the paid parental leave to fathers as part of implementing EU's work-life balance directive, Denmark is the only country in the Nordics that up until February 2022 did not yet have a substantial amount of earmarked leave for fathers. Parts of the trade union movement and Social Democratic Party were initially hostile towards earmarked leave, arguing that it intervenes with families' rights to organize their care arrangements according to their individual needs (de la Porte et al. 2020).

The Conservative Party and liberal-leaning political parties, along with the Danish employers, have also criticized earmarked leave, arguing that it intervenes in individual families' rights to organize their care arrangements. The right-of-centre parties are also more keen on privately operated, but publicly funded, care options, including promoting home-based care through cash-for-care schemes (Borchorst 2003; Rostgaard 2014; Venstre 1963; Konservativ Folkeparti 1966). Danish employers support publicly funded ECEC as it clearly enables men and women to participate actively in the labour market. They have consistently and repeatedly called for increased opening hours of childcare institutions (Larsen 2007). In conjunction with the implementation of EU's work-life balance directive, Danish Industry was the first organization to proclaim support for statutory earmarked paternity leave, as an instrument of a broader gender equalizing labour-market policy. Notwithstanding these different emphases, any survey of position papers of social partners as well as the different election manifestos of individual political parties over the years will lead to the conclusion that since the early 1960s, there has been a strong commitment to strengthen and develop Danish ECEC—including its social investment components (Konservative 1965; Venstre 1963; 1970; Socialdemokratiet 1977; 1961).

Process Dynamics: Dynamic Convergence

From a residual childcare approach to a public duty to provide ECEC

The early childcare debates, often centred around women's role in the family as homemaker/care-taker or (secondary breadwinners). Danish childcare up until the 1960s targeted the most vulnerable children and their families, such as single mothers and social excluded groups, while the norm ideologically for other women was that they should be 'home-makers' (Borchorst 2005; Thorsen 1997). Yet, even in 1964, the Children and Young People's Care Act included a focus on an environment to enhance children's learning and well-being (Borchorst 2005: 13–17; Ministry of Social Affairs and Ministry of Education 2000). The discourse started to change in the early 1970s, where ECEC, to support working mothers, was viewed more positively (Eklund Hansen and Petersen 2000). The 1976 childcare guarantee was adopted by a broad coalition of political parties with the aim to develop the public childcare infrastructure (Thorsen 1997; Folketingets tidende 1974).

Along with the 1964 Act, the 1976 childcare guarantee provided key turning points for ECEC. These reforms not only extended childcare to all children, but also emphasized and strengthened the social pedagogical ideas that childcare could contribute to small children's development and upbringing (Thorsen 1997; Borchorst 2009). In fact, the 1976 childcare guarantee is the first form of Danish legislation stipulating that local authorities were not only required to provide child-care, but also that they had the discretion to decide on its service level and eligibility criteria. The law also emphasized that the childcare guarantee was to assist working families with reconciling work and care responsibilities (Lov nr. 333 af 19/06/1974: §69; Thorsen 1997).

Yet, with the emphasis on facilitating labour supply, the social investment component of ECEC was in the background with the 1970s' legislation. It was in that context that progressive pedagogues, together with leading female Social Democrats and the trade union movement, pushed the agenda of a stronger focus on social investment and learning outcomes for the ECEC system (Borchorst 2009; Eklund Hansen and Petersen 2000). This was successfully integrated, in line with the de facto universalization of ECEC, although in a piecemeal fashion. This position was mostly shared across party lines. Yet there were also internal divisions among stakeholder groups (Borchorst 2009; Abrahamson 2010). For example, within the Social Democratic Party and the trade union movement, there were critical voices advocating for women as homemakers in the 1960s and 1970s. The Social Democrats' 1973 catalogue entitled 'Demands on Equality' reflects this by warning against leaving families' childcare responsibilities to less personalized public institutions (Eklund Hansen and Petersen 2000:

48). The 1977 election manifesto of the Social Democrats indicates their dual childcare approach, on the one hand pledging for flexible working and extended leave entitlements to secure parents enough time with their small children, but also calling for the expansion of ECEC infrastructure to promote social inclusion and gender equality (Social Democratic Party 1977). Within the Danish trade union movement, the comments by the former union president in 1979 about earmarked paternity leave, which he opposed on grounds that ‘men would just use these leave days for fishing trips’ are examples of the more traditional views of women as care-takers/homemakers within the Danish trade union movement (Eklund Hansen and Petersen 2000). Additionally, various surveys from the mid-1970s suggest that Danish parents were divided in terms of their values about care responsibilities in the family: 25 per cent of parents preferred the traditional male breadwinner model and 35 per cent favoured the one and half-male breadwinner with children in part-time ECEC, while less than 2 per cent per cent supported the dual-earner model with children in full-time day-care (Knudsen 2004).

The Conservative Party and Liberal political parties’ approach to ECEC, like the Social Democrats, was also quite ambivalent. In their various election manifestos from the early 1960s and 1970s, they emphasized the role of mothers as homemakers and care-takers, but at the same time, they stressed the importance of securing labour supply and thus, supported the expansion of publicly funded childcare infrastructure (Konservative 1965; Venstre 1963, 1970; Borchorst 2003). It was, in fact, the Liberal Party that ensured that the 1976 Danish childcare guarantee was enacted, when they were in office, although this reform was the work and flagship of the former Social Democratic Party that lost power in the 1973 election. The childcare guarantee was passed with a majority in 1974 with the Liberal Party, Social Democrats and left-wing parties voting in favour, while the Conservatives abstained from voting (Farbøl et al. 2018; Folketingets tidende 1974).

The shifting gender balance within many political parties and the Danish trade union movement, notably during the 1960s and 1970s, combined with increased labour demands and public pressure to develop the childcare infrastructure due to the influx of women into paid work, seem to have paved the way for the 1976 childcare guarantee (Eklund Hansen and Petersen 2000; Borchorst 2009). At the time, the Danish women’s movement emerged, leading to various local women’s groups and debate fora on gender equality at workplace level (Knudsen 2004; Borchorst 2009). The Danish Employers also supported publicly funded childcare with their 1976 joint pamphlet, and the unions, in particular LO, the largest union, called for further expansion of the childcare infrastructure to enable both parents to reconcile work and care-giving (Eklund Hansen and Petersen 2000).

From childcare duty to a nation-wide universal childcare right

Although there was a rapid expansion of childcare infrastructure and availability throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, the rising childcare demands exceeded the supply, leading to long waiting lists, and to municipalities prioritizing working parents, whereas the unemployed, students and socially excluded fell short of the childcare guarantee (Esping-Andersen et al. 2012; Thorsen 1997). This sparked a political debate, and in the early 1990s, a broad coalition of political parties urged the then Conservative-led government to include the shortage of childcare availability in their negotiations with the local governments (Thorsen 1997). The incoming Social-Democratic-led government embraced this urge in its 1993 parliamentary opening speech. It promised to create genuine care options for families with children by extending the statutory leave schemes and including a childcare guarantee in their negotiations with local governments (Nyrup Rasmussen 1993). By 1995, the aim had become to guarantee all parents a childcare place within the first 12 months of a new child's life (Folketingets Tidende, 1995). While the Social Democrats succeeded in passing new laws and extending the statutory leave scheme, they were unable to obtain political support for a statutory universal childcare guarantee for all parents. However, municipalities started to offer their own versions of childcare guarantees, and by the early 2000s, the childcare guarantee *de facto* had become quasi-universal (Eydal and Rostgaard 2011).

To ensure the implementation of the promised universal childcare guarantee, the Socialist Party was subsequently led to repeatedly raise the issue in parliament from the early 1990s and onwards, proposing legislative measures for a nationwide universal childcare guarantee, but without much success (Folketingets Tidende 1991, 1995, 1998). Both the Social Democrats and right-of-centre parties opposed this proposal, but for different reasons. The Conservatives and the Liberal Parties claimed the childcare guarantee intervened in the autonomy of local government, with some Liberal politicians calling for extending the schemes and funding for home-based care, although they in principle also supported publicly funded ECEC (Folketingets tidende 1998). The Social Democrats sympathized with the initiative, but opposed it on grounds that the parliament had already agreed that they would present their own childcare plan later in the year. However, in 1998, the Social Democrats surrendered and promised to introduce a statutory nationwide universal childcare guarantee for children aged 26 weeks, up to compulsory schooling, but did not succeed with their pledge, as they were unable to gain a majority in parliament (Socialdemokratiet 1998).

Thereafter, the Liberals were in government, under Anders Fogh Rasmussen. Building on the work of the left-of-centre parties, the Liberal government successfully proposed, in 2004, that the nationwide universal childcare right was adopted, guaranteeing all children from 26 weeks the right to a full-time child-care place, with all political parties voting in favour, except for the Christian Democrats and

the left-green alliance (Folktingets tidende 2004). The Social Democrats, Socialist Party and Social Liberals supported the 2004 nationwide childcare guarantee which built on the leg-work they had done in the previous decade. However, they also called for lower childcare fees (1,000 DKK per month), increased focus on the care quality, favourable staff-to-child ratios and for transferring parental leave days to caring days to ease families' work-life balance (Folketingets Tidende 2004—Villy Søvnald, SF, Lotte Bundsgaard, SD; Ida Jørgensen, RV). Likewise, the trade unions, representing childcare staff, echoed the positive remarks about the new childcare rights, but shared the concerns of the Social Democrats and left-wing parties, especially emphasizing that the childcare guarantee should be a social-pedagogical-informed ECEC offer (BUPL 2004; FOA 2004; PMF 2004). The Danish private employers, the Danish trade union movement and other relevant stakeholders, such as parental organizations, welcomed the childcare guarantee, while KL—the interest organization, representing all Danish municipalities, feared that the new childcare rights would jeopardize their autonomy and entail increased costs (KL 2004; Hesselager 2004).

Before and after the 2004 childcare guarantee, the Liberal Party, with the support of the Danish People's Party, granted parents' alternative care options to publicly provided childcare services. For the Liberals, it was about free choice among different public provided and private, but publicly funded care options, while for the Danish People's Party, it was about traditional gender roles (Folketingets Tidende 2004—Pia Kristensen, DF, Henrik Vernersten, Venstre, Charlotte Dyremose, KF). In practice, the development of various alternatives for care, including high-quality publicly funded care, public-procured private and home-based care options, signified that parents had a wide range of possible care options (Eydal and Rostgaard 2011). Table 4.1 summarizes the policy evolution of the ECEC system.

Policy Endurance: Preservation through Adaptation

Since the adoption of the 2004 universal childcare rights, take-up rates of childcare places from all social classes and all regions in Denmark have increased and have remained at a consistently high level. Since then, the financial crisis of 2008 led to years of austerity, which also affected childcare. Subsequently, there were a series of reforms, which, on the one hand, ensured that original aims, such as high quality, are maintained. It is especially the newest 2020 regulation on childcare quality, which addresses this. On the other hand, some recent reforms since the 2010s, have elements of coercion, à la Nanny state, which could undermine the notion of free choice that entails that parents can choose between different public-provided and private, but publicly financed, childcare options, which characterizes the Danish ECEC system.

Table 4.1 Main childcare reforms in Denmark, 1919–2020

1919	The Danish government starts to subsidize childcare
1933	The government's grants for subsidizing childcare are inaugurated in the law
1964	Developing the public childcare infrastructure based on social pedagogical ideas Introducing access to childcare for all children Private childminders inaugurated in the law as an emergency care solution
1976	Introduction of a general childcare guarantee Relegation of the childcare responsibility to local municipalities Private childminders a supplement rather than emergency care solution to public day care Ceiling for childcare fees equal to 35% of total childcare costs
1990–98	Permissive powers to local governments to fund private care solutions and home-based care (1990) Extension of paid parental leave Universal childcare guarantee for all children six months and/or older (1998) Pilot projects on private childcare solutions
2002	Extension of paid parental leave to one year Roll-back of earmarked paternity leave Permissive powers for municipalities to grant 1 year paid childcare leave
2003–2004	The Free Choice schemes (2003) under which municipalities are legally obliged to subsidize any childcare provision allowing parents to opt for private childminder, day care or home-based care Legal strengthening of the universal childcare guarantee (2004) Pedagogical teaching plans for children 0–5 years (2003) Upper threshold for childcare fees (2004) Privatization of childcare services including new possibilities for private childcare for profit (2005) The structural reform (2007) introducing nationwide regulatory restraints on public childcare spending
2011–2017	Compulsory day care for bilingual children aged 3 years (2011) Compulsory daycare for bilingual children aged 2 years (2016) Danish language becoming compulsory for day-to-day language in private childcare
2018–2020	Compulsory day care extended for 1-year-olds living in deprived areas on the so-called Ghetto list (2018) Nationwide regulatory standards for staff-to-child ratio in formal day care Targets for increasing share of educated staff in day care (2020) Removal of possibilities of private childcare for profit (2020)

Source: compiled from Borchorst 2005; Rostgaard 2014; Larsen 2007; Regeringen (2019, 2020); Lov nr. 279 af 13/05/1998; Lov nr. 333 af 19/06/1974 with subsequent revisions, LOV nr 501 af 06/06/2007, with subsequent revisions.

In 2004, when the childcare guarantee was introduced, mandatory teaching plans for the 0–3-year-olds were also introduced, along with the lowering of childcare fees (Eydal and Rostgaard 2011). This has de facto meant that childcare fees are affordable for all families; for poor families, on the basis of means tests, the fee is even lower or in some instances wavered away. Furthermore, quality is ensured through teaching plans and guaranteeing and maintaining levels of qualification of staff. However, and especially since the financial crisis, childcare fees have increased everywhere, but more so in the richest than the poorest municipalities. Local childcare fees in the richest municipalities have increased between 7.5 per cent and 40 per cent since 2009 compared to an increase in local childcare fees ranging from 2.2 per cent to 40 per cent in the poorest municipalities (authors' own calculation—Statistics Denmark 2021b). However, the share of childcare fees as a percentage of families' average income differs across municipalities, amounting to around 5 per cent of families' average income in the richest municipalities, compared to up to 13 per cent in some of the poorest municipalities (authors' own calculations—Statistics Denmark 2021b). Thus, hidden inequalities appear to exist regarding access to affordable childcare, even if regulatory standards set an upper threshold for childcare fees.

The central government has allocated additional funds on an ad hoc basis (2012: DKK 500 million; 2015: DKK 250 million; 2020: DKK 500 million; DKK 200 million for each subsequent year 2021–2024) to respond to local cutbacks in childcare in conjunction with the austerity years. The explicit aim was to improve the availability and quality of Danish ECEC (Regeringen 2020; Interview BUPL 2021). However, despite this extra funding, several municipalities have continued to curb their childcare spending, for instance by shortened opening hours of care institutions, or hiring more non-qualified staff (FOA 2017, 2020b; BUPL 2021a; authors' calculations based on data from Statistics Denmark 2021a).

The financial cutbacks in childcare spending and subsequently lower levels of childcare quality in the years after the financial crisis (altogether, the proportion of GDP spent on childcare decreased from 1.7 per cent of GDP in 2009 to 1.2 per cent of GDP in 2018) sparked political debates among key stakeholders. This also created tensions between central and lower levels of governance regarding regulatory standards for the quality of childcare. During the austerity years, an increasing share of childcare staff felt they did not have time to provide the necessary care for children (FOA 2020a; BUPL 2020a; 2020b). Work-related stress became more common among childcare staff, with nearly one in four educated childcare teachers having symptoms of work-related stress in 2016, which is an increase of 50 per cent since 2012 (AE-rådet 2018). These numbers, which at first sight do not seem so alarming, actually suggest a wider and more alarming trend of decrease in the quality of care in the childcare institutions. In the public debate, a series of incidents with highly distressed toddlers attending public childcare, provided more fuel to the issue of quality in care institutions. Public documentaries point to poor

working conditions, lack of qualified staff and understaffed childcare institutions. This pushed the theme up the political agenda, not least during the general election in 2019.

In 2019, following the public debate on this issue, including FOA and BUPL, but also the parent organization FOLA, an extensive nationwide campaign was organized for improving the quality of childcare under the slogan ‘Where is an adult’. In its electoral campaign, the Socialist Party wanted to introduce nationwide regulatory standards and to increase public spending to finance their implementation; the Social Liberals, instead, called for a focus on the level of education of care staff, and campaigned for a larger proportion of skilled staff to unskilled staff in ECEC. To gain the support from the Socialist Party and Social Liberals, the minority Social Democratic government agreed in 2020 to introduce nationwide regulatory standards and to expand the childcare budget. This reform was adopted with a much slimmer majority than in the past, and is expected to be fully implemented by 2024, although the government has already started to finance this new scheme as of its 2020 budget (Regeringen et al. 2019, 2020).

Unions, such as BUPL, considers the new nationwide regulatory standards a ‘historical victory’, and FOA recently stated that ‘it is much more than we have dared dream about’, while the parent organization, FOLA, stated: ‘[A]ll we have fought for in all these years will now become reality’ (FOA 2020a; 2020b; FOLA 2020). Other key actors such as left-wing and Social Liberals have also welcomed the new regulatory standards and stress they are pivotal to secure similar high childcare standards, while the liberal-leaning central and local political parties and KL are sceptical about implementation on the ground (Conservative Party 2021; KL 2021). Yet, BUPL assesses that the funding provided to introduce this provision will lead to upwards convergence in regulatory standards (Interview with BUPL 2021; BUPL 2020b), especially considering there is a reasonable time horizon (2024) to implement the standards. Overall, this reform successfully addresses the issue of quality in childcare, which is central from a social investment perspective.

To secure similar regulatory standards across public and alternative private day care options, the 2020 Social Democratic government extended the scope of recent reforms on staff-to-child ratio to also cover private day care institutions. Furthermore, the 2020 reform also removed the possibility for private care institutions to make a profit. Part of their 2020 reform was also to allow municipalities to demand that wage and working conditions in private care institutions are at a similar level to public day care (Regeringen 2020). These regulatory changes have had the support of the left-wing political parties, the Social Liberals and unions, while the liberal-leaning parties and the employers’ organizations, such as Danish Industry, have criticized them. Danish Industry has opposed the removal of private institutions’ possibility to organize for-profit institutions, while the liberal parties have criticized the government for excluding private institutions in their plans for raising the qualifications of care staff (DI 2020). Overall, however, this 2020 decision

is in sync with ensuring that childcare, whether publicly or privately organized, could lead to upward social mobility for all children irrespective of background. Thus, these reforms do promise to adjust childcare, especially following years of austerity.

Alongside the universalization of the right to childcare, there have been concerns about the integration of non-Western ethnic minorities by the political establishment, whether the governments were more right- or left-leaning. Thus, in 2011, universal childcare rights shifted to a requirement for some groups of children, that is, bilingual children from 3 to 5 years. This was later extended to the 0–3-year-olds living in socially deprived areas. The aim is to give these groups of children a better start in life, although these motives were criticized from different interest groups and from the social liberals, for targeting non-ethnic Western citizens (Seemann 2021). The fact that both right-wing political parties and the Social Democrats repeatedly advocated for free childcare choices, but compulsory day care for children living in the so-called ‘Ghetto-list’ areas, points to the dual nature of their childcare approach. Here, the nanny state comes in, removing freedom of choice, which reflects the populist and anti-migrant stance of most of the Danish political establishment.

Conclusion: A Robust Success

Danish ECEC for the 0–3-year-olds is without any doubt a policy success according to the PPPE framework. In terms of *programmatic success*, Denmark was not only a pioneer in developing nationwide ECEC, but from the beginning, social investment—focusing on learning capabilities of children, was integrated into the system. The implementation of ECEC nationwide is remarkable, and take-up rates have been high since the 1970s. The use of childcare is particularly high among the 1- to 3-year-olds, while the take-up rate of ECEC among children below 1 year is around 20 per cent, due to parents’ possibility to take up to one year paid parental leave.

Furthermore, most ECEC in Denmark is publicly organized, and the public institutions have higher quality standards than alternative private solutions. In fact, private for-profit solutions are crowded out of the ECEC market in Denmark, while non-for-profit arrangements are valuable for families that may have particular needs. Furthermore, the public expenditure of ECEC is relatively stable, even if it decreased slightly during the austerity years. Childcare in Denmark is used not only across the whole country, but also among families from different social classes. Thus, it is possible to organize and to deliver this policy of high quality without the kind of social inequalities which characterize ECEC in many other countries (Pavolini and van Lancker 2018; OECD 2020). ECEC invests in the capabilities of children, while it also enables men and women to engage in gainful employment. Although children are enrolled in full-time ECEC,—many women choose to work part time during

the years their children are small. By providing universal access to full-time childcare, the system enables families to decide how they combine work and family life.

Danish ECEC has also been a clear *political success*, as political parties from the left to the right of the political spectrum, at central and local levels of government, support ECEC. There has been broad-based support for major decisions on expanding ECEC, in the 1970s, the 1990s and the 00s. In fact, ECEC policies developed incrementally not only to institutionalize availability, but also to integrate learning. The landmark reforms were proposed by right-of-centre political coalitions, building upon preparatory work done by left-of-centre parties. In addition to political parties, unions, employers and parents' organizations have been very active in the debate on the design and the incremental reforms of ECEC. While it was very much progressive childcare staff together with the women's movement, trade unions and the left-wing and Social Democrats that pushed for the childcare reforms in the 1960s and 1970s, the parent organization, FOLA, with unions, played a very active role in the most recent reforms, which illustrated the engagement of stakeholders in the process. This has been a conditioning factor both for the past and the most recent childcare decisions. Linked to the political success, ECEC has also been a clear process success, with incremental reforms by broad-based coalitions, carried out without major obstacles.

The Danish system of ECEC has *endured* over several decades. There have been challenges along the way, in particular savings during the austerity years, which spilled over to quality. Yet, this has been addressed with the new decision of minimum norms for staff: child ratio. Other challenges include creeping inequality, where families at the lower end of the income scale use a larger proportion of their income for childcare, but it seems to have been curbed, due to the maximum parent fee.

On the basis of the success according to the PPPE framework, it is therefore unsurprising that Denmark' full-time, high-quality, publicly regulated childcare guarantee is a poster-child for the EU's child-guarantee initiative, launched to promote upwards social mobility, *and* for the Biden administration's plan for families, proposing universal high-quality care for 3- to 4-year-olds. On both sides of the Atlantic, the rationale for comparable schemes is that investment in skills at a young age pays off in terms of learning later in life.

Questions for discussion

1. How are the formal childcare arrangements in your own country?
2. Do all children have access to affordable formal childcare?
3. If yes, was the universal childcare guarantee politically debated?

4. If no, has the issue of a formal childcare guarantee been raised and why have formal childcare rights not been implemented in your country?
5. If you compare the level of childcare use in Denmark to your own country, how does it differ? Why do you think that is the case?

Links to online resources

For comparative European data, consult EU-SILC, under ‘Living conditions’: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/income-and-living-conditions/data/database/>.

Also check the EU-SILC Ad-hoc module from 2016 on ‘Access to Services’, with access to childcare across the EU (including affordability): <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/income-and-living-conditions/data/database/>.

The OECD family database offers a wide range of interesting indicators regarding childcare and family policies, in a comparative perspective: Furthermore, <https://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm/>.

Statistics Denmark has comparative cross-country data, at the level of municipalities: <https://www.dst.dk/en/Statistik/emner/borgere/husstande-familier-og-boern/boernepasning/>.

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