

## Values Education in Nordic Preschools: Theory and Practice

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Dear Readers,

In this special issue, we are proud to present seven articles which focus on values education in the early years. Six research studies are presented which draw on data from a large research project conducted across five Nordic countries. The seventh article provides a commentary on the articles as well as on the state of research knowledge about values education. In this introduction, we provide a short overview of the research studies and the final commentary on the research studies that is provided as the end of the special issue.

In the first paper, *Interpreting Values in the Daily Practices of Nordic Preschools: A Cross-Cultural Analysis*, the researchers explore how practitioners interpret their educational practices from a values perspective. The article gives a broad picture of the complexity of values and the embedded nature of values in preschool practice. It highlights the difficulties for educators in conceptualising just how values are embedded in their practice. Educators live these values with children but lack a professional language to discuss the values, although their talk about educational practices contained themes connected to various values, such as care, discipline, competence, and democracy.

In the next study, the focus is on values education in one Icelandic preschool. What kind of values do preschool teachers hold as important to communicate to children and how do they comprehend their own role in values education? These

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questions are raised in the article, *An Action Research Study in an Icelandic Preschool: Developing Consensus about Values and Values Education*. This study shows how teachers prioritise values such as care, respect, and discipline. The teachers consider how they act as a role model in the expression of values, through the use of language, discussion, and guidance but also through exercising control. While democracy was not at the forefront of practice in this preschool, the value of respect which was discussed could be related both to democracy and care.

Children's experiences of belonging and community are central in developing democratic practices in preschool. This is discussed in the third research study presented which analyses data from seven Norwegian preschools: *The Contribution of Different Patterns of Teachers' Interactions to Young Children's Experiences of Democratic Values during Play*. The question explored is: What connection may exist between different interaction patterns in play and the communication of democratic values? The findings illustrate how group interactions are more likely to safeguard children's opportunities to experience democratic practices than during dyadic interactions. This is a challenge about which educators should remain aware about how different kinds of interactions with children may support or hinder the expression of democratic values.

While value statements are written into the curriculum, values in practice are constantly communicated through the social, cultural, and the material environment. In the article, *A Narrative Inquiry about Values in a Finnish Preschool: The Case of Traffic Lights*, the issue about how values are communicated through materiality and artefacts is considered. The researchers focus on the question: How are values conveyed through the use of an artefact, a chart with traffic lights? The authors report discussions with the practitioners about the artefact and observed children's everyday activities around the traffic lights. The findings highlight that opposite values can be communicated around the same practice, such as the use of the traffic lights as a discipline tool by practitioners and children's understanding that the traffic lights acknowledge their rights to participation

Values about democracy were the focus of the next study in which observations of conflict situations in 20 Nordic preschools were analysed. The study also places values within a context of rights and gender. What kinds of rights are communicated in the interactions between teachers and children and how? What kind of gender patterns can be identified? These are questions raised in the study: *Individual and Collective Rights Expressed in Educators and Child Interactions in Nordic Preschools*. Whereas individual rights dominated communication by educators and children about various conflicts, collective rights were only marginally expressed and mainly by the educators. The authors show how interactions about rights are built on masculinity, as a taken-for-granted hegemony, and how expectations for adaptation required girls sometimes to waive their rights.

Gender and values are also at the forefront in the next study, *Gender Beliefs and Embedded Gendered Values in Preschool*. This study was conducted in eight Swedish preschools. In this project, the researchers explored the question: What beliefs about gender and associated values, can be identified in practitioners' talk when they discuss gender issues? Primarily, the practitioners believed in gender neutrality and preschool as an arena in which traditional gendered behaviour is not

promoted. While boys were encouraged to express greater femininity, paradoxically, girls were encouraged to reject femininity. The authors also identified various value dilemmas that educators encountered when they tried to reduce expression of traditional gender roles and counter the inequalities in gender-biased activities.

The final article, *Values Education in Nordic Preschools: A Commentary*, takes a meta-perspective on the presented studies and on the topic of values education in ECEC settings. The author presents a synthesis of previous studies in this research field and placed the current studies in this broader research context. Certain themes based on the presented studies in this special issue are raised, for example, how educators use a personal rather than a professional language in discussing values and how the values prioritised may be regarded as a hybrid between traditional and progressive approaches: on the one hand, as explicit and formal and, on the other hand, as implicit through the hidden curriculum. The author invites further discussion about the idea of values as constructed and relative versus historically constant, universal, and socially invariant. The author suggests that one solution of this problem may be “a qualified relativism”. This morally sensitive approach invites researchers and educators to address the situated nature of values, and the complexity and diversity of values without ending up in an “anything goes” position.

As invited editors of this special issue, we sincerely hope that the research presented will provoke discussion and contribute to knowledge development through research and practice in the field of values education in the early years. Happy reading!

Guest Editors of the Special Issue