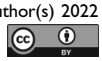
Check for updates

Empirical Research

Contemporary Issues in EARLY CHILDHOOD

Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood
2024, Vol. 25(4) 445–459
© The Author(s) 2022

Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/14639491221133454
journals.sagepub.com/home/cie

Assessing children's psychosocial well-being: Norwegian early childhood education and care teachers' challenges when completing a global screening tool

Karianne Franck, Monica Seland, Johanne Rimul, and Anne H Sivertsen
Queen Maud University College of Early Childhood Education, Trondheim, Norway

Margaret Kernan
Hibernia College, Dublin, Ireland

Abstract

In this article, the authors illustrate some of the challenges and dilemmas that Norwegian early childhood education and care teachers experienced when completing a global screening tool (UPSI-5: Universal Psychosocial Indicator for 5 Year Old Boys and Girls) concerning the psychosocial well-being of five-year-olds as part of an international research project. Based on interviews with 31 teachers, the authors present in-depth analysis of the critical reflections of 19 teachers concerning the assessment forms. While previous research has criticized standardized testing and screening in early childhood education and care, there is a need for the critical voices of practitioners to be heard. The aim of this article is to illustrate which aspects teachers find challenging and how they respond when in doubt. The authors found that teachers' assessments are inextricably linked to the early childhood education and care context, and the values, ideas and norms that are prevalent in Nordic early childhood education and care settings.

Keywords

evaluation, kindergarten, normalcy, professional discretion, socio-emotional

Corresponding author:
Karianne Franck, Queen Maud University College of Early Childhood Education, Thrond Nergaards Vei 7, 7044 Trondheim, Norway.
Email: kfr@dmmh.no

There is an increasing international tendency to measure, monitor and document children's development and learning at an early age (Alasuutari et al., 2014, 2020; Moss et al., 2016). Standardization is often seen as a way to ensure quality in early childhood education and care (ECEC), leading to an increase in the use of global assessment tools, screening forms and tests. Renewed emphasis on psychosocial well-being has created a new target group among the 'normal population' (Houmøller, 2018), along with the development of various tools to assess children's social and emotional skills. The tools address concerns grounded in preventive policies and notions of early intervention, as the ECEC setting has a key role in identifying and acting on early signs of problems (Harrits and Møller, 2014; Houmøller, 2018). The demand to implement standardized assessments and programmes often comes from the authorities (Bartholdsson, 2021 ; Evetts, 2011; Lund et al., 2022; Seland, 2020) and may constrain teachers' space for professional judgement, potentially leading to deprofessionalization (Bartholdsson, 2021; Evetts, 2011; Osgood, 2006). However, teachers are required, and indeed desire, to use their professional discretion when handling prerequisites, criteria and the perspectives that are embedded in standardized assessments and programmes (Lund et al., 2022; Seland, 2020). As such, there is a need to expand knowledge on teachers' use of, and considerations when employing, assessment tools (Kimathi and Nilsen, 2021). It is therefore important to explore professionals' strategies and tactics in meeting these emerging challenges (Evetts, 2011), investigate teachers' opinions and experiences, and avoid seeing them solely as passive recipients of externally imposed assessments (Aabro, 2020).

In this article, we explore the statements of teachers who found it challenging to complete a global screening tool on children's psychosocial well-being. The purpose of the article is to further the debate on standardized assessment in ECEC and expand current knowledge on how teachers try to deal with the challenges of assessing children with such tools.

This study is an extension of an international research project ('SEED: Social and Emotional Education and Development' project) that asked ECEC teachers from five countries to fill out a global screening tool (UPSI-5: Universal Psychosocial Indicator for 5 Year Old Boys and Girls) designed to measure children's psychosocial well-being (detailed description below) and then interviewed them on their understanding and practice concerning psychosocial well-being. When interviewing the 31 Norwegian teachers participating in the project, we asked them what they thought about filling out the tool. Twelve teachers said that they found it easy and straightforward, and did not express any desire to discuss or elaborate on the issue. However, 19 teachers engaged with the question by reflecting on several challenges and dilemmas. The aim of this article is to explore what these 19 teachers found challenging, and how they responded when in doubt. The overall research questions addressed in this article are: 'In what ways do Norwegian ECEC teachers find it challenging to complete a global screening tool on children's psychosocial well-being?' and 'How do they respond to these challenges?' The concept of 'challenges' here refers to when teachers reflected on difficulties, dilemmas and doubts with filling out the forms, and when they problematized questions in the screening tool, in addition to when they explicitly used the word 'challenging'.

It is important to underline that, for the purpose of this article, UPSI-5 is used as an example, as we relate the results to critical perspectives regarding the use of standardized assessment tools in ECEC in general. We draw on previous scholarly work in order to discuss the challenges expressed by the teachers in our study.

Previous research

There is a growing body of international research which emphasizes that children's long-term success at school is heavily influenced by social, emotional and self-regulation skills (Cefai et al., 2018). Social and emotional competence, often referred to as 'psychosocial well-being' (Mashford-Scott et al., 2012), is said to be a main contributor to successful school transitions and a significant preventative factor for disruptive behaviour and mental health problems (Cefai et al., 2018; Fossum et al., 2017). In accordance with preventive policies and notions of early intervention, teachers must ensure that all children are seen, which calls for systematic observations. Previous studies assert that standardized screening tools and tests can help to measure children's executive functioning (Hendrickson and McCrimmon, 2019) and behaviour disorders (Harris et al., 2016), as well as preschool children's mental health (Barbarin, 2007) and well-being (Mayr and Ulich, 2009). In addition to small-scale assessment tools for use by ECEC teachers and special needs teachers, bodies such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development , Save the Children and International Child Development Initiatives have developed easy-to-use global tools for large populations of children to measure children's early learning and development (Fernald et al., 2017).[1]

Whilst acknowledging that assessment tools may be helpful for teachers and special education teachers in certain situations, our focus is the concerns raised by scholars regarding the use of global tools to monitor large populations, such as the International Early Learning and Child Well-Being Study (Moss and Urban, 2017, 2019), and, in particular, how global tools disregard the wider political, social, cultural and pedagogical contexts of the child (Carr et al., 2016; Moss and Urban, 2017). Standardized assessments have, in general, been critiqued for being a tool for governing children and childhood as part of a neo-liberal agenda, where children are viewed as 'human capital', an investment for the future (Alasuutari et al., 2014; Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). Some of the major problems raised in the previous literature concern the categorization and labelling of children and the professional autonomy and judgement of ECEC teachers.

Previous research emphasizes that standardized assessments risk becoming a sorting process, decontextualizing and labelling children in 'deficit' terms (Alasuutari et al., 2014; Franck, 2014; Houmøller, 2018; Keary et al., 2020; Koch, 2012; Schweda, 2020). Assessments often exclude contextual conditions and ignore how children's behaviour and abilities are intertwined with and depend on relations with other people, situations, physical environments and so on (Franck, 2021; Schweda, 2020). Scholars also critique how assessments rely on norms and standards of what is perceived as normal at various ages (Alasuutari et al., 2014; Turmel, 2008). While 'well-being' is a widely used term in everyday language (often related to happiness and quality of life), studies illustrate that teachers assess and categorize children's well-being in terms of culturally constructed ideas and norms of what constitutes an attuned and well-behaved child (Houmøller, 2018; Koch, 2012). Teachers' assessments often rely on a form of implicit 'local normal', related to the structural conditions of the ECEC setting and the configuration of children (Houmøller, 2018), as well as an experience-based sensitivity and common-sense notions about what is normal (Harrits and Møller, 2014). To comply with the goals of early intervention, teachers often rely on social technologies (such as assessment tools) and end up categorizing children (Houmøller, 2018; Kimathi and Nilsen, 2021).

As mentioned, scholars also point to the risk of deprofessionalization and constraining teachers' professional judgement. Some studies show that teachers in Nordic countries will conform to standardization, questioning their own professional knowledge (Bartholdsson, 2021), or put aside their professional discretion when using standardized tools (N Vik, 2019). Other studies reveal tensions and pedagogical dilemmas caused by assessment practices (Houmøller, 2018; Jahreie, 2021;

Johansson, 2016). Assessments depend, however, on teachers' interpretations, and the outcome is largely the result of their discretionary judgements (Kimathi and Nilsen, 2021). Teachers' professional judgement includes professional knowledge, experience, and cultural norms and understandings (Molander, 2016). Professional discretion is a mode of reasoning and part of professional work, where general knowledge is applied to particular cases or situations. With a set standard in mind, professional reasoning examines a case with the intention to find out whether something is, for example, true, good or normal related to the standard (Molander, 2016). This is especially demanding in cases where the standard is blurred or contested, which is the case when assessing children's psychosocial well-being (Mashford-Scott et al., 2012). The focus of this article is on teachers' reflections regarding the challenges and doubts about how to answer assessment forms. The results support and nuance previous knowledge and critiques raised by scholars by illustrating how teachers use their professional discretion to discuss challenges and employ various strategies when filling out a global screening tool.

Tensions in the Norwegian ECEC field

Tensions and debates related to the increased use of standardized assessment tools are entrenched in the Norwegian ECEC field. On the one hand, social pedagogy and perspectives from the sociology of childhood have dominated the field of ECEC in Norway, as well as other Nordic countries (Alasuutari et al., 2014; Brembeck et al., 2004; Nordic Council of Ministers, 2022). This educational tradition focuses on the child's perspective, seeing the child as a whole and a competent agent. Assessments are primarily directed at the practices and organization of the ECEC, not the skills of individual children (Alasuutari et al., 2014; Nordic Council of Ministers 2022; Vallberg Roth, 2017). Norwegian teacher training emphasizes an approach to ECEC that is inscribed in a sociocultural paradigm and based on the European *Bildung* tradition, with little focus on the measurement of competences or outcomes (Alasuutari et al., 2014). On the other hand, there is a growing trend to standardize education in Norway, focusing on outcomes and goals at the individual level (Skarpenes and Nilsen, 2014) . This has led to increased use of various tools and programmes to assess and stimulate the individual skills and competences of children in ECEC settings (Aabro, 2016; Bartholdsson, 2015; Lund et al., 2022; Nordic Council of Ministers, 2022; Pettersvold and Østrem, 2019; Seland, 2020; N Vik, 2019). Early intervention practices, with strong roots in an Anglo-American education tradition, have gained influence in Norwegian ECEC settings (S Vik, 2014, 2015). Recent national policy documents and expert reports also promote more extensive documentation and assessment of individual children in ECEC (Nordahl et al., 2018; Norwegian Ministry of Education, 2020; Official Norwegian Report, 2019: 3). In other words, the Norwegian ECEC field is experiencing a sense of urgency to monitor children and identify potential problems or special needs.

As the data presented in this article was produced as an extension of a larger international research project, we offer a short account of the international research project and the screening tool used – UPSI-5. We will then elaborate on the methodological approach and present the results.

The SEED research project and the UPSI-5 screening tool

'SEED: Social and Emotional Education and Development' (2017–2019) was a European project focusing on the importance of social and emotional well-being for children's learning and development (SEED Project Consortium, 2018).[2] It was funded by the European Commission under the Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships for School Education programme. The aims of the SEED-project research were, firstly, to assess the psychosocial well-being of five-year-old children in

ECEC settings in Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, the Netherlands and Norway,[3] and, secondly, to identify the factors in ECEC settings that promote or hinder children's psychosocial well-being in each country. Local and national contextual factors influencing teachers' assessments were considered when designing the study and interpreting the findings. However, in-depth socio-historical analysis of the services for young children in each country was beyond the scope of the study. The sampling strategy was governed by the research objective to measure the psychosocial well-being of a comparable sample of approximately 200 five-year-old children in each country using UPSI-5.

UPSI-5 was developed as an easy-to-use global screening tool that assesses the psychosocial well-being of large populations of children to make comparisons between settings, regions and countries over time (Van Oudenhoven et al., 2012). Importantly, it was not designed as an individual diagnostic instrument. It consists of a list of 29 statements concerned with the social and emotional behaviours of five-year-old children. The statements were carefully translated into each of the countries' respective languages by the researchers. The teachers score each statement by ticking boxes with either 'agree' or 'disagree'. The data collectors know when a question corresponds to either a grey or a white box, but these are not displayed to the teachers. When, for instance, 10% of a representative sample of five-year-olds scores more than five 'in the grey', this indicates a reason to be concerned about the psychosocial well-being of 10% of the broader population of five-year-old children in the setting from which the sample was drawn.[4] The SEED-project was the first use of UPSI-5 for comparative purposes in Europe. The findings were noteworthy with respect to the large variation both within and between countries in the percentages, indicating reasons for concern about the psychosocial well-being of children (for more information, see SEED Project Consortium, 2018). Qualitative interviews with the participating teachers and ECEC principals/managers provided additional insights into how psychosocial well-being was understood, and the place it had in everyday pedagogical work.[5] Although five countries participated in the project, only the Norwegian teachers were questioned concerning their experience with filling out the screening forms. As such, this article focuses exclusively on the Norwegian participants.

Methodological considerations

In Norway, 31 ECEC teachers working in 12 randomly selected ECEC institutions in central Norway participated in the study. All of the teachers had at least a Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education. We informed the teachers both in writing and verbally of the aims and content of the research project, and they gave their written consent. All of the data was depersonalized during transcription, and we implemented rules and regulations for ethical research and data processing in accordance with the Norwegian Centre for Research Data and general ethical rules for research. The majority of the teachers who were interviewed were women, due to a predominance of female ECEC teachers in Norway. All of the teachers have been given female names in order to maintain anonymity.

The participants were asked to fill out the UPSI-5 screening tool, and the Norwegian teachers completed a total of 197 UPSI-5 forms. The teachers were only allowed to fill in forms on five-year-olds they knew well, and they were instructed to read each statement on the form carefully and then tick 'agree' or disagree'. Once the teachers had completed the UPSI-5 forms, we conducted individual qualitative semi-structured interviews. Each of the 31 interviews lasted for about 30 minutes to an hour, and they were all recorded and transcribed. The data used in this article focuses specifically on parts of the interviews where 19 teachers discussed challenges when completing the UPSI-5 forms. These discussions amounted to a total of 209 minutes.

The interviews began by asking the teachers to reflect on the completion process of the UPSI-5 form. Answers to the question 'Will you please tell me about your thoughts and reflections about completing UPSI-5?' form the data for this article. The initial analysis process revealed that the teachers appeared to be answering in two qualitatively different ways when asked to describe how they experienced the global screening tool and the assessment situation. Twelve teachers responded that they found the completion of UPSI-5 easy and unproblematic. They said it was easy to understand and quick to complete, and that they appreciated that there were no in-between alternatives. These teachers did not express any desire to engage further with the question. The other 19 teachers told us that they found the completion of UPSI-5 challenging and wanted to elaborate and reflect on the assessment process, children's behaviour and the statements on the form. We asked follow-up questions based on the teachers' initial response that were aimed at clarifying and deepening our understanding of the practitioners' reflections and how they answered when in doubt (e.g. 'Do you have any examples of statements or notions/words/concepts that challenged you?'; 'Can you tell me more about your thoughts on that statement/word/concept before ticking off agree/not agree?').

The data analysis process was based on an inductive approach where we constructed empirically related codes through a thematic analysis of the raw data – that is, the interview transcripts (Braun and Clarke, 2012; Saldaña, 2021; Tjora, 2019). In the first cycle of the analysis, we generated several codes to find patterns or themes in the data (Saldaña, 2021). Our attention was drawn to the challenges teachers experienced, and we decided to further explore teachers' critical statements and reflections when describing the process of completing the UPSI-5 forms. Sometimes in qualitative analysis, the specific question answered 'becomes apparent through the analysis' (Braun and Clarke, 2012: 57). We recoded the teachers' statements and searched for patterns, which we then gathered into four main themes, or categories. The categories were developed by trying to find similarities and overlap between the codes, capturing a meaningful pattern in the data that related to the research question (Braun and Clarke, 2012). This process was characterized by going back and forth, reworking and redeveloping the categories several times. While the process was mainly an inductive, bottom-up approach, our previous knowledge, interests and theoretical perspectives would inevitably have influenced what caught our attention and how we coded and categorized the data.

The results of this study are based on a limited number of teachers, all of whom were working in Norwegian ECEC institutions. As such, we do not know whether the teachers in the other participating countries experienced similar challenges. The teachers filled out the USPI-5 tool as part of the research study – in other words, the assessment form is not part of their regular pedagogical practice. As such, we do not have information on how the forms would influence the teachers' pedagogical practices or decision-making processes more broadly. The analysis is also restricted to the teachers who experienced challenges and dilemmas while filling out the screening forms. While it would have been interesting to explore the statements of the teachers who did not report any challenges, the open-ended question in the interview led to no further data on their reflections and experiences. The following analysis is therefore based on the 19 teachers who responded to the question concerning their thoughts and reflections on filling out the screening tool by highlighting various challenges and dilemmas. We have translated the extracts to English.

Results: challenges experienced by teachers when filling out assessments of individual children

We explored the statements of the teachers who reflected on various aspects regarding their experience with completing the UPSI-5 tool – in particular, the challenges and how they responded when in doubt. The results are presented in four themes to illustrate the central issues that the teachers

emphasized when discussing their experience: the blurred concept of 'normalcy', context-dependent understanding of children's behaviour, children's perspectives and intentions, and what to do when in doubt.

As already mentioned, the UPSI-5 tool requires teachers to tick boxes stating whether they 'agree' or 'disagree' with 29 statements about a child. We did not inform the teachers that ticking five or more grey boxes indicates 'reason for concern'. Nevertheless, the teachers expressed that they understood what ticking 'agree' or 'disagree' implied for each statement.

The blurred concept of 'normalcy'

The teachers commonly noted that it was difficult to fill out the forms because they felt they had to judge whether the child was behaving 'normally' or not. While the terms 'normal child' and 'normal behaviour' are not used in UPSI-5, some of the terms that are used are 'regular', 'often' and 'most children'. There are statements such as: 'S/he plays like a regular five-year old', 'S/he regularly plays with other children' and 'S/he often destroys things'. The teachers problematized these statements in the interviews, questioning, for instance: 'What is often? How often must it be to be not "normal"?' This line of questioning is in line with how some teachers in previous research displayed reluctance and challenged the presumed validity of standardized assessments and/or programmes (Pettersvold and Østrem, 2018; Seland, 2020). The teachers also underlined that the term 'regular' is open to personal and local interpretation, and referred to the subjective and experience-based features of normalcy (see Harrits and Møller, 2014). They claimed that normalcy is not a fixed concept but negotiable, and therefore difficult to judge. One of the teachers, Karen, expressed it like this:

Karen: I think about what is within normalcy. Normalcy can be a very wide issue, actually. And kids – they may change a lot from one period to another, so I have to think about what normal and not normal is. And it is a bit difficult to know exactly where that line goes. Because kids are very diverse too. How far must it go to be not normal? So, I had to think a lot about that issue when completing the form – what I mean is normal and what I think is normal, what I think is within the limits of normalcy.

Researcher: Where have you acquired your understanding about what is normal or not?

Karen: Well, it has something to do with experiences I have had, experiences with how children are. And what I have read and what has been done before. For example, interventions – how far does it have to go before you use specific interventions to correct or change a child's behaviour? It is a bit of common sense, I would say.

Karen reflected on the concept of normalcy and the difficulty of drawing a line between normal and not normal. To complete the form, the teachers did not relate a child's behaviour to a common or fixed definition of normalcy, but used their experience, comparing the child to other children in the ECEC institution. In line with previous studies, the teachers relied on 'a local normal' as they filled in the assessment form (see Houmøller, 2018). In addition, our study illustrates how the teachers were aware of this issue and problematized normalcy. They resolved the issue by using professional discretion based on experience and common sense (see Harrits and Møller, 2014).

Context-dependent understanding of children's behaviour

The teachers also found it difficult to 'agree' or 'disagree' with decontextualized statements about a child's social and emotional behaviour, as they understood it as depending on the context. Standardized assessments and tests have previously been criticized for decontextualizing children's well-being (Guimaraes et al., 2016). In the interviews, the teachers presented rich descriptions of children, highlighting the complexity and variations in an individual child's social and emotional appearance in the ECEC community. One teacher, Hanne, reflected on how psychosocial behaviours tended to improve during the year:

> Late autumn and around New Year the group begins to settle down a bit. The kids have found their place and they start getting used to accepting and following more instructions, getting used to us, the practitioners, making greater demands than we did before.

When asked, Hanne agreed that the results of UPSI-5 would have been different if the forms had been completed at the start of the school year. Another teacher stated that it was tricky to assess a child whose behaviour differed in the ECEC setting and at home. This illustrates how the teachers' professional judgement highlighted children's behaviours as dependent on and intertwined with other people. They seemed to find the screening tool's focus on the individual child challenging and highlighted the responsibility of practitioners, as the following extract shows, when a teacher, Nina, reflected on behaviour referred to as a 'power struggle' on the screening form:

> I think this [UPSI-5] question was quite interesting: 'Is the child in a power struggle with adults?' If some children often refuse – for example, 'No, I don't want to!' – and don't want to engage in activities or don't want to get dressed when we are going outdoors to play – these daily routines – and if we practitioners don't handle this situation in the right way, then it may develop into a power struggle.

Here, Nina problematized the individual perspective embedded in the notion of a child being in a power struggle with adults. She emphasized instead a relational and context-based perspective, in which a power struggle depends on how the practitioner meets the child. The discrepancy between the individual-oriented perspectives embedded in the screening tool seemed to cause challenges for the teachers whose professional discretion relied more on a relational and contextual understanding of behaviour.

Children's perspectives and intentions

When discussing the UPSI-5 tool, the teachers also emphasized the importance of engaging with children's perspectives. The statement 'S/he is often aggressive for no apparent reason' led one teacher to object and state: 'No apparent reason just means that teachers do not understand the child's intentions'. The teacher further explained how what might *appear* as no reason from the outside could, from the child's perspective, be a huge frustration and legitimate reason for anger. In a similar manner, the aforementioned reflection on power struggles continued with Nina emphasizing what a child is trying to communicate with their behaviour:

> And some children, maybe every day, they just refuse to do what they are told. I think that there is a reason for that. What is it that the child actually wants to tell us? I think we handle a situation like this in very different ways. I believe that the way the practitioner chooses to meet that child has a lot to do with it. It's in our hands.

The teacher here redefined children's resistance as a way of communicating. Instead of seeing it as a deficit or problem belonging to the child, she questioned what the child 'wants to tell us'. This indicates a shift from assessing children (as objects) to engaging with children as competent agents with the right to express their views (Brembeck et al., 2004).

In a similar way, another teacher, Sophia, contested the statement 'S/he is often stubborn'. The word 'stubborn' is common in the Norwegian language, and has an implicitly negative meaning related to both behaviour and personality. The teacher redefined 'stubborn' as a positive quality as it points to how children express and argue for their opinion, even when others disagree:

> When I tick 'agree' on the statement about kids being stubborn, it is so negative! But actually, I have ticked 'agree' for several kids. When I have stated 'Yes, agree, she or he is often stubborn', it might be because I have seen that child discussing something that she really believes in. She argues for her case and won't give in just because someone disagrees. And I think, frankly, that it is quite a good personal quality.

The redefinition of 'stubborn' as a positive quality urges an understanding of children as competent beings who express their beliefs. When completing the screening tool, Sophia refused to engage with a deficit perspective and ticked 'agree' based on her own positive interpretation of the word. This way of responding to the challenges of assessing children can be interpreted as an oppositional strategy or form of resistance (see Osgood, 2006).

What to do when in doubt

When the teachers were not sure about how best to complete the form, some would try to resolve this by contacting colleagues to discuss a child – to make sure they had assessed the child 'correctly'. They were concerned about whether the assessment form as a whole represented a 'true' image of the child. This, at times, led them to go back and make changes to better reflect the child. The teachers commonly expressed that it was quite easy to agree on the positive statements, but the clearly negative ones – such as 'S/he hurts other children more than most children do' or 'S/he is a danger to others' – were experienced as problematic to agree with. Faced with uncertainty, the teachers would emphasize a positive interpretation. This is how one teacher, Eva, explained it:

> You don't want to create a negative image of the child, you know. You will try to think about them in a positive way. Maybe we will try to cover up, too – them not being so, well, I don't know. We want to think well about everyone really. I think that's the way it is generally in day care. We think it can't be *that* bad. And, in most cases, that's the fact, so you can't think worst-case scenario all the time.

This illustrates how, in cases of doubt, teachers may emphasize that it is right to judge a child positively – that is, if you are unsure, it is wrong to judge negatively. The teachers expressed concern for not having observed a child properly or, as one of them said: 'Maybe I remember the times when we had a conflict best'. Just one of the teachers, Mary, reported the opposite when asked about reasoning in an unclear case: 'I was thinking that maybe that kid has some problems, so he will need support on that issue. So, I ticked that I agreed the child has trouble with that'. Mary wanted to ensure that the child and his possible difficulties were recognized in the system, so that he could get the help he might need. Whilst the purpose of the tool was not to diagnose individual children, in some cases, the teachers felt that they were being forced to take an 'impossible' position on a child's behaviour, which could have important long-term consequences.

Discussion

The results highlight various challenges that Norwegian teachers experienced when completing a universal screening tool about five-year-olds' psychosocial well-being (UPSI-5). The teachers filled in the assessment forms as part of a European research project (SEED), thus the focus in this study is limited to challenges with answering the form itself and does not cover concerns regarding implementation – for example, time, resources or organizational conditions. Out of the 31 teachers participating in the study, 19 expressed that they faced challenges and dilemmas with filling out the assessment forms. The analysis points to three key issues: the blurred concept of normalcy, context-dependent understandings of children's behavior and children's perspectives and intentions. The results also illustrate how the teachers completed the assessment forms when in doubt.

The teachers discussed the design and content of the specific screening tool used (UPSI-5), questioning certain concepts (e.g. 'power struggle', 'stubborn') and statements (e.g. 'S/he is often aggressive for no apparent reason'). In addition, the binary structure of the assessment form (ticking either 'agree' or 'disagree') left no room for nuance and compelled the teachers to make a clear distinction between 'normal' and 'not normal'. At the same time, the challenges the teachers discussed are relevant beyond the specific screening tool in question and include widespread concerns regarding the use of standardized tests and assessments in ECEC. In line with previous research, the teachers in our study tried to resolve the issue of defining normalcy by relying on a 'local normal' directed by common sense and previous experience (Harrits and Møller, 2014; Houmøller, 2018). The teachers also emphasized context and children's perspectives when reflecting on statements that portrayed behaviour as a problem belonging to a child.

The teachers' reflections are indicative of a discrepancy between an individual perspective embedded in the assessment form and professional discretion based on a more social and contextual understanding that values children's perspectives. This study thus illustrates how some of the teachers were aware of and experienced tension between the traditional values of Norwegian ECEC settings and the screening tool, and reflected on this tension after being compelled to fill out the form. As such, the results provide further nuance to and extend previous knowledge on Norwegian teachers being loyal and compliant (Østrem et al., 2009), and even conforming to the demands of standardization (N Vik, 2019). In addition, by drawing attention to the teachers' challenges and critical reflections, this study contributes with the voices of teachers, who often risk being silenced by leaders and authorities in the field of ECEC (see Pettersvold and Østrem, 2018). At the same time, the results illustrate various strategies that the teachers used when facing challenges with filling out a standardized tool. For instance, we see how the teachers tried to portray a 'true', whole picture of the child by consulting colleagues and adjusting their answers. While one teacher emphasized the need to ensure that a child would receive help, most of the teachers in our study emphasized a positive interpretation ('no reason for concern'). One teacher even insisted on holding onto a child-centred interpretation of the statements and ticked 'agree' with regard to children being stubborn, despite the negative connotations. The findings of our study indicate that a completed assessment form is the result of strategies and compromises that teachers make, drawing on their professional judgement. It also draws attention to how the language and design of standardized tools can stimulate teachers to reflect on and scrutinize the forms and function of assessment in early childhood. Indeed, greater value should be afforded to teachers' expert knowledge and experience when designing assessment tools and strategies. To further understanding about teachers' professional judgements when faced with standardized assessments, there is a need for more research on teachers' thoughts and practices regarding the usability, consequences and purpose of the standardized tools commonly used in ECEC.

Concluding remarks

This study investigated the reasoning and reflections of Norwegian teachers when completing a global screening tool for children's psychosocial well-being (UPSI-5). Although five countries participated in the SEED project, which provided the overall context and opportunity for this investigation, it was only in Norway that this more in-depth study of teachers' experiences and challenges when completing the screening form took place. There were large variations within and between the countries in the percentages indicating reasons for concern about the psychosocial well-being of children in the SEED project (SEED Project Consortium, 2018). As such, it would have been useful to explore the experiences of the teachers in all five countries to see how local and national educational discourses, as well as cultural norms, come into play when assessing young children's well-being and development. Even so, we have illustrated that the Norwegian teachers' challenges and ways of answering the screening forms when in doubt intertwined with the local context of the ECEC setting and the cultural norms and values of pedagogical traditions (see Moss et al., 2016; Nordic Council of Ministers, 2022). Despite efforts to consider national and local context while designing the study and interpreting the findings, one can also question whether challenges with completing the forms were heightened because the screening tool was developed for international use, and may have lacked sensitivity to a country's pedagogical, political and cultural context (see Moss and Urban, 2019). The results thus accentuate the need for careful consideration of cultural context and ECEC tradition when imposing universal systems of measurement and assessment in early childhood, given the variation in how aspects of children's development, skills and competences are viewed, conceptualized, and valued across countries and cultures.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships for School Education programme (grant number 2017-1-NL01-KA201-035191).

ORCID iDs

Karianne Franck https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8053-375X
Margaret Kernan https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5625-3769

Notes

1. See IDELA Data Explorer tool available at: https://idela-network.org/data/#data-sets. For the International Child Development Initiatives website, see https://icdi.nl.
2. This is the full research report from the project.
3. The working definition of 'psychosocial well-being' guiding the SEED project was: 'the developing capacity of young children to form close and secure adult and peer relationships; experience, regulate, and express emotions in socially and culturally appropriate ways; and explore the environment and learning – all in the context of family, community and culture' (Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning 2008).

4. For more information on how UPSI-5 was developed, see Van Oudenhoven et al. (2012) or email International Child Development Initiatives at icdi@icdi.nl.
5. In the second part of the SEED project, a group reflection pathway called WANDA was piloted with 80 ECEC practitioners from all five countries. Its aim was to help them deal with daily challenges in their practice so they could better support the socio-emotional well-being of the children in their care (SEED Project Consortium, 2019). For more information about WANDA see https://sites.arteveldehogeschool.be/wanda-en/

References

Aabro C (2016) *Koncepter i pædagogisk arbejde: En etisk udfordring*. Copenhagen: Hans Reitzel.

Aabro C (2020) Juggling, 'reading' and everyday magic: ECEC professionalism as acts of balancing unintended consequences. *Policy Futures in Education* 18(6): 757–771.

Alasuutari M, Kelle H and Knauf H (2020) *Documentation in Institutional Contexts of Early Childhood: Normalisation, Power Relations and Participation*. Wiesbaden: Springer Nature.

Alasuutari M, Markström A-M and Vallberg Roth A-C (2014) *Assessment and Documentation in Early Childhood Education*. London: Routledge.

Barbarin OA (2007) Mental health screening of preschool children: Validity and reliability of ABLE. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 77(3): 402–418.

Bartholdsson Å (2015) Lärarprofessionalism och manualbaserade program. In: Bartholdsson A and Hultin E (eds) *Sociala relationer, värdegrund och lärarprofessionalitet*. Malmö: Gleerups Utbildning AB, pp. 35–54.

Bartholdsson Å (2021) When there is a book to stick to": teacher professionalism and manual-based programmes in two Swedish early childhood education settings. *Education Inquiry* 12(1): 17–34.

Braun V and Clarke V (2012) Thematic analysis. In: Cooper H, Camic PM and Long DL, et al. (eds) *APA Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology, Volume 2: Research Designs*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, pp. 57–71.

Brembeck H, Johansson B and Kampmann J (2004) *Beyond the Competent Child: Exploring Contemporary Childhoods in the Nordic Welfare Societies*. Roskilde: Roskilde University Press.

Carr M, Mitchell L and Rameka L (2016) Some thoughts about the value of an OECD international assessment framework for early childhood services in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 17(4): 450–454.

Cefai C, Bartolo PA, Cavioni V, et al. (2018) *Strengthening social and emotional education as a core curricular area across the EU: A review of the international evidence. NESET II report*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Center on the Social & Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (2008) Handout 1.2: CSEFEL Definition of Social Emotional Development [Online] Available from: http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/trainings/1.2.pdf (Accessed: October 2022)

Dahlberg G and Moss P (2005) *Ethics and Politics in Early Childhood Education*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Evetts J (2011) A new professionalism? Challenges and opportunities. *Current Sociology* 59(4): 406–422.

Fernald L, Prado E, Kariger P, et al. (2017) *A Toolkit for Measuring Early Childhood Development in Low and Middle-Income Countries*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

Fossum S, Handegård BH and Drugli MB (2017) The Incredible Years teacher classroom management programme in kindergartens: Effects of a universal preventive effort. *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 26(8): 2215–2223.

Franck K (2014) *Constructions of children in-between normality and deviance in Norwegian day-care centres*. PhD thesis, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim.

Franck K (2021) The educational context in expert assessments. A study of special education documents of children in ECEC institutions. *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 37(5): 819–833.

Guimaraes S, Howe S, Clausen SB, et al. (2016) Assessment of what/for what? Teachers' and head teachers' views on using well-being and involvement as a screening measure for conducting baseline assessment on school entry in English primary schools. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 17(2): 248–253.

Harris SE, Fox RA and Holtz CA (2016) Screening for significant behavior problems in diverse young children living in poverty. *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 25(4): 1076–1085.

Harrits GS and Møller MØ (2014) Prevention at the front line: How home nurses, pedagogues, and teachers transform public worry into decisions on special efforts. *Public Management Review* 16(4): 447–480.

Hendrickson NK and McCrimmon AW (2019) Test review: *Behavior Rating Inventory of Executive Function®*, second edition (BRIEF®2) by Gioia, G. A., Isquith, P. K., Guy, S. C., & Kenworthy, L. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology* 34(1): 73–78.

Houmøller K (2018) Making the invisible visible? Everyday lived experiences of 'seeing' and categorizing children's well-being within a Danish kindergarten. *Childhood* 25(4): 488–500.

Jahreie J (2021) The ambivalence of assessment – language assessment of minority-language children in early childhood education and care. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 29(5): 715–732.

Johansson EM (2016) *Det motsägelsefulla bedömningsuppdraget: En etnografisk studie om bedömning i förskolekontext*. PhD Thesis, Gothenburg University, Gothenburg.

Keary A, Garvis S, Zheng H, et al. (2020) 'I'm learning how to do it': Reflecting on the implementation of a new assessment tool in an Australian early childhood. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*. Epub ahead of print 19 August 2020. DOI: 10.1080/13603116.2020.1803428.

Kimathi E and Nilsen ACE (2021) Managing categories: The role of social technology in kindergarten teachers' work to promote early intervention and integration. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*. Epub ahead of print 10 November 2021. DOI: 10.1177/14639491211045419.

Koch AB (2012) Idealet om det glade og afstemte barn – pædagogers blik for trivsel i børnehaven. *Nordisk Barnehageforskning* 5(16): 1–21.

Lund Å, Franck K, Juritsen L, Østmoen JP and Wilhelmsen T (2022) Utbredelse av konsepter i norske barnehager. *Forskning i Pædagogers Profession og Uddannelse* 6(1): 91–110.

Mashford-Scott A, Church A and Tayler C (2012) Seeking children's perspectives on their wellbeing in early childhood settings. *International Journal of Early Childhood* 44: 231–247.

Mayr T and Ulich M (2009) Social-emotional well-being and resilience of children in early childhood settings – PERIK: An empirically based observation scale for practitioners. *Early Years* 29(1): 45–57.

Molander A (2016) *Discretion in the Welfare State: Social Rights and Professional Judgment*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Moss P, Dahlberg G, Grieshaber S, et al. (2016) The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's International Early Learning Study: Opening for debate and contestation. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 17(3): 343–351.

Moss P and Urban M (2017) The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's International Early Learning Study: What happened next. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 18(2): 250–258.

Moss P and Urban M (2019) The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's International Early Learning Study: What's going on. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 20(2): 207–212.

Nordahl T, Persson B, Dyssegaard CB, et al. (2018) *Inkluderende fellesskap for barn og unge*. Bergen: Fagbokforlaget.

Nordic Council of Ministers (2022) *Nordic approaches to evaluation and assessment in early childhood education and care. Final report*, TemaNord 2022:512. Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers. Available at: https://pub.norden.org/temanord2022-512/

Norwegian Ministry of Education (2020) *Tett på – tidlig innsats og inkluderende fellesskap i barnehage, skole og SFO*. Stortingsmelding 6 (2019–2020). Available at: https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/3dacd48f7c94401ebefc91549a5d08cd/no/pdfs/stm201920200006000dddpdfs.pdf

Official Norwegian Report 2019:3 (2019) *Nye sjanser – bedre læring: Kjønnsforskjeller i skoleprestasjoner og utdanningsløp*. Ministry of Education and Research. Available at: https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/8b06e9565c9e403497cc79b9fdf5e177/no/pdfs/nou201920190003000dddpdfs.pdf

Osgood J (2006) Deconstructing professionalism in early childhood education: Resisting the regulatory gaze. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 7(1): 5–14.

Østrem S, Bjar H, Føsker LR, et al. (2009) *Alle teller mer: En evaluering av hvordan rammeplan for barnehagens innhold og oppgaver blir innført, brukt og erfart*. Report 1/2009. Tønsberg: Høgskolen i Vestfold.

Pettersvold M and Østrem S (2018) *Profesjonell uro. Barnehagelæreres ansvar, integritet og motstand*. Bergen: Fagbokforlaget.

Pettersvold M and Østrem S (2019) Problembarn og programinvasjon. In: Pettersvold M and Østrem S (eds) *Problembarna: Metoder og manualer i barnehage, skole og barnevern*. Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk, pp. 7–36.

Saldaña J (2021) *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC, Melbourne: SAGE.

Schweda A (2020) The logics and practices of documenting diagnostic findings in school entry proceedings. In: Alasuutari M, Kelle H and Knauf H (eds) *Documentation in Institutional Contexts of Early Childhood: Normalisation, Power Relations and Participation*. Wiesbaden: Springer, pp. 103–123.

Seland M (2020) *Når evidens møter praksis: en studie av programbasert arbeid med sosial kompetanse i barnehagen.* Bergen: Fagbokforlaget.

SEED Project Consortium (2018) The Psychosocial Well-being of Young Children in ECEC Settings: Research Report of the SEED Project (2017–2019). Leiden: SEED Project. Available at: https://icdi.nl/media/uploads/downloads/seed-researchreport- 21dec18-final.pdf

Skarpenes O and Nilsen ACE (2014) Making up pupils. *Norsk pedagogisk tidsskrift* 98(6): 424–439.

Tjora AH (2019) *Qualitative Research as Stepwise-Deductive Induction*. London: Routledge.

Turmel A (2008) *A Historical Sociology of Childhood: Developmental Thinking, Categorization and Graphic Visualization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Vallberg Roth AC (2017) (Meta)theoretical gateways in studies on assessment and documentation in preschool: A research review with a Scandinavian focus. *Nordisk Barnehageforskning* 14(3): 1–16.

Van Oudenhoven N, Miedema E, Euwema M, et al. (2012) *UPSI-5: The Universal Psychosocial Indicator for Five-Year-Old Boys and Girls*. Antwerp-Apeldoorn: Garant.

Vik N (2019) Den føyelige pedagogen – kartlegging som disiplinering av pedagogisk praksis. *Nordic Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 18(12): 1–14.

Vik S (2014) Barns deltakelse og tidlig innsats: Et pedagogisk bidrag til forståelse av tidlig innsats i norske barnehager. *Nordic Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 8(2): 1–13.

Vik S (2015) *Tidlig innsats i skole og barnehage: Forutsetninger for forståelser av tidlig innsats som pedagogisk prinsipp*. PhD Thesis, Høgskolen i Lillehammer, Lillehammer.

Author biographies

Karianne Franck is associate professor and lectures in Early Childhood Education and Special Education.

Monica Seland does research and lectures in the interdisciplinary field of Early Childhood institutions.

Johanne Rimul is assistant professor/PhD-candidate and lectures in Early Childhood Education.

Anne H Sivertsen is assistant professor and lectures in Early Childhood Education.

Margaret Kernan lectures in methods at Hibernia College. She led the European SEED Project.