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Gains and challenges with the Classroom Assessment Scoring System in a social pedagogical tradition

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Introduction: This qualitative study explores how Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) professionals' perceptions of gains and challenges using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS, Pre-K and Toddler) within the social pedagogical tradition in Norwegian ECEC.

Methods: Focus group interviews ($n=22$), group interviews ($n=4$), and in-depth interviews ($n=3$) were conducted online, followed by conventional content analysis.

Results: The findings indicate that ECEC professionals perceived CLASS as contributing to their pedagogical understanding and practice. At the same time, the introduction of CLASS enhanced ECEC professionals' awareness regarding the pedagogical value of the social pedagogical tradition (SPT), which they wished to preserve and protect, and the specific elements of the school readiness tradition (SRT), which they wished to include in their pedagogical understanding of high-quality ECEC pedagogy.

Discussion: The findings suggest that the use of CLASS expands ECEC professionals' understanding of the value of both pedagogical traditions. Finally, inspired by the present study's findings regarding interaction quality, the research team proposes a hybrid model of pedagogical approaches in ECEC.

KEYWORDS

pedagogical tradition, Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), interaction quality, cognitive development, socio-emotional development

Introduction

During recent years there has been a growing international interest in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) quality amongst educational researchers (Burchinal et al., 2011; Zaslow et al., 2011), parents, and policymakers. Various stakeholders are interested in monitoring everyday ECEC practices to ensure best practice for all children (Ishimine and Tayler, 2014).

ECEC quality assessments define areas of ECEC, such as communication between teacher and children, as widely agreed-on quality indicators that can feed into professional development and higher-quality practice (Ishimine and Tayler, 2014) and increase

employees' reflection on their practice (Evertsen et al., 2022). However, no consensus has been reached regarding the appropriateness of the global application of standardised assessments of ECEC, particularly in relation to cultural complexities and problems relating to the validity of instruments migrating outside their cultural frames (Pastori and Pagani, 2017).

ECEC quality assessment and early childhood staff observation is relatively new phenomena in Norway, and the research team sought to determine how professionals perceive such systematic observation tools in their pedagogic practice. In our previous work, the perceptions and reflections of educational professionals regarding CLASS as a system for individual and collective learning in Norwegian ECEC were studied (Evertsen et al., 2022), but we did not go in-depth into their reflections regarding pedagogical traditions. A controversy regarding what ECEC quality is has been identified and social investment arguments from the school readiness tradition, have been heavily criticised in Norway, especially amongst scholars (Tuastad et al., 2019). It is important to illuminate the voices of ECEC practitioners related to this important issue. Therefore, in the present study, we explored how ECEC professionals' perceived gains and challenges using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), which derives from a school readiness tradition (SRT), within the social pedagogical tradition (SPT) of Norway.

The sociocultural learning theory

This study is nested in sociocultural learning theory (Vygotsky, 1980). The sociocultural approach to learning permeates the Norwegian ECEC system and its framework plan (FWP; Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). This learning theory suggests that individuals develop through interactions with their surrounding environments and in dialogue with one another using sociocultural tools that mediate these interactions (Vygotsky, 2001). Sociocultural learning theory views learning and development as processes that occur through language and participation in social practices (Säljö, 2001).

Norwegian social pedagogical context

The Norwegian ECEC has been considered to belong to the social pedagogical tradition (SPT; OECD, 2006). The Norwegian FWP emphasises core values, such as childhood, democracy, diversity and mutual respect, equity and equality, and sustainability in the curriculum (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). The Norwegian FWP guides ECEC centres to provide all children with equal opportunities for socio-emotional and cognitive development. One of the main goals of a recently launched quality strategy is to ensure high-quality ECEC provision for all children, regardless of their place of residence or which ECEC centre they attend (Ministry of Education, 2021). This may be achieved through planning, observation, documentation, and systematic

assessment of daily practices. According to a government mandate, Norwegian ECEC centres should be learning organisations and should conduct systematic observations and evaluations, and they should work continuously to improve their pedagogical quality (Ministry of Education, 2021). Before this government mandate, few assessment tools for observation of ECEC quality have been applied in Norway, and there is a need to evaluate such tools for future use.

Children in Norwegian ECEC have the right to play, learn, build friendships, and be surrounded by staff who engage in safe and positive interaction (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). These objectives require that ECEC staff possess high-quality interaction skills. It is thus necessary to assess interaction quality to ensure sustainable learning environments for both children and staff. However, although the national government focuses on interaction quality in Norwegian ECEC, considerable variation in quality persists across centres (Rege et al., 2018; Alvestad et al., 2019).

Surprisingly, children's rights to participate fall short of the FWP recommendations. A Norwegian study found that children in ECEC lacked opportunities to actively participate in learning activities (Ree and Emilson, 2019). Other research shows that children receive relatively weak teacher support in learning and language development (Drugli and Berg-Nielsen, 2019). A study of 22 ECEC staff members found that their primary focus was on children's emotional needs in their reflections on quality in ECEC and that they exhibited a 'taken for granted attitude' to children's learning and development (Baustad et al., 2018). Overall, research highlights a weak or absent interaction quality in Norwegian ECEC, particularly regarding instructional support, and the need for further investigation into potential improvements.

ECEC educational traditions

ECEC pedagogy has long been divided into two main traditions: the school readiness tradition (SRT) and the social pedagogical tradition (SPT; OECD, 2006). The two traditions have different origins and different emphases. Despite their different theoretical angles and objectives, it is worth investigating whether these traditions share commonalities and whether some aspects unite the traditions (Tuastad et al., 2019). SRT is prominent in English-speaking countries, France, and the Netherlands. SPT is practiced in Nordic countries, some European countries, and New Zealand. Even though both traditions are based on developmental psychology there are some clear differences. SRT focuses on preparing children academically for school and future life and is characterised by a high focus on cognitive stimulation by instructional learning, child assessment, and benchmarks (Sylva et al., 2016). SPT focuses on children's lived experiences in the *here and now*, children's free play, and children's own initiative to play and learn (Sylva et al., 2016). Free play is this tradition's chief pedagogical principle, whereby the main goal is to support children's socio-emotional development. Scholars and teachers

within this tradition oppose the SRT believing that a more holistic approach is key for healthy child development (Biesta, 2013).

There are also clear differences in the goal of the traditions. SRT's main societal goal is to provide all children with equal opportunities for future development and growth. ECEC in SRT contains a more formal education than in the SPT (OECD, 2019; Sylva et al., 2020). The differences also become evident in the traditions' frameworks and curricula. SRT's curricula have clear child outcome standards and are highly structured and precise (OECD, 2006), whilst SPT's curricula traditionally do not contain benchmarks, and autonomy is encouraged at both the child and ECEC centre levels (OECD, 2006).

Despite the well-established notions of the two traditions there seems to be a growing integration of some of the goals from SRT in Norwegian ECEC. The SRT's aims to provide all children with equal life opportunities through early intervention for all children. The Norwegian FWP states that ECEC centres should contribute to evening out social differences and act as places that protect and respects children's rights. Furthermore, the FWP's latest edition specifies that ECEC centres should stimulate children's learning in seven thematic areas (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 47). Although the differences between SRT and SPT have been widely acknowledged (OECD, 2006), other new, emerging pedagogies integrate child-centred aspects from SPT, with the more goal-oriented pedagogy that characterises SRT: *'Playful learning or guided play actively engages children in pleasurable and seemingly spontaneous activities that encourage academic exploration and learning. Here, teachers using guided play have a set of learning goals in mind...'* (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009, p. 27). A playful learning approach has been suggested in a new Norwegian curriculum (Størksen et al., 2018; Rege et al., 2021). Cognitive stimulation within this tradition is characterized by children being engaged in meaningful activity in interaction with others (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). Thus, it is not enough to arrange cognitively stimulating activities, children also need to be active, engaged, see meaning, and interact with other children and with teachers. Previous Norwegian research has shown that children have lacked opportunities to actively participate in learning activities even during planned learning activities (Ree and Emilson, 2019).

CLASS Pre-K and Toddler

There is a trend in Norwegian ECEC towards the use of CLASS to assess and support professional development, e.g., in two new research and development projects (Språksterk 1-6, 2022; Trygg for tre, 2022). A recent study showed that Norwegian ECEC staff improved their interaction quality through CLASS (Toddler) observations, feedback, and guidance (Buøen et al., 2021). Other than these studies, CLASS has not been widely applied in Norway until now. Thus, there is a need for more research in this field.

The standardised observation system is based on the theoretical framework of Teaching Through Interactions (TTI)

which is anchored in systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), where human *interaction* is the most important component for children's development and growth (Hamre and Pianta, 2007; Hamre et al., 2014). The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS; La Paro et al., 2012) is an observation tool designed to measure the quality of interaction between staff and children in education. The observation tool is frequently used to collect data in research but is also developed to create learning opportunities for teachers with the aim of strengthening the quality of learning environment for children in education. CLASS has the focus on the adult role and on the employees' responsibility to facilitate and support all children's development of security, learning and well-being (Hamre et al., 2014).

CLASS Toddler (18–36 months) consists of eight dimensions organised into two domains (Emotional and Behavioural Support, and Engaged Support for Learning; La Paro et al., 2012). CLASS Pre-K (3–5 years) comprises 10 dimensions organised into three domains (Instructional Support, Classroom Organisation, and Emotional Support; Tuastad et al., 2019).

CLASS scores are linked to various academic, social, emotional, and behavioural outcomes, and its growing popularity is thus unsurprising. However, this instrument was developed in a context characterised by a SRT, which contrasts with the SPT seen in most Nordic countries. It is therefore important to gain knowledge of teachers' perceptions of gains and challenges related to the use of CLASS in Nordic ECEC contexts.

Cultural differences in the use of quality assessments

In recent decades, several quality assessments have been developed in ECEC internationally, although most measurements come from the US context. The links between CLASS and the social pedagogical principles can be seen through the emphasis on learning through interactions, a focus on emotionally supportive relationships, and through the regard of children's perspectives, and thus CLASS is based on theoretical principles that coincide well with social pedagogical principles. Still, it is nevertheless developed in a school readiness context, and cautions should be taken when adapting this tool to new contexts (Pastori and Pagani, 2017).

It has been pointed out that European countries may meet challenges with ECEC quality assessments unless appropriate adjustments are made to ensure their suitability in different contexts (Ishimine and Tayler, 2014). Norwegian ECEC must consider international research critically since education systems are structured differently, concepts may have different meanings, and values and priorities differ across countries (Alvestad et al., 2009). Therefore, quality assessments do not automatically translate to other contexts, including the Norwegian or Nordic understanding of high-quality ECEC (Bjørnstad et al., 2020).

Few international qualitative studies have explored staff experience of CLASS and cultural differences in ECEC, except for some studies from Italy (Pastori and Pagani, 2017) and the US (Barnes-Najor et al., 2021), which indicate that cultural

misalignments may occur. Hence, it is important to study CLASS's application in other context, such as Norway, particularly amongst its hands-on users: ECEC teachers and their support system (Pedagogical Psychological Service (PPS), the Resource Centre, the Centre for Multilingual Children and municipality ECEC administration).

The current study

A municipality in southwest Norway implemented CLASS to create a professional community for ECEC employees. As a result, the municipality implemented CLASS, focusing on employees in ECEC and the support systems around using CLASS observations for adapted guidance and professional development. The municipality has 35 certified CLASS observers who conduct annual observations in 67 ECEC centres. The trained and certified CLASS observers comprise head teachers, directors, and employees from the ECEC support system. CLASS observations are conducted with the CLASS Pre-K and Toddler manuals once a year for each centre. Certified observers visit several centres but do never carry out observations in their own centre. Each observation lasts 15–20 min with subsequent scoring in to the CLASS scoring sheet, and this routine is carried out four times. After the observations, the observer arranges a meeting with the headteacher where they receive oral feedback and a written detailed observation report for the given observation. The head teacher is responsible to communicate the report to other employees in the classroom, and to discuss and make goals for further professional development. Furthermore, the municipality has employed 70 facilitators whose main task is to support professional development on a daily basis in the ECEC centres, based on the theoretical framework of the CLASS dimensions and observation score.

This study aimed to explore how Norwegian ECEC professionals perceive gains and challenges using CLASS (Pre-K and Toddler) in the SPT. The municipality in which this study was conducted pioneered in the use of ECEC quality measures and feedback for teachers in Norway and were the first Norwegian municipality to introduce CLASS in ECEC (Toddler and Pre-K). This municipality's implementation of CLASS allowed us to explore the participants' perceptions of and reflections on CLASS from the perspectives of both the observers and the observed staff (who received guidance).

Our research question was: How do Norwegian CLASS observers and observed staff perceive the use of CLASS in the social pedagogical ECEC tradition?

Materials and methods

Given the lack of empirical research on ECEC professional experiences with CLASS in Norwegian ECEC environments, a qualitative explorative interview study was conducted. The data

were collected in 2020. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic obliged researchers to engage with new data collection methods (Kucirkova et al., 2020) and analogue interviews had to be replaced with online interviews. Focus group interviews, group interviews, and individual interviews were considered appropriate for generating a rich understanding of participants' experiences with new interventions or systems (Krueger and Casey, 2002; Krueger and Casey, 2015) and collective understandings of the phenomenon under study (Morgan, 1993; Lune and Berg, 2017).

Participants

A municipality in the southwest of Norway implemented CLASS to gather observations and feedback to strengthen their ECEC centres' quality prior to this study's commencement. Purposeful sampling was performed, and participants were invited through the municipality's email system, their consent forms was submitted directly to the administration of the University of Stavanger. Thus, the municipality's ECEC management was not privy to the final participant list. All staff with 4–5 years' experience with CLASS in ECEC centres and all certified CLASS observers were invited to participate. This resulted in 196 ECEC professionals being invited to attend. Amongst these, 29 educational professionals signed up. The participants represented Pedagogical Psychological Service (PPS), the Resource Centre, the Centre for Multilingual Children, municipality ECEC administration, and teachers and assistants in ECEC centres. All participants were female and came from nine ECEC centres and four different sectors of the support system.

To ensure sufficient participants in the focus group interviews to facilitate meaningful analysis (Krueger and Casey, 2015), all consenting candidates were invited to participate. Four focus group interviews ($N=22$), two smaller group interviews ($N=4$), and three individual interviews ($N=3$)—all online—were conducted (total $N=29$). The interviews were organised based on the participant's professional role. Initially, we planned for 4–6 focus group interviews including all participants. However, owing to sick leave and scheduling issues, new group and individual interviews were held to prevent attrition from the study. The various online interview formats gave the participants rich opportunities to contribute and express themselves (Kucirkova et al., 2020).

Data collection and procedure

An open-ended, semi-structured interview guide was developed. The questions varied slightly between CLASS observers and those who had been observed and received feedback through CLASS, see [Appendix](#). The main themes concerned the professionals' experiences of and reflections on the use of CLASS in the Norwegian ECEC context. The interview guides were piloted with an ECEC leader, a teacher,

and an assistant. Participants gave feedback on which questions worked well or needed improvement, and the interview guide was adjusted accordingly. Extended focus group interviews were applied (Berg et al., 2004), where the interviews' main topics were presented to participants in advance. This allowed participants to reflect on their personal opinions before interview, thus increasing the likelihood that they would express their opinions more fully and freely during the focus group interview (Breen, 2006) and hence increase the trustworthiness of the data (Berg et al., 2004). The main author conducted group and individual interviews, whilst the main author and a moderator assistant conducted the interviews online based on focus group interview guidelines (Krueger and Casey, 2015). Each interview lasted 60–90 min and was audio-recorded and transcribed.

Data analysis

The main author closely read the transcripts several times to compile the first draft of the initial themes (Harding, 2018). The second co-author then refined the themes in discussion with the first author. To validate the findings, the third author read the raw data separately and discussed the final analyses and agreement of key themes with the other authors.

The analysis comprised three stages. The first involved the establishment of codes, followed by themes, and finally high-level categories were defined using inductive category development (Mayring, 2000). A conventional content analysis was performed (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Fauskanger and Mosvold, 2014) using NVivo12 software. The qualitative saturation of meaning, rather than the quantification of utterances, formed the basis of the analyses (Saunders et al., 2018). The material was narrowed down to overarching categories and subcategories (Patton, 2002). The researchers agreed following several rounds of discussion, resulting in the final categories presented below.

All interviews were analysed individually and then cross-sectionally. Two overarching topics emerged from the cross-sectional analyses: (1) ECEC professionals' experiences with CLASS as a framework for professional development, and (2) participants' perceptions regarding the use of CLASS in the SPT. Results related to the first topic have been reported previously (Evertsen et al., 2022), and results related to the second topic are reported in the present study. A member check was performed *via* email to increase the findings' trustworthiness (Miles et al., 2020) and give the participants an opportunity to provide feedback on the initial analyses. The member check revealed no disagreement or need for change.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD), and all ethical recommendations were followed

throughout. Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any point without any negative consequences for them or their professional roles.

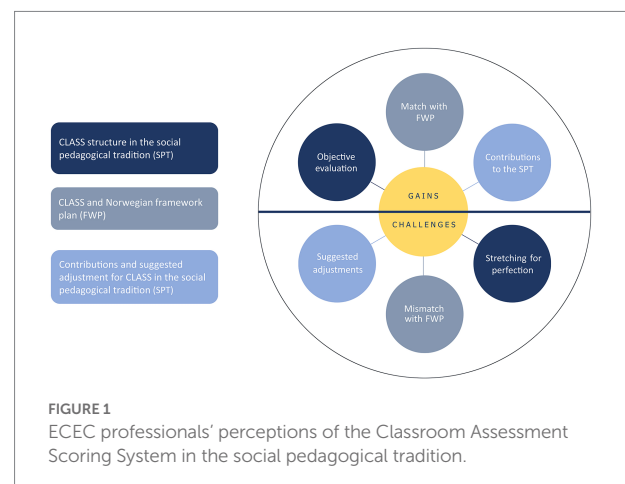
Results

The content analysis yielded three main high-level categories (1) *CLASS structure in the social pedagogical tradition (SPT)*, (2) *CLASS and Norwegian framework plan (FWP)*, and (3) *Contributions and suggested adjustment for CLASS in the social pedagogical tradition (SPT)*. Each main category included two subcategories (themes): *gains* and *challenges*. To provide an at-a-glance overview of the main findings (Miles et al., 2020), Figure 1 visualises the results of the analyses. As it is crucial to translate quotes in a way that reflects the original content (Helmich et al., 2017), the quotes have been translated to reflect the original Norwegian content as accurately as possible whilst maintaining idiomatic English. To preserve the participants' anonymity, each informant was assigned a number.

Main category 1: CLASS structure in the social pedagogical tradition

Subcategory 1: Objective evaluation

The participants considered CLASS's contributions to continuous objective observations and feedback positive. Furthermore, they expressed the view that assessments are reinforced using trained and certified CLASS observers and the CLASS framework, which is research-based and thus helps avoid subjective judgement when practitioners receive feedback on their own practice. As participant 3.1 observed, "...it's somehow not their point of view... they have a marker and indicator to follow and put aside what they think... which makes it very objective. They do not interpret between the lines or know the staff."



The participants reported that the objective assessment helps determine the staff's professional strengths and areas for improvement. The participants described this as motivating. Participant 1.1 said, "...getting feedback is motivating, and it is evolving." The participants reported that the CLASS structure has contributed to establishing a quality standard for adequate pedagogical practice, which further creates constructive expectations of staff and amongst staff. Participants 4.2 and 6.1 described it as: "...it is very specific and clear on what is expected of the adult..." and "...the big advantage is that through CLASS we have defined quality standards () what is expected of staff, and how this may be facilitated."

Participants reported that CLASS is a helpful tool to align with various intentions in the FWP's content and national guidelines by systematising pedagogical practice. Participant 6.2 described the ways in which feedback was handled prior to CLASS: "I feel maybe you should have been a little better with... now observers give examples of what they have seen, and then they connect this to the different dimensions in the feedback." Participant 1.3 continued, "This is what develops quality, I think. That we focus on what we do... what is good and what is not so good? What do we need to improve?"

Subcategory 2: Stretching for perfection

Some participants reported that they pulled themselves together during the observations. Participant 2.3 experienced it as follows: "I do not think you would have seen the same thing if you put up a camera, so to speak. I'm absolutely sure. People pull themselves together () I do not think it completely represents the truth." Others pointed out that it was crucial that they were allowed to be in development and that the CLASS scores are not necessarily representative. Participant 2.1: "We've talked a lot about this – whether it's real or not. Then we landed on that it really does not matter ... [it is] more important to talk about why the result was as it was () It may be false, but it's good."

Participants reported a tension associated with being observed, but that it is also fun and exciting, giving them opportunities to learn new things. Participants 1.4 and 3.1 described it as follows: "Some people thought it was scary that we should be observed. But as you do it, you become much more confident" and "It gave me a lot of food for thought. I get tips for things I could say more of and get even more out of the thing I was doing."

Participants reported that observation scores are often not representative of daily practice, but that it does not necessarily matter, because the observations facilitate reflection and awareness of what one should strive for. The observers reported that it can sometimes be uncomfortable to give medium or low scores, and that in some cases it leads to them 'embellishing scores' to avoid the discomfort that may arise when communicating results to the ECEC centres. Participant 5.2 openly described how the dissemination of scores can be unpleasant: "The fact that I have to sit face to face and say what I do not think was so good makes me score them a little higher than maybe what I would do if it was a video...I do not think I am as strict as I should be."

Main category 2: CLASS and Norwegian framework plan

Subcategory 1: Match with the Norwegian FWP

Most participants highlighted CLASS's understanding of care and its significance as coinciding with the framework plan's guidelines for children's right to care in Norwegian ECEC. The participants used concepts such as sensitivity, interaction, and relationships, which constitute care according to the FWP. The participants further described a connection between CLASS's focus on cognitive stimulation and the FWP's requirements relating to children's rights to play and learn. A newly educated participant (2.4) experienced it as follows: "I came straight from college, and read CLASS, and wondered what's new here? We learned this in lectures and it is in the Framework Plan. This is just another way to... make it more specific." A more experienced participant (2.3) stated, "I absolutely think it is easy and draws threads to the FWP, both for care, play, education, and learning. I see connections between dimensions and domains in CLASS." Participant 2.5 observed, "...the framework plan says that we should have learning, so this is something we need to become even better at, I think." Participant 4.1 continued, "...in the framework plan you can see that the staff should promote wonder and philosophical thinking among children, and CLASS helps with that."

Participants reported that CLASS has helped them to systematise the assessment of their own practice and document their educational activities and has given them a systematic approach to learning organisation, in accordance with the FWP's requirements. CLASS's contribution was described by participant 6.2: "It has become even more clear to many what planning is. It's not just sitting there making annual plans, but it's being structured in what you do with the kids. And how you have prepared yourself. CLASS has, to a much greater extent, made this part of the framework plan visible to us. Learning has emerged more in the new framework plan, and CLASS specifies it." Participant 2.2 says, "Then there is also the fact that you have documentation of it (the pedagogical work)."

Subcategory 2: Mismatch with the Norwegian FWP

Participants' perceptions regarding the misalignment between CLASS and the FWP mainly concerned children's need for rest and relaxation during a day. Participant 5.5 stated, "There is a fairly large focus on how efficient and organised the adults are, but the FWP says that there should also be time for peace, rest and relaxation, and there is no goal for that in CLASS." Furthermore, participants miss the topic of parental collaboration from the CLASS manual, since this is considered valuable in the SPT. Participant 6.1 pointed out, "The theme of parent collaboration is not present in CLASS."

The participants reflected on the CLASS term *productive* and expressed the belief that children must also be given the opportunity to "just be" without adults continuously eliciting their active participation in activities. Participant 8.1 reflected, "How do

we create the conditions to be fluctuations in the day, where we are down and calm? I think it is often something we forget, or miss, it is a time when they (children) have time off?

Participants believed that the concepts of *productivity* and *classroom*, frequently mentioned in CLASS, do not correspond with the Norwegian pedagogical tradition. They offered rich descriptions of the challenges that the terms from the SRT can pose to the SPT. Participant 5.7 reflected, *“They call the kids students, and they talk about classrooms, while we have children and kindergarten. And we are playing, and we are outside... instead of having a specific lesson... we have a more holistic learning... I also think of productivity. I think it is a bit problematic when I give feedback, because in the manual the criteria are that you should squeeze as much instruction into the day as possible, and then I think: shall we?! I do not think so. I think the kids should learn, but I am critical.”* Participant 4.1 continued, *“...productivity! (laughs)... find another word! It sounds like we are working in a factory.”* Some participants said that although they saw a connection, they feared that CLASS would impose a school readiness culture onto Norwegian ECEC. Nevertheless, most participants believed that CLASS’s focus on cognitive stimulation would not necessarily lead to a school readiness approach but rather would add valuable input to the Norwegian ECEC.

Main category 3: Contributions and suggested adjustments for CLASS in the social pedagogical tradition

Subcategory 1: Contributions to the SPT

The participants experienced that the CLASS content coincides with the FWP regarding high-quality interactions. There was a joint agreement that emotional support is a foundation for cognitive stimulation, and emotional support was highly emphasised. As participant 4.5 expressed, *“the emotional support is definitely the most important.”* The participants did not describe the emotional support in more detail but were clear about its significance. This may be because they focused on new elements that CLASS had contributed to in the SPT. As participant 4.3 stated: *“I agree that the socio-emotional must, of course, be there as a foundation. But I also think that was what we were best at before we got CLASS.”*

All participants were positive that the SPT in Norwegian ECEC is somewhat challenged in the intentional facilitation of cognitive stimulation. Children’s natural search for learning opportunities is central to Norwegian ECEC. Participant 5.6 described the need to create more exciting activities for children: *“I think that the Norwegian ECEC offer too few exciting toys and activities for the children... it can get a little boring. The children deserve a little more variety, more creativity, a little more exciting new things sometimes. So that they become a little more like ‘wow!’, and feel like starting an experiment or whatever it should be.”* The participants discussed planning more exciting activities for the children with the intention that the children would enjoy more

opportunities to be cognitively challenged. Participant 4.4 said, *“... the cognitive development is very useful for us. Because this is perhaps where we have performed worst at on a general basis... when it comes to challenging the kids on their own thinking and mindset. It is not a standard we are used to.”* Participant 4.1 continued, *“the cognitive topic has been the most useful.”* In the reflection on cognitive stimulation and the fear surrounding the school readiness approach, participant 5.2 said, *“I agree that that we (the children) do not need to learn something in all situations, or that we need to focus like that. At the same time, I think it is very exciting with those dimensions (cognitive stimulation) precisely because we in Norwegian ECEC may have had an idea that it (ECEC) should not be school. They must be allowed to play, not learn. Maybe we have separated these two things a little too much.”* Participant 5.1 continued, *“Getting more learning into Norwegian ECEC is not necessarily negative either.”* Participant 6.2 envisaged a new expanded understanding of child development: *“They affect each other both ways (ref to cognitive and emotional development). The cognitive affects the socio-emotional and the socio-emotional affects the cognitive. They go together. Almost like in an eternity circle.”* Participant 5.7 pointed out, *“It is good that we are being challenged to do a little more than we are used to ... by talking, asking questions in the way that we learn through CLASS. I think it is positive in many ways and provides good learning.”* Participant 5.1 added, *“I often think that it is the Norwegian ECEC model that should be adjusted a little.”* Hence, the participants perceived commonalities between the CLASS framework and the FWP’s focus on children’s right to participate in ECEC. Participant 5.6 said, *“CLASS is very concerned that the adult should be actively participating and happy to provide input and do all these things that promote engagement in the kids, participation and learning.”* Participant 4.3 observed, *“In our kindergarten we have been used to the kids going and finding what they want and playing and such. But after we started with CLASS, we have become more aware of creating stations...so that things are a little more accessible and the adults are at the different stations and are involved and active there...which may be a little American...but I think it’s a good thing...”*

The participants also found it positive that CLASS observes the employees (the adults) and not the children. Participant 4.5 said, *“(CLASS) is more about us adults, what opportunities we give the kids.”* Participant 4.2 also had some thoughts on this: *“We think it was very exciting that the relational and quality of the staff is measured. Because we (adults) are the most important tool in kindergartens.”*

Subcategory 2: Suggested adjustments

The participants reflected on what they believed were necessary adjustments to CLASS in the SPT. Reflecting on changes or adjustments that the participants wish to see in future work with CLASS in Norwegian ECEC, some participants (who work with the youngest children) emphasised that they wish to see CLASS toddler include the planning and structure dimension, similarly to CLASS Pre-K. Participants 2.4 and 6.2 said, *“I notice*

that organisation does not apply to the little ones. It is silly... you organise at least as much in a toddler group,” and “For toddlers, there are only two dimensions () it is just as important with planning, organisation, and structure for the youngest.”

Most participants wanted more frequent observations. At the same time, they wanted the post-observation feedback to be given to everyone observed and not only the head teacher. Participant 1.2 expressed, *“I think the whole group should be present when the report is presented. There is a lot of communication which can be lost when only the head teacher is sitting there.”* Participant 3.2 observed, *“I remember that people were more comfortable and relaxed the second time they were observed. I think to myself that if it had happened a little more often... then it would have become more natural.”*

Discussion

This study’s main aim was to explore ECEC professionals’ perceptions concerning the use of CLASS in the SPT. The findings suggest that the ECEC professionals perceived CLASS as contributing to enhanced understanding of high-quality ECEC pedagogy, particularly in relation to the important balance of cognitive and emotional stimulation of children. At the same time, the introduction of CLASS prompted them to reflect on the pedagogical values of the SPT that they represent and that they wish to preserve.

CLASS structure in the social pedagogical tradition

The findings indicate that CLASS positively contributed to objective classroom observations and feedback. The assessments seem to be further strengthened using trained and certified CLASS observers and the research-based CLASS framework. In their opinion, this helped them avoid “personal perception” when they received feedback on their own practice. The objective pedagogical assessment that CLASS offers is a new way of working with quality improvement in Norway. Traditionally, quantitative research has not been prioritised in Norwegian ECEC, and therefore systematic observations have been rare in research and practice (Alvestad et al., 2009). Furthermore, the findings indicate that the objective assessment contributes to specifying the staff’s professional strengths and areas for improvement, and participants describe this as motivating. However, participants describe that the observed groups may often be “decorated as a bride” (a Norwegian term for pretending to be better than you are) during the observations. The participants reported that they put on a performance during the observations. Other studies also suggest that this may be a challenge (Delaney and Krepps, 2021). The participants seemed to express that it was not wholly negative if some participants stretch for perfection during observation, as this facilitated learning, reflection, and awareness of what

high-quality practice is. Furthermore, observers report that it can sometimes be uncomfortable to give medium or low scores, and that in some cases it leads to them “embellishing scores” to avoid discomfort in their dialogue with teachers. These findings may indicate that the implementation of CLASS at a municipal level creates learning communities and conscious practice with the intention of enhancing ECEC’s quality rather than facilitating credible and accurate assessment of ECEC quality (e.g., for research).

CLASS and Norwegian framework plan

Participants observed that the CLASS structure is a helpful tool that facilitates alignment with various objectives in accordance with the FWP’s content and national guidelines by systematising pedagogical practice. Children’s right to participate is a fundamental value in the Norwegian ECEC tradition (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). The participants reported perceiving commonalities between the CLASS framework and the FWP (e.g., a focus on children’s right to participate in everyday practices). It is interesting to note that some participants worry that tools developed in a SRT will limit children’s opportunities to participate. But at the same time, they also reported that the focus on cognitive stimulation in the CLASS framework has provided children with *more* opportunities to think for themselves and express their own way of thinking. A previous Norwegian study revealed that teachers, although trained in the SPT, did not allow children to participate actively in learning situations (Ree and Emilson, 2019). Other Norwegian researchers have indicated a need for tools that can enhance staff competence in planning cognitively stimulating activities (Baustad et al., 2018). In a study related to the present study, teachers expressed new understandings of cognitive stimulation through their use of open-ended questions in everyday situation, transforming these moments into learning opportunities for children (Evertsen et al., 2022).

Contributions and suggested adjustments for CLASS in the SPT

The findings indicate that the participants want to preserve the SPT. Education professionals are encouraged to critically evaluate pedagogical tools adapted from other pedagogical traditions (Alvestad et al., 2009; Barnes-Najor et al., 2021). The present study’s participants would like to see changes to CLASS that deal with practical elements, such as the frequency of observations and how feedback is given. At the same time, they point out the terminology used and the value of allowing children to “just be.” Nevertheless, all participants agree that the SPT faces challenges with the intentional facilitation of cognitive stimulation. The participants discussed planning more exciting activities for the children, whereby children should be given cognitive

challenges, an opportunity that often appears to have been overlooked in Norwegian pedagogical practices (Baustad et al., 2018; Drugli and Berg-Nielsen, 2019). Being challenged to stimulate children's cognitive development led participants to reflect on the complexity of children's development. Somewhat surprisingly, findings from a previous study indicated that CLASS—deriving from the SRT—imbued teachers educated in the SPT with greater confidence in devising learning situations that facilitated high levels of child participation (Evertsen et al., 2022).

A middle way focusing on high quality interactions

Although elements from the SRT and SPT are often described as mutually exclusive (OECD, 2006), this was not this study's main finding. The present study offered an opportunity to study the perceptions of professionals in the SPT whilst they implemented a quality assessment system adopted from the SRT, and their experiences do not appear to confirm a clear boundary between the two traditions. This study's findings suggest that CLASS, with its focus on interaction quality, lends itself to a hybrid model that combines the SPT and SRT in ECEC.

Other researchers have seen the potential for Norwegian child policy to combine elements from both the SPT and the SRT into a united model (Tuastad et al., 2019). Our findings support this perspective. However, we propose an expansion in terms of a new hybrid model of the two traditions—with the idea that the two pedagogical approaches can be understood as a flexible continuum with a high degree of cultural variation. A hybrid model would facilitate a dynamic understanding of children's development, recognising the overlap between traditions. Namely, both the SRT and the SPT strongly value children's well-being and development and claim that learning occurs during human interaction (OECD, 2019). A hybrid model could provide space to preserve cultural values, whilst possibly remaining open to the use of elements from the other tradition's understanding, where the focus regardless of tradition is high interaction quality. A hybrid model may enhance further dialogue between scholars from different pedagogical traditions rather than cementing a universal way of thinking.

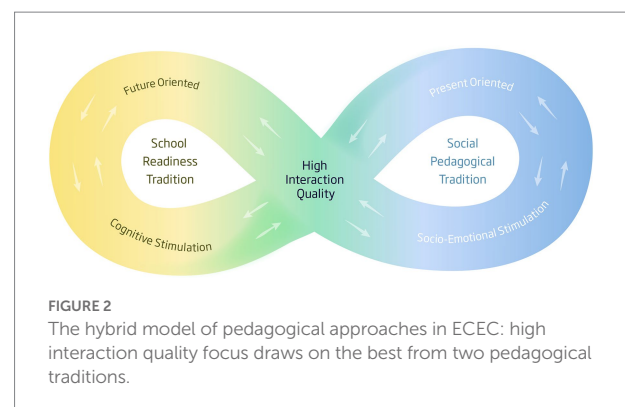
Our suggested model is inspired by the present study's findings emphasising that children's cognitive and socio-emotional development mutually influence one another. Children's socio-emotional *and* cognitive development is important for healthy and holistic growth (Shonkoff, 2013; Hart and Lindahl Jacobsen, 2018), and the expansion of cognitive abilities can positively affect a child's emotional growth and resilience (McClelland et al., 2000). Furthermore, the suggested model fits well with dynamic skills theories. Mascolo and Fischer (2015) state that “Psychological acts are integrated processes. There is no such thing as a simply cognitive or emotional or conative or behavioural processes; any action that affects the world necessarily involves some integration

of meaning, feeling, needing, and motor action.” (Mascolo and Fischer, 2015, p. 117). Similarly, we may see modern pedagogical approaches from the SRT and the SPT as mutually enhancing rather than mutually exclusive. Our hybrid model highlights children's need for socio-emotional *and* cognitive stimuli for optimal development, keeping in mind children's best interests in both the present *and* the future. This hybrid model is best understood within *sociocultural learning theory*, where children's *proximal developmental zone* for emotional and cognitive development needs to be maintained (Vygotsky, 1980; Bruner, 1984). Sociocultural theory together with contemporary theory of child development concerns the delicate balance between how much stimulation the child “tolerates” on one hand and actually needs on the other hand (Vygotsky, 1980; Hart and Lindahl Jacobsen, 2018). Cognitive stimulation in this hybrid model is not understood as school preparation in terms of giving children work sheet etc., but by supporting and expanding children's wondering, their reflections, and their interests in phenomena in the world around them through high quality interactions. A hybrid model can challenge the current dichotomies in different educational approaches by raising awareness of which elements from both traditions should be preserved. High quality interactions are at the centre of all child development, as displayed in Figure 2.

Study limitations and future research

Self-selection bias often represents a threat to small qualitative studies. The participants who volunteered may have been professionally committed and overly positive to the use of CLASS in the municipality.

Research environments and the field of practice require deeper exploration of pedagogical traditions and their significance for the field of practice. It is necessary to study children's collective and individual needs for emotional and cognitive stimulation from pedagogical and psychological perspectives, as such knowledge can benefit children in ECEC. It is further necessary to investigate children's subjective perceptions on what high interaction quality is for them.



Child-centred values relating to children's need for emotional and cognitive stimulation should be a priority for research and development within ECEC. Our findings and the hybrid model could feed into updated research and theory to guide future high-quality practices in ECEC.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

This study was reviewed and approved by NSD – Norwegian centre for research data. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in the study.

Author contributions

CE is the main author of this scientific article and has been responsible for planning and preparing research questions and interview guides, carrying out data collection, analysis and writing of the manuscript. IS participated in planning and preparing research questions and interview guides, the analysis process, and the manuscript's writing. KT participated in the manuscript's writing. NK participated in planning and preparing research questions and interview guides, the analysis process, and

the manuscript's writing. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Appendix

Interview guide with CLASS observers

1. What do you think about CLASS's use as a quality measuring instrument? What do you think about CLASS as a tool for feedback and development?
2. CLASS has three domains: emotional support, classroom organisation and instructional support. Do you experience the domains as useful in terms of development work and quality goals in ECEC centres?
3. Are there aspects of CLASS that you consider to fit well or less well with the Norwegian context or with the Norwegian Framework Plan?
4. What advantages and disadvantages do you perceive in the use of systematic tools to observe the care and learning environment provided by kindergartens?
5. Is there a need for adjustments in CLASS or the Norwegian kindergarten context with respect to promoting children's emotional and cognitive development?

Interview guide with ECEC employees who have been observed and who receive guidance through CLASS

1. What is your opinion about CLASS as a tool for feedback and development?
2. Are there aspects of CLASS that you consider to fit well or less well with the Norwegian context or with the Norwegian Framework Plan?
3. What advantages and disadvantages do you see in using systematic tools to observe the care and learning environment in ECEC centres?
4. How does it feel to be systematically observed and to receive guidance based on the CLASS observers' observations?