The ‘Nordic countries’ are often perceived as a homogeneous unit of geographically close and politically and economically stable countries that share social democratic values rooted in a shared history and culture. While this is not wrong, it ignores significant political, economic and geographical differences that make it misleading. This chapter discusses some of their qualities and how they relate to early literacy education. These countries’ policies and practices are then addressed, with a contrastive view on Norway and Finland. Finally, I will raise some concerns about future resources in the increasingly complex and multicultural learning communities of the Nordic preschools and schools.

The context of early literacy education in the Nordic countries

Geography, history and culture

Geographically, the Nordic countries constitute a Northern European and North Atlantic region consisting of five countries with 26 million inhabitants: Denmark (5.7 million), Finland (5.5 million), Iceland (325,700), Norway (5.1 million) and Sweden (9.6 million). In addition, there are three autonomous regions, the Åland Islands (28,700), associated with Finland, and the two Danish associates, the Faroe Islands (48,200) and Greenland (56,300) (Haagensen, 2014). Located between the Arctic and Atlantic Oceans, east of the Canadian Arctic Archipelago, Greenland is in the westernmost part of the Nordic region. In all of the northernmost parts of the Nordic region live the Sami population, an indigenous people who live in traditional settlement areas in northern Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. Though the majority lives in Norway, a precise population estimate is not available, as there is no official record of citizens with Sami identity.

These countries have much in common in terms of social structure and lifestyle, but governmentally and politically their only official inter-parliamentary body is the Nordic Council. Their differences in terms of systems of government, military alliances and foreign policy are quite profound. Norway, Denmark and Sweden are monarchies, while Iceland and Finland are republics. Denmark, Iceland and Norway are members of NATO, but Sweden and Finland are neutral. Finally, Finland, Sweden and Denmark are members of the EU; however, Iceland and Norway are members of the European Economic Area, but not the EU.
All of the Nordic countries are currently experiencing a period of population growth and complex demographic changes due to waves of immigration from Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Since 1990, the Nordic population has increased by more than three million (13 per cent), particularly in Iceland (28 per cent) and Norway (21 per cent) (Haagensen, 2014). In 2014, Norway and Denmark had the largest proportions of non-nationals, relatively speaking (11.1 per cent and 9.5 per cent, respectively), while Finland had the smallest (3.8 per cent). Sweden experienced the largest net population increase, with 115,845 new citizens. These trends have a clear impact on the Nordic educational systems.

Historically, two factors have impacted on Nordic identity and values, and more indirectly early literacy education. The first is related to the common linguistic heritage shared by Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and parts of Finland, and the second is socioeconomic in origin, often referred to as the ‘Nordic (Welfare) Model’ (Barth et al., 2014; Kvist et al., 2012).

The Nordic languages

The Nordic languages represent three language families: the North Germanic languages (Danish, Faroese, Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish), the Finnish–Sami branch of the Finno-Ugric languages (Finnish and the Sami languages in Finland, Norway and Sweden), and the Eskimo-Aleut languages (spoken in Greenland, related to languages spoken in northern Canada and Alaska). Nearly 80 per cent of the Nordic population speak Danish, Norwegian or Swedish, which are mutually intelligible; another 20 per cent speak Finnish (6 per cent of the Finnish population speaks Swedish as their mother tongue). There are also a number of minority languages in the region, such as Kven in Norway, Karelian in southern Finland, Romani, spoken by the Romani people in all of the countries, and Sign Language for deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals.

The Nordic scripts are alphabetic, but they vary considerably in sound–letter correspondence. Finnish is regular, with a transparent, almost perfect, match between the phonological and orthographic structures (Lyytinen et al., 2006). The Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish systems are semi-regular (Hagtvet et al., 2006; Pind, 2006), while Danish is irregular and non-transparent (Elbro, 2006). Also, the distinctiveness of phonological cues, such as their salience, strength or length, varies among the languages, and again it is Danish that has the least transparent and least distinct phonology. Bleses et al. (2011) showed that Danish children understand and use inflectional past-tense morphology later than Icelandic children, who learn a more distinct phonological structure. This difference is arguably due to phonetic differences in the strength and salience of the cues critical to past-tense suffix identification. By analogy, one would expect that these differences in orthographic and phonological transparency would make it harder to segment words’ phonemic structure, and hence to learn to read in Danish, though to my knowledge this hypothesis has not been systematically tested (but see Aro and Wimmer, 2003; Furnes and Samuelsson, 2010; Lundberg, 1999).

The Nordic model

The ‘Nordic (welfare) model’ refers to the economic and social platform to which all Nordic countries adhere. The model was conceived in the 1930s as a means of stabilizing the economy by combining a free-market economy with a welfare state funded collectively by high taxes. Welfare in the ‘Nordic model’ is not only about helping those in special need of help; it is built into citizens’ lives, with low-cost healthcare, free education from age six
through university, highly subsidized preschools, free library services, and so on. One main reason that the Nordic countries receive top rankings in international evaluations of the structural quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) (e.g. The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2012) may be the welfare model, which offers universal availability and subsidies to ensure access for underprivileged families and children in need.

Education is crucial to the sustainability of a model of society that depends on citizens’ contribution and collaboration to survive, and the Nordic countries share the same general view on educational issues, not only on macro issues, such as equal access to ECEC, but also on curricular issues, such as the importance of teaching the principles of democracy, social responsibility and critical awareness, which, some would argue, are often taught at the cost of ‘foundational skills’, such as literacy. However, within the context of the Nordic welfare model, early literacy education may itself be seen as a democratization project and a gateway to universal participation in education and the workforce.

Although both citizens and political parties vary in their dedication to some of the ideas of the Nordic welfare model, egalitarian values permeate many segments of society, including the educational system and family life – even the way parents communicate with their children. This was illustrated in a study comparing mealtime conversations in 22 Norwegian and 22 US homes (Aukrust and Snow, 1998). Among other things, the Norwegian families produced more narrative talk, in particular stories about deviations from social scripts, while the American parents more often explained events and individual behaviours to their children. More specifically, the Norwegian parents tended to invite their children to talk about events, while the American parents quite regularly taught their children facts about the world and about social skills. The authors argued that these differences reflected Norwegian values of collectivism, egalitarianism and implicit social rules, in contrast to values of individualism and diversity, and the more explicit transmission of civic values in the USA.

**A comprehensive education system**

The Nordic model of education is a comprehensive, inclusive system with modest streaming of pupils, relatively few private schools and limited use of special institutions for children with special needs. In general, the Nordic countries share common views on basic educational issues, and all have gone far in founding educational priorities in human rights ideas such as ‘inclusion’ and ‘equity’. An average government expenditure of 7.1 per cent of their GDP on educational institutions, from 6.2 per cent in Sweden to 8 per cent in Denmark, places the Nordic countries at the top among the OECD countries (OECD, 2014). When the welfare model was crafted some 80 years ago, the Nordic societies were ethnically homogeneous, and most children with special needs either got no education or were educated in state institutions of special education, often boarding schools. The inclusion of children with special needs and an increasing number of children with multicultural backgrounds in comprehensive educational systems is an educational, social, cultural and financial challenge. Although this has been carried out with much political and public support, it has also brought disagreements, and some special schools still exist. Also, with the possible exception of Finland (see below), the Nordic countries are challenged by some ugly facts regarding the power of the educational systems to reduce social differences. For example, children’s social background is still a predictor of academic outcome (Bakken and Elstad, 2012; Jobér, 2012), and language skills at three to four years predict later language skills (Klem et al., in press). This has led some to wonder why welfare states do not raise welfare(d) kids (Ringmose et al., 2014).
Early literacy education in the Nordic countries

‘Early literacy education’ is an ambiguous notion. It commonly covers from birth to eight years of age (e.g. Gjems and Sheridan, 2015), which is also the convention used here. Covering this rather large age span means that the issues surrounding ‘early literacy’ touch upon at least two educational systems and two sets of jurisdiction rooted in the different educational philosophies and ethos of preschool and school. Over the last decade, Nordic early literacy policy has been, and still is, an area of increasing attention and change. Moreover, knowledge about early literacy practices is limited. Systematic observational studies are scarce, and those that do exist are mainly small-scale qualitative studies from which generalizations must be drawn with great care. Knowledge about literacy practices is mainly based on teacher reports. As there is often a discrepancy between what people say they do and what they actually do, this methodological limitation should not be underestimated.

Historically, ‘early literacy education’ has been synonymous with ‘learning to read and write’. In all Nordic countries, formal introduction to the written language has been the responsibility of schools starting in a child’s seventh year. The purpose of preschools (day-care centres) was originally to offer care to children whose parents (often single mothers) worked outside the home. The idea that preschools served an educational purpose was introduced in the nineteenth century, mainly by a middle-class demand for increased focus on children’s learning. In the 1970s, Nordic women’s increasing participation in the labour force demanded the provision of both safe and high-quality childcare (Karila, 2012; Korsvold, 2011). However, this did not necessarily include ‘literacy’; on the contrary, teaching children to read and write was, and still is, the task of early schooling.

Early literacy education at school

In each Nordic country, the teachers’ mandate is regulated by a national curriculum common to all schools and with no prescription of teaching method. However, the level of detail regarding pupils’ learning goals varies across the countries, and both content and methods for teaching reading and writing vary across countries and classrooms. More generally, early schooling traditionally involves the systematic teaching of the alphabet, with an emphasis on a phonics instruction that integrates reading and writing of words and simple texts, in combination with an ABC book (Kristmundsson, 2007; Lundberg, 1999). The didactics of such teaching went through a period of controversies around 1980 to 1990, with disagreements between the proponents of ‘whole language’ and ‘phonics’ approaches, most predominantly in Sweden and Denmark (e.g. Frost, 1998; Hjälme, 1999). However, teachers in general continued to act independently and used ‘a mix of both’; that is, they chose approaches that ‘worked in practice’.

Informed by international research (e.g. Snow et al., 1998), the general trend today is to adhere to balanced methods, combining code-oriented (‘phonics’) and meaning-oriented (‘whole-language’) approaches (Frost, 2000). A ‘writing to reading’ approach may also be used (Hagtvet et al., 2012; Korsgaard et al., 2010; Trageton, 2003). On the whole, the teaching of reading and spelling in Nordic schools stands out as rather ‘instruction driven’ and ‘material driven’, but less so in Finland, where it is more teacher driven (Linnakylä et al., 1997).

Early literacy education at preschool

As a competence area, ‘early literacy’ is less focused in Nordic preschools than in schools. This is only natural, given its central position in schools and the rather strict division of labour...
between preschools and schools. Also, adhering to an ethos of holistic, child-centred, play-oriented and experiential approaches, and with a content focus on oral language, social and motor skills (Bennett, 2010; Einarsdottir and Wagner, 2006; OECD, 2006), many Nordic preschool teachers probably feel that the ‘early literacy’ they know of is rather alien to them (Broström et al., 2010; Einarsdottir, 2006). However, inter-country variations are noticeable; for example, the importance of actively encouraging children’s early literacy is emphasized in Swedish guidelines for teacher training, but is barely mentioned in the Norwegian guidelines (Gjems and Sheridan, 2015); the Swedish plans also accentuate topics like ‘teaching’, ‘learning’ and ‘knowledge’ more than ‘play’ and ‘care’, while the latter are more highlighted in the plans of the other countries (Roth, 2014).

The idea that literacy practices may be carried out holistically in play, and that writing and reading skills may be acquired through guided, yet child-driven explorations, has traditionally received limited attention in the Nordic national guidelines for ECEC. However, more recent policy documents indicate that this situation is changing (e.g. the ongoing reform of the Finnish National Curriculum Framework (Explanations for the Core Curriculum, 2014; Sahlberg, 2015: Meld.St.19, 2015–2016 (Norway)). Three factors appear to drive this process: societal changes, new research-based knowledge about the importance of early education and international and national education policies. I will argue that these factors contribute to a growing awareness among preschool teachers and their educators of the relevance of ‘early literacy’ to ECEC.

**Early literacy education in a process of change**

*Societal changes* are presumably decisively affecting the ongoing change. Today’s young Nordic mothers and fathers often work full-time once their child has turned one, which implies a great demand for ECEC. This need is reinforced by the rapidly growing multicultural population, who are encouraged by the national authorities to send their young children to ECEC to learn the language and be included in their new culture. In all of the Nordic countries, ECEC is increasingly seen as an active tool for integrating minority groups, supporting social mobility and preventing difficulties for children from less fortunate backgrounds. Therefore, affordable ECEC is offered to all children from the age of one year, and children from families with a multicultural background or who are in special need of care for other reasons are often offered subsidized education; if necessary, ECEC is offered free of charge (OECD, 2015). In all Nordic countries but Finland, more than 97 per cent of children between the ages of three and five were in ECEC services in 2011 (76 per cent in Finland); a reduced average of 50 per cent of one- to two-year-olds also attended (from 30 per cent in Finland to 70 per cent in Norway) (Eurydice, 2014). The participation of one-year-olds in ECEC provision has increased since 2011. ECEC provision, in other words, has replaced parents in the daily care of their children in significant ways. Therefore, it plays a vital role in supporting each child’s development and potentially also in contributing to the reduction of social differences, including differences in access to literacy.

The second proposed driver of this process of change, *research-based knowledge about the importance of the early education*, has considerably influenced policy-makers and thereby national investments in ECEC. Findings have included, for example, the young developing brain’s advanced ability to learn new words and new languages (Hart and Risley, 1995), the young child’s great receptivity to word stimulation (Borgström et al., 2015), high-quality preschools’ positive long-term effects on academic achievement (Barnett and Nores, 2015; Chambers et al., 2015; Gorey, 2001; Jensen et al., 2011; Pianta et al., 2009; Sylva et al., 2010) and the
encouraging results of early intensive intervention for children with language and cognitive delays (Camilli et al., 2010; Ramey and Ramey, 2006).

Another line of influential research concerns studies of early literacy itself. Reading and writing skills are rooted in early oral and script-related ‘precursor skills’ that develop during the preschool years. An increased awareness of the importance of these ‘emergent literacy skills’ (Clay, 1995; Storch and Whitehurst, 2002; Sulzby, 1986; Whitehurst and Lonigan, 1998) has contributed to an expansion of ‘literacy’ as a phenomenon and construct. As an expanded notion, ‘literacy’ includes the comprehension and use of the language of books, for example decontextualized language, extended discourse, identification of rhymes and phonemes, recognition of letters and logos, pretend reading and invented/explorative writing. A further expansion of the literacy concept is implied in terms like ‘multi-literacies’ and ‘digital literacy’, referring to the combined texts, pictures and signs presented on digital screens. The digital revolution, which in less than two decades has changed the infrastructure of society, the way we communicate and even our notion of literacy itself, is thus another aspect of the ongoing societal changes, with potentially huge impacts on early literacy education. (For Nordic studies of emergent literacy skills, see, among others: Arnqvist, 2014; Aukrust, 2001; Dahlgren et al., 2013; Fast, 2007; Hagtvet, 1988; Heilä Ylikallio, 1994; Hoßlundsengen et al., 2016; Jensen et al., 2010; Kjertmann, 2002; Korsgaard et al., 2010; Liberg, 2006; Lundberg et al., 1988; Magnusson and Pramling, 2011; Sheridan and Pramling Samuelsson, 2003; Skantz Åberg et al., 2015; Söderbergh, 2011; Svensson, 1998/2009.)

This process of reconceptualizing ‘early literacy’ by emphasizing its preschool emergent qualities and digital references may contribute to an increased appropriation of ‘early literacy’ among preschool teachers as a knowledge area of great relevance to their practice. The third driver of changes in early literacy education concerns an active international and national educational policy guiding the preschool sector towards increased structure and process quality in ECEC. The ongoing move towards multicultural and increasingly inclusive practices has been monitored by policy documents promoting ideas such as tolerance of individual differences, social responsibility and empathy from an early age (e.g. OECD, 2006, 2015). ECEC has become a political focus and a ‘human rights’ issue. The purpose of ‘education and care’ (educare) in preschool is not, first and foremost, to prepare children for school or to provide care, but to educate the young child ‘in its own right’, cognitively, socially, emotionally, linguistically – and literacy-wise.

The transition from preschool to school

A much-debated issue is the bridge between preschool and school. Reconciling preschools’ conception of ‘emergent literacy’ as a developmental process with the curricular goals of schooling in ways that are not alien to either tradition is a vital challenge (Sandvik et al., 2014). Over the last 20 years, all Nordic countries have taken steps to link preschool to school via a transitional year with more academic content during children’s sixth year (Broström et al., 2010). The most radical actions have been taken in Norway and Iceland, where school-entry age has been lowered from seven to six years, although it is still referred to as ‘play school’ in Iceland. In Denmark, Sweden and Finland, the transitional year has retained its preschool status, but its name has changed to ‘school year zero’ (Denmark), ‘preschool class’ (Sweden) and ‘pre-primary education’ (Finland). Below I discuss some of the intercountry differences in policies and practices of early literacy by comparing specific solutions chosen in Finland and Norway.
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Nordic policies and practices as reflected in a comparison between Finland and Norway

Being similar in basic values and approaches to education, but different in many practical solutions, Finland and Norway constitute an interesting comparative case. They are similar in socioeconomic platform, population size, expenditure on education (Finland: 6.5 per cent; Norway: 7.4 per cent of GDP in 2011) (OECD, 2014) and pupils with special education needs (7 per cent of the total school population in both countries, Eurydice, 2014) and an estimated 5 per cent of the children in ECEC. They also have similar orthographies (Norway: semi-regular; Finland: regular) and basic educational priorities (both have received top rankings in international evaluations of the structural quality of ECEC provisions (Finland: 1; Norway: 3) (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2012). However, in terms of pupil outcome, there are conspicuous differences in favour of Finnish pupils, who for over 20 years have topped the lists of international comparative studies, such as PISA, in all academic areas, including reading. Norwegian pupils have typically scored below, or around, the OECD average.

The reduction to two Nordic countries in comparison allows for more in-depth analyses in attempting to identify potential early literacy-related causal factors in the observed differences in reading level outcomes. The Finnish system is discussed in greater detail than the Norwegian because it is often seen as an educational success story – a miracle (Simola, 2005). It should be noted that the comparison is complicated by ongoing changes in the core curricula involving early literacy in both countries.

The case of Norway

Some national characteristics

Like other Nordic countries, Norway is highly industrialized. Women are a natural part of the labour market, and young families’ dependence on ECEC services is considerable. Over the past decade, a politically driven expansion of ECEC provisions has covered the need for such services, and few, if any, countries allocate more resources to ECEC services than Norway (OECD, 2006). However, the scarcity of educated employees in the sector is a problem, and the general public feels that ECEC services’ quality varies considerably (Meld. St.19, 2015–2016).

With the lowering of the school entrance age to six years in 1997, ten years of mandatory schooling was introduced (School Reform 97, 1997–1998). One important aim of the extra year was to facilitate children’s transition to school by focusing on the learning areas of school, such as literacy, in the new Grade 1, via the child-centred, holistic and play-oriented didactics of preschool, and with no outcome goals for literacy skills prescribed until Grade 2. In 2006, a second reform, intended to strengthen children’s basic skills, was introduced (School Reform 06, 2006–2008). Reading and writing instruction was now to begin in Grade 1, still without specific outcome goals until Grade 2. The principal national ‘control mechanism’ of reading and spelling instruction quality was – and still is – an external national test at the end of Grade 1 assessing alphabet knowledge, word reading and word spelling. One would suspect that this could have a washback effect on the teaching of literacy in Grade 1, but to my knowledge this has not been systematically evaluated.
Legislation and staffing of ECEC

The Ministry of Education is responsible for ECEC services, but their organization and quality assurance is largely decentralised. State regulations tend to be normative rather than absolute; for example, the staff–child ratio is normed to at least one trained adult for every seven to nine children under three years, and one for every 14–18 children above age three. Teachers should have at least three-year tertiary-level university college training, but due to the current shortage of qualified preschool teachers, about two-thirds of the workforce in ECEC provisions are assistants without sufficient qualifications (Statistics Norway, 2014). This lack of a formal qualification requirement for the many assistants in daily direct contact with children is seen as a serious threat to the quality of the Norwegian ECEC services (NOKUT, 2010; Meld.St.19, 2015–2016). Another concern is the shortage of qualified students applying for ECEC training; thus, all students with pre-qualifications above a normed minimum level are accepted (NOKUT, 2010). Nonetheless, approximately 90 per cent of educational leaders were trained preschool teachers in 2014, which is an improvement (Statistics Norway, 2015). The situation is less dramatic for school teachers, yet similar in terms of recruitment.

Educational goals and curriculum content for ECEC

The national curriculum plan (The Framework Plan, 2006) covers all ECEC age groups (1–5 years). It builds on a holistic pedagogical philosophy, with play and experiential learning as core didactic components. Seven ‘learning areas’ mirroring those pursued in school constitute the plan’s key content components. One of these, ‘communication, language and text’, includes ‘literacy’, but topics such as ‘digital literacy’, ‘emergent literacy’ or ‘links between oral and written language skills’ are hardly mentioned. Given the open-endedness of this guidance, its implementation depends largely on individual teachers’ initiative. The plan is under revision, and there are indications in existing process documents that ‘early literacy’ is an area undergoing change (Meld.St.19, 2015–2016).

Children in need of special services

Children who do not benefit from the ordinary educational programme (approximately 5 per cent) have the right to special needs support if their needs can be documented by relevant experts, most often the Municipal Pedagogical and Psychological Counselling Service (the PP-service), on referral by teachers or the local health nurse (who sees all children regularly). In addition, in 2015, another 15 per cent had a minority ethnic background and used Norwegian as a second language (versus 5 per cent in 2005) (Statistics Norway, 2015).

With ECEC being seen as preventive child welfare, day care may be fully funded for children considered at risk (OECD, 2006); also, centres that accept many migrant children may receive additional personnel and/or financial support. The PP-service is the expert and advisory authority in most of these matters and may, if needs be, refer a child further to special education resource centres that can help support the preschool or school. The referral processes vary somewhat across municipalities, and the impression created in the media and among parents is that the time from referral to when a child receives help is too often too long.

Teacher training

The Norwegian national guidelines for early childhood teacher education (2012) focus on six content areas, one of which is ‘language, text and mathematics’, covering topics such as
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‘knowledge about children’s monolingual, multilingual and written language development’ and ‘the use of play in encouraging children’s language learning’. These guidelines are implemented rather differently at the approximately 30 colleges training preschool teachers; therefore, both content and quality of training vary considerably (Meld.St.19, 2015–2016). Topics such as ‘encouraging the children’s emergent literacy’ or ‘prevention of reading problems’ are not mentioned in the curricula of a fair number of colleges. The training of school teachers also varies across colleges, but the ‘teaching of reading and writing’ is in all cases highly prioritized.

The case of Finland

Some national characteristics

Finnish children start their nine years of compulsory education at the age of seven, preceded by a pre-primary compulsory programme from age six – either a half-day programme, free, as part of a full day of care, or at schools, organized by the schools. Before this age, municipal or private day-care institutions are available to all children from one year of age, with income-based financial assistance from the state.

The educational system is highly regarded by the Finnish public. This includes the ECEC services, which stand out in quality (Lindeboom and Buiskool, 2013). Literacy itself is likewise highly valued; most Finnish families read newspapers daily and are regular library users (Ahtola and Niemi, 2014; Korkeamäki and Dreher, 2011). Reading, therefore, naturally becomes a part of children’s habitus; this is reinforced in schools, where pupils are not only encouraged to take a book home every day to read, but also taught how to read, such as strategies for word decoding and reading comprehension (Linnakylä et al., 1997).

Legislation and staffing of ECEC

The Ministry of Education is responsible for the total age group (nought to eight years), and the national legislation sets clear requirements regarding local services, such as the universal right to access, staff qualifications, staff–child ratios, curriculum guidelines and parental involvement in programmes. Yet in terms of regulation and power distribution, ECEC is a strongly decentralized system. Steered by some rather broad common national standards, the municipal authorities organize preschool, pre-primary and primary school education according to local needs. The level of detail at the local level varies across municipalities, but all services must submit a detailed curriculum plan with proposed goals to the municipal authority. These plans are used as an evaluation framework for the annual municipal inspection.

Parental involvement plays a crucial role in ensuring that quality preschool education is adapted to each child’s needs, specifically in the development of an annual learning plan, which guides each child’s learning progress. National initiatives to increase parental involvement are strictly implemented. In the past, for example, there was an initiative to strengthen the staff’s ability to support parents and parenthood through ‘educational partnerships’. Nevertheless, considerable local variation exists in parents’ involvement in curricular activities (Lindeboom and Buiskool, 2013).

The staff–child ratios are presumably the best in the world, with one trained adult to four children under age three, and one to every seven above age three. The staff at Finnish ECEC centres are multidisciplinary and consist of the heads of centres and preschool teachers with
a bachelor’s or master’s degree, children’s nurses (with three years of secondary vocational training) and appropriately trained assistants. At least one-third of the staff must have a bachelor’s degree or higher, and the rest upper secondary-level training. School teachers, including primary school, must have a master’s degree.

**Educational goals and curriculum content for ECEC**

Educational activities in Finnish ECEC centres are guided by broad national ‘goals for the child to reach’, such as ‘promotion of personal well-being’, ‘critical awareness’ and ‘social responsibility’ (National Curriculum Guidelines on ECEC, 2004). Adult–child and child–child interaction is seen as essential; it strengthens children’s self-esteem, stimulates their curiosity and promotes their language development and potential for learning. Content-wise, the vital role of language in children’s development is highlighted, as is also the notion that preschool education should form a foundation for learning to read and write through, for example, literature, fairy tales and phonological awareness activities. The implementation of these regulations in practical activities is, however, entirely up to the teacher.

Pre-primary education should function as a bridge between preschool and school (National Core Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education, 2010). It comprises a set of ‘subject areas’, among which ‘language and interaction’ includes ‘early literacy’. Teachers should initiate and support children’s interest in observing, exploring and playing with spoken and written language via, for example, rhyming, phonological games, music and drama. The Explanations of the core curriculum (2014) further specify teachers’ responsibilities. For example, children with a multicultural background should both receive qualified support in learning Finnish as a second language and experience their mother tongue as valuable and important. Also, children’s emergent literacy should be supported through, for instance, play-oriented writing with digital tools. A recently highlighted knowledge area is ‘multi-literacy’; that is skills for interpreting and producing verbal, visual, numerical and other messages. Digital competence is likewise seen as important. Taken together, a prominent quality of the Finnish curricula for ECEC and pre-primary education is their apparent rootedness in updated research on the development of early literacy.

As implied above, ‘output targets’, or goals of achievement, do not exist at this level. Nor does any external national assessment of individual children’s performance. However, formative evaluations of children’s progress relative to their individual learning plans are to be carried out regularly by the teachers (Lindeboom and Buiskool, 2013).

**Children in need of special services**

Within the Finnish ECEC system, children with special needs have the right to relevant special services. Special education is generally highly prioritized in teacher training education, and special education teachers are seen as valuable resources at schools and ECEC centres (Hausstätter and Takala, 2008).

Children with a multicultural and multilingual background receive support in developing Finnish as a second language; some are also supported in developing their first language. The national core curricula for basic education (2010) introduced a new plan for organizing educational support for children in need of extra attention following ‘the prevention before cure principle’. Three levels of support are offered: general support (low-threshold support integrated into everyday learning), intensified support and special support. Intensified
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and special support are based on systematic assessments and planning in multi-professional teams and follow an individual learning and support plan.

A core element in the Finnish educational system is its built-in focus on pupil welfare, involving teams of special needs educators, school nurses, school social workers, school psychologists and school doctors (Ahtola and Niemi, 2013). The team, which meets regularly with relevant local staff members, is meant to initiate interventions at the individual, family and/or ECEC centre/classroom/school level.

According to Ahtola and Niemi (2013), the quality and organization of special education services largely explain why Finnish pupils with the lowest 20 per cent of scores on international literacy tests (e.g. PISA) strikingly outperform the corresponding subgroup in other countries. It might also explain the consistently small between-school variance. Ahtola and Niemi (2013) argue that the Finnish educational system appears to have an equalizing effect that begins in preschool and the early years of schooling. On this backdrop of academic success, it seems paradoxical that the psychological wellbeing of Finnish school children is a concern (Ahtola and Niemi, 2013). However, Finnish youngsters show more restless behaviour in class than pupils in comparable OECD countries and, when asked, they are more likely to state that they do not enjoy school (OECD, 2011). One possible interpretation of these findings is that the strong investment in the early years of schooling in Finland has not been followed up at the more advanced levels.

Teacher training

The teacher profession is an attractive career path for young people; only 10 per cent of applicants are admitted to teacher education for school teachers; for preschool teachers, it is 20 per cent (OECD, 2011; Sahlberg, 2010). Admission to teacher education is challenging, including an entrance exam with a written examination, an aptitude test and, finally, interviews. Teacher training programmes at universities or polytechnics are research based, with a strong focus on core topics of pedagogy, special needs education and didactics, as well as professionally oriented topics such as ‘children’s literature’, ‘music’ and ‘science’. ‘Language and communication’ plays a particularly dominant role. With the Finnish teacher seen as a key to quality, practising teachers have a high degree of autonomy, and no inspectorate agency checks teaching standards. Teachers’ professional development is prioritized, and in-service training for educational personnel is funded (Eurydice, 2014).

Two similar Nordic educational systems with significant differences

This comparison of early literacy education in Norway and Finland aimed to elucidate some of the factors that may contribute to the advanced literacy skills of Finnish pupils, with a particular focus on early literacy education. Four factors have emerged as crucially important in understanding Finnish success: the control mechanisms built into the state–municipality relationship, staff quality, the content of the early literacy education services and the availability of expertise resources.

The control mechanisms of the state–municipality relationship are subtly different in the two countries, although the similarities at the system level are many. In terms of similarities, the educational systems for children from birth through age eight are organized under one ministry in both countries, with binding general national guidelines alongside decentralized curricula and service regulation and organization. However, the Finnish national requirements for local services seem more clearly formulated, and the control mechanisms seem
For example, Finnish municipal authorities have a clear mandate to follow up ("inspect") on the extent to which the goals formulated in a centre’s curriculum plans have been reached. Norwegian municipalities have the same decentralized responsibility, but the follow-up appears less systematic, resulting in considerable variation across municipalities. Furthermore, the Finnish national requirements are specifically directed at key quality markers of ECEC, such as those used, for example, by the OECD and The Economist Intelligence Unit (2012): specific teacher–child ratios, staff qualifications and parental involvement in programmes. Equivalent requirements are more loosely formulated in Norwegian legislation. In summary, the Finnish control mechanisms appear more specific in kind, more precise in requirements and more strongly and systematically enforced.

The second factor, staff quality, is the area in which Norwegian and Finnish priorities and solutions are most noticeably different. While many Norwegian (preschool) teachers are highly qualified and motivated for their job, the Finnish are typically highly skilled and dedicated (Sahlberg, 2010). This has resulted in a general and noteworthy respect for Finnish teachers – among pupils, parents, politicians and bureaucrats. That neither politicians nor bureaucrats call for external evaluations of student outcomes, but instead prefer internal, teacher-driven formative evaluations, is a testimony to the Finnish trust in their teachers. It seems that this trust has replaced the accountability system that Norway and many other nations adhere to. Both politicians and bureaucrats have a share in this priority. The Finnish early literacy education benefits, for instance, from a solid teacher training education at the master’s level (bachelor’s level for preschools) and a research-based national core curriculum loyally implemented at the local level. Satisfying working conditions for teachers, with easy access to expertise, such as special education teachers, are also beneficial. Conversely, Norwegian teacher and preschool teacher training education is at the bachelor’s level, and local curricula are rather diverse, while areas of great pedagogical importance (‘core areas’) may be missing or granted little attention. Local resource team availability may also be limited. A corollary of this is that Norwegian teachers’ skills, knowledge and professional capacity tend to vary with training institution, local access to resource teams, in-service training and mentoring (Hausstätter and Takala, 2008; NOKUT, 2010). The relatively high percentage of unqualified assistants working in Norwegian ECEC services adds to these challenges.

In spite of a basic similarity in holistic and play-oriented didactic approaches in Finnish and Norwegian ECEC, the content of early literacy education, the third explanatory factor, varies noticeably. Finnish curricula for both ECEC and the pre-primary year highlight the early literacy skills that are foundational to reading and writing skills, and with a gradual and individually based increase in focus on letters and writing- and reading-related activities as the children get older. The Norwegian ECEC curriculum (The Framework Plan, 2006, currently under revision) also accentuates the importance of oral language skills, and to some extent also emergent literacy skills such as phonological language games, whereas script-related emergent literacy skills are mentioned only superficially. With the lowering of the school entrance age to six years, the stimulation of reading and writing skills in this age group has increased. Today most children are taught how to read and write. With a dearth of observation studies, knowledge about how children are taught is limited, but a qualified hypothesis is that the didactic approach is highly influenced by traditional basic reading and writing skills pedagogy as taught in the first grade of school (when the children were a year older). This gap in emphases and demands between the Norwegian ECEC and the new grade one may be challenging for some children. In the worst case, it may be an obstacle to positive literacy development. Such an abrupt transition from ECEC to school is not research based.
In sum, the Finnish curricula for ‘early literacy’ appear to be better founded in updated research than the Norwegian curricula; also preschool and school appear better bridged. This difference was highlighted by Afdal (2014) in a comparative study of the development of education policies and curricula in Norway and Finland. A main finding was that researchers and educators played a more active role in developing the curricula in Finland; in Norway, the important decisions seemed driven by ideology and politics.

The fourth and final factor presumably contributing to the Finnish success is the availability of expertise resources. Immediate access to expertise is crucial when a pupil’s need for support exceeds the teacher’s competence and professional insights. Recently, such expertise has become less available in many Norwegian municipalities. In Finland, it is easily available; ‘the prevention before cure principle’ is not an empty slogan, but an inherent part of the Finnish schools and work ethos (Ahtola and Niemi, 2014). The relatively high functioning of the pupils at the lower tail of the distribution of, for example, the PISA results (Ahtola and Niemi, 2014) indicates that particularly ‘pupils at risk’ profit from these resources.

Analysts of the systematically positive Finnish educational results underscore that they cannot be attributed to one factor alone; it is the totality of factors in combination that constitute the Finnish educational system (Simola, 2005). Other factors than those examined here, such as those related to national historical experiences and cultural traditions (Simola, 2005), may also play a role. However, those mentioned here are the ones that may be handled instrumentally at various institutional levels.

**Future directions and challenges**

A number of serious challenges face the Nordic countries as we approach the 2020s – challenges in the content, didactics and organization of early literacy education. The first concerns the extensive immigration to the Nordic countries. The inclusion of many new citizens demands a multicultural mindset that many Nordic preschool and school teachers are unfamiliar with. It may also challenge the Nordic model itself, with its associated premises of rights and duties, and the public acceptance of belonging to an egalitarian democratic society where basic values are shared. The Nordic educational systems will have to play a key role in passing on to all of their children not only the Nordic languages, but also the values and the duties associated with the Nordic model.

A second challenge concerns the needs of young children to be guided toward digital competency in age-appropriate ways, to take the best of the potentialities of the current digital revolution. Not only is this a demanding educational project for which teachers must be trained alongside the children, it is above all a project of democratization, where access to digital literacy is a tool to participation in the Nordic societies.

The third challenge follows from the other two and has to do with staff training: the success of future early literacy education will depend on the quality of teachers and other professional groups. Offering qualified early literacy education to all children within a complex inclusive system will only succeed if schools and preschools are well organized and teachers are well trained, highly dedicated and in regular collaboration with relevant and easily available expertise resources. Finland is an important reminder that this is not impossible.

**References**


