

Exploring pedagogues' understanding and detection of vulnerability in Danish early childhood education and care

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Abstract: The conceptualisation of vulnerability among Danish pedagogues in the context of early childhood education and care (ECEC) is framed by both Danish legislation (Dagtilbudsloven, 2020) and key pedagogical concepts such as *well-being, learning, development* and *formation* (Ministry of Children and Education, 2020). Employing a phenomenological approach, this study investigated how pedagogues perceive vulnerability through interviews conducted with 15 informants. Drawing on Abbott's key concepts of jurisdiction, diagnosis, inference and treatment, the collected data are operationalised to discern pedagogues' different understandings of vulnerability. The findings highlight the inherent ambiguity surrounding pedagogues' comprehension of vulnerability, closely tied to their primary responsibilities within the ECEC setting, namely, promoting well-being, facilitating learning, fostering development and enabling formation. The implications of the study shed light on the challenges faced by pedagogues in identifying vulnerability within ECEC, which encompasses both "traditional" and "new" understandings. Pedagogues tend to focus on detecting individual factors, such as personality traits and developmental disorders, or contextual factors related to a child's family background, without considering the institutional context as a potential source of vulnerability production. This study emphasises the importance of re-evaluating current approaches to vulnerability detection in ECEC, particularly with regard to children in vulnerable positions.

Keywords: children in vulnerable positions, vulnerability, pedagogues, Danish ECEC curriculum

Introduction

In recent decades, Denmark, along with many other European countries, has shown increased attention to children in vulnerable positions. There has been a strong political will to implement social and pedagogical reforms aimed at reducing the proportion of vulnerable children or at least reducing the extent of their vulnerability (“Section 8(5) of the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care,” 2018; Socialstyrelsen, 2011).

Vulnerability is not a new concept in the field of pedagogy. It has long been an essential aspect of pedagogical and professional vigilance, appearing in various forms, such as endangered, grey zone and distressed children. However, the concept of vulnerability has gained significant focus within early childhood education and care (ECEC) since its inclusion in legislation that introduced the pedagogical curriculum in 2004 (Børne- og undervisningsministeriet, 2022). Political attention and the framework for vulnerability have been closely associated with social work perspectives, which seek to understand vulnerability from dimensions such as poverty, social exclusion, violence, sexual abuse, health difficulties, stigmatisation and discrimination (Andersen et al., 2017; House of Commons, 2008; Mynarska et al., 2015). These dimensions align more with the field of social work than with pedagogy.

The focus on vulnerability, combined with reforms and interventions, is also evident in the European context (Eurochild, 2016, 2017; European Commission, 2013). Here, similar patterns are observed, linking vulnerability to concepts associated with social work perspectives (Brown, 2011; Jopling & Vincent, 2016; Schweiger, 2019). Globally, vulnerability is reflected in documents such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1992) and is a core issue in the UN Sustainable Development Goals, particularly in Goal No. 4, which addresses quality in education, and Goal No. 10, which focuses on reducing inequality (2017). Existing research literature emphasises vulnerability as an area of specialisation within early childhood, where social workers and psychologists are primarily involved rather than the broader field of pedagogy (Brown, 2011; Jopling & Vincent, 2016; Schweiger, 2019).

According to *the Strengthened Danish Curriculum* of 2018, there appears to be a stronger emphasis on addressing vulnerability as part of the pedagogical task. The curriculum states, “It should be evident from the pedagogical curriculum how the pedagogical learning environment takes into account vulnerable children to promote their well-being, learning, develop-

ment and formation” (“Section 8(5) of the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care,” 2018).

However, there has been limited corresponding focus on how pedagogues understand vulnerability among children. This understanding is crucial for identifying vulnerability and determining how pedagogical tasks can effectively promote children’s well-being, learning, development and formation. There has been a general lack of emphasis on identifying children in vulnerable positions from broader pedagogical perspectives, such as relating vulnerability to well-being or as a transitional phenomenon. However, a specific Danish research project conducted by Petersen (2010) has identified “children in social emergencies”. Recently, there has been growing interest in expanding traditional ways of defining vulnerability. This trend is less inclined to label children as vulnerable and instead focuses on vulnerability as a transitional phenomenon, as exemplified by the aforementioned project (Petersen, 2010). This research field is known as “new vulnerability” (Görlich et al., 2019) and is linked to pedagogical issues, such as well-being, performance pressure and loneliness.

The field is characterised by tensions between the understanding of vulnerability as a political construct aimed at reducing or eliminating vulnerability, particularly the “old” understanding of vulnerability and professional considerations that focus on detecting vulnerability as early as possible to initiate appropriate interventions. In this context, it becomes especially relevant for pedagogues to identify the core aspects of vulnerability: What does vulnerability entail? Which conditions place a child in a vulnerable position? How should vulnerability be addressed once detected? According to the global political agenda on social vulnerability, pedagogues play a key role in understanding, translating and implementing policies into practice.

This study aimed to explore how vulnerability occurs in the Danish ECE curriculum and how pedagogues understand vulnerability among children aged 0–6 years. The research question was as follows: How do pedagogues in ECEC understand vulnerability when defining a target group for interventions and special efforts? This question necessitates an investigation into how these understandings are put into practice and the outcomes of these processes. This study contributes to the academic field by supporting previous research on pedagogues’ diverse and multiple understandings of vulnerability, while also highlighting blind spots in their own involvement in creating and addressing vulnerability (Gilliam, 2015; Petersen, 2009).

Aim, Research Design and Methods

The objective of the study was to investigate the perceptions of pedagogues regarding vulnerability as a core component of the *Strengthened Pedagogical Curriculum* that is widely acknowledged in national, European and global contexts. The study was rooted in the interconnection between the political and professional domains and drew on welfare theoretical perspectives, recognising that the field of pedagogy is intricately linked to both the welfare society and the political system, despite their fundamental differences and potential conflicts of interest. Therefore, it is essential to explore how pedagogues reflect upon identifying children in vulnerable positions.

The study was empirical and involved conducting semi-structured interviews with 15 pedagogues, including 3 individual interviews and 3 focus group interviews, with each group consisting of 4 pedagogues. The inclusion of both individual and focus-group interviews allowed for a diverse range of perspectives to emerge, facilitating a comprehensive and nuanced analysis. The interview guide encompassed broad, open-ended questions, primarily focusing on thematic aspects rather than on finer details. The themes explored were as follows: (1) target group descriptions (identifying children in vulnerable positions), (2) recognition of vulnerability indicators and signs (How and why do pedagogues identify vulnerable positions? What observations and concerns do they have?), (3) intervention possibilities (What actions do they undertake when concerned about a child? What interventions are possible?) and (4) professional knowledge (What types of knowledge do pedagogues draw upon, including theoretical perspectives, experiences and concepts?).

The interviews were analysed using the NVivo software package. The coding process encompassed two levels: initially, a broader thematic coding based on key concepts (target group descriptions, signs of vulnerability, intervention possibilities and professional knowledge), followed by a more focused coding that incorporated key theoretical concepts derived from Abbott's (1988) notions of jurisdiction, diagnosis, inference and treatment. The coding involved organising statements from the pedagogues according to their tasks and understandings of vulnerability clustered in distinct categories. To facilitate analysis, I employed power quotes and proof quotes (Pratt, 2008). Power quotes captured strong opinions and statements from interviewees that encapsulated the central messages of the analysis, while proof quotes comprised concise individual statements that contributed to the overall analysis. The proof quotes are presented in condensed tables to

convey their significance (Pratt, 2008). The power quotes were integrated as part of the analysis.

The analysis was conducted in two stages. The first part examined theoretical perspectives on vulnerability by investigating the symptoms and causes associated with vulnerability, delving into pedagogues' definitions and understanding of vulnerability. The second part explored the types of knowledge that influenced pedagogues' perceptions of vulnerability, with consideration for their professional backgrounds and roles.

Based on the findings, I reflected on the implications of various definitions of vulnerability encompassing both the practical implementation of different interventions and the *Strengthened Pedagogical Curriculum*. Furthermore, I discuss how pedagogues' professional identities influence their identification of a problem. Finally, I summarise the key points of the study and provide reflections on the diverse and multiple understandings of vulnerability among the pedagogues.

Theoretical Approach

I employed Abbott's (1988) theoretical framework, focusing on his concept of jurisdiction and key concepts, such as diagnosis, inference and treatment, as an analytical approach to explore empirical data. This approach is particularly valuable when investigating the essence of professions. However, I believe that to capture the complexity and diversity within the pedagogical profession, this approach requires additional support from supporting theoretical perspectives. Inspired by the field of professional identity in pedagogical practice, I aimed to elucidate and connect those approaches to unfold the multiple understandings of children in vulnerable positions from the pedagogues' perspectives.

Diagnosis, Inference and Treatment

Regarding Abbott's framework, jurisdiction refers to the authorised requirements for specialised workers to maintain their expertise and related competences. Each profession builds a *knowledge system*, as described by Abbott, which encompasses both academic expert knowledge and practical, experience-based cognitive processes for problem identification and intervention. Abbott emphasises that the construction of professional jurisdiction involves not only language but also embodies experiences, material tools and organisational arrangements. However, language plays a central

role, as Abbott's concepts of the knowledge system largely revolve around how expertise and understandings of diagnosis and intervention are linguistically codified as common professional resources. Professions must strike a balance between different linguistic forms that pertain to academic and practical working contexts. This aspect is also pertinent to the construction of vulnerability among pedagogues.

In Abbott's framework, diagnosis, inference and treatment are interconnected elements of practical professional work and contribute to the concept of professional discretion (Østergaard Møller, 2018). Although Abbott employs these terms primarily to understand the work of medical professionals, in my case, they encompassed the various ways vulnerability was perceived and identified (diagnosis) and how it was professionally addressed and explained through social and pedagogical interventions (treatment). Fundamentally, presenting a professional problem identification involves how a particular profession classifies, designates and distinguishes a problem as an issue of expertise. Problem intervention, in contrast, focuses on how professions tackle problems by selecting appropriate types of interventions. Inference serves as the process that connects these two aspects, bridging the general classification of a problem with a specific intervention tailored to the unique circumstances of an individual child.

This becomes particularly relevant as pedagogues utilise their professional jurisdiction to identify and operationalise vulnerability. They must reflect on what constitutes vulnerability in children, including the signs and symptoms that characterise a child in a vulnerable position. Simultaneously, pedagogues must employ their professional assessments, drawing from their professional perspectives, knowledge and experiences, to determine the efforts and interventions that must be initiated. They need to contemplate the knowledge on which they rely to ensure that appropriate interventions are implemented.

Pedagogical work cannot be separated from the pedagogue who performs the tasks, underscoring the importance of recognising why and how an individual pedagogue's professional identity is relevant in the construction and detection of vulnerability.

Professional Identity

Professional identity is closely tied to professional practice. It is essential to understand that professions in the realm of human services are not solely

defined by their associated jurisdictions. Professions are also influenced by the human aspects of those who demonstrate professionalism. Pedagogues, for example, are not just individuals practicing their profession; they are also individuals who exercise professional discretion and adhere to ethical requirements.

In contrast to Abbott (1988), Tuft (2015), a researcher in the history of pedagogy, argues that the early childhood education (ECE) profession lacks top competencies. According to Tuft, the core of education lies in personal development, ethical maturity and democratic participation. Tuft connects the ECE profession, its object field and its issues to the ways in which pedagogues conduct themselves. In my view, both perspectives are valid. To be able to recognise pedagogical practice as a professional endeavour, objective demands and educational knowledge and competences are necessary. These demands, knowledge and competences are unique to the pedagogy profession, which also operates within an objective field that is sensitive to professional discretion.

Rothuizen and Togsverd (2020) argue that values, norms, ethics, professional standards and personal viewpoints—core values in the profession—extend beyond the individual pedagogue and are also integrated into professional practice as matters of professional and personal concern. Although research on pedagogues' professional identity is not extensive, existing studies indicate that pedagogues possess a distinct professional identity with a specific pedagogical and moral orientation when dealing with educational matters.

Clausen and Ringsmose (2017) assert that pedagogues are integral and indispensable parts of the Danish welfare society because their specific role—through their professional identity and profession—is to form children into democratic citizens (Clausen & Ringsmose, 2017). The formation of children involves experiences, knowledge, creativity and cultural participation—fundamental aspects of *The Strengthened Pedagogical Curriculum*. According to Brogaard-Clausen and Ringsmose (2017),

The history of the Danish pedagogue and traditions of forming children is a narrative about a professional identity developed within the context of creative processes, equality, emancipation, and democracy. The aim is to engage, support, and guide children to become more independent, responsible decision-makers, and active participants in their communities. (p. 247)

This perspective and pedagogical professional identity (Rothuizen & Togsverd) along with Abbott's key concepts of diagnosis, inference and treatment formed the theoretical framework for my analysis.

Findings

The academic literature concerning children in vulnerable positions encompasses various terms and concepts that can be categorised into two broad categories: factors that burden children's daily lives and the symptoms, signs or indicators of the different types of burdens they face (Görlich et al., 2019). One crucial aspect of the professional role of pedagogues working in this field is their ability to accurately interpret these indicators of vulnerability. The approach pedagogues choose to address the issue depends on how they perceive, experience and explain vulnerability as a problem (Abbott, 1988). Pedagogues employ different definitions to identify and classify children in vulnerable positions, thereby creating target groups for diverse efforts within the welfare sector.

The overall understanding of vulnerability comprises three elements: symptoms, signs or indicators of vulnerability; causes of vulnerability; and the consequences of vulnerability. Symptoms and causes play a significant role in defining vulnerability and differentiating it from other phenomena. Symptoms represent observable manifestations of vulnerability, while causes are often more challenging to identify. Uncovering the underlying factors that give rise to symptoms often requires additional information. Through professional analysis, pedagogues must attempt to explain the relationship between symptoms and causes and provide guidance on how to intervene in specific situations. However, one potential implication for pedagogues when detecting vulnerability is the inadvertent blindness of the institutional contexts in which vulnerability may arise.

Analysis Part 1: Defining and Classifying Vulnerability

To establish a framework for analysing how pedagogues in early childhood education (ECE) define and classify children, Rubington and Weinberg (1969) proposed a series of questions: Who defines and classifies whom? Why do pedagogues engage in these definitions and classifications? How can this process be carried out?

Regarding the question of who is involved in defining and classifying, it is obvious that pedagogues attach definitions and classifications to children

who exhibit symptoms indicating vulnerability. These symptoms, as identified by pedagogues, manifest as violent behaviour, self-harm, kindergarten absenteeism, stress, anxiety and a lack of engagement in social interactions with other children. Families of these children are also included in the definitions and classifications because the root causes of vulnerability often lie within the family dynamic. Examples include instances of violence, abuse, changes in a child's behaviour due to parental conflicts and parents who are preoccupied with work and have limited time for their children. Additionally, the institutional context of the kindergarten plays a role, as it provides a framework within which signs of vulnerability can be observed.

Regarding the reasons why pedagogues engage in defining and classifying, both political and professional frameworks come into play. Kindergartens are part of a welfare society that has an obligation to address social and pedagogical issues. According to Bacchi (2009), vulnerability becomes a problem when society perceives it as such and demands action. The starting point is the perception of vulnerability in relation to an idealised state of normality against which anomalies are constructed as undesirable counterparts. Based on this concept of normality, various indicators of well-being deficits are defined as abnormal and potentially detrimental to the child in the long term. This concern also stems from the professional sphere. Both perspectives create a morally justified imperative to intervene in the problem, both politically and pedagogically.

In practical terms, when defining and classifying vulnerability, pedagogues are generally conscious of children's access to and involvement in social relationships (Theilmann, 2020). Pedagogues operating within this general domain initially classify disturbances and issues based on their impact on daily operations, such as *well-being*, *learning*, *development* and *formation*. Consequently, they focus on maintaining the flow of operations, which often leads to a broader emphasis on overall well-being.

To ensure action, pedagogues need to consider how this process can be implemented in practice. Identifying and classifying vulnerability are integral parts of the broader process of identifying, understanding and intervening in problems. As components of professional work, these activities are supported by the pedagogical profession (Abbott, 1988; Møller, 2018). Pedagogues draw upon a broad knowledge base that describes and explains the phenomenon as well as a set of procedures that prescribe how action should be taken (Argyris, 1992; Laursen, 2020).

Through the interviews, it became obvious that pedagogues relied on various sources of information. They adopted a multifaceted approach to knowledge and methods when articulating their understanding of a problem. Their understanding was informed by insights from the child's family, discussions with colleagues and professional interactions with cooperators. They also drew from handbooks, methods, models and theories. For instance, one pedagogue (P1) mentioned the use of "Børnelinealen", an assessment tool, to make relevant determinations. Another pedagogue (P2) explained that her colleagues employed "the three perspectives of in front, next to and behind the child (three learning spaces and the zone of proximal development)". These approaches helped qualify the identification and classification of problems and served as prerequisites for initiating interventions (Theilmann, 2020).

How pedagogues define vulnerability

Pedagogues were interviewed to determine how they defined children in vulnerable positions and what distinguished them from other children. The definitions and classifications provided by the pedagogues were clustered into eight categories. These categories are summarised in Table 1.

The categories in the table reflect current political and societal discussions, addressing various understandings of vulnerability. Traditional social problems within a child's family are recognised as a significant cause of vulnerability. Other examples, such as physical or mental handicaps (e.g. ADHD and autism), are also acknowledged as factors in identifying vulnerability. Ethnicity and premature birth were commonly reported as well. These examples align with public debate and research in the field (Andersen et al., 2017; Mynarska et al., 2015), focusing on visible and identifiable symptoms that pedagogues can easily recognise.

However, pedagogues also refer to alternative understandings of vulnerability that deviate from the traditional approach. This aligns with the emerging research on new vulnerability (Görlich et al., 2019), which emphasises the importance of considering subtle factors. From this perspective, symptoms can be assessed and interpreted differently, indicating that there is no single solution or specific approach to solving the problem that can address all pedagogues' concerns. This is expressed in the following categories: (1) problems associated with learning, skills and competences; (2) severe incidents; and (3) stressful features related to parents. Finally, a category of lack of well-being is relevant to analyse due to its inherent ambiguity and is explored further below.

Table 1. Categorisation

Category	Pedagogue responses
Traditional social problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children not guided by their parents • Unwashed and dirty children • Concerns about family-related issues • Children who have been exposed to incest, violence or misguidedness
Physical and mental handicaps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maldevelopment • Lack of contact with the child • Physical problems • Children with diagnoses
Problems associated with learning, skills & competences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children with difficulties concentrating • Children lacking knowledge of environmental awareness • Sensory disturbances • Handicaps • Verbal challenges • Child's development, contact, interplay and relationships
Lack of well-being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes in the behaviour of the child or context • Changes in the child's mood or sadness • Children who lack attention and are looking for affirmation • Children with aggressive behaviour • Frustrated children • A child who is not doing fine and who deviates from the group • Quiet girls • Children with physical limits • Children striking, biting, kicking, shouting or running around wildly
Severe incidents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children with changed home environments due to parents' divorce • Illness and death in the family
Stressful features related to parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Career parents who are busy and do not have time for their children • Lack of care from parents in spite of material goods • Parents who are busy realising themselves through sports, new relationships, etc.
Ethnic affiliation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bilingual children who are far behind in language development
Prematurity of the child	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prematurely born children

Problems associated with learning, skills and competences

Learning, healthy development and the acquisition of competences are both causes and symptoms of vulnerability and phenomena that arise in the relationship between a child and daycare providers. It is important to note that a child with learning problems, such as difficulties in understanding mathematics, may not necessarily be in a vulnerable position before encountering those specific subjects and associated learning goals. Thus, it

does not necessarily represent a problem in which a child has difficulties in achieving mathematical competences. However, to understand vulnerability as something that might be produced in the institutional context is beyond a pedagogue's perspective when that vulnerability is either created in the private sphere and then brought into the institutional context or is something inherent in the child. Similarly, the behavioural interactions of a child with other children and adults may only be recognised as problematic when observed within the institutional context.

Severe incidents (divorce, illness and death)

Pedagogues acknowledge severe incidents as factors that influence and stress a child. Divorce, illness and death can affect anyone, regardless of their social status. This represents a departure from the notion of classic social problems as the sole encompassing risk factor. In this case, pedagogues look beyond the traditional approach to vulnerability and highlight causes that make vulnerability relevant to other groups.

Stressful features related to parents

In real-life contexts, pedagogues recognise various symptoms when identifying vulnerability. Stressful factors can be perceived as classic risk factors for vulnerability, such as unemployment in specific demographic areas and issues connected to welfare-oriented relationships. For instance, stress may arise due to careerist, self-centred and self-actualising parents who prioritise work and fail to adequately attend to their children's well-being. Pedagogues emphasise this welfare problem as an explanation for vulnerability.

Lack of well-being (social isolation and conflicts)

The category of lack of well-being encompasses both the classic understanding of target groups for the early detection of vulnerability and a deviation from the traditional understanding. Pedagogues highlight social isolation and conflict as issues that affect children in more privileged families. Empirical data also reveal an important insight: The powerful influence of classic understandings of vulnerability leads to unequal recognition of the seriousness of vulnerability symptoms in more privileged families compared to families exhibiting traditional symptoms of vulnerability. Sometimes the pedagogues were not able to identify a lack of well-being in privileged families. According to P4, "We don't have these kinds of children here", while she refers to children lacking well-being as attached to certain demographic

areas. Pedagogues sometimes believe that privileged families, equipped with multiple resources, such as wealth, networks and education, can handle challenges without interventions. As a result, there is less concern for these children. While pedagogues acknowledge the diverse understandings of vulnerability and which indicators should be observed, they find it easier to identify and act upon the classic risk factors that constitute vulnerability.

Individual and familial stress

Pedagogues further differentiate between individual and familial stresses and signs of a lack of well-being. Individual stresses may involve inherent traits or diagnoses in the child, as well as deviant behaviour. Familial stresses relate to the conditions surrounding the child and can encompass both a family and institutional context (Theilmann & Laursen, 2020).

Empirical data indicate that pedagogues view individual stresses as either behavioural reactions or traces of a child's personality. Regarding contextual stresses, there is a noticeable tendency among pedagogues to attribute vulnerability causes solely to the family context. In contrast, when it comes to the kindergarten or daycare setting, pedagogues tend to perceive individual traits associated with the child as causes of vulnerability, while the institutional context remains largely unexamined as a causal factor.

Table 2. Origination

Origination	Personal traits attached to the child	Familial context
Pedagogues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes in the behaviour of the child or changes around the child • Sadness or changes in the child's mood • Bilingual children who are far behind in language development • Children with difficulties concentrating • Children lacking knowledge of environmental awareness—sensory disturbances • Children with aggressive behaviour • Frustrated children • A child who is not doing fine; one who deviates from the group • Quiet girls • Children who need physical limits • Physical handicaps • Verbal challenges • Children striking, biting and kicking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes in the behaviour of the child or changes around the child • Children not guided by their parents • Unwashed and dirty children • Career parents who are busy and do not have time for their children • Children who lack attention and are looking for affirmation • Concerns about family-related issues • Children who have been exposed to incest, violence or mis-guidedness

Analysis Part 2: Knowledge Influencing Understanding of Vulnerability Among Pedagogues

The perception and handling of vulnerability by pedagogues were often influenced by various types of knowledge. These included (1) professional knowledge and values that inform problem definition, (2) professional- and practice-related knowledge on how to identify and interpret signs of vulnerability and (3) knowledge of relevant intervention strategies for addressing potential problems (Abbott, 1988; Bacchi, 2009; Høybye-Mortensen, 2013; Jenkins, 1996; Jöhncke et al., 2004).

In order for vulnerability to be experienced and detected, it must first be observable as a concern. Indicators, expressions or symptoms serve as visible manifestations of phenomena and become objects of observation and detection. A symptom is both a part of the phenomenon and an indicator of something that goes beyond an individual's immediate presence (Laursen, 2020; Theilmann & Laursen, 2020). Interpreting aspects of the observable world as signs of an underlying reality can be achieved through various sources of knowledge.

In practice, pedagogues often do not distinguish between signs, indicators and causes of vulnerability attached to children. For instance, a lack of care manifested through inadequate nutrition, clothing and hygiene can be both indicators of stress and stressful factors in themselves. A child who arrives at kindergarten without a lunchbox may be seen as an indicator of their vulnerability, but it could also be considered an indicator of insufficient parental capability, which is the actual cause of vulnerability. The selection of which aspect of the phenomenon to attribute as the cause of vulnerability is heavily influenced by the theories and models adopted by the pedagogues, which are primarily rooted in their professional knowledge and observable factors. This aspect of problem identification relies heavily on what Abbott (1988) referred to as inference—the use of specific knowledge that characterises professionals in their practice.

Additionally, the pedagogical professional identity of each individual pedagogue was also relevant to consider. The unfolding of professional identity within pedagogical practice means that pedagogues draw upon their own values, norms and perspectives as well as those associated with their profession when assessing vulnerability. Consequently, the identification and detection of vulnerability can become highly complex. P5 emphasised, “I rely a lot on my gut feeling,” reflecting a complex interplay between professional

knowledge and the personal values, norms and perspectives of the individual pedagogue.

Consequences of Different Ways of Understanding Vulnerability

The different ways in which pedagogues understand vulnerability have significant consequences. First, pedagogues tend to perceive vulnerability as primarily linked to the child, either to the child per se (based on diagnoses or behavioural expressions) or within the child's immediate context, usually the family. The institutional context is typically not considered an arena in which vulnerability can be produced. This underlying assumption often leads to overlooking the possibility that daycare settings, such as nurseries and kindergartens, can sometimes contribute to the creation of vulnerable situations for children. Recognising the institutional context as a potential co-producer of vulnerability requires a self-critical awareness of how institutions and pedagogues interact with the child (Laursen, 2020; Theilmann & Laursen, 2020).

Second, it appears relatively straightforward for pedagogues to identify severely stressed children in vulnerable positions, particularly when the causes are traditional and well-known social problems within families. However, it becomes much more challenging to identify vulnerability when pedagogues encounter interactions between multiple possible causes during the detection phase. Similarly, selecting an appropriate intervention from various alternatives becomes more difficult in such situations. Moreover, this complexity is amplified by the range of interventions available for pedagogues to choose.

Discussion

The present study has primarily focused on pedagogues' identification, definition and understanding of vulnerability in accordance with legislation and their professional tasks and responsibilities. Specifically, pedagogues have placed explicit emphasis on children already recognised by social services as being in precarious situations. Referring to *The Strengthened Pedagogical Curriculum*, vulnerable children are described as follows: "Vulnerable children means a complex group of children, e.g. children with low socio-economic backgrounds, children with physical or mental disabilities, children at risk of being excluded from the community etc." ("The strengthened pedagogical curriculum," 2018).

While the curriculum acknowledges the complexity of vulnerability among children, it predominantly emphasises well-established and traditional categories of vulnerable children. However, this study has revealed a more varied understanding of vulnerability, incorporating perspectives such as children experiencing grief, children from privileged yet busy families and lonely children. These expanded views align with the concept of *new vulnerability*, but they are not adequately represented in the existing legislation. Consequently, these differing perspectives complicate the task of identifying vulnerability in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings and implementing early interventions. Furthermore, the professional identity of individual pedagogues, including their values, norms, ethical and professional standards and personal beliefs, also influences their perception of vulnerability. This aspect further complicates the translation of vulnerability assessments into professional practice as it involves both objective professional evaluations and subjective personal judgements.

An important finding from the interviews with pedagogues is that their understanding of vulnerability was influenced by their primary work tasks. In kindergartens, these tasks revolve around a child's *development, formation, well-being* and *learning*. Pedagogues primarily focus on a child's social interactions within the group and observe whether the child conforms to social expectations when identifying vulnerability. There is a tendency among pedagogues in kindergartens to categorise children into dichotomies based on their level of participation in activities and social integration within the kindergarten community. When a child deviates from the "norm", pedagogues tend to search for factors intrinsic to the child, such as personality traits or developmental disorders, or contextual factors related to the child's family background. However, it appears that pedagogues may not be fully aware of, or at least not explicitly acknowledge, the institutional context as a potential arena for the production of vulnerability.

Finally, the findings indicate a tendency to disproportionately focus on children who are considered "at risk" in the traditional sense, which inadvertently leads to overlooking children from privileged families. Consequently, there is a greater likelihood of initiating interventions for children already known to social services, while those from privileged backgrounds may be overlooked in terms of pedagogical support and interventions.

Conclusions

The present study reaffirms previous research on vulnerability by es-

establishing a connection between vulnerability and factors such as social exclusion, violence, sexual abuse, health difficulties (including poor mental health or disabilities), stigmatisation or discrimination, cultural affiliation, unemployment and sole provider status. These findings align with the *Strengthened Pedagogical Curriculum* and ongoing societal discussions. While indicators such as loneliness, social isolation, conflicts and contextual impacts (including divorce, illness and death) are not necessarily linked to problematic familial backgrounds, there is still a greater emphasis on children from families with traditional problems. In summary, there seems to be a tendency to address concerns related to this specific group of children rather than those who exhibit similar symptoms but come from more privileged families. The assumption often made is that these advantaged families are capable of handling their own problems and are therefore seen as anything but vulnerable.

When understanding vulnerability, pedagogues typically attribute its causes either to personal traits expressed through specific patterns of behaviour of the child or to the child's familial context. However, in this study, pedagogues tended to view the institutional context primarily as a place to detect vulnerability, rather than as a context that may contribute to its creation or exacerbation. This indicates a significant tendency to overlook or disregard kindergartens as a potential explanation for vulnerability.

While the pedagogues did consider family background when assessing vulnerability, they also took into account a wide range of symptoms and signs, which raised concerns for them. Their professional identity, combined with their knowledge and expertise, guided them in identifying problems from various perspectives. The ways vulnerability is detected and perceived are influenced by professional background and the knowledge associated with pedagogy, as well as political and societal currents, trends and key concepts. Moreover, they are guided by implicit factors tied to their professional identity, such as professional discretion, intuition, gut feelings and experiences.

Finally, pedagogues face complexity in navigating and addressing diverse understandings of vulnerability, even though their contributions serve to expand and refine these understandings. This complexity arises because problem solutions, interventions and actions must be tailored to the specific problem identifications. The pedagogues need to address vulnerability in both the traditional—and the most common—understanding of vulnerability and “new vulnerability”, which to a greater extent aligns with pedagogy

and pedagogical tasks. Therefore, it is crucial to pay specific attention to expanding the concept of vulnerability not only in pedagogical practice in Denmark, but also internationally, as perceiving vulnerability should consist of many aspects that leads to earlier problem identification and problem intervention according to children in lack of well-being.

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