Children's play interactions

A comparative look at play in a sample of Norwegian and English early childhood education and care settings

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Abstract

The aim of this research was to investigate how practitioners in two early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings in England and Norway interacted with children during child-directed activities, specifically during play. The purpose of the research was to compare the support children received in these two contexts during child-directed play activities. To do this, child-directed activity times in all four settings were observed. Observations during adult-directed activities also took place to create a well-rounded representation of the day. Using a sociocultural perspective, the findings revealed that adult-direction was more present in the English ECEC settings than in the Norwegian ones, with more than half of the day in England being planned by practitioners. It was also observed that play was supported differently in the two contexts. Instructing behaviours were much more common in the English settings, whereas joining in was the most common supportive behaviour in the Norwegian settings, although, overall joining in was not a common activity observed in any of the settings. As a whole, the support provided to children while they engaged in play during child-directed activities proved to be rather limited in both settings, and did not indicate high-quality interactions from the practitioners.

The findings presented clearly show the contrasting approaches to play and practitioner involvement during child-directed activities in the ECEC settings observed in each country. The findings prove significant when planning for play in ECEC settings across the world and how involved practitioners are in supporting and encouraging child-directed play. In addition, the findings add to the limited existing empirical research on the topic as well as providing a cross-cultural view on the topic, which is also lacking in the literature.

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1 Introduction

In recent years, early childhood education and care (ECEC) has received increasing attention across the globe, progressing from a possibility for a select few to being a universal right for all children (Haug & Storø, 2013a). As the European Commission (2017) states, 'ECEC lays the foundations for later success in life in terms of education, well-being, employability, and social integration' (n.p.). Because of this, ECEC is given priority in the policy agenda in most OECD countries.

ECEC settings vary across the world and a number of terms are used to describe these settings. In Norway, the Norwegian word *barnehage* is used. Directly translated this means 'children garden' and is referred to as 'kindergarten' in English by Norwegians. This term has a different meaning to the American 'kindergarten' which caters to children about to enter their first year of formal schooling (ages 5-6). In Norway, kindergarten is provided to children between the age of one and six and is the main ECEC provision offered. Nannies or 'day mothers' (*dagmamma*) are also used in Norway, when children do not receive a place at kindergarten. However, this is less common. England, on the other hand, offers a number of ECEC provisions to children of different ages before they begin formal schooling. Because of this, there are a number of terms used to refer to ECEC provisions in this country. Some of these include nurseries, playgroups, child-minders, childcare centres and reception classes. Reception classes cater to children about to start their first year of formal schooling (age 4-5), and can therefore be considered the equivalent of the American kindergarten. The focus of the current research was on nursery provisions in England. This setting is primarily offered to children between the ages of three and four.

When referring to 'kindergarten' in this thesis, unless otherwise stated, I will be referring to the Norwegian kindergarten system. When I use the term 'nursery', I am referring to the English ECEC setting. When using the term 'preschool' or 'ECEC' I will be referring to the general provision of early childhood education and care in both England and Norway, or across the world.

Presently, in accordance with the Barcelona Objectives, the European Commission has a benchmark in which by 2020 at least 95% of children between four and the age of starting

formal schooling in the country* should be attending ECEC (European Commission, 2013). According to a 2014 report, more than a third of European countries have already reached a participation rate higher than this benchmark (European Commission, 2014). With so many children already attending ECEC across Europe, and the aim to get even more children involved, it seems imperative to look at how children spend their time in these settings, and the quality of these periods. The benefits of ECEC depend greatly on quality – something that has been given great attention in recent years.

Because play is a central theme in ECEC (OECD, 2012), it is important to look at the differences in how play is approached and what effects this may have. There are many cultural differences with regards to what activities societies deem beneficial for children's development (Göncü *et al.*, 2000). Therefore, as Göncü *et al.* (2000) maintain, it should not be taken for granted that 'all communities value and provide comparable play opportunities for their children' (p.321; see also, Roopnarine & Johnson, 1994). Based on their investigation into toddler social play in four communities, they found that although social play occurred in all four communities, the frequency and partners of this play showed cultural variations. Based on this, they propose that developmental play theory should also take into consideration cultural variations. What is more, Lasater and Johnson (1994) believe that cultural studies allow other cultures to reflect on their own practices, as well as learn about others, enhancing the quality of their provisions further.

As will be shown, play is a highly relevant theme in today's society. However, although research on play, suggested definitions, and its benefits are not hard to find, there is still considerable debate as to how much time should be devoted to different types of play in ECEC settings, and how involved adults should be in this activity (Wood, 2010). Nonetheless, Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) clearly states that all children have the right to play (UNCRC, 1989: a.31). In addition, Bennett *et al.* (1997) point out that play has long been a central part of early learning and development (see also, Bruce, 1991; 2004; Canning, 2012; Duffy, 2006; Fisher, 2013; Knight, 2011; May, 2006; Moyles, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978; Whitebread, 2008; Wood, 2009). Not only is play, in its many forms, seen by many academics as beneficial to children's development and learning, but it is also discussed frequently in debates on

* As of 2015, this age ranges from five to seven years across Europe (see World Bank, 2016).

curriculum development and reforms in the early years throughout the world. In addition, Wall *et al.* (2015) believe that one of the best ways to determine the effectiveness of a pedagogical practice is through how well it facilitates play.

In Early *et al.*'s (2010) investigation into how children spend their time in pre-kindergarten programs, using classroom observations of 2061 children in 652 classrooms in the United States, they discovered that the day was equally divided among free choice, teacher-assigned activities, and meals/routines. In addition, they report that children spent most of their time in language/literacy, social studies, and art, and less time in math and gross motor activities. They also found that interactions between teachers and children were more than three times as likely to contain rote or closed ended-questions, than scaffolded interactions, and that both these types of interactions were less likely to occur during child-directed activities. Although this research sought to investigate how the use of time in pre-kindergarten relates to ethnicity, gender, and family income, in relation to narrowing achievement gaps, it seems important to investigate this further when thinking about the quality of ECEC experiences. In other words, to further investigate the activities that take place, as well as the type of interactions children experience during these times.

Limited research has been done on how adults support play through their interactions with children and their arrangement of activities. Interactions between practitioners and children during child-directed activities specifically, will therefore be the focus of this thesis. Although little research has been done on differences in interactions across contexts, in their case study on effective pedagogy in 12 ECEC settings in England previously identified as 'excellent', Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2002) found that interactions between practitioners and children were essential to early childhood development, and therefore pedagogical quality.

What is more, a large body of research has also been presented on the positive effects of mother-child play, particularly pretend play (see, for example, Baskett & Johnson, 1982; Dunn, 1986; Dunn & Wooding, 1977; Farver, 1993; Miller & Garvey, 1984; O'Connell & Bretherton, 1984). Although much of this research has been done with toddlers, the ideas and findings indicate a need for further investigation, perhaps with older children, and are still relevant to the present research. Thinking about adult-child interactions further, Bodrova and Leong (2010) point out that children are often expected to develop play skills on their own, something that they believe children need to be shown how to do. They point out that the

ECEC setting provides the perfect opportunity to do this (ibid). Similarly, Berk and Winsler (1995) believe that from interactions with 'experts', 'children learn the communicative conventions, social skills, and representational capacities to play on their own' (p.63).

In order to give this thesis a comparative aspect and investigate cultural differences in the provisions for play, two nursery schools in England and two kindergartens in Norway were the focus of the investigation into practitioners' interactions with children. As of January 2017, Norway has a population size of 5.3 million, with 58 thousand live births the previous year (SSB, 2017b). England on the other hand, has a population of 54 million, with 697 thousand live births in 2015 (ONS, 2016). Although these countries have significantly different child populations, these figures do indicate an equal need for ECEC in both countries. As of 2016, England and Norway had an ECEC attendance rate of 95 % (3-4 year olds) and 96,8 % (3-5 year olds) respectively, in keeping with the Barcelona Objectives benchmark of 95 % (England: DfE, 2016; Norway: SSB, 2017a). In total, 91 % of children in Norway attend ECEC (ages 1-5) at present (SSB, 2017a). In addition, much previous, as well as current, government documentation on education in both England and Norway emphasizes the importance of play and the role it has in children's lives (see, for example, for England: DfE, 2017; Nutbrown, 2012; Tickell, 2011; for Norway: *St. Meld. 16.*, 2006-2007; *St. Meld. 24.*, 2012-2013 ; *St. Meld. 19.*, 2015-2016; Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2011). These details, as well as the fact that the educational systems of these two countries were familiar to me, were the basis for choosing these contexts.

Research Aims

The aim of this research was to investigate how practitioners interacted and involved themselves in children's play in two ECEC settings in Norway and England. This was done using both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The aim was to look at how often children were provided with child-directed activities, what the provision for adult-directed activities consisted of, and the support and interactions that occurred between children and practitioners during child-directed activities.

Research questions

1) How was the day structured in the observed ECEC settings in Norway and England? *What proportion of the day was spent on child- and adult-directed activities?*
2) How were the child- and adult-directed activity times used in the observed ECEC settings in Norway and England?
3) Were there differences in how practitioners participated and supported children during child-directed activities in the observed ECEC settings in Norway and England? If so, how?

Thesis outline

This thesis consists of seven chapters. To begin with, the theoretical framework and background in which the research was grounded will be presented. Following on from this, an introduction to the research topics can be found in chapter two where a literature review is presented. This literature review gives various definitions and views on play. It also contains information about previous research on the topic of play as well as the background of education and play in each context. The methodology chapter follows on from this, focusing on the processes and methods used for the literature review and data collection. The research questions, a description of the sample, the procedure of the data collection, methods of analysis, and the validity of the research, as well as ethics and limitations will all be addressed here. Next, the findings will be addressed. Here, the three research questions will be focused on individually. Each setting will be presented separately before a summary of the data is described in the context of both countries, answering the respective research question. An analysis of the findings is presented at the end of each research question section before a final discussion chapter is presented containing a summary and discussion of the most significant findings, implications of these findings, as well as the overall thesis. Finally, a conclusion of the thesis will be presented in the concluding chapter.

2 Theoretical Framework

A sociocultural framework for analysis was adopted for this research. The sociocultural theory defines learning as a social process. This theory focuses on society's role in the child's learning and development (O'Connell & Bretherton, 1984). Specifically, this framework will be used to focus on the social context and its role in forming attitudes towards play, including support and provisions for different types of play. Sociocultural variations in play are dependent on several elements, and as Isenberg and Jalongo (2002) point out, these elements include the attitudes of parents, teachers, and society in general, as well as variables such as the amount of play space and time allocated to the activity (see also, Roopnarine *et al.*, 1998).

Zone of Proximal Development

The sociocultural theory suggests that all higher mental functions originate from the child's social experiences with more competent members of a culture (Creasey & Jarvis, 1998). What is more, the Vygotskian view on development sees the child accomplishing a certain 'level of functioning before they can incorporate anything more from the social environment' (O'Connell & Bretherton, 1984: 339). This is the basis for what is known as the zone of proximal development (ZPD). This concept is what defines the space between what a child can do alone and what they can do with help from an 'expert' (i.e. a peer, adult or sibling) (Vygotsky, 1978; see also, Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002; Vialle *et al.*, 2005). Vygotsky defined ZPD in the following way:

> The child is able to perform much better when together with and guided by adults than when left alone, and can do so with understanding and independently. The difference between the level of solved tasks that can be performed with adult guidance and help and the level of independently solved tasks is the zone of proximal development.
>
> (Vygotsky, 1982: 117, cited in Hedegaard, 2005: 172)

This idea of helping the child to reach their potential is known as scaffolding and is central to the sociocultural theory, and this thesis. Scaffolding implies 'sustained shared thinking' and occurs when 'two or more individuals work together in an interrelated way' (Wall *et al.*, 2015: 56; see also, Siraj-Blatchford & Nah, 2014). Wood *et al.* (1976) suggest that the

expert's role is to, among other things, 'reduce or simplify the number of steps required to solve the problem so that the child can manage them' (p.60). In doing so, the child is supported to perform at a higher level. Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2002) further this by describing scaffolding as an interaction whereby the expert 'stretches the child's abilities' (p.144).

Going deeper into some of the ideas within ZPD, we see how important the role of the practitioner is in children's development. According to Vygotsky, the development of an action or behaviour takes place on two levels. The first is what the child can do with maximum help, their *assisted performance*. The second is what the child can do on their own, their *independent performance* (Vygotsky, 1978). The help that occurs during assisted performance comes from interactions with adults or peers in the form of hints, rephrasing questions, and demonstrating the task (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Supportive interactions may also take the form of indirect assistance, such as planning the learning environment in such a way that specific skills may be rehearsed. Similarly, assisted performance may also take place through conversation. In sum, 'a child's level of assisted performance includes any situation in which there are improvements in the child's mental activities as a result of social interaction' (ibid: 41). As Bodrova and Leong (ibid) point out, how competent a child is in their independent performance is a useful measure of development, but, as Vygotsky argues, it is not adequate to describe development in its entirety. It is also important to note that 'the child's assisted performance level changes as the child develops, meaning it can differ from day to day' (Vygotsky, 1987: 211).

Also related to the role of the practitioner, is Early *et al.*'s (2010) research, which included an investigation into practitioner teaching interactions. Within this investigation, the researchers identify two interactions: scaffolded and didactic. They define scaffolding behaviours as those in which the practitioner displays 'an awareness of an individual child's needs and responds in a manner that supports or expands the child's learning' (ibid: 183). These behaviours include open-ended questions, assisting children in expanding their ideas, or linking activities to real world experiences. Didactic interactions on the other hand, involve the practitioner instructing, modelling or demonstrating information, or asking closed-ended questions. Early *et al.* (ibid) include 'engaging children in rote activities such as counting or days of the week, or engaging the children in closed-ended activities such as worksheets or directed art' within didactic interactions. The practitioner, therefore, plays a central role in

supporting children's development by exploring ZPD, and providing both scaffolded and didactic interactions.

Play and the Zone of Proximal Development

The Vygotskian view sees play as 'creating an imaginary situation, having defined roles with implicit rules, and using language' (Bodrova & Leong, 1998: 278). In other words, children pretend using defined roles with rules about how to act, using language to express these roles, rules, and the situation. This viewpoint sees play as constructing a ZPD for many areas of development through 'providing support for skills that are on the edge of emergence' (Bodrova & Leong, 2007: 132). Vygotsky (1978) believed that while playing, 'the child is always behaving beyond his age, above his usual everyday behaviour; in play he is a head above himself'(p.102). To illustrate this point, Bodrova and Leong (1998) use the example of a constantly disruptive child. The child may be disruptive during group time, but has been observed pretending to be a 'model student' while playing 'school' with his peers. Here the child is practising the self-regulatory skills needed to sit quietly during group time, and will eventually be able to use them outside of the pretend situation. Similarly, Elkonin (2005) describes a situation where pretend play was needed to coax his daughters into eating their lunch. In line with the Vygotskian view, through the use of play, children become 'more socially mature and show better cognitive skills, such as higher levels of self-regulation' (Bodrova & Leong, 2007: 132). Similarly, Berk and Winsler (1995) believe that the young child's development is further supported during play with parents, where turn-taking and the 'rules' of conversations are taught. These interactions teach children how to regulate their emotions and arousal, how to read the emotions of others, and they also help facilitate play with peers (ibid).

The current research

Central to the sociocultural perspective is the idea that society shapes the views and beliefs of a culture. This idea was used within the current research when exploring the educational frameworks and other documentation from England and Norway. These documents revealed how policy-makers communicate the role of play and the weight it is given in the respective frameworks. These ideas were further investigated by looking at how play was organised and supported in the two ECEC settings chosen in each country. What is more, the concept of scaffolding was an important aspect of this research and was specifically used when

analysing the findings for research question three, regarding the participation and support provided to children during child-directed activities.

3 Literature Review

Introduction

As pointed out, play is a popular yet elusive concept. This literature review will attempt to define play and focus on the perceived role it has in children's lives, types of play represented within the literature, and finally, how the idea of play has been represented in current curriculum documentation in Norway and England.

The Role of Play in Children's Lives

Defining play

Although play is seen as a common experience among children throughout the world, regardless of their circumstances, there is no concrete definition of play (Moyles, 2010; Wood & Attfield, 2005; Woolfolk & Perry, 2012). This is mainly due to the fact that children are different; they enjoy several types of play and consider various activities to be play. In Göncü *et al.*'s (2000) research on toddlers' social play, they point out that play includes different behaviours, contexts and meanings to different people. Because of this, there are many cultural differences in play (Barnes, 1998; Izumi-Taylor *et al.*, 2010; Ramsey, 1998).

Nonetheless, a number of western academics have tried to find ways to universally define play. For example, Reynolds (1972) suggests that play is simply a recreation of actions – 'a behaviour in the simulative mode' (p.621; see also, Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1970). Here play is seen as a series of actions, performed slightly differently from their traditional fashion, resulting in a different outcome to the original. As Sylva *et al.* (1976) put it: 'play behaviours are often borrowed from non-play sequences', for example, a child imitating caring for a baby or preparing a meal (p.244). On the other hand, Sylva *et al.* (ibid) also see play as 'practice in assembling bits of behaviour into unusual sequences'. This idea is similar to the Vygotskian view whereby play is seen as the creation of roles and pretend situations (Vygotsky, 1978).

Focusing on the qualities of play, there does seem to be some agreement among scholars. Bruce (2011) believes that play should be spontaneous and child-centred for it to truly be considered play. Similarly, Hughes (2010) posits that play has five fundamental features. 'It is intrinsically motivated, freely chosen, pleasurable, non-literal, and actively engaged in by

participants' (Hughes, 2010: 33; see also, Garvey, 1977). By the same token, Bruce (2011) considers play to be an activity with no apparent purpose in mind (p.11; see also, Sandseter, 2009; Smith & Vollstedt, 1985; Wood & Attfield, 2005). Sylva *et al.* (1976) do however point out that this does not mean that play is entirely without goals but simply that 'the process is more important than the product' (p.244). This is particularly true during constructive play where the child is building something; or pretend play, where the goal may be to make food or clean the house.

In her book on play, Canning (2011) maintains that there is a 'natural disposition towards self-motivated play' among children (p.11; see also, Bruce, 2004; Fisher, 2013; Hughes, 2010; Moyles, 2010; Sylva *et al.*, 1976; Woolfolk & Perry, 2012). Elkind (2007) follows on from this, suggesting that children may keep going at the activities they consider play for long periods of time without any reward. What is more, Garvey (1977) points out that play is different from 'lounging' as it requires the key component of active engagement (p.10). Similarly, although work and organised sports can be seen as pleasurable too, Garvey suggests that they are different from play in that they 'seek to change the real world in some perceptible way' (ibid; see also, Vygotsky, 1976).

The 'function' of play

Vygotsky (1976) saw play as 'the leading source of development in pre-school years' (p.535). What is more, in their position paper for the Association for Childhood Education International, Isenberg and Quisenberry (2002) point out that play is 'both a process and a product' (p.34). As a process, play helps children to gain an understanding of skills, and concepts; as a product, it allows children to express their understanding of skills and concepts (Fromberg, 2002). Similarly, despite its 'lack of purpose', it is generally agreed that 'play serves as an important learning tool during childhood' (Glenn *et al.*, 2012: 186; see also, Garvey, 1977; Isenberg & Jalongo, 2002). However, this is mostly based on conceptual research on the topic. Nonetheless, according to Woolfolk and Perry (2012), play is a fundamental part of children's lives, creating a foundation for cognitive, physical and social development (see also, Bruce, 1991; 2004; Canning, 2012; Duffy, 2006; Fisher, 2013; Greve, 2013, 2016; Hakkarainen, 2006; Hughes, 2010; May, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978; Whitebread, 2008; Wood, 2009). Therefore, Moyles (2010) strongly believes that opportunities for play should be encouraged throughout childhood.

Piaget, a leading figure in child development, understood play as a way for children to unify experiences, knowledge and understanding (cited in Fisher, 2013). Likewise, in their historical overview of play theories, Saracho and Spodek (1998) point out that play helps children to 'explore and understand various roles and interaction patterns' (p.8). They suggest that this kind of relationship assists in supporting young children's understanding of the social world and creates a realistic sense of self. Wood and Attfield (2005) further this idea by proposing that play enables children to practise verbal communication, social skills and creative, imaginative and divergent thinking skills as well as problem-solving capabilities (see also, Anderson, 1998; Garvey, 1977; Saracho & Spodek, 1998). Focusing on socio-dramatic play among disadvantaged children in particular, Smilansky (1968) suggests that play is highly beneficial for a child's success in school. She points out that this type of play encourages emotional, social and intellectual development as well as creativity. What is more, Smilansky (ibid) finds there to be a great number of aspects of make-believe in the school environment, such as mathematical story-sums and reading comprehension. In the same way, Saracho and Spodek (1998) conclude by stating that 'play helps children to learn how to learn' (p.9), although, Samuelson (2006) points out that often play and learning are seen as mutually exclusive.

Types of play

In Synodi's (2010) paper on the play in the kindergarten curricula of Norway, Sweden, Japan and New Zealand, she identifies three main types of play; child-directed, teacher-directed and mutually directed play. Each of these types of play is defined depending on who has control. Many researchers have found that there is a scale of involvement from practitioners when it comes to play. This scale ranges from complete non-involvement to directing exactly what children do (see, for example, Jones & Reynolds, 1992; Roskos & Neuman, 1993; Schrader, 1990). Christie (1998) suggests that the most effective role a practitioner takes on lies somewhere between the two extremes. What is more, during their longitudinal study with 3 000 children, investigating child development and effective provision in ECEC settings in England, Sylva *et al.* (2004) found that settings described as 'excellent' by their study, showed evidence of free play and instructive play activities, as well as staff-initiated group-work. In their follow up study of this, Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2002), reported comparable findings. Synodi's (2010) three types of play are discussed below.

Child-directed play

As the name suggests, during child-directed or free-play the child has the power and is in control of the play (Wood & Attfield, 2005) and practitioners do not directly interfere (Einarsdottir, 1998). In other words, child-directed play seems to encompass the foundations of play described by many researchers, with its spontaneity, child-centeredness and lack of adult interference (see, for example, Bruce, 2004; 2011; Canning, 2011; Fisher, 2013; Hughes, 2010; Moyles, 2010; Sandseter, 2009; Smith & Vollstedt, 1985; Wood & Attfield, 2005; Woolfolk & Perry, 2012). Practitioners are simply there to organise, observe, listen, assess and plan during this type of play (Jones & Reynolds, 1992; Wood & Attfield, 2005). The role of organiser involves 'setting the scene', that is, organising the classroom or outdoor environment with resources that enable play (Synodi, 2010). Christie (1998) describes this role as 'stage manager' whereby practitioners encourage the play by responding to the requests for materials, helping create costumes or props and by helping to organise the play setting.

Once free-play is happening, the practitioner then 'acts first as an observer and a listener, then as an assessor of children's development and later as a planner of activities' (Synodi, 2010: 186; see also, Fisher, 2013). Christie (1998) finds the role of observer to be particularly important as it demonstrates to children that the practitioner is interested and finds their activity worthwhile. He also points out that this role often sees the practitioner 'subtly providing support through actions such as nodding or verbalising praise' (ibid: 53). Each of the roles a practitioner takes on serves a particular purpose for the responsibilities of the practitioner – to 'make professional judgments' regarding a child's progress and interests, and to better plan for future play activities (Synodi, 2010: 186; see also, Bruce, 2011; Curtis, 1998; Hurst, 1991). However, as Nicolopoulou (2010) points out, high quality ECEC provisions do not only devote time to free-play. This leads to the next type of play, teacher-directed play.

Teacher-directed play

Teacher-directed play, is play guided by a teacher, with the goals of the teacher in mind. This type of play sees the practitioner using 'playful activities as learning opportunities' (Synodi, 2010: 186). As Synodi (ibid) points out, this type of play often follows on from the assessment that occurs during child-directed play. Smaragda-Tsiantzi (1995) believes that this guided play is helpful as it is a way for children to practice and combine things they have

been taught (cited in Synodi, 2010: 186). Linked to this idea, Chien *et al.* (2010) undertook an investigation into classroom engagement and school readiness among 2 751 four-year-olds in the United States. Children were classified into four profiles of classroom engagement; free play, individual instruction, group instruction, and scaffolded learning. They report that children in the more structured, adult-directed groups (i.e. individual instruction, group instruction, and scaffolded learning) showed the greatest gains in language⁄ literacy and mathematics compared to the children in the free-play group. They conclude by suggesting that children should spend more 'quality instructional time' with practitioners, and that less free-play time should be spent without teacher guidance or scaffolding in order to better prepare children for school. Fuligni *et al.* (2012) report comparable findings in their investigation of 125 centre-based and family childcare settings. Examining the activities and the daily routines among three- and four-year-olds in California, USA, their findings revealed that children in structured, adult-directed classrooms had more opportunities to engage in language, literacy and mathematics activities, leading to higher language scores among these children.

In contrast to these studies, and in corroboration with a number of other academics (see, for example, Canning, 2011; Moyles, 2010; Warden, 2005; Williams, 2010; Wood, 2009), Fisher (2013) believes adult-directed play situations to be, at times, limiting in terms of children's opportunities for exploration and development of 'their own creative voice' (p.147). She goes on to explain that the presence of an adult may often be limiting for a child's creativity within their play – they may not be as adventurous, inventive and imaginative (ibid, see also, Belton, 2001; Bruce, 1991, 2011; Knight, 2009, 2011; Quindlen, 2002). However, Fisher (2013) does point out that an attentive and interested adult may be involved in children's play activities (see also, Christie, 1998). She believes this to be positive if they are providing 'rich opportunities to support and extend children's ideas and their thinking' (Fisher, 2013: 147).

Closely related to this idea, May (2006) proposes that the process of planning for play should include reflection on 'the cognitive, physical, emotional, spiritual, moral and creative dimensions' of what is provided (p.9; see also, Canning, 2011; Fisher, 2013). Similarly, Warden (2005) urges adults to think about the resources and games they offer or supply to children, as they are doing so with 'adult design' in mind. She suggests that practitioners in particular, should be made more aware of how much learning they may have removed for the child in their planning (ibid). However, as Armitage (2001) points out, play planned by adults

may not be carried out by children in the manner the adult intended. Therefore, Warden (2005) suggests that practitioners remember that resources provided by adults should simply afford links to learning so that children can take what adults have provided but make it their own. These ideas about a supportive and interested adult lead on to the final category of play, mutually directed play.

Mutually directed play

Mutually directed play is play over which both adults and children share power (Bruce, 1997; Henry, 1990; Waller & Davis, 2014; Wood & Attfield, 2005). Most importantly, practitioners do not interrupt the play to demonstrate rules or concepts from the curriculum (Synodi, 2010; see also, Henry, 1990; Wood & Attfield, 2005). Waller and Davis (2014) believe there to be two vital elements of mutually directed play – dialogue and co-construction. They further point out that this idea of working together to create meaning is closely linked to the view of learning as a social process. In other words, play takes place when both practitioners and children talk about and create the play situation together. What is more, Craft (2011) believes imagination and reflective thinking to be vital to this process. Wood and Attfield (2005) maintain that during this type of play, practitioners allow children to 'play on their own terms' (p.173; see also, Canning, 2007). Synodi (2010) believes that this leads to practitioners assisting children in thinking of new ways to use resources creatively as well as facilitating discussions and solving problems together, which in turn creates a more complex play situation (see also, Fisher, 2013). She suggests that this requires practitioners to 'impart enthusiasm, so that children's play continues' (Synodi, 2010: 187). In addition, Rubin *et al.* (1983) consider adult-child play to greatly support children's emotional, social, and cognitive development.

As with the former two types of play, mutually directed play also assigns different roles or responsibilities to the practitioner. During this type of play, practitioners may act as mediator, co-player or scribe (Fisher, 2013; Jones & Reynolds, 1992; Wood & Attfield, 2005). Synodi (2010) finds the role of scribe to be especially important in aiding children's logical thinking and literacy development through symbolic representations. What is more, as Roskos and Neuman (1993) pointed out in their investigation with three literacy-based play settings, looking into practitioners' literacy-assisting behaviours during play with three- and four-year-olds, symbolic representations assist in making the play more sophisticated to the children (see also, Rowe, 1998), and allowing them more control, which, as a number of authors

suggest, ‘indicates that they are becoming master players’ (Synodi, 2010: 187; Jones & Reynolds, 1992; Wood & Attfield, 2005).

Closely linked to Waller and Davis’ (2014) idea of dialogue and co-construction, Synodi (2010) explains that the role of co-player sees the practitioner assuming a role in the children’s play and helping with suggestions or questions when the children may need them. Christie (1998) suggests two parts to the role of co-player. The first is described as the practitioner becoming part of the children’s dramatizations, taking on a small role and following the children’s lead, letting them make the decisions. The second is more of an active leadership role and is used when the practitioner feels the play needs new direction (ibid). Finally, as a mediator, practitioners assist in resolving differences or solving problems, so that their play is not disrupted (Synodi, 2010). This mediation is realised through the modelling of appropriate behaviours without controlling or taking over the play and ‘without directly teaching or reminding children of their classroom rules’ (Synodi, 2010: 187; Jones & Reynolds, 1992; Wood & Attfield, 2005).

Tied to the notion of practitioners assisting in making children’s play more meaningful, Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2002) found interactions between practitioners and children to be integral to early childhood development, and therefore pedagogical quality. They believe that high-quality verbal interactions in particular are crucial (ibid, see also, *St. Meld. 16.*, 2006-2007; *St. Meld. 24.*, 2012-2013 ; Hart & Risley, 1995; Mashburn *et al.*, 2008; Smilansky, 1968). Expanding on this, Dunkin and Hanna (2001) define high-quality interactions as practitioners displaying a genuine interest in what the child is doing. These interactions involve listening and helping to extend the child’s thoughts and knowledge using open-ended questions (ibid; Wall *et al.*, 2015), a key characteristic of mutually directed play. What is more, Smilansky (1968) found that adult involvement, during dramatic play in particular, did not disturb the play but rather helped to ‘unfold [the play] and assist children in expressing their inner world’ (p.94).

Similarly, the fundamental characteristics of mutually directed play also suggest links to Vygotsky’s ZPD. As Wall *et al.* (2015) point out, everyone ‘contributes to the thinking’, therefore developing and extending understanding (p.56). With these ideas in mind, the practitioner’s role in mutually directed play seems to be directly linked to the concepts of ZPD and scaffolding.

A final word on adult involvement in play

In their report on the need for play in American kindergartens, Miller and Almon (2009) state that play should be offered to children in a balance between classrooms rich in child-initiated play and playful classrooms with focused learning. Within these two positions, teachers should be actively present in the children's play and guide learning with 'rich, experiential activities' (ibid: 22). In much the same way, Christie (1998) finds timing and the role the practitioner takes on, to have a major impact on whether their involvement has a positive or negative effect on the play. In relation to this, Roskos *et al.* (1995) find sensitivity to be the most important element in positive involvement. This sensitivity has to do with being aware of the child's play interests and helping to enrich and extend the play experiences (Schrader, 1990). What is more, in Roskos and Neuman's (1993) investigation, they found that experienced practitioners did not take on one specific role when facilitating play activities. Their role depended on the type of play going on and the children involved in the play. Roskos and Neuman (ibid) feel that practitioners' ability to switch between roles to fit the play situation is just as important as the interaction style they use. In other words, the ability to be flexible is key to good practice and successful involvement (Christie, 1998).

Pretend play

Because of the strong pretence aspect to children's play, pretend play and imagination are important topics to be addressed. Although there are several play situations that do not embody pretence, for the purpose of this research, pretend play is given greater attention. Pretend has a major role in children's play. However, it is a play situation that may be hard for practitioners to access, as it belongs to children and is not part of the 'adult world'.

Pretend play involves the child creating an alternative reality. This reality is created based on actual events as well as imagined scenarios (Vardi-Rath *et al.*, 2014). Children may take on the role of someone or something else, or they may assign a role or persona to something or someone else (Fisher, 2013; Harris, 2000; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998; Smilansky, 1968). As Sawyer (1997) describes it, children use their language, intonations, gestures and manipulation of objects to create and communicate these imaginative worlds. In addition, Lindqvist (2001) points out that drawing and pretend play go hand-in-hand. She suggests that through drawing, children create stories in the same way that they do during pretend play.

Creativity, imagination and pretend play

Although, the words 'creativity', 'imagination' and 'pretend' have different meanings and are not interchangeable, they are interconnected concepts. What is more, in her book on children's creativity and imagination, Duffy (2006) concludes that these concepts should be the focal point of all experiences children encounter, promoting effective learning, development and well-being (see also, Cecil *et al.*, 1985; Diachenko, 2011).

The National Advisory Committee for Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE) (1999) demonstrates the interconnectedness of imagination and creativity by referring to creativity as 'an imaginative activity[...] producing outcomes that are both original and of value' (p.29). By this definition alone, it is clear that creativity frequently requires imagination. Imagination has been described as using images and concepts that do not exist in real-life (Diachenko, 2011; Duffy, 2006; Isenberg & Jalongo, 2001). This leads us to the idea of pretend.

Harris (2000) believes that children's imagination is clearly marked by their engagement in pretend play. In addition, several researchers have found there to be great developmental benefits in allowing children to use their imagination and engage in pretend play (see, for example, Duffy, 2006; Harris, 2000; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978; Woolfolk, 2010). Bouldin *et al.* (2002), in their investigation into children with imaginary companions (IC), for example, found that children with IC exhibited more mature language, demonstrating enhanced social-cognitive skills. They concluded that the presence of IC is positively associated with language use and discourse competency (see also, Roby & Kidd, 2008; Trionfi & Reese, 2009). Likewise, Morgenthaler (1988) states that, from a developmental/cognitive stance, pretend play 'encourages reasoning, problem-solving and other cognitive functioning of the child' (p.316). Similarly, in corroboration with several researchers, Connolly and Doyle (1984) have found fantasy play in the preschool years to be linked to socially competent young children (see also, Garvey, 1977; Rubin, 1980; Smilansky, 1968). Finally, Berk and Winsler (1995) believe that when adults create an environment for make-believe, that is encouraging and accepting of children's ideas, met with enthusiasm and respect, creativity is fostered.

Adult-child interactions and pretend play

As Creasey and Jarvis (1998) point out, adult-child play is a central aspect of supporting pretence, and is an important source of socially skilled behaviour (see also, Berk & Winsler, 1995; Haight & Miller, 1993). What is more, Fuligni *et al.*'s (2012) investigation revealed

that children in high free-choice classrooms had more opportunities for fantasy play. Similarly, both Huston-Stein *et al.* (1977) and Smith and Connolly (1980), examining preschool behaviour, adult-child interactions and classroom structure, report comparable findings. In addition, Smith and Connolly (ibid) found no increase in the cognitive or linguistic test scores of children in a high structure classroom (see also, Thompson, 1944). These findings are however, contradictory to what Chien *et al.* (2010) reported.

Based on their research, Smith and Connolly (1980) propose that practitioners should suggest and initiate pretend play even in highly structured, adult-led settings. They point out that structuring activities will only reduce pretend play behaviours if this structure means quieter, more cognitive or skilful tasks. This suggestion is significant since research on mother-child play interactions further point towards the positive outcomes of adult interaction during pretend play. Although the mother-child dynamic is different to that of the practitioner-child relationship, this link is still meaningful.

What is more, while investigating pretend play and emotion regulation among 47 four- and five-year-olds in New Zealand, Galyer and Evans (2001) found that children who engaged in frequent pretend play with a more experienced play partner, exhibited 'a higher frequency of adaptive affect displays, empathy and emotional self-awareness in everyday interactions' (p.103). In addition, evidence of mothers and older siblings scaffolding younger children's pretend play has also been presented. Several researchers believe that by playing together with a more experienced play partner, young children are able to 'extend their level of pretend play expertise' (Farver, 1993: 349; see also, Baskett & Johnson, 1982; Dunn, 1986; Dunn & Wooding, 1977; Johnson, 1998; Miller & Garvey, 1984). Similarly, in Slade's (1987) observations with 16 mother-toddler dyads in free-play settings, she discovered that play reached a higher level when mothers initiated the play and actively interacted with the child during the play. In their investigation of 30 toddlers, based on a previous longitudinal study, O'Connell and Bretherton (1984) also found, that toddlers were more diverse in their pretend play when their mothers were participating in the play as opposed to when they played alone. They credited this to the mother's support in structuring the play, and therefore believe that the mother's presence alone was not seen as adequate to affect the play. Although these examples focused on younger children than the present study did, these findings are still significant and may be worth further investigation.

Play in Context

Because play is cultural, it is important to look at how play is viewed in Norway and England through their education documentation before moving on. These sources of information are invaluable since the attitudes of a culture are often seen through their education documentation. More specifically, how Norwegian and English education documentation represent play, their provisions, play space and time devoted to play will all give an indication of their attitudes towards the activity.

Below each country's parental benefits, childcare provisions, as well as their view on play will be discussed. Because of the strong pretend aspect of play, creativity, imagination and pretend, in relation to the education documentation of these two countries, will also discussed here.

3.1.1 Norway

Background

Parental leave and benefits. There are different rules for births and adoptions in Norway. However, for the sake of simplicity, births will be the only situations discussed here. Following the birth of a child, parents in Norway are provided with paid leave from work. At present, both the paternal and maternal quota is ten weeks of leave each and should be used before the child turns three years old (NAV, 2017). There is also a shared period of up to 40 weeks, which is distributed between parents, as they desire. Parents may claim up to 49 weeks at 100 % of their salary or 59 weeks at 80 % in total (NAV, 2017). Once they go back to work, parents in Norway usually send their children to kindergarten.

The Norwegian kindergarten. Past. Norwegian kindergartens were initially set up as social institutions derived from 'child asylums'. The first centre was established in 1837 and was modelled on British early childcare (*St. Meld. 16.,* 2006-2007). They were first set up as a place for young children to go during the day while their older siblings and parents were at work. As stated in the white paper 16 (i.e. *St. Meld. 16.,* 2006-2007), Norway was going through an economic crisis as well as a rapid increase in the population during the 1830-1840s. At this time, childcare facilities were set up in the bigger cities of Norway. These facilities were open all day and children could attend from the age of two. The primary aim of these institutions was to give children care, supervision and a good upbringing [*Asylene*

skulle gi barna tilsyn, omsorg og oppdragelse] (*St. Meld. 16.*, 2006-2007: 18). In addition, these childcare institutions were also seen as 'school for the youngest' (ibid, see also, Haug & Storø, 2013a). This idea of kindergartens as 'pedagogical institutions' stems from the work of philosopher Friedrich Fröbel, who in the 1880s, put forward a new view of children. One aspect of this view was that the content of kindergartens should build on children's own competencies. Because of this, free play was given a central role in the kindergartens (*St. Meld. 16.*, 2006-2007).

Present. Prior to starting formal schooling at age six, children in Norway attend kindergarten. Presently, kindergarten in Norway caters to children between ages one and five (SSB, 2017c). Since 2008, children in Norway have had the right to centre-based childcare and the kindergarten sector became framework funded in 2011. Although it is not compulsory, Haug and Storø (2013b) indicate that Norwegian parents see kindergarten as 'a natural part of caring for children' (n.p.). Consequently, SSB (2017a) reports that at the end of 2016, 91 % of children between the ages of one and five attended kindergarten in Norway.

The Norwegian government states clearly that the purpose of the Norwegian kindergarten is to create a good foundation upon which learning and development can take place (see Regjeringen, n.d.). Their main aim is to create a safe space with qualified and caring adults, where children can play and learn [*Barnehagen skal legge et godt grunnlag for videre utvikling og læring. Målet er en trygg barnehage med kvalifiserte og omsorgsfulle voksne, en barnehage der barna kan leke og lære*] (ibid) – as we can see, ideas that originated in the early concept of kindergarten in Norway.

The *Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergartens* is the framework for the educational activities of kindergartens in Norway (see Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2011). Norway does not have a prescribed curriculum but, instead, kindergartens are given 'pedagogical freedom' to adapt their own educational activities to the framework plan (OECD, 2015: s. 9.2.1). This framework plan is made up of three parts: The Social Mandate of Kindergartens, The Content of Kindergartens, and Planning and Collaboration. Included in the Content of Kindergartens are seven learning areas. These learning areas are 'grouped in a way that is intended to facilitate children's transition to primary school' (ibid), and include the following: Communication, language and text; Body, movement and health; Art, culture and creativity; Nature, environment and technology; Ethics, religion and philosophy; Local

community and society; and Numbers, spaces and shapes (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2011).

A culture of play

According to a report by Taguma *et al.* (2013), Norway is among the few countries that put play at the centre of their curriculum. What is more, Norwegian kindergartens see play as a foundation for learning [*I norske barnehager er leken det viktigste utgangspunktet for læring*] (*St. Meld. 24.*, 2012-2013 : 3).Within the Norwegian framework plan, as well as a number of other educational documentation, play is generally referred to together with learning and development (see, for example, NOU, 2012; *Ot.Prp. Nr. 72.*, 2004-2005; *Prop. 33 L.*, 2015-2016; *St. Meld. 24.*, 2012-2013). The word 'play' is found on 28 of the 47 pages of the 2011 framework plan. Judging by this figure, as well as the content of each of these pages, play is highly regarded in Norwegian society.

The framework plan begins with a purpose clause where it is evident that play is greatly valued: 'The Kindergarten shall […] safeguard the children's need for care and play' (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2011: 7). Another significant paragraph, taken from a section specifically devoted to play, can be seen below:

> Children have many opportunities for self-expression through play, and play is a natural and important aspect of kindergartens. The kindergarten must contribute to a good childhood by giving all the children an opportunity to play. Play is of importance for the wellbeing of the children and as a fundamental aspect of life and learning. In the kindergartens, children must be able to experience play as both an intrinsic value and as a basis for learning and a well-rounded development.
>
> (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2011: s. 1.3)

Tradition is highly significant to the way in which Norwegian kindergartens are run, and the 'intrinsic value of childhood' is central to this tradition, with special regards to play (ibid: 12). Within the framework plan, varied play is written about as a significant part of a child's culture, as a way to learn and express themselves, as well as promoting well-being. The framework plan also states that 'mutual processes of interaction between children and adults in play' are vital (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2011: s. 1.3).

Ideas about play can be seen throughout the framework plan and, as Synodi (2010) pointed

out, there seems to be evidence of all three types of play within each of the seven learning areas in the 2006 framework. The same is true of the 2011 framework where it is stated that the kindergarten should offer 'the physical and organisational framework for varied play' and that practitioners are urged to 'make themselves available to children by supporting, inspiring and encouraging them in their play' (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2011: s. 2.2). What is more, in accordance with section four of the framework plan; Planning, documentation and assessment, play is one of the areas to be planned by practitioners (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2011: s. 4.1). This section suggests that practitioners should assume the role of organiser, as mentioned previously; a role practitioners take on when presenting children with opportunities for free play. What is more, the role of both organiser and assessor are predominant throughout the 2011 framework. Synodi (2010) also points out that section three; Number, spaces and shapes, is the only learning area where adult-directed play is recommended (see Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2011: s. 3.7), indicating a preference towards more 'free flow', child-directed play activities.

What is more, in reference to their report on the quality of Norwegian kindergartens, based on a large-scale, longitudinal cohort-study, Lekhal *et al.* (2013) allude to the fact that the majority of Norwegian kindergartens put greater emphasis on free play and activities that are not planned. They found that it was common for practitioners to skip planned activities if the play children were engaged in was considered 'good'. Other findings from this investigation revealed that most practitioners found a balance between letting children play, uninterrupted, and getting involved. Though, most practitioners said that they actively looked for opportunities to guide children in play.

Imagination, creativity and pretend

In addition to its emphasis on play, the 2011 framework plan encourages practitioners to provide children with creative activities and offer opportunities for imaginative and creative thought. It states that practitioners should 'motivate children to express themselves, and allow them to find their own modes of expression' (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2011: 37). Furthermore, in their report for the OECD on quality in ECEC in Norway, Taguma *et al.* (2013) report that creative activities are at 'the core of the curriculum' in Nordic countries (p.32), something Vartun *et al.* (2012) point out is a traditional part of kindergartens in Norway [*… lek og kreativitet tradisjonelt sett er en del av barnehagehverdagen*] (p.32; see also, Lekhal *et al.*, 2013). In addition, art, culture and creativity have their own place in the

framework plan for Norwegian kindergartens, with self-expression taking a central role. Here, art and culture are explicitly linked to children's play in the Norwegian kindergarten.

Returning to the Norwegian framework plan and the descriptions of play proposed here, it is evident that creativity and imagination are underlying themes. Through self-expression, children in Norway are encouraged to be creative and imaginative in their play. What is more, in Lekhal *et al.*'s (2013) investigation, they found that most kindergartens reported offering planned creative activities to the children in their classrooms daily. They also found that the majority of kindergartens planned playgroups, focusing on pretend play daily. It can therefore be inferred that these activities were valued in the kindergartens. In addition, the value of pretend is briefly addressed within the framework plan in reference to the importance of play.

3.1.2 England

Background

Parental leave and benefits. As with Norway, England has different rules for births and adoption but births will be the only situation discussed below. Currently, mothers in England are entitled to 52 weeks of maternity leave, 39 of which are paid and two of which are compulsory. A total of 90 % of their average weekly earnings is paid to them for the first six weeks. Following this, £139.58 is paid to them for the next 33 weeks. If 90 % of their salary is lower than this, they are paid the 90 % instead (Government Digital Service, 2017b). Fathers are entitled to one to two weeks of paternity leave and are paid £139.58, or 90 % of their average weekly earnings (Government Digital Service, 2017b). A shared period option is also available (see Government Digital Service, 2017b). Once parents go back to work, there are a variety of childcare opportunities available to them.

Early childhood provision. Past. According to Nutbrown and Clough (2014), although education had already been set up for young children, schools for the youngest were slowly established in the 1800s. This began with the help of protestant 'evangelicals', who first opened 'infant schools'. At the same time, there was extensive work going on to 'develop the curriculum' for young children. The work of educational figures such as Maria Montessori, Friedrich Fröbel, Susan Isaacs, and many others, piqued an interest in working with a more child-centred approach, where play was an essential component (Nutbrown & Clough, 2014). However, the expansion of industry is what truly inspired schooling for young children (ibid).

The enactment of Forster's Education Act (1870) created a desire for children in England to attend compulsory schooling a year before other European countries so that British children would have an advantage in educational achievement (cited in Szreter, 1964). This later meant that nursery schools for two- to five-year-olds should be set up. During the First World War in particular, mothers needed somewhere to send their young children so that they could work. At this time, nursery schools thrived (Nutbrown & Clough, 2014). Interestingly, the local education authority in Sheffield describes the early nursery schools in England as providing robust and skilful outdoor play, as well as very real imaginative play. They believed that children were 'independent, practical, capable and resilient' (cited in Nutbrown & Clough, 2014: 9).

The 1944 education act suggested that nursery education would become universal. However, state provision declined in the 50s and 60s due to economic and staffing pressures (Nutbrown & Clough, 2014). There was a lack of nursery places and parents were forced to make their own childcare provisions. The preschool playgroup movement was therefore formed in 1960. 'The expansion of this movement and dedication of those working contributed significantly to awareness of the needs of under-fives' (Nutbrown & Clough, 2014: 9).

Present. Today, starting from birth to the age of five, parents in England are offered a range of childcare provisions. The Department for Education (2016) reports that 95 % of the three- and four-year-old population, and 68 % of the eligible two-year-old population, attends some sort of funded early education. In addition to nannies, au pairs and child-minders, day nurseries are a common place to send children. All three- and four-year-olds in England are entitled to 570 hours of free ECEC a year, with some places for two-year-olds from low economic backgrounds funded as well (Government Digital Service, 2017a). At the age of four, children may begin what is known as Reception. Here children are introduced to school life. Following their fifth birthday, children are expected to begin formal schooling. In practice, however, many children start formal schooling at the age of four because of school intake times (Kent County Council, n.d).

It is the responsibility of the *Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) to put in place standards for learning, development and care of children between birth and five years of age. The EYFS framework contains six areas of learning: Personal, social and emotional development; Communication, language and literacy; Problem solving, reasoning and numeracy;

Knowledge and understanding of the world; Physical development; and Creative development. As with the Norwegian framework plan, the EYFS framework 'does not require practitioners to use particular pedagogies'. However, as of 2008, a guidance booklet for staff on pedagogy has been developed (Wall *et al.*, 2015: 41; see Department for Children Schools and Families, 2008). The aim of the EYFS framework is to provide the 'best possible start in life' for children, though good development in a healthy and safe environment (DfE, 2017: 5). It intends to '…ensure children's 'school readiness' and give children the broad range of knowledge and skills that provide the right foundation for good future progress through school and life' (ibid).

Playtime

The word 'play' is found on six of the 33 pages of the current framework documentation. Although the EYFS framework is only a recommendation to practitioners, it nonetheless necessitates that play should be planned into children's days through all six areas of learning, and that there should be a combination of child-initiated and adult-led activities (see DfE, 2017: s. 1.8). What is more, the 2017 EYFS framework explicitly states that it is up to the practitioner to decide when play should be child-initiated and/or adult-led (ibid). As in the Norwegian documentation, play is also written about with high regard in the EYFS framework (see below).

> Play is essential for children's development, building their confidence as they learn to explore, to think about problems, and relate to others. Children learn by leading their own play, and by taking part in play which is guided by adults. There is an ongoing judgement to be made by practitioners about the balance between activities led by children, and activities led or guided by adults. Practitioners must respond to each child's emerging needs and interests, guiding their development through warm, positive interaction. As children grow older, and as their development allows, it is expected that the balance will gradually shift towards more activities led by adults, to help children prepare for more formal learning, ready for Year 1.
>
> (DfE, 2017: s. 1.8)

As Siraj-Blatchford and Nah (2014) point out, the EYFS framework puts a lot of emphasis on a play-based approach to learning based on both child-centred and constructivist perspectives. What is more, Wall *et al.* (2015) explain that one of the main features of this

play-based approach is the provision of ‘guided play opportunities’ (p.46). They go on to point out that the child-centeredness of this provides for ‘a stimulating yet open-ended environment for children to play within’, whereby sustained shared thinking is key (ibid). Following on from this, the 2017 EYFS framework specifies that play should be planned and purposeful. In order to do this, the EYFS framework suggests that practitioners focus on identifying opportunities to join in during children’s play and to help to guide their learning.

Being imaginative

Although imagination and creativity are not common words in the 2017 EYFS framework, pretend play and art are mentioned as important experiences for children attending ECEC. It can therefore be inferred that these concepts are valued in the early years in England. Similar to the Norwegian framework, the EYFS (2017) also has a specific section devoted to ‘expressive art and design’, where the child’s own thoughts and designs are encouraged. Furthermore, previous versions of this framework have highlighted imagination and creativity in more detail. The 2008 EYFS framework, for example, emphasised the fact that creativity should be supported through opportunities for exploration and play, and that representational and imaginative play are vital (see Department for Children Schools and Families, 2008). Additionally, in an online survey conducted by the National Children’s Bureau, it was reported that over half the parents and carers believed creativity, among other things, to be an important part of ECEC experiences (cited in Tickell, 2011: 25, s. 3.20).

4 Methodology

Introduction

This chapter illustrates the processes and methods used to collect data for a case study on how play is organised and supported in two ECEC settings in Norway and England. The study focused on practitioners in two Norwegian public kindergartens, one public English nursery school and one private English nursery school. The purpose was to look at how practitioners supported children during child-directed activities in the four settings. The research looked at how often children were provided with child-directed activities, what the provision for adult-directed activities consisted of, and the interactions that occurred between children and practitioners during child-directed activities. This data was collected using qualitative methods. The data was then analysed using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

The following sections will present the research questions, discuss the methods used for collecting literature, describe the sample used for data collection, the procedure of the data collection, methods of analysis, and the validity of the research, as well as ethics and limitations.

Research Questions

1) How was the day structured in the observed ECEC settings in Norway and England? *What proportion of the day was spent on child- and adult-directed activities?*
2) How were the child- and adult-directed activity times used in the observed ECEC settings in Norway and England?
3) Were there differences in how practitioners participated and supported children during child-directed activities in the observed ECEC settings in Norway and England? If so, how?

Literature search

Figure 1: Types of literature used for the literature review

Following the initial literature search, it was discovered that limited up-to-date empirical research on play exists. Questions posed by the empirical research were identified and created the basis for the literature review. Adult participation in play and empirical research on the topic proved to be one of the most limited areas. However, the existing research on this topic was identified and used as a starting point for the design of the current research. Research papers and other academic material on play in animals was generally avoided during the literature search, and play was limited to children from birth to seven years of age. In particular, a handful of studies on toddler-parent play were found, but these were looked at with caution considering the age group of the children that would be attending the observed ECEC settings. Overall, it was identified that despite play being a central theme in ECEC, there is limited new research on play.

The main sources of data used for the literature review were found in conceptual research on the topic. In addition to this, a number of government documents from England and Norway, such as curriculum frameworks and white papers, were looked at. Reports from large international organisations such as the OECD and Association for Childhood Education International were studied and relevant information gathered from these was also used. Empirical research was also used when relevant investigations were identified. Mentions of play, imagination and pretend were searched for, and any other reference to these topics were noted. Overall, the resources used for the literature review originated from a number of international sources to give the literature review a wide outlook, particularly because this research focuses on cultural differences in the approaches to supporting play. The literature reviewed was primarily in English but did include a selection of Norwegian literature, particularly in the form of reports and articles. This helped to gain a good amount of

information on the existing Norwegian literature. This was especially important for gaining information about research and reports about play, conducted by Norwegians.

The prevalent definitions and operationalisations of play were investigated early on. This information was primarily found in books on early childhood and, as pointed out, conceptual research on play. Key words such as 'play in ECEC' and 'play definitions' were searched for in online databases, and previously familiar authors were revisited. These authors previously familiar to me formed the basis of the literature review. These authors were mostly well-known early childhood researchers and authors on play such as Tina Bruce, Janet Moyles, Elizabeth Wood and Jane Attfield. A large amount of literature on the benefits of play was found, but limited research on how play is implemented in ECEC settings was identified.

Types of play identified in conceptual research on play were also found. Pretend play took a central role in the literature and was therefore investigated further in books and peer-reviewed journal articles. Scaffolding and ZPD were another two topics that were researched in greater depth in order to base the current research and findings on a theoretical framework. The initial sources of this literature were found in Oslo university library within the psychology and education sections.

Sample for data collection

4.1.1 The recruitment process

Once the initial kindergarten in Norway was recruited, the remaining three settings were chosen based on their location and socio-economic status. This was to ensure that findings would not be heavily based on socio-economic biases. Although these settings were chosen based on their similarities in this regard, there were undoubtedly discrete differences that were not compensated for. Some of the more obvious differences will be discussed in the following sections.

Norway

Initially, several settings were contacted and visited across Norway, in areas that were easily accessible and familiar to me. A number of settings did not want to participate or did not respond to my communication. After some weeks of searching, I visited a kindergarten that agreed to take part. This kindergarten agreed to have me for three full days the following

month. I visited the second kindergarten soon after the initial data collection days and they agreed to have me for two full days the following week.

During recruitment, I spoke directly to the teachers in charge at each kindergarten. The research project and what it would involve was briefly explained to these teachers during the initial meeting. Following our conversations, both kindergartens were sent an email, providing more information about the research, an information letter for practitioners and parents (see *appendix 1*), and suggested dates for the data collection.

Both were kindergartens that I had previously worked at for a few days and was therefore somewhat familiar with. Having a familiarity between us had its advantages as well as disadvantages. Thinking about the advantages, it is possible that our relationship made it more likely that the kindergartens would allow me to do data collection. Since they knew exactly who I was and my background, the kindergartens may have been more willing to have me. In addition, this may have helped participants to feel more comfortable with my presence, something that will be addressed further in this chapter.

However, having a relationship with the kindergartens also entailed some minor disadvantages. Because I spoke to the practitioners face-to-face, and because the practitioners had a relationship with me, they may have felt obligated to participate or behave in a specific way during data collection. Alternatively, my knowledge and previous experiences at the kindergarten may have influenced my judgements, leading to the halo effect (Cohen *et al.*, 2000: 116). This occurs when a familiar setting or person is studied, leading to biases in the conclusions and evaluations made. However, my acknowledgment of this may have helped to avoid this. Another drawback of our familiarity was the fact that the children knew me and were eager to talk and interact with me throughout the day. This made it difficult to observe at times. In addition, it was also difficult not to get involved with what the children were doing or help a practitioner during a particularly stressful situation because it was usually my job to do so.

England

I decided to recruit the nurseries in England while still in Norway so that only one trip would be necessary and with the intention of saving time. Since I was not physically there, the recruitment process proved to be even harder in England than in Norway. I chose to focus on

London and Oxford, two areas that I was most familiar with from previous research experience in the field of early childhood. Several nurseries in these areas were contacted via telephone and email. It was challenging to get into contact with nurseries and a number of emails were not answered. After the initial struggle of recruiting, and many back and forth phone calls, two nurseries agreed to let me observe in their classrooms. Both nurseries were however, sceptical of the research and who I was. After sending police clearance from Norway and a letter from my university, it was confirmed that I could do my data collection at these nurseries for two full school days the following month. As with the Norwegian kindergartens, both nurseries in England received information letters for their staff and parents (see *appendix 1*), and a final summary of the research project.

4.1.2 The research settings

Norway

Both kindergartens were located in middle-class areas of central and western Oslo and catered to children between the ages of one and six.

Kindergarten A. In total, there were 35 children between the ages of one and six attending this kindergarten. The classroom used for data collection consisted of 15 children between the ages of one and six, with three practitioners working there each day, all of whom were present during data collection. One of the children in this classroom had special educational needs.

Kindergarten B. This kindergarten consisted of 130 children in total, between the ages of one and six. The classroom used for data collection consisted of 33 children between the ages of two and five, with 10 practitioners working there each day, all of whom were present during data collection. One of the children in this classroom had special educational needs.

England

Both nursery schools were located in a middle-class area of Southwest London.

Nursery C. This nursery catered to children between the ages of two and three years in one classroom. There were 85 children attending this nursery school with 18 practitioners working there each day, all of whom were present during data collection. Thirty-one of the

children at this nursery school had special educational needs on a range of levels, and 17 were considered vulnerable* children.

Nursery D. This nursery was a morning only nursery and catered to children between the ages of two-and-a-half and four years of age. There were five practitioners working at this nursery and 40 children, all of whom were present during data collection. None of these children had special educational needs or were considered vulnerable.

4.1.3 Participants

The practitioners working in the classrooms were the primary participants for this research. The choice was made to alternate between participants, to limit the influence of individual differences in teaching and/or interaction styles. This approach was also used so that interactions with specific children would not affect the results.

Kindergarten A (Norway). Altogether, I observed seven practitioners from this kindergarten. Three of these seven practitioners worked in the target classroom every day and four came from other classrooms to help in the target classroom. These additional practitioners were only observed when they were the only ones present with the children from the target classroom, something that mostly occurred during outdoor activities. One of the seven participants was a head teacher [*pedagogisk leder*], and six were assistants. Four of these six had no childcare-related education, and two had a high school diploma in children and young people [*barne- og ungdomsarbeider*].

Kindergarten B (Norway). In total, ten practitioners participated from this kindergarten. Three were trained teachers [*pedagogues*], four had a high school diploma within childcare [*fagarbeidere*] and three were assistants, without any childcare education. One of these assistants was taking a course in childcare at the time of data collection. All ten practitioners worked in the target classroom, and no additional practitioners were observed.

Nursery C (England). Altogether, 18 practitioners participated from this setting. Four of these practitioners were qualified teachers, one of which was also a special educational needs

* The term 'vulnerable children' is used in England to refer to children who need special care because of an event in their lives. This can be something short- or long-term.

coordinator (SenCo). Fourteen of the practitioners had the equivalent of a high school diploma in early childcare.

Nursery D (England). In total, five practitioners participated from this setting. One of these practitioners had a Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), two were Montessori trained teachers and two had a high school diploma in early childcare.

Data Collection Procedures

Prior to data collection

Below is a description of the steps taken prior to data collection.

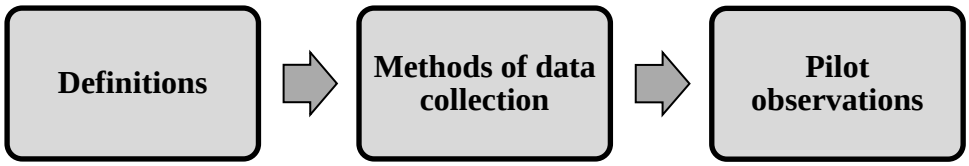

Figure 2: Procedures prior to data collection

4.1.4 Definitions

Before going into the field, a working definition of play was established. This is because play is defined differently by different researchers and can occur anywhere and at any time. This helped to narrow the focus of the research and helped to pinpoint areas of interest. Because play occurs within a situation of activities, adult- and child-directed activities were defined, as well as play and non-play actions.

Adult- and child-directed activities were considered mutually exclusive during data collection. In other words, child-directed activities could not occur during adult-directed activities and vice-versa. However, adult- and child-*led* play could occur in both activities. This idea will be addressed and expanded upon in more detail further on.

Adult-directed activities. These were categorised as times that contained activities organised by practitioners. Some examples of these activities included gym, reading time and circle time. These took the form of both play and non-play activities. Before going into the field, it

was decided that activities occurring during these times had to involve the whole class, and be compulsory for all children.

Child-directed activities. These were categorised as times when children were free to choose what and who they participated with. During data collection, these activities took the form of play and non-play activities.

Figure 3 shows that for this research, both child- and adult-directed activities contained play and non-play behaviours. These definitions will be discussed shortly. It is important to note that as per *Figure 3,* play directed by an adult is still considered play despite the fact that it may no longer be spontaneous and child-centred. We also see that play can occur in all three forms (i.e. child-, adult- and mutually-led) when thinking about the five play situations represented in the lowest level of *Figure 3.* Although mutually-led play is represented in *Figure 3,* this category was not used when categorising play during data collection. However, this category was used during analysis, particularly in terms of support and scaffolding.

Play. Based on the literature and for the purpose of data collection, play was defined as child- and adult-directed activities where children explored objects and ideas through imaginary scenarios and/or interaction with tools and objects or physical movement (such as running) and experimentation with language (such as singing or rhyming). These activities did not, however, require speech but often did contain some form of speech or interaction with others. Examples of play included children playing tag during gym time, pretending to eat soup, and singing in a playhouse.

To distinguish play from non-play behaviours, non-play activities were also identified. On the one hand, these contexts involved structured actions with clear goals, set out by a practitioner. In other words, they needed to be completed in some way and had a goal. An example of this was a pre-academic activity such as a worksheet, developing early literacy during group time, or rote activities such as recalling the days of the week during circle time. On the other hand, other situations that were not considered play were conversations between children and/or practitioners that did not have any relation to play. These conversations occurred when children were not in play situations but were talking about things in their lives. An example of this is two children sitting together talking about their pets. It is important to note that these conversations sometimes led to play. In the previous example, the

children may have begun pretending to be their pets after their conversation or later in the day. This activity was then considered play.

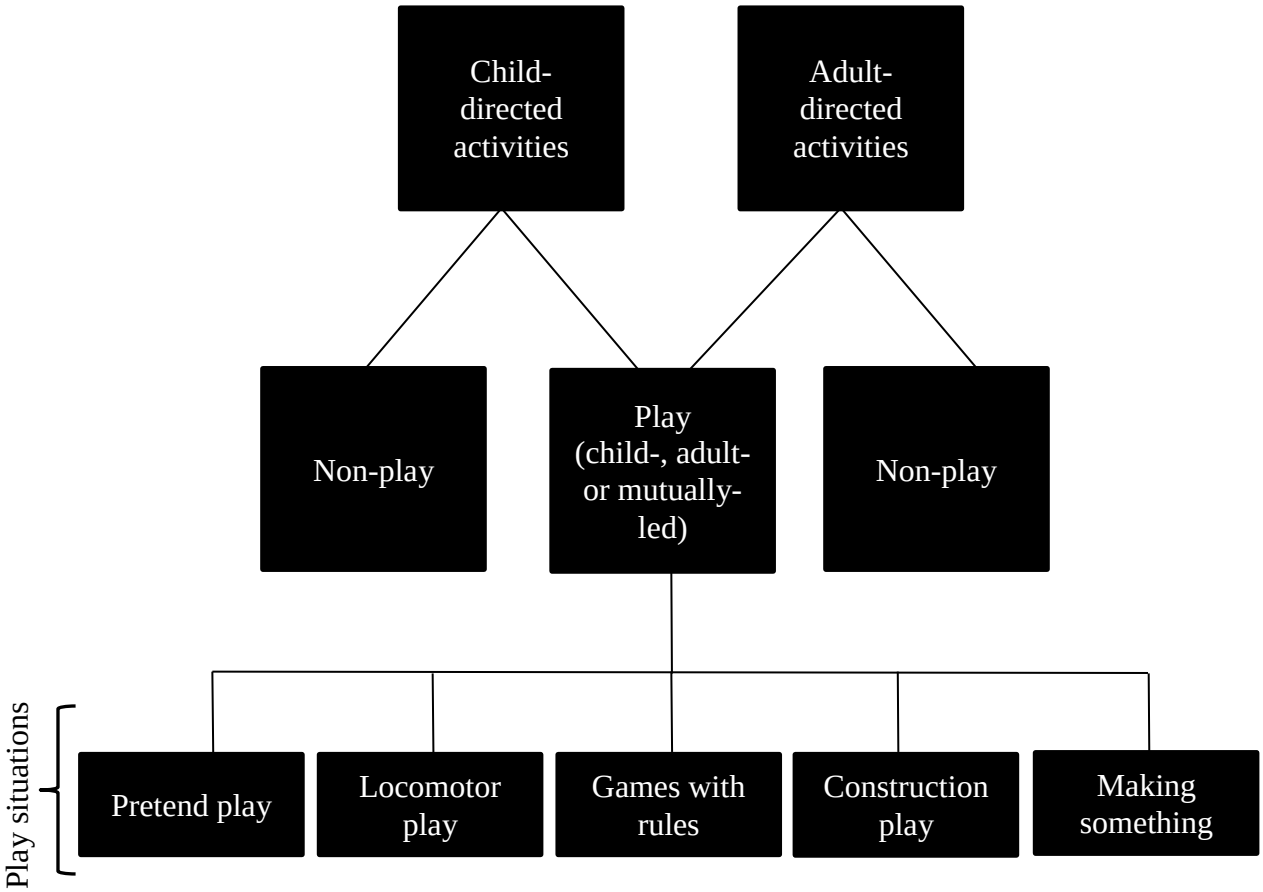

Figure 3: Child- and adult-directed play activities, categories used during data collection and analysis

Child-led play. Based on the literature, similar to child-directed activities, during child-led play, the children had the power and were in control of the play (Wood & Attfield, 2005). This type of play referred to activities or play situations and topics that the children had chosen themselves and of which they were guiding the direction. This play occurred in relation to the children's own interests and the children played freely in any way they pleased (Einarsdottir, 1998). This activity primarily occurred during child-directed activities, during which time practitioners did not directly interfere with what the children were doing. The practitioner could have, however, been present, helping the children focus on specific elements of the play (Weisberg *et al.*, 2013). Most importantly, if practitioners were present during these times, they still followed the children's lead and did not try to alter the children's play agenda.

Another important quality of practitioner involvement during these times was the resources they provided. The practitioners may have set up the play areas for the children, but the children were not obligated to play anywhere or do anything specific when the play was child-led. An example of child-led play included children playing princesses or painting a picture, without any adult involvement. On the other hand, it also included the practitioner being involved in play, helping to build a house out of blocks for some farm animals, together with the children. Parallel play between children and a practitioner also took place during child-led play. During these times, the practitioner was nearby the children, doing the same activity as them, an activity completely free of adult restrictions, but performing it separately from the children, often without communication.

Adult-led play. Much the same as adult-directed activities, for the purpose of this research, adult-led play referred to playful activities that the practitioner was guiding. Instances identified as adult-led play may have, however, included a child choosing an activity or resource but not being permitted to do anything outside of the specified activities. These instances involved singing, creating something or even using imaginative scenarios, but they were controlled by the practitioner. Adult-led play was often incorporated into adult-directed activities such as group time or gym, meaning that the child was required to participate in the play.

On occasions, adult-led play occurred during child-directed activity times. For example, a child could choose how, where and with whom they played during child-directed activities but they chose to paint with an adult who had specific plans for the activity. These were specific plans for the play and not suggestions made by the practitioner, in passing. This activity time was still identified as child-directed since the child could leave at any time but, because the adult wanted the child to paint something specific, it was adult-led play.

Play situations: Five situations of play were established in order to easily identify and categorise play activities as they occurred during observations. These five situations were chosen because they are the most prominent types of play represented in the literature and were seen to be common during pilot observations. It was possible for all five of these play situations to be identified as child- or adult-led play meaning that a total of ten play situations were identified.

Pretend play. For the purpose of this research, pretend play was categorised to include *symbolic*, *dramatic*, *socio-dramatic* and *fantasy play* (Fisher, 2013; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998; Smilansky, 1968). Here children took on a role and acted it out for the play situation. They may have been using objects to facilitate this play or simply using 'themselves' or natural resources, such as leaves or branches. Typically, the objects were provided to children to prompt or encourage pretend play. These objects included dolls, cars or doctor's equipment. This type of play also included situations where children may have been in the sandpit, making a cake or building a sandcastle. They were using their imagination and creativity to create a play scenario, using objects to dig and mould. Children engaged in this type of play did so alone and in groups. Morgenthaler (1988) points out that this type of play includes 'story-based and imaginative manipulation and imitation' (p.357). In other words, children used the real properties of the object and assigned imaginative qualities to them as well. The children, therefore, used their imagination and creativity to construct the play and its characters.

An example of adult-led pretend play was a practitioner reading to the children and asking them to act out the story. An example of child-led pretend play was a group of children using milk crates as skis and 'skiing' around the playground.

During this type of play two types of speech were observed, in- and out-of-frame speech. During in-frame speech, the participants were talking as a character in the play with no reference to the outside world (Sawyer, 1997). This also included talk about the activity they were doing together (for example, talking about the pictures they are colouring in) and singing. Out-of-frame speech on the other hand, consisted of a conversation about a play activity, but the participants were using their own persona and referring to the play as a separate activity. This often included plans for a play activity or talking about a character as separate from themselves.

Locomotor play. Fisher (2013) defines this situation of play as 'activities that involve all kinds of physical movement' (p.140; see also, McGrew, 1972; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). This play situation is seen to 'stimulate muscle growth and help develop general physical capability' (Smith & Hagan, 1980: 922). Locomotor play seemed to be most prominent outdoors where children had the space to use their bodies. Within the current research project, this play situation included the children kicking a ball, climbing on a climbing frame,

and other gross motor skill practice, such as balancing and swinging. These activities were only categorised as locomotor if there was no obvious pretend scenario occurring within the play.

Locomotor play occurred in both child- and adult- directed activities during data collection. During child-directed activities, instances of children following instructions from a practitioner, and directing their own locomotor play, was observed. During adult-led locomotor play, practitioners organised running races and other competitions for the children, both during child-directed activities and gym times. During child-led locomotor play, a group of children chased after each other and climbed on the jungle gym. As previously mentioned, if the children were chasing each other, pretending to be monsters, this would be categorised as pretend play.

Games with rules. Examples of this play situation included board games or puzzles, but also predefined games that did not involve chasing such as 'hide and seek'. Running races, although containing rules, were not included in this situation because it was believed they fit better in the locomotor play situation. The same was true of chasing games such as tag.

Elkind (2008) finds games with rules to be particularly prominent among children nearing school starting age as they contribute to important social and developmental experiences needed in school such as strategising and risk taking, as well as socio-moral and intellectual development (see also, DeVries, 1998). Generally, an adult was present during this play situation, often making it rather structured, but still child-led in most cases. An example of this play situation in an adult-led scenario, was the practitioner sitting with a group of children, watching how they played a board game, and explaining the rules to the children involved, making sure they followed the rules, often guiding the direction of the game. When it was child-led, the children were building a puzzle together while the practitioner watched and suggested where pieces might go and discussed the picture of the puzzle with the children.

Construction play. During this play situation the child was creating a structure with objects, Lego or blocks, often provided to them by a practitioner (Johnson, 1998; Smilansky, 1968). This type of play was different from pretend play with objects, where the goal of construction was based on the pretend situation. For example, when children were building a barn out of

blocks for the plastic animals to live in while they were being used in the children's pretend play, this situation was considered pretend play. On the other hand, when children wanted to see who could build the tallest tower, or built a car out of Lego, this was considered construction play.

An example of adult-led construction play was a practitioner telling the children to only build houses with the blocks. An example of child-led construction play, on the other hand, was a group of children building blocks on top of each other with no design in mind.

Making something. This type of play would often be labelled as art, and included drawing, painting or cutting and pasting. Typically, the child was using resources provided to them by a practitioner either to create something from their own imagination or something specified by the practitioner. This play mostly took place at a table and was different to construction play because children were not 'building' things. Examples of making something in a child-led scenario were children choosing a picture to colour in, drawing a picture of their choice, or cutting out shapes. Conversely, adult-led play of this kind involved the practitioner specifying what the children should paint or where they should stick elements of their pictures.

Play considered to be tactile play was also included in this situation. Tactile play was categorised as play with resources or substances of different textures that were used with one's hands. These resources here were used to stimulate one's sense of touch. Examples of tactile resources used during data collection included jelly, lentils in a trough, and water with bubbles. This play situation was included in the 'making something' situation because both cases require the hands and some element of creativity.

4.1.5 Methods of data collection

To answer the research questions, naturalistic, structured observations were used to investigate what practitioners did with the children throughout the day and how they engaged in play situations in their setting (Bell, 2010; Denscombe, 2007; Greig *et al.*, 2007; Patton, 1990; Rolfe & Emmett, 2010). By using this method of data collection, I saw what practitioners were doing and did not have to guess or imagine the situation based on literature or interviews (Bryman, 2012). This method was also fitting since the purpose was to

investigate what practitioners were doing and not what the curriculum says or what they say they are doing (Denscombe, 2007; Nolan *et al.*, 2013; Simon & Boyer, 1974).

Before going into the field, I decided that observation schedules and field notes would be used to collect data. So that sufficient data could be gathered during child-directed activities, when various activities were going on, an observation schedule was designed. This observation schedule served as a way to identify predefined categories, activities, actions and behaviours taking place in each setting during this time (see *appendix 2*). In addition to the observation schedule, short field notes were also taken, explaining situations from the observation schedule in more detail. Field notes were also taken during adult-directed activities, when no observation schedule was used.

The purpose of the field notes during child-directed activities was to have a record of activities that could be used during data analysis, when examples of behaviours were needed. These tools helped narrow down the amount of data collected and created a deductive approach to data collection. The field notes taken during adult-directed activities served a similar purpose but, because only one activity was occurring at a time, no observation schedule was used.

Before designing the final observation schedule, pilot observations were undertaken.

4.1.6 Pilot observations

Prior to data collection in the four settings, the observation schedule was designed and piloted in an additional ECEC setting in Norway. Details of this can be seen below.

Purpose

The purpose of the pilot observations was to test the original data collection tools and modify them as needed before conducting the final observations. In addition, it aimed to establish whether the observations would indicate the results needed to answer the research questions. Conducting pilot observations helped to save time during the final observations and test the validity and reliability of the collection tools. Because the aim of the pilot observations was to ensure reliability, making sure that there was inter-observer agreement on the use of categories, an additional researcher was present for these observations.

Pilot observation methods

Recruitment. The research project was explained in as much detail as possible to a colleague before she agreed to take part as an additional researcher. This ensured that she was fully aware of what taking part would entail. She agreed to assist in testing the original observation categories by observing events together with me and making notes about improvements to the observation schedule and the way in which data was collected in the final observations. Next, I visited four kindergartens during the process of recruitment for the pilot observations, with just one agreeing to take part. This was not a kindergarten I had any previous experience with, and was chosen based on its location and the fact that it catered to children of various ages. After our initial meeting, I sent an email to the head teacher, providing more detailed information about the project and asking permission for myself and my colleague to do the pilot observations together. The head teacher agreed to have us for one full day the following week.

Before the pilot observations. My fellow researcher was given a predesigned observation schedule and the methods of data collection were explained to her prior to the pilot observation day. We agreed to arrive together on the day of pilot observations and, before starting our observations, to sit and play with the children for half an hour. We also used this time to talk to some of the practitioners. This made it easier to get to know the children and practitioners, and helped them to feel more comfortable with our presence. This was important to both of us since neither of us had visited the kindergarten before and were unfamiliar with the children and staff. Once we felt that everyone was comfortable and the day was well underway, we began the observations. We decided to observe for five minutes at a time.

During the pilot observations. The pilot observations took place for one school day. The other researcher and I sat in the same area of the playground, next to each other and individually observed what we saw around us for five minutes. We repeated this twice before discussing what we saw and how easy it was to collect data based on our positioning and the observation schedule. Following this discussion, we decided that it would be best to focus on one practitioner at a time, for five minutes. This was so that we would not miss any important events, constantly changing our focus between practitioners and children, and so that we saw the same things. We tried the new method of observation a few times with the observation schedule; again, in the same area and focusing on the same practitioner, before comparing

notes and discussing whether the observation schedule was showing us what we wanted to find out. During this discussion, it was discovered that the categories were too narrowly defined, which led to too many categories and confusion about which to use in different situations. We discussed and tried out a few new categories during some more observations before agreeing on simpler, more refined categories.

After the pilot observations. Suggestions about improvements to the data collection were essential to creating a final observation schedule that would be easy and effective to use, as well as reliable. Following the pilot observations, I refined the categories even more and developed new ways to watch and take note of what practitioners were doing based on our findings during the pilot observations.

Limitations and challenges

Ideally, one more day of pilot observations should have taken place to test the final observation schedule and methods of observations one more time with my colleague. However, this was not possible due to the limited access to ECEC settings. Because of the difficulty involved in recruiting ECEC settings, and not wanting to do pilot observations at the same setting as the final observations to avoid biases, when I found settings that agreed to take part, I thought it best to do my final observations immediately so that I would not struggle to find more settings for the final observations, and would not have to wait weeks to do the observations. Following the pilot observations, the final observation schedule was therefore, discussed with the other researcher but no further testing took place. I was also advised to do a statistical analysis of the reliability of the data during pilot observations. This was going to be done with the additional researcher during a second pilot observation day, but because no other settings were found in time, this statistical analysis did not take place.

The pilot observations also helped to determine how children and practitioners would behave while being in the presence of researchers. Initially, practitioners were not comfortable with two researchers present. This made it challenging since one of the main aims of the pilot observations was to have two researchers observing the same events. Once a classroom was found that could accommodate both of us, we found that the practitioners were very inquisitive while the observations were taking place. They spent some time talking to us about the research and discussing the contents of the observation schedule during data collection. This was something that we felt needed some reviewing since participants should

not change their actions according to the observation schedule criteria. However, the schedule could also not be 'hidden' from the participants. This also helped in preparing me for situations that may have occurred during the final observations.

4.1.7 Final data collection: Final observation schedule

Following the pilot observations, a new and more refined observation schedule was developed for the final data collection. Categories were re-developed and more broadly defined so that ambiguities were reduced and validity heightened (Croll, 1986; Simon & Boyer, 1974).

Action categories involving the practitioners' actions and behaviours during play throughout child-directed activities were included in the observation schedule (see *Table 1*), in addition to the five play situations previously addressed. These recorded the practitioners' actions during each five-minute observation and were based loosely on Rubin's (2001) *Play Observation Scale*. These actions involved elements of the practitioners' presence, if they were engaged in managing activities, and if they were involved in play with the children. These categories were used to identify different activities as they occurred. Since the aim of the schedule was to assist in identifying behaviours quickly, the use of these classifications was essential. This also helped create simplified data, meaning that the information collected was less overwhelming and easier to work with during data analysis (Bell, 2010; Bryman, 2012; Croll, 1986; Denscombe, 2007).

The final observation schedule was designed in such a way that 'coded' pictures were used to represent actions and activities (see *appendix 2)* (for similar techniques, see Melbin, 1954; Honigman, 1967 cited in Simon & Boyer, 1974). It seemed important that no one but me would be able to decipher what was represented if they saw the observation schedule (Melbin, 1954). This technique also helped keep the categories private so that practitioners would not act according to the categories if they happened to see the observation schedule. This idea was developed following the pilot observations and proved to be very useful in the final data collection when both children and practitioners were just as inquisitive about what I was writing during observations. Using pictures also made the observation schedule look less threatening and more child-friendly.

Table 1: Practitioner actions during child-directed activities, categories and definitions

Action		Description
Presence	**Not present**	The practitioner was not involved in any play situations and did not fit into any other category listed below. They were not showing any signs of being occupied with either Christie (1998) or Synodi (2010) roles of the practitioner (i.e. organising, listening, assessing or planning). The practitioner may or may not have been physically present in the room. This was characterised as unoccupied behaviour (Rubin, 2001). The practitioner may have been with a child but was out of the room with them and not involved in assisting or organising play in anyway.
	Present	The practitioner was near the play situation but was not directly involved in the play – they did not take on any specific role. This category was however used when the practitioner was showing subtle signs of support such as nodding or encouragement (Christie, 1998). In this case the practitioner was physically present but may not have been engaging in any conversation with the child per se. This was specifically characterised as onlooker behaviour (Rubin, 2001).
Managing	**Ending an activity**	Play was interrupted and/or stopped for any reason by the practitioner. This may have been because 'playtime' was over or because the child was engaging in inappropriate behaviour.
	Solving a problem	**Problem:** The practitioner was solving a problem within the play/ helping with something. This category was used particularly when the practitioner took on the role of 'stage manager' or organiser (Christie, 1998; Synodi, 2010).
		Conflict: The practitioner was solving a conflict. This may have been solving an argument between children or comforting a child who was crying.
Playing		**Joining:** The practitioner joined in with the play and was doing the same activity as the child (e.g. pretending to be someone, kicking a ball to the child, etc.). Both parties were engaged in the play and participated as equals. This category included the practitioner narrating the play.
		Assisting: The practitioner was not involved in the play in the same way as the child but was helping facilitate the play (e.g. pushing the child on the swing, handing them resources). This category was one step 'up' from problem solving as it involved the adult being more involved in the play and not simply fetching things. Generally, the practitioner remained with the child before and after they had assisted.
		Parallel: The practitioner was involved in a play activity but was not playing 'together' with the child (e.g. drawing or building beside the child).

Talking occurred during present, managing and playing behaviours. This took the form of discussions about the play and other topics. It involved in- and out-of-frame talk during pretend play, and dialogues about what a child was doing, instructions, plans or future

activities. General conversations also took place about the child and everyday topics in the child's life. On some occasions, no talking took place. This mostly occurred during parallel play, and onlooker behaviours. As mentioned, non-play talking also took place during observations. These were noted in the field notes.

Field notes. For final data collection, field notes were used to explain situations from the observation schedule in more detail. The time corresponding to the observation schedule was recorded in the field notes and short descriptions were written, explaining relevant information that may be needed during data analysis. Some examples of these included where participants were positioned in regards to the children, and conversations, and activities that were going on around the participants. These details were important in helping to link events together and remind myself, in more detail, of things that had happened. These short notes were expanded upon in more detail following the observation days so that well-described records of the day could be easily accessible during data analysis. This proved to be particularly useful in re-examining the observation days and helping to develop ways of processing and presenting the data.

In addition, extra field notes were also taken during times identified by myself as adult-directed activities. Time-sampling and the observation schedule were not used during these times, but short notes were taken, describing the situation, who was involved, and the activities taking place. The reason for emitting the time-sampling and observation schedule was because only one activity was occurring, with all the children, during these times. There was also generally only one practitioner present during these times, meaning that overall, there was less to focus on. It is important to note that this method does not indicate that I did not expect play to be occurring during these times. Because the focus of this thesis was how practitioners interacted during times I considered to be led by the child, adult-directed activities did not receive as much focus. I was more interested in how much practitioners got involved during the 'child's' playtime. However, the data collected during adult-directed activities was important because it provided a well-rounded description of the day. These field notes were particularly important because they helped represent the whole day at school in each setting, showing all the learning opportunities occurring and not just those facilitated through child-directed activities or play. In hindsight, however, an observation schedule should have been used during adult-directed activities in order to collect a more detailed account of the activities, interactions and support that occurred during these times. This

would have provided richer data and perhaps revealed other interesting findings related to the support provided to children in their ECEC settings.

During data collection

The following steps were taken during data collection.

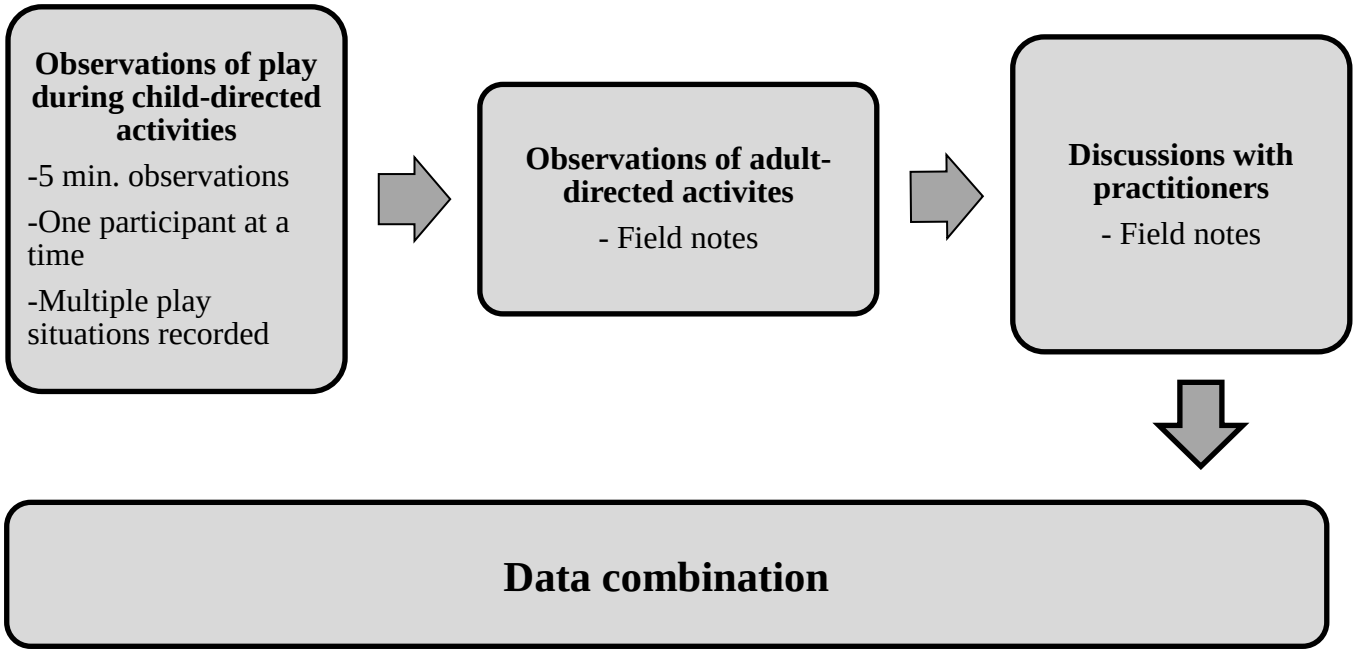

Figure 4: Data collection procedures

Prior to data collection. Nothing in the setting was changed prior to the observations taking place. This was to ensure that both practitioners and children were in their familiar, everyday play settings. I arrived 15 minutes before I began observations each day so that I could get settled, prepare the observation schedule and greet the staff, parents and children before I began observations. On the first day at each setting I spent a little time talking to and getting to know staff, parents and children before I began observations so that I was not a stranger to them when they saw me during data collection. In addition, the resources provided to the children and the classroom set-up was also noted before the observations began.

When not to observe. During meal times and big transitions, such as dressing for outdoor activities or getting ready for group time, no observations took place. This was so that participants could take a break from being observed. Big transitions also proved to be stressful times for the practitioners and being observed during these times would have added

extra pressure on the participants. Thus, some play-conversations may have been missed during these instances.

4.1.8 Observations of play during child-directed activities

To begin with, I sat in an area of the classroom or outdoor area that had a good view of several play situations. This made it easier to switch between participants without moving around multiple times or making it obvious which participant I was observing. When there were no participants in view, I moved to find them. I always sat far enough away so as not to disturb the play situations, but close enough to hear conversations occurring where possible. If the participant left the room during an observation, I did not follow them.

During these observations, all activities were observed. These included all child- and adult-led play situations occurring during child-directed activities, as well as non-play conversations. During the observations at these times, the categories and time of each situation were marked down on the observation schedule and field notes were taken with the corresponding time noted.

Timing. Data collection at kindergarten A was undertaken over the course of three school days and observations were done between 09:00 and 16:00. Observations at kindergarten B were done over two days; both between 09:00 and 16:00. The data collection at nursery C consisted of two days, between 09:30 and 15:00. The observations at nursery D were done over two days, between 08:30 and 12:30. These times were chosen because this was when most, if not all, of the children were present in the settings.

Practitioners in all ECEC settings were observed for five-minute intervals with a three-minute break between each observation. No observations were done during these breaks and no extra notes were taken. These three-minute breaks served as a time for me to skim though what I had observed in the previous five minutes as well as to identify a new play situation to watch for the next observations. I felt it was necessary to go over the notes before the next observation so that all the information was still fresh in my mind and anything that was not immediately clear could be corrected. Because not all participants were always in view, it was also important to use this time to identify the next participant for observations. The decision to do five-minute observations was made so that enough interaction between the

child and practitioner could take place, and I would have a good idea of the activity they were involved in. This proved to be a good decision during pilot and final observations since practitioners did not generally stay with children longer than five minutes at a time. In total, 72 five-minute observations were taken at kindergarten A. At kindergarten B, 50 five-minute observations were done. Nursery C had 43 and nursery D had 16 five-minute observations. The five- and three-minute intervals were taken with a countdown timer to ensure accuracy.

Participants. The choice was made to observe one participant at a time. The way the participant was chosen depended on the situation and who was taking initiative with the children (Pianta *et al.*, 2008). This was decided on because I was aware that not every practitioner could be with the children all the time and that there are many tasks to be done in ECEC settings throughout the day, not just play. Although it was originally intended that no single practitioner would be observed for more than two consecutive observations (i.e. two five-minute intervals in a row), this proved to be unrealistic. On many occasions, only one practitioner was present with the children or available to be observed for long periods of time. Consecutive observations of a single practitioner were therefore limited to no more than three where possible.

Play situations. The play situations that the practitioner was involved in were recorded in the observation schedule. Since children and practitioners could be involved in several activities during a five-minute observation, all activities the practitioner was involved in during a five-minute observation were recorded (Rubin, 2001). Originally it was intended that only the predominant activity would be recorded. However, this proved to limit the data collected since not all situations would be represented. If the practitioner was not present in any play activity during the entire observation, this was noted and no activity was recorded. What the practitioner was doing during this time was also recorded in the field notes.

Play situations that were occurring away from the practitioner were also noted in the field notes but the duration and content of these situations were not meticulously recorded.

When children were divided into groups, and it was impossible to observe all groups, one group was chosen and observed. This group was chosen based on the activity the children were doing and how many children were involved.

4.1.9 Observations of adult-directed and non-play activities

During times that I identified as adult-directed activities and/or non-play activities, such as gym, group time or pre-academic activities, only field notes were taken. I noted who was involved in the activity, how long it lasted for and what the activity involved in as much detail as possible. During these times, I sat far enough away so as not to disturb the activity but close enough to hear the conversations occurring.

4.1.10 Discussions

On the first day at each setting, the head teachers were kind enough to talk to me about their settings and the classrooms, giving me vital background information to be used later. This was done in a quiet room, away from the children and was very informal. So that no information would be missed during these discussions, I took short notes. Some basic questions were prepared beforehand, based on information I knew I would need later. These questions included how many children and practitioners were in the class, the practitioners' education, and if there were any children with special needs in the class.

4.1.11 Data combination

At the end of each day, the field notes and observation schedule were combined and, as Bell (2010) advises, rewritten in more detail, in order to be analysed as a whole event. Summaries of the adult-directed and non-play observations were also written in greater detail. A synopsis of the discussions with head teachers was also transcribed so that the relevant information was easily accessible and any unclear information could be clarified as soon as possible.

Data analysis

Units of comparison

To begin with, each setting was considered a single case and initial findings were treated as such. Once these finding were analysed, the data from both settings were combined and looked at in terms of country. In other words, kindergarten A and B were combined and looked at as a single case, the case of Norway; and nursery C and D were combined and looked at as another case, the case of England. For the final data analysis, Norway and England were used as the level of comparison. This information in represented in *Figure 5* on the following page.

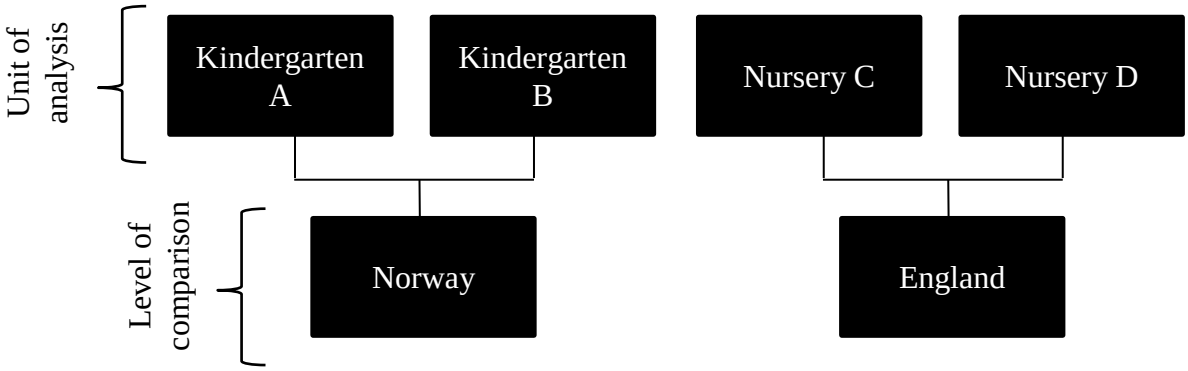

Figure 5: Data analysis, units and levels of comparison

Coding

Field notes were coded using a deductive approach since the practitioner's actions and play categories were established prior to data collection and analysis (presented in *Table 1*, and *Figure 6* and *7*). The practitioner's action categories presented in *Table 1* (i.e. present, not present, managing, talking, and playing), as well as information represented in *Figure 6* (adult- and child-led play) and *Figure 7* (adult-directed activities) were used to code the data collected. *Figure 6* and *7* were specifically used to code the data collected to answer research question two, addressing how child- and adult-directed activity times were used.

The grey block represented in *Figure 7* indicates an activity identified by myself as a non-play activity. The other six blocks represent activities that I believed may have contained elements of play at some point in their execution. *Table 1* was used to code the data collected for research question three, regarding practitioner participation and support during child-directed activities. A more detailed account of the methods used to answer each can be seen on the following page.

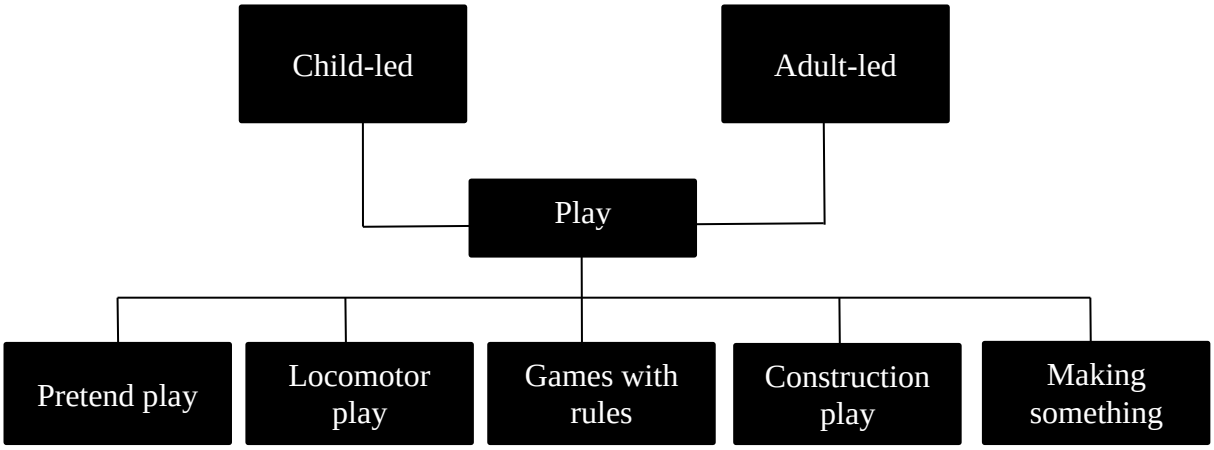

Figure 6: Play categories used for coding data

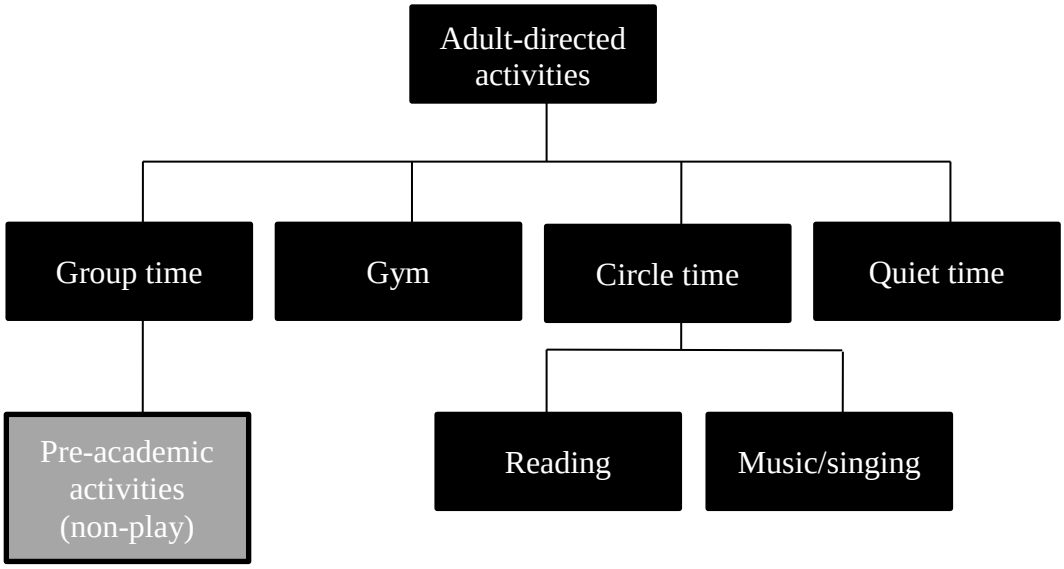

Figure 7: Adult-directed activities

Research question one: How was the day structured in the observed ECEC settings in Norway and England? ***What proportion of the day is spent on child- and adult-directed activities?***

Data from the observations was used to answer this research question. Discussions with the head teacher were later used to validate these observations further. Based on the definitions of child- and adult-directed activities developed for the research, data regarding the daily schedule at each setting was coded using these two categories. Following this, the data was put into tables to make charts. The information was also presented graphically for easy identification of each activity. Once key aspects of the day were identified (i.e. when child- and adult-directed activities took place), descriptions of each observation day were written from the field notes.

Research question two: How were the child- and adult-directed activity times used in the observed ECEC settings in Norway and England?

The data needed for this research question was gathered only through observations and was presented both qualitatively and quantitatively. Data from the observation schedule and field notes were coded using the information in *Figures 6 and 7*. Information about the resources and play environments provided in each setting were noted in the field notes and used for answering this question. The frequency of play situations evident during child-directed activities was calculated using the observation schedule and adding the number of minutes in

each play situation specified in *Figure 6*. A description of the adult-directed activities was compiled using the field notes taken during these times and coded using *Figure 7*.

Research question three: Were there differences in how practitioners participated and supported children during child-directed activities in the observed ECEC settings in Norway and England? If so, how?

To begin with, the practitioners' general participation was looked at. To find this out, five categories (not present, watching, managing, commenting, and joining) were devised to code the practitioners' behaviours from the observations. This involved looking at how practitioners spent their time in child-directed activities. The frequency of these actions was calculated using the observation schedule and adding the number of minutes practitioners spent on each action. These actions only represent what occurred during child-directed activities. The definitions of these categories, which correspond with the definitions in *Table 1*, can be seen below.

Not present: The practitioner was not involved in any play situation. This category was sub-divided into six categories to specify why the practitioner was not involved in play.

> **Not in the room**: The practitioner left the room.
>
> **With another practitioner**: The practitioner was engaging with another practitioner.
>
> **With a parent**: The practitioner was engaging with a parent.
>
> **Wandering**: The practitioner was walking around the play space. They may have been watching the children but were not close to the play or showing an active interest in a specific activity.
>
> **With a child**: The practitioner was doing something other than play with a child. Common examples of this included taking a child to the toilet or helping them get changed.
>
> **Organising**: The practitioner was involved in a daily ECEC task such as organising a planned activity.

Managing: The practitioner was comforting a child, stopping an activity or solving a problem.

Watching: The practitioner was present but not involved in the play. They were watching the play activity from a distance, they may have shown subtle signs of encouragement, such as nodding or smiling, but were not talking to the children.

Commenting: The practitioner was describing or explaining the play activity, or talking to a child about the play they were involved in. This included questioning the child about the play and commenting on past play activities. This category also included suggesting, whereby the practitioner verbally suggested something that the child could do with the objects (for example, *why don't you build a house for the giraffes?*) or characters they could be within the play (for example, *why don't you be the mom and she can be the baby.*). Instructing and directing was also included in this category for this section of the research question. Here the practitioner gave explicit instructions regarding how to use the resources in play. This category also included setting up a model for the child to copy. This included controlling or influencing the child's behaviour and correcting the child's actions.

Joining: This category included all three classifications of playing specified in *Table 1* (i.e. joining, assisting and parallel). The practitioner was actively assisting in a play situation, joining in with the game or playing parallel to a child as opposed to simply watching the activities from a distance. An example of this was a practitioner sitting in a playhouse with some children, pretending to be a character in their play, asking when dinner would be ready.

Looking further into the support practitioners provided to children, four categories of supportive behaviours (joining, commenting, helping and instructing) were identified. These categories were based on Farver's (1993) research into scaffolding behaviours. The definitions of these categories used during data analysis can be seen below. The frequency of these actions was calculated using the observation schedule and adding the number of minutes practitioners spent on each behaviour. Early *et al*.'s (2010) definitions of scaffolded and didactic interactions were combined to create the supportive behaviours identified for this research question. In other words, the supportive behaviours identified below included scaffolded and rote/didactic interactions. This is because both types of interactions can be considered supportive. These four categories of supportive behaviours were only coded from the data collected during child-directed activities.

Joining: Taken from *Table 1*, during this category of supportive behaviour, the practitioner became engaged in the play, either independently or after being asked by a child. They were active in the play situation, joining in with the game or playing parallel to a child. An example of this was a practitioner joining in during pretend play, pretending to be a monster.

Commenting: The practitioner described or explained the play activity, or spoke to the child about the play they were involved in. This included questioning the child about the play and commenting on past play activities. Sometimes practitioners used the child's play to engage with the child, referring to their 'pretend persona' and their actions. Although, these instances could be considered 'joining', since the practitioner was joining the pretend world, and acknowledging its presence, because the practitioner did not take this any further, these interactions were only seen as commenting. An example of this was a practitioner asking a child if they were making soup in their pot, which in reality was a bucket of sand.

Helping: The practitioner gave a child resources for their play, or helped them fulfil the play (for example, lifting them into a swing and pushing them). A practitioner may also have verbally suggested that a child engage in play. An example of this was a practitioner holding a child's hand while they balanced on a beam, and calling to another child to join them.

Instructing: The practitioner gave explicit instructions regarding how to use the resources in play. This category also included setting up a model for the child to copy, or correcting their actions, controlling or influencing their behaviour. An example of this was a practitioner telling a child how to paint a picture and what the picture should be of.

Only instructive and joining in behaviours were analysed for this research question. These two behaviours were chosen because they showed the most variation in the two contexts.

Ethical considerations

Practitioners

Prior to data collection, information letters were sent to staff, informing them about the research and explaining that they could request not to be included in the observations (see *appendix 1*). Since the practitioners were the primary participants of this research, their consent was most significant. It was also important that the practitioners were aware of what

the research would involve so that they could make an informed decision about participating. All practitioners were informed about when the observations would take place, and that I would be present throughout the day. They were informed that I would be focusing on how the day was structured at their setting, how activities were organised for the children, and what the adults and children did together. In order to make the participants feel as comfortable as possible, it was made very clear to each of them that they would not be 'evaluated, studied or used as a model' (Flanders, 1970: 73).

Although staff received information letters prior to my arrival, I made sure to ask each practitioner if it was ok that I observe them and explained my project to them once more before starting the observations. Staff who were not part of the target classrooms but were present during the observations were also informed about what I was doing and their consent to be observed was also given. Staff who were present at the setting but not participating in my research were also informed about my research so that they were comfortable and familiar with me if they saw me again in the classroom or outside during data collection. In all four settings, no practitioner requested not to be observed.

Each participant was guaranteed anonymity. As part of this, the gender of every participant was not specified. Because there are generally less males working in ECEC settings (Norway: SSB, 2017a; England: DfE, 2014), this information may have identified particular participants. In addition, although this information could be particularly interesting when looking at who is involved and supporting play, it was not relevant to the present research.

During the data collection, I made sure to sit far enough away from the participants so that they were not acutely aware that I was watching what they specifically were doing. I felt it was important not to single any participants out by letting them know that it was not only their actions that I was noting down and that I was watching the activities in the whole room or outdoor area.

Throughout my time in each classroom it was vital to me that the participants felt relaxed. This was easiest at the Norwegian kindergartens, where I was slightly familiar to some of the staff members. Nonetheless, whenever there was a chance, in every setting, I engaged in casual conversation with the practitioners. During lunch times, I sat with the staff and made

sure to show my appreciation for being able to visit their classrooms. Before leaving each day, I thanked all the members of staff present for allowing me to observe them.

Children and parents

While children were not directly the participants of this research, special consideration was taken to accommodate their presence. As with the practitioners, parents and carers also received an information letter, describing my research project and letting them know when I would be at their setting (see *appendix 1*). It was explained to them that individual children would not be observed and that parents could exclude their child from the observations if they wished to. Children were also told that I would be in their settings, watching what they did during the day. They were also given the choice not to be observed and were informed that they could ask not to be observed at any time. No child asked not to be observed, although some children were a little sceptical of my presence. Any time a child asked me what I was doing, I explained the project as simply as possible and asked if it was okay that I carried on watching.

As Folque (2010) points out, children should feel comfortable at all times when participating in any research. Although children were not participating as such, this was still an important issue to think about. In addition, Nolan *et al.* (2013) suggest that the time and duration of observations are important considerations when researching with children. This was primarily achieved by sitting far enough away from the children that they were not acutely aware of my presence and taking breaks during mealtimes. I also made sure to engage in conversation with children when I was not doing observations to help them feel more comfortable with my presence.

Validity and reliability

Validity and reliability are two important concepts in any type of research. Reliability in qualitative research specifically involves the question of whether the research could be repeated by another researcher and produce the same results and conclusions. Because this is not always easy to know, Denscombe (2007) suggests that the purpose, theory and aims of the research should be made clear to the reader. Others should have a clear understanding of how the research was undertaken and the context and reasoning for the steps taken (ibid).

The validity of this type of research, on the other hand, involves the findings and conclusions made. As Cohen *et al.* (2000) suggest, validity is addressed through the 'richness and scope of the data achieved' (p.105). In order to produce sound findings, influences on the findings should be identified. The complexity of the phenomenon investigated should also be addressed and possible alternative explanations should be suggested (Denscombe, 2007; Bowling, 2002). In addition, triangulation is also an important method of ensuring validity (Denscombe, 2007). Here, an additional method of data collection may be used to confirm the findings further. Finally, how the findings corroborate with previous research on the topic can also be used as an indicator of validity.

However, because of the nature of play, findings from research on play are not always easy to compare and generalise (O'Connell & Bretherton, 1984). In addition to this, the final data collection for this thesis was done by just one researcher, making it susceptible to bias and unreliability. Despite this, validity and reliability was strengthened using several methods.

To begin with, having some knowledge about the ECEC systems in England and Norway helps confirm the validity of the data. Hughes (1976) believes that 'validity is confirmed when the observer learns the social norms and rules of the group being observed…' (cited in: Bowling, 2002: 364). This knowledge was gained through research on ECEC settings and personal experience in the two contexts. So that readers gain this knowledge to understand the findings presented, a review of the literature on ECEC settings in England and Norway is presented in the literature review. In addition to this, examples from the observations are included in the analysis and discussion of the data, so that a transparent representation of the findings is presented, indicating the validity and reliability of the research. This information helps readers to see where conclusions have been drawn from and creates a more holistic view of the data.

Another method of strengthening both validity and reliability was using pilot observations. The pilot observations assisted in determining whether the observations would indicate the results needed to answer the research questions as well as the level of agreement between researchers. Somewhat in contrast to Hughes' (1976) idea presented above, Bowling (2002) believes that researchers should observe 'unfamiliar social settings and interactions' as this makes it unlikely that researchers will overlook or take activities for granted (p.363). This idea was considered when recruiting the additional researcher. Although the other researcher

was a colleague, she was unfamiliar with early childhood research and had no previous experiences in ECEC settings. This was seen as an advantage since she had the research expertise needed but not the ECEC background, making her more likely to remain impartial during observations. With the combination of my knowledge of ECEC and her neutral outlook, we made a good team. Because of time restrictions and difficulty recruiting settings, however, it was not feasible to have another researcher present during the final observations and this may have reduced reliability somewhat.

To compensate for this, an observation schedule, looking for specific activities during child-directed activities, was used. These were activities and categorisations tested and agreed upon during the pilot observations, and contained strict definitions. Because different observers may take note of different activities, affecting the validity of the data, the observation schedule ensured that researchers would look for the same activities, should the present research be replicated. By having an observation schedule, a 'framework for observation' was provided, reducing differences that may have appeared due to individual perceptions of events and situations (Denscombe, 2007: 195). Similarly, making the decision to watch just one participant at a time helped to reduce what was observed, thus heightening inter-researcher reliability further. To compensate for the fact that another researcher may have chosen to observe a different participant, I made sure to alternate between participants throughout data collection.

Another issue with the observation schedule was the definition and operationalisation of concepts. Because play is an elusive concept, it is challenging to operationalise. What is more, Schwartzman (1978) speculates that researchers are often hypothetical and arbitrary in their definition of play (p.7). Although I tried to avoid this as much as possible, my definitions and operationalisations are still limited. Cohen *et al.* (2000) suggest basing operationalisations on literature to make them more sound. This method was used for the present research, whereby definitions and uses of terms are presented in multiple chapters. However, the validity of the data may have been compromised due to the operationalisation of abstract constructs in the first place. Terms such as play, creativity, imagination and support are not easily operationalised and are rather subjective. Because of this, clear descriptions of how these constructs were defined and operationalised in the research is vital so that readers have a full understanding of how the concepts were used in the present research.

Limitations

In addition to the limitations of reliability and validity, there were also limitations with the method of data collection and the data collection itself. These are presented below.

4.1.12 Observations

As with any kind of research, there are limitations. Regardless of the limitations presented below, the method of observation was chosen because it created a clear overview of typical activities and the actions of practitioners (Greig *et al.*, 2007).

Misinterpretation and bias. Intentions and ideas are not easily observed or interpreted fairly by an outsider (Darlington & Scott, 2002), which may lead to meanings being lost or misinterpreted by the observer (see also, Bell, 2010; Denscombe, 2007). As an outsider, observing only the actions of the participants, I did not have a full understanding of what was going on in each play situation or knowledge of any past activities that may have led to the play situation – something that Canning (2012) brings up when talking about play observations. Similarly, Morgenthaler (1988) points out that 'there are almost always internal processes involved in play…' (p.363), something that I had no insight into during the observations. Linked to this is the fact that participants were not given a chance to explain their intentions or the situation surrounding their interactions. Perhaps with the use of interviews or recording participants and allowing them to explain their actions, a more well-rounded representation of the interactions between children and practitioners would have been presented. However, due to time restrictions, as well as limited resources this was not feasible.

The idea of internal processes and intentions occurring was, however, considered throughout the data collection process. There were occasions when actions were quickly noted down as they happened but the notes had to be changed soon afterwards when it was revealed that the practitioner was actually on their way to do something else. For example, at first glance it seemed that a practitioner was choosing a new book to read with a child. Upon closer attention, it was revealed that they were simply putting the book back onto the shelf and then leaving the reading corner. On another occasion, a practitioner seemed to have left the room suddenly. It then turned out that the practitioner was fetching a resource for the play. When occasions like these occurred, notes were quickly edited to accurately represent the situation.

Close attention was paid to practitioners and the context of their actions, to avoid misinterpreting the situation as much as possible. This also helped to gain a greater understanding of each situation.

Social desirability. Consideration of social desirability and the Hawthorne effect was also an important idea to keep in mind for this research (Denscombe, 2007; see also, Bowling, 2002; Darlington & Scott, 2002). This theory suggests that practitioners may alter their behaviour on account of the presence of a researcher. To avoid this as much as possible, I spent some time before observations, talking to some of the participants and getting to know them better, helping them act more naturally when the observations began (Bowling, 2002; Denscombe, 2007). Another way that social desirability was regulated was by the use of pictures and symbols in the observation schedule. As previously mentioned this was to avoid putting practitioners off or leading them to act in a particular way.

4.1.13 Data collection

Some limitations with the data collection specifically, include the following:

Lost parts of the day. Observations took place during a specific part of the day, a time when most children had been dropped off for the day, and most of the practitioners had arrived for work. This may not be representative of what was occurring throughout the day since the first and last few hours of the day could have involved greater practitioner-involved play. However, practitioners advised that this time would be best to do the data collection since most, if not all, the children were present and the school day was underway. Starting the observations earlier, as soon as the settings opened, for example, would mean that less children were present and practitioners may have interacted with the children more than usual. This would not however, be representative of the day. The practitioners may also have had less time to interact with children during the earlier hours of the morning, doing administration work or comforting children who had just arrived. This would also not be representative of the day.

In addition, I was not present during most of the mealtimes and did not make any observations when the children were eating. This was a time for the practitioners, children and I to have a break from the observations. In addition, these were not seen as play times,

although playing does often occur at these times. These periods may have, however, offered opportunities for talking and interaction that were not present during any other part of the day, and is something to consider. The same is true for big transitions, another time that I did not observe.

Lost developmentally important activities. Darlington and Scott (2002) point to the fact that the observer is in control of what is recorded and therefore analysed. Linked to this, developmentally important activities such as those that took place during adult-directed activities were not accounted for in as much detail as the child-directed activities. In addition, transitions and mealtimes were not recorded at all. These are all-important experiences in ECEC settings and offer a great deal of valuable experiences for children. Play was the focus of this thesis and, although other activities that occurred throughout the day should not be disregarded altogether, they could not be given as much attention due to the word restrictions of this thesis. It is important to mention here that the greater emphasis on play does not mean that the other activities that took place were not considered beneficial or significant to the children's experiences and development. If I did this research again, I would have looked more closely at the adult-directed activities and observed how much support was provided during these times as well.

Differences in settings. When combining data from both settings in each country, it was important to consider the obvious differences between the settings. On the surface, the nurseries in England were noticeably different from one another. The biggest difference between these two nurseries was the number of children with SEN. More than half of the children in nursery C had some type of SEN or were considered vulnerable. Although this was the case, both nurseries were very similar in their approach to interacting with their children and the activities they provided throughout the day. In other words, this did not seem to affect the data.

The Norwegian kindergartens also showed obvious differences that were taken into consideration. For example, the target classroom at kindergarten B was a lot bigger than kindergarten A's, meaning that there were more practitioners present and more opportunities for practitioner involvement. Despite this, the amount and type of interactions were still very similar in both settings. Practitioners did not spend more time with the children or interact

with them in different ways. Overall, despite the differences in settings, they still showed similar findings, and no setting stood out a great deal.

5 Findings and analysis

Introduction

This chapter presents the finding of the data collection. Below, the three research questions are presented, along with the basic information gained through observations and discussions with participants. Following on from this, each research question will be addressed individually. Each setting will be presented separately before a summary of the data is described, answering the respective research question.

Research questions

1) How was the day structured in the observed ECEC settings in Norway and England? *What proportion of the day is spent on child- and adult-directed activities?*
2) How were the child- and adult-directed activity times used in the observed ECEC settings in Norway and England?
3) Were there differences in how practitioners participated and supported children during child-directed activities in the observed ECEC settings in Norway and England? If so, how?

Findings

5.1.1 Background information

Below is a summary of the basic information of the four settings, gained through observations and discussions with participants.

	Kindergarten A (Norway)	**Kindergarten B (Norway)**	**Nursery C (England)**	**Nursery D (England)**
No. of practitioners in the classroom	3	9	18	5
No. of children in the classroom	15	33	85	40
Age of children (years)	1-6	2-6	2-3	2-4
No. of SEN/ other concerns	1	1	48	0
School hours	07:30 - 17:00	07:30 - 17:00	09:20 - 15:20	08:15 - 12:30
Observation days	3	2	2	2

Table 2: A summary of the classrooms observed

5.1.2 Research question one: How was the day structured in the observed ECEC settings in Norway and England? *What proportion of the day is spent on child- and adult-directed activities?*

Below, a description of each setting will be introduced before a summary of the findings is presented. Details about the opening hours and activities that occurred throughout the day in each setting is presented prior to graphical representations of the data.

Kindergarten A (Norway): This kindergarten was open from 07:30 to 17:00 every day. The head teacher reported that children generally arrived by 09:00 and left from 15:00 onwards. According to a daily schedule displayed in the classroom, the children in this classroom had 'free play' and breakfast between 07:30 and 09:30 every day.

On Day One of observations, at 09:30, depending on their age, the children were either sent outside to play or remained inside playing. On Day Two, at 09:30, the children were asked to come together for a group time before they were divided into different areas to play.

At 11:00, on Day One and Day Two, all the children gathered together inside to have their first meal. Once all the children had finished eating, the youngest children were prepared for their nap outside and the others were helped to get dressed for outdoor play. This outdoor play and naptime lasted for roughly one-and-a-half hours on both days. Once outdoor playtime was over, the children were led inside to get changed and either lie down to relax or draw quietly for quiet time. After 15 minutes, the children had their second meal. This lasted for another hour before the children were given time to play as they pleased for the rest of the day. This playtime occurred inside on all three observation days.

Day Three was set up slightly differently because the children and practitioners went on a walk. At 09:30 the children were helped to get dressed appropriately for the trip. They returned to the setting at 12:00, after which the day continued as normal with quiet time occurring immediately upon their arrival. *Table 3* illustrates this information and how these activities were categorised.

Time:	07:30 - 09:30	09:30 - 09:50	09:50 - 11:00	11:00 -12:00	12:00 - 13:30	13:45 - 14:00	14:00 -15:00	15:00 - 17:00
Day One	**Free-play:** *Child-directed activities*			Eating	**Free-play:** *Child-directed activities outdoors (+nap time)*	**Quiet time:** *Adult-directed activity*	Eating	**Free-play:** *Child-directed activities*
Day Two	**Free-play:** *Child-directed activities*	**Group time:** *Adult-directed activity*	**Free-play:** *Child-directed activities*	Eating	**Free-play:** *Child-directed activities outdoors (+nap time)*	**Quiet time:** *Adult-directed activity*	Eating	**Free-play:** *Child-directed activities*
Day Three	**Free-play:** *Child-directed activities*	**Trip:** *Child-directed activities outdoors*		Eating	**Quiet time:** *Adult-directed activity*	**Free-play:** *Child-directed activities*	Eating	**Free-play:** *Child-directed activities*

Table 3: Kindergarten A's daily schedule (Norway)

As can be seen from the table above, as well as in *Figure 8* below, children in this kindergarten spent a significant amount of time during observations engaged in what I identified as child-directed activities (72% of the day). Eating times have been included in adult-directed activities in *Figure 8* since meal times were compulsory for the children to attend. Although the children in this classroom could choose what they wanted to do during child-directed activities, they were given help and guidance from practitioners throughout the day.

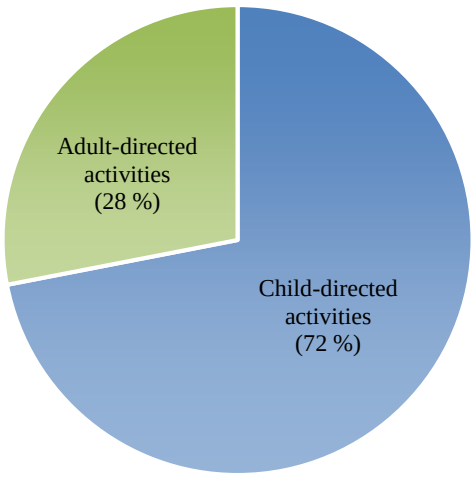

Figure 8: Daily activities, Kindergarten A (Norway)

Kindergarten B (Norway): This kindergarten was open from 07:30 to 17:00 every day. The head teacher reported that children were usually dropped off by 09:00 and were fetched from 15:00 onwards.

According to the head teacher in this classroom, the children had breakfast and 'free play' between 07:30 and 09:20 each day. At 09:20 on the first day of data collection, the children all gathered in a circle for group time. After group time, they were free to play as they pleased. At 11:00 the children had their first meal. Once the children had finished eating, they got ready to play outside for two hours. Between 14:00 and 15:00 the children had another meal before they continued playing indoors for the rest of the day.

On the second day, at 09:20, instead of group time, the four-year-old children from the target classroom and one additional class had gym. This group was observed during this time. After gym, the day continued in the same way as the first.

As can be seen from *Table 4*, as well as *Figure 9* on the following page, children spent most of their time during observations engaged in what I identified as child-directed activities (61% of the day). Eating times have also been included in adult-directed activities in *Figure 9* as these times were also compulsory for children to attend. The practitioners in this classroom guided the children in their tasks during child-directed activities and the children were never completely on their own in their activities.

Time:	**07:30 - 09:20**	**09:20 - 09:45**	**09:45 - 11:00**	**11:00 – 12:00**	**12:00 - 14:00**	**14:00- 15:00**	**15:00 – 17:00**
Day One	**Free-play:** *Child-directed activities*	**Group time:** *Adult-directed activity*	**Free-play:** *Child-directed activities*	Eating	**Free-play:** *Child-directed activities outdoors*	Eating	**Free-play:** *Child-directed activities*
Day Two	**Free-play:** *Child-directed activities*	**Gym:** *Adult-directed activity*		Eating	**Free-play:** *Child-directed activities*	Eating	**Free-play:** *Child-directed activities*

Table 4: Kindergarten B's daily schedule (Norway)

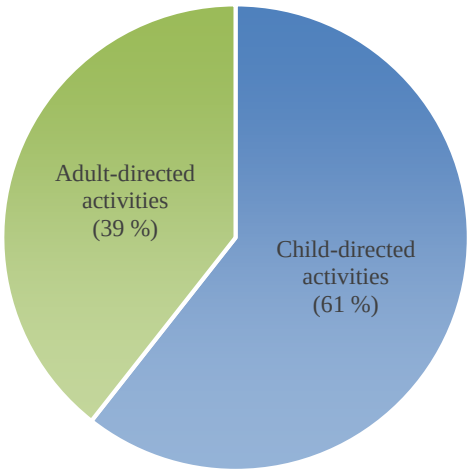

Figure 9: Daily activities, Kindergarten B (Norway)

Nursery C (England): This nursery began at 09:20 and ended at 15:20 every day. Children could stay for the full day or leave/arrive at 12:00.

As was observed, between 09:20 and 11:00 the children could choose who and what they played with. The children could also choose to be inside or outside during this period. At 11:00 the children had group time. The children had lunch at 11:30. At 12:00 some new children arrived and some of the children present in the morning session left. The new children had their lunch before starting the session in the same way as the morning one with about an hour and a half of free-play in or outside before group time. This information can be seen in *Table 5*.

Time:	**09:20 - 11:00**	**11:00 - 11:30**	**11:30 - 12:30**	**12:30 - 14:00**	**14:00 - 15:20**
Day One	**Free-play:** *Child-directed activities*	**Group time:** *Adult-directed activity*	Eating	**Free-play:** *Child-directed activities*	**Group time:** *Adult-directed activity*
Day Two	**Free-play:** *Child-directed activities*	**Group time:** *Adult-directed activity*	Eating	**Free-play:** *Child-directed activities*	**Group time:** *Adult-directed activity*

Table 5: Nursery C's daily schedule (England)

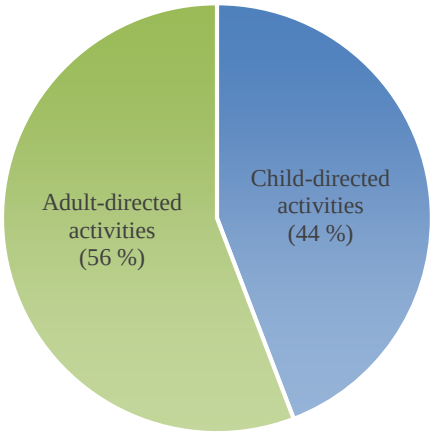

Figure 10: Daily activities, Nursery C (England)

As shown in the table above as well as in *Figure 10*, children in this nursery spent slightly more time on adult-directed (56% of the day) than child-directed (44% of the day) activities during data collection.

Nursery D (England): This nursery began at 08:15 and closed at 12:30. As was observed, children were dropped off at the setting until 09:15.

Between 08:15 and 09:15 the children could choose what they wanted to do. Circle time began at 09:15 every day. On the first day of data collection, at 10:15 the children were divided into groups, depending on their age, and did activities together with their group leaders (practitioners). After group time, the children were given a snack and then rotated activities for the rest of the day. These activities included music, gym, reading and outdoor play.

On the second day, after circle time, the children got into groups for group activities. After this, the children had 15 minutes to do an activity of their choice outside before having a snack. After snack time the children got into groups again. As *Table 6* and *Figure 11*, on the following page show, children in this nursery spent a significant amount of time on adult-directed activities (76% of the day) during data collection.

Time:	08:15 - 09:15	09:15 - 10:15	10:15 - 10: 45	10:45 - 11:00	11:00 - 11:20	11:20 - 12:05	12:05 - 12:20
Day One	**Free-play:** *Child-directed activities*	**Circle time:** *Adult-directed activity*	**Group tasks:** *Adult-directed activities*		Eating	**Group activities:** *Adult-directed activities*	**Free-play:** *Child-directed activities outdoors*
Day Two	**Free-play:** *Child-directed activities*	**Circle time:** *Adult-directed activity*	**Group tasks:** *Adult-directed activities*	**Free-play:** *Child-directed activities outdoors*	Eating	**Group activities:** *Adult-directed activities*	

Table 6: Nursery D's daily schedule (England)

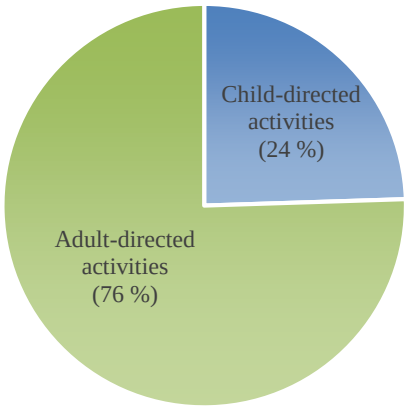

Figure 11: Daily activities, Nursery D (England)

Summary: How was the day structured in the observed ECEC settings in Norway and England? ***What proportion of the day is spent on child- and adult-directed activities?***
As the above findings show, the school day was set up in a relatively similar way in both countries. Despite the differences in school hours across settings, the children were allocated a similar amount of time to comparable tasks. For example, children spent some time outside during the observation days in both countries, and both countries participated in a combination of child- and adult-directed activities during data collection. Both countries began the day with child-directed activities before moving on to more structured activities set out by practitioners.

Although there were similarities, as expected, there were also stark differences between the two countries. The children in Norway, for example, spent more time on child-directed activities with more than half of the day being 'unplanned'. These times were explicitly labelled by the head teachers as 'free play'. The children in the English settings, on the other

hand, spent more time on planned, adult-directed activities throughout the day, with more than half of the day being adult-directed. *Figure 12* summarises these findings and shows the variation in child- and adult-directed activities in both countries. Here, it is clearly represented that the English settings spent almost the same amount of time on adult-directed activities as the Norwegian settings spent on child-directed activities.

The findings that both Norwegian kindergartens were mostly child-led in their activities were not surprising and support what Lekhal *et al.* (2013) found, in that Norwegian kindergartens value free play and activities that are not heavily planned by practitioners. It is important to note that this does not necessarily mean that one country had a more beneficial daily structure or that the adult-directed activities are not valuable for the children's development and preparation for formal schooling. This is particularly shown through Chien *et al.*'s (2010) research on the matter where the benefits of adult-directed activities for development were emphasised.

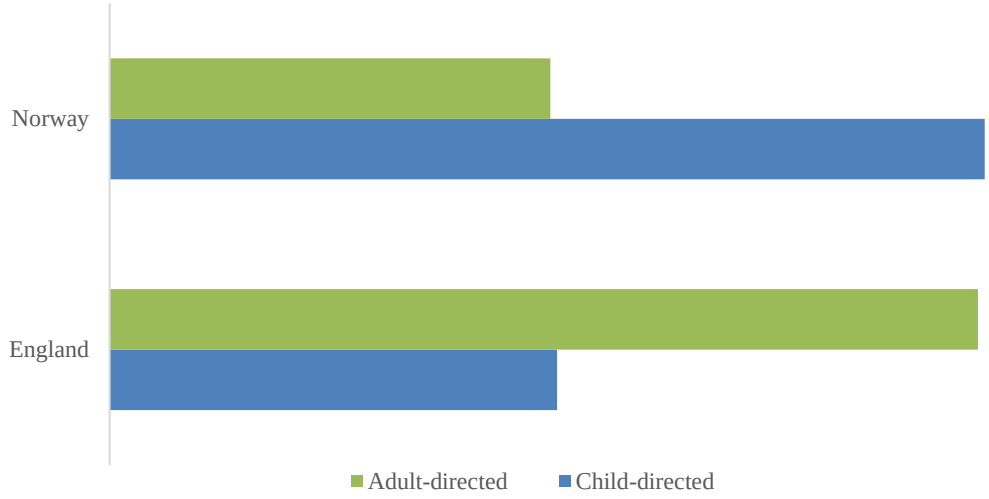

Figure 12: Summary of activities in the English and Norwegian ECEC settings observed

5.1.3 Research question two: How were the child- and adult-directed activity times used in the observed ECEC settings in Norway and England?

The resources and play environments provided to the children during child-directed activities in each setting will be discussed below. Following this, a brief description of the frequency of play situations evident during child-directed activities will be presented. This topic will be discussed in greater detail in the following section. Finally, a description of the adult-directed activities in each setting will be given.

Kindergarten A (Norway): The environment and resources for child-directed activities. According to the head teacher, about five-and-a-half hours of child-directed activities were spent indoors, from the moment the setting opened each day, and at least one and a half hours was spent outdoors every day. When the children where outdoors, they played together with children from other classrooms as well as their own. As presented previously, these times were identified by myself as child-directed activities.

It was observed that the indoor play areas provided spaces spanning across three main rooms. Here the children could find and set up resources for their play. Practitioners supplied children with drawing and colouring resources, and fetched other recourses for play situations as needed. Resources that children played with over the course of the observations included plastic animals, cars and train sets, Lego, Duplo, cards and other board games, and dolls. Children were also given everyday objects to play with such as a mailing tube, mattresses used for quite time, and handbags to do with what they pleased.

Outdoors children played with several ‘outdoor objects’ such as buckets and spades, wheelbarrows, tricycles and balls. They also used the jungle gym and slide, swings, climbing frame, playhouse and sandpit. Outdoors the children were also given everyday objects to play with such as milk crates of different sizes. The children could take the objects they wanted to play with from a shed containing all the outdoor toys.

In addition, both in- and outdoors, the children played chasing games and other play activities that did not require any resources.

Play situations during child-directed activities. Five of the ten play situations identified prior to data collection were evident at this kindergarten during data collection during child-directed activities, all of which were child-led. Pretend play was the most common, followed by making something and locomotor play. During pretend play, the children created fantasy worlds, sang and made up songs, played families and pretended to be animals. While involved in locomotor play, children chased each other, rode tricycles, climbed things and played with balls. Construction play and games with rules also took place but were less common than the other three situations. Construction play mostly consisted of building things with Lego and making towers. During games with rules children played card games.

Adult-directed activities. As mentioned previously, most of the day at this kindergarten centred on child-directed activities. Therefore, adult-directed activities did not occur frequently in this classroom. Practitioners had specific plans for these times but did not spend a lot of time on them during the three observation days.

Group time (20 mins.): During group time, which only occurred on Day Two of data collection, the children got together and were told about the plans for the day. The children were then divided into age groups and assigned different areas, both inside and outside, to play. The older children [*førskolebarn*], beginning primary school the following year, were given the task of preparing lunch with a practitioner. The children were all required to attend group time and were asked not to move around the room or play with any toys around them.

Quiet time (15 mins.): The children could choose between lying down or drawing but could not do anything else during quiet time. This time was allocated to relaxing, with gentle music and dimmed lights. All children were required to take part in this activity and were asked not to play with anything or get up and move around during these 15 minutes.

Trip: Although only child-directed activities were observed once the children arrived at their destination, the walk itself was adult-directed. The children were divided into age groups and went on different walks depending on their age. The older children from the target classroom went on a longer walk while the younger children walked a few meters to a playground where they played and ate their lunch. The younger group is the one that was observed during this time.

Kindergarten B (Norway): The environment and resources for child-directed activities. According to the head teacher in this classroom, the children had roughly five hours of child-directed activities indoors, from when the kindergarten opened to when it closed each day. They were also allocated at least two hours of outdoor play every day. As pointed out previously, these times were defined by myself as child-directed activities.

Inside, it was observed that children played in 'play areas' or independently chose something to play with. In the play areas, practitioners set up specific activities for the children. These activities included painting, using Hama beads, playing with playdough, drawing/colouring in, hammering onto cork boards, and building with Lego, all of which were used during data collection. The children also chose to play board games and puzzles from the cupboard, look at books from the shelf, and play in the fantasy play room where there was a toy kitchen and some dress up clothes and dolls. The children also used blocks and other construction objects during data collection. The indoor area was made up of four main rooms.

Outside, the children played in sandpits, on swings, climbed on the jungle gyms and slide and used the playhouses. They also had a forest area and a number of objects to play with such as buckets and spades, wheelbarrows, tricycles and balls, which were all made use of during data collection. These objects were stored in a shed and were accessible to the children as they needed them.

It was also observed that the children played games that did not require any resources or used naturally occurring resources such as puddles and leaves for their play.

Play situations during child-directed activities. Five of the ten play situations identified prior to data collection were evident at this kindergarten during data collection during child-directed activities, all of which were child-led. There was generally an even distribution of play situations throughout the observations. However, pretend play and making something were the most common situations, followed by locomotor play and games with rules. Construction play also took place but was the least common situation. During pretend play, children pretended to be animals and monsters, played families and made things in the sandpit. They also sang made-up songs and created pretend worlds during these times. During locomotor play, the children rode tricycles, chased each other and climbed things. During games with rules, the children built puzzles and played board games. During

construction play, children used a number of object specifically designed for this type of play (such as Lego, blocks and Polydrons) to build towers and figures.

Adult directed activities. These activities took up a small portion of the day at this kindergarten. The practitioners had specific plans for these times but seemed to be rather flexible as to how they were carried out.

Group time (25 mins.): During this time, the children sat in a circle while the head teacher took roll call. After this the children sang a few songs of their choosing, and were told about the plans for the day and things happening that week. All children were required to attend this group time and were not allowed to bring any toys to the circle.

Gym (60 mins.): The four-year-old children from the target classroom and one additional class (also four year olds) walked to a nearby hall and did some physical activities together. This time was spent playing chasing games and practising ball skills. All the practitioners present during gym time got involved in the games. The rules of the games were reiterated a few times to the children and seemed to be an important part of the session. All the children were required to take part in gym, and this time was seen as adult-led play.

Nursery C (England): The environment and resources for child-directed activities. As seen through the observations, this classroom had four hours devoted to child-directed activities each day and the children could choose what activities they would do during this time. It was observed that children could choose whether to play indoors, between three big rooms, or outdoors. The children could come and go as they pleased between these two environments. Before the school day started, practitioners set up different activities for children to choose from. The resources for these activities were set up at tables around the classroom, and included art material, tactile play troughs and construction blocks. There was also a fantasy play area and spaces for reading books. Outside, children could play on jungle gyms, and with other objects such as buckets and spades, balls and beanbags. These times were labelled child-directed activities, although some adult-led activities did occur in the art areas where children made things. While children were never forced to take part in any particular play during these times, they were often encouraged to join a play situation.

During the observation days, the children did not engage in play activities outside of the provided resources during indoor play but did play chasing games outdoors.

Play situations during child-directed activities. Eight of the ten play situations identified prior to data collection were identified at this nursery during data collection during child-directed activities. Making something, directed by an adult, was the most common situation, followed by making something led by the child and child-led locomotor play. However, adult-led locomotor play was also relatively common. During locomotor play, children chased each other, balanced, ran races, and threw objects. Construction and pretend play were the least frequent play situations, both child-led. Games with rules (child- and adult-led) occurred slightly more frequently. During construction play children built towers and train tracks. They pretended to be shopping and played families during pretend play, and played different board games during games with rules.

Adult-directed activities: As discussed previously, these activities took up more time than the child-directed ones. In addition, they were planned and relatively structured in their execution.

Group time (30 mins. x 2): On the first day of data collection the children sang songs and discussed the language of the week during their first group time. The children were also taught how to say hello in the language of the week. For their second group time, they went outside to watch sparklers being lit for their Bonfire Day theme. This was different from the normal routine, according to the head teacher.

On the second day, the children were read to and sang songs together with a practitioner during their first group time. For their second group time, they read a story and discussed what had happened in the book. All children were required to take part in all the group times and were not permitted to take any toys with them to these times.

Nursery D (England): The environment and resources for child-directed activities.
As seen through the observations, this classroom devoted 75 minutes to child-directed activities each day. During this time, children could choose who and what they played with. One hour of this time was spent inside, in a big hall, and 15 minutes were spent outdoors. The children were provided with activities to do, during what were identified as child-directed

activities. Some of these activities included art, playdough, and construction activities. Outdoors, children played with dress-up clothes, hula-hoops and tricycles. During these activities, children were never forced to join in but were at times strongly encouraged to do so. Although these activity times were labelled by me as 'child-directed', activities that occurred at the art table were considered adult-led. Children always played with the resources provided by this nursery during child-directed activities

Play situations during child-directed activities. Four of the ten play situations identified prior to data collection were observed at this nursery during data collection during child-directed activities, all of which were child-led except for making something. Making something, led by an adult, was the most frequently occurring activity during child-directed activities, followed by locomotor play. During locomotor play children played with hula-hoops, chased each other and rode tricycles. During pretend play, the third play situation observed, children made use of the dress up box and played in the shopping corner. Games with rules was the least frequent situation overall and consisted of children playing board games and matching games alone.

Adult-directed activities: These activities were highly structured and took up a large portion of the day at this nursery as seen previously.

Circle time (30 mins.): On the first day of data collection, during this time the children sat together and recalled the days of the week and counted who was present together with a practitioner. They discussed the country of the week and then sang songs. Some children were rewarded for good behaviour at the end of circle time.

On the second day, the practitioner read a story to the children during this time. The practitioner talked to the children about the story, pictures and the children's thoughts as they read. All children had to participate during these times and were not allowed to wander around.

First group time (45 mins): All children were required to stay in their seats and participate during these times. On the first day, the children were divided into groups depending on their age and did worksheet activities to do with shapes, letters and matching, with difficulty depending on the children's age. The practitioners guided the children in their

activities and helped them to stay on task. The children could pick an activity or toy after they had completed the task given by the practitioner. The children could only choose between specific objects; this time was still considered adult-directed because of this.

On the second day, the children got into groups to make faces for their Hobby Horses (a theme present in the story they read earlier in the morning). The children were given the materials and were shown how to make the horses' face. The children were asked to cut out specific shapes for the facial features and stick on pre-cut circles for the eyes. The practitioner showed the children how to stuff the head with newspaper and told them where to stick the ears, eyes and eyelashes.

Second group time: (Day 1, 45 mins.) The children rotated between three activities during this group time.

Music (15 mins.) This time consisted of a small group of children sitting together and singing songs led by two practitioners. At the time of data collection, the children were practicing their Christmas play so the practitioner read a story and guided them in their singing at the right times in the story.

Reading (15 mins.) This time consisted of a small group of children sitting on the floor listening to a story read by a practitioner. The practitioner asked some questions about the story once they were finished reading.

Gym (15 mins.) During gym time, a sports coach affiliated with a company called *Playball* led the children. Here the children practised ball skills and coordination through games and other physical activities.

(Day 2, 60 mins.): During this time, the children got into groups to make hummus. They were given the ingredients to make the hummus, premeasured and cut. A practitioner sat with the children and spoke to them about the ingredients, what they were called and what they smelled like. The children passed around the ingredients and had a small taste of some of them. Once they had discussed each ingredient they cut up some herbs with scissors and were given a little of each ingredient to add into a bowl. Once all the ingredients were added, the practitioner blended them in a food processer. The children each got a short turn to press the button on the food processor. Once it was blended the children got a jar of the freshly made hummus to take home with their names written on the jar.

Just before the children were finished for the day, a practitioner re-read them the story from earlier that morning, this time with some of the children acting it out for the class.

Summary: How were the child- and adult-directed activity times used in the observed ECEC settings in Norway and England?

Overall, child- and adult-directed activities were used in relatively similar ways in both contexts. During child-directed activities children chose who and what they wanted to play with, and during adult-directed activities children were in groups doing activities together with the direction of a practitioner. However, both types of activity times were generally more flexible in the Norwegian settings – children were given a lot of autonomy over how these times were spent. Despite the variation in flexibility, as well as time-allocation, both countries did make use of similar themes, resources and activities.

Child-directed activities: Although children were allocated different amounts of time for child-directed activities, the activities that occurred in both countries were very much alike and involved similar play situations and resources. Children were also provided with similar environments for their play (i.e. indoor and outdoor spaces) and created comparable stories or ideas within their play. Children in both countries tended to build towers and other figures out of Lego or blocks during construction play, explore similar pretend stories such as families and animals, and show an inclination to making things. These similarities are not surprising since children growing up in these two contexts experience a relatively similar childhood in terms of their everyday lives.

Despite these similarities, however, during child-directed activities the children attending the Norwegian kindergartens had slightly more autonomy over what they played with. The English nurseries had set up play areas and children could not take out new activities or toys as they pleased, whereas the children in the Norwegian schools could. Children attending the Norwegian kindergartens were also more commonly observed choosing to play games that did not involve resources or objects provided by the setting. This was common during pretend play.

What is more, pretend play was the most common play situation in the Norwegian kindergartens. Because these kindergartens were considered less structured than the English ones, these findings corroborate what previous researchers have found: that less structured

classrooms showed more evidence of pretend play (see, for example, Huston-Stein *et. al.*, 1977; Smith & Connolly, 1980). Although pretend play was most common among children in the Norwegian kindergartens, making something was a common activity in both countries, showing that this was a common ECEC activity in both contexts. Early *et al.* (2010) report similar findings about the activities children spent most of their time doing in the American pre-kindergarten classrooms.

Adult-directed: Both countries took part in adult-directed activities, although these activities varied slightly in their content and duration. Group times in particular seemed to be more planned in the English nurseries and had more verbal and creative content such as reading and making things. These activities lasted longer and were also generally more structured in the English nurseries. In Norway, even during these times, the activities were rather flexible in their content and seemed easily changeable to suit the children's wishes. For example, children were asked which songs they wanted to sing and could choose who they wanted to sit next to during group time. The English settings, on the other hand, were more structured in their implementation of group times, with specific songs and tasks to be done. Some children were also asked to sit in specific places or moved from the place they chose.

Reading was also a common activity during these times in the English nurseries, with time devoted to this activity every day. Although books were present in the Norwegian kindergartens, and reading with children was observed, no time specifically devoted to reading was observed.

5.1.4 Research question three: Were there differences in how practitioners participated and supported children during child-directed activities in the observed ECEC settings in Norway and England? If so, how?

In order to investigate practitioner participation and support, practitioners' general participation will first be addressed. The findings relating to this are presented on the following page in *Table 7,* which, represents the number of minutes practitioners spent in each activity. Following this, a description of this data is given relative to each setting. Next, an analysis of practitioner participation during specific play situations is presented. This information is given graphically following a description of each situation. Finally, the findings relating to practitioner support during child-directed activities are presented.

Descriptions of support in each setting are presented before each country is looked at as a whole. Finally, these findings are combined and compared with each other.

Activity (minutes)	Kindergarten A (Norway)	Kindergarten B (Norway)	Nursery C (England)	Nursery D (England)
Not present	115	133	81	19
Managing	84	32	43	19
Joining	29	62	32	16
Present	109	75	75	28
Not present activities:				
With another practitioner	21	47	45	7
Not in the room	26	10	9	7
With a child	49	11	15	2
Wandering around	40	47	10	1
Organising	13	14	8	3
With parents	4	3	0	1

Table 7: General practitioner participation in child-directed activities, summary (minutes)

Kindergarten A (Norway): General participation. As represented in *Table 7*, practitioners in this classroom spent the most time not present throughout the three observation days during child-directed activities. This time amounted to 115 minutes (34% of child-directed activity time) in total. They spent a very similar amount of time present, engaged in watching and commenting behaviour. These actions lasted for a total of 109 minutes (32% of child-directed activity time) in total with commenting taking up 56 minutes. The data shows that practitioners predominantly divided their time between being present and not present throughout the three days during child-directed activities. However, *Table 7* also indicates that while practitioners were not present when the children were playing, they were, most frequently, still occupied with a child in some way. Practitioners spent 49 minutes (36% of the absent time) with a child during these absent times. Nonetheless, practitioners spent the least amount of time actually joining in with play, spending just 29 minutes (9% of child-directed activity time) joining in. Managing activities also took up a relatively significant amount of time in this classroom with 84 minutes (25% of child-directed activity time) being spent on such activities.

Although *Table 7* shows that practitioners spent most of their 'absent time' with a child, the data shows that they also spent a considerable amount of time completely absent from the children (i.e. out of the room or with other practitioners/parents). This amounted to 51 minutes in total (34% of the absent time), showing that practitioners spent their absent times either with or away from the children. Practitioners also spent a considerable amount of time simply wandering around, watching the general area of play activities with 40 minutes (26% of the absent time) spent on this activity, and 13 minutes (8% of the absent time) on organising the classroom.

Kindergarten B (Norway): General participation. In *Table 7* we can see that practitioners in this classroom spent a significant amount of time not present (44% of child-directed activity time) during child-directed activities. This amounted to a total of 133 minutes not present in the children's play. What is more, practitioners spent most of their absent time either with another practitioner (36% of the absent time) or wandering around the play area (36% of the absent time), each adding up to 47 minutes. They spent a small amount of time with a child (11 minutes, 8% of the absent time) during these absent times, spending almost half of these times away from the children completely (with a practitioner/parent or not in the room – 60 minutes, 45% of the absent time combined). However, practitioners spent the same amount of time away from children as they did either being present or actively joining in with play (45% of child-directed activity time combined). Practitioners spent 32 minutes in total commenting on children's play and an additional 32 minutes (11% of child-directed activity time) on managing activities. Finally, 14 minutes (11% of the absent time) was spent on organising behaviour while practitioners were not present.

Nursery C (England): General participation. In *Table 7* we see that practitioners in this classroom spent most of their time not present (35% of child-directed activity time) during child-directed activities. This amounted to 81 minutes. This information is extended further when it is shown that practitioners spent a little more than half of their 'absent time' with another practitioner (45 minutes, 52% of the absent time). This means that a significant amount of time was spent completely away from the children (out of the room or with another practitioner – 54 minutes, 62% of the absent time combined). However, being with a child (15 minutes, 17% of the absent time) during absent times was still the second most common activity. Despite this large portion of time away from the children, practitioners spent 75 minutes (32% of child-directed activity time) present in a play situation outside of

participating themselves. They spent 60 minutes in total commenting on the children's play and just 32 minutes (14% of child-directed activity time) actually joining in with play. Managing activities (43 minutes, 19% of child-directed activity time) also took up some time at this nursery. Similarly, wandering around (10 minutes, 12% of the absent time) and organising (eight minutes, 9% of the absent time) during absent times were less frequent but were still rather commonly observed activities among practitioners.

Nursery D (England): General participation. From *Table 7*, we see that practitioners in this classroom spent most of the time simply being present (28 minutes, 34% of child-directed activity time), spending 24 minutes commenting on the play during child-directed activities. Practitioners spent almost as much time managing play situations (19 minutes, 23% of child-directed activities) as they did commenting and a little less time joining in with play (16 minutes, 20% of child-directed activity time). Practitioners did, however, spend some time absent from play situations all together (19 minutes, 23% of absent time).

Table 7 indicates that practitioners spent more than half of this absent time completely away from the children's play (with another practitioner/parent and not in the room – 15 minutes, 71% of absent time combined), with only two minutes (10% of absent time) spent directly with a child. Practitioners also spent some time wandering around (one minute, 5% of absent time) or organising the classroom (three minutes, 14% of absent time).

Kindergarten A (Norway): Play situations during child-directed activities. In total, practitioners interacted with children for 113 minutes (52% of child-directed activity time) while they were involved in pretend play. However, this pretend play was also the most common among the children and thus, the most available to the practitioners. Some of the pretend play instances observed, involved a child pretending to be a lion, a group of children playing family, and a pair racing cars down a mailing tube. When practitioners interacted with children during these times, they often watched and commented on the play, asked what the children were doing or got involved themselves.

As *Figure 13* shows, practitioners spent the least amount of time (9 minutes, 4% of child-directed activity time) overall interacting with children during games with rules. This was also the least common play situation among children. However, a practitioner was always close by during these times, for varying amounts of time. When practitioners interacted with

children during these times it was often to regulate the game or make sure the children were playing fairly.

Practitioners did not interact very much with children when they were involved in construction play, even though this play situation was more common than games with rules. Practitioners spent 15 minutes (7% of child-directed activity time) in total interacting with children during construction play throughout the child-directed activities. When practitioners did interact with children during these times it was often when they were joining in with the play. On the other hand, practitioners interacted with the children for a total of 42 minutes (19% of child-directed activity time) when they were making something. This play situation mostly consisted of drawing or colouring in. During these times practitioners mostly watched or commented on what the child was making. They also got involved in this play situation on occasions.

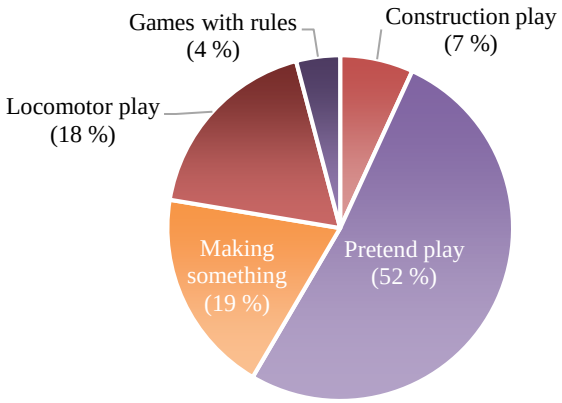

Figure 13: Play situations, Kindergarten A (Norway)

As *Figure 13* shows, practitioners also interacted with children somewhat regularly when they were engaged in locomotor play (40 minutes, 18% of child-directed activity time), which mostly consisted of ball games or climbing. During these times practitioners typically watched the children or commented on what they were doing.

Kindergarten B (Norway): Play situations during child-directed activities. As *Figure 14* indicates, practitioners at this kindergarten spent most of their time interacting with children in pretend play (37 minutes, 39% of child-directed activity time). Again, the most commonly occurring play situation during child-directed activities, and thus the most accessible.

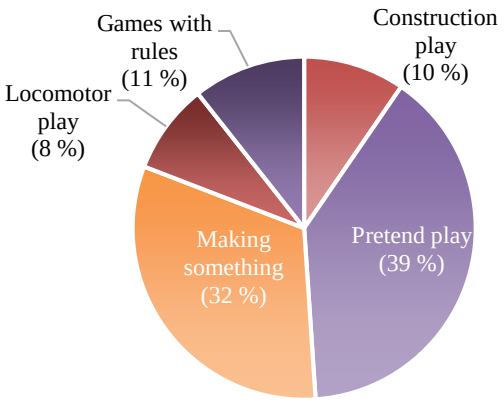

Figure 14: Play situations, Kindergarten B (Norway)

During these pretend play scenarios, some of the things children did were run away from 'crocodiles', chase each other in a game of monsters, and bake 'cakes' in the sandpit. Practitioners did not, however, interact with children when they were in the fantasy play room, a room specifically devoted to this play situation. When practitioners did interact with the children, they spent a considerable amount of time joining in and taking on the role of a pretend character. Practitioners also spent a significant amount of time interacting with children when they were making something (30 minutes, 32% of child-directed activity time), also a frequently occurring play situation. Here the children were often drawing while practitioners commented.

As *Figure 14* shows, practitioners spent the least amount of time engaged with children during locomotor play (eight minutes, 8% of child-directed activity time). Locomotor play mostly consisted of the children riding tricycles or running. When practitioners did interact with children they were often observing and commenting on the children's play.

Overall, the practitioners in this classroom spent a small amount of time interacting with children when they were playing games with rules (10 minutes, 11% of child-directed activity time) and involved in construction play (nine minutes, 10% of child-directed activity time), although these play situations were frequent among children. When practitioners did interact with the children during these times it was to help, watch or comment on the play.

Nursery C (England): Play situations during child-directed activities. As *Figure 15* indicates, practitioners at this nursery spent most of the time interacting with children while they made something independently, the most frequently occurring play situation. Practitioners most commonly watched or commented while children painted or stuck things together. These interactions lasted for 24 minutes (23% of child-directed activity time) in total.

As shown in *Figure 15*, practitioners also spent a relatively large amount of time interacting with children during locomotor play (30 minutes, 30% of child-directed activity time combined). Here practitioners mostly commented or watched the children while they balanced, threw beanbags or ran races. On the other hand, practitioners spent little time interacting with children while they were engaged in construction or games with rules (17 minutes, 17% of child-directed activity time combined), although when the children were playing a game with rules, a practitioner was usually there, watching and making sure the game was being played correctly. The children at this nursery did not engage in pretend play often and this is reflected in the amount of interactions practitioners were involved in (11 minutes, 11% of child-directed activity time). During pretend play, practitioners occasionally joined in but this was usually brief. While in pretend play, children most frequently recreated everyday scenarios such as family situations or shopping.

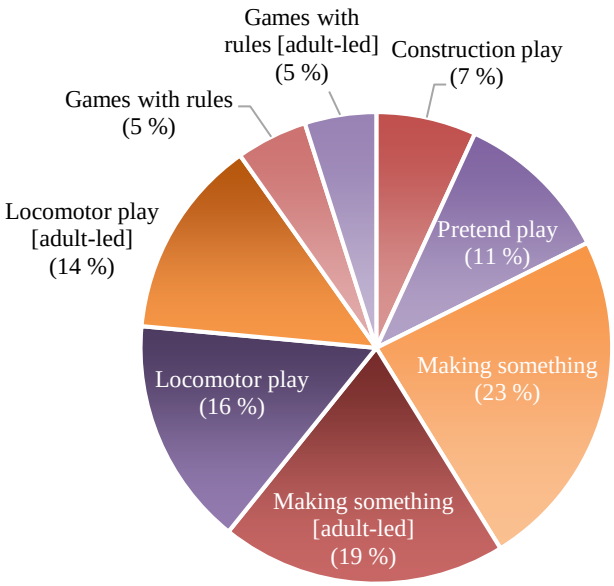

Figure 15: Play situations, Nursery C (England)

Nursery D (England): Play situations during child-directed activities. As *Figure 16* indicates, practitioners mostly interacted with children while they were making things, directed by a practitioner. These instances lasted for a total of 19 minutes (33% of child-directed activity time). Here practitioners spent most of the time commenting on what the children were doing while they painted or stuck things together.

Practitioners also spent a significant amount of time interacting with children when they were involved in locomotor or pretend play, both amounting to 18 minutes each (31% of child-directed activity time). Here practitioners often got involved with the play, such as pretending to be a character or throwing things to the child. They were not involved in any way when children participated in construction play, although this was not a frequently occurring play situation. Games with rules did not occur frequently either and practitioners were not very involved when it did, spending only three minutes (5% of child-directed activity time) in total on these activities.

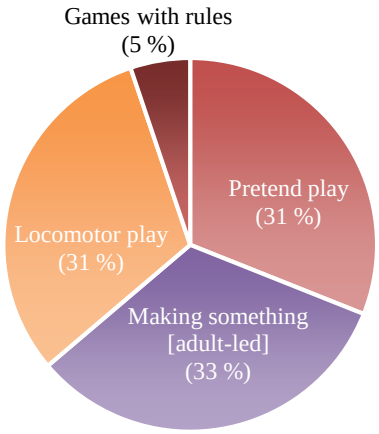

Figure 16: Play situations, Nursery D (England)

Kindergarten A (Norway): Supportive behaviours during child-directed activities. As *Figure 17* indicates, of all the supportive behaviours, practitioners spent the most time commenting and did not spend any time instructing in this kindergarten during child-directed activities. In total, commenting behaviours lasted for 64 minutes (38% of child-directed activity time). Some examples of these comments included questions about the play (during 17 of 34 commenting observations), encouraging words (during 7 of 34 commenting observations) or responses to a child's actions (during 4 of 34 commenting observations). Despite it being the most frequently occurring behaviour, none of these comments or conversations lasted longer than two minutes.

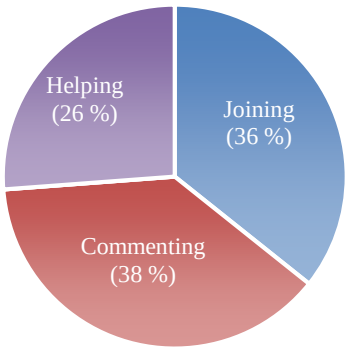

Figure 17: Supportive behaviours, Kindergarten A (Norway)

On the other hand, practitioners spent a significant amount of time, in relation to other supportive behaviours, joining in with children's play (60 minutes, 36% of child-directed activity time) and slightly less time helping (44 minutes, 26% of child-directed activity time). Joining in behaviour elicited longer interaction times than commenting even though it was a less frequent behaviour overall. During these times, practitioners pretended to be a character in the children's games (during 9 of 28 joining in observations) or used the games to engage with the children (during 11 of 28 joining in observations). Finally, during helping behaviour, practitioners most often held children while they climbed or lifted them into swings (five of 28 joining in observations). Play situations that contained the most diversity in supportive behaviour were pretend play and making something, also the two most frequently occurring situations in this classroom.

Kindergarten B (Norway): Supportive behaviours during child-directed activities. As *Figure 18* shows, practitioners at this kindergarten spent most of their time joining in, and the least amount of time instructing during child-directed activities. Joining in lasted for 34 minutes in total (42% of child-directed activity time) and instructing lasted for five minutes (7% of child-directed activity time).

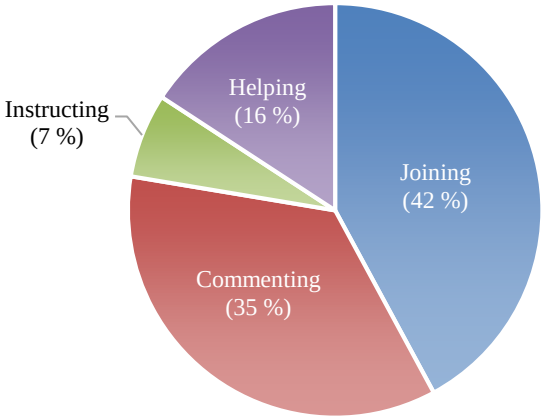

Figure 18: Supportive behaviours, Kindergarten B (Norway)

Instances of joining in varied in length but mostly involved the practitioner pretending to be a character in the children's game (seven of 12 joining in observations) or using the game to engage with the children (three of 12 joining in observations). Instructing behaviour involved the practitioner watching and helping the children play games with rules. This occurred just once during data collection. Commenting behaviour also took up a significant amount of time in relation to other behaviours, lasting for a total of 27 minutes (35% of child-directed activity time). During these times practitioners typically asked the children about what they were doing (three of 13 commenting observations) or gave encouraging words to the children as they played (three of 13 commenting observations). Helping was less frequent, lasting just 12 minutes (16% of child-directed activity time). During these times practitioners often lifted and pushed children on swings (two of 5 helping observations) or fetched resources for the children (two of five helping observations). The play situation that contained the most diversity in supportive behaviours was games with rules.

Norway: As indicated, commenting and joining in during child-directed activities were the most commonly occurring supportive behaviours in the Norwegian kindergartens. Practitioners most frequently exhibited these behaviours during pretend play, where they either took on a role as a character, or asked about the children's characters.

Joining: When practitioners joined in with play, they commonly followed the direction of the children, but also spontaneously thought up ideas for the game. Practitioners joined in after being requested to do so by a child (see *interaction five*) but also did so independently. Joining in elicited varied interaction times ranging between one and five minutes. When a practitioner was joining in the play, they often also had a conversation with the child (see *interaction one* and *interaction two*). This was most prominent during construction play and when the children were making something, times when pretend characters were generally not present. Examples of these interactions can be seen below. Both interactions lasted for most of the observations.

Interaction one

A child and practitioner are playing with Duplo

Practitioner: Should we use this blue one here for the big wall here?

Child: Yes.

They keep building while they talk.

Practitioner: Are you feeling sick today?
Child: No.
Child: Where is [practitioner]?
Practitioner: [practitioner] is not here today, she has a free day.

During *interaction one*, a child and practitioner were sitting on the floor playing with a box of Duplo. They had been building together for a few minutes before the practitioner suggested that they use one of the blue blocks for the big wall they were building. The child agreed to this suggestion and they carried on building in silence. After a short time, the practitioner asked the child if they were feeling sick. The child responded that they were not and asked about where another practitioner was that day. The practitioner explained to the child that the practitioner did not work at the setting on that day. Although the opportunity for further conversation was there, the practitioner did not initiate any other interaction with the child, regarding the play or otherwise. This interaction was very open-ended and did not involve much complex communication, something that was common in these kindergartens.

A similar exchange occurred during *interaction two*, where a group of children were sitting together at a table, drawing and colouring in. A practitioner walked over to the table and asked if they could join in. One of the children said yes and asked the practitioner to help them with their colouring in. The practitioner asked what the child would like to colour in and they agreed on an octopus. The practitioner asked what colours they should use and what the names of all the sea creatures were. After a short time of silently colouring in, the practitioner got up and left the room. This interaction contained slightly more concept development than the previous interaction, in that the practitioner used the opportunity to incorporate the child's knowledge of colours and sea creatures into the play, but this was still on a relatively low level. This interaction was also very open-ended and relied on the direction the child took.

Interaction two
A group of children are drawing and colouring in at a table.
Practitioner: May I draw too?
Child: Yes, colour with me!
Practitioner: Which picture should we colour?
Child: Octopus…

Practitioner What colour should we make the octopus?
Child: Red
Practitioner: Should we name all the creatures here? There's an octopus and a crab...

The above interactions are good examples of how practitioners joined in during making something and construction play in the Norwegian kindergartens. While joining in with these play situations, practitioners often had discussions with the child about the task or other related topics at varying levels and were generally open-ended in their interactions. However, these interactions were usually very brief.

While joining in during pretend play, on the other hand, practitioners always joined the child's play once the game had started and never changed the storyline in any way, keeping their interactions flexible. *Interaction three*, illustrates an instance where a practitioner joined a pre-existing play. Some children were playing parents when a practitioner joined them and made crying sounds for the doll they were holding. The practitioner added to the narrative the children had already began, saying that the baby had fallen over and needed to go to the doctor. Following this a child accepted the practitioner's contribution and said they should take the baby to the doctor quickly. This interaction was, however, short and did not involve any further communication. The practitioner left the play scenario soon after the interaction and did not return.

Interaction three
The children are playing parents with the practitioner.
Practitioner: Waa, waaa! The baby is crying. She fell over. We need to go to the doctor.
Child: Let's take her to the doctor. Hurry!

Conversely, *interaction four* lasted for the entire observation. The practitioner used the game the children were already involved in to interact with the children. During this interaction, a group of children were playing in the forest area, balancing on logs suspended with ropes. The practitioner watched the children play before they joined in and said the children should be careful of the 'crocodiles'. Another group of children came over and asked if they could join in. The practitioner used this opportunity to stay in character and told the new children they could join the adventure. Here the practitioner helped create a fantasy world and encouraged the children's play further by adding to the narrative and making sounds and

voices of imaginary things. The practitioner remained in this area of the playground for many observations, narrating the pretend scenario while the children balanced and acted out the game. This was the only pretend scenario that received this much attention and lasted for multiple observations.

Interaction four

Some children are climbing and balancing on logs.

Practitioner: Be careful of the crocodiles!

Child: Can we play?

Practitioner: Yes, you may join our adventure!

These two interactions represent both extremes of practitioner involvement (i.e. long and short interactions) without being invited to do so. Although varying lengths of interaction occurred during joining in, interactions under four minutes were prominent during these instances.

In comparison, *interaction five* involved two children who indirectly asked the practitioner to join their pretend world. In this world, the children had baked a cake. To begin with, they showed the practitioner the cake. The practitioner took the opportunity to join the play and asked if they could taste the cake. They discussed the flavour of the cake and how good it was. The children left the practitioner briefly to 'bake' a new cake before they brought it to the practitioner. The practitioner continued the play by responding to the idea of a new cake and encouraged the children by saying it was a tasty cake. This interaction lasted for the entire five-minute observation but also ended there. As mentioned, this type of interaction was common, whereby the practitioner joined in after being asked by the children. Although these interactions were common, they usually did not last for more than one observation.

Interaction five

A group of children have made a cake in the sand.

Child: Look! We made you a cake!

Practitioner: Oh! May I taste it? It is strawberry. Oh, that's my favourite flavour. Very good!

The children leave and come back with some more sand cake.

Practitioner: Oh, that's so kind of you to bring me another cake. Ooh yummy!

Instructing: Instructive supportive behaviour was only observed on one occasion in the Norwegian kindergartens. This instance took place while some children were playing a game with rules and was still very much open-ended. The practitioner's involvement during this play situation indicated that the rules were an important aspect of the game. The practitioner seemed to take on the role of mediator at this time, making sure the rules were followed and problems were quickly solved. During this interaction, the practitioner watched the children playing a memory game and remained with the children throughout the observation, monitoring the game and making sure the children were taking turns. The practitioner asked the children if they remembered how to play the game properly and explained the rules. When the children picked the cards, the practitioner told the children if it was right and made sure the children took turns. When a child got impatient, the practitioner told the child to wait their turn.

Interaction six

A practitioner is watching some children play a memory game.

Practitioner: Do you remember how to play? You only get one turn and you pick two cards. Remember? [child] can start.

Oh no, that was the wrong card.

[child's] turn now.

Child: Aww! I didn't get something.

Practitioner: Try again next time. [child]'s turn. Wait your turn.

Whoo! You got it. Did you see what the card was?

Child: It's my turn now.

Practitioner: No, you need to wait. That's not how you play.

Child: I got the car!

Nursery C (England): Supportive behaviours during child-directed activities. As *Figure 19* shows, of all the supportive behaviours, practitioners at this nursery school spent the most time instructing and the least time joining play. Instructing behaviours lasted for a total of 30 minutes (34% of child-directed activity time) and joining in lasted for 16 minutes (18% of child-directed activity time). During all instructing behaviour observed, practitioners showed or told the children what to do within the play. When practitioners joined in with play, on the other hand, they usually sat silently with the child, and did the same activity as them (five of

11 joining observations). It was also common for practitioners to suggested a play scenario to the children and help them implement it (three of 11 joining observations).

On the other hand, practitioners spent 17 minutes (19% of child-directed activity time) in total helping children. This was almost the same amount of time spent joining children's play. When practitioners helped children they most frequently helped with a play situation children were already involved in. They also spent a significant amount of time commenting on play, with a total of 26 minutes (29% of child-directed activity time). When practitioners commented, they most frequently used encouraging words to show their approval of what the child was doing (11 of 16 commenting observations). Locomotor play and making something were the two play situations that contained the most diversity in supportive behaviours.

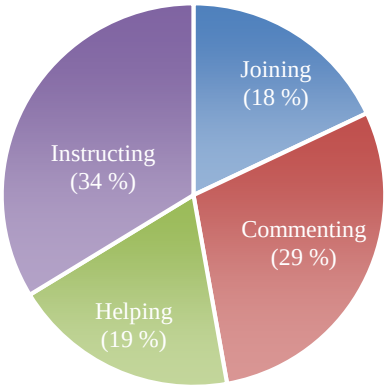

Figure 19: Supportive behaviours, Nursery C (England)

Nursery D (England): Supportive behaviours during child-directed activities. As *Figure 20* shows, practitioners at this nursery school spent the most time joining. They spent 18 minutes (39% of child-directed activity time) in total on this behaviour. During these times, practitioners most frequently created play scenarios for the children and then joined in themselves (four of five joining observations). The other three supportive behaviours were relatively evenly spread between helping (10 minutes, 22% of child-directed activity time), instructing (nine minutes, 20% of child-directed activity time) and commenting (nine minutes, 19% of child-directed activity time). When practitioners helped the children during their play, they responded to a request for help from the child. During instructing behaviour, practitioners usually directed what the child was doing, giving suggestions and explanations about what the child should do (two of three instructing observations). Finally, when commenting, practitioners most frequently encouraged the children to carry on with the

activity they were involved in (six of nine commenting observations). The play situation that contained the most diversity in supportive behaviours was making something, also the most frequently occurring situation.

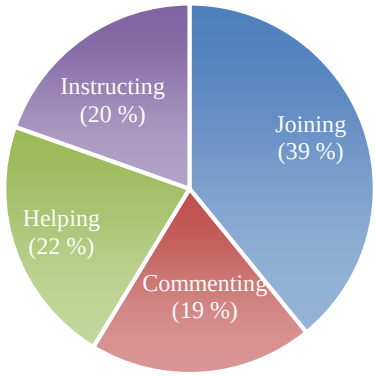

Figure 20: Supportive behaviours, Nursery D (England)

England: As indicated, instructing and joining in were common supportive behaviours in these nurseries, taking up a significant amount of time during child-directed activities. Practitioners most frequently exhibited joining in behaviours during pretend and locomotor play. During pretend play they narrated a story for themselves and the children to act out. During locomotor play, practitioners often initiated the play themselves. Instructing behaviours occurred most frequently during making something and consisted of the practitioner showing children how to do something according to their specifications.

Instructing: Instructing was a common supportive behaviour which mostly occurred during adult-led play. These interactions usually only lasted for a minute at a time, although some interactions did last longer. Below two instructing interactions are illustrated. Both occurred during making something, through adult-direction, and were common interactions during this play situation. On both occasions, following the interaction described, the practitioners remained with the children, watching what they did. It was common for the practitioners to devote time during instructing to demonstrating and explaining things to the children.

During *interaction one*, a practitioner sat with a child at a table, where they were making fireworks out of colourful cardboard and toilet paper rolls. The practitioner explained to the child that they needed to stick the cardboard onto the toilet paper roll. The practitioner

showed the child where to stick the pieces of cardboard and how to do it – demonstrating what they wanted the child to do.

Interaction one

A practitioner is helping some children to make fireworks out of cardboard and toilet paper rolls.

Practitioner: You need to stick this piece over here and this goes here. You see?

During *interaction two*, a practitioner was watching some children make hobby horses. The practitioner saw a child making their horse the wrong way around and told the child to fix it. The practitioner explained why the horse was wrong and how it should have been. The practitioner then suggested that the child use some glitter on their horse too. It was common for practitioners to suggest that the child add something to the thing they were making, as occurred during this interaction.

Interaction two

A practitioner is watching some children make hobby horses.

Practitioner: Put the horse the other way around. You can't have it like that it will be upside down and the reins will be on the wrong way. The mane needs to go on that side. You see, like this one. Maybe you can use some glitter on your horse.

Interaction three and *interaction four*, elicited the longest interaction times during this supportive behaviour. During *interaction three*, the practitioner watched some children making clay models. The practitioner noticed that the children were making the figures too big and asked them to start over and make them smaller. The children were not creating the models the way the practitioner had shown them, so they demonstrated how to do it again. The practitioner explained their actions to the children and described how theirs was different to the models the children had made.

Interaction three

The practitioner sees that the children are making big clay models.

Practitioner: Start over. That's too big. You need to make them small like this. It's not meant to look like that. This is how big you must make them, ok? Do it like this. I am rolling it small, you see?

Interaction four involved some children doing an egg and spoon race. This race was organised by the practitioner. The practitioner counted down for the children to run and explained how the race worked. They explained what 'ready, set, go' meant and showed the children where to stand. While the children ran, the practitioner went over to a nearby practitioner and spoke to them. Although the practitioner spent time explaining the game to the children, they did not seem very invested in the play, leaving to talk to the other practitioner when they got the chance.

Interaction four

Some children are having an egg and spoon race

Practitioner: Ready, set, go!

Remember what "ready, set, go" means. You have to wait until I say go. Wait, you stand here and you take this one, ok?

Joining in: Overall, joining in did not occur often in the English nurseries. When a practitioner joined in during play, they were often pretending to be a character or playing an active game such as throwing and running. The practitioners were often the ones to initiate this play. In other words, the children did not often ask the practitioners to join. When they were playing together, it was not common for practitioners to have a conversation with the children. Practitioners either played silently, saying a few encouraging words now and then, such as good job, or good colouring, or took on character roles, talking to the children in and out of play frames. However, because joining in and pretend play were not commonly seen in the English nurseries, these were not common interactions.

Two joining in interactions can be seen below. Both interactions lasted for longer than two minutes, and were initiated by the practitioner. During *interaction five* a practitioner was standing near a child, watching them play with two dolls. The practitioner was holding a doll too and narrating what the child was doing, as well as giving them ideas about what to do. The practitioner told the child that the babies were hungry and that maybe it should be lunch time soon. The child used this idea and agreed that it was lunch time and put the dolls at the table to eat. The practitioner then suggested that it would be bedtime after the dolls ate. When the child put the dolls into the bed, the practitioner asked if the child was singing to the babies and then began to sing too. Although the practitioner was helping the child to think of

new ways to play and suggesting what the child could do, the practitioner seemed to be directing the play to some extent.

Interaction five

A practitioner is playing with a child in the home corner with two dolls. The practitioner is holding a doll and so is the child.

Practitioner: Is it lunchtime for the babies soon because they are hungry?

Child: Yes.

The child takes both dolls to the table.

Practitioner: The babies are eating and then it is bedtime.

Practitioner: Are you singing to the babies? *The practitioner begins to sing.*

Similarly, during *interaction six*, a practitioner was sitting on the floor with some children, who were playing with blocks. The practitioner picked up a fairy and began to talk to it. The practitioner pretended to ask the fairy for a wish and then asked the children what they wanted to wish for. One child wanted to wish for a cake. The practitioner told them that was a good wish. During this interaction, the practitioner created the imaginary world and guided the direction of the play. However, this was a relatively open-ended interaction.

Interaction six

A practitioner is sitting on the floor with some children who are playing with blocks and figures. One of the figures is a fairy. The practitioner picks up the fairy.

Practitioner: Look! It's a fairy. Hello fairy. I would like to make a wish. I want to wish for a big, pink flying horse. What do you want to wish for [child]?

Child: Cake.

Practitioner: That is a very good thing to wish for.

During *interaction seven*, a practitioner asked a group of children if they wanted to pretend to be firemen. The practitioner made fire truck sounds and walked around the playground with the children. Once again, the practitioner created a pretend world and guided the direction of the play. However, this was the most open-ended interaction during this supportive behaviour.

Interaction seven

A practitioner has asked some children if they want to pretend to be firemen. They are walking around the playground.

Practitioner: Beeebaaaa, beeeebaaa! Pretend your car is on fire and the firemen are coming to rescue you and put out the fire.

Child: Ahhh! Help us!

Practitioner: Beeebaaaa, beeebaaaa! We're coming to save you little girl.

Summary: Were there differences in how practitioners participated and supported children during child-directed activities in the observed ECEC settings in Norway and England? If so, how?

As shown above, when addressing practitioners' general participation, we see that both countries spent most of the observation times not being present in play or simply watching and commenting on it, without a great deal of joining in.

Thinking about Christie's (1998) reflection on the importance of practitioner presence in encouraging children's play, the findings that practitioners were frequently not present is significant. Although practitioners in Norway spent a little more time 'not present' during child-directed activities, they were still available to the children (i.e. the children could see the practitioner because they were still in the room). Nonetheless, one explanation for higher instances of absenteeism in Norway is the fact that these children spent more time outdoors than the children in England, a time when practitioners were observed as generally less present in play. The fact that practitioners implemented a more 'free play' approach to the day is also reflected in this finding.

When focusing on the discovery that practitioners were not especially involved (i.e. joining) in children's play in both countries, O'Connell and Bretherton's (1984) conclusion that the involvement of an adult helps to create more diverse play opportunities, is also important. The fact that practitioners were not frequently observed joining in the Norwegian kindergartens indicates a preference for the children to play without adult interference. Although practitioners in England joined in to much the same extent as the Norwegian practitioners, the fact that they spent more time commenting and were a little more present within play situations, shows that adult involvement was slightly more prominent.

Although managing activities also took up some time in both countries, this was to be expected in any ECEC classroom and was not a very surprising finding.

As *Figure 21* indicates, the Norwegian kindergartens did not engage in any adult-led play situations during child-directed activities. These were only present in the English nurseries and were relatively prominent. Although the children could choose to be involved in these activities, when they were, they were given specific instructions on how to carry out the activity. It is not surprising then, that the most common form of interaction during this time was instructing.

It was also observed that it was less common for practitioners in the Norwegian ECEC settings to interact with children while they were involved in locomotor play. This may be because practitioners were often not present during this play situation. This play situation most frequently occurred during outdoor play, a time when practitioners were largely observed as 'not present' in these settings. Similarly, construction play was also not a common situation for interactions from practitioners. However, this was a common observation in both the English and Norwegian settings.

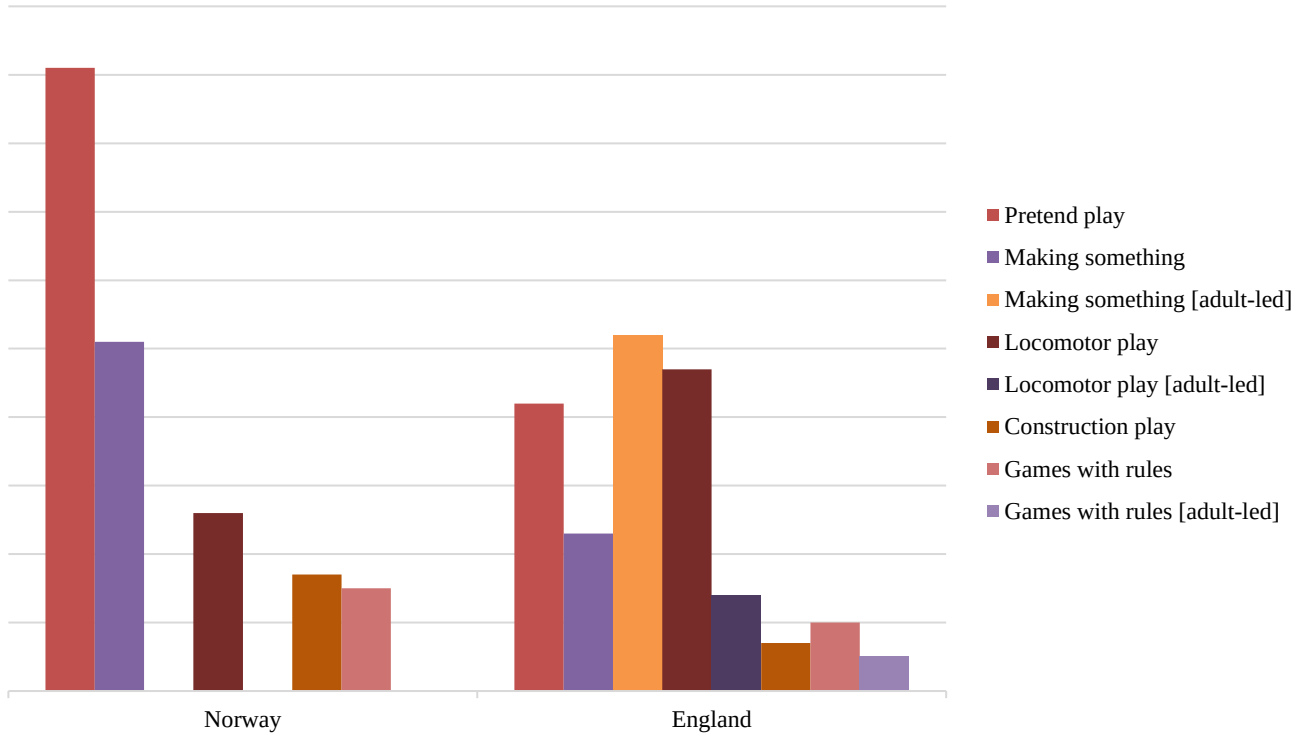

Figure 21: Play situations, summary

In addition, although practitioners in both contexts supervised and made sure the children were playing properly during these times, games with rules was not a common situation in which practitioners interacted with children overall. However, a practitioner was usually close by during these play situations. This shows that it was play situations that practitioners felt they should oversee. When practitioners interacted with children during these times, it was often to regulate the game or make sure the children were playing fairly.

As *Figure 21* indicates, pretend play was by far the most frequently occurring play situation in which practitioners interacted with the children in the Norwegian kindergartens. Although these findings may be due to the fact that children engaged in more pretend play overall, it also shows that practitioners in Norway actively encouraged and supported pretend play. In contrast, the English nurseries showed more variation in the play situations that practitioners got involved in, but overall showed less preference for pretend play. It is also important to note that although interactions during pretend play did not occur often, it does not mean that the English nurseries did not encourage or support pretend play, it was just less obvious. Another significant finding is that, overall, the English nurseries spent a lot of time making things, both during child- and adult-directed activities. This time was often used to make something specific, a characteristic of making something that Narey (2009) believes is also true of American ECEC settings. This guidance could be considered valuable in modelling to children how to be creative and take on creative tasks. On the other hand, when thinking about Fisher's (2013) view that the child's creative voice is limited by adult instruction, this type of modelling may be restrictive to children's creativity. In contrast, children in the Norwegian kindergartens had complete freedom to make what they wanted during these times. However, Narey (2009) suggests that it is not beneficial to assume that children's creativity will 'advance on its own', whereby practitioners do not take responsibility for learning processes that occur during these times (p.2).

When looking at the findings relating to the supportive behaviours observed in the settings, we see that instructive support behaviour was not as strongly present in the Norwegian kindergartens as it was in the English nurseries. This is an interesting finding since previous research into the quality of settings indicates that a balance between free and instructive play is imperative for high quality ECEC provisions (see Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002; Sylva *et al.*, 2004). However, these two research projects were undertaken in Britain, already indicating a preference for such a balance in this region.

In relation to this, the practitioners in Norway did not often tell children how or what to play, therefore demonstrating little instructing behaviour. This behaviour only occurred during games with rules, a time when rules were already in place about how to play, and only occurred on one occasion. This interaction was still rather open-ended and mostly involved the practitioner reminding the children to take turns or how the game worked. The practitioner's presence during this time seemed to help regulate the play and teach the children about the rules without taking away the children's feeling of independence over the play. Because of this, the practitioners seemed to show a preference for the children creating and discovering ideas for play on their own. Overall, there seemed to be an attitude that the play 'belonged' to the children.

The English nurseries on the other hand, showed greater instructive behaviour, with more directing involved. The interactions categorised as instructive supportive behaviour showed that practitioners were preoccupied with how children fulfilled the play and did not show much leeway for the child's own creative ideas during instructive behaviour, particularly while making something. Although the strict guidelines given to the children seemed unnecessary on the surface, the practitioners usually enhanced the children's play by frequently demonstrating ideas and explaining how or why they wanted something done a certain way. These explanations served to help children understand what was expected of them. *Interaction one, two* and *three* are good examples of this, where demonstrating and explaining took place during making something. After explaining things, practitioners either remained with the children, showing an interest in what the child did and how they used the practitioner's instructions, or left the play altogether. Either way, most instructive interactions, including the time spent watching the child, did not last for a full observation.

Joining in behaviour was also somewhat different in the two countries. In Norway, although they joined in more often than in England, practitioners most frequently entered the children's already existing imaginary worlds, relying on the direction the child took. The play remained very open-ended during these times, with the practitioner mainly joining in for a brief time, as a sign of encouragement or approval of the play. This showed that practitioners predominantly let children discover and explore their own play topics. Practitioners did not frequently join children in their play for long periods of time and often left before the child had finished the play.

There were some occasions when practitioners used the opportunity to join in so that they could teach or help children to practice skills they had learnt, through the conversations the activities elicited. However, this was more frequent during commenting behaviour. Although the idea of these conversations seems highly beneficial, practitioners did not often pursue long or complex discussions. The topics were usually shallow and did not elicit long responses from the child or practitioner. Although some conversations contained slightly more concept development than others, the content mostly consisted of recalling colours and names of things. Even though it was not common for practitioners to explore concepts further with children, they did sometimes encourage children to think about their actions or different elements of their play and connect them to the real world, such as during *interaction five* involving the cake.

There were also a handful of instances where the practitioner joined the play, playing parallel to the child, not interacting very much with them. This behaviour was also considered to encourage children to continue playing, as well as modelling how to play. Despite the general open-endedness of the practitioners' participation, there were also instances where the practitioners spent a bit more time subtly changing the play or adding their own narratives. This was not frequent but did occur to varying degrees. Regardless, children were still able to change the narrative to their own liking during these times, keeping it open-ended.

In the English nurseries, narrating and creating imaginary worlds for the children was more common. Practitioners were observed describing imaginary worlds to the children such as during *interaction six* and *seven*, or narrating a play scenario such as in *interaction five*. During these times, the practitioner initiated the pretend play, with a slight element of directing apparent. Similar to the instructing behaviour, while joining in, practitioners seemed to primarily be showing children *how* to play. Much like the practitioners in the Norwegian kindergartens, when practitioners in England joined the children's play it was usually to show encouragement for play. Practitioners seemed to only join in when they thought the children needed help exploring a play topic or to encourage them to get involved in a play situation. These interactions did not explore concept development or relate the play to real-life situations but practitioners did use real-life themes, particularly during pretend play (see *interaction five* and *seven*).

Based on these findings, it seems that when children were given ‘free play’ opportunities in the English settings, practitioners showed an inclination towards supporting children’s play by demonstrating how to play ‘correctly’. In contrast, the practitioners working in the Norwegian kindergartens showed a preference towards letting children create and engage in play on their own, discovering and learning through their own play processes.

6 Discussion

Below, the three most significant findings from the research are presented.

- Adult-direction was more present in the English ECEC settings observed than in the Norwegian ones.
- Pretend play was more common in the Norwegian ECEC settings observed.
- Play during child-directed activities was supported differently in the two contexts based on the observed ECEC settings.

Direction. One of the biggest differences between the two contexts was the frequency of adult-directed activities in the ECEC settings observed. These findings point to the fact that different cultures may deem different activities to be beneficial in terms of children's development. Within the settings observed, it seems that these two countries valued and provided different play opportunities for the children through assigning different amounts of time to adult- and child-directed activities. The English nurseries spent more time on adult-directed activities and even included adult-led instances within the child-directed activities. This indicated that adult direction was seen as beneficial in these English settings. Adult-led instances within child-directed activities were most prominently observed during 'making something', where practitioners demonstrated specific wishes for how the child carried out the activity. An example of this was seen in *interaction three* of the final research question, where a child joined a practitioner to make a clay model. Here, the practitioner told the child exactly what to make, even specifying how big the model should be. Interactions of this kind were not uncommon in the English ECEC settings observed.

Adult-led play instances during child-directed activities in the English nurseries were also structured and showed evidence of planning for the learning opportunities they may offer. This was specifically seen when practitioners asked children to make something specific such as fireworks and hobby horses during these times. Here the children were only allowed to use certain colours and could not deviate from the practitioner's design. As seen in some of the interactions represented in the final research question, children were asked to start over, or fix their design if they strayed from what the practitioner wanted. These findings support what the 2017 EYFS framework plan suggests in that play should be planned and purposeful

during both child- and adult-directed activities. It was evident that practitioners had thought about what they wanted the children to do since all the resources were provided to the children and the design of these activities was set up before the children joined the play.

In addition, adult-directed activity times were also more structured in English ECEC settings than the Norwegian ones, and showed greater evidence of planning for creative content. This was demonstrated by practitioners assigning specific times for reading and making things (i.e. imaginative and creative tasks), during adult-directed activity times. These times lasted longer and occurred more often than in the Norwegian ECEC settings observed, therefore containing more activities. In other words, the children participated in more activities that required preparation from the practitioners during these times. This indicated that these times were planned and thought through by the practitioners. An example of this was the hobby horse activity in one of the English nurseries. Here resources were prepared for the children prior to the activity. This activity was also linked to the story the children were reading earlier in the day, indicating that the practitioners had planned it that way, helping to link the story to experiences the children could identify with in some way.

What is more, the prevalence of adult-direction across activities in the English ECEC settings demonstrated guidance and modelling of how to play and use imagination and creativity within play situations. Practitioners often explained and demonstrated to the children how to carry out the play, indicating some forms of Vygotsky's *assisted performance*. This direction encouraged children to follow instructions and tested how they implemented suggested changes into their activities. Despite this, however, the EYFS does suggest that practitioners join in with children's play, something that was not observed often in these ECEC settings. Still, the EYFS does indicate that more adult-led play should occur as children reach age four. In light of the above findings however, this idea seemed to be implemented across all ages during data collection in the English ECEC settings.

In contrast, the flexibility of both adult- and child-directed activities in the Norwegian kindergartens was clearly apparent during data analysis. Children were given greater autonomy during both these activity times in the Norwegian ECEC settings. Children were given the choice to choose the resources they used during child-directed activities and were occasionally asked what they would like to do during the adult-directed activities. Some examples include choosing songs during group time and choosing a game to play during

gym. During child-directed activities, children in these settings were provided with many opportunities to engage in play the way they wanted to, without practitioners altering the children's play agenda. The self-expression suggested in the Norwegian framework plan seemed to be frequently indicated during the observations in these settings, where children were given opportunities to 'explore alone'. Children were encouraged, throughout the day, to create their own learning opportunities, with practitioners merely supervising. This corroborates what Bodrova and Leong (2010) believe: that children are expected to develop play skills on their own. This was specifically indicated through how much time practitioners in these settings spent away from, or simply watching, the children play. When practitioners did join the children's play, they continued to follow the children's direction, often seeming to join in as a sign of encouragement or approval of the play. This was indicated in the final research question where it was mentioned that practitioners generally did not alter the children's play and joined in with an already existing play narrative.

What is more, the high frequency of not present behaviours in the Norwegian kindergartens during child-directed activities indicates that practitioners were more partial to letting the children play on their own, creating their own learning opportunities. However, such a high frequency of not present behaviours may be counterproductive in supporting and encouraging children's play, since practitioners are not with the children and are also not closely observing their development through play. Within the 2011 Norwegian framework plan, practitioners are urged to be available to children while they play, supporting, inspiring and encouraging children. Although these ideas were evident during data collection when practitioners joined in or commented on the play, the frequent observation that children were playing without practitioners observing nearby or encouraging the play, indicates that practitioners may need to look at how much time they spend away from children while they are engaged in child-directed activities. As a number of researchers have pointed out, practitioners do not necessarily need to be joining in with play but they should be showing some signs of subtle encouragement if they are not joining.

Despite the heavy focus on adult-direction in the English nurseries, practitioners were also regularly observed as 'not present' during child-directed activities in these settings. This indicates that both contexts did encourage some purely free-play activities where the children were uninterrupted by plans, procedures or adult-identified learning opportunities.

Pretend. It was clear from the findings that practitioners encouraged pretend play and used opportunities to pretend in both the Norwegian and English ECEC settings observed. In relation to this, it is important to consider Berk and Winsler's (1995) idea that creativity is fostered when adults create an encouraging and accepting environment for make-believe. There were more occasions of pretend play among children and more interactions from practitioners during these times in the Norwegian kindergartens observed. Therefore, pretend play was undoubtedly the most frequently occurring play situation in which practitioners interacted with the children in the Norwegian kindergartens. These findings corroborate similar findings on this topic. Because the day was less structured in the Norwegian kindergartens observed, children had the choice, as well as the resources to engage in pretend play. Practitioners did not just assist during these times but also asked questions about the pretend situations, and occasionally even joined in. Practitioners spent time joining in with children's imaginary worlds, following the direction of the child during this play situation. This does not, however, mean that pretend play was better facilitated in the Norwegian ECEC settings observed. Practitioners in this context did not often remain in pretend play situations for more than five minutes at a time and were often shallow in their contributions to the play, be it through commenting or joining in. These contributions often consisted of asking the children what they were doing and then leaving, without investigating the children's answers further, or pretending to be a character in the play, but relying only on the child's directions.

Pretend play was less common in the ECEC settings observed in England. This may be due to the fact that there were more instances of more cognitive skilled tasks taking place in these classrooms, which, according to Smith and Connolly (1980), leads to less pretend. Practitioners in the English settings observed spent even less time joining in or commenting during pretend play. Although pretend aspects were present in the English nurseries, by using stories and other means, it was more common for practitioners to actively incorporate real-life experiences into the children's play activities. Examples of this include elements of things going on around the children such as making fireworks for Bonfire Day and hobby horses related to a story they had read. When practitioners joined in during pretend play, it seemed to be to show the children how to create an imaginary world, with describing and narrating taking place. Examples of this are the interactions presented in the final research question about the wish-granting fairy, and the practitioner narrating a situation where the child was caring for some babies and the practitioner creating the firemen scenario.

In the same vein, children in the English settings were also encouraged to use their creativity and imagination in other ways, outside of pretend. This was specifically seen through making things. Here, although children were generally expected to fulfil the activity in a certain way, they were shown how to use creative ideas. Other creative and imaginative experiences were also encouraged in the Norwegian kindergartens such as through free drawing and colouring in. Again, these creative times were very open-ended compared with the English ECEC settings observed. Overall, both contexts seemed to be equally supportive of imaginative ideas, just in different ways. This corroborates the findings in the literature review whereby both contexts regard imagination and creativity highly

Support. In relation to the support practitioners provided to children during child-directed activities, some aspects of scaffolding were observed during data collection in both contexts. However, because the basic definition of scaffolding implies that the practitioner has enhanced the child's learning in some way, it was not possible to know this for sure based on the observations alone. However, overall, the support provided to children in both contexts did not reflect much scaffolding. Many of the supportive behaviours observed were not as rigorous as they could have been in terms of scaffolding, and there was little evidence of children performing at a higher level following most interactions with practitioners. What is more, because a child's assisted performance level may differ from day to day, the child may need more support one day than they did on a previous day. This is also not something that I had any insight into.

Nonetheless, practitioners in the English nurseries predominantly used instructive behaviours to support children's play, something that was not common in the Norwegian settings. During these times, practitioners often directed the play the children were involved in, explaining how the children should carry it out and sometimes explaining why they should do it in that way. This indicated a preference towards making sure children fulfilled play in a certain way to get the most out of the play experience. Because of this, and related to the strong adult-direction within this context, the children's own creative voices were not especially represented during these interactions. This is something that Fisher (2013) addressed and was brought up in the literature review. Despite this, demonstrating and explaining ideas to the children did seem to support the children's play to some extent. At times, these behaviours were considered to be scaffolding the child's learning by enhancing their understanding of how to play, as well as follow directions. This can be seen in the example of the clay models

in the final research question, where the practitioner explained why the figure was too big and how to make it smaller. However, these instructing interactions did not always last very long. Examples of this can be seen throughout the final research question where practitioners generally only said one or two sentence to the child regarding how change their play.

Practitioners in the Norwegian kindergartens primarily used joining in and commenting behaviours to support the children's play. Although, overall, joining in was not a common behaviour in these settings. What is more, this support was delivered in a very open-ended way. Practitioners largely let children discover and explore their own play topics, providing support in the form of conversations, suggestions and encouragement more than anything else. At times, these periods were considered beneficial because they indicated subtle support, through helping to extend the child's ideas. This can be seen in the example of the children baking a cake for the practitioner in the final research question. Here the practitioner encouraged the children's ideas by prompting them to think about the play. However, this, as well as many other similar periods of support where practitioners acted as co-players, did not often last for a long time. Practitioners never remained with children for more than one observation to provide support in these forms. What is more, despite their inferred intention, conversations and commenting were generally shallow and did not provide or encourage long interactions between the child and practitioner. Once again, indicating a preference for children to discover things for themselves. This was seen in most of the interactions presented in the final research question, where conversations were generally limited to colours and everyday pleasantries such as how the child was feeling. What is more, for the majority of these interactions, it was not immediately obvious that these behaviours were enhancing the children's play. Practitioners did not ask open-ended questions very often, or model language or concept development to a large extent during these interactions occurring during play. Although practitioners did talk to children outside of the play situations, these conversations were also rather closed-ended and short. This indicates that practitioners were not using other opportunities to support the children to a large extent either.

Despite the differences in support provided to children in these settings, practitioner participation rates overall, were also relatively similar in both countries. In all ECEC settings, practitioners spent most of the observation times not being present in play or simply watching and commenting on it, without a great deal of joining in. One explanation for this is that practitioners may not know when to join in, or how much 'freedom' children should be given

during child-directed activities. Similarly, the roles practitioners took on when joining in during play were also slightly different in each country. For example, practitioners in the Norwegian kindergartens observed generally took on small roles within the play, following the children's lead. Whereas the practitioners in the English nurseries observed seemed to take on a more active role, showing the children a new direction for their play.

Based on the socio-cultural perspective and the concept of ZPD, children perform better when they are guided and supported by practitioners. Based on this, and the fact that practitioners did not seem to offer many high quality interactions in the form of open-ended questions, concept development or long periods of genuine support, children in both contexts were not always supported effectively during play. According to several researchers, these high quality interactions should include showing an interest and helping children to 'unfold the play'.

Overall, the findings presented are significant because they clearly show the contrasting approaches to play and practitioner involvement during child-directed activities in the observed ECEC settings in each country. These are interesting findings to consider when planning for play in ECEC settings across the world and when looking at how involved practitioners really are in supporting and encouraging child-directed play. As previously mentioned, data on the activities ECEC settings engage in throughout the day does exist but there is limited data on the support practitioners provide during these times. The current research adds to the literature on what occurs in ECEC settings in terms of structure of the day but goes further by expanding on the content of these activities, as well as the interactions that take place. Therefore, this research contributes empirical data on adult participation during play, as well as providing a cross-cultural view on the topic, something that is lacking in the present literature.

It is, however, important to consider the shortcomings of this thesis. For example, this thesis has only focused on two ECEC settings from each context. It is therefore not appropriate to assume that all ECEC settings in England and Norway would produce the same results. Collecting data from just two days in each setting is also not indicative of how the settings operate or a true representation of how often practitioners support and interact with the children during playtimes. However, I am under the impression that visiting these settings again would produce similar findings in regards to how often the practitioners interacted and

supported children in their play during child-directed activities based on how similar their interactions were over the two day period.

Another important aspect of this research to consider is the fact that no statistical analysis of reliability was done. This is a clear weakness and something that should definitely have been done, given more time and easier access to settings.

Finally, although play was looked at in these two contexts and their curriculums analysed for their views and attitudes on play, because play is defined in different ways, these two countries may have defined play differently to each other or even differently to me. Each of the four settings may have had different opinions on what play was and how it should be defined. This is not something that was explored but definitely could have been.

7 Conclusion

The aim of this research was to investigate the similarities and differences in how practitioners interacted and supported children during child-directed activities, specifically during play, in two English and Norwegian ECEC settings. The main findings show that practitioners interacted and supported children in the observed ECEC settings in England and Norway in slightly different ways. Adult-direction was more present in the English ECEC settings in both adult- and child-directed activities as opposed to the Norwegian ones. As previous researchers have pointed out, this may have led to the finding that pretend play was more common in the Norwegian ECEC settings.

Finally, play was supported differently in the two contexts. The practitioners in the Norwegian settings displayed more commenting and joining in behaviours to support the children's play than the practitioners in the English settings, although joining in behaviours were still uncommon overall in both settings. Observations in the English settings revealed that practitioners spent more time on instructing behaviours while children played. Overall, it seems that practitioners in the English settings were preoccupied with showing children how to play, whereas the practitioners in the Norwegian settings were more concerned with letting children explore and create play themselves. This finding was further supported by the time practitioners spent away from children's play.

The findings presented are significant because they clearly show the contrasting approaches to play and practitioner involvement during child-directed activities in the ECEC settings in each country. These are interesting findings to consider when planning for play in ECEC settings across the world and how involved practitioners really are in supporting and encouraging child-directed play.

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Appendix 1: Information letters to parents and practitioners

Kjære barna og foreldre

Jeg heter Lisa Karlsen og er masterstudent ved Universitet i Oslo. Jeg skriver min masteroppgave i Komparativ og Internasjonal Utdanning. I oppgaven skal jeg sammenligne aktivitetene i norske og engelske barnehager. I den forbindelse ønsker jeg å gjøre noen observasjoner på [redacted] Barnehage fra *dato*. Jeg skal observere hva som skjer i løpet av dagen i barnehagen, hvordan aktiviteter er organisert, og hva barn og voksne gjør sammen. Jeg er ikke interessert i enkeltbarn. Hver observasjon vil bli gjennomført ved kun penn og papir (dvs. ingen video eller lydopptak skal bli brukt).

Hvis du ikke vil at jeg observere barnet ditt, gi [redacted] beskjed så vil jeg ikke inkludere noen av barnets aktiviteter i mine observasjoner/notater. Barn har rett til ikke å delta, og tegn som tyder på at noen er ukomfortable mens observasjonene foregår vil bli tatt på alvor. Jeg vil da stoppe observasjonen av barnet/barna umiddelbart.

Informasjonen som samles inn vil bli presentert i masteroppgaven min. All informasjon som samles inn vil være anonym. Jeg vil sørge for at ingen ledetråder til ditt barns identitet vises i avhandlingen.

Hvis du har noen spørsmål, ikke nøl med å kontakte meg.

Takk for hjelpen.

Med vennlig hilsen,

Lisa Karlsen
lisamark@student.uv.uio.no

Kjære ansatte,

Jeg heter Lisa Karlsen og er masterstudent ved Universitet i Oslo. Jeg skriver min masteroppgave i Komparativ og Internasjonal Utdanning. I oppgaven skal jeg sammenligne aktivitetene i norske og engelske barnehager. I den forbindelse ønsker jeg å gjøre noen observasjoner på [redacted] Barnehage fra *dato*. Jeg skal observere hva som skjer i løpet av dagen i barnehagen, hvordan aktiviteter er organisert, og hva barn og voksne gjør sammen. Jeg er ikke interessert i enkeltbarn og du som ansatt vil ikke bli evaluert. Hver observasjon vil bli gjennomført kun ved penn og papir (dvs. ingen video eller lydopptak blir brukt).

Hvis du ikke vil bli observert, gi meg beskjed så vil jeg ikke inkludere noen av dine aktiviteter i mine observasjoner/notater. Du har rett til ikke å delta og kan ombestemme deg når som helst.

Informasjonen som samles inn vil bli presentert i masteroppgaven min. All informasjon som samles inn vil være anonym. Jeg vil sørge for at ingen ledetråder til din identitet vises i oppgaven.

Hvis du har noen spørsmål, ikke nøl med å kontakte meg.

Takk for hjelpen.

Med vennlig hilsen,

Lisa Karlsen
lisamark@student.uv.uio.no

Dear children and parents/carers,

My name is Lisa Karlsen and I am a master's student at the University of Oslo in Norway. I am writing my thesis in Comparative and International Education. For my thesis, I will be comparing activities that occur in British and Norwegian nurseries. In regards to this, I would like to do some observations at [redacted] Nursery on *dates*. I will be observing what happens during the day at nursery, how activities are organised, and what children and adults do together. I will not be focusing on individual children. Each observation will be done using only pen and paper (i.e. no video or voice recorders will be used).

Please let me know if you are uncomfortable with me observing your child and I will not include any of their activities in my observations/notes. Your child has the right not to participate and any signs of him/her being uncomfortable while the observations are taking place will be taken seriously and I will stop the observation immediately.

The information collected during observations will be presented in my thesis. All information collected will, however, be anonymous. I will ensure that no clues to your child's identity appear in the thesis.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you for your help.

Best regards,

Lisa Karlsen
lisamark@mail.uio.no

Dear early years practitioners,

My name is Lisa Karlsen and I am a master's student at the University of Oslo in Norway. I am writing my thesis in Comparative and International Education. For my thesis, I will be comparing activities that occur in British and Norwegian nurseries. In regards to this, I would like to do some observations at [redacted] Nursery on the *dates*. I will be observing what happens during the day at nursery, how activities are organised, and what children and adults do together. I will not be focusing on individual children and you as a practitioner are not being evaluated or studied. Each observation will be done using only pen and paper (i.e. no video or voice recorders will be used).

Please let me know if you are uncomfortable with me observing you and I will not include any of your activities in my observations/notes. You have the right not to participate and may change your mind about participating at any time.

The information collected during observations will be presented in my thesis. All information collected will, however, be anonymous. I will ensure that no clues to your identity appear in the thesis.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you for your help.

Best regards,

Lisa Karlsen
lisamark@mail.uio.no

Appendix 2: Observation schedule

Date:				activity no.	activity no.	activity no.	activity no.
							
							
							
				prac. no.	prac. no.	prac. no.	prac. no.
Time:							
☒							
☑							
⌀							
½	Ⓟ						
	©						
T							
R							
◆							
■							
⌘	$	∞	I				
			O				
			N				
		=	O				
			N				
		≈	I				
			O				
			N				

Observation schedule legend

☒	Not present		
☑	Present		
⃠	Ending an activity		
T	Teaching		
R	Reading		
½	Solving a problem	Ⓟ	Problem
		©	Conflict
$	Playing	∞	Joining
		=	Assisting
		≈	Parallel
⌘	Talking	**I**	In-frame
		O	Out-of-frame
		N	None
		◆	Child
		■	Other