

## Values Education in Nordic Preschools: A Commentary

Robert Thornberg<sup>1</sup> 

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**Abstract** The six papers in this special issue focus on how values and values education are embedded in the everyday life at Nordic preschools. The studies in this special issue provide stimulating theoretical and methodological knowledge to inform further study of values education internationally. A key contribution of the papers is that there is identification of a need for a more professional language through which teachers can discuss how their values are expressed in teaching. This may enable teachers to become more explicit in how they work with values in preschool programs. Through professional discussions, preschool teachers can become more conscious and elaborative in their language as values educators. This is important because inevitably teachers are role models to children, no matter how aware they are of this role. This is demonstrated through the special issue papers in the importance that teachers place on developing caring, warm, and supportive relationships with children, as well as how they convey implicitly their values about democracy, rights, and gender in daily practice. A holistic approach to values education was also indicated as necessary because values education cannot be confined to explicit teaching of values and morality. Instead, values education needs to be viewed as lived relational phenomena in early childhood programs.

**Keywords** Values education · Moral education · Preschool · Nordic countries · Early childhood · Teachers

**Résumé** Les six articles de ce numéro spécial portent sur la manière dont les valeurs et l'éducation aux valeurs s'intègrent à la vie quotidienne dans les établissements préscolaires nordiques. Les études de ce numéro spécial fournissent des

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✉ Robert Thornberg  
robert.thornberg@liu.se

<sup>1</sup> Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning, Linköping University, 58183 Linköping, Sweden

connaissances théoriques et méthodologiques stimulantes afin d'inspirer d'autres études sur l'éducation aux valeurs à l'échelle internationale. Une contribution clé de ces articles est de révéler le besoin manifeste d'un langage plus professionnel permettant aux enseignants de discuter de la façon dont leurs valeurs s'expriment dans l'enseignement. Ceci pourrait aider les enseignants à devenir plus explicites sur leur manière de travailler avec les valeurs dans les programmes préscolaires. Grâce à des discussions professionnelles, les enseignants du préscolaire peuvent devenir plus conscients et élaborer davantage dans leur langage en tant qu'éducateurs aux valeurs. C'est important, car les enseignants sont inévitablement des modèles pour les enfants, quel que soit leur degré de conscience de ce rôle. Les articles de ce numéro spécial en font la démonstration par l'importance que les enseignants accordent à des relations bienveillantes, chaleureuses et encourageantes avec les enfants, ainsi que la manière dont ils transmettent implicitement leurs valeurs sur la démocratie, les droits et le genre dans la pratique quotidienne. Une approche holistique à l'éducation aux valeurs s'est aussi avérée nécessaire parce que l'éducation aux valeurs ne peut pas être confinée à un enseignement explicite de valeurs et de morale. L'éducation aux valeurs doit plutôt être vue comme un phénomène relationnel vécu, dans les programmes de la prime enfance.

**Resumen** Los seis artículos que se incluyen en esta edición especial se centran en la forma en que los valores y la educación en valores permea la vida cotidiana en las escuelas pre-escolares de los países nórdicos. Las investigaciones presentadas en esta edición especial brindan conocimiento teórico y metodológico de gran interés que nutrirá futuros estudios sobre educación en valores a nivel internacional. Una contribución importante de estas investigaciones es la evidente necesidad de un lenguaje más profesional por medio del cual los educadores puedan discutir la forma en que sus valores se expresan en la enseñanza; esto a su vez puede brindarles las herramientas necesarias para expresar de manera más explícita la forma en que trabajan con valores en los programas de educación pre-escolar. Por medio de discusiones profesionales, los profesores de pre-escolar pueden utilizar un lenguaje más consciente y elaborado como educadores de valores. Esto es importante ya que inevitablemente los profesores se convierten en modelos para los niños, sin importar qué tan conscientes sean de este papel. Lo anterior se demuestra en los diferentes artículos de esta edición especial en la importancia que los profesores le dan al desarrollo de relaciones de apoyo, cálidas y comprensivas con los niños, así como también a la forma en que transmiten implícitamente en su práctica diaria sus valores sobre democracia, derechos humanos y género. También se sugiere como necesario un método holístico para la educación en valores ya que ésta no puede restringirse a la enseñanza explícita de valores morales; , en cambio, la educación en valores debe verse como un fenómeno relacional, vivido en los programas educativos para la primera infancia.

## Introduction

Values education refers to the aspect of pedagogical practice in which moral or political values, including norms, dispositions and skills grounded in those values, are mediated to or learned by pupils (Lovat et al. 2010; Thornberg 2008). The concept focuses on pedagogical processes in which young people learn values and morality and acquire knowledge of this domain about relating to other people, together with the ability and disposition to apply the values intelligently (Aspin 2000). Although the concepts of values education and moral education are sometimes used interchangeably in the literature, the British scholar Monica Taylor (2006) and several educational researchers from the Nordic countries (e.g., Johansson and Thornberg 2014) and Australia (e.g., Lovat 2010) use values education as an overarching concept including concepts such as moral education, character education, ethics education, and citizenship education. Whereas a large amount of research on values education focuses on elementary, middle, and high school levels (e.g., see review by Nucci et al. 2014), this special issue draws attention to values education in the preschool setting. The six contributions to this special issue have a clear focus on how values and values education are embedded in everyday life at preschools in a Nordic context (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden).

## Lack of Professional Moral Language in Values Education

Puroila et al. (2016) examined how Nordic preschool educators make sense of values by interpreting and discussing a description of an everyday “dressing event” in a preschool cloakroom. One of their findings was that the educators rarely used the term *values*. It was difficult for them to verbalize and identify values on a conceptual level, which indicates that values are rather implicit and embedded in the pedagogical practice of preschool. In their action research study in an Icelandic preschool, Sigurdardottir and Einarsdottir (2016) revealed that the preschool teachers, who had meetings to discuss and reflect upon values and values education in their pedagogical practice, found it complicated to define the concept of values. The teachers were unsure about their own understanding of the concept at the outset of the action research process. These findings from preschool practitioners could be compared with research on schoolteachers showing that they display a lack of a professional meta-language in the domain of teacher ethics and values education (e.g., Thornberg 2008; Thornberg and Oguz 2013). Thus, both preschool teachers and schoolteachers need to develop a qualified moral language, because without it, it is difficult to see how they can address the complexity of moral judgments they have to make in their everyday practice; how they can develop moral understanding; and how they can teach children to think about and reflect on moral issues (Shapira-Lishchinsky 2011; Sockett and LePage 2002).

Colnerud and Granström (2002) state that there are four characteristics that most researchers who study professionalism attribute to higher status professions. The

first characteristic is *systematic theory*, which means that the profession is conducted from the perspective of a common scientific knowledge base. The professional has acquired a professional language containing concepts, and above all scientific theories and conceptions, of the content and practice of the profession. The second characteristic is *authority*, that is, the members of the profession have acquired public and formal legitimacy (e.g., doctors and psychologists). The third characteristic is *professional autonomy*, which refers to the professionals' right and responsibility to independently decide which tools and methods they will use in their practice. For example, a school principal cannot make the decision regarding which test a school psychologist should use in a particular case. The fourth characteristic is *self-governed professional ethics* (i.e., the professional group has developed ethical guidelines or principles regarding the professional practice).

In the light of these four characteristics, Colnerud and Granström (2002) concluded that teaching is not yet an academically high-status profession in a strict sense, but rather semiprofessional. Most of all, teachers lack a scientific common knowledge base, and in daily practice, if they get ill, they can temporarily be replaced by substitutes without any teacher training (in contrast to professionals such as doctors and psychologists). *Meta-language* is a professional language (i.e., a language that helps professionals reflect on their practice and make predictions and theoretical descriptions and explanations regarding their practice). Non-professionals use very little or no meta-language at all. Instead, they use everyday language as a working tool, which results in a more unconscious, intuitive, and routinized occupational role. Everyday language starts from concrete incidents and feelings instead of concepts and knowledge from educational philosophy, educational psychology, curriculum theory, the sociology of education, social psychology, educational research, and so on. According to Colnerud and Granström (2002), both meta-language and everyday language are required if a professional is to do a good job.

As a part of the educational science and research field, values education includes moral philosophy, moral psychology, and educational theory and research (cf., Nucci et al. 2014). *Moral philosophy* offers a broad range of normative ethical perspectives such as virtue ethics, deontological ethics, consequential ethics, ethics of care, and pragmatic ethics (for reviews, see Rachels 2003; Singer 1991). Some examples of classic philosophical works on values education are Dewey's (1916) progressive approach and Nodding's (1984) feminine approach based on ethics of care. *Moral psychology* includes various theories and research on how children, adolescents, and adults develop, learn, understand, reason, judge, and behave with reference to morals. A particular interest for values education is the literature on children and adolescents' moral development (for a review, see Killen and Smetana 2014). *Educational theories and research* include fields such as curriculum, teaching, learning, classroom management, teacher ethics, classroom interaction, and so on. The literature on values education includes traditional or conservative approaches (e.g., Durkheim 1961), progressive, constructivist or liberal approaches (e.g., DeVries et al. 2000), hybrids between traditional and progressive approaches (e.g., Berkowitz 2011), and critical and postmodern approaches (Alexander 2000; Swanson 2010).

Despite this body of knowledge, in various studies, very few student teachers and teachers report that they have felt prepared to teach ethics and work with values education in school (for a review, see Sanger and Osguthorpe 2013b). In addition, very few teacher trainers in Sweden report that they educate student teachers in ethics to cope with ethical dilemmas in school (Bergdahl 2006; Frånberg 2004). A moral vacuum in teacher education (Sanger and Osguthorpe 2013b) might therefore explain a lack of moral language among teachers in schools. This might also be the case with preschool teachers and preschool teacher training programs. Theories and research on values education should be included in and adapted to preschool education programs in order to prepare preschool teacher candidates to become competent and efficient values educators. They need a moral language and professional knowledge to work with values education. One of the take-home lessons from the collection of papers in this special issue is that this indeed seems to be the case.

### Important Values According to Preschool Educators

Even though explicit verbalizations of values were rare in their interview data with the educators from Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian, and Swedish preschools, Puroila et al. (2016) found various values embedded in the narratives. They identified four main themes of implicit values expressed in the discussions which educators had about the “dressing event” vignette. In *caring values* the educators were occupied with fulfilling children’s needs and showing empathy and responsiveness toward children. In *disciplinary values* the educators emphasized the importance of maintaining order by managing and controlling the situation. *Competence values* were about both the educators’ and the children’s competence, such as addressing children’s age, development and learning, and encouraging their self-enhancement. *Democratic values* refer to children’s opportunities to participate in and influence the preschool community. It included consideration of equality and treating children fairly. Hence, although the teachers seemed to lack a professional moral language, they did not display a value-free, value-neutral, or a disengaged approach. On the contrary, they actively valued what was going on in the “dressing event” in a very engaged way, and in which these four main values recurrently influenced the discussion.

Although the Icelandic preschool teachers found it difficult to understand the concept of values and to verbalize important values in the beginning of the action research project as reported by Sigurdardottir and Einarsdottir (2016) in this special issue, during this reflection and discussion process, the teachers came to identify and agree upon three prioritized values in their values education at the preschool: (a) *care*, which referred to well-being for others, warmth, comfort, helpfulness, consideration, and friendship; (b) *respect*, which referred to good communication by speaking nicely, listening, and responding, how to treat others, consideration, see others’ points of view, understanding difference, fairness, and courtesy; and (c) *discipline*, which referred to rules and self-control or self-discipline. Whereas the value of discipline could be linked to disciplinary values and the value of care could

be compared with caring values in Puroila and colleagues' study, the value of respect seemed to be close to democratic values but also had a certain overlap with caring values in Puroila et al. (2016). However, the dimension of participation and having influence included in democratic values in Puroila et al. (2016) were not salient in the value of respect as discussed in Sigurdardottir and Einarsdottir (2016). Moreover, the competence values in Puroila et al. (2016) were not identified as a distinct value domain in Sigurdardottir and Einarsdottir's (2016) study. There are striking similarities between the studies in which caring and discipline emerge as really important values. There are several possible explanations for the differences between the studies, such as various methodological and contextual differences.

Sanger and Osguthorpe (2005) have proposed the *Moral Work of Teaching* (MWT) as a theoretical framework for analyzing the underpinnings of various approaches to moral education. MWT consists of a set of categories: *psychological assumptions* about moral psychology, development, and learning; *moral assumptions* (meta-ethical and normative assumptions); *educational assumptions* about the aims, nature, and scope of teaching and education; and *contingent factors* (personal, historical, social, political, and institutional). This framework could be adopted in order to analyze preschool teachers' assumptions or beliefs regarding values education. The values identified in the above studies are normative values, but there are no references to normative ethics. The practitioners used a personal language rather than a professional language when verbalizing the values. Democratic values could be connected with a progressive approach to values education, whereas caring values as well as discipline values seemed to express a hybrid between traditional and progressive approaches. These findings support previous studies on schoolteachers showing a common teacher propensity to hybrid positions between traditionalism and progressivism/constructivism in relation to values education (Thornberg 2008; Thornberg and Oguz 2013). Moreover, the psychological, moral, and educational assumptions of preschool teacher candidates and preschool teachers could be further examined, not only by researchers but also by themselves by actively participating in deliberative discussions and by using their initial assumptions as a starting point when studying ethical theories, and theories and research on moral development and education in order to develop a professional meta-language of values education.

## Implicit Values Education in Preschool

All six papers in the special issue emphasized that values were embedded in everyday pedagogical practice and in teachers' narratives. Juutinen and Viljamaa (2016), for example, examined how values were communicated in everyday life at preschool by focusing on a cardboard chart illustrating traffic lights, as it was used as a pedagogical tool in a preschool. This was created by the educators as a way of displaying disciplinary values, in other words, to maintain control and to avoid chaos. The green lights told the children that they were allowed to play. The yellow lights indicated that the play could continue for a while. The red lights said that it was time to tidy up after playing. Their study revealed how order, values, and

meanings were negotiated in everyday social interactions between educators and children using the traffic lights, and how values were tightly intertwined with materiality. Both disciplinary and democratic values were communicated by using the traffic lights. Juutinen and Viljamaa noted that social belonging and participation emerged and were mediated as values as a contrast to the more intentional disciplinary values in this pedagogical practice. Thus, various values were embedded in the everyday narrative practice of the use of the traffic lights. My reading of their findings reminds me of the work within the sociology of childhood (Corsaro 2005; Prout and James 1997). Although the traffic lights demonstrated adult power and children's subordinate position, the narrative indicated that children acted upon them and negotiated order and space in their interactions with the educators. As Juutinen and Viljamaa put it, "where people worked and lived in close cooperation, values were not stable but rather were shaped and negotiated constantly in relations". According to the sociology of childhood, children are both constrained by structure and at the same time active agents acting in and upon structure (Prout and James 1997). They do not simply internalize the social world, including adults' socialization practices, but strive to make sense of their culture and to participate in it as active and creative agents (Corsaro 2005). Juutinen and Viljamaa's study supports a social constructivist approach to values education in which values are considered as co-constructed and situated in socio-cultural contexts (Buzzelli 1993; Tappan 2006; Thornberg, in press). Values are constituted in everyday social interactions in the preschool setting. They are therefore often implicit, embedded, and taken-for-granted.

While *explicit values education* refers to preschools and schools' official curricula of what and how to teach values and morals, including teachers' explicit intentions and practices of values education, *implicit values education* is associated with a hidden curriculum and implicit values embedded in school and classroom practices (Halstead 1996; Thornberg 2008). Values were often embedded in the pedagogical practice according to the studies in this special issue, and Puroila et al. conclude that it was "often difficult for the educators to verbalize and identify values on a conceptual level." Values education is inevitably embedded in teachers' work, and teachers need to reflect upon their pedagogical practice, to increase their awareness of values education and its implicit presence in their practice (Willems et al. 2015) and to develop a professional moral language (Sokkett and LePage 2002; Thornberg 2008). Thus, the studies reported in this special issue indicated that the situation of values education in preschool is very similar to the situation in school—it is to a large extent implicit, complex, and left within the domain of the hidden curriculum.

Frequently the values of the school are not fully explored or articulated. This may be simply because the values are hard to analyze, since they are deeply embedded in teachers' taken-for-granted world view; or because teachers are not often well prepared in their initial training for reflection on values; or else because teachers have to make so many day-to-day decisions at a classroom level that they tend to rely on what may be termed a moral instinct./.../Many values, however, are left within the domain of the hidden curriculum. Where

there is no systematic discussion of values and value issues in the classroom, children may be more likely to develop values haphazardly, and indeed it is not uncommon for the values which pupils develop in school to be different from those the school intends (Halstead 1996, p. 4)

The situation discussed above by Halstead risks being the very same in the preschool. However, in their combination of participatory action research and a narrative inquiry in this special issue, Juutinen and Viljamaa (2016) concluded that “telling and retelling about everyday work seem to make practitioners more aware of the ethical aspects of early childhood education.” Therefore, they emphasize the need for discussions about everyday work in preschool, about practices used in groups, and about their own emotions toward their work. This is a way of transforming implicit values education into explicit and thus more qualified values education. Sigurdardottir and Einarsdottir’s (2016) action research study showed how the preschool teachers became more conscious and elaborated their language in their role as values educators and gained new knowledge and empowerment in their own practice by participating in the study. From a socio-cultural perspective, this collective learning can be understood in terms of the zone of collaborative development, which refers to a process of collaborative problem solving of real-life moral dilemmas, in which educators’ cultural backgrounds also provide an important setting for discussion of moral complexities (Balakrishnan and Claiborne 2012). This process provided an opportunity for them to learn from each other’s experiences, perspectives, and cultures, in order to reflect, compare, and contrast suggested arguments and resolutions, and to develop a shared moral language rather than “correct” solutions. To establish and maintain a zone of collaborative development, Balakrishnan and Claiborne (2012) stressed that there is a need for a safe environment in which moral issues and dilemmas can be analyzed in a context of respectful, caring relationships.

## **Democracy, Rights, and Gender Issues in Everyday Life of Preschool**

Issues concerning democracy, rights, and gender were also found to be present as part of the implicit values education of everyday preschool life in the papers in the current special issue. In their analysis of twenty-five episodes of conflicts in Nordic preschools, Johansson et al. (2016) revealed that whereas children tended to strive for individual rights, the educators tended to strive for collective rights. In these processes, children were allowed to negotiate to a certain extent, but in the end, the individual rights they were trying to claim were often overruled by the collective institutional rules and educators’ intentions. Thus, the children’s right to participation was restricted by teacher control. Their findings remind me of a similar pattern that I found in an ethnographic study conducted in two elementary schools (Thornberg 2009a, 2010). Even in school democracy meetings, there was a missing shift from traditional pupil control discourse to deliberative democratic discourse, and a lot of decisions had already been made by the teachers outside the meetings (Thornberg 2010). Several studies have shown that at school, children are seldom



given any opportunity to create, modify, or abolish formal rules through open negotiation (e.g., Devine 2000; Thomas and O’Kane 1999; Thornberg 2009a), and some of the papers in this special issue portray the very same situation for children in preschool.

In her examination of video observation of informal play situations in Norwegian preschools, Zachrisen (2016) found two types of children–practitioner interaction patterns associated with different democratic opportunities for the children. In *dyadic interaction*, the lines of communication run mainly between the practitioner and each individual child. In *group interaction*, the main lines of communication run between the practitioner and the children as important members of a peer group. According to the analysis, when a practitioner is positioned at the center of a play situation with children (dyadic interaction), over time, it can “overshadow the children’s peer relations and thus limits the children’s opportunities to experience the value of community in the peer group.” In contrast, group interactions provide more opportunities for children to develop a sense of belonging and community in the peer group, which can be considered as important democratic values. Zachrisen’s study demonstrates the importance of knowing and considering social and group psychology in values education. Moral education literature usually considers theories of moral development with a focus on individual development (e.g., Killen and Smetana 2014). Nevertheless, ethical learning and behavior have to be understood as a result of a complex interplay between individual and contextual factors, and we therefore need to emphasize contextual factors such as peer groups, group processes, social relationships, and peer pressure. Children are situated in social contexts, which are stressed by social constructivist or socio-cultural approaches (see Thornberg, in press).

In addition, Johansson et al. (2016) found that whereas girls more often were expected to adapt and surrender their rights, boys more often positioned themselves as persons with a right to speak out and with rights to make decisions. Thus, their findings as well as Emilson et al. (2016) study showed how the communication of values was gendered in preschool. Emilson et al. interviewed preschool teachers, and their analysis identified a complex and contradictory pattern of gender beliefs among the educators. The preschool educators seemed to believe that conditions outside their preschool pedagogical practice, such as the parenting at home and commercial interests in the society, contributed to the category-maintenance of gender stereotypes. Here, the educators took a critical stance toward these discursive practices. At the same time, at least some of them expressed a belief in stereotyped gender differences in terms of genetics and gender-related behaviors. They also expressed ambivalent gender–neutrality beliefs. When it comes to equality and individual rights, the educators denied any gender differences. Choices and opportunities should not be hindered by sex differences. Although they believed that the mission of preschool was to strive for gender neutrality, at the same time, they believed the importance of considering children’s individuality and own choices. “The practitioners believed that the children have the right to play in line with their own interests even if their play supports category-maintenance.” Thus, their study demonstrated how preschool educators run into value dilemmas when trying to conduct values education aimed at counteracting traditional gender roles and

gender-biased unequal opportunities: (a) gender as a social construction vs. a biological reality, (b) promoting gender neutrality and gender norm transgression vs. children's right to act and play in line with their own interests even if it might support category-maintenance of gender stereotypes, and (c) femininity as a prioritized value in relation to boys but rejected in relation to girls.

Gendered patterns found in Johansson et al. (2016) and in Emilson et al. (2016) have to be considered as a part of ongoing implicit values education or hidden curriculum in preschool settings. Their studies might help us to understand somewhat more about the complex gender socialization that takes place in preschool. Scrutinizing teacher assumptions and social interaction patterns in preschool is a crucial first step toward a more qualified values education concerning gender equity.

### Preschool Teachers as Role Models

One way the preschool teachers understood their role as values educators in Sigurdardottir and Einarsdottir's (2016) study was by being a good role model. Their strong emphasis on being a good role model can be compared with previous studies on how schoolteachers view their work within the field of values education. Sanger and Osguthorpe (2013a), for instance, found in their analysis of open-ended questionnaire data from pre-service teachers that the most common, clear and specific explanation of how moral education works offered by the pre-service teachers referred to modelling (e.g., "I believe we can teach children to be good by being an example, and by being a living care role model"; "Yes, we can teach them, by modeling and showing, what is right and what is wrong and how to be a good person," p. 170). Also in other studies, teachers have reported that a main method of values education is to be a good role model (Joseph 2016; Thornberg and Oguz 2013).

Teachers are inevitable role models as values educators, no matter how aware they are about it. Halstead (1996) argues that a part of the implicit values education is teachers as exemplars. It is therefore crucial that teachers are aware of that notion and act as *good* role models in order to be more conscious, explicit, and qualified in their role as values educators. Being a role model can of course be associated with Bandura's (1977) notions of *social learning* and *modelling*, but can also be understood within a socio-cultural approach to values education. Tappan (1998) for instance refers to Vygotsky's (1978) classic concept of the *zone of proximal development*, which Vygotsky defines as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). The various strategies verbalized by the preschool teachers in Sigurdardottir and Einarsdottir's (2016) study could therefore be considered as integrated parts of being a good role model creating zones of proximal development for the children to develop, learn, or appropriate values: (a) being a good role model, (b) using the right words, (c) discussing values with the children, (d) guidance and closeness, and (e) using rules and directing children in rule transgression situations. Values are enacted and

communicated in each strategy. Even when directing children who have broken rules, teachers have to act as good role models in the way they approached the children. From a socio-cultural perspective, values education includes a process of *guided participation* in which children are helped, supported, and guided by teachers and more competent peers to appropriate a richer and more multifaceted moral language and functioning (Balakrishnan and Claiborne 2012).

The very idea that the main work of values education is to be a good role model can also be discussed in terms of teacher qualities. Campbell (2013) for instance argues that teaching is inherently a moral activity and teachers have to be *moral persons*. Being a teacher involves both being a moral person and a moral educator. “Moral education, as it is broadly conceived, includes both what teachers as ethical exemplars model in the course of their daily practice and what moral lessons they teach directly either through the formal curriculum or the informal dynamics of classroom and school life... moral education is based not on programs but on the teacher as a person who intentionally promotes, as well as exemplifies, ethical virtues such as honesty, fairness, respect, and kindness” (Campbell 2013, p. 47). Sanderse (2013) states that if teachers want to be good models, they have to become reflective in their own practice, facilitating meta-cognition by explaining their actions in words about why and how they teach and act as they do. Sanderse also suggests a number of questions that teachers could ask, both individually and collectively: “What virtues do I/we want to be a model of? Why do I/we want to model these character traits? How can I/we model these virtues best?” (p. 38). Here, Sanderse adopts virtue ethics as a basic normative assumption. Teachers could of course consider other normative ethical perspectives, or—which I favor—a moral pluralistic approach. The crucial point, however, is that teachers have to realize that they must be moral persons and reflect upon what, how, and why they mediate as role models.

Finally, teachers’ emphasis not only on guidance but also on closeness as values education strategies in Sigurdardottir and Einarsdottir’s (2016) study can be compared with a robust body of research that has shown positive, caring, warm, and supportive teacher–child relationships to be positively linked with children’s academic engagement and achievement (for a meta-analysis, see Roorda et al. 2011), emotional, social, and moral development and behavior (Jennings and Greenberg 2009), higher psychological well-being (Sarkova et al. 2014), and less antisocial and aggressive behavior (Breeman et al. 2015; Hamre et al. 2008; Richard et al. 2011), including peer victimization and bullying (Gregory et al. 2010; Richard et al. 2011; Thornberg et al. 2016). Developing caring, warm, and supportive relationships with children is a part of being a moral role model and of creating a moral climate or atmosphere in school and preschool (Battistich 2008; Watson 2014).

## **A Holistic Approach to Values Education and a Discussion About Relativism**

Puroila et al. (2016) emphasized a holistic approach to values education, which allows for “understanding values education as a lived relational phenomenon, rather than as an individual enterprise”. I agree. Our understanding of values education

cannot be confined to the explicit teaching of values or morality. Previous research has demonstrated that values are embedded in everyday pedagogical practice, and values education is thus a lived relational phenomenon (e.g., Brint et al. 2001; Buzzelli and Johnston 2002; Emilson and Johansson 2009, 2013; Jackson et al. 1993; Thornberg 2007, 2009b; Thornberg and Elvstrand 2012). Taylor (2006) argues that “values are embedded in school structures, management, policies, language, and relationships” (p. 114), and the collection of six articles in the current special issue demonstrates that this is also the case with preschool. A social constructivist approach to values education (see Thornberg, in press) attracts teachers’ attention to—and promotes their critical reflection upon—language, discourses, and practices in order to become more conscious about how values, norms, morals, identities, power, social categories, gender, intersectionalities, prejudices, oppressions etc. are mediated, constructed, and maintained but also changed by language and discursive practices embedded in historical and cultural social processes and everyday interactions. Values and moral assumptions cannot simply be taken for granted but have to be scrutinized and discussed, also when dealing with the preschool context and practice. A clear implication of the holistic approach to values education and the six papers in this special issue is to make educators more aware of the hidden curriculum of values education embedded in their pedagogical practice, and to consider the totality of everyday preschool life when planning, performing, and assessing values education. This is also a main theme and conclusion in my commentary.

According to the holistic approach to values education as stated by Puroila et al. (2016) educators have to recognize the contextual and situational realization of values. Although they reject a total relativism, viewing values as social constructions inevitably evokes the issue of relativism (Thornberg, in press). However, Kekes (1999) argues that there are universally human, historically constant, and socially invariant needs created by human nature: (a) physical needs such as food, shelter, and rest, (b) psychological needs such as hope and the absence of terror in one’s life, and (c) social needs such as security and some order and predictability in one’s community. He calls the satisfaction of these basic human needs *primary values*, which he contrasts with *secondary values*. “The rules, customs, and principles protecting people in their pursuit of primary values will be called ‘deep conventions’”. It follows then that any morally acceptable tradition must protect people belonging to it by means of deep conventions” (p. 171). In line with this, there is a growing body of psychological and anthropological studies that demonstrates commonalities across cultures as well as variations within cultures, and that cultural practices that construct inequalities and unfair treatment are not uncritically accepted (for reviews, see Turiel 2002, 2015; Wainryb and Recchia 2014). Turiel (2015) concludes that critiques, conflicts, resistance, and struggles for change arise from human reflections on social relationships including judgments about welfare, fairness, dignity, and rights. Even if we reject a universal morality and only accept the view of values as developed within more or less distinctive geographical and cultural-historical contexts, searching for common values, such as the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as negotiated social contracts, should be seen as necessary.

To start with, our status among biological species constructs our options and demands a couple of general principles to grant our own survival as a social species. Even though general principles are still object of endless negotiations, some wide-ranging laws—such as reciprocity, mutual respect, and certain degrees of tolerance toward diversity—are a definitive “must” for global survival; otherwise we may end up blowing ourselves up in the near future. (Branco 2012, p. 757)

Thayer-Bacon (2001) suggests a distinction between vulgar relativism and qualified relativism, which I think might be one way of addressing the problems with relativism inbuilt in social constructivist approaches to values and morality (also see Thornberg, in press). In the well-known poem about the blind men around the elephant, the blind men explored an elephant from different positions and described it as a rope, a fan, a tree, a snake, a spear, or a wall, depending upon which part of the elephant each man touched. Thayer-Bacon (2001) argues that knowers are fallible that our knowledge and our criteria for its justification or plausibility are situated and socially constructed, and therefore corrigible and continually in need of critique and reconstruction. According to Thayer-Bacon, *vulgar relativism* refers to the claim that it does not matter what one’s perspective is, in relation to the elephant, because all perspectives are right (“true”). Instead of blindly clinging to one voice, she argues that the blind men should start talking to each other and share the information and conceptions they each had. “Only by acting as a community of inquirers can they hope to gather a more complete understanding of elephants” (p. 401). Thus, Thayer-Bacon contrasts vulgar relativism with what she calls a *qualified relativism*, which (a) insists on the need for pluralism (i.e., a conversation between different perspectives in order to reach a more qualified understanding); (b) accepts fallibilism (i.e., that we can never attain knowledge that is certain because we are fallible, limited, and contextual beings); and (c) claims that knowledge is a cultural embedded social process of knowing that is continually in need of re-adjustment, correction, and reconstruction. A qualified relativism offers researchers and educators a morally sensitive approach to address the situatedness, complexity, and diversity of values without ending up in an “anything goes” position. It helps us take values seriously by engaging us in a dialogue to understand, revise, and negotiate plausible values. Values and values education are lived relational phenomena and have to be approached as such.

## A Final Comment

The editors, and contributing authors, are to be congratulated on bringing together this special issue of very insightful and high-quality papers. Whereas a lot of scholarly work within the field of values education focuses on school and adopts either philosophical or quantitative methods (e.g., Nucci et al. 2014), the six papers in this special issue have instead focused on preschool and adopted qualitative methods. Taken together, the studies in this special issue make an important contribution and provide most stimulating theoretical and methodological

approaches to the study of values education in Nordic preschool settings. Further research on values, values education, and values learning in preschool is needed. The special issue invites scholars to investigate moral and citizenship education in early childhood education and to bring together various theoretical and methodological approaches.

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