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Read-aloud and writing practices in Nordic preschools

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ABSTRACT

Preschool teachers' read-aloud and writing practices were investigated using a questionnaire about how activities were planned and organized, and what their purpose was. The results indicate that early literacy practices were not planned systematically. Most of the preschool teachers (77%) reported having storybook read-alouds at least three times per week. A large minority (45.5%) reported never or seldom using writing activities, and rarely in play. The main aims of read-alouds were to promote learning and development, create a sense of community, and regulate group activities. The main aims of writing practices were to learn about letters, understand the function of print, and arouse interest in writing. We discuss the implications of these findings in relation to a need for a didactic approach, where play is the core of early literacy practices.

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Early literacy, which refers to the initial reading and writing skills and knowledge of young children prior to formal literacy learning, has been shown to relate closely to learning fundamental literacy skills later in school (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). Most often, early reading and writing skills develop simultaneously (Ehri, 2000), where letter knowledge, phonological awareness, and vocabulary learning are basic components (Puranik & Lonigan, 2014). Children need support and stimulation in their early reading (Clay, 1991; Justice et al., 2009) and writing development (Pulido & Morin, 2018), and for this reason, an investigation of preschool teachers' perceptions on read-alouds and writing practices is useful. Traditionally, preschool education in the Nordic countries has focused on care, socialization, and play rather than on academic activities (Korkeamäki & Dreher, 2012). In addition, the Nordic preschool views free play and children's self-directed activities as vital to children's learning (Broström et al., 2014). However, in recent years, both Nordic preschool curriculums and research have noted children's early literacy development to be important in preschool play-based activities (Korkeamäki & Dreher, 2012; Vallberg Roth, 2014). Moreover, there has been a decline in the reading skills of Norwegian students, while the gap between low-achieving and high-achieving students is increasing in Finland and Sweden (OECD, 2019). Knowledge and understanding of current early literacy practices is valuable in the development of Nordic preschool education so that it can support students' literacy later on. Against this

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background, this study will investigate Nordic preschool teachers' didactic approaches to early literacy in preschool. In brief, didactics can be defined as the theory and practice of teaching and learning (Jank & Meyer, 1997). Didactics incorporates several types of questions relating to the planning, implementation, and evaluation of teaching, i.e., *what* is to be taught, and *how* and *why* this is to be taught (Jank & Meyer, 1997). In terms of preschool, didactics can be understood as preschool teachers' strategies to plan, organize, and support children's learning. For this study, we investigate the didactic approaches of preschool teachers in relation to read-aloud and writing activities in early literacy practices. Below we present a brief overview of prior research on read-aloud and writing practices to contextualize our study.

Read-aloud practices in preschool

Read-aloud practices have been shown to benefit children in terms of the following: social development and learning from their own experiences in interaction with other children and adults, which contributes to their understanding of the world (Barton, 2007); the development of early literacy, language, and meta-cognitive abilities (Dowdall et al., 2020); comprehension skills (Beck & McKeown, 2001); vocabulary growth (Rogde et al., 2019); print awareness (Justice et al., 2009); and sensitivity to sounds and letters in words (Wasik et al., 2006). Children need exposure to several text types because they provide different kinds of experiences and linguistic diversity (Montag et al., 2015). Contextualized and decontextualized text talk during book reading is important for children's language development, especially their vocabulary (Wasik & Hindman, 2014). Thus, children's early literacy learning in preschool is important for their future narrative and literacy achievement (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998) and later schooling (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Hjetland et al., 2020). Cunningham and Stanovich (1997) found links between early reading acquisition and later reading comprehension, while Hjetland et al. (2020) found that letter knowledge and phonological awareness as well as vocabulary and grammar in preschool predict later reading comprehension. To deepen and extend children's language and linguistic awareness, teachers need both to plan the read-alouds carefully (Bingham et al., 2018; Shedd & Duke, 2008) and to construct a play environment that is literacy-rich (Norling & Lillvist, 2016). The present study discusses that play and literacy practices can be intertwined in preschool education.

Storybook reading is a common preschool activity in both the Nordic countries (Alatalo & Westlund, 2021; Damber, 2015; Eskebaek Larsen et al., 2008; Hagen, 2018) and other countries (Shedd & Duke, 2008). In Norway, 71 preschool teachers were interviewed about the kinds of language practices the children engaged in over one year (Hagen, 2018). Shared book reading was quite common in all classrooms¹, yet only 20 teachers reported reading to the children every day.

International studies have described how teachers engage children in text talk while reading storybooks (Dowdall et al., 2020). Yet in the 39 Swedish preschools observed, Damber (2015) found there to be very little text talk during read-alouds. Most often, read-alouds occurred once a day and were seldom planned or embedded in a context. Books were chosen at random, usually by the children, while the preschool teacher usually initiated reading sessions. Damber (2015) concluded that read-alouds were used primarily to manage classroom behavior.

Korkeamäki and Dreher (2012) observed the practices of three Finnish preschools and found that the environment was not print-rich and that text materials in the physical environment (for example, a poster of the alphabet, a calendar, and nursery rhymes in large print) were rarely used.

In a focus group conversation study of 15 preschool teachers from different preschools in Sweden, Alatalo and Westlund (2021) found that reading aloud often involved the whole group, frequently without discussion about content. Whenever possible, the preschool teachers organized read-alouds once a week, yet some teachers stressed the importance of daily read-alouds for children's language development. Children's interest was key when it came to the choice of book (cf.

¹The term preschool classroom means a place for preschool activities.

Damber, 2015). Read-alouds seemed to connect with learning about different themes, developing socially, and curbing unrest and conflicts, while teachers stated that they focused on children's language development whenever the opportunity arose. A Danish study showed similar results (Eskebaek Larsen et al., 2008): reading aloud was a way to create calm, cosy moments.

To sum up, prior research demonstrates that the active support of children's language skills with read-alouds is not a priority in preschool, which is surprising given the importance of reading aloud for vocabulary and reading skills development (Rogde et al., 2019). In the present study, we investigate Nordic preschool teachers' didactic perspectives with the view to gaining further insight into the opportunities teachers afford children so that they can develop their literacy skills.

Writing practices in preschool

Previous studies on literacy in preschool have indicated a lack of research that investigates writing practices in preschool (Bingham et al., 2017; Gerde et al., 2012; Magnusson et al., 2021); preschool teachers' instructional practices (Gerde et al., 2015; Guo et al., 2012; Norling, 2015); and preschool teachers' engagement and didactic strategies when it comes to invented writing (Norling et al., 2015). Thus, in the present study we investigate Nordic preschool teachers' didactic approach regarding early literacy.

In a recent observational study that describes the supportive writing practices of forty preschool teachers in the U.S. (Bingham et al., 2017), researchers found that teachers planned activities that helped children develop their handwriting skills, mainly copying and tracing letters. As well, Bingham et al. found that preschool teachers did not seem to have a wide range of strategies for teaching the component skills of spelling beyond naming letters.

In the Nordic context, studies have been conducted on early writing practices in preschool (Hofslundsengen et al., 2016; Korkeamäki & Dreher, 2012; Magnusson & Pramling, 2016; Norling, 2015). Korkeamäki and Dreher's (2012) study described the wide use of children's names written in capital letters to label cupboards and lockers. However, the researchers did not observe the preschool teachers' active use of these for the purpose of, for example, finding belongings or learning letters. In our study, we focus on the perspectives of teachers when it comes to the planning and organizing of writing activities, and their purpose.

Norling et al. (2015) investigated the literacy environment in 55 Swedish preschool classrooms with focus on how preschool teachers dealt with children's engagement in literacy practices and found there to be few, if any, instructional dialogues in literacy events and practices. Furthermore, there were no symbols, texts, or writing materials available in the play environments; in addition, there was a lack of confirmation, support, and engagement from preschool teachers in children's play activities. Norling (2015) discusses how preschool teachers need to understand children's early literacy learning so that they can arrive at a stated purpose in their didactic practices. In the present study, we broaden the perspective to a Nordic context.

The results of a study on writing artefacts and the print environment in Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish preschools showed that children received logographical input in the form of signs, symbols, and text that were displayed in almost every classroom (Hofslundsengen et al., 2020). However, only half of the preschools in the study had a dedicated writing center, suggesting that writing was not a priority. Physical environmental supports, such as environmental print and writing materials, promote children's early writing skills (Gerde et al., 2012) but are not enough for most children (Guo et al., 2012); rather, it is the teachers' use of writing materials and their instruction, individual or group, that encourage and model and that have shown to help children develop writing skills (Gerde et al., 2015; Guo et al., 2012).

To sum up, the literacy environment in preschool is multidimensional and one in which both the social and physical environments can offer the necessary conditions for children's literacy events and practices (Gerde et al., 2015; Guo et al., 2012; Norling, 2015). Nordic preschool teachers view play (Broström et al., 2014) and children's early literacy development (Korkeamäki & Dreher,

2012; Vallberg Roth, 2014) as important aspects of preschool. However, there are few studies on how teachers in Nordic preschools view practices (i.e., their didactic perspective) that stimulate children's literacy development, which is central to our study. Thus, there is a need to highlight didactic strategies in terms of planning, organizing, and establishing a purpose with literacy practices in preschool education, which is the focus of this study.

Purpose and research questions

The aim of this study is to contribute knowledge about Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish preschool teachers' early literacy practices in preschool. To build on prior research, we address the following research questions:

1. To what extent do the preschool teachers report that they plan read-aloud and writing practices?
2. In what way do the preschool teachers say that they organize read-aloud and writing practices?
3. What do the preschool teachers report as being the purpose of the read-aloud and writing practices that they carried through?

Nordic preschools have many similarities: for example, they are built on basic social democratic values and view free play as the main activity (Broström et al., 2014); however, each of the three Nordic countries in this study has its own curriculum, language, and attendance rate. Preschool here means the early childhood education and care system for children aged between one and five that precedes formal education in school. Finland has the lowest attendance figures, with 28% of children under three and 68% of children aged three to five attending preschool (OECD, 2016). Formal literacy learning begins when children start school at the age of seven; however, the national core curriculum (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018) advocates language learning, including early literacy practices, as central aspects of early childhood education. In Norway, almost all children (92%) aged between one and five attend preschool (Statistics Norway, 2021). Formal literacy learning starts in first grade at the age of six. In the Framework Plan for Kindergarten (Norwegian Ministry of Education, 2017), language learning is highlighted, and early literacy practices, such as exploring letters and invented writing, are emphasized. In Sweden, 85% of all children aged between one and five attend preschool (National Agency for Education, 2019a). Formal literacy education begins at the age of seven when they begin compulsory school. In the Swedish preschool curriculum, spoken language is highlighted, and early literacy is linked both to the promotion of interest in written language as well as to an understanding of symbols and how they are used to communicate (National Agency for Education, 2019b).

We wanted to investigate whether the number of read-aloud and writing activities in the preschool classroom differs depending on children's age. The rationale for this stemmed from the fact that traditionally, Nordic preschool classrooms have a mixed age group (toddlers aged up to three and children aged three to five). Even though classes with children under three tend to have fewer children, children in this age require more time for care, which could influence practices (Williams et al., 2019). This we wanted to investigate – that is to say, we wanted to see if children's age influences teachers' organization of early literacy practices. We also wanted to investigate if the organization of read-aloud and writing practices differed by country.

Conceptual framework

The theoretical framework is based on Vygotsky's social cultural perspective (Smagorinsky, 2011) and Barton's (2007) ecological perspective on early literacy. Reading-aloud and early writing are viewed as social and cultural practices as regards both form and function, as well as mediating tools for communication in play and literacy practices in preschool. Barton (2007) combines both the social cultural and the ecological perspective when he explains that literary practices

have a social, cultural, and historical impact on an individual. Our questionnaire, as well as our analyses and interpretations, is based on a social cultural approach to early literacy didactics.

In this study, the theoretical framework can be explained as being the preschool teacher's approach to reading aloud and early writing as well as the way in which preschool teachers promote meaningful and scaffolding environments that benefit children's literacy practices in preschool. From a didactic perspective, meaning-making and scaffolding support the process of learning and development, such as children's literacy learning, through activities guided by preschool teachers and peers. It is a continual process in which literacy practices start with the question "what", such as in "What is the aim of literacy practices in preschool?"

Methods

The design of the study

To achieve the aim of our study, we adopted a mixed methods approach with an explanatory sequential design, which included both a quantitative and qualitative analysis. In this approach, we first analyzed quantitative data then qualitative data, as this gave the analysis of the collected material more substance and nuance (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The purpose of this approach was to gain a more holistic understanding of the research questions that the present study intended to address. However, the two open-ended questions that were analyzed may indicate only some of the informants' views on didactic considerations relating to early literacy practices: this needs to be noted when data is being interpreted.

Data collection and participant characteristics

The research participants were preschool teachers in Finland, Norway, and Sweden. About 340 participants were invited to participate: 222 consented (52 from Finland, 91 from Norway, and 79 from Sweden). The sample constituted 65% of those invited to participate. All participants were qualified preschool teachers (3–3.5 years of preschool teacher training at the university level) and had attained their teaching degrees between 1981 and 2020. The mean number of years of preschool work experience was 15 ($SD = 9.59$); range 0–39 years; mean year Finland = 14.35 ($SD = 11.78$), Norway = 14.29 ($SD = 7.42$), Sweden = 16.3 ($SD = 9.67$). Data was collected in both urban and rural areas of western and southern Finland, western Norway, and central and south-eastern Sweden. Of the preschool teachers, 146 (66%) worked with children over the age of three, while 76 (34%) worked with children aged one to three. In our study sample, 42% of the Finnish teachers, 42% of the Norwegian teachers, and 20% of the Swedish teachers worked with children aged one to three. The preschool teachers completed a paper-based questionnaire that student teachers distributed in preschools during their teacher-training placement between November 2019 and November 2020. Data collection was planned for the spring of 2020 but was delayed by six months due to Covid-19 restrictions in Finland. All participants received information stating that the study was anonymous and voluntary and were asked to provide their consent to be in the study. According to the local ethics committee at the university of one author, no ethical review was required given that the study collected neither information that could identify the informants nor data that was sensitive.

Materials

A two-part questionnaire was developed for the study that had didactic questions about read-aloud and writing practices. For this study, we used twelve questions, seven concerning read-aloud practices and seven concerning writing practices (six multiple-choice and one open-ended question in each of the two parts). The questions used in this study are presented in the appendix.

Analytic strategy

The quantitative analyses were carried out in IBM SPSS Statistics 27.0, using frequency analysis and chi-square tests with a fine-grained investigation of significant differences using z-tests with Bonferroni adjustment. The two open-ended questions in the questionnaire were examined using content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Three of the authors analyzed the qualitative data. To ensure accurate understanding and interrater reliability, we read the responses to the two open-ended questions (Appendix) several times and all codes were reviewed in the group. Any disagreement was resolved through discussion. As shown in Table 1, meaningful units were identified, condensed, and categorized. Based on the categories, overall themes were analyzed using the theoretical concept of literacy practices, as was content related to meaning-making, scaffolding, and the function and form of read-aloud practices and writing practices where literacy is seen as a mediated tool in a social context in preschool (Barton, 2007; Smagorinsky, 2011). To ensure validity, the analysis was conducted in three stages: first, the general reading and categorization were conducted independently by the researchers; second, they discussed the categorization to determine its trustworthiness; and third, the researchers reasoned in a joint process to arrive at the overarching themes in literacy practices that resulted in conclusive categorization. Examples of the teachers' statements are presented in the findings.

Findings

Planning read-aloud and writing practices

To answer research question 1 about the extent to which teachers plan read-aloud and writing practices, frequency analyses were conducted of responses concerning the total group and each country sample (Table 2). It was more common not to plan read-alouds or writing activities than it was to plan them. Seventy-seven percent of the preschool teachers ($n = 171$) reported that reading aloud was most often done without systematic planning and *not* to plan writing activities was nine times more the case than *not* to plan read-alouds. There were no significant differences between the countries in the reported planning of read-alouds, but there was a difference in the planning of writing activities. Z-tests showed significantly fewer Norwegian teachers reported planning writing activities than Swedish teachers.

Organizing read-alouds and writing practices

To answer the second research question about the organization of read-aloud and writing practices, responses were analyzed as a whole and for each country sample (Table 3). While 77% of the preschool teachers reported storybook read-alouds at least three times per week, 10% reported storybook read-alouds once a week or less. Further, 43% reported never or seldom having read-alouds of

Table 1. Examples from the Analysis of Qualitative Data on Read-Aloud and Writing Practices.

	Meaningful units	Condensation	Categories	Literacy practices
Read-aloud practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It is about friendship. Our themes are friendship and inclusion - The purpose of reading aloud is to promote children's language development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Friendship and inclusion To promote children's language development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning about the world Language development 	Theme: Reading aloud to promote learning and development
Writing practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inspire children to identify the first letter of their name - Recognize their name, learn to pronounce (sound) their name, know the order in which the letters come 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify the first letter Recognize, learn to pronounce (sound), know the order in which the letters come 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Graphic/visual focus Connecting graphemes and phonemes 	Theme: Writing to learn about letters (form)

Table 2. The Frequency of Preschool Teachers' Planned Read-Aloud and Writing Practices.

Sample	Frequency				Chi-square tests
	How often do you plan read-aloud practices in advance?				
	Never	Mostly do not plan	Mostly plan	Always	
Total (n = 222)	8 (3.6%)	171 (77%)	40 (18%)	3 (1.4%)	$\chi^2 (6) = 5.79, p < .45$
Finland (n = 52)	1 (1.9%)	38 (73.1%)	11 (21.2%)	2 (3.8%)	
Norway (n = 91)	4 (4.4%)	74 (81.3%)	13 (14.3%)	0	
Sweden (n = 79)	3 (3.8%)	59 (74.7%)	16 (20.3%)	1 (1.3%)	
Sample	How often do you plan writing activities in advance? ^a				Chi-square tests
	Never	Mostly do not plan	Mostly plan	Always	
	Never	Mostly do not plan	Mostly plan	Always	
Total (n = 216)	72 (32.4%)	98 (44.1%)	42 (18.9%)	4 (1.8%)	$\chi^2 (6) = 14.41, p < .03$
Finland (n = 50)	17 (32.7%)	20 (38.5%)	10 (19.2%)	3 (5.8%)	
Norway (n = 87)	37 (40.7%)	35 (38.5%)	14 (15.4%)	1 (1.1%)	
Sweden (n = 79)	18 (22.8%)	43 (54.4%)	18 (22.8%)	0	

Note. ^aMissing data in the Finnish sample ($n = 2$), the Norwegian sample ($n = 4$)

non-fiction books, and 64% reported never or seldom having read-alouds of digital books. A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between the reported frequency of reading storybooks aloud with the country (Table 3). The relation was statistically significant. Finnish preschool teachers reported reading every day significantly more often than Swedish and Norwegian teachers. A chi-square test of independence showed there to be no significant association between the age of children and the frequency of reading aloud that was reported ($\chi^2 (4, N = 218) = 4.09, p = .39$). About 66% of the preschool teachers reported that they usually read to 1–3 children or groups of 4–7 children (Table 4). A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between the reported group size and country. The reported number of children in the groups differed significantly. Z-tests showed that Norwegian teachers read more often to smaller groups (1–3 children) and less to bigger groups (7–9 children) than Swedish and Finnish teachers. Almost all (99.5%) of the preschool teachers reported talking with the children about story content.

When it came to writing practices, 45.5% of the teachers reported never or seldom organizing writing activities with children (Table 3). However, an investigation of this in relation to children's ages showed a statistically significant relationship between the age of the child group and the reported number of writing activities ($\chi^2 (5, N = 220) = 12.43, p = .03$): 61% never or seldom organized writing activities in classrooms of children aged one to three, while 37% did not include writing activities in classrooms of children aged over three. A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between the reported writing and country, with significant results (Table 3). There were no significant differences in the frequency of reported writing activities among the teachers who offered writing activities to their children, however, more of the Norwegian and Finnish teachers reported *never* using writing activities. About 88% of all preschool teachers reported that they most often organized writing activities for 1–6 children (Table 4). Few (13.5%) reported that children wrote often during play activities. Most of the preschool teachers (85%) reported that they talked with children about the content of their writing and the print (letters).

The purpose of the read-aloud and writing practices

Qualitative content analyses were conducted to examine the purpose of the read-aloud and writing practices. In response to the open-ended question about the aim of reading the chosen book, 203 teachers of 222 provided a response that contained enough information to enable a classification. We identified three different categories (including sub-categories) in the responses: *read-alouds to promote learning and development*; *read-alouds to create a sense of community*; and *read-alouds*

Table 3. Descriptive Data on Teachers' Statements of How They Organize the Read Aloud and Writing Practices.

Sample	How often do you usually read storybooks for children?					Chi-square tests
	Never/seldom	1 t/week	2 t/week	3 t/week	Every day	
Total (<i>n</i> = 218)	1 (0.5%)	20 (9.2%)	28 (12.8%)	58 (26.6%)	111 (50.9%)	$\chi^2 (8) = 27.46, p < .001$
Finland (<i>n</i> = 51)	0	2 (3.9%)	2 (3.9%)	7 (13.7%)	40 (78.4%)	
Norway (<i>n</i> = 88)	1 (1.1%)	12 (13.6%)	14 (15.9%)	31 (35.2%)	30 (34.1%)	
Sweden (<i>n</i> = 79)	0	6 (7.6%)	12 (15.2%)	20 (25.3%)	41 (51.9%)	
Sample	How often do you usually read non-fiction books for children?					Chi-square tests
	Never/seldom	1 t/week	2 t/week	3 t/week	Every day	
Total (<i>n</i> = 219)	95 (43.4%)	78 (35.6%)	21 (9.6%)	21 (9.6%)	4 (1.8%)	$\chi^2 (8) = 9.46, p = .31$
Finland (<i>n</i> = 52)	19 (36.5%)	21 (40.4%)	8 (15.4%)	3 (5.8%)	1 (1.9%)	
Norway (<i>n</i> = 88)	41 (46.6%)	27 (30.7%)	5 (5.7%)	13 (14.3%)	2 (14.8%)	
Sweden (<i>n</i> = 79)	35 (44.3%)	30 (38%)	8 (10.1%)	5 (6.3%)	1 (1.3%)	
Sample	How often do you usually write with a group of children?					Chi-square tests
	Never/seldom	1 t/week	2 t/week	3 t/week	Every day	
Total (<i>n</i> = 220)	100 (45.5%)	44 (20%)	22 (10%)	45 (20.5%)	9 (4.1%)	$\chi^2 (10) = 28.5, p < .001$
Finland (<i>n</i> = 52)	27 (51.9%)	9 (17.3%)	4 (7.7%)	11 (21.2%)	1 (1.9%)	
Norway (<i>n</i> = 90)	54 (60%)	15 (16.7%)	6 (6.6%)	12 (13.2%)	3 (3.3%)	
Sweden (<i>n</i> = 78)	19 (24.4%)	20 (25.6%)	12 (15.4%)	22 (28.2%)	5 (6.4%)	
Sample	How often do the children use writing during play (outdoors or indoors)?				Chi-square tests	
	Never/seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always		
Total (<i>n</i> = 215)	66 (30.7%)	120 (55.8)	26 (12.1%)	3 (1.4%)	$\chi^2 (8) = 7.44, p = .49$	
Finland (<i>n</i> = 50)	18 (36%)	27 (54%)	5 (10%)	0		
Norway (<i>n</i> = 86)	31 (36%)	44 (51.2%)	10 (11.6%)	1 (1.2%)		
Sweden (<i>n</i> = 79)	17 (21.5)	49 (62%)	11 (13.9%)	2 (2.5%)		

Table 4. Descriptive Data on Number of Children in Organized Read Aloud and Writing Practices.

Number of children in read-alouds					Chi-square tests
Question: How many children do you usually read for?					
Sample	1–3	4–6	7–9	More than 10	
Total ($n = 222$)	74 (33.4%)	72 (32.4%)	37 (16.7%)	39 (17.6%)	$\chi^2 (10) = 33.41, p < .001$
Finland ($n = 52$)	13 (25%)	12 (23.1%)	16 (30.8%)	11 (21.2%)	
Norway ($n = 91$)	47 (51.6%)	24 (26.4%)	4 (4.4%)	16 (17.6%)	
Sweden ($n = 79$)	14 (16.5%)	36 (45.6%)	17 (21.5%)	12 (15.2%)	
Number of children in writing activities					
Question: How many children do you usually organize writing activities for?					
	1–3	4–6	7–9	More than 10	
Total ($n = 192$)	117 (60.9%)	52 (27%)	17 (8.9%)	6 (3.2%)	$\chi^2 (10) = 13.6, p = .19$
Finland ($n = 44$)	29 (65.9%)	10 (22.7%)	4 (9.1%)	1 (2.3%)	
Norway ($n = 74$)	45 (58.5%)	17 (22.1%)	9 (11.7%)	3 (3.9%)	
Sweden ($n = 74$)	43 (58.1%)	25 (33.8%)	4 (5.4%)	2 (2.8%)	

to regulate activities. There is no notable difference between the countries in the proportion of responses in each respective sub-category; however, learning about the world, and entertainment and participation were the most frequent responses.

Furthermore, in response to the open-ended question about the aim of the writing activity, 178 teachers provided a response that contained enough information to enable classification. Of the responses, six refer to the children's age with claims that the children are too young for writing practices. The responses enabled us to identify three different categories (including sub-categories) in the responses: *to learn about letters*; *to understand the function*; and *to arouse interest*. Some responses covered more than one category. The proportion of responses in each respective sub-category on writing practices did not differ notably between countries. However, learning about letters as being graphic or visual images and communicating a message were the most frequent responses.

Statements about the aims of read-aloud practices

Data from the open-ended question about the aim of reading the chosen book shows that preschool teachers used book content to promote *learning and development* regarding a wide range of aspects, as the following statements illustrate:

To challenge stereotypical gender norms. (Sweden)

It is about friendship. Our themes are friendship and inclusion. (Norway)

It is currently interesting because of corona. (Book on diseases, viruses, and hand-washing) (Finland)

Most preschool teachers who saw reading as a way to support language development referred to language development in general terms only, without mentioning specific aims. In more detailed responses, teachers talked about, for example, wanting to increase children's interest or wanting them to learn specific words, such as spatial language.

Another reason behind read-alouds was to create *a sense of community*. Many preschool teachers explained that they based their choice of book on what children asked to hear about or on what children were interested in, indicating that they wanted the read-alouds to be a shared and entertaining experience for the children.

The child wanted this book, having recognized it from home. (Sweden)

The children think poop is fun. (About *The Story of the Little Mole Who Knew It Was None of His Business*) (Norway)

Preschool teachers also described how they let children choose the books as this was a way to promote participation.

The children think it is interesting and become involved. (Finland)

The children asked to read it – participation. (Norway)

A few preschool teachers used shared book reading to *regulate activities*. They talked about creating calm and gathering the children by reading aloud. A few teachers explained that they read aloud to regulate activities.

Statements about the aim of writing practices

Data from the open-ended question about the aim of the writing activity indicated name writing as being the most common. The responses showed name writing to have two purposes: *name writing to learn about letters* and *name writing related to children's interests and identity*. Furthermore, the practice, recognition, and learning of letters were the joint-second most common reasons for writing practices. The following examples illustrate preschool teachers' views on using writing practices to learn about letters:

Recognize their name, learn to sound out their name, know the order of the letters. (Finland)

Practice writing their name and hearing the sound in words. (Norway)

Practice writing upper- and lower-case letters, fine motor skills. (Sweden)

The preschool teachers offered the children opportunities for *writing to learn about letters*, whereas name writing was described as being an introduction to the letters of the alphabet. Thus, by exploring the graphics in the letters of the children's names, letter learning connected not only to the children's names but also to their visual knowledge. The preschool teachers described practicing writing to teach children about graphemes like upper- and lower-case letters, and also about how to connect the letters with how the letters sound. Furthermore, the preschool teachers explained how children who practice letter knowledge also practice their fine motor skills.

Another aim of the writing activity was children's *writing to understand the function*, which means connecting children's writing to meaningful activities such as writing messages, books, shopping lists, or tickets, as exemplified here:

To teach the child to describe and inform the recipient using text and image. (Sweden)

Their own writing, easy words so they can read by themselves. (Finland)

Build gingerbread houses. (Norway)

Few preschool teachers reported using writing in play activities. However, the results indicate that seven preschool teachers did include writing practices in play activities: the purpose was to promote both communication and function in play.

That text and image belong together and that there are rules for play. (Sweden)

When playing doctor, the children took notes about their patients' problems. (Norway)

Although few writing practices in play were reported, results indicate that the teachers drew attention to the writing initiatives of children with the words *writing to arouse interest*.

Become familiar with letters relating to the children's interest. (Sweden)

The writing happened spontaneously upon the initiative of the children. (Finland)

The children showed an interest and curiosity. (Norway)

The descriptions show that several of the writing practices resulted from the initiative and interest of the children. However, the statements showed that the most common writing practices were initiated by teachers who wanted to arouse children's interest in writing. They began with the children's names, as exemplified here:

Practice writing names, identities. (Norway)

Understanding the meaning of written language. I write my name on a drawing. Others know it is mine. (Sweden)

These statements indicate that the preschool teachers promote children's interest in writing by connecting to the child's name as a function related to affiliation. Thereby, the name fulfills the function

of representing the children as individuals with an identity – for example, by writing their names on something they created to ensure that it belongs to “me”.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to contribute knowledge about Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish preschool teachers’ read-aloud and writing practices in preschool. Our study confirms what prior studies have shown: reading aloud is a common practice in preschool classrooms (Alatalo & Westlund, 2021; Damber, 2015; Eskebaek Larsen et al., 2008; Hagen, 2018). In our study, read-alouds occurred on average three times a week; however, about 80% of the preschool teachers stated that they seldom if ever planned read-alouds. This lack of planning need not imply that teachers were not mindful of early literacy practices; rather, it could simply reflect the informality of learning activities in Nordic preschools and teachers’ beliefs about children’s learning. Nordic preschool teachers value children’s initiatives and choices, viewing them as crucial for learning (Broström et al., 2014). As such, read-alouds on the initiative of children take place as opposed to being planned.

Almost all preschool teachers in our study reported talking about the content of the book, which is important for children’s language development (Wasik & Hindman, 2014). Just as shown in the results of other Nordic research (Alatalo & Westlund, 2021; Damber, 2015; Eskebaek Larsen et al., 2008), our preschool teachers let children choose what book to read as a way to generate their interest in reading and indicated that entertainment was an important purpose of their read-alouds. Both of these – interest and entertainment – are well-established factors in a Nordic context; however, we would argue that systematic didactic planning could optimize book reading as a means of developing children’s language skills (cf. Bingham et al., 2018). By planning and implementing read-alouds that include text talk, preschool teachers enable children to learn about the content of a book while supporting and scaffolding their knowledge and understanding of key vocabulary and text structure (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Bingham et al., 2018; Shedd & Duke, 2008).

When it comes to writing practices, 45.5% of the preschool teachers reported seldom, if ever, organizing writing activities for young children. The activities were rarely planned, especially among the Norwegian teachers. Further, Swedish teachers were more likely to use writing activities at least sometimes in their classrooms. The free responses about the aim of the writing activity demonstrated that emphasis was on children’s learning to identify the letters as graphic/visual images and to communicate in print. Many of the preschool teachers also indicated children’s name writing as being important to the strengthening of identity. These results correspond with those of studies by Bingham et al. (2017) and Korkeamäki and Dreher (2012), who found letter work to be principally about copying and tracing letters, and less about writing or understanding print concepts or letter sound. Hofslundsengen et al. (2020) confirm that Nordic preschools offer logographical input, albeit with less focus on writing as a prioritized activity. One explanation as to why preschool teachers seldom include writing in their practices may be that writing traditionally belongs in school. The mean number of years of work experience of study participants was 15 ($SD = 9.59$), and many may not have been trained in writing practices, which may also be an explanation.

While we found no differences in terms of children’s age and the number of read-aloud sessions, writing activities were more common among preschool teachers working with children older than three. However, we would argue that early literacy is a process that begins at birth and not within a specific time frame or at a specific age (Barton, 2007; Clay, 1991; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998); as such, it is important that Nordic preschool teachers also expose the youngest children to literacy practices. Writing activities in preschool are not the same as formal literacy teaching; however, they serve to expose children to the written language and to develop their curiosity, which supports literacy learning primarily through play.

It should be noted that despite such differences as the Finnish preschool teachers appearing to read storybooks aloud more often and to larger groups than the Norwegian teachers, the responses

of the preschool teachers in our sample are largely the same. This could be due to the similarities between the countries' preschool curriculums, yet also demonstrates a shared understanding among Nordic preschool teachers of the questions *what*, *how*, and *why* in relation to supporting early literacy practice.

On the one hand, preschool teachers' concordant statements regarding the didactic questions *what* and *how* correspond to the tradition of care, socialization, and play in Nordic preschool education (Korkeamäki & Dreher, 2012). This could also suggest that teachers wait for children to take the initiative (Broström et al., 2014) or consider the age of the child before promoting academic content such as early literacy. This seems to be the case with the teachers in our study, who assumed that some children were too young for writing practices.

On the other hand, the results point to a need for a didactic approach (Jank & Meyer, 1997), where play is the core of literacy practice with very young children. This involves early education literacy practices (Barton, 2007) where children create their own meaning and understanding through play and with the preschool teacher as mediator (Smagorinsky, 2011). In this way, writing has a meaningful function in the activity and is not overshadowed by a focus on form. An early start and play give all children a long runway before the take-off into formal teaching of reading and writing (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008).

To make the purpose of preschool literacy practices clearer, there needs to be a stronger focus on the didactic question of *why*. Further research is needed for an in-depth understanding of preschool teachers' current rationale for early literacy practices. Such research would also be valuable when it comes to changes to preschool teacher training that could further teachers' understanding of the importance of diverse, frequent, and play-centered literacy practices.

Limitations

The present study was relatively small (only three countries), and the sample was not random. As such, there are no claims that it is either comprehensive or generalizable; however, what the study does do is provide insight into the thoughts of this group of informants. The strengths of the sample are that they were from different geographic regions and different preschools in the three countries. Since we chose a mixed methods approach, the qualitative analysis supported our analysis and understanding of the quantitative analysis. However, more open-ended questions would have provided deeper insight into the informants' understanding of early literacy. In addition, we do not know whether teachers in their responses were relating to their current preschool classes or their general views on early literacy.

Conclusions

Our results indicate that the preschool teachers focus more on read-aloud practices than on writing practices, and that these early literacy practices are most often unplanned. We know from previous research that early literacy relates closely to the learning of fundamental literacy skills later in school (Hjetland et al., 2020; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008), future narrative and literacy achievement (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998), and later schooling (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997). Therefore, one conclusion of this study is that preschool teachers should plan early literacy activities that address the didactic questions of *what*, *how*, and *why* (Magnusson et al., 2021). Preschool teachers could, for example, plan to expose children to several text types (Montag et al., 2015), implement contextualized and decontextualized text talk during read-alouds (Wasik & Hindman, 2014), and plan to use different scaffolding strategies in writing practices (Gerde et al., 2015; Guo et al., 2012). Despite the preschool teachers in our study emphasizing and recognizing the importance of children's interests and perspectives, they seem to lack the necessary tools to incorporate early literacy practices into, for example, play activities. Literacy practices in preschool as part of spontaneous or planned play activities offer opportunities to engage children in meaningful early literacy

events (Norling & Lillvist, 2016). Free play and children's self-directed activities are understood to be vital to the learning process of children in Nordic preschools (Broström et al., 2014), which is why early literacy practices in play activities in preschool are an important area for further research.

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Appendix

Questions used in the study, type of question, coding of responses, and categories for analyses of responses of the open-ended questions.

Questions about reading-aloud practices.

Question or statement	Quantitative data		Qualitative data	
	Type of question	Coding	Examples of categories for analysis	Themes
How often do you plan reading aloud in advance?	Multiple-choice question: Never, more often without planning, more often with planning, always	0–3		
How often do you usually read aloud storybooks to children?	Multiple-choice question: Never, once a week, twice a week, three times a week, every day	0–4		
How many children do you usually read to?	Multiple-choice question: One child, 2–3 children, 4–6 children, 7–9 children, 10–12 children, more than 12 children	1–6		
Do you usually talk about the content of the book?	Multiple-choice question: Yes, no	1–2		
(What was the latest book you read to children?) What was the aim of reading the chosen book?	Open-ended question		To challenge stereotypical gender norms. It is about friendship. Our themes are friendship and inclusion. The child wanted this book, recognized it from home. The children think poop is fun. The children think it is interesting and become involved. Creating calm and gathering the children by reading aloud.	Reading aloud practices to promote learning and development. Reading aloud practices to create a sense of community. Reading aloud practices to regulate activities

Questions about writing practices

Question or statement	Quantitative data		Qualitative data	
	Type of question	Coding	Examples of categories for analysis	Themes
How often do you plan writing activities in advance?	Multiple-choice question: Never, more often without planning, more often with planning, always.	0–4		
How often do you usually write with a group of children?	Multiple-choice question: Never, once a week, twice a week, three times a week, every day.	0–4		
How many children do you usually write with?	Multiple-choice question: One child, 2–3 children, 4–6 children, 7–9 children, 10–12 children, more than 12 children	1–6		
How often do the children use writing during play (indoors or outdoors)?	Multiple-choice question: Never, once a week, twice a week, three times a week and every day.	0–3		
Do you usually talk with the children about the content of their writing?	Multiple-choice question: Yes, no	1–2		
Do you usually talk with the children about the print (letters)?	Multiple-choice question: Yes, no	1–2		
(What was the latest writing activity you did with a group of children?) What was the aim of the writing activity?	Open-ended question		Recognize their name, learn to sound their name, know the order in which the letters come. Practice writing their name and hearing the sound in word. Support the children in letter writing. They wrote signs with information that it was possible to buy coffee and cakes. Become familiar with letters relating to the children's interest. The children showed interest and curiosity.	Writing practice to learn about letters Writing practices to understand the function Writing practices to arouse interest