

**Preschool as an Arena for Developing Teacher Knowledge  
Concerning Children's Language Learning**

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# Preschool as an Arena for Developing Teacher Knowledge Concerning Children's Language Learning

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**Abstract** The most important benefits of international comparisons are the indications that make hidden national characteristics visible and shed new light on the system in each country. From a comparative perspective, this article explores what Swedish and Norwegian preschool teachers emphasise as important to preschool student teachers about preschool as an arena for children's language learning. The theoretical framework of the study is based on ecological system theories (Bronfenbrenner in *The ecology of human development*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1979; Bronfenbrenner in *Dev Psychology* 22(6):723–742, 1986) and socio-cultural theories concerning language learning (Vygotsky in *Thought and language*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1986). The data are produced through interviews with 69 Swedish and 35 Norwegian preschool teachers. The analyses focused on what the preschool teachers stated to be the most important elements to work with concerning children's language learning, how and why they worked like this, and what rationales may have led to their pedagogy. The two countries seem quite alike in terms of the values embedded in early childhood education and political ideas concerning a rich childhood based on play and democratic ideals. By comparing the two countries, the results reveal differences

that can lead to a deeper knowledge of cultural concepts that are often taken for granted, such as pedagogical approaches, and how these create different conditions for children's preschool language learning.

**Keywords** Preschool · Children's language learning · Preschool teachers' conceptions · Comparing pedagogical work

## Introduction

From a comparative perspective, this article explores what Swedish and Norwegian preschool teachers emphasise as important to preschool student teachers concerning preschool as an arena for children's language learning. The focus is on interviews conducted by preschool student teachers (hereafter student teachers) with preschool teachers during the practical stage of their preschool teacher education. In this article, we examine the interviews in order to study the conditions in which student teachers in the two countries learn about children's language learning during their practical training periods in a preschool.

In both countries, preschool teacher education has been subject to reform and, to deepen one's understanding of the structure and content of preschool teacher education, it can be both valuable and necessary to move across borders and away from the familiar. The two countries, Sweden and Norway, seem to be quite alike in terms of the values related to early childhood education and political ideas about the importance of a supportive and rich childhood based on play and democratic ideals. Bennett (2010) describes Nordic early childhood education as a social pedagogical approach in opposition to a pre-primary approach. Such a social pedagogical approach focuses on

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the development of social competence, aiming to empower children as active participants who can influence their own lives by strengthening their identity and self-esteem. The pre-primary approach instead focuses on academic learning, teaching and children's cognitive learning and development in order to prepare the child for school.

As researchers, we are both engaged in preschool teacher education and are involved in a project that compares preschool teacher education in the field of early literacy in our two countries. Since it is hard to comprehend your own country's policy context, comparative studies have become a powerful means by which to uncover new perspectives (McMullen et al. 2005; Stipek and Byler 1997). Comparative studies, focusing on the policy, philosophy and intentions within preschool teacher education and preschool, are vital, both in terms of learning from other settings and going beyond the familiar in order to highlight what is often taken for granted. By widening the research from a single national context to a comparison between our two countries, we expect to gain a richer and more complex view of what characterises each country's early childhood education. We focus on three different aspects of preschool teacher education in the field of early literacy: (1) the preschool teachers' understanding of what is important within the field; (2) how to work with these children; and (3) why they should be concerned with these aspects of early literacy. The decision to focus on language learning was made because in both countries, as well as throughout the Western world, there is a growing recognition of the importance of language learning during the early years. As, from a comparative perspective, this study highlights the relationship between a specific country's policy and its preschool education and practice, the results are expected to provide valuable knowledge to the field of research as well as preschool practice.

### Early Childhood Education in Sweden and Norway

The Nordic countries have much in common regarding early childhood education. On a general level, they share, to a large extent, pedagogical views and aims for children, childhood and preschool (Einarsdottir and Wagner 2006). Over the last decade, there has been a great deal of pressure from politicians concerning children's learning outcomes in the early years and many commercial market operators have developed programmes for teaching children language and mathematics in preschool. In addition, children's environments have changed dramatically over the last few decades, with increasing numbers of children being enrolled in early childhood education environments due to social changes and financial pressures. Hence, children's language experiences will take place in various contexts: home, community and preschool. Taking into

consideration the socio-cultural context in which young children grow up, parents and teachers constitute the key figures in their lives and thus play important roles in enhancing their language learning. In many homes, parents engage with their young children in mutual language activities. These activities take place in many preschools as well and are, in both Sweden and Norway, a major part of the literacy curriculum.

In Norway and Sweden, preschool teacher education and preschools are governed by national policy, curricula and guidelines (Ministry of Education and Science 2010; SFS 2010:541). In both countries, preschool teacher education results in at least a bachelor's degree and an academic education based on scientific evidence and proven experience. Sweden has a three-and-a-half-year programme, involving 210 higher education credits, while Norway has a three-year bachelor's preschool teacher programme, involving 180 higher education credits. In both countries, preschool teacher education embraces preschool practical training and requires students to complete 30 credits worth of practice experience. One common key goal is for student teachers to learn how to create appropriate conditions for children's communication and language development in preschool.

Preschool in both Sweden and Norway is for children between 1 and 5/6 years of age. Preschool is part of the educational system and so is governed by a national curriculum that integrates play, care and learning (Ministry of Education and Research 2003; Ministry of Education and Science 2010). Preschools can be either private or owned by the municipality and are usually open from 6:30 to 18:00 on weekdays in Sweden and from 7:00 to 17:00 in Norway. In both countries, children are expected to learn and develop their language skills as they take part in everyday activities that they chose for themselves, or through activities initiated by preschool teachers and/or by the preschool teacher and child together.

Despite the many similarities, there are also substantial philosophical differences between the two countries' preschool curricula regarding what they emphasise as important (Vallberg-Roth 2013). Differences can also be discerned in their respective national plans for preschool teacher education (Ministry of Education and Research 2003; Ministry of Education and Science 2010). The Swedish plan focuses extensively on future preschool teachers' knowledge about children's language learning. According to the Norwegian plan, on the other hand, student teachers learn that language is primarily a skill that children should develop as a tool for participation in cultural activities (Gjems and Sheridan 2015).

In both countries, preschool teachers play an important role as models for student teachers during their practical training in preschools. Our particular interest concerns what the current preschool teachers emphasise about their

pedagogical work with children's language learning in preschool, as well as what similarities and differences that may exist in the rationales for preschool teachers' practices in the two countries. The student teachers interviewed their practical training teachers in order to identify what they emphasise in their work with children's language learning and to discover the rationales behind their work. In addition, as part of their practical training and preschool teacher education, they observed how the preschool teachers work. The research question at issue is therefore: *What conditions are created by preschool teachers in Swedish and Norwegian preschools to facilitate student teachers' understanding regarding children's language learning?*

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on ecological system theories (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1986; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2007) and socio-cultural theories about language learning (Vygotsky 1986). According to these theories, children's language learning, as well as student teachers' learning about working with children's language in preschool and during their preschool teacher education, are said to interplay in order to form a complex system. Both individuals and the environment influence one another in a continuous system of interactions. Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) ecological framework is used to explain how different systems interact and influence the conditions for children's language learning in preschool, in addition to student teachers learning about language learning in preschool and during preschool teacher education. The ecological framework describes how, alongside chronosystems (time), there exist microsystems of cultures and societies (children, student teachers and preschool teachers in preschool), mesosystems (preschools), and exosystems (preschool teacher education). Further, macrosystems (economic and social policies) interact and influence the conditions for communication, interplay and language learning in preschools, as well as the ways in which such systems determine the forms in which the conditions for language learning in terms of philosophy, approaches, didactics and quality can develop. Whilst macrosystems, which are formed by ideological, legal, economic, historical and political values, influence what children and student teachers are expected to learn in preschool and preschool teacher education (respectively) within different cultures and societies, chronosystems show how these values and expectations change and develop over time. The systems are intertwined, and the dialectic link between them means that the overall intentions of the preschool teacher education system are intertwined with events in preschool practice (Ball 2006). Consequently, all

of these systems need to be taken into consideration in order to understand in a more comprehensive way the conditions for children's language learning in preschools (Sheridan et al. 2009). In this article we mainly focus on the microsystem in preschools.

## Student Teachers' Learning Regarding Children's Language Learning

Student teachers' learning can be seen from many different perspectives. Borko (2004) categorises teachers' knowledge into three distinct types: knowing what, knowing how and knowing why. Blömke et al. (2008) define effective teacher education as professional competence for future teachers, and they underscore that there has to be a minimum of knowledge in all three areas for there to be a high level of performance. Knowing *why* makes it possible for teachers to separate knowing *what* from knowing *how*.

To know *what* in the field of children's language learning must encompass the developmental process of language as well as the elements that language learning consists of. Knowing *how*, or procedural knowledge, is knowledge that is especially important for recognising how to act in different pedagogical situations. If preschool teachers only develop content knowledge and knowledge about different facts, they will experience problems concerning how to act and work as preschool teachers in practice. Knowing *how* in the field of children's language learning involves, for instance, knowing that children learn language best when they are engaged in situations they experience as meaningful, and not when the activity is experienced as uninteresting. The knowing *why* is important to understand the role of language in all kinds of learning. All of these three forms of knowledge are interwoven with each other (Blömeke et al. 2008). A Swedish study of preschool teacher competence also adds *interactive, relational and transactional competence* as important aspects of knowledge for preschool teachers (Sheridan et al. 2011). These knowledge types encompass preschool teachers' communicative, social and didactic competencies as well as their competencies to care, all of which are vital competencies for student teachers to develop in order to fulfil their goals of working effectively with children in all knowledge areas.

## Children's Language Learning

Early language learning is important as an artefact to use for gaining all kinds of knowledge, establishing friendships and social contacts, joining in play and participating in all kinds of activities (Wells 2007). Further, research has revealed that the foundation for learning to read and write is laid during the preschool years (Dickinson and Porche

2011). Both social and emotional development are dependent upon a functional language for communication with other people and are important for today as well as for tomorrow.

Children learn language when they are engaged in meaningful everyday activities with people they know and enjoy being with. According to Tomasello (2003), how the adults in children's environments support them in interpreting communicative signals, and in both using and understanding words, are of great importance for children's language learning.

Research has shown that young children benefit from learning words, concepts and new knowledge in contexts where they are engaged as participants in meaningful activities (Neuman and Marulis 2010). Older children, youths and adults, however, can learn well in decontextualized and abstract situations. Children of preschool age learn best when they are engaged in something that occupies them, like play and physical or aesthetical activities. They learn words, concepts and phrases when they are included in a context, whether initiated by the children or by a preschool teacher. When children participate in language interactions that engage them and they hear the words for objects and phenomena, they can learn what the words represent and they will better remember what they represent and which contexts they can be related to (Nelson 2007). To support children's learning of words and phrases, as well as to provide them with rich opportunities to share their thoughts, ideas, and needs with others, the preschool teachers must have thorough and relevant knowledge of how to lead and guide different children's language learning. Further, they must have adequate knowledge about what and why they need to learn concerning how children of different ages and with different language experiences learn language. They must also learn how they can support, teach and guide children to learn more. Vygotsky (1986) claims that the educator's knowledge of the child's actual knowledge is necessary in order to expand his/her "zone of proximal development".

## Method

### Comparing

The most important benefits of international comparisons are the indications that make hidden national characteristics visible and shed new light on the system in each country (Blömeke and Paine 2008). By comparing two countries, which mainly follow the same ideals, we can reveal differences that are invisible on the surface and so gain a deeper knowledge about cultural concepts that were previously taken for granted. Taking a cross-country

perspective in research will allow wider perspectives to emerge concerning what is typical and atypical in each country.

### Data Collection

The data in the study consist of interviews with 69 Swedish and 35 Norwegian preschool teachers. The informants were selected because the University and University College employed them as practical training supervisors. Student teachers conducted the interviews during their practical training period. The reason to engage the student teachers in the research was both to create opportunities for them to be part of a research project, and to reflect on their practice in new ways, and for us as researchers to be able to include a larger number of preschools and preschool teachers in the study. The interview guide was developed by the researchers and comprised nine questions, some open-ended and some closed. The questions dealt with what exactly the training supervisors emphasised in the field of children's language learning, how they work in this field, and why they have chosen to work in the way they do. The student teachers received thorough instruction about how to conduct an interview and how they should transcribe the data. They were explicitly told to keep to the questions, to ask every one of them, and to follow them up, even if the informant had partly answered the question already. The student teachers delivered the transcribed interviews after their practical period.

The practical training supervisors (the preschool teachers) also received information about the student teachers' role as research assistants and the interview at a meeting beforehand. Ethical aspects of the research were taken into consideration, including the requirements for confidentiality, written consent, information and autonomy, along with the assurance that participation in the study was voluntary (Norwegian Social Science Data Services 2014; Swedish Research Council 2002). The written consent was handed out to the participating preschool teachers at the meeting, and they were invited to deliver their consent either at the meeting, or by post. They were informed that they had the right to refuse to be an informant. They were also given the interview guide in advance of the interview so that they had the opportunity to prepare their answers. The Norwegian Social Science Data Services and the Swedish Research Council acknowledged the ethical procedure in the project. The interviews were carried out in each of the participating preschools. The interviews lasted between 10 and 30 min and were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The use of untrained student teachers as research assistants may represent some shortcomings in the data collected. Some of the transcripts are quite short, with two to three word answers apparently being given by the

preschool teacher informant. However, most of the interview transcripts are rich and have comprehensive information. All the student teachers have followed the instructions regarding how to transcribe and they asked the preschool teachers all of the questions in the interview guide.

## Analyses

The data analyses focused on what the preschool teachers stated to be the most important aspects concerning children's language learning. In order to grasp the totality of the data, all of the interviews were read and studied repeatedly, focusing on key questions that were asked of all participants.

We then searched for patterns in their responses and thus the analytical process was conducted in different steps. First, we analysed the preschool teachers' answers separately and, second, as a comparison between the two countries. We looked for similarities and differences in what they emphasised as the most important part in their work with children's language learning. We then conducted the same analysis regarding their responses to how they choose to accomplish what they identified as the most important areas of work concerning children's language learning. Next, we studied why they worked as they described and what rationales might have informed their pedagogy. In the third stage of the analyses, the results were related to ecological and socio-cultural theories of children's language learning, as well as to the preschool curricula and preschool teacher education in both countries.

The process of analysis can therefore be described as an interplay between empirical data and ecological and socio-cultural theories, and, thus, as an analytical process of abduction (Alvesson and Skjöldberg 1994; Bazeley 2013; Pierce 1931-1935). Through the analytical process of comparing old meanings to new and new to old, we identified common themes, leading to the identification of key concepts and utterances. We counted the key concepts and utterances to make the patterns more obvious, and then

listed the most apparent. This helped us to prompt the comparative analysis.

## Findings

### Preschool as an Arena for Children's Language Learning

The results from the analyses highlight three main themes. The first theme, *preschool teachers' views on what is important for children's language learning*, focuses on *what* preschool teachers' emphasise to be the most important that children can learn in the field of language in preschool. The first theme includes two subthemes: communication and vocabulary. The second theme, *preschool teachers' views on how children learn languages*, also embraces two subthemes: *how do the preschool teachers work on children's language in everyday situations* and *planned activities for language learning*. The third theme, *preschool teachers' views on why children should learn language* focuses on the preschool teachers' conceptions of why learning language and communication is important for children (Table 1).

### Preschool Teachers' Views on What is Important for Children's Language Learning

Knowledge of *what* concerns the substance in a field. In preschool teacher education and preschool teachers' pedagogical practice, several substance fields must be taken into account at once. In this study, general pedagogical knowledge about how to work with children at different ages, as well as with different experiences in the language field, must be worked on based on theories and research about children's language development and learning (Han et al. 2005). Further, this knowledge must be combined with procedural knowledge (Blömeke et al. 2008). Knowledge of *what* also includes curriculum intentions and policy within macrosystems (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1986).

**Table 1** Results as main themes and subthemes

Main theme	Subtheme
Preschool teachers' views on what is important for children's language learning	Communication. "...to express feelings and to absorb knowledge..." Vocabulary. "...vocabulary and to learn about concepts are the two main things..."
Preschool teachers' views on how children learn languages	How the preschool teachers work on children's language in everyday situations. "We talk about what has happened over the weekend..." Planned activities for language learning. "We use drama and read books..."
Preschool teachers' views on why children should learn language	"They must learn to have a conversation, but also listen to others..."

Verbatim from preschool teachers

## Communication

It is vital to be attentive and responsive to all the different ways in which children communicate and to know that children's communication is both verbal and non-verbal, even if the emphasis is on supporting children's verbal language development. Language is emphasised by most of the preschool teachers as the key to all learning and as fundamental for the children to be able to live in the world and make themselves understood. An underdeveloped language skill makes it difficult for children to express their thoughts, argue, make their voices heard and take part in different situations and contexts.

SPT (Swedish preschool teacher): It is a very big goal (language learning). I think that if we have mastered a language, we have the key to many other subjects and the key to life! And to express feelings and to absorb knowledge and...thus language is/.../language is vital! I think. And it must permeate all situations. (SPT 68)

In addition, a rich understanding of language gives children confidence and preschool teachers state that it is their responsibility to create both everyday situations and goal directed situations in which children can develop their language and communicate in various different ways.

Many of the Norwegian preschool teachers emphasise the social side of language as very important. They emphasise that children must develop a functional language and learn to communicate with other people. One preschool teacher answered the question about what she thinks of as important for children learn about language in preschool with:

NPT (Norwegian preschool teacher): I think the most important thing is that the children learn to talk together and to use language in social situations.

I: Why do you think that is important?

NPT: If you do not have the language to communicate with others it will be difficult to be with other people, it is difficult to get friends when you cannot talk together. It will not help to be a skilful reader and writer when you cannot communicate with others. (NPT 20)

This preschool teacher clearly expresses her thoughts about what is the most important reason to teach children about language. The majority of the Norwegian preschool teachers also share these key viewpoints: language is important for children to play, establish friendships and to communicate in many situations.

## Vocabulary

All the Swedish preschool teachers emphasise the importance of naming things and continuously introducing new words, concepts and situations into the children's world and vocabulary. Language learning is meant to be joyful and taught in a playful manner. Preschool teachers emphasise that they have to talk with the children rather than to them, and that they should be good linguistic/language role models.

I: What do you think is the preschool teacher's task and role in children's language development and language learning?

SPT: Hm... I think that we as educators should challenge children's language, that is... uh... how should I put it now? Using a language that, according to Vygotsky, then is a step above their skills, so using a relatively sophisticated language with the children. A rich sophisticated language. Don't settle on children's language or below, you should challenge the children's language. Use appropriate expressions in various contexts, in the case of math, or what you are now doing, use the correct expression or correct word in this context that is appropriate at the time. (SPT 26)

This Swedish preschool teacher made reference to Vygotsky (1986) and the zone of proximal development. She states that it is important to use a rich, correct and advanced language in order to challenge children's language learning.

Most of the Norwegian preschool teachers answered that they see vocabulary and linguistic awareness as the most important tools in their work with children's language learning. Many of them also mentioned concepts in connection with vocabulary, like this preschool teacher:

NPT: Yes, it is like I said, vocabulary and learning about concepts are the two main things I will emphasise as the most important for children to learn about language. (NPT 13)

Both of the quoted preschool teachers articulate what all the other informants said; they consider vocabulary and concept learning to be the most important elements for children to learn about language in preschool. They also express that children's language learning is fundamental for their lifelong learning and that it is vital for children to develop language knowledge. In addition, the Swedish preschool teachers emphasise their own role and the role of preschool in laying the foundation for children's language learning. The Norwegian preschool teachers do not

mention this, and instead focus mainly on vocabulary and language competence.

### Preschool Teachers' Views on How Children Learn Language

Both knowledge of how and procedural knowledge contribute to preschool teachers' overall language-related knowledge and are especially relevant to pedagogical actions. Procedural knowledge helps a preschool teacher to teach or prepare for learning step-by-step, led by the progress of both the children and preschool teachers. In preschool, the knowledge about *how* to work must concern the preschool teachers' adaptation to children's language experience and also support their learning in the zone of proximal development. This includes knowledge of curriculum goals, children's step-by-step language learning, as well as knowing each child's competencies and interests. Knowledge of *how* highlights how curriculum intentions and policy within macrosystems are interpreted and understood as preschool practice (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1986).

#### *Everyday Situations*

All of the participating Swedish and Norwegian preschool teachers state that all situations in which preschool teachers are together with the children can be used for language learning. This embraces all routine situations, such as meal times, changing of napkins, when the children are getting dressed, and children's free play inside and outside.

It is important to talk about all the things children experience throughout the day and to term what they see and experience. While talking with the children, the role of the preschool teacher is to expand the children's vocabulary by naming colours, shapes and numbers and to use substantives, adjectives and verbs in such ways that the language becomes concrete, visible and understandable for the children. The Swedish preschool teachers state that everyday situations are most important for children's language learning. One said:

SPT: We talk about what has happened over the weekend, for example, or what they've done in their theme groups during the day. This is to get them to think and reflect and learn to retell. I try to weave in different language games, for example, a child may think of and describe an animal, and so many other children ask questions and guess which animal it is. They may practice their abstract thinking. While we talk, we try to highlight the children's influence. For example, if you notice there is something a child is interested in, try to highlight and challenge the child

on this. For example, if the child is interested in inventions, you should ask what he/she wants to invent, how it should look, etc. (SPT 1)

The aim here is clearly dual: children's individual and social development. In focus are not only children's self-awareness, their self-confidence and their being able to make themselves understood, but also their ability to learn how to listen to peers and take turns.

Also, all of the Norwegian preschool teachers focused on everyday situations and everyday conversations between the adults and the children as the most important places to support their language learning. When asked about a situation they consider as very important to work with language learning through conversations, half of them chose meal times as the most important context. For the other half of the group, the preschool teachers chose either the hall situation or spontaneous reading aloud situations. Below is an extract from an interview with one of the preschool teachers who consider meal times as the most important situation for promoting children's language learning:

NPT: I think eh... that how we use our language in everyday situations is of great importance, and especially I will choose meals, while we sit around the table. While we eat, we use language a lot, prepositions, we talk to each other, wait for one's turn and so on. How we do this is to participate in conversations with the children. And all the time express we what happens. Like for instance: "now I take cheese on my bread." All the time you have to be conscious of how you use your language in the situation. (NPT 4)

This preschool teacher expresses a viewpoint many of the preschool teachers claimed: the importance of using language (i.e. words and expressions) in everyday situations and natural settings. They engaged in using language in settings that are meaningful for the children. This Norwegian preschool teacher emphasises what they all claim to be of the greatest importance, the naming of things and vocabulary learning.

#### *Planned Activities for Language Learning*

Approximately one-third of the Swedish preschool teachers talk about language learning through planned language activities while working on projects and themes or during circle time. Examples of activities during circle time are singing, rhyming, reading books etc. However, these activities can either be intended as a social gathering or as an opportunity to learn a language, learn new words and learn how those words are expressed in a joyful way. They

also emphasise the importance of language materials such as jigsaws, games, books and digital tools like iPads etc. Reading books can also have many functions, for example, as a social gathering, a magic time and a time to learn new words and become aware of letters and the relationship between pictures and text.

SPT: Mm... thus we read the books sometimes. Ehm, sometimes the preschool teacher is reading the text, sometimes the child is telling, based on the picture, what happens in the book, eh sometimes the children read to each other, sometimes we just talk about what it is in the pictures, and then we learn from each other, uh, it comes on next, uh yeah... and we do this for the children to develop their vocabulary and hear the words pronounced, how sentences are built up. Eh... even for them to see, they'll develop recognition. Everything we've seen before creates a recognition process. Uh... and then why, what to learn from this is that the children can see that the pictures and the text can say the same thing, that there is a link. (SPT 10)

Preschool teachers also organise activities such as the children writing their names on the picture and/or writing and telling what they have drawn in order to understand the relation between letters and reading and the picture. A few preschool teachers say that they talk about the relation between language and mathematics, and that they direct the children's attention to symbols such as ICA, IKEA<sup>1</sup> etc. in order to make the children aware of them.

Only two of the Norwegian preschool teachers answered that circle time with all or some of the children is the situation they emphasise as being very important for children's language learning. One of the preschool teachers answered like this:

NPT: Then we often have drama, drama play and puppet theatre. In this situation, you will use concrete methods to learn words and expression. And I read books, this is important to generate good conversations and so on.

I: How do you work with language in this situation?

NPT: We have rhymes and jingles, fairy-tales and objects. That is how I work. (NPT 9)

Also during circle time, the two preschool teachers consider the learning of words and concepts to be the most important language learning outcome for the children.

## Preschool Teachers' Views on Why Children Should Learn Language

This theme focuses on the rationales behind the preschool teachers' pedagogical practice in the field of children's language learning, both why they worked as they did and what they wanted to accomplish with their practice.

Knowledge related to knowing *why* makes a preschool teacher capable of differentiating between the knowledge of *what* and the knowledge of *how*. To accomplish this in the field of language learning, preschool teachers need knowledge about cognitive demands in addition to pedagogical knowledge about how to work and how to proceed in supporting different children's language learning (Filmore and Snow 2003; Han et al. 2005). Knowledge of *why* creates an understanding of preschool teachers' professional knowledge and pedagogical intentions related to policy and curriculum goals (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1986).

The Swedish preschool teachers give multiple motives for promoting children's language learning and development. These can be categorised as: individual, cognitive, social, democratic, and for children to become language literate. They emphasise that the strongest motive is to tutor children to master a language. They say that language learning encourages and strengthens children's individual development in terms of self-awareness, self-confidence, and the confidence to make themselves understood.

SPT: They're supposed to learn to have a language and to know how to talk in order to make their voices heard. Hm... if you have no language, you cannot say anything, the others do not understand you. (SPT 28)

They also relate children's language learning to their social development in terms of learning how to listen to peers and how to take turns.

SPT: ...that they must learn to have a conversation, but also to listen to the others' stories, and there will be a certain turn taking there when they're talking. That they listen to each other and we talk together. (SPT 7)

The preschool teachers mean that children need to learn languages and to be communicative humans in order to deal with the world around them.

Below is an interview with a Norwegian preschool teacher who argues that meal times are the best situation for promoting children's language. She works with conversation to support their language learning.

NPT: Well, I think the everyday conversations are so important, that you can sit and talk together and have time to talk together. Listen to each other; work with the ability to listen. Not everybody around the

<sup>1</sup> These are well-known logos in Sweden.

table can talk at the same time, some must listen too. We also place words on concepts while we eat, and this is a way to learn words. Especially small children do not know what everything is called, and when they hear other use words, they learn them.

I: What do you think the children will learn from this?

T: They learn concepts of course. And the names of different cold cuts and cheeses, each other's names, but they also learn to listen to each other and help each other. Look at each other and learn. I think that to learn to listen is very important. Children are quite clever in talking, but not in listening to what others say. So they need to exercise the ability to wait and listen to what others say. (NPT 12)

This preschool teacher offers two main reasons for why she uses conversations as the context to promote children's language; these situations give them the opportunity to learn how to talk together in a group, both as listeners and speakers. She argues that in such a situation the children will learn names of cold cuts etc. as well as learn about words and concepts related to the meal. She refers to both those children who know many words and those children who need listen and learn words in this context. It is possible to interpret her rationale as built on factual knowledge about how children learn words and concepts in a social context. She also emphasises the need to adapt the learning process to children's different experiences and ages.

However, most of the Norwegian preschool teachers focused mainly on the social side of language when they were asked why they practiced language learning as they did.

## Comparisons and Conclusions

This study explores what Swedish and Norwegian preschool teachers express to student teachers about preschool as an arena for children's language learning. From a comparative perspective, the analyses focused on what preschool teachers' emphasise as being important in children's language learning, how they work with it, and why (Blömeke et al. 2008; Sandvik et al. 2013).

### Comparing What

There are several similarities between the preschool teachers in the two countries when it comes to what they emphasise in promoting children's language learning. In both countries, the preschool teachers express that children are in a continuous dialogue with the world around them,

and that language and communication are key concepts in the process of learning. They emphasise that preschool teachers need to be responsive and to create an environment that supports and challenges the children's language learning. It is important that they use a rich and multi-faceted language with correct words and concepts.

One difference is that Swedish preschool teachers identify a broader spectrum of language skills and abilities that children need to learn as well as a more complex picture of what language learning embraces in relation to consequences of not having a developed language. The Norwegian preschool teachers place the strongest emphasis on language learning as important for children's life today: for play and for communication with the world around them. Some of the Swedish preschool teachers, on the other hand, combine a here and now perspective with a long-term perspective, for instance Swedish preschool teacher #26.

In both countries, children's learning of the written language is more implicit and integrated in their overall language learning, and thus is mainly to be given attention when the children show interest and take initiative.

### Comparing How

The preschool teachers in the two countries emphasise everyday situations, as well as situations and activities that the children choose themselves as the best situations for language learning. This is in accordance with the Nordic way of conceiving early childhood (Einarsdottir and Wagner 2006). Both the Norwegian and the Swedish preschool teachers seem to plan activities for children's language learning. They create activities such as specific language projects, circle time activities, reading books and drama activities and also arrange situations for children to learn language. They also make the children aware of the relationships between letters, pictures and reading. However, only two of the Norwegian preschool teachers mentioned circle time and planned activities as being important for children's language learning, while approximately one-third of the Swedish preschool teachers talked about such things.

A few Swedish preschool teachers also talk about the importance of initiating interest in the written language and creating situations in which children can reflect and use meta-communication. One preschool teacher refers to Vygotsky's (1986) theory and to abstract thinking as an important element to promote in language interactions with children. This may reflect a more skilled form of teaching practise than the Norwegian data suggest. The Norwegian preschool teachers express somewhat more strongly the importance of language as a social process and focus on what they say and do in concrete interactions with the

children without including theories about language as part of the children's development and learning. None of the Norwegian preschool teachers refers to the theoretical grounds of their practice.

### Comparing Why

In both countries, preschool teachers emphasise the importance of children's individual and social language learning, so that they can be active and valued members of the community, as motives for the pedagogical work with children's language learning.

However, compared to the Norwegian preschool teachers, the Swedish preschool teachers offer a wider spectrum of motives for promoting children's language learning. They express cognitive and democratic motives and emphasise the importance of children becoming language literate. The Norwegian preschool teachers are mainly concerned with children's participation in different activities and that they must learn to communicate in social ways. Some of them also underline the importance of listening to children's voices. These perspectives seem to be more important than their learning of words and concepts, while learning how to express thoughts, feelings, as well as to explain and narrate, are related directly to language development.

### Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979, 1986) shows how policy within the macrosystems in both countries interacts with the intentions regarding the preschool teacher education within exosystems, creating slightly different arenas within the microsystems for children's language learning in Swedish and Norwegian preschools. Early language learning is an important artefact to use for gaining all kinds of knowledge (Hasan 2005). Thus, it is vital to support children's language learning in a wide spectrum of areas, as well as to communicate with the children, giving them rich opportunities to share their thoughts, ideas, and needs with others, and laying the foundation for them to learn how to communicate, read and write in the early preschool years (Dickinson and Porche 2011).

The findings in this study point to several fundamental similarities between the two neighbouring countries. They both value children's choices and their right to be engaged and interested in the learning activities that the preschools offer them. If the children are uninterested and not engaged, the preschool teachers are not to force anything upon them. This represents a pattern that is expressed through all interviews in both countries.

The preschool teachers in both countries also agree that language learning is important for children in many ways. In particular, they underline the importance of vocabulary learning in everyday situations. Here we also find some systematic differences. The Norwegian preschool teachers talk about children's vocabulary learning as something that happens only when they hear words in appropriate contexts. For instance, they express that children learn the names of cold cuts when they eat, names of their clothes when they dress, and that this is what is appropriate to talk about in these situations. Even though the children spend 4 or 5 years in preschool, the Swedish preschool teachers perceive language from a more comprehensive perspective, relating the here-and-now to the children's future and lifelong learning.

When talking about how they work with language, preschool teachers in both countries are quite vague. The everyday conversations are presented as the most important context for children's language learning, including activities like meals, play, and hall conversations and diapering. None of the informants talk about how they can use these situations to expand the children's vocabulary by asking open-ended questions, prolonging a conversational theme, or supporting children in uttering a thought, feeling, idea or point of view. Nor can the interviews be interpreted as implying communication to be shared sustainable thinking (Siraj-Blatchford 2007). They mainly present everyday conversations as automatically promoting language learning. Research shows that preschool teachers need to have thorough, relevant and didactical knowledge about how to lead and support children's language learning and how they can teach and guide them to learn more (Neuman 2006; Pramling and Pramling Samuelsson 2011; Roskos and Neuman 2005). Curriculum language goals are clearly stated at a macro-level and the question is how this policy is interpreted as practice on the exo-level. That is, what knowledge can preschool teacher education offer in this field and whether they teach in-depth about children's language learning?

According to Vallberg-Roth (2013), and her analysis of the content of the Nordic preschool curricula, the Norwegian Framework Plan for Content and Task for the Preschools are different from the rest of the Nordic countries in that they emphasise children's participation. Thus, Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979, 1986) may explain some of the Norwegian preschool teachers' focus on children's communication and participation, while the Swedish preschool teachers follow a broader spectrum that emphasises the importance of children meeting a rich language environment in preschool and learning a language both for now and for life. On a policy level, both Sweden and Norway seem to be quite alike concerning the values of early childhood education. By comparing the two

countries, we have revealed differences that can lead to a deeper knowledge about cultural concepts previously taken for granted, such as how pedagogical approaches can create different conditions for children's language learning in preschools.

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