Valued Learning Topics in Kindergarten

Liv Ingrid Aske Håberg

Abstract

In the Scandinavian tradition, *how* children learn is of much greater importance than *what* children. However, this study seeks primarily to investigate "what to learn" as opposed to "how to learn." The matter of what topics are most valued is under-researched, particularly in regard to kindergarten teachers and what they think children should learn during their time in kindergarten. In this study, the above-stated fact was investigated through focus group interviews (Halkier, 2015) in six kindergartens during January of 2020. In each kindergarten, 3-5 kindergarten teachers – 23 in total – participated in these interviews. A qualitative approach was used to obtain participants and capture their perspectives (Kvale & Brinkman, 2015). All of the responses emphasized a common theme, that focus should be placed on learning and developing social competence and early literacy learning (ELL). National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) defines ELL as learning vocabulary and developing oral language, along with becoming familiarized with the alphabet, writing letters, and obtaining phonological awareness (2008). In contrast, when asked what the most important aspect was in following the governmental curriculum, kindergarten teachers specified ELL.

The findings discussed regarded ELL as a critical topic in early childhood education and care (ECEC), both internationally and in the Scandinavian countries of Norway, Sweden, and Denmark (Børne-og Undervisningsministeriet, 2007; Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017; Skolverket, 2019). The findings were also discussed regarding social competence as an expression of the *Bildung* concept (Klafki, 1997) and in regard to Froebelian pedagogy, which has greatly influenced Scandinavian kindergartens. Although this heritage may have been used, shaped and interpreted in a child-oriented direction (Brostrøm, 2004; Håberg, 2017), it has the potential to provide various input and directions.

Keywords

early literacy learning (ELL), social competence, *Bildung*, curriculum, Froebelian pedagogy

Valued Learning Topics in Kindergarten

This study investigates kindergarten teachers' most valued learning topics in Scandinavian kindergartens. Within this study, kindergarten includes all forms of childcare institutions for children from the age of zero to the approximate age of six years old, when formal education begins. In the Scandinavian countries of Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, kindergartens observe long-standing traditions with roots from Froebel's pedagogy that were built upon Rousseau and Pestalozzi and later elaborated by Key and Dewey's work in the beginning of the last century (Alvestad & Pramling Samuelsson, 1999). According to the

Citation: Håberg, Liv Ingrid Aske. (2022). Valued Learning Topics in Kindergarten. *Global Education Review, 9* (2), 83-98.

Froebelian fundraising pedagogy established in Germany around 1840, valued learning topics in kindergartens were built upon gardening as an expression of natural experiences, movement play and special play objects ("play gifts"); these concepts were considered vital and necessary to be at the center of the interactions between children and kindergarten teachers (Johansson, 2004). Although context and society have changed considerably, there is still a lack of research surrounding topics valued by kindergarten teachers.

As an institution, Scandinavian kindergartens have historically been established from the "bottom-up" by volunteer organizations and other non-governmental agencies and persons; they have also been internally autonomized to a large extent (Brostrøm, 2004). In contrast, Scandinavian kindergartens nowadays are included in the educational systems to varying degrees. Since the early 2000s, kindergartens have been defined as the first part of the educational race; it is not seen as a form of schooling but rather as learning integrated in care and play. Similar to schools, kindergartens are also part of an international educational context. The school tradition is influenced by Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), competences and basic skills. Although "what to learn" is quite clear, "how to learn" has been highlighted to a much greater degree in the Scandinavian kindergarten tradition and among kindergarten teachers (Brostrøm, 2004).

In each of the aforementioned countries, Scandinavian governments have created a national curriculum that applies to all kindergartens. A curriculum specifies values, intentions and ideas in a society; studying these concepts provides different perceptions of education relevant to democracy (Karseth & Sivesind, 2009). In this study, the curricula in the three Scandinavian countries are analyzed according to identify valued learning topics. The main impression from this study stands true: there are very few studies that have inductively investigated valued learning topics, searched beyond the curriculum and inquired openly into the true meaning behind kindergarten teachers' ideas. This study addresses this gap by interviewing kindergarten teachers in Norway to determine their perspectives and experiences. The guiding research question is as follows: *what do kindergarten teachers consider the most valued topics for children to learn during kindergarten time before starting school?*

Analyzing Valued Topics in Government Directions

Early Literacy Learning (ELL)

The author analyzed the following Scandinavian curricula: the Norwegian "Framework Plan for Kindergartens" (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017), the Swedish "Curriculum for the Preschool Lpfö 18" (Skolverket, 2019) and the Danish "Day Care Act" (Børne-og Undervisningsministeriet, 2007). Findings from this analysis suggested that in following these curricula, early literacy learning (ELL) is the most valued topic for children to learn prior to starting school. Early literacy is a "…description of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that precede learning to read and write in the primary grades" (Roskos et al., 2003, p. 53). This is defined as learning vocabulary, developing oral language and acquiring knowledge, along with becoming familiarized with the alphabet, writing letters and phonological awareness (NELP, 2008).

Learning Areas

A commonality among Scandinavian kindergarten curricula is the highlighting of six or seven learning areas which kindergartens

must implement. In all three countries, ELL is among these learning areas. The Norwegian curriculum (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, p. 19) also refers to six objectives that "contribute to the children's all-round development." One of these objectives specifies that kindergarten must promote communication and language (p. 23-24), which may be interpreted as ELL. By comparing the six objectives and their content with the seven learning areas in the Norwegian curriculum (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017), ELL is the common concept revealed in both of them. This double emphasis indicates that ELL is a highly valued topic in Norwegian kindergarten and, more specifically, in governmental directions of content within the kindergarten.

The Danish curriculum specifies that ELL entails learning the Danish language to a much greater degree than the two other Scandinavian curricula. The Denmark government can exclude economic support in the event that parents disagree with sending their child to the language-stimulating program; these programs occur for 30 hours a week within the kindergarten setting (Børne-og Undervisningsministeriet, 2007). As opposed to this, a suggestion in a recent white paper involving kindergartens in Norway (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2019) was greatly resisted by kindergarten teachers; this involved imposition of a statutory duty for municipalities to assess all children's Norwegian language skills before they begin school (Gravklev, 2021). Although the suggestion was yet to be politically decided, Norwegian kindergarten teachers desired the ability to voluntarily identify children who may want their language skills investigated further; the teachers' autonomy and professional assessments were considered to be sufficient in this matter (Gravklev, 2021). The resistance did not concern the idea of working with ELLs. Rather, it was directed towards assessing the children's language skills.

International Trends

The great value on ELL is also an international trend, and it is placed high on the political agenda (Sommer, 2015). Gradually, kindergarten has been incorporated into national education strategies with a stronger connection between economic growth, school and kindergarten (Krejsler, 2013). This also applies internationally, where the kindergarten is increasingly seen to contribute to strengthening the knowledge economy (Bennett, 2010).

The high valuing of ELL – both nationally and internationally – may be interpreted as a kind of centralization of educational context and direction. It may also be seen as an approach to achieve a higher level of quality in the kindergarten sphere. The quality concept is a debated phenomenon in the kindergarten field and is criticized for having little focus on contextualizing kindergarten pedagogy: "…there are a few universal answers: everything depends on the particular circumstances involved" (Moss & Petrie, 2019, p. 399). In this study, interest has not been placed on the quality concept, as well as to what degree ELL is a part of a centralized educational direction. ELL, however, is not the overall purpose of kindergarten in following the Scandinavian curricula.

Overall Purpose of *Bildung*

Bildung – and further on, learning democracy – is of utmost importance in the Scandinavian curricula (Børne-og Undervisningsministeriet, 2007; Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017; Skolverket, 2019). In this context, ELL subordinates this overall purpose. Willbergh (2016) stated that

"the basic task of education in the German and Scandinavian traditions is encompassed by the term *Bildung*" (p. 112). *Bildung* is a term with various meanings, including the following: "…in essence, it refers to the inner development of the individual, a process of fulfillment through education and knowledge" (Watson, 2010; Moss & Petrie, 2019, p. 400). It also includes developing responsible actions through the inner man and commitment to values and norms which society recognizes (Gundem, 1998, p. 145).

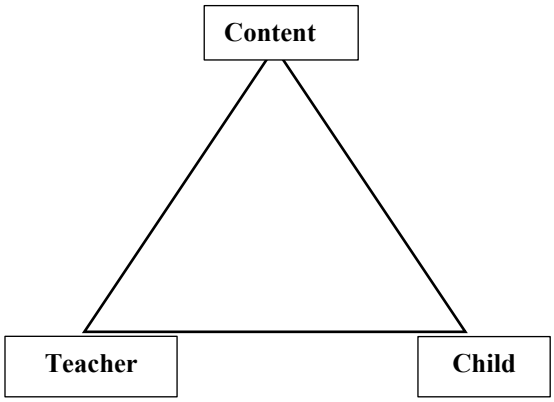
Klafki (1997) connected *Bildung* and democracy through "categorical *Bildung*." Categorical *Bildung* is divided into material and formal theories. Material *Bildung* entails which subjects should be taught and it is defined by the content that dominates the children's subjective perspectives (Willbergh, 2016). Contrarily, formal *Bildung* addresses what skills should be learned, and it is defined by the content that is subordinate to the child as a subject. Formal *Bildung* theories also include processes of learning methods such as "learning to learn" (Willbergh, 2016). According to this, valued learning topics in kindergarten are principally grounded in material *Bildung*, however both of these traditional strands of didactics are necessary to achieve categorial *Bildung*; categorical *Bildung* includes both "…content prepared for children by an adult… [and] what the child does with it and how his or her perception of things is change" (Krüger, 2008; Willbergh, 2016, p. 115). Learning concepts and categories that encompass phenomena in the world is essential, along with discussing ultimate goals of education; this is emancipation for all, "formulated as the development of self-determination, co-determination, and solidarity" (Willbergh, 2016, p. 115).

Froebelian Pedagogy Heritage

Froebel balanced material and formal *Bildung* (Brostrøm & Vejleskov, 2009). *Bildung* is achieved by staff members both offering valued content and being concurrently interested in the children's input and experiences (Johansson, 2004).

Froebel based his pedagogy upon play, experiences with nature and intersubjective relationships between children and kindergarten teachers surrounding special play objects ("play gifts") (Johansson, 2004). The content remains outside of the child and the kindergarten teacher (Wallström, 1992). The didactical triangle, which is part of the same tradition as Froebelian pedagogy reveals a balance among three factors: teacher, content and child.

Figure 1

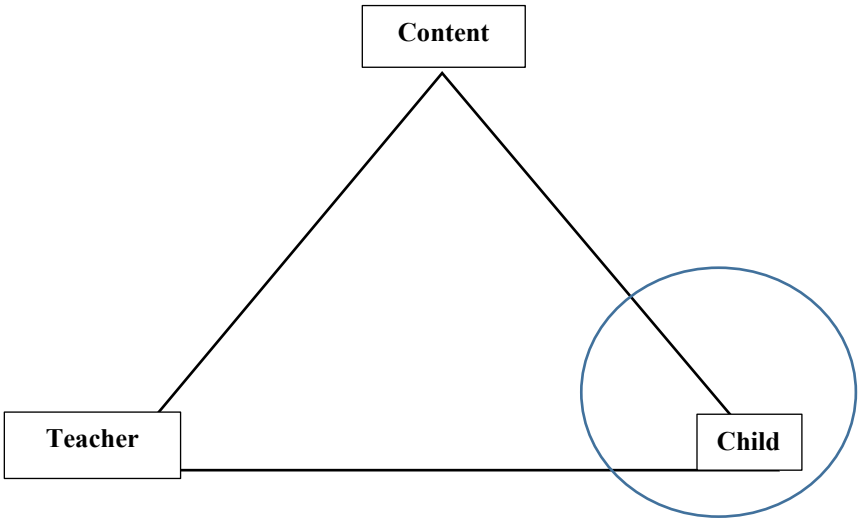


The Didactical Triangle (after Künzli, 2000, p. 49)

Trends like Froebelian pedagogy, however, can change and enter directions other than the originator's plan. Brehony (2009) specified that Froebelian pedagogy has been revised around the world, such as in the case of the "free play movement" (p. 599) which advocated a permissive pedagogy. Although the

degree to which the Scandinavian countries were influenced by this is unknown, kindergarten pedagogy was greatly transformed into a formal *Bildung* direction (Brostrøm, 2004; Johansson, 2004). Furthermore, child-oriented pedagogy can be expressed with emphasis on the child in regard to the content and staff in the didactic triangle (Håberg, 2017).

Figure 2



Child-Oriented Pedagogy (Håberg, 2017, p. 308, after Künzli, 2000, p. 49)

It is typical in child-oriented pedagogy that the kindergarten teacher attempts to create a stimulating environment where children themselves can initiate their learning and development. Neither instructions nor guidance should be given (Johansson, 2004). Free play has been emphasized as the main way of learning, while learning "what" has been strongly disregarded. This means that formal *Bildung* has been emphasized while material *Bildung* has been almost neglected (Brostrøm & Vejleskov, 2009).

Many studies have emphasized Nordic pedagogy as exemplary, as "play" is very centralized in the pedagogy. In the observation put forth by John Bennet (2010), leader of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), thematic reviews of ECEC policy and provision specified that the pedagogy in the Scandinavian countries is characterized by "broad orientations rather than prescribed outcomes" (Bennet, 2010, p. 19). He praised the curricula for not specifying learning outcomes but rather learning areas which the children may experience during the kindergarten time. However, the OECD problematizes the Norwegian kindergarten curriculum for being feeble in its learning topics for each child. Norway "avoids making specific prescriptions as to what exactly children should learn" (OECD, 2013, p. 41). The *Quality Matters in Early Childhood Education and Care* report (OECD, 2013) pointed out that this ambiguity can potentially give staff too much freedom to make choices about learning content.

This study does not seek to examine why and how Froebelian pedagogy was transformed into a child-oriented pedagogy in Scandinavian countries; relevant arguments can be traditionally little access to written Froebel sources with great emphasis on oral transmission (Brostrøm, 2004). Relevant arguments can also be influences by the work of Rousseau, including a view of learning as awakening a child's slumbering potential (Willbergh, 2016), and the progressive pedagogy influenced by Key and Dewey's work in the

beginning of last century (Alvestad & Pramling Samuelsson, 1999).

Research and the current study

Although the current study does not fully explain the status regarding research on the most valued learning topics among kindergarten teachers, it contributes to the research status. In Norway, the research is dominated by investigations of learning areas in the curriculum (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017), which kindergarten teachers find most valued and which are worked most with in the kindergartens. Several studies have utilized surveys to investigate kindergarten teachers (Brenna-utvalet, 2010; Fagerholt et al., 2019; Riksrevisjonen, 2009; Østrem et al., 2009), and these studies found that the learning area of "communication, language, and text" is highly valued, with an increasing emphasis placed on it over the last century. While 67% of kindergarten teachers used this learning area to a large extent in 2008, approximately 81% reported having done so in 2018 (Fagerholt et al., 2019).

Using a quantitative approach of data collection, including a large random sample, the main findings in these studies are significant (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). ELL remains the overwhelming "winner" among the seven learning areas. In any case, most Norwegian research has focused on how children learn, not the content or "what to learn". The main impression is the lack of knowledge base regarding studies that have investigated what kindergarten teachers considered most important for the children to learn, specifically outside government curricula. This study primarily investigates "what to learn" as opposed to "how to learn."

Methodological Approach

The research question in this study is as follows: *"What do kindergarten teachers consider the most valued topics for children to learn during kindergarten time before starting school?"* This has been studied through semi-structured qualitative interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). A hallmark of qualitative research is that the researcher interprets a reality that has already been interpreted by participants, and it is a double hermeneutic (Giddens, 1976). By choosing semi-structured qualitative interviews, the data material is based on questions from a pre-made interview guide and the participants' unique views, experiences and reflections (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). In this way, semi-structured qualitative interviews convey deductive and inductive data. This provides a considerable opportunity to capture the participants' interpreted reality.

Focus group interviews were chosen to identify not only each kindergarten teacher's meaning but also each kindergarten's specific practices. Focus group interviews produce empirical group-level data about a topic, and knowledge production depends on participants' social interactions (Halkier, 2015).

Preparing Data Collection

Before collecting the data, notification forms, information letters and interview guides were submitted to the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD). After approval, six relevant kindergartens were found using websites in three different communities. This was done by sending mail and a participant information letter to the chairs. It was specified that the proposal was not to perform any type of assessment, but rather to learn from the practitioners (Halkier, 2015). The six kindergartens responded positively, which was

unexpected; a potential reason for this outlook may have been the time of year chosen for participating in interviews (January 2020) or the harmless, interesting nature of the study themes.

The sample was strategic (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). To obtain the required number of participants in the focus group interviews, the criteria were as follows: kindergartens with at least three departments with departments for both toddlers (0–3 years) and older children (3–5 years). In each kindergarten, pedagogical leaders were invited to participate in one common interview. As interviewing with a recorder makes personal data linkable to a person (NSD, 2020), all the participants signed a written consent form. Pedagogical leaders were chosen first as they work daily with the children and have a special closeness to the ordinary life in the kindergartens. Second, according to the curriculum (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017), these individuals can lead the work in each department, guide the assistants and perform the planning and evaluation work.

Overall, 23 kindergarten teachers participated in the focus group interviews. All of the teachers had positions as pedagogical leaders, with the exception of two individuals who worked as chairs and wanted to represent pedagogical leaders who were unavailable on the interview day. The chairs were well-acquainted with daily life in the departments; for this reason, their presence did not significantly affect the data. Flat structure and little distance between chairs and pedagogical leaders is typical in the Norwegian kindergarten context (Brenna-utvalet, 2010; Løvgren, 2012). The kindergartens in the sample were randomly given the title A–F.

Table 1

Sample Kindergartens (n = 6) and Participants (N = 23)

Name	Number	Working as
Kindergarten A	4	Pedagogical leaders, named A1–A4
Kindergarten B	3	Pedagogical leaders + 1 chair, named B1–B3
Kindergarten C	4	Pedagogical leaders, named C1–C4
Kindergarten D	4	Pedagogical leaders, named D1–D4
Kindergarten E	4	Pedagogical leaders, named E1–E3
Kindergarten F	4	Pedagogical leaders + 1 chair, named F1–F3
SUM	23 participants	21 pedagogical leaders and 2 chairs

Conducting Focus Group Interviews

Interviews were conducted in the kindergartens themselves. Each interview lasted about 35 minutes and was led by the researcher. The participants partook in the interviews by answering the questions in the interview guide and by presenting their own moments. They complemented each other, described that this was “how we usually do it in this kindergarten” and gave small narratives from daily life and practice.

The impression was that participants knowing each other well made them feel safer and more willing to be open; Halkier (2015), however, specified that focus group interviews may be a part of social control, making participants feel unsafe and not open to contribute. The role of the moderator, therefore, is vital for managing the social interactions in the group (Halkier, 2015), and the researcher was made aware of this during each of the six interviews.

Conducting Focus Group Interviews

The interviews were transcribed by the author, which gave proximity to the data material. The gap between the spoken and transcribed texts, according to Geertzt (1973), is more than a technical process; rather, it is an interpretation woven into cultural analysis. The transcribed data material was categorized using the main points in the interview guide. In addition to this deductive approach, the data material was coded into inductive categories built upon the participants' moments. Both the inductive and deductive codes were analyzed together and categorized into two main findings in regard to the research question. Overall, this created an abductive analysis process; according to Peirce et al. (1994), this process reveals ways to explain unexpected moments.

The first main finding concerned what is most important to learn during a child's kindergarten time and the time prior to their starting school. This question was posed without any comments, tips or directions. The answers are, therefore, a form of inductive data. In contrast, the second main finding concerned which learning area is the most important. This question directed the participant to choose between seven learning areas in the curriculum (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017). Therefore, this data is built considerably upon a deductive approach.

Several approaches have been used to verify the findings. According to Maxwell's (1992) verification theory, qualitative studies gain validity by describing exactly what the participants say, defining theoretical concepts with precision ~~a~~nd interpreting the participants` statements from their perspective. In the interview situation, this was achieved by the moderator repeating the participant's answers and asking whether they were correctly perceived. Second, the participants' statements were recorded and subsequently transcribed with attention to accuracy. The results from the interviews were presented thoroughly, and this included quotation usage. Overall, these moments strengthen the reliability; according to Maxwell (1992, p. 288) reliability is not "…a separate issue from validity, but to a particular type of threat to validity." This concept aligns with Richards (2009), who emphasized that the best way to ensure reliability is to have valued procedures.

Third, theoretical concepts were precisely defined in this study (Maxwell, 1992). Main theoretical concepts like *ELL*, *Froebelian pedagogy* and *Bildung* were operationalized in order to ensure that they considerably represented the studied phenomena. The fourth and last verification procedure was to interpret the data material from the participants' perspective; this took into consideration the double hermeneutic approach (Giddens, 1976). A part of this process was to compare the participants' statements to create the main impression of valued learning topics in each of the six kindergartens and concurrently highlight any existing nuances. This aligns with Kvale and Brinkmann (2015), who specified that participants can be involved in a validation community in focus group interviews, and that

this can strengthen the *member validity* (2015, p. 284).

Results

In all six kindergartens, the participants emphasized that the main concept to learn in kindergarten is the development of social competence followed by ELL. It was unexpected that these two themes were so clear and ranked this way in each of the kindergartens.

The Most Valued Learning

Social competence was defined by the participants as a concept that embraces social functioning and self-development by the individual child. It also embraces having a feeling of belonging a group. Social competence was defined as "to collaborate and to share" (A1), "to be part of a group" (A2), "to function together with other children" (A4) and "to relate to other human beings positively and adequately…then you create wellbeing around you and then you can learn. It is basic" (B3). The participants stated that they start working with social competence in the toddler department. "We are comforting them, showing them how to behave with each other," participant D4 said. By giving the children safety and closeness, "we see how they are imitating and doing it themselves" (D4).

Social competence also entails that children are allowed to be themselves and to have space; concurrently, it was agreed that children also needed to learn to "pay attention to others and give them space" (F1). According to this, clear big differences exist among the children; for some of them, it falls "naturally" to assert themselves while others rather almost "apologize for their existence" (F1). In kindergarten C, social competence was defined as: "Developing a positive self-image, mastering, feeling safe and feeling that they [the children] are important" (C1–3).

The participants in all the kindergartens emphasized the importance of teaching children that they are good enough as they are, and that each child is unique. It is an ideal that the children should experience in order to show their strengths and understand that they each have something to contribute to the community, as participant E3 mentioned: "To be a little different, that is tip top!" The staff attempted to highlight the children who are silent and "do not shout so loud to get attention" (E1).

The six kindergartens highlighted working with social competence as defined above. It was seen as something they had always worked with but that they could not stop working on due to the fact that "we see that there is a huge need for it" (D1). In two of the kindergartens, the participants expressed that children have changed within the last decade and have become increasingly egocentric: "It is me and me and me" (A2).

Overall, what really matters is social competence: "How we can be with others… it must somehow be at the bottom" (D4). Working with social competence is important and fundamental. According to typical school preparation activities for a five-year-old, "pencil grips and all these things may come second" (D4). This statement highlights a clear finding from all six kindergartens. The concept of ELL, mostly referred to by the participants as "language learning," is the second most important factor in each of the six kindergartens.

The Most Important Learning Area

In response to which of the seven learning areas in the curriculum (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017) is the most important, all six kindergartens answered

uniformly. The most valued learning area was "communication, language, and text". This learning area is a "must" (C1) and a part of the basic work in a kindergarten. Disregarding it is assimilated to being unconscious in the field of teaching. Participant C3 asked the following: "If you go for a walk with the children, without talking about it, then it will be just a walk, but what is the content and the purpose with what we are doing?"

Some kindergartens found it "a bit natural" (F1) to work predominantly with this particular learning area. These kindergartens had children from nearly 20 different countries. Around 40% of these children had a different mother tongue than Norwegian. For this reason, learning Norwegian is part of ELL. The various languages among the children affect the teachers' work, so "it is critical to show [the children] the pictures and concretes" (A3). This means visualizing and using concrete objects so that the children to a greater extent understand what is being said. However, many other children need language stimulation. This was particularly emphasized in one of the kindergartens (D), where it was specified that more children struggled with developing a functional language than in previous times, despite their Norwegian mother tongue. The participant specified that the most important way to work with language stimulation is through daily life activities––such as mealtimes and dressing–– and putting words on what they are doing.

The participants expressed that the curriculum (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017) is the starting point and the foundation for all types of other plans in the kindergartens: "It is the bottom" (D2), or the basis. Although the most valued learning area is "communication, language, and text", this does not mean that other learning areas are unimportant. Several kindergartens highlighted that the seven learning areas are "intertwined" (D3). The main impression is that the participants were well-acquainted with the seven learning areas in the kindergarten framework plan (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017) and had clearly chosen the most important area for the children to learn about.

Discussion

The main finding in this study is as follows: social competence is the most important topic for a kindergarten to work with. In Norway, these kindergarten years begin from when the child is around a year old up to the age of six years before they begin at school.

Social Competence and Learning Areas

Participants answering that ELL is the most important learning area implied that this topic dominates over the six other learning areas: "body, movement, food, and health", "art, culture, and creativity", "nature, environment, and technology", "quantities, spaces, and shapes", "ethics, religion, and philosophy" and "local community and society" (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, p. 47-57). The learning areas are not ranged in the curriculum. When the participants stated that the most valued topic to learn in kindergarten was social competence, none of the learning areas were mentioned. The participants mentioned that social competence is something they have "always" worked with and that it is necessary.

This finding aligns with a qualitative Swedish study that investigated 30 kindergarten teachers and what they considered fundamental aspects of learning within the goals of the Swedish curriculum (Williams et al., 2014). Their main finding was that learning social knowledge was of greatest importance (p. 226). Williams et al. (2014) explained these findings

by mentioning that the Swedish kindergarten "has a long tradition of focusing on play-oriented programs, where developing children's social competence is central" (2014, p. 227).

Although social competence is unestablished as a learning area in the Norwegian and Swedish kindergarten curricula (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017; Skolverket, 2019), it is embedded in the Danish kindergarten curriculum (Børne-og Undervisningsministeriet, 2007). In the Norwegian curriculum (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017), social competence is mentioned only twice. Vallberg Roth (2013), who studied concepts' usage in Scandinavian curricula, claimed that the absence of concepts connotes exclusion. Additionally, the lack of utilizing the term "social competence" in the curriculum may be interpreted as absence and neglect. However, does this indeed mean that social competence is among the government directions for kindergartens, even to a small degree?

Social Competence Part of Bildung

Social competence can be interpreted as a part of *Bildung*; *Bildung* is the overall goal of all educational institutions in Norway, including schools and kindergartens (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017). The participants' explanation of "social competence" largely coincides with how *Bildung* is understood in the Scandinavian educational context. The participants' definition of social competence entails both the inner individual development, including a positive self-image (Watson, 2010, in Moss & Preire, 2019, p. 400), and the ability to take part in a group or society through collaboration and sharing (Gundem, 1998).

In comparison with Klafki's term "categorical *Bildung*" as a dialectical unity of material and formal *Bildung* (Willbergh, 2016), the connection to material *Bildung* is quite clear: The content given to children by the adults (Krüger, 2008; Willbergh, 2016, p. 115), in this case is social competence. However, formal *Bildung* is also present. The adults, or kindergarten teachers, work to edify the content relevant to the children (Willbergh, 2016). The kindergarten teachers also show the children how to behave with each other as a form of modelling, give attention to all children with the inclusion of the silent ones and initiate the teaching of social competence from when the children are toddlers. These approaches were effective in regard to the participants' testimonies. According to Klafki, a unity of material and formal *Bildung*, content and modelling is an expression of "categorical *Bildung*" (Willbergh, 2016).

Categorical *Bildung* can also be an expression for exposing possible connections between social competence and ELL. In contrast, social competence, ELL, and *Bildung* may be perceived as three separate cases when compared to each other. However, according to Klakfi, categorical *Bildung* is achieved by acquiring new concepts and categories, which can encompass phenomena in the world (Willbergh, 2016). By highlighting material learning like ELL, children can develop a rich vocabulary; this, in turn, can assist them in learning about the world, increase their social competence, aid them in developing their individual inner selves and increase their ability to function in a group (Gundem, 1998; Watson, 2010; Moss & Preire, 2019, p. 400). Similar to formal learning, this strengthens the *Bildung* process by treating children like subjects. The participants mentioned that they try to be aware of each child, to ensure that everyone gets

attention and to reiterate that everyone is equally important.

"Learning What" and "Learning How"

Debates and resistance surrounding what children should learn before starting school (Gravklev, 2021) is not found in data material. Rather, the impression existed that learning "something" was completely natural for the participants. They described their role in children's learning processes as more than just waiting for the children's initiative and activity, and this opposes typical features of child-oriented pedagogy (Brostrøm, 2004; Håberg, 2017).

According to the didactical triangle (Künzli, 2000), child-oriented pedagogy is characterized by disregarding both the content and the staff's role, placing the child as the centralized subject. The critique against child-oriented pedagogy specifies that this direction gives the child an overwhelming responsibility for self-development and self-learning (Håberg, 2017). Reducing the *Bildung* process to a formal direction causes material *Bildung* direction to be ignored. This, in turn, entails consequences for categorial *Bildung*. Problems with formal *Bildung* lie in the children's content denial, which may open their eyes to other unknown perspectives. Consequently, children with weak socioeconomic environments may potentially experience limited stimulation in kindergartens.

In this way, social inequalities are maintained rather than balanced, reflecting that the kindergarten does not fulfil government directions regarding children receiving the same opportunities for learning and development (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017). When "how to learn" surpasses "what to learn", the view of children's *Bildung* processes is unbalanced. However, problems with material *Bildung* lie in the ways that traditions and irrelevant content are prioritized over other topics, and this is predominant in today's society (Willbergh, 2016). In any case, the balance of "how to learn" and "what to learn"—the formal and material *Bildung*—may be of great interest for the future.

Froebel's Influence

Emphasizing both "how to learn" and "what to learn" matches the original Froebelian pedagogy, as Froebel balanced both material and formal *Bildung* (Brostrøm & Vejleskov, 2009). *Bildung* is achieved by the staff members, who offer valued content and are concurrently interested in the children's input and experiences (Johansson, 2004).

The heritage of transforming Froebelian pedagogy into a child-oriented pedagogy is a potentially debatable subject. When government directions place considerable recommendations on learning content through the kindergarten curricula—as seen in the learning areas in the Scandinavian curricula (Børne-og Undervisningsministeriet, 2007; Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017; Skolverket, 2019) —the possibility of making professional decisions outside of governmental frames is weakened. However, the participants in this study answered that social competence was the most valued topic, and this was done through their choosing of a topic that only indirectly matched the curriculum. It was only matched by the author's interpretation of social competence and it being synonymous with the concept *Bildung*.

The findings in this study on social competence being a kindergarten's most valued topic to learn may be interpreted as an expression of Froebelian pedagogy, emphasizing the child as a learning subject and learning through interaction with other people

(Johansson, 2004). It is likely that Froebelian pedagogy has inarticulately survived as tradition. If so, the traces in the pedagogical tradition are significantly deep. These findings support the work of Professor Tina Bruce (2019), who used a Froebelian approach in her life-long work in the early childhood education field. She specified that "Froebel's influence is deeply embedded in practice today and is no longer made explicit in the training of teachers and other early childhood practitioners" (Johansson, 2004, p. 82).

In any case, the content in the kindergarten, or "what to learn," must always be assessed and contextualized. The pedagogical heritage, however, can provide relevant insight for both "what to learn" and "how to learn." It is not enough to merely love the children (Bruce, 2019) nor is it enough to "just play" (OECD, 2013); it goes without a doubt that children do need kindergarten teachers who can convey both valuable knowledge and the fact that children are valuable (Håberg, 2019). In light of this, Froebelian pedagogy can provide considerable input and direction.

Conclusion

In this study, kindergarten teachers were included in focus group interviews to highlight the most valued topic of what children should learn, specifically during the years in kindergarten before starting school. The participants were suitable for answering and commenting both inductively and deductively. Regarding these kindergarten teachers, the findings reflected that the most important topic to learn in kindergarten was social competence, a topic that cannot be directly interpreted from the curriculum (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017).

The kindergarten teachers maneuvered in a landscape of national and international trends that were connected with school and the knowledge economy (Bennett, 2010; Krejsler, 2013; Sommer, 2015). This study revealed that empirical investigations are required to discover the goings-on within kindergartens. Kindergarten teachers, who inevitably work directly with children, may have understandings of what children need to learn before starting school, and these may conflict with the ideas behind government direction. This knowledge is required to help kindergarten children develop categorical *Bildung* regarding "how to learn" and "what to learn."

The strengths of this study remain in the qualitative and inductive approaches. However, this study does contain notable weaknesses. The sample of six kindergartens comprising 23 participants is relatively small; similar to other qualitative studies, it is difficult to generalize these findings (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). However, Stake (2000) specified that findings can inspire both research and practice, and in these ways, a naturalistic generalization can be achieved. In regard to the significant question of what topics are important for children to learn in kindergarten, this study may inspire further research.

References

Alvestad, M. & Samuelsson, I. P. (1999). A Comparison of the National Preschool Curricula in Norway and Sweden. *Early Childhood Research & Practice 1*(2).

Bennett, J. (2010). Pedagogy in Early Childhood Services with Special Reference to Nordic Approaches. *Psychological Science and Education 15*(3), 16-21.

Brehony, K. J. (2009). Transforming theories of childhood and early childhood education: child study and the empirical assault on Froebelian rationalism. *Paedagogica Historica 45*(4-5), 585-604.

Brenna-utvalet (2010). *Kartlegging av det pedagogiske innholdet i skoleforberedende aktiviteter i barnehager*. [Mapping of the pedagogical content of school-preparatory activities in kindergartens]. Oslo: Rambøll Management Consulting.

Broström, S. (2004). *Pædagogiske læreplaner: At arbejde med didaktik i børnehaven*. [Pedagogical curriculums: Working with didactics in kindergarten]. Århus: Systime Academic.

Broström, S., & Vejleskov, H. (2009). *Didaktik i børnehaven: Planer, principper og praksis*. [Didactics in kindergarten: Plans, principles and practice]. Frederikshavn: Dafolo.

Bruce, T. (2019). *Educating Young Children: A Lifetime Journey into a Froebelian Approach*. London: Routledge.

Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet (2007). *Day Care Act*. København: Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet.

Fagerholt, R. A., Myhr, A., Stene, M., Haugset, A. S., Sivertsen, H., Carlsson, E. & Nilsen, B. T. (2019). Spørsmål til Barnehage-Norge 2018. Analyse og resultater fra Utdanningsdirektoratets spørreundersøkelse til barnehagesektoren (TFoU-rapport 2019:2). [Questions to kindergartens in Norway. Analysis and results from the Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training`s survey of the kindergarten sector]. Retrieved from https://www.udir.no/globalassets/filer/tall-og-forskning/rapporter/2019/sporsmal-til-barnehage-norge-2018.pdf

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. New York: Basic Books.

Giddens, A. (1976). *New rules of sociological method: A positive critique of interpretative sociologies*. London: Hutchinson.

Gravklev, B. R. (2021, February 16.). Du må faktisk lære deg norsk nå, lille venn, for det har Erna bestemt. [You actually have to learn Norwegian now, little friend, because Erna has decided that]. *Dagsavisen*. Retrieved from https://www.dagsavisen.no/debatt/kommentar/du-ma-faktisk-lere-deg-norsk na-lille-venn-for-det-har-erna-bestemt-1.1832777

Gundem, B. B. (1998). *Skolens oppgave og innhold: En studiebok i didaktikk* (4rd ed.). [The school`s assignment and content: A textbook in didactics]. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Halkier, B. (2015). Fokusgrupper. [Focusgroups]. In S. Brinkmann & L. Tanggaard (Eds). *Kvalitative metoder. En grundbog*. (p. 137-152). København: Hans Reitzels Forlag.

Håberg, L. I. A. (2017). Barnesentrert pedagogikk i barnehagen. [Child-centered pedagogy in kindergarten]. Prismet, 68(4), 305–318.

Håberg, L. I. A. (2019). Verdiformidling til verdifulle barn i barnehagen. [Dissemination of values to valuable children in kindergarten]. In B. M. Afset & A. Redse (Red.), Religion og etikk i skole og barnehage (p. 207–222). Cappelen Damm Akademisk.

Johansson, J.-E. (2004). Friedrich Wilhelm August Fröbel: fritt tänkande och samhandlande barn. [Fröbel: Free thinking and interacting children]. In K. Steinsholt & L. Løvlie (Eds.), *Pedagogikkens mange ansikter: pedagogikkens idéhistorie fra antikken til det postmoderne* (p. 260-273). Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Karseth, B., & Sivesind, K. (2009). Læreplanstudier - perspektiver og posisjoner. [Curriculum studies—perspectives and positions]. In E. L. Dale (Ed.), *Læreplan i et*

forskningsperspektiv (p. 23-61). Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Klafki, W. (1997). Kritisk-konstruktiv didaktik. [Critical-constructive didactics]. In M. Uljens (Ed.), *Didaktik* (p. 215-228). Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Krejsler, J. B. (2013). Barnehagen, læring og den nasjonale konkurranseevnen. [Kindergarten, learning and national competitiveness]. In K. Steinsholt & M. Øksnes (Eds.), *Danning i barnehagen: Perspektiver og muligheter*: (p. 69–94). Oslo: Cappelen Damm.

Kunnskapsdepartementet. (2017). *Framework plan for Kindergartens. Retrieved from*

https://lovdata.no/dokument/SFE/forskrift/2017-04-24-487

Kunnskapsdepartementet. (2019). *Early intervention and inclusive education in*

kindergartens, schools and out-of-school-hours care (Meld. St. 6 (2019–2020)).

Retrieved from
https://www.regjeringen.no/en/dokumenter/meld.-st.-6 20192020/id2677025/

Künzli, R. (2000). German Didaktik: Models of Re-presentation, of Intercourse, and of Experience. In I. Westbury, S. Hopmann & K. Riquarts (Eds.), *Teaching as a*

reflective practice: the German didaktik tradition (p. 41–54). Mahawah, N.J.:

Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Kvale, S. and S. Brinkmann (2015). *Det kvalitative forskningsintervju*. [The qualitative

research interview]. Oslo: Gyldendal Akademisk.

Løvgren, M. (2012). I barnehagen er alle like?: Om arbeidsdeling blant ansatte i norske barnehager. [Is everyone equal in the kindergarten?: Division of labour among employees in Norwegian kindergartens]. In B. Aamotsbakken (Ed.), *Ledelse og profesjonsutøvelse i barnehage og skole* (p. 37-49). Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Maxwell, J. A. (1992). Understanding and Validity in Qualitative Research. *Harvard Educational Review,* 62(3), 279-300.

Moss, P. and P. Petrie (2019). Education and social pedagogy: What relationship? *London Review of Education 17*(3), p. 393-405.

NELP National Early Literacy Panel. (2008). *Developing early literacy: Report of the National Early Literacy Panel.* Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy.

Retrieved from
https://lincs.ed.gov/publications/pdf/NELPReport09.pdf

NSD Norwegian Centre for Research Data (2021, January 14.). *Notification Form for personal data. Retrieved* from
https://www.nsd.no/en/data-protectio services/notification-form-for-personal-data

OECD. (2013). *Quality Matters in early Childhood Education and Care: Norway 2013. Retrieved* from doi:10.1787/9789264176713-en

Peirce, C. S., Dinesen, A. M., & Stjernfelt, F. (1994). Semiotik og pragmatisme. [Semiotics and pragmatism]. København: Gyldendal.

Richards, L. (2009). *Handling qualitative data: A practical guide* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE.

Riksrevisjonen. (2009). *Riksrevisjonens undersøkelse av styring og forvaltning av barnehagetjenestene* (Dokument nr. 3:13 (2008-2009)). [Office of the Auditor General`s investigation of the management and administration of kindergarten services]. Oslo: Riksrevisjonen.

Roskos, K., Christie, J. F., Richgels, D. J. & Dickens, C. (2003). The Essentials of Early

Literacy Instruction. *Young Children*, p. 52- 60.

Skolverket (2019). *Curriculum for the Preschool Lpfö 18*. Stockholm: Skolverket. *Retrieved from* https://www.skolverket.se/publikationsserier/styrdokument/2019/curriculum for-the preschool-lpfo-18

Sommer, D. (2015). Tidlig i skole eller legende læring? Evidensen om langtidsholdbar læring og udvikling i daginstitutionen. [Early to school or playful learning? The evidence of long-term sustainable learning and development in the kindergarten institution]. In J. Klitmøller & D. Sommar (Eds.), *Læring, dannelse og udvikling* (p. 61-82). København: Hans Reitzels Forlag.

Stake, R. E. (2000). Case studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd ed., p. 435-454). Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE.

Vallberg Roth, A.- C. (2013). *Nordisk komparativ analys av riktlinjer för kvalitet och innehåll i förskola*. [Nordic comparative analysis of guidelines for quality and content in kindergarten]. København: Scandinavian Council of Ministers.

Wallström, B. (1992). *Möte med Fröbel.* [Meeting with Fröbel]. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Willbergh, I. (2016). Bringing teaching back in: The Norwegian NOU The school of the future in light of the Allgemeine Didaktik theory of Wolfgang Klafki. *Scandinavian Journal of Pedagogy and Critique 2*(3), 111-124. *Retrieved from* https://doi.org/10.17585/ntpk.v2.268

Williams, P., Sheridan, S. & Sandberg, (2014). Preschool—an arena for children's learning of social and cognitive knowledge. *Early Years 34*(3), 226-240. *Retrieved from* DOI: 10.1080/09575146.2013.872605

Østrem, S., Bjar, H., Hogsnes, H. D., Jansen, T. T., Nordtømme, S., & Tholin, K. R. (2009). *Alle teller mer: En evaluering av hvordan Rammeplan for barnehagens innhold og oppgaver blir innført, brukt og erfart*. [Everyone counts: An evaluation of how Framework Plan for Kindergartens is introduced, used and experienced]. (Høgskolen i Vestfold Rapport 1/2009). *Retrieved from* https://openarchive.usn.no/usn-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/149122/rapp01-2009-alle-teller-mer.pdf?sequence=1 Tønsberg: Høgskolen i Vestfold.