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Editors’ Preface

Dear readers and contributors,

Quality education for all is one of the United Nations’ sustainable goals formulated in the Agenda for 2030. Quality education also includes early childhood education. Even if attendance is not an obligatory, it contributes greatly to creating better, sustainable futures for all children and the communities and cultures they live in, and the global consequences of this are good. Participation in kindergartens or other early childhood education settings is important for children’s well-being, development, learning, and socialization. Being a part of a community that co-develops peaceful ways of living and playing together, regardless of background, ethnicity, nationality, religion, or socio-economic position is important for the world’s future, but it requires professional, competent, ethical teachers.

Educating kindergarten teachers is not always an issue that governments want to invest in or which academics decide to research, reflect on, and change. Norway, however, is one county that, in 2012, reformed kindergarten teacher education holistically in order to provide all children with better quality kindergartens. This reform reflects an understanding that kindergarten teachers’ knowledge, competences, and ethical attitudes are essential in improving the quality of institutional childcare.

Teachers’ professional qualifications will resonate in the processes they facilitate among children and undertake with them; it will be mirrored in the way they work with caregivers and cooperate with other kindergarten staff. In order to strengthen the kindergarten teacher professional exercise in these and other areas, the kindergarten teacher education reform conducted in 2012 transformed the educational program into an interdisciplinary one that is research-based, profession-oriented, and practice-related. This special edition of the Universal Journal of Education Research examines certain institutional practices that were introduced. The research project was developed by a research group at Western Norway University of Educational Sciences in cooperation with the World Organization for Early Childhood Education (OMEP), and it quickly became clear that the question of good kindergarten teacher education is important and relevant for many countries.

This special edition presents Norwegian kindergarten teacher education at a certain historical point a few years after the reform implemented in 2012. It discusses the Norwegian ambition of implementing and supporting a research-based, profession-oriented, and practice-related kindergarten teacher education program with regard to student experiences with it and academic teachers’ perspectives on student learning. The cultural-historical theoretical perspective is applied in the discussion of these issues. This indicates that we recognized individual experiences as anchored in conditions shaped by institutional practices and institutional practices that are anchored in society, culture, and the legal apparatus. This also means that any international comparison needs to take into consideration all of these levels, as is done in article two that presents Norwegian and Croatian student experiences of the different national kindergarten teacher education programs. We hope that this perspective and the research reported on in these articles will inspire various higher education institutions running kindergarten teacher education programs to reflect holistically and to implement improvements since, more than ever before, we all need competent, professional, ethical kindergarten teachers.

We would like to thank the journal editor, the entire journal team, and the authors for their contributions to this special edition and for believing in the importance of the kindergarten teacher profession for the world’s future.

Kind Regards,

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Why is the Norwegian Kindergarten Teacher Education Internationally Inspiring in this Historical Moment?

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Abstract The editors of this special issue invite all readers to have a look at Norwegian kindergarten teacher education a few years after a complex reform. In this special issue, kindergarten teacher education will be described at the level of the steering documents and curricula, institutional practices at certain university colleges, and the experiences of academic teachers and students. We believe that such complex insight into the very local practices of professional education provide a holistic understanding of professional education programs, and that, based on this, certain legal or institutional solutions could be inspiring to an international readership.

Keywords Kindergarten, Teacher Education, Norway, Reform, History

1. Introduction

With this special issue on kindergarten teacher education on, we aim to actualize kindergarten teacher education as a relevant voice in ongoing public debates in many countries, especially those which do not have a model of it established at the state level, and in academic discussions about pre-service teacher education. We find the Norwegian model inspiring for many nationalities because it is anchored in the child’s high status in society, which is reflected by the fact that professionals working with children aged 0–6 are recognized as teachers and have to earn qualifications at the bachelor degree level.

What is also interesting about the Norwegian model of kindergarten teacher education is that it is rooted in the Nordic cultural concept of the “good childhood.” Certain values connected to childhood and childcare define kindergarten teachers as those who safeguard this by facilitating a child-centered, holistic educational approach based on play, children’s institutional participation, and closeness to nature. The focus on the processes of play, care, and learning and not their outputs and the facilitation of children’s agency and participation within the institution are highlighted in OECD reports [1] as good practices to be followed internationally. Since kindergarten teachers are the ones who perform and safeguard these practices, we decided to focus this special issue on educating good, professional kindergarten teachers.

With this special issue, it is our intention to capture Norwegian kindergarten teacher education at a certain historical point after the reforms implemented in 2012. The main change introduced by them is the transition from subject-based to interdisciplinary education. The previous subjects of pedagogy, natural sciences, social sciences, and others were incorporated into interdisciplinary areas of knowledge that include children’s development play and learning arts; culture and creativity; nature, health, and movement; language, text, and mathematics; and leadership, cooperation, and organizational development. The intention behind this was to make kindergarten teacher education more relevant professionally and in practice to the complexity of the daily kindergarten world.

Pedagogy has become a subject that pervades all areas of knowledge while simultaneously being responsible for coherence and progression in kindergarten teacher education and for the professional and personal growth of students [2 : 10].

In the subsequent articles, we use the cultural-historical theoretical framework to try to capture the experiences and conceptualizations of practices aimed at students’ professional and personal development that is directly related to pedagogy and the interdisciplinary projects that this subject addresses. The research reported herein was conducted from an involved position. Even though we have attempted to distance ourselves from our roles as teachers by using the cultural-historical theoretical framework and systematic data analysis, it is important to mention that we, the contributors to this issue, are lecturers in pedagogy and social sciences in a program for kindergarten teacher education at Norwegian and Croatian universities.
2. The Cultural Historical Theoretical Approach

The theoretical approach that the papers in this special issue have in common is the cultural historical approach, particularly in its understandings developed by Marianne Hedegaard [3, 4] and Marylin Fleer [5]. The authors contextualize individual motivations and activities in the context of culture and society and in the contexts of various institutions that the individuals participate in.

“The state perspective,” which is also known as the “society perspective” [5], contains a context for society developed historically, in which the state apparatus, in the form of laws, statutory instruments, and the institutionalization of practices, provides frameworks for child and youth participation in activities. In the papers presented in this special issue, the level of culture and society refers to both cultural values and meanings connected to good childhood and good childcare and to steering documents regulating both early childhood education settings, or kindergartens, as well as kindergarten teacher education.

The institutional level refers in this paper to activity settings and the teaching and learning taking place during kindergarten teacher education, which, in both Norway and Croatia (that in one of the papers is functioning as a comparative landscape), happens on academic campuses and in-service kindergartens. This means that the professional formation of the students happens at the intersection of institutions representing different logics and the gathering of unlike participants, which is governed by different steering documents. What is significant for institutional practice is that through its formal and informal expectations it forms and develops individuals’ motivations and acts [4: 73].

This means that individuals gathered together in certain institutions may develop goals and motivations that are, to a certain degree, similar and collective. Individuals involved in kindergarten teacher education are academic teachers, in-service teachers, and, obviously, students. The papers in this special issues focus on individual experiences and reflect on creating better institutional conditions for individual learning development or work related to students’ learning and development.

The figure below presents the correlation between the levels of society, institution, and individual described above.

What is also important in this theoretical perspective is that institutions are developed under certain historical and social processes and under pressure from various groups so that values develop, change, or disappear from social life. Below we present a short overview over the history of the establishment of kindergartens and kindergarten teacher education in Norway.

![Figure 1](image_url)  
A model of children’s learning and development through participation in institutional practice. Source: [4].
3. A Historical View of Kindergartens and Kindergarten Teacher Education in Norway

The Norwegian kindergarten sector has developed from being a possibility for a few children to a universal right for all children. In Norwegian society today, kindergartens are regarded as important and good for children. This point of view represents various stakeholders involved in early childhood education and care: politicians, policy makers, parents, professionals and researchers, and most child-oriented and childcare organizations.

Historically, however, kindergartens were first perceived as a “necessary evil” for single mothers who could not provide for their children without working. This is why the first children’s asylums were opened, and they expanded during urbanization when families moved to the cities for jobs in the early twentieth century. Children had to be taken care of when mothers were working; otherwise they would have been left to fend for themselves. The first Norwegian children’s asylum, which was owned by a private foundation, was established in Trondheim in 1837; its mission was to care for poor, neglected children. The children were fed, their hygiene was looked after, and they were even given clothes when needed.

Fredrik Froebel and his viewpoint on children as participants in society inspired the Norwegian asylums. Froebel wanted children to grow up in a democratic society where the child was seen as a subject who was fit for play. The first Froebel kindergarten was established in 1883 and was staffed mostly by women since Froebel believed that women were engaged with children, and they had natural qualifications as mothers. Nevertheless, he also requested musical skills and a decent moral character [6]. The requirement for specific skills to take care of children inspired the establishment of the first educational institutions for kindergarten teachers. The Child Welfare Academy (Barnevernsakademiet) opened in Oslo, Norway in 1935. Its mission was to educate women in pedagogy for the betterment of children and society. Women needed a certificate from a college and some experience working in kindergartens or asylum practice to be accepted as students. More academies were established throughout the country, and this course of study became very popular. The first kindergarten teachers’ union was established in 1945. Kindergarten teachers wanted a common professional platform for their work, and they improved their professional standards through practical actions in quotidien kindergarten practice [7]. Thus, kindergarten teachers aimed to improve both their own working conditions and children’s rights to learn and play. The first Child Welfare Act [8] required that kindergarten teachers be educated in order to lead kindergarten work, which was a step toward a more professional kindergarten. As kindergartens became more popular among working mothers, kindergarten teachers and mothers fought together for improved kindergarten practices for children and for mothers’ rights to contribute to the family income and to participate in the society of work. The involvement of the welfare state in the expansion of kindergartens has been on the rise since 1975. There has also been increasing interest in the content and the goals of kindergartens. The Kindergarten Act introduced in 1975 [9] was the first legislation to regulate kindergartens, and it launched a new phase for Norwegian kindergartens. It regulated kindergarten content through a national curriculum, and there was a shift in perspective from care to a child’s right to play and learn. The development of kindergartens has paralleled development by the Norwegian state in creating good and equal possibilities for all children. The aim was to guarantee all children the right to attend kindergartens that afford them possibilities to play, learn, develop, and form a democratic society. Today all children aged 0–5 have the right to attend kindergarten [10] and over 95% of parents send their children to one. Most families report that the educational proposal for their children is good [11]. Although politicians have updated kindergarten acts over the years, kindergarten teachers and their unions have been active partners in discussions about kindergarten content and kindergartens as a field for play and learning. The new kindergarten education program [2] strengthens kindergarten teachers’ academic, professional, and practical knowledge and professional standards. To become a professional kindergarten teacher, one must have a bachelor degree in early childhood education from a Norwegian university. The professionalization of childcare and education has resulted in growing academic, research-based knowledge on kindergarten issues. Critical reflections and professionalism support kindergarten teachers in resisting political and public pressure. Although tertiary education institutions are working hard to improve quality in kindergartens, there are still some obstacles; one is the public belief that kindergarten work does not require academic knowledge and that caring and kindergarten work is similar to motherhood and family work [12]. However, politicians have listened to professional kindergarten teachers and researchers in the field. They agree that kindergarten must be a learning organization led by pedagogical leaders working in teams. These quality debates have led to the newest national framework plan for the content and tasks of kindergartens.
This framework plan describes the core values of kindergartens and the kindergarten teachers’ responsibility for meeting every child’s need for care, security, belongingness, and respect, and ensures that children can participate in and contribute to the community. Teachers and kindergarten staff promote democracy, diversity and mutual respect, equality, sustainable development, life skills, and good health. Fewer questions are asked about the need for educational knowledge to teach in kindergartens. There is increasing acceptance of kindergarten teachers as professionals. The job requires professional skills, and the status of kindergarten work in general and the status of the kindergarten teachers as professionals are increasing [13].

4. Overview over this Special Issue

This special issue presents kindergarten teacher education in a particular historical moment just a few years after the complex reforms of 2012. This issue begins by presenting, in article 1, a critical description of the Norwegian model of kindergarten teacher education. The article asks if the Norwegian model provides good conditions for student professional education by analyzing the model’s central ambitions that are to provide a) research-based, b) profession-oriented, and c) practice-related study course. The subsequent three articles focus on the either student or teachers- or both perspectives and experiences with the kindergarten teacher education program and the role of pedagogy in it (article 2), possible value conflicts between the campus and in-service kindergartens (article 3), and professional guiding (article 4), which refers to obligatory meetings with pedagogy teachers to assist students in succeeding in their studies [2: 12]. Article 2 focuses on Norwegian students’ perspectives in comparison with experiences of kindergarten teacher students in Croatia. Both groups focused on the particular role of pedagogy and the possibilities of developing theory-based competences to act. Article 3 focuses on students’ voices reporting on serious differences and value-related conflicts between in-service kindergartens and campus-based teaching, which, again establishes the link between theory and practice and the possibilities to develop crucial competences to act that are more challenging than national and institutional guidelines assume. Article 4 analyzes academic teacher and student experiences of professional guiding that took the form of an educational conversation at the researched institution. This direct, face-to-face meeting between the academic teacher and the student seemed to be of crucial importance for student professional and personal growth; nevertheless, it also created a series of ethical dilemmas.

Article 5 reconstructs student experiences with an interdisciplinary project aimed at developing professionals skills connected to parental cooperation within a heterogenic society. This chapter builds on the results presented in article 2, which show that the most important learning and developmental outcomes are obtained when students experience projects rooted in real life challenges that prompt them to articulate professional knowledge in new social settings. The research presented in article 5 provides deep insight into one of the interdisciplinary projects at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences entitled “The Difficult Conversation,” which, with the use of drama, focuses on discussing and practicing difficult and controversial parental meetings.

As several themes and skills are traditionally considered in Nordic countries as to be crucial in the kindergarten teacher profession, namely observation and play, the subsequent papers analyze its presence in the kindergarten teacher education programs. Article 6 examines the phenomenon of observation that is considered to be a professional skill of kindergarten teachers in Norway. This paper analyzes steering documents and curricula of kindergarten teacher education programs in Norway in order to reconstruct various approaches to the practice of observation presented to the students. Article 7 reconstructs the perspective of academic pedagogy teachers on ongoing institutional practices that aim to facilitate students’ learning about play and on the phenomenon of play in the context of the university campus. The concept of situated cognition allows the author to grasp the practical phenomenon of play as possible to learn in an academic, campus-based context.

The critical and empirical characters of the papers above aim to describe the Norwegian model of kindergarten teacher education in a reflective way that invites dialogical involvement and reflection on other kindergarten teacher education programs around the world.

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[2] Norwegian Ministry of Science and Education. Nasjonale


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