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# Stakeholders' opinions of quality in Norwegian kindergartens

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## Abstract

The theme for this article is parents' and centre leaders' opinions regarding what makes a good kindergarten. Both stakeholder groups agree on statements expressing child-centred values as indicators of a good kindergarten. However, their opinions differ regarding children's learning and work with letters and numbers; more parents than centre leaders respond that learning, literacy and mathematics are hallmarks of a good kindergarten. Parents with short education find these characteristics most important. The traditional Nordic kindergarten-concept is still strong among parents, but their opinions of learning vary. Therefore, perspectives on learning should be highlighted in dialogues between parents and staff.

Keywords: *parents, centre leaders, child-centred values, learning, quality*

## Introduction

The traditional social pedagogical approach seems to dominate in Norwegian kindergartens<sup>i</sup>. However, increased political focus on increasing quality and strengthening kindergarten as a learning-area may change parents' and professionals' expectations. The aim of this paper<sup>ii</sup> is to explore parents' and centre leaders' opinions regarding quality in kindergarten, and discuss how their opinions may influence the collaboration between parents and staff. Parents of children attending Norwegian kindergartens have strong legal rights to collaborate. These rights are stipulated in several paragraphs of the Kindergarten Act (2005) and consolidated in §1: 'The Kindergarten shall, in collaboration and close understanding with the home,

safeguard children's need for care and play, and promote learning and formation as a basis for an all round development' (p. 1). The Kindergarten Act (2005) and the Framework Plan for Kindergartens (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017) encourage a participatory approach to the content of kindergarten and inclusion of parents' voices. According to Goodall (2013, p.133) "It is widely accepted that parents' involvement in their children's education and learning is of the foremost importance". In times when there is an increased focus on the quality of learning and kindergarten, parents' voices are important when improving quality in kindergarten. The Ministry of Education and Research (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2008, p.6) also stated that mutual trust and good cooperation between the kindergarten staff and children's families is fundamental for a high quality kindergarten. Important values that should be reflected in kindergarten include '[m]eeting every child's need for care, security, belongingness and respect and enabling the children to participate in and contribute to the community' (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017, p. 7).

From January 2006, the Ministry of Education and Research, rather than the Norwegian Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, became responsible for kindergartens. Kindergarten became the first part of the educational system, and in the same year, kindergarten received a new framework plan and primary schools got a new curriculum. The school curriculum was called 'Kunnskapsløftet', which has a double meaning; Knowledge-lift and Knowledge-promise. Øksnes (2010) claimed that the framework plan for kindergarten could be regarded as a little 'Knowledge-lift or -promise' for the youngest children and placed increased focus on learning and the learning benefits of play. An evaluation of the implementation of this framework plan (Østrem, Bjar, Føsker, Rønning & Tholin, 2009) described a shift towards stronger emphasis on children's learning and measurable skills. However, parents' expectations for kindergarten were mostly the same as found in earlier studies; parents were still most concerned about children's play, friendship and care.

Several previous studies (Barne- og familiedepartementet, 2005; Østrem et al., 2009; Søbstad, 2002, 2004; Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2017) show that, for a long time, parents have been mostly satisfied with the services provided by kindergarten, and that they find children's social environment, care, play, happiness, humour and outdoor life, most important. However, little research has been conducted with parents to determine their opinions regarding what makes a good kindergarten and how they are able to collaborate and participate in achieving high kindergarten quality. Borg, Kristiansen and Backe-Hansen (2008) reported existing

research and knowledge in kindergarten and noted the lack of research related to quality and parents' participation. They only found one survey study (Rognan 2004) reported that parents with a low level of education felt more powerless regarding participation in kindergarten than parents with a high level of education. This could relate to Stefansen and Skogen's (2010) finding that Kindergarten pedagogy mirrored middle-class parents' values related to childrearing. There are few studies of parents' views of quality, and their positions and collaboration with kindergarten staff. This article compares and discusses parents' and centre leaders'<sup>iii</sup> opinions regarding quality and what makes a good kindergarten, using extensive data from two surveys, conducted with 1047 parents and 84 leaders, in 84 kindergartens.

#### Policy documents, earlier national and international studies

In 1990, only 36% of all children aged 0 – 6, in Norway were enrolled in kindergarten (Gulbrandsen, 2016). In 2000, there was still a huge gap between available kindergarten places and the number of parents who had applied for a place. It was not until 2006, after a period of increased public and private efforts to establish more kindergartens, that it seemed possible to meet parents' demand (Ellingsæter & Gulbrandsen, 2007). Since August 2009, parents have had a legal right to have a place for their children in kindergarten if their child was one year old during August of the year they applied<sup>iv</sup>. As many as 75% of one-year-olds with the right to a kindergarten-place, and 50% of children born after August, attend kindergarten (Gulbrandsen, in press). By the end of 2017, in total, 91.3 % of the children in Norway between one and five years of age attended kindergarten (Statistisk Sentralbyrå, 2018).

In connection with the Norwegian political initiative<sup>v</sup> to provide enough kindergarten-places before 2000, parents' opinions were investigated to detect *if* and *how* kindergartens were adjusted to parents' needs. Extensive studies (e.g. Mordal, 1997) were conducted with parents as well as with children and kindergarten-staff. The report (Bjørngaard & Mordal 1998) concluded that parents are mostly satisfied with kindergarten. However, the researchers pointed out that *dialogue* between parents and staff is important, as surveys risk not noticing issues that are significant for parents.

Political initiatives (Barne- og familiedepartementet, 1999-2000) paid increasing attention to kindergarten quality. One project, 'The Norwegian kindergarten quality' (Søbstad, 2004) showed that parents were very satisfied with their children's kindergarten. For these parents, the most important characteristics of kindergarten were information about their child's well-

being, playing, aesthetic activities and learning social competence. However, parents' knowledge and insight about the pedagogical work varied.

Gulbrandsen and Sundnes (2004) investigated how kindergartens worked to increase quality and found that daily exchange of information between parents and staff was less formalised in written policies and that neither children nor parents participated in planning and evaluation processes. In 2004, an expert group<sup>vi</sup> was tasked with investigating and suggesting how to improve and secure quality in kindergarten. Quality was described as a dynamic and relevant concept that depended on personal views, contextual and cultural characteristics and different understandings and values of children and early childhood. In addition, the Barne- og familiedepartementet (2005) stated that '... defining the good kindergarten is a political and continuing process' (p. 4) and that it is important to enable all stakeholders to participate. Gulbrandsen and Eliassen (2013) investigated structural aspects of quality from centre leaders' points of view, finding that the processes for involving parents had improved since 2004. In addition, pedagogical work related to learning and linguistic competence had increased to some degree, but the authors concluded that the values associated with traditional Norwegian kindergarten remained consistent.

In 2015, one survey (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2016) found that parents wanted better daily dialogue with staff and more knowledge about their children's daily experiences in kindergarten. One year later, results from a similar survey (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2017) showed that parents were satisfied with kindergarten, especially regarding children's well-being and relations between children and staff. However, parents were less satisfied with the information from the staff. The Agency of Public Management and eGovernment, Difi,<sup>vii</sup> has investigated users' satisfaction with different public services. Their latest study (Difi, 2018) found that parents were very satisfied with the services provided by kindergarten and believed that staff met their children's needs in a caring and respectful way. Parents were more satisfied with the information exchanged in encounters with the staff and only partly satisfied with the digital service and information. They were less satisfied with the ability to complain about issues relating to kindergarten.

Conducted in nine European countries, the Curriculum and Quality Analysis and Impact Review of European Early Childhood Education and Care (CARE) Stakeholder study<sup>viii</sup> found that parents emphasised children's 'soft' social, emotional and personal skills over 'hard' pre-academic skills (CARE-project, 2015). In addition, the national curriculum guidelines in Nordic countries<sup>ix</sup> were analysed to explore how Nordic early childhood educational policies

frame the values of education and guide ECEC-actors (Einarsdottir, Purola, Johansson, Brostöm, & Emilsom, 2015). Einarsdottir et al (2015, p.102) found that all Nordic policies embedded values of democracy, caring and competence (ideas and aims of what and how children learn). However, differences between the countries appeared, as the values comprised varied and had multiple dimensions and meanings. Competence values concerning children's learning and development were most frequent in all Nordic curricula, "based on the view of children as active and competent as well as developing and learning in a lifelong perspective" (Einarsdottir et al 2015, p.109).

In Iceland, according to Einarsdottir (2010), parents found kindergarten-staff members' care and attentiveness more important than the teaching of knowledge and skills, and they expected kindergartens to support their children's social development. A Swedish study (Sheridan, Pramling Samuelsson, & Johansson, 2009) found that teachers and parents agreed upon the importance of kindergarten as a place for both individual and social learning and development. However, parents placed greater emphasis on children's learning about literacy and mathematics than did teachers. A comparative study of Swedish and Danish teachers (Broström, Johansson, Sandberg, & Frøkjær, 2012) found that teachers' understanding of learning in both countries was still aligned with what they called the traditional Nordic perspective, connecting care, play and learning in a holistic approach. However, recent studies in Denmark (EVA, 2016, p.55), found that especially bilingual parents and parents with short education, wanted more dialogue and supervision by kindergarten-teachers about their child's learning and development in general.

### Pedagogical quality and children's learning

Exploring quality and what makes a good kindergarten is a complex task; concepts related to quality may be expressed differently from various positions and incorporate various dimensions (Katz, 1993; Wittek & Kvernbekk, 2011). Distinctions are often made between structure, process, content and outcome quality (Sheridan, 2009; Sommersel, Vestgaard, & Larsen, 2013). Stakeholders' opinions of *quality* relate to their conceptions of *how* things are, a specific *characteristic, nature* or *condition*, and quality is understood in terms of the satisfaction of one's expectations and demands (Gundersen & Halbo, 2018).

According to Broström (2016), pedagogical quality is often defined as the 'researcher's view of the conditions and relations that contribute to children's well-being and learning' (p. 4). He emphasised the need to consider children's perspectives and voices and explored pedagogical

quality from children's retrospective perspectives. Traditional values in Nordic kindergartens are closely connected to the idea of a *good childhood*, and 'Nordic preschools are both a platform for children's ideas and a place where they can construct their childhood cultures, together with adults who want to care for them without dominating them' (Wagner, 2006, p. 302). The perceived quality of this approach depends on individuals' positions and subjective expectations. In this study, children's perspectives are not researched directly. However, parents' opinions may indirectly reflect children's perspectives based on what parents interpret as 'good' for their child, although parents also may not know how their child feels in kindergarten.

Pedagogical quality, from Sheridan's (2009) point of view, can be discussed from subjective and objective perspectives, which 'both have their strengths and limitations' (p. 245). She suggested that one should not see quality as either a subjective entity *or* an objective truth and introduced a perspective on pedagogical quality '...grounded in research on quality, theories of learning and development, and proven experience in preschool, [which] is also culturally and contextually sensitive' (Sheridan, 2009, p. 246). Sheridan (2009) also claimed that there are values that are crucial for children's well-being and learning (United Nations, 1989), that comprise the foundation of pedagogical quality and are part of a more complex and nuanced approach based on children's perspectives and opportunities. Exploring kindergarten-quality from parents' and centre leaders' positions, an outside-in- and inside-out-perspective (Katz 1993), could find multiple answers to what is perceived as 'good', though within the limitations set by the questions asked and possible response-alternatives. The theoretical foundation of the surveys reported here reflects child-centred values and pedagogical quality (Sheridan 2009), and theories of learning and development related to the Norwegian Kindergarten Act (2005) and framework plan (2017).

Bae (2018) identified some tendencies that could weaken Nordic kindergarten traditions, such as stronger emphasis on learning and outcomes. Aspects such as care and play seem to be less important as they cannot be systematically measured, documented or tested for their effects (Bae, 2018). Sommer (2018) warned about global tendencies that risk limiting the focus on tested knowledge in early childhood education, and he called attention to threats to parents' positions as 'childhood-architects' with influence over their child's childhood. This study explores and discusses stakeholder's opinions of kindergarten quality, related to both child-centred values and different concepts of learning.

## Method, analysis and ethics

Parents' and centre leaders' opinions of kindergarten-quality are explored with reference to data from two surveys. The surveys were designed and conducted by researchers as part of the Better Provision for Norway's Children's in ECEC-project<sup>x</sup>. The questionnaires are based on perspectives of pedagogical quality (Sheridan 2009), valuing children's well-being, as well as theories of learning and development, reflecting the social pedagogical approach in the Framework Plan for Kindergartens (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017). I have used already existing data material from these surveys in the analysis. Exploring concepts of quality within surveys is inhibited by limitations within the questions asked and possible statements to which participants respond. However, this approach may identify different opinions of quality which can point out important issues to be problematised and discussed in terms of collaboration between the stakeholders.

The surveys are conducted with stakeholders 1047 parents and 84 centre leaders from 84 kindergartens that vary in typology, size and location in Norway. Both surveys were conducted in standardised ways to achieve the most reliable results and avoid the influence of different researchers on participants' answers. The sampling of kindergartens was first delimited geographically within five counties where the BePro-project was carried out. And finally further selected based on the *Probability Proportional to Size* (PPS) sample, in which the number of children in kindergarten determined the probability of the centres to be selected (Bjørnstad, Gulbrandsen, Johansson, & Os, 2013).

In the survey with parents, comprehensive data about many aspects of children's life at home and in kindergarten were collected. The survey with centre leaders collected structural data about kindergartens, their pedagogical content and staff members' competence. The two surveys differ but had one identical set of questions; both parents and centre leaders were asked to express their attitudes towards ten statements regarding what makes a good kindergarten. The use of a Likert scale with five different responses provided some range and complexity in the possible answers (Gobo, 2014).

In total, 75% of the participating parents were born in Norway. Almost every parent was married or a co-habitant. In total, 90% of mothers and 95% of fathers were employed. Half of the mothers had bachelor's degrees and 33% had a master's degree. In total, 33% of the fathers had a bachelor's degree and 33% had a master's degree. Approximately 25% of the mothers and 33% of the fathers had compulsory education, upper secondary education or vocational education. The average age of mothers was 34 years, with a range of 20 to 52

years. The average age of the fathers was 37 years, with a range of 29 to 60 years. A total of 66% of the parents had more than one child. Since parents answered the survey when their child was under 30 months old, we can assume that most of the children with siblings had older siblings and that their parents probably had previous experience with kindergarten.

In the following section, similarities and variation between and among the stakeholders' opinions are searched for. Descriptive analyses of parents' and centre leaders' responses to the statements in the surveys are presented in a frequency table. From the variation among the stakeholder-groups and within the parent-group, parents' opinions regarding two statements are further explored in cross-table analyses considering their different educational backgrounds. Finally, the findings are controlled for, where two multivariate models are tested. Binary linear regression analyses are used instead of logistic regression because distributions like those we have on the dependent variables will provide the same results and be easier to interpret, than analyses with logistic regression models (Hellevik, 2007; Løvgren & Gulbrandsen, 2012; Mood, 2010).

As this research involves collecting data with, from and about people, it raises ethical questions that need to be anticipated and reflected upon throughout the research process. The research was conducted in an appropriate and honest manner, with emphasis placed on sensitivity, respect and responsibility (Powell, Fitzgerald, Taylor, & Graham, 2012). The BePro-project and PhD-project were evaluated by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) and approved by the Norwegian Data Protection Authority (Datatilsynet). The stakeholders gave their informed written consent to participate, and had the right to withdraw their consent at any time.

### Parents' and centre leaders' opinions regarding good kindergartens

The results, from parents' and centre leaders' points of view, are analysed, compared and discussed. The stakeholders were asked to respond to a question with ten statements using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1) *totally agree* to 4) *totally disagree* and 5) *don't know*.



Table 1.

Parents' (P) and centre leaders' (CL) responses to the question  
*What do you believe a good kindergarten should be?*

(Parents: N=1047, centre leaders: N=84).

It is a kindergarten where ...	% totally agree P / CL	% partly agree P / CL	% partly disagree P / CL	% totally disagree P / CL	% don't know P / CL
Children can express their thoughts and opinions	97 / 96	3 / 4	# / -	- / -	# / -
Staff encourage children's curiosity and interests	96 / 99	3 / 1	# / -	- / -	# / -
Staff work with children's social competence	88 / 93	11 / 7	# / -		# / -
Children's play is most important	71 / 89	29 / 11	1 / -	# / -	
Staff work to promote children's creativity	70 / 63	26 / 31	2 / 5	# / 1	# / -
Staff and children decide together what to do	60 / 66	36 / 34	4 / -	# / -	# / -
Children's learning is most important	48 / 44	45 / 46	5 / 10	1 / -	# / -
Staff work with letters and numbers with the children	47 / 13	44 / 49	7 / 30	2 / 7	# / -
Staff decide what children should do in kindergarten	15 / 27	57 / 51	21 / -	6 / 22	# / -
Children can do what they want	3 / 1	52 / 47	35 / 37	10 / 15	# / -

(# = below 0,5%)

### Agreement about child-centred values

In table 1 we can read that there is nearly no variation between parents' and centre leaders' opinions about three of the statements; almost every stakeholder *totally agreed* that a good kindergarten is a place where children can express their thoughts and opinions, their curiosity and interests are encouraged, and staff work with children's social competence. Some variation in *totally* and *partly agree* appears among stakeholders' responses to 'children's play is most important' and 'staff work to promote children's creativity'.

The stakeholders largely agree upon what makes a good kindergarten; statements relating to children's being and doing, creativity, play and social competence are highly valued in both groups. This could indicate that parents and centre leaders mostly *agree*, that it is difficult to disagree with this, or that statements in the surveys did not reveal disagreement that might exist. More apparent variation exists between *totally* and *partly agree* than between *agree* and *disagree*.

### Varied opinions about decision-making

Two of the three statements related to decision-making reveal some, and almost the same, variation among the stakeholders; most agree that children and staff decide together in a good kindergarten. Almost half of the stakeholders agreed that children can do what they want. However, most parents, and none of the centre leaders, *partly agreed* that staff decide what children should do.

Variation between parents can arise from differences in their opinions or uncertainty about these statements. It could be difficult to take a stand as the situation may determine whether it is best for staff or children to make decisions. As most parents answered *partly agree* and *partly disagree*, not *totally agree* or *totally disagree*, they may have reservations regarding decision-making in kindergarten. Parents' responses to these statements seem more indistinct than their responses to the statement 'staff and children decide together what to do'; nearly all parents *totally* or *partly agreed* with this statement.

### Different opinions about children's learning

There are different opinions among and between the stakeholder groups regarding children's learning and work with letters and numbers in a good kindergarten. Although most parents agree that a good kindergarten is a place where children's learning is most important, they divided themselves between *totally* and *partly agree*. Almost the same variation appears among parents who *totally* and *partly agree* that staff should work with letters and numbers with the children.

Centre leaders' responses to 'children's learning is most important' feature almost the same variation as parents. However, the variation in centre leaders' opinions regarding work with letters and numbers differs from parents'; half of the centre leaders *partly agree* and one-third *partly disagree* that this is a characteristic of a good kindergarten.

There is similar variation in stakeholders' responses to 'children's learning is most important'. However, it is important to note that the survey does not ask about stakeholders' understanding of learning in this context. Therefore, we do not know whether parents and centre leaders have a common concept of learning either within or between the groups.

Nevertheless, the largest split in parents' and centre leaders' opinions concerns 'staff work with letters and numbers with the children'. Around 90% of parents *totally* or *partly agreed* that this is a characteristic of a good kindergarten, while only 60% of centre-leaders *totally* or *partly agreed* with this statement. More parents than centre leaders *totally agreed* with the

statement, and more centre leaders than parents *partly disagreed* with it. Variation in this statement could reflect different understandings of learning, not only the value of ‘soft’ holistic social learning, but also more academic learning.

The phrase ‘staff work’ might be interpreted differently by parents and centre leaders. Centre-leaders may understand ‘staff work’ as a more formal and instructed activity, while parents may not differentiate between *how* letters and numbers are thematised with the children. However, no matter how we interpret the answers, parents are more concerned than centre leaders about work with letters and numbers, and may consider it as a preparation for school. Some parents may be unsure and have no specific opinion about this statement. The tendency for participants who are unsure to *agree* rather than *disagree* could be strong, especially among those with short education, a phenomenon referred to as ‘yes-saying’ (Hellevik, 2011, p. 51).

Stefansen and Skogen (2010) found that working-class parents valued learning specific skills such as knowing letters and numbers, in contrast to middle class parents who were more concerned about stimulating children’s natural curiosity. Working-class parents, in contrast to middle-class parents, also think that ‘pedagogical intervention represents work rather than normal interaction’ (Stefansen & Skogen 2010, p. 600) and that home is no arena for pedagogical work. Bråten (2014) explored working-class parents’ childrearing strategies, and found that they see education as a necessity, and value skills that are going to be measured.

Table 2.

A good kindergarten is a place where children’s learning is most important.

	Parents with short education	Parents with bachelor’s degree	Parents with master’s degree
% Totally agree	61	49	32
% Partly agree	34	45	57
% Partly disagree	4	5	8
% Totally disagree	1	1	2
N=1017	N=161	N=685	N=171

Table 3.

A good kindergarten is a place where staff work with letters and numbers with children.

	Parents with short education	Parents with bachelor's degree	Parents with master's degree
% Totally agree	66	45	35
% Partly agree	29	47	53
% Partly disagree	4	7	9
% Totally disagree	1	1	3
N=1015	N=160	N=683	N=172

In terms of parents' educational background, we can read in table 2 and 3 that there is variation between parents' opinions regarding the statements 'children's learning is most important' and 'staff work with letters and numbers with children'. Parents' responses to these statements correlate with their educational background. More parents who received compulsory, upper secondary and vocational education (hereafter referred to as 'short education'), than parents with a bachelor's or master's degree (hereafter referred to as 'long education') *totally agreed* that a good kindergarten is a place where children's learning is most important and staff work with letters and numbers with the children.

As shown in both tables, there is a strong negative correlation between mothers' education and their perception of the importance of learning and working with letters and numbers. The percent who totally agree decreases from 61 and 66% among those with shortest education, to 32 and 35 % among those with longest education.

What might influence the opinions of parents with different educational background? Parents' age and experience with kindergarten could reduce their emphasis on the importance of learning and work with letters and numbers. In this way parents might be affected by teachers. Parents who find learning and work with letters and numbers important, might also play with letters and numbers at home. Data of mothers' education and age are used and controlled for as it provides more material to analyse. How conditions vary or correlate in relation to parents' opinions, is presented in Tables 4 and 5, showing the results of binary linear regression analyses with standardised regression coefficients for each of the two dependent variables.

Table 4. Binary linear regression on parents' opinions regarding children's learning in a good kindergarten.

Children's learning is most important	Std. coefficients/Beta	Sig.
Mothers' education	-.174	.000 *
Mothers' age	.023	.513
Parents' experience with kindergarten	-.067	.047 *
Parents' play with letters with their child at home	.017	.608
R Square	.035	

\*p < 0.05

Table 5. Binary linear regression on parents' opinions regarding staff members' work with letters and numbers with children in a good kindergarten.

Staff members' work with letters and numbers	Std. coefficients./Beta	Sig
Mothers' education	-.189	.000 *
Mothers' age	-.011	.744
Parents' experiences with kindergarten	-.080	.016 *
Parents play with letters with their children at home	.098	.002 *
R Square	.057	

\*p < 0.05

After control for the other variables, mothers' educational background still has a negative effect on parents' opinions regarding children's learning. Mothers with long education valued children's learning less. To some extent, experience with kindergarten had the same negative effect. Mothers' age and play with letters at home with their child had no independent effect on their opinion regarding children's learning.

Controlling for the variables above, we find that parents' education, specifically mothers', correlates strongly with parents' opinions regarding children's learning and work with letters and numbers in kindergarten. Parents with long education place less value on work with letters and numbers. Experienced parents valued working with letters and numbers less. We found no correlation between education and actual play with letters at home. Earlier experience with kindergarten was associated with less of such play at home (see appendix 1). The parents' different educational background and experiences with kindergarten might have influenced their concepts of learning.

Parents with short education valued children's learning and work with letters and numbers most among the group of parents and more than did centre leaders, perhaps because parents with a short education have a different initial understanding of learning than professionals in kindergarten. Centre leaders and kindergarten-teachers have a high level of education and may communicate common understandings and taken-for-granted learning concepts with highly educated parents, with a potential risk not to communicate and share concepts with parents with shorter education. This raises questions about how professionals communicate with *all* parents about educational values and a holistic approach to children's learning in Norwegian kindergartens.

## Reflections on the holistic Nordic tradition

### Child-centred values

The analyses above show that both stakeholder groups place high value on child-centred values in a good kindergarten. The dominant responses aligned with a social, holistic pedagogical approach that emphasised children's curiosity, interests, ability to express thoughts and meanings, social competence, play and creativity. Both stakeholder groups also emphasised that both children and staff should participate in decision-making together. The abilities to express oneself, actively participate with others, negotiate and make decisions together can, according to Wagner (2006), be related to Nordic values and ideas of good childhood and democratic community. In particular, the stakeholders emphasised the importance of children expressing thoughts and meanings and deciding together, reflecting Nordic opinions regarding children's participation and values of democracy and egalitarianism.

To a large extent, the stakeholders' opinions align with the values, content and holistic social pedagogical approach described in the Norwegian Framework Plan (2017) and with the child-

centred values examined in previous studies conducted with parents since the beginning of the year 2000. The results of these studies have continually shown that parents are mostly concerned about children's well-being, safety, care, play, friendship and social competence (Barne- og familiedepartementet, 2005; Sjøbstad, 2004; Østrem et al., 2009). The Nordic kindergarten-tradition was built on the Nordic concept of a *good childhood* and on ideas such as 'democracy, egalitarianism, freedom, emancipation, cooperation and solidarity' (Wagner, 2006, p. 292). A comparative study of five Nordic curricula (Einarsdottir et al., 2015) found that, although dimensions and meanings of the values differs within the Nordic countries, values related to a child-centred holistic approach remain strong despite an increased focus on individual and standardised assessment in other European countries. Similarly, the results of this article show that the Nordic tradition remains strong among stakeholders in Norwegian kindergartens. However, concepts and emphases of learning might differ, and therefore will be discussed further.

#### Different concepts of learning

For the most part, parents and centre leaders had similar opinions regarding the importance of children's learning. However, opinions regarding work with letters and numbers varied; parents valued work with letters and numbers more than centre leaders. In addition, there are significant differences between parents with short and long education; parents with a short education considered work with letters and numbers to be most important. Letters and numbers are often associated with school activities, and these parents may expect that a good kindergarten will prepare their child for school in this way. That staff "work with" letters and numbers with children, as a more formal instructed activity, may be understood as an important contribution in this matter. We could also assume that parents with different educational backgrounds have different concepts of learning. Sveen (2014) focused on changes in social status and claimed that, when working-class parents supported their children's education, they intended for their children to have opportunities they themselves did not have. Ambjörnsson (2005) also describes working-class families' unspoken ambitions that the children were expected to study and "move" out of working class society.

Bråten (2014) interviewed working-class parents in Norway about their upbringing strategies and found that parents considered education to be the most important factor affecting success in society, education is necessary to get a job and manage life on your own. "The knowledge- and test-regime demands considerable effort from parents who want to follow up their children" (Bråten 2014, p.197) and children are expected to "do their best". Parents with a

short education may expect kindergartens to provide children the best opportunities and help them become ready for school. This finding is in line with a Swedish study (Sheridan et al., 2009), which found that more parents than teachers considered work with literacy and mathematics to be important content in kindergarten. A study conducted in Denmark (EVA, 2016) found that parents with shorter education were more likely to want more supervision and focus on school-readiness in kindergarten.

Parents' understanding of learning and work with letters and numbers may come from their own experiences in kindergarten and school. If parents follow the news, they may also have been influenced by the debate and increased attention on learning in policy documents. As parents' experience with kindergarten had an effect on their opinions about work with letters and numbers, we can assume that parents' opinions are influenced by the practice and opinions of the professionals. As concepts of learning differ between parents with different educational background, we stress that the nature of learning in kindergarten may be taken for granted by professionals and not be an issue highlighted in dialogues with all parents.

However, questions arise regarding *how* and *what* parents have insight into and knowledge about when it comes to content, children's experiences and learning in kindergarten. Wagner (2006) found, from an outsider's perspective, that the vision of a *good childhood* underlying the Nordic tradition is often unspoken. If this is true, the ideas behind the holistic approach to children's learning could be difficult to identify and discuss. For parents with a short education and working-class background, this could be even more difficult as values in kindergarten '[seem] to rest on a pedagogy that mirrors central elements in childrearing logics found in the middle class' (Stefansen & Skogen, 2010, p. 588). According to Crozier (1999), who studied working-class parents and teachers in UK schools, although staff recognised that parents may have different needs and ways of seeing the world, teachers' strategies to promote parental involvement were based on their own values. In addition, an overview of research about parental involvement showed that 'there are communication barriers starkly experienced by some parents – and especially those from the working class' (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003, p. 46).

In addition to parents' educational background, political attention to quality and learning in kindergarten and increased focus on kindergarten in the media might influence parents' values and expectations regarding a good kindergarten. The exploration (Østrem et al 2009) of how the 2006 Framework Plan was implemented and experienced showed that parents knew *about* the Framework Plan but had limited knowledge about its content. It is thus relevant to



question whether this might be the same for parents' collaboration and participation today. If professionals do not actively invite *all* parents to engage and take part in dialogues, we cannot expect to hear all parents' voices, particularly the voices of parents with a short education and parents with values and childrearing beliefs that differ from those reflected in Norwegian kindergartens. As Rognan (2004) found out, parents with short education felt more powerless regarding participation in ECEC.

## Conclusion

Stakeholders' similar opinions regarding child-centred values and the social pedagogical tradition could mean that the idea of a *good childhood* and the traditional Nordic approach to kindergarten serve as a foundation for mutual understanding between parents and staff. We can assume that staff mostly work, according to the law, 'in collaboration and close understanding with the home' (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2005, p. 1) and that the traditional approach continues to have a strong position in Norwegian kindergarten.

Variation among and between stakeholders' opinions about children's learning and work with letters and numbers should be considered an important issue in future collaboration to improve kindergarten-quality. Professionals could be more concerned and aware about parents' multiple understandings, their different backgrounds and experiences with kindergarten, and could take responsibility for inviting all parents with their different opinions to engage in dialogue and collaboration, in line with the Kindergarten Act (2005).

Understanding each other's values, mutual dialogue between parents and staff and the possibility to explore and exchange the meanings of fundamental concepts seem to be important. Since parents' engagement is important for their child's learning and development (Goodall 2013), and quality and early learning are strong political focuses, it is crucial to include parents' opinions and voices in the ongoing dialogue within the kindergarten-field.

In addition to the importance of children's voices, play and social environment in a good kindergarten, parents emphasised learning and activities that prepare children for school. As parents might have limited insight and knowledge about the pedagogical content and how kindergarten serves as a learning area, it is crucial that these issues become topics in the ongoing dialogue between parents and staff. This will help improve kindergartens today and in the future and ensure that they provide a *good childhood* and kindergarten for all children.

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## Appendix 1

Correlation matrix showing bivariate correlations used in the regression analyses.

Pearson's

	Work with letters and numbers	Learning	Mothers' education	Experience with kindergarten	Mothers' age
Learning	0,455 *				
Mothers' education	-0,185 *	-0,173 *			
Experience with kindergarten	-0,080 *	-0,054	0,076 *		
Mothers' age	-0,085 *	-0,041	0,271 *	0,285 *	
Play with letters at home	0,096 *	0,020	0,034	-0,112 *	-0,010

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- <sup>i</sup> Norwegian kindergartens include children from one to five years of age.
- <sup>ii</sup> The article is the first part of a PhD-study with multi-method approach, exploring parents' views of quality in kindergarten. The study is part of the research project 'Better Provision for Norway's Children in ECEC' (BePro).
- <sup>iii</sup> Centre leaders have overall responsibility for the content and tasks in kindergarten and for leading processes related to quality and good practices.
- <sup>iv</sup> The right to a place was extended in 2016 and 2017 to include children who turned one year of age before December.
- <sup>v</sup> 'Development program for the ECEC-field' was conducted from 1995–1997 and intended to achieve enough places for children in kindergarten before 2000. The Statens Institutt for Forbrukerforskning (SIFO) was responsible for identifying parents' needs and expectations.
- <sup>vi</sup> The work of the expert group is reported in "Klar, ferdig, gå!" (Barne- og familiedepartementet, 2005).
- <sup>vii</sup> Difi (in Norwegian, Direktoratet for forvaltning og IKT) works to ensure that government administration in Norway is characterised by excellence, efficiency, user orientation, transparency and democracy. They aim to develop the organisation and leadership of the public sector and coordinate various public authorities and services.
- <sup>viii</sup> The CARE project, Curriculum and Quality Analysis and Impact Review of European ECEC, a research project with partners in England, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Belgium and Denmark. The Stakeholder study is part of the CARE-project, and contain interviews with parents, teachers and policy makers in nine of the eleven countries.
- <sup>ix</sup> Curricula in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden were studied.
- <sup>x</sup> The surveys were inspired by a Swedish study (Sheridan, Samuelsson, & Johansson, 2009), and conducted with parents during 2013 and 2014, and with centre leaders during 2014 and 2015.