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**Early literacy in Norwegian
and Swedish preschool teacher education**

Liv Gjems^{a*}, Sonja Sheridan^b

^a *Buskerud and Vestfold University College, Kongsberg, Norway*

^b *University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden*

* Corresponding author. E-mail: liv.gjems@hbv.no

Since the turn of the century, politicians in the Scandinavian countries have placed great emphasis on early childhood education and care. They have been especially concerned with lifelong learning in the field of language learning, early literacy, and numeracy. Almost all children between the ages of 1 and 6 years attend a preschool, and the quality of the learning environment is of great importance. This article presents a comparative study of student preschool teachers' conceptions of the knowledge that they claim to have acquired about children's early literacy throughout their bachelor education in Norway and in Sweden. The aim is to compare responses to a questionnaire administered to the student teachers and to examine the similarities and differences in the content of and goals indicated in the two countries' national plans for early literacy. This study is based on sociocultural theories and has a multimethod design. First, through a discourse analysis we examined the national plans for preschool teacher education in Norway and Sweden and studied similarities and differences. Second, we sent a questionnaire to all student preschool teachers at all universities and university colleges in Norway and at the University of Gothenburg. The differences between the Norwegian and Swedish education students were most obviously seen in their responses to the questions about how they work with early literacy. The discourse analyses showed that the national education plans for preschool teacher education in the two countries differ in certain instances but share common ground in others.

Keywords: early childhood education, language learning, early literacy, preschool teachers, preschool teacher education, comparative study

Introduction

Laying the groundwork for early literacy education requires that student preschool teachers know how they can support early language learning in young children (Neuman & Marulis, 2010). This article presents a comparative study of student preschool teachers' conceptions of the knowledge they claim to have acquired about children's early literacy throughout their bachelor education in Norway and Sweden. We administered questionnaires to student preschool teachers (student teachers, hereafter) in Norway and Sweden. We then related the results of the questionnaire analyses to the national plans for preschool teacher education in both countries, with a focus on early literacy learning (Ministry of Education and Research, 2003–2009; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2010).

The aim of this study was twofold: to compare the questionnaire responses of the student teachers and to examine the similarities and differences in the content of and goals indicated in the two countries' national plans.

Thus far, no comparative study has focused on the policies, philosophies, and intentions of Nordic countries with regard to preschool teacher education. Comparative research is crucial to enable learning from different perspectives and to emphasize educational issues that are taken for granted. Providing the innovation required in education is difficult when only a single country's policies are examined. The need to go beyond the familiar and to uncover new perspectives has become a powerful argument for comparative studies.

The research questions that this study aims to answer are as follows:

- (1) What conceptions about early literacy have Norwegian and Swedish student teachers gained in their education?
- (2) What information is provided and what intentions are articulated regarding early literacy in the two countries' national guidelines for preschool teacher education?

Contextual background

This study is built on the theoretical viewpoint that knowledge is constructed through interaction both among people and between people and artifacts in cultural contexts (Säljö, 2006; Vygotsky, 1931/1981). In this study, therefore, the meaning ascribed to early literacy is situated and constructed in the interaction between people and policy in Norway and Sweden.

Bennett (2010) describes two pedagogical approaches to early childhood education: the social pedagogical approach and the preprimary approach. These two approaches differ in focus, process, the presence or absence of predefined goals in relation to values, the knowledge and skills that children are expected to acquire in preschool, and the requirement or nonrequirement for documentation and assessment. The social pedagogical approach focuses on the development of social competence: it aims to empower children as active participants who can influence their own lives by strengthening their identity and self-esteem. The preprimary approach focuses on academic learning, teaching, and cognitive learning and development to prepare the child for school.

Preservice teacher education

An educational program significantly influences the conceptions developed by university educators and student teachers regarding the content of their education and the teaching profession. Polat (2010) defines educators' and student teachers' conceptions as "an inter-dependent complex system of [an] experiential, affective, cognitive, and metacognitive repertoire of perceptions, perspectives, ideologies, knowledge, theories, and principles that are somewhat related to teachers' decision-making and instructional practices" (p. 196). Borko (2004) categorizes teacher knowledge as three distinct types: understanding the concepts being taught (what), understanding how these concepts should be taught (how), and understanding why they should be taught (why). In the current work, we examined these three knowledge types via a questionnaire administered to the student teachers and via analyses of the national plans, and we also looked at how these plans combine the three knowledge types.

A Swedish study highlights a fourth knowledge type that is related to preschool teachers' competencies: interactive, relational, and transactional competence (Sheridan, Williams, Sandberg, & Vourinen, 2011). These competencies are relational, are mutually intertwined, and develop in interaction with knowing what, knowing why, and knowing how. This fourth knowledge type encompasses teachers' communicative, social, and didactic competencies, as well as their ability to care. All these proficiencies are critical for inspiring preschool teachers to develop so that they can meet their goals in line with preschool curricula.

Early literacy

Early literacy refers to the development of literacy in the years from birth to the age of 8. To become skilled learners and readers, children need a number of competencies, including a rich language and conceptual knowledge, a broad and extensive vocabulary, and verbal reasoning abilities; these skills are necessary for them to understand messages that are conveyed in pictures and in print form (Filmore & Snow, 2003).

A large-scale longitudinal study by Sylva et al. (2010) indicates that children learn language more effectively in a high-quality than in a low-quality preschool; a high-quality preschool combines communication, collaboration, and creativity into a pedagogical approach implemented by the teachers. These results support a Swedish study that indicated that children as young as 2 years old experience better language development in high-quality than in low-quality preschools (Sheridan, Pramling Samuelsson, & Johansson, 2009).

Methods

This study was initiated in 2012 and is related to the curricula currently required in Norway and Sweden (the 2003–2009 and 2010 curricula, respectively). First, we administered a questionnaire to student teachers in Norway and at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. The questions were designed to determine *what* the student teachers regard as knowledge worth acquiring, *why* this sub-

ject matter is important, and *how* this subject matter can be taught in practical pedagogical work. Second, we performed discourse analyses to compare the similarities and differences in the national plans of the two countries in regard to early literacy.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire measured the student teachers' conceptions of what they had learned. It had two parts. The first asked the student teachers 50 questions about the degree to which they believed their preschool teacher education had provided them with knowledge about early literacy, among other subject fields. The student teachers were asked to rate the items on a scale ranging from "to a small extent" to "to a very high extent." The second part of the questionnaire required the student teachers to consider 71 assertions about central subjects in their education and what they believed a preschool is and should be. Like the items in the first part of the questionnaire, the assertions were rated on a scale that ranged from "disagree" to "agree."

In Norway, a print version of the questionnaire was distributed to the student teachers at the end of their third year of bachelor education at all the university colleges and universities that offer preschool teacher education (total = 1,061). The number of student teachers who returned their questionnaires was 898, giving a response rate of 85%.

In Sweden, the print version was administered to student preschool teachers at the end of the second year of the new preschool teacher program (2011). Out of 100 students, 85 returned their questionnaires, again yielding a response rate of 85%.

Results

The student teachers in Norway and Sweden agreed about the central values related to what Einarsdottir and Wagner (2006) call the Nordic approach. In the subject field related to play and learning, the answers of the student teachers were mostly similar. The descriptive analysis showed that considerable consensus was present among the student teachers with regard to the outcomes of learning in general. In most of the subject fields, the majority of the student teachers agreed that they had gained knowledge to a large extent.

Table 1. To what degree do you believe your education has provided you with knowledge about how you can promote young children's language learning?

	To a small extent, %	To some extent, %	To a large extent, %	To a very large extent, %
Norwegian	7	31	43	19
Swedish	2	15	60	23

$p = .003$

However, the responses of some of the student teachers reflected disagreement with the views of the majority. Looking into single variables, we found differences among the respondents in several of the fields. Specifically, the student teachers' responses substantially differed in regard to early literacy, which is the main focus of this study. Table 1 shows the differences between the Norwegian and Swedish student teachers' conceptions of how much they learned about children's early literacy.

An obvious difference existed between the student teachers from the two countries in how they measured their knowledge about early literacy. A full 60% of the Swedish student teachers believed that their education provided them with such knowledge to a large extent, and 23% believed it did so to a very large extent. By contrast, 43% of the Norwegian student teachers believed that their education provided them with such knowledge to a large extent, and 19% believed that it did so to a very large extent. Comparison of the "large" and the "very large" groups shows a 21% difference between the two student teacher groups in their conceptions of the degree to which they had learned about young children's language learning. More than twice as many Norwegian student teachers in comparison with Swedish student teachers stated that they had learned about this issue to only a small or moderate extent (38% versus 17%). These findings suggest that Swedish preschool teacher education emphasizes young children's language learning more than Norwegian education does.

Table 2 shows the responses of the student teachers to a question regarding the type of knowledge that they had acquired about language. Here again, the student teachers of the two countries differed in their responses. Of the Norwegian student teachers, 34% reported that to a small or moderate extent they had acquired knowledge about how to encourage children to talk about their experiences. By contrast, only 13% of the Swedish student teachers provided the same response. Among the Swedish student teachers, 39% agree that they have learned this skill to a very large extent, whereas 17% of the Norwegian student teachers provided this answer.

Table 2. To what degree do you believe your education has provided you with knowledge about how you can encourage children to talk about their experiences?

	To a small extent, %	To some extent, %	To a large extent, %	To a very large extent, %
Norwegian	3	31	50	17
Swedish	2	11	48	39

$p < .000$

Overall, in regard to language learning and early literacy, the Swedish student teachers believed they had learned more than did the Norwegian student teachers.

In the 71 assertions, many of which are directly related to work with early literacy, the student teachers differed substantially in their reactions to the assertions related to early literacy and the role of preschool as part of the educational system. They differed especially about the assertions on book reading and the division of education between preschool and the higher grades. Table 3 presents the reactions to the assertion on book reading.

Table 3. Preschool teachers should read to children only when the children ask.

	Disagree, %	Partly disagree, %	Partly agree, %	Agree, %
Norwegian	37	25	21	17
Swedish	0	5	45	50

$p = .000$

The student teachers from the two countries provided very different responses to these assertions. Of the Norwegian student teachers, 62% disagreed or partly disagreed that preschool teachers should read to children only when the children ask to be read to, whereas only 5% of the Swedish student teachers offered the same response. Of the Norwegian student teachers, 17% agreed with the assertion, and 50% of the Swedish student teachers agreed. This difference contrasts with the correspondence observed in the responses to the questions on early literacy.

Table 4. When reading books, preschool teachers should ask questions only as a way to control/monitor listening in class.

	Disagree, %	Partly disagree, %	Partly agree, %	Agree, %
Norwegian	37	25	39	9
Swedish	4	17	46	33

$p = .000$

Regarding the assertion that teachers should ask questions only to exercise control over or to monitor listening in class (Table 4), the student teachers from the two countries gave different responses. Of the Norwegian student teachers, 62% disagreed or partly disagreed with the assertion, whereas only 21% of the Swedish students provided these responses. By contrast, 79% of the Swedish student teachers partly agreed or agreed about the use of questions as a monitoring/control measure for listening in class. Among the Norwegians, 48% agreed. A question that arises from these findings is whether Swedish educators more strongly value the books being read to children or ensuring silence as they present literature. An interpretation is that the Norwegian student teachers have broader

views and aims with regard to reading than do the Swedish student teachers. The issue that arises from this explanation is whether the Norwegian student teachers learn that children's participation in and influence on reading books is more important than the book itself.

Conclusions. The differences between the responses of the Norwegian and the Swedish student teachers are most obviously seen in regard to the questions about how they work with early literacy. Norwegian preschool teacher education appears to emphasize the *what* and *why* elements (Borko 2004) more strongly than the *how* elements, whereas Swedish education equally espouses all three elements.

The foundation of literacy is vocabulary, and the Swedish student teachers more than the Norwegian student teachers appear to believe that they learned about this topic. When it came to book reading — a well-documented and recommended activity for learning about words, sentences, and texts — the student teachers responded differently. The responses of the Swedish student teachers indicated that they deemed book content more important than discussing what had been read, whereas the responses of the Norwegian student teachers pointed to a preference for allowing children to talk instead of merely presenting the contents of a book. The discourse analyses of the national guidelines may explain some of the differences in these student teachers' conceptions.

Discourse analyses

Discourse analysis is an approach to examining not only written and spoken ideas and knowledge (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002) but also attitudes, the manner in which topics are addressed, the terms of reference used, and the social practices embedded in conventions (Phillips, 2007). The discourse within social practice that we examined in this study is written material about how the topics of early literacy are constructed in the national plans for preschool teacher education.

The Norwegian and Swedish national plans were examined to acquire knowledge about the field as described in the documents — that is, *what* the student preschool teachers should learn about children's early literacy learning. We then investigated the proficiency that student teachers are expected to gain — that is, *how* to work in this field and the goals the student teachers will attain through their education, or, in other words, *why* this field is important and for whom and for what.

We initiated the analyses by examining the words that are highlighted and most frequently used to refer to early literacy in the documents. According to Jørgensen and Phillips (2002), the choice of words and how they are connected are an important starting point for analysis because words have a significant function in the construction of meaning and values. The documents were read following the steps presented in Table 5.

With reference to the table, the progression of the analyses proceeded from the left column to the right. In the first reading, the question we examined was about conspicuous concepts. We began by identifying the intentions articulated in the two plans and the items related to early literacy. The next step was to look for how

Table 5. Analytical process

	Purpose	Analytic strategies	Research questions
Reading 1	Identify the content regarding early literacy in the national plans.	Determine the frequencies of central words: language learning/development, phonological awareness, concept learning, oral/written language.	What concepts about early literacy are conspicuous?
Reading 2	Through the concepts revealed in the first reading, identify how the national plans construe early literacy.	Discover the words that are most frequently connected to the topic of early literacy.	How is early literacy construed in the national plans?
Reading 3	Discuss the construction of content related to what, how, and why.	Compare the scope of the content related to what, how, and why.	What is the most highly valued topic in the national plans?

frequently the central words relating to early literacy occur and whether or how they are connected to other subject areas. The second reading built on the concepts we identified in the first reading, and we followed through by identifying them across the documents to determine whether or how they contribute to the development of the early literacy field. We also looked for the most frequently used words in the field. In the third reading, we searched for the factors that teacher education programs in the two countries emphasize as the most valuable and specifically those factors that drive future preschool teachers to learn about early literacy. We began by scrutinizing the areas concerned with what student teachers should learn, why they should learn this subject matter, and whether the manner by which work is carried out in early literacy is emphasized.

Findings on the Norwegian national plan. The first reading revealed that the concept most frequently related to early literacy in the Norwegian national plan is *language*. The only recommendation in the plan for the pedagogy course related to early literacy is that the student teachers “shall learn to be sensitive towards small children’s bodily and verbal signals.” This finding prompted us to analyze the plan for the Norwegian language course, in which the concept of language occurs 24 times. Searching for the contexts in which the word occurs, we found that it is used 20 times in connection with student teachers’ own language learning. Language is mentioned only 4 times in relation to children’s language learning and early literacy. In one instance the document states that student teachers need knowledge of children’s language development; in another instance, the document articulates the importance of understanding the concepts that lay the groundwork for reading and writing; and one other instance pertains to the relationship of language to narration and read-aloud activities in preschool. In addition, in one instance the document states that student teachers should learn about children who speak

Norwegian as their second language and children with language disabilities. The conclusion drawn from the first reading was that language is presented in general terms, whereas phonological and language awareness are never mentioned. The plan stipulates the need only for student teachers to acquire “knowledge about children’s language development.”

In the second reading, we focused particularly on how early literacy is constructed in the national curriculum. The concepts found in the first reading, *language learning* and *learning to read and write*, formed the basis of the analysis. The analysis revealed that children’s oral and written language development is mentioned only once: “student teachers shall have knowledge about children’s oral [language] and commencement of written language.”

The national curriculum introduces the subject plan for Norwegian student teachers by stating that “the subject has aesthetic dimensions. It is the starting point for thinking, experiencing and communication, and is a fundamental cultural factor. Through language, children develop as participants and they meet a manifold of impulses” (p. 46). This quote summarizes the main findings from the analyses of this subject plan: the primary focus is on children’s language as a tool for communication and participation in cultural activities.

The third reading indicated that the *what* element of the national plan focuses mainly on student teachers’ own oral and written language learning. The *how* element that addresses children’s early literacy is mentioned once, in a requirement that student teachers learn to arrange for “children’s cultural creativity and invite them to tell.” The *why* element is an important part of teaching and working with early literacy because language is closely related not only to reading and writing but also to cognitive development and problem solving. Nonetheless, this element is not referred to anywhere in the national plan.

In the national plan the aspect that is considered the most valuable in relation to early literacy is that student teachers must become well-versed in their own language and obtain knowledge about the cultural and esthetic elements of language. Important questions are what this national plan communicates to educators at university colleges and how these views are expressed in local programs and conveyed to student teachers.

Findings on the Swedish national documents. In total, the Swedish national enactment document on preschool teacher education and exams is three pages long, and the contents are structured as goal areas. The first reading of this document revealed that the concepts related to early literacy are *communication*, *language development*, and *learning to read and write*. Each concept is referred to once and in relation to the requirement for student teachers to obtain knowledge and understanding of children’s learning within this goal area. In the goal area of the skills and abilities that the student teachers are required to develop, communication is mentioned three times, whereas listening, talking, and writing are each referred to once. Digital tools, media, and digital environments are also remarked on once in relation to early literacy. The conclusion drawn from the first reading was that concepts such as communication, language development, and learning to read and write are presented in general terms throughout the document.

The second reading focused on how the subject of early literacy is constructed in the national document. The analysis indicated that “student teachers shall show an in-depth knowledge about children’s communication and language development” and “student teachers shall show knowledge of basic learning in how to read and write.” Furthermore, student teachers are required to “demonstrate communication skills in listening, speaking and writing.” Student teachers are also enlisted to “demonstrate the ability to communicate in a broad sense” the (for example) fundamental values of “human rights and basic democratic values.” Another goal in this area is that student teachers should “demonstrate the ability to safely and critically use digital tools in educational practice and consider the role of different media and digital environments in this.” Thus, early literacy is constructed as student teachers’ knowledge of children’s language learning, basic knowledge of how to read and write, and the ability to communicate in a variety of areas.

The third reading focused on the *what*, *how*, and *why* elements of the national plan. Overall, the third reading revealed that the *what* element is given sufficient attention, whereas the *how* and *why* elements are disregarded. This approach is understandable because the Swedish guidelines and plan focus on the *what* aspects; the *how* elements are expected to be addressed by practicing professionals. The objective is for student teachers to develop broad communicative competence and in-depth knowledge of children’s communication and language development.

Conclusions. The discourse analysis demonstrated that the national education plans for preschool teacher education in the two countries differ in certain instances but share common ground in others.

In regard to *differences between the two plans in their focus on language learning*, *language* is the most commonly mentioned concept in the Norwegian plan. The concept is used primarily in general terms and in relation to the Norwegian language course. Early literacy is expressed in the plan for the pedagogy course as student teachers’ development of sensitivity to children’s verbal and bodily signals and not as language learning. In the plan for the Norwegian language course, the word *language* is used primarily in connection with student teachers’ own language learning and competence, which are, of course, central to children’s language learning.

In the Swedish plan, the concepts of *communication*, *language development*, and *learning to read and write* are presented in general terms. The plan focuses on children’s communication and language learning and on the language learning and understanding required of student teachers.

The difference between the two plans is that the Norwegian plan uses the concept of language mainly in relation to student teachers’ own learning, whereas the Swedish plan uses the concepts of language and communication in relation to children’s and student teachers’ language learning. In the Norwegian plan, children’s language is viewed primarily as a tool for communication and participation in cultural activities. The Swedish plan states that student teachers should possess in-depth knowledge about children’s early literacy learning and display wide-ranging communicative competence.

These findings were reflected in the responses of the Swedish student teachers to the questionnaire. The responses indicated that the Swedish group more than the Norwegian group believed that they had gained knowledge concerning children's language learning.

In regard to *differences between the two plans in their requirements for the knowledge required of preschool teachers*, the two plans focus primarily on student teachers' own language learning, although this idea is more strongly emphasized in the Norwegian plan. The main differences between the plans is that the Swedish plan far more explicitly refers to language as an avenue for children's development and as a communicative skill to be used in many areas. The Swedish plan focuses extensively on future preschool teachers' knowledge about children's early literacy learning. From the Norwegian plan, student teachers learn that language is primarily a skill that children should develop as a tool for participation in cultural activities.

The differences in content and intentions in the national plans were also confirmed by the questionnaire answers. Compared with the Norwegian student teachers, the Swedish group stated that they had learned more about how to promote children's language learning, how to encourage children to talk about their experiences, and the importance of reading to children.

Discussion

The results of the questionnaire and the discourse analyses of the national plans revealed the relationships between the student teachers' conceptions of their own early literacy learning and the intentions expressed in this area by the two countries' national plans. The relationships emerged when the Swedish student teachers stated that they regarded integrating children's early literacy learning with care and play as being aligned with the intentions expressed in the Swedish national plan; the Norwegian student teachers' responses showed that they had learned about children's language learning and early literacy to an extent lower than that achieved by the Swedish student teachers. This difference can be attributed to the content of and intentions articulated in the Norwegian national plan.

The Norwegian plan can be interpreted as grounded in a social pedagogical approach (Bennett, 2010) that focuses on student teachers' development of sensitivity to children's communicative expression and participation in cultural activities. The Swedish curriculum is more learning oriented, and it more explicitly emphasizes the importance of student teachers' knowledge about children's early literacy learning, their knowledge of how to instruct children as they learn a language, and their skills in doing so. The Swedish plan more clearly articulates the knowledge demanded of future preschool teachers, whereas the Norwegian plan underscores sensitivity to children's language learning and knowledge about language as a tool for realizing objectives such as participation in cultural activities.

The differences in plan contents can explain some of the dissimilarities between the two student teacher groups in the questionnaire responses about how to promote young children's language learning and how to encourage exchange (talking). An intriguing finding is that the Swedish student teachers do not emphasize the importance of discussing the books that they read with children. Most

of them also stated that they intend to read to children only when the children ask to be read to, whereas the Norwegian student teachers disagree with this perspective. In the Norwegian national plan, the scheme for the Norwegian language course emphasizes student teachers' knowledge of the quality of books and book reading as an esthetic activity and critical exercise for language learning. Whether this difference is due to dissimilarities in the early literacy subjects offered by the teachers' educational programs or whether it is related to other circumstances is impossible to determine. It may be linked to conceptions regarding preschool teachers' roles: Swedish future preschool teachers may be more concerned with the purposes of book reading, whereas the Norwegians may be more inclined to focus on children's participation.

The emphasis on play and child autonomy as the most important avenues of learning in the Norwegian plan can encourage educators and students teachers to pay little attention to early literacy and to exercise excessive consideration for care, social competence, play, and participation. The Swedish plan for preschool teacher education emphasizes the importance of language learning, as well as the learning of concepts that are fundamental to mathematical knowledge, in early childhood. Nevertheless, the guidelines clearly express the importance of play and children's right to participate, play, and choose the activities in which they prefer to engage. Early literacy and numeracy are valued as essential knowledge for children to develop and are not emphasized at the cost of children's autonomy, play, and participation; this approach aligns with the recommendations from research (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2010).

The current study reveals the influence that national plans can exert on the competencies taught in preschool teacher education in different countries. Since the turn of the century, research on the importance of early literacy and language learning for all children has emerged, particularly for those who speak minority languages and those from homes with poor language support (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005; Melhuish, Phan, Sylva, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2008; Siraj-Blatchford, 2007, 2010). The national plan for Swedish preschool teacher education corresponds with the findings of the present research; Norway, however, is one of the few countries in Western Europe that substantially emphasizes care and participation (Vallberg Roth, 2014). The challenge for future preschool teacher education is to take into consideration relevant research on the importance of early childhood education in language learning and early literacy. Research highlights the importance of enabling children to develop linguistic knowledge and skills in the early years (Siraj-Blatchford 2007). An important requirement, therefore, is for student teachers to develop specific linguistic and communicative knowledge and competencies so that they can effectively structure children's early literacy learning. These are subject fields that can be thoroughly combined with care, play, and participation, as in the Swedish national plan for preschool teacher education and the preschool curriculum.

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