



# Layering and institutional change: framework plan revision in Norwegian early childhood education and care

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Accepted: 20 June 2024 / Published online: 4 July 2024  
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## Abstract

Central among a range of reforms and policy measures aimed at enhancing the quality and social cohesion of Norwegian early childhood education and care (ECEC) services is the 2017 *Framework Plan for Kindergartens*. In this article, we investigate the policy formation process and how framework plan reform has been carried out by public and private stakeholders at different levels. The reform is explored as institutional layering, referring to theoretical contributions that stress the role of incremental development and gradual institutional change. We ask: What are the policies added, and to what extent do added policies instigate institutional change? This article relies on qualitative document analyses, semistructured interviews, and quantitative survey data. We find high legitimacy for the framework plan in the ECEC sector, and informants broadly regard it as a continuation of earlier versions of the plan. Our analysis further shows that the implementation of the 2017 framework plan reform cannot be viewed in isolation, as it interacts with other reforms, trends, and instruments in the sector. We argue that blending reform design features with existing values and practices adds layers to Norwegian ECEC, instigating change. The analysis points to the need for further research on how national educational reforms are implemented in complex settings and to investigate the relationships between policy design and measures and between policy outcomes and ambitions. The relationships between different measures can be unclear to local implementers. Thus, we stress the importance of considering how reform outcomes depend on intertwined reforms and varying local conditions regarding capacity, norms, and values.

**Keywords** Early childhood education and care · Framework plan · Implementation · Layering · Institutional change

## Introduction

In recent decades, there have been increased efforts to reform early childhood education and care (ECEC) in many countries to secure service quality and future skills through improved early education (Brown, 2013; Cheeseman & Torr, 2009; Duncan et al., 2013; Engel et al., 2015; European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2023; Gambaro, 2017; Ryan & Date, 2014). This article analyses the implementation of the 2017 Norwegian Framework Plan for Kindergartens (Ministry of Education, 2017a), which was launched as one of several reforms and policy measures aimed at enhancing the quality and social cohesion of Norwegian ECEC services (Ministry of Education, 2016: Report to the Storting, Meld. St. 19 (2015–2016)). The framework plan sets out provisions on the content and tasks of ECECs and has a distinctive status as both a pedagogical tool for the centers and a management tool for central and local authorities, as well as service providers.

A broad policy compromise expanded the provision of ECEC services in 2003, giving all children between the ages of one and five the right to ECEC and redefining the services as part of the educational system. Service expansion has led to increased attention to ECEC quality. Since 1996, a national framework plan, revised in 2006, has accompanied the Norwegian Kindergarten Act (Regjeringen, 2006). A new revision was initiated to improve the coherence between the framework plan and the Kindergarten Act and to secure the future needs of the sector through a knowledge-based and relevant framework plan. Since 2012, official Norwegian reports and white papers from shifting governments have focused on improving the quality of ECEC (Ministry of Education, 2013, 2016; NOU, 2010a: 8, b: 12). The measures included competence building as well as new norms for the staff ratio, implemented in 2017 (Ministry of Education, 2017b). In studying the implementation of the framework plan, we need to consider how this reform is entwined with a range of other policies.

Over the past 20 years, the OECD has carried out surveys to strengthen the quality of and access to ECEC in member states, and policy developments within the Norwegian ECEC often refer to international policy recommendations. The framework plan policy process partly drew upon the most recent OECD report on ECEC policies in Norway, providing recommendations on staffing standards and minimum employee qualifications, as well as a need to clarify the roles of actors and define supervision standards (Engel et al., 2015). A lack of capacity and possible municipal role conflicts were addressed. Concern about unwanted variation in service provision made it particularly important to design a framework plan as a measure to equalize quality differences and ensure children's rights (Ministry of Education, 2016).

The framework plan provides overarching guidelines, roles, and responsibilities, requiring interpretation by all responsible actors. We aim to explore the role of the framework plan reform of ECEC as an institutional structure and ask the following questions: What are the policies added, and how and to what extent do added policies instigate institutional change? To investigate these research questions, we analyze the policy design and how crucial actors interpret and carry out the plan. In line with Winter's perspective (Winter, 2012), we first explore the policy design of the plan and, second, analyze how the reform has been met and put into practice by public and private stakeholders at different levels. Our analysis is inspired by two different

strands of research perspectives: policy implementation and institutional change. An important starting point is the insight that external factors will always impact the implementation of reforms (Hill & Hupe, 2022). To grasp the features of policy-making and institutional change, we use the concept of layering (Capano, 2019; Thelen, 2003). Despite the explicit emphasis on this relationship between policy implementation and institutional change in frequently referred analytical-theoretical frameworks, among them Winter (2012), there has thus far been little interest in further exploring and systematizing the concept of institutional layering (Sætren & Hupe, 2018, p. 572). By analyzing the implementation of the 2017 framework plan for ECEC as a reform directed toward the main actors in the sector aiming to enhance ECEC quality, we address the question of whether and to what extent this policy reform leads to institutional change. In this way, the analysis of Norwegian policy reform contributes to the understanding of ECEC governance and policy implementation processes in general and adds to the literature on conditions for institutional change.

## Earlier research

Recent research on ECEC has frequently focused on quality improvement, among other issues, using quality monitoring from the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) (Manning et al., 2019). Other studies have focused on the development of ECEC structural quality standards and the tension between the demands of framework plans and resources for pedagogical work in ECEC organizations (Strehmel, 2016, 2019; Viernickel et al., 2016). In contrast, our article aims to grasp variation and convergence in reform implementation.

Furthermore, research on ECEC policy reforms tends to view implementation as a process consisting of several phases or steps leading toward full implementation. In the evaluation of the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework in Australia, Garvis et al. (2012) performed an analysis based on the educational change model (Pendergast et al., 2005), proposing that reform is typically established in three phases, “gradually introducing particular core component changes” (Garvis et al., 2012, p. 3). The model recognizes that educational reform takes longer than usual expected or normally allowed for in reform schedules (Garvis et al., 2012). Instead of studying the phases of framework plan implementation, we regard implementation as an ongoing process that does not necessarily follow distinct phases or steps toward goal attainment.

The links between OECD surveys and recommendations, national ECEC policies, and commissioned research evaluations of national ECEC reforms often seem unclear. A 2022 report concluded that a distinct Nordic ECEC model persists, despite strong international recommendations pointing toward an enhanced learning focus (Urban et al., 2022). All the Nordic countries organize ECEC under their education ministries and have national bodies with the mandate to support local evaluation and assessment. According to the report, national guidance documents such as the Norwegian Framework Plan describe a wide range of learning areas with specific, process- and value-oriented learning objectives. Two evaluation reports scrutinized the 2006 framework plan reform. Østrem et al. (2009) identified challenges for

implementation related to a lack of resources at the service level and suggested a comprehensive and systematic plan for competence building. Ljunggren et al. (2017) studied governance challenges and noted the need to enhance the framework plan as a governing tool.

Regarding service content, values, and principles, Nordic countries share strong similarities, emphasizing children's play, holistic growth, all-day pedagogy, well-being, democracy, equality, participation, child rights, community, and social justice (Urban et al., 2022). The dual mission of education and equal opportunities is reflected in a dual pedagogic that emphasizes both care/well-being and learning (Urban et al., 2022). Other research stresses the role of the Nordic welfare model, which focuses on equal opportunities, social inclusion, and universal access to ECEC services (Einarsdottir et al., 2015), as well as the role of ECEC in preventing marginalization (Dannesboe & Kjær, 2021). In Norway, ECEC is an integrated part of the welfare state and has publicly regulated accessibility for children aged one to five years. The ECEC has an attendance rate of 97% for individuals aged three to five (Statistics Norway, 2023).

For a better understanding of the implementation of the Norwegian Framework Plan for Kindergartens, it is crucial to emphasize the important role of local authorities and service providers in developing services. EC centers are owned either by municipalities or a wide range of private providers, including commercial and non-profit organizations of varying sizes. ECEC governance and provision are situated in the policy context of decentralization and multiple levels of local government (Urban et al., 2022). The delegation of responsibility to the municipal level leads to variations in practice and may draw services in different directions. Furthermore, structural contextual factors regarding children's group size and staff recruitment may impact their ability to live up to national guidelines at the center level (Urban et al., 2022). Growth in for-profit provisions has been followed by stronger state regulations (Trætteberg et al., 2023). Thus, to analyze how the 2017 framework plan was implemented and whether it has instigated institutional change, the specific and varied local contexts regarding service provision and demography as well as local authority and provider capacities must be considered. The 2017 clarification of local authority and provider responsibilities may enhance both variation and convergence at the level of local authorities and public and private providers and between centers with different providers.

## Perspectives on implementation, reforms, and layering

This study suggests that implementation studies should be bridged with concepts of historical institutional theory to grasp how framework plan reform contributes to the continuation of or change in ECEC. We draw on insights from a synthesizing approach in implementation studies, which takes an upward approach (Goggin et al., 1990; Sætren, 2005; Sætren & Hupe, 2018) by stressing what happened rather than what should have happened. It also emphasizes variation in performance rather than compliance with policy goals (Hill & Hupe, 2003). Furthermore, the study argues that policy is developed along a continuum between policy and action. In line with

Ingraham (1987), Hill and Hupe (2003) suggest that the actions of implementers are regarded as part of the policy process. Thus, it becomes important to study how policy is made and interpreted by actors at different levels and to consider the institutional context of the specific policy features, as pointed out by Winter: “A policy design typically contains a set of goals, a mix of instruments for obtaining these goals, a designation of governmental or nongovernmental entities charged with carrying out the goals and an allocation of resources for the requisite tasks” (Winter, 2012, p. 5). The policy design of the 2017 framework plan regards the goals, objectives, and tools and the relationships among them (Howlett, 2014). Here, we study policy design features through the concept of layering, aiming to grasp how the framework plan was formed and put into practice in a context with a range of partly intertwined instruments and practices.

Several strands of research into layering can be traced. In historical institutionalism, layering is linked to incremental change, often based on path dependencies (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Streeck & Thelen, 2005). Thelen (2003) suggested that layering may be one form of change occurring in apparently stable institutional arrangements. Inspired by this approach, Helgøy and Homme (2006) showed how increased variation was hidden in the seemingly convergent use of tools to solve educational problems in Norway, Sweden, and England. Institutional change, values based on different welfare state models, and political economies explained the different outcomes of educational change in the three countries. Layering also highlights the context for new policies and practices (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). ECEC content and services are not solely determined by the actors and processes inside ECEC. As stated by Homme (2008), institutional arrangements and practices are shaped and framed at the intersection between the education sector and adjacent institutions, such as the municipality and external actors seeking influence over the sector. Thus, it is crucial to analyze the 2017 framework plan as an incremental policy change within its institutional context.

However, according to Capano (2019), this historical-institutionalist definition of layering makes it synonymous with change, without specifying the forms and effects of the changes. Furthermore, studies have failed to determine how layering may contribute to stability. Capano therefore defines the concept of layering as a specific means of formulating policies through which ‘something new’ is added to the existing institutional arrangement in a specific policy field (Capano, 2019, p. 594). This ‘new’ can be a policy instrument, an idea, or an inclusion of new actors (Capano, 2019). Thus, according to Capano, layering can lead to changes or stability, depending on what is added.

Our analysis of the Norwegian framework plan policy is inspired by a recent study of Scandinavian higher education policies (Kvilhaugsvik, 2021, p. 41), combining insights from the two mentioned strands of layering research. In line with Capano (2019), we regard layering as a multitargeted mode of institutional design that can address both change and stability. According to Capano, decision-makers may expect change or stability when introducing new policies. Layering may aim at policy results, e.g., enhanced legitimacy. Furthermore, Capano argues that it is possible to address two dimensions of policy outcomes: policy expectations and changes in practice. He proposes a typology of layering according to policy outcomes: consis-

tent layering, tense layering, and counterproductive layering (Capano, 2019, p. 598). Consistent layering implies that “the achieved effects in terms of the policy are coherent with the expectations of policymakers when layering something onto the existing institutional arrangements” (Capano, 2019, p. 598). Tense layering points to cases where the expected policy results are contradictory and lead to persistent conflict (Capano, 2019, p. 598), and counterproductive layering characterizes results where “institutional layering hinders the expected results against expectations” (Capano, 2019, p. 598).

We consider the content and forms of layering embedded in framework plan policies and the expected effects by applying suggestions from Capano’s layering typology. According to Mahoney and Thelen (2010), new instruments may change how old instruments are interpreted and used. New and existing instruments may be mixed and interpreted in relation to each other (Kvilhaugsvik, 2021, p. 42). Thus, the interpretation and use of instruments should be studied with attention given to context. According to Capano (2019, p. 594), layering may first involve policy instruments, such as regulations, financial resources, information, and evaluation. Instruments are often combined and developed over time. Second, layering may involve rules that introduce new actors, arenas, or decision-making levels that may increase institutional complexity. Third, ideas, values, goals, and programs may be added through layering and lead to changes in problem definitions, often by adding new ambitions or policy paradigms in addition to old ones.

Our study stresses the role of policy design, local variation, and core actors’ roles and experiences in the implementation of the 2017 framework plan. We first investigate the characteristics of the reform and the implementation processes as institutional layering by analyzing core features of the policy design and scrutinize the content of the new ECEC policy to identify whether the ambitions of policymakers aim to secure stability or change. Second, we regard the response to the framework plan reform among ECEC providers and staff. Third, relying on Capano’s typology (2019), we discuss whether the obtained results of layering are achieved, contradictory, or failed. Finally, we will discuss and conclude on the issue of how the framework plan represents stability or change. Next, we present the methods and data we rely on in this analysis.

## Methods and data

To investigate the process of implementing the 2017 framework plan, we used various methods to involve key actors and gather data from different sources. Our approach is inspired by the integrated implementation model proposed by Winter (2012). The research project used a convergent mixed methods research design (Creswell, 2015) that included concurrent and sequential qualitative and quantitative methods. The data were collected in 2019/2020 and 2022/2023. The research started one year after the framework plan was launched. Thus, to compensate for this limitation and grasp institutional change, we build on earlier research analyzing the prereform situation and the implementation of earlier framework plans and rely on sequential design.

To understand the policy design of the reform, we conducted a document analysis of relevant government documents, plans, and guides. We also conducted 10 in-depth semistructured individual and group interviews with 20 people who represent key actors at the national level. The interviews involved policy formulation, decision-making and implementation processes at the Ministry of Education, Directorate for Education and Training, National Association of Private Kindergartens (PBL), and ECEC teacher unions and stakeholders at the regional and local levels, including the county governor, the municipal authority, and providers.

Furthermore, to explore how the framework plan was interpreted and put into action by different actors, namely, ECEC staff, heads, public and private service providers, and authorities at the municipal and state levels, we rely on two national electronic surveys carried out in 2019/2020 and repeated in 2022/2023. The first survey included all municipalities as the local authority responsible for, among other things, ECEC quality within their geographical borders. The second survey was sent nationwide to all the ECEC headteachers. The response rate of the municipality survey was 52.4% in the first round and 59.1% in the second round. Broad insight into ECEC center experience and management priorities was gained through the second survey to headteachers, with response rates of 35.3% and 38.8%, respectively. The surveys were administered via the web-based survey program *SurveyXact*, and analyses were carried out by using Stata software. The analysis of the dropout rates shows minor biases, but we can still assume that the data are representative (Homme et al., 2023). The survey analyses included in the article have been previously documented in a research report and a scientific anthology from the project (Homme et al., 2020, 2023).

Public and private providers and municipal authorities constitute important actors responsible for the implementation of ECEC policies. We conducted in-depth interviews with a strategic sample of six public and eight private providers in 2020 regarding their interpretation and implementation of the framework plan. Moreover, to gain in-depth knowledge of practices at the service level, we conducted fieldwork studies in 19 ECEC centers through in-depth semistructured individual and focus group interviews and document analyses of annual, monthly, and weekly plans, as well as other plans and schedules. The strategic sample consisted of ECEC centers of different sizes, ownership levels, levels of diversity and geographical settings and was analyzed twice. The questions asked how staff interpreted and implemented the framework plan in practice. In 2019/2020, 18 heads, 30 teachers and 29 assistants were interviewed. In 2021/2022, 11 heads, 25 teachers and 19 assistants were interviewed. Qualitative interviews, policy documents and local plans were read and categorized by research team members individually and collectively, inspired by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Eggebø, 2020). The quantitative data were summed through frequency and regression analyses (for details, see Homme et al., 2020, 2023). Ethical considerations regarding questions on anonymity, confidence and data storage were made following GDPR guidelines. We obtained informed consent, preserved anonymity, and provided a precise and nuanced presentation of our findings.

## Main findings: a continued framework plan anchored in the sector

In the following, we present our findings regarding the stability and change embedded in the policy reform and following the implementation of the 2017 framework plan.

### The policy design of the framework plan: policy instruments

The analysis of the policy design is based upon an analysis of the reform documents and interviews with key actors at the national level. Our analysis revealed that the 2017 framework plan reform can be regarded as a compromise following criticism and mobilization among stakeholders during the policy process. External participation from stakeholders in the design and thorough feedback processes were measures aimed at anchoring the process, both during policymaking and implementation.

For the Ministry, the revision of the framework plan had two purposes: strengthening the document as both a pedagogic tool and an instrument for governing the sector (Interviewee, Ministry of Education and Research). An overarching purpose was to provide equal-quality ECEC provisions throughout the country, ensuring a good start in education for all children (Ministry of Education, 2017a). Thus, the main aim of the policymakers was change. The result was a clearer regulatory framework adapted to the curriculum genre. The new framework plan text was shorter than the previous versions, as binding responsibilities replaced the former recommendations.

The responsibility to plan and carry out the implementation was given to the directorate, which is the executive agency for the Ministry of Education and Research (KD). This responsibility includes publishing and disseminating the framework plan content, as well as providing pedagogical support, supervision, competence development, and knowledge acquisition. The process involved cooperation with various actors both nationally and regionally. The directorate connected current initiatives and strategies to the new framework plan by updating online resources and information and providing coordinated consulting.

The framework plan was developed through a consensus-oriented consultation process in which various stakeholders laid out conditions for the policies. The final plan represented a continuation of core values and crucial elements but also a compromise between aims and values. A few pedagogical elements were reinforced or added, both regarding substance and methods, but essential elements remained unchanged. The Kindergarten Act assigns providers formal responsibility to running services according to the legal framework. In the Framework plan, a new chapter regarding responsibilities and roles for the providers, headteachers and teachers was added, specifying the provider's responsibilities for the quality of the services (Ministry of Education, 2017a, p. 15). The providers are thus legally responsible for the quality of the ECEC provision. Qualified pedagogical staff were considered a prerequisite for high-quality services, and the providers were expected to acknowledge the professional and pedagogical judgment of the ECEC staff. The two former framework plans included decisions on the necessity of adapting the plan to the local context (Barne- og familiedepartementet [Ministry of Children and Families], 1995; Ministry of Education, 2006). This was also allowed in the 2017 plan despite the more binding regulations



(Ministry of Education, 2017a). The reform design included several existing and new and targeted strategies and measures. Although the elements in the new plan were more binding, the briefer document may leave more room for teachers' interpretation and discretion in carrying out the plan, which in turn may hinder consistent layering. To conclude, we may anticipate that compromise-based policy design and the continuation of core elements may lead to support among actors and thus lead to consistent layering. On the other hand, briefer documents may leave more room for discretion and thus hinder consistency.

### **New rules: broad local authority effort and strengthened provider responsibilities**

As stated above, the framework reform is implemented within a decentralized governing structure of municipal ECEC administration and municipal and private providers. The Kindergarten Act assigns municipalities as local ECEC authorities, giving them the responsibility to facilitate and support the implementation of the framework plan. In addition, the municipality is responsible for auditing both public and private ECEC centers to ensure compliance with the framework plan.

The results from our municipality survey (both rounds) indicate that local authorities perceive the plan as a continuation of previous plans but with clarification of roles and responsibilities as added elements. Overall, local authorities work to fulfill their assigned role as authorities to support the implementation of framework plans at the center level (Homme et al., 2020, 2023). Earlier research revealed restraint in carrying out auditing (Ljunggren et al., 2017), and clarifying how to sharpen the framework plan as a governing tool was the main ambition of the reform. Our survey showed that the majority of the municipalities regard the 2017 framework plan as a stronger basis for auditing than previous plans due to more concise regulations (Homme et al., 2023).

The complex structure of private and municipal ECEC provision in Norway may present a challenge to the overall goal of levelling out quality. ECEC centers are owned by municipalities as well as a broad range of private providers that may include one single local center or many centers across the country. The broad and generally defined responsibility of providers may thus accommodate large variations. Both the municipality surveys and the provider interviews revealed considerable variations in competence and capacity between providers. This pertains to the number of staff at the provider level dedicated to ECEC-related tasks.

Municipal providers may benefit from support from the larger municipal administration. However, there are significant variations in size and capacity among both municipal and private providers. Furthermore, the relationship between the size of the provider organization and capacity is not always clear. The study revealed that some medium-sized providers were highly engaged in the ECEC centers' services and offered much support; moreover, large public and private providers who were less involved in the implementation of the framework plan at the center level were identified (see also Børhaug & Nordø, 2020).

All provider representatives in the interview survey agreed that the new framework plan clarifies responsibilities and roles both outside and inside the ECEC centers. However, the interviewed providers emphasized slightly different aspects of their

main responsibilities. Two contrasting examples illustrate this variation. One of the large public providers (Municipality 1) underlined the significance of the providers' interpretation of the plan as well as the importance of clear communication of expectations to the ECEC centers. This provider produced a quality development plan for ECECs to support the centers' practices in line with the plan. A small private provider of one ECEC center (Private provider 6), however, stressed the role of the headteacher as responsible for the translation and implementation of the framework plan. Thus, the providers' role as interpreters of the framework plan and mediators between the framework plan and the practice at the ECEC center level were perceived differently among providers. Such variation in provider capacity and governing ambitions may challenge the government's goal for the framework plan to provide just services and support social cohesion.

The analysis of the local ECEC authorities and providers indicates a change in the balance between levels in the governing system. The framework plan leaves providers with increased responsibility for achieving the framework plan goals. This approach may lead to less autonomy at the center level if active and ambitious providers provide resources and initiatives. However, the framework plan appears to be an important point of reference that may modify increased provider authority. Hence, the changes in ECEC governance due to framework plan reform add new layers to ECEC.

### **Continuity and change at the ECEC center level**

The framework plan states that headteachers and teachers are responsible for the implementation of the reform in ECEC centers in cooperation with providers. A significant change noted by many staff members was that the 2017 framework plan was much shorter and clearer than previous framework plans. The staff perceived the framework plan as a well-suited pedagogical tool that also gave them room for professional judgment. The short formulations of core values and objectives rather than specifying the content of the objectives provide space for the staff to fill the values and objectives with meaning and activity: "There is room for how we want to do things and what we want to create" (ECEC Center 11, teacher).

The room for professional judgment is also apparent regarding interpreting the changes brought forward by the new plan. The analysis revealed no clear or dominant patterns of what staff interviewees framed as new features of the framework plan. Regarding substantial changes, some mentioned an increased focus on children's participation, while others pointed to the increased weight on social skills or life skills. The local context of the ECEC centers and the traditions, experiences, and views of the individual staff seem to have influenced how they perceived the changes. Here is one example:

It was less play, more learning, much less singing. Some concepts that I am very concerned with have become more theoretically based, in a way. At the same time, it is quite open, so we can choose what we want to do. (ECEC Center 15, teacher)

At this ECEC center, the staff continued to focus on children's singing, arguing that this aligned with the objectives of the new framework plan.

Staff interviews revealed that the content of the framework plan was predominantly perceived as a continuation and clarification of earlier plans. Most of the staff agreed with what this headteacher said: "There is hardly anything new here. A lot of the content was there in the old one, too". (ECEC Center 1, headteacher). Staff thus did not identify a profound change in direction in the new plan.

When asked about new elements in the 2017 framework plan, staff members were uncertain about where specific changes stemmed from:

That particular change started before the 2017 framework plan came into force, and the process of reforming the framework plan started many years before it was launched. There may be a connection, I do not truly know. (ECEC Center 1, teacher)

Thus, several employees and leaders indicated that the reform process was initiated before 2017. Moreover, the qualitative data clearly illustrate that staff members perceived a convergence of simultaneous reform processes. Many interviewees expressed the challenge of differentiating the influence of the framework plan from other reforms and trends in the sector.

The relationships between various national reforms and measures and between national and local or provider-initiated projects and measures were interpreted in varying ways among heads and staff. In some cases, we observed awareness of the connections between the framework plan and provider initiatives; however, in other cases, the staff interpreted provider-initiated implementation measures as competing strategies rather than integrated efforts.

Among the centers, some staff experienced actively involved providers, whether public or private, who provided direction for framework plan implementation. Others experienced a more distant provider and thus had more room for themselves to maneuver in the implementation process. Most of the heads and teachers considered the provider's contributions as support to enhance the quality of the services. Some staff members referred to a tradition with a high level of independence and room for local adaptation "and done things as we please, sitting in our corner" (ECEC Center 7, teacher).

We have a large municipality as a provider, and they have worked well strategically with the implementation, also creating networks for all the ECEC centers to enhance the quality and create common practices, and we see that the level and quality in the ECEC centers are enhanced and we identify a development (ECEC Center 7, teacher).

Some of the heads and teachers experienced providers making decisions above their heads, as the initiatives were not anchored, and the staff was not prepared for the directives from the providers. A headteacher conveyed that intended changes were sometimes difficult to implement in practice: "However, I am assigned the task to

promote it, and if I do not have the overview or it is pitched to me first, it becomes even worse to sell it to the staff” (ECEC Center 6, headteacher).

To some degree, all the employee groups were involved in putting the plan into practice at the center level, in accordance with the demands in the framework plan stating that all staff should adhere to the plan. In some ECEC centers, the framework plan worked as a core pedagogical tool for all staff. In addition, it was used more as a planning tool for heads and leaders. Some used the framework plan for planning their practice, while others mainly used it for documenting and explaining activities in retrospect.

We find that the framework plan to a great extent confirms the values and practices embedded in the work at the center level. The framework plan is considered by staff and leaders to continue former regulations. The nationally intended integration between the framework plan and other reforms, however, does not appear with clarity to all actors at the center level and is interpreted in various ways. Providers, as well as local authorities and leaders, may initiate projects and implement tools and measures with unclear links to the framework plan, and staff may consider these as competing ambitions and goals. This blurred integration of reforms may lead to tensions at the service level.

## Discussion: variation and convergence

Our analysis demonstrates the relevance of policy design and implementation for institutional development. Furthermore, our findings of complex and multiple structures involved in the processes of implementing the plan support the argument to view policy implementation as a continuum between policy and actions (Hill & Hupe, 2003). The revision of the framework plan aimed at strengthening the governing of the sector and at the same time pursuing the overall institutional norms and values embedded in the sector. We also find that the policy embraces ambiguous aims and measures. The plan carried an ambition of streamlining and enhancing coordination, improving governing tools, strengthening the responsibility of the owners, enhancing quality, and enacting equalization as well as aiming to contribute to social cohesion. Moreover, the need for professional discretion and adaptation to local needs was stressed. Drawing on Capano (2019), we characterize policy change as institutional layering. Capano, however, argues that it is important to address the expectations of decision-makers when studying institutional layering.

The final 2017 framework plan was formed through a consensus-oriented consultation process, resulting in an intended compromise. The plan incorporates tensions between the goals of enhancing quality, levelling out differing standards and securing autonomy at local levels. The plan has dual status as both a regulatory tool and a curriculum. Furthermore, it includes traditional Nordic ECEC values as well as educational ambitions, aims to enhance both service quality and equality, and relies on professional autonomy and adaptation to local needs.

A striking finding is the general support for the new framework plan among all central actors. Thus, we discover few explicit tensions regarding the content of the plan. Moreover, the conditions for consistent layering seem evident. The analysis of policy

implementation reveals tendencies toward convergence through increased provider involvement, which implies that many providers execute their increased responsibilities. Varying degrees of provider involvement may lead to convergence among some centers but may also enhance differences between centers with and without strong providers. Moreover, we find that different interpretations of the framework plan and how to put it into practice at different political, administrative, and service levels lead to various priorities and practices. This finding adds to Fehn-Dahle's (2020) research, which identified a new category of private providers in Norway that influence educational content by controlling academic topics and setting specific standards and output guarantees. Moreover, research from Nordic countries points to the commodification of preschool knowledge due to commercialization (Carlbaum & Rönnerberg, 2024). The surveys and interviews conducted at the provider and center levels identify variations in implementation performance. We argue that this variation aligns with the policy goals that promote adaptation to local needs and professional discretion.

A traditional phase study may interpret such variation as noncompliant with policy goals. Based on our perspectives, variation in carrying out the framework plan in practice may be regarded as successful implementation. However, a great degree of local discretion based on unclear professional competencies and standards may challenge the ambition to improve service quality. Our analysis showed that providers and local authorities stress their own and ECEC centers' capacity as a crucial factor for putting the framework plan on the agenda and following it up in practice, but authorities and providers interpret and carry out their responsibilities in various ways and to different degrees.

In addition to the role of local authorities and providers in the implementation processes, our analysis points to the extended role of ECEC teachers and assistants. The teachers actively participate in the interpretation and practice of the plan, and the analysis indicates that they rely to a large degree on their evaluation of the policy. Both survey and interview data support the overall impression of variation in policy interpretation and practice, implying that staff, especially teachers, are important policymakers in ECEC. Teacher autonomy regarding interpretations and priorities may be regarded as a core idea of the framework plan. Thus, varying interpretations and practices can be regarded as part of professional discretion. ECEC staff may inhabit different possibilities and capabilities regarding experience, traditions, and professional values. Service variations may thus be related to differences in capacity, competence, and resources at the center level. The multilayered contextual organizational and institutional factors, including advice and guidelines from national and local ECEC authorities and providers, may also influence the perception and behavior of staff.

Varying interpretations and practices may also relate to policy design features. Although the national government has attempted to streamline ECEC policies, we find ambiguities between the framework plan and chosen policy instruments. Furthermore, coordinating initiatives at the national and provider levels is not always welcomed at the ECEC center level. ECEC staff may oppose the initiatives or find them competing for their implementation of the framework plan.

The degree to which the center heads and teachers focus on the framework plan in their practice can also be related to the capacity and involvement of the providers. The strengthening of the provider level in the framework plan gives the providers room to regulate the level of autonomy at ECEC centers. More than recognized in earlier research, our study indicates that provider capacity influences the autonomy exercised at the center level. A high level of provider involvement in policy interpretation and directions for implementation can contribute to reducing the professional autonomy of ECEC heads and teachers. Strengthening provider-level responsibility may have various implications for professional autonomy at the center level. Professional autonomy can become either narrowed or widened, depending on how much and in what way the provider is involved in the implementation strategies. Another consequence is an increased gap in service provision between centers with well-resourced and ambitious providers and those with limited access to resources. This potential bias at the provider level may imply that reforming the framework may contribute to hindering rather than promoting social cohesion.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have investigated the policies added in the Norwegian ECEC framework reform, and how and to what extent the added policies instigate institutional change. We know from earlier studies of education reforms in Norway that new framework plans or curricula do not completely replace the previous ones (Aasen et al., 2012; Homme, 2008; Prøitz & Aasen, 2017). Instead, policy reforms may take different forms depending on previous changes, the local context and the actors involved. The policy design of the framework plan, both the formal framework plan document and the additional policy means, builds on the former plan and incorporates partly parallel reforms. Provider involvement varies, but we see a small systematic impact on implementation at the center level.

Furthermore, the implementation process is characterized by efforts to coordinate strategies and measures related to adjusting other relevant reforms to the ECEC framework plan. The interpretations of actors and their varying understandings based on organizational roles, capacity, traditions, and professional values indicate that existing cultures and practices in ECEC influenced how the 2017 framework plan reform was implemented. We argue that blending existing values and practices with features of new policy design adds layers to the Norwegian ECEC through implementation processes, thus instigating institutional change. However, the relation between policy expectations and practice changes is not unambiguous. The support from stakeholders indicates consistent layering, which gives reason to believe that the effects in terms of policy will be coherent with ambitions for the framework reform. Still, we also find indications of tense layering, as the diversity of providers includes different interpretations of the plan and varying administrative capacities for implementation. These differences may lead to contradictory results and potential conflict (Capano, 2019).

We have used an integrated implementation perspective to explore both the formation and the implementation of a national regulative framework for ECEC in Norway.

The analysis elaborates on how educational reforms are translated and put into action in a complex world. The framework plan revision process aimed at setting out a new direction for ECEC policies, but the aims were modified in the policy process. Nevertheless, the framework plan policy adds new layers to traditional values and practices. Furthermore, the analysis indicates that the implementation of this comprehensive reform did not lead to convergent changes because of inherent tensions in the reform design and the complex implementation context. Thus, the core values of the Nordic ECEC model seem to prevail, although the current framework plan focuses slightly more on learning.

Our analysis points to the need for comparative research on implementing educational reforms in complex settings and investigating the relationships between policy design, educational measures, and aspirations for change. Research should examine how education within an institutionalized context may respond to complex policy reforms. It should also consider how the layering of policy design may constitute a foundation for legitimating such policies and how this is reflected in various countries. Furthermore, our analysis shows the importance for education policymakers to determine what kinds of changes are possible in highly institutionalized contexts. Moreover, we point to challenges regarding the ambition of integrating several strategies and means into coordinated efforts. Some goals and ambitions may be overlooked or given sequential attention at the service level due to reform overload and the need to prioritize. The relationships among different measures can be unclear to local implementers. For local implementers, providers, and staff, we want to stress the need to scrutinize the complexities of the aims and measures of the policies. The connections between local initiatives and national regulations and strategies should be considered to avoid conflicting goals and measures. The proliferation of external tools and measures offered for service development may compete with national policies and cause counterproductive layering. Finally, we underline the crucial role of considering that the reform outcome depends on varying local conditions, capacity norms, and the values of the service providers and staff. Thus, the varied ECEC landscape may be an obstacle to achieving cohesion.

**Acknowledgements** This study is part of a five-year research project (2018–2023), “Evaluation of the implementation of the Norwegian framework plan for kindergartens” carried out by NORCE Norwegian Research Centre in collaboration with University of Bergen and Western Norway University College and funded by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training.

**Funding** Open access funding provided by NORCE Norwegian Research Centre AS

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