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Article

# Understanding Different Approaches to ECE Pedagogy through Tensions

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**Abstract:** The concept of pedagogy is the key to understanding pedagogy in early childhood education (ECE) in the Nordic countries, which are known for their high quality of life and education. However, in ECE, there are several different approaches toward pedagogy and it can be said that pedagogy is a multidimensional and dynamic concept. In this paper, the different approaches to pedagogy are defined and reconceptualized through an integrative literature analysis focusing on scientific papers and research reports of the concept. Five approaches to pedagogy were constructed: pedagogy through interaction, pedagogy through scaffolding, pedagogy through didactics, pedagogy through expertise, and pedagogy through future orientation. The identified tensions and elements within the five approaches are presented. Finally, the shared elements among these pedagogical approaches are presented in a dynamic model.

**Keywords:** Nordic education; interaction; didactics; teacher; children; content; learning; scaffolding; pedagogical model

## 1. Introduction

The focus of this research is to form a contextual understanding of early childhood education (ECE) pedagogy. The context of this paper is within Nordic pedagogy and the Nordic countries. Over the last century, the Nordic countries have established a welfare model that is often cited as the “Nordic model.” This perspective is connected to the economic and social policies common to the Nordic countries, which all have a high level of social welfare and social cohesion that also has natural implications for the education system. According to Garvis et al. [1], the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) continually score high in lifestyle measures, quality of life, and children’s outcomes. However, the Nordic early childhood education has also imported methodology and philosophies from other countries through research; therefore, we would prefer to follow the suggestion of Garvis and Ødegaard [2] (p. 1) of a Nordic dialogue for this paper, where “Nordic perspectives are closely linked to national and global economies and transnational cultural ideas and ideals on families and children’ rather than discussing a ‘Nordic model.’” One of the main concepts of this study is pedagogy. The view on pedagogy can be said to be multidimensional. This can be seen in the research connected to ECE. The amount of research in the field of ECE, especially connected to curricula,

teaching practices, learning, classroom interaction, quality, children's roles, and agency, has increased rapidly across the Nordic countries [3–6]. The concept of pedagogy can therefore be viewed from many perspectives, and it also has therefore multiple definitions.

On a general level, pedagogy can be understood to mean raising young children in the society. The Greek-origin word *paidagōgia* simply means “to lead the child.” In the English-speaking world, the concept of pedagogy is related to formal learning environments and classroom-based learning because of teachers' interventions [7]. In the context used in Nordic countries and Central Europe, the concept of pedagogy is related to the support of children's development through holistic care and education [2,8]. In Bennett's [9] conclusion of curriculum strategies, this kind of pedagogical conceptualization follows the so-called social pedagogic tradition that is typical in Northern and Central Europe and Australia as well. This social pedagogic curriculum approach defines the developmental aims more broadly, enabling local setting tailoring and focusing more on children's agency and social development [10]. Further, this approach to pedagogy has been adopted widely in research on ECE since Vygotsky's [11] theories of learning and has found support in other disciplines, such as sociology, developmental psychology, and cultural studies [12]. Due to the multiple perspectives, it is easy to understand that the previous literature has provided tensions, when it comes to the conceptualization of pedagogy. Therefore, there is a need to take a closer look at pedagogical approaches. The tensions of ECE pedagogy are formed through its multidimensional definition related to historical, cultural, political, social, and societal factors [13]. Thus, it is important to note that the concept of early childhood pedagogy is dynamic and needs constant reconceptualization. From these premises, we conducted an integrative literature review to form a critical understanding and reconceptualization of the Nordic early childhood education pedagogy. In this paper, we will explain the understanding of the ECE pedagogy that is presented in literature and finally suggest five tentative approaches for a better understanding of the concept of pedagogy. It is important to note that the context of our five tentative approaches is in the Nordic countries, within the Nordic dialogue and view on ECE.

## 2. Literature Review on the Multiple Viewpoints of Pedagogy in ECE across the Nordic Countries

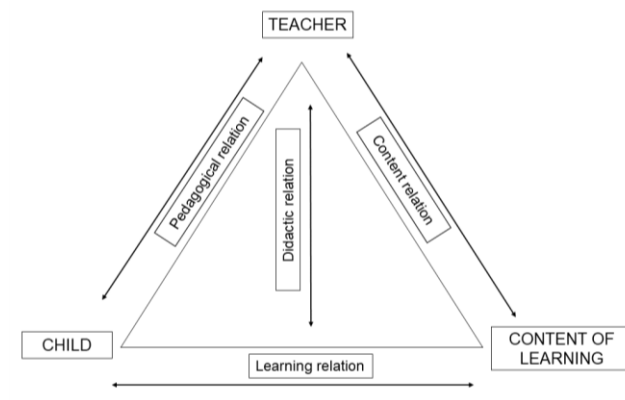
As mentioned before, the understanding of pedagogy is multidimensional, depending on the historic, cultural, political, social, and societal factors [1,13]. The concept of pedagogy is mentioned to cover the practice, teaching orientation, organization of the learning environment, and the operational culture. In this section, we will provide a summary of this through literature.

Traditionally, ECE pedagogy is viewed as a tool between the outcomes defined in curricula and other guiding documents and children's learning; thus, it should be goal-oriented and systematic [14]. According to Kansanen [15], pedagogy contains interaction, aims for the best of the child (scaffolding), and takes place in a historical and political context. These are not permanent, and they are also future orientated. A strong focus on the future can be found in the national curricula across the Nordic countries, where learning to learn and critical thinking skills are recognized as transversal skills. The development of these skills creates a basis for the development of competence and lifelong learning. [16]. Further, according to van Oers [17], pedagogy is understood as a concept of teaching in curriculum documents and often connected with the general understanding and beliefs of learning, childhood, and interactions in the ECE settings [13]. According to Siraj-Blatchford et al. [18], pedagogy in ECE can be understood from a broad perspective with the integration of curricula, values, and philosophies that currently influence political, social, and operational contexts of early childhood education [19]. Depending on the focus and viewpoint, the whole picture of pedagogy is understood through the different contexts in different countries and educational approaches [18]. Therefore, in the Nordic countries, pedagogy is based on the values and principles of the society about the naturalness of childhood, equality and egalitarianism, democracy and participation, emancipation, warm and cooperative social relationships, and solidarity [16].

The pedagogical viewpoints can be divided into underpinning “categories” as well. For instance, van Oers [17] and Fleer [20] have identified clusters of pedagogy through four discrete categories according to their cultural-historical goals. These categories explain the pedagogy of ECE in the context of learning. Some of these categories are adult oriented, such as learning to perform and learning to make meaning, or more child oriented, such as learning to belong and learning to participate. In this model by van Oers [17], we can identify some central elements of pedagogy, for example, the interaction and care, supporting and scaffolding, teaching and content-oriented learning, the future orientation of education, as well as teachers’ and policymakers’ expertise in understanding and transforming goals behind the curriculum of pedagogy [21]. The first two categories include learning of important concepts and skills that are appropriate for the cultural community and set by more advanced members of the community, where the pedagogy aims to produce learning. These first categories are typical of curriculum documents in nations that follow a strictly academic pre-primary tradition and focus on “readiness for school” as an important aim (e.g., Belgium, France, UAE, UK, and the US) [9]. However, the last two pedagogical categories by van Oers [17] (see also Fleer [20]) view the learning process from the children’s perspectives and holistic development and can also be considered through participatory learning where the pedagogy is aimed to support the children. The “learning of belonging” category focuses on the learners’ identity, motivation, and values and aims to support development through these. The “learning to participate” category aims to empower children toward creative and critical citizenship, where they can share learning experiences and adopt agency to develop their own learning [20,22].

Teaching and content-oriented teaching, as well as the scaffolding and supportive teaching, have been traditionally separated from each other. Pedagogical understanding, popular in Nordic countries and Central Europe, has received much attention in the educational discourses the recent decades. Children are seen as active participants and citizens in their educational society; thus, the teacher’s role is to support their learning and initiatives [10]. This kind of pedagogical approach can be recognized from the models of play-based pedagogy, where learning takes place solely through play [23]. However, teacher-led and content-oriented education require a different pedagogical approach, where the focus of teaching is more strongly aimed toward the didactical goals and delivering the set goals [9].

In Sweden, Samuelson and Carlsson [23] explain pedagogy by evaluating the quality of pedagogy through teachers’ decisions and methods. More generally, they explain that pedagogy is an action of the teacher and it should be understood based on the strategies the teacher is using to bring children’s skills, competencies, and ideas to the center of educational actions. Apart from the other Nordic countries, in Finland, traditionally, the basic elements of pedagogy have been described through a didactic triangle [15]. This German-originated concept of “didactics” is used to refer to the teaching expertise and competence in the substance area in education in Nordic countries [24]. In this approach, didactics is understood to attach the teacher-led and school-like learning situations often with frontal teaching, while the pedagogical approach considers more broadly the multidimensional aspects of the teaching–learning process [21]. The didactic triangle (see Figure 1) aims to approach the teaching and learning process. The didactic triangle considers the society around educational institutions, a school or an ECE center, from the perspectives of curriculum-based content and teachers’ expertise. School is not a fortress but an important stakeholder of society [25]. The model also aims to pay attention to the perspective of both the teacher and the child and thus value the conception of children as active agents [15,26]. In this triangle, pedagogy is understood through relationships among the teacher, the child, and the learning content. These three basic elements of pedagogy are connected to each other through the didactic triangle [27]. However, in ECE, children are younger and their development and learning are more intertwined with well-being and social aspects [10,23].



**Figure 1.** Representation of the instructional core model (cf. [15,28]).

In ECE, the didactic triangle visualizes the basic relationships between teachers and children, which eventually leads to the development of pedagogical actions of the teaching staff [29,30]. Pedagogy is implemented through the pedagogical process, in which the elements are the driving force and purpose, starting point, functional part, and process outcomes [19]. When implemented to practice, a framework requires contextualization and critical reflection to support the holistic learning concepts of ECE. For example, this framework focuses on the interaction between an individual child and a teacher, which is rather a dualistic model in Finland, where togetherness, belonging, and shared meaning-making processes in a peer group are essential elements of ECE [29,30]. This interplay has been critical in Nordic ECE practices that are also entwined with play, education, and learning [23]. The relationship between teacher and content, and children's interests and learning relation, could be emphasized in pedagogy through planning and implementation. ECE is not based on teachers' expertise of subjects and their content but holistic learning [10]. Care also has a strong role in ECE, especially with the youngest children [31]. Thus, the didactic relationship refers to the aim to promote the child to achieve the goals according to the curriculum [28].

The tensions of ECE pedagogy are formed through these multidimensional definitions described above. For this reason, the concept of early childhood pedagogy is dynamic and needs constant reconceptualization. In the next section, we will describe the methods used in this study, which will take us toward a new Nordic reconceptualization of pedagogy.

### 3. Study Research Questions

The purpose of our research is to deepen our understanding and reconceptualize Nordic early childhood education pedagogy with the help of an integrative literature review. As we earlier described, we see early childhood education pedagogy defined in relation to historical, cultural, social, and societal factors. Since these factors are constantly changing, the concept of early childhood pedagogy needs continual reconceptualization. The pedagogy of early childhood education has been examined in the past using conceptual analysis [32]. Further, the purpose of this article is purely to develop theoretically the concept of pedagogy. Initially, we wish to scrutinize the background and character of early years education in terms of pedagogical approaches, then to elaborate the findings of several years of research about children's learning in preschool related to the curriculum of early years' education, and, finally, to propose sustainable pedagogy for the future to promote creativity in future generations. From these premises, the following research question are conducted for this research:

1. What approaches of early childhood education pedagogy can be identified in literature?
2. What kind of tensions can be identified from the early childhood education pedagogy definition in literature?

3. What are the shared elements among the different pedagogical approaches in ECE literature?

#### 4. Methods

Our data are textual. Research on document sources has applicability in educational sciences, as educational systems consistently produce excessive amounts of documentary data [33]. In this research, we use highly relevant textual data regarding the definition of ECE pedagogy. It consists of European and mainly Nordic research literature, legislation, and national curricula on early childhood education pedagogy. An integrative literature review aims to lead to fresh insights and to reconceptualize and expand on the theoretical foundation of early childhood education pedagogy [34,35] and aligns with our perspective of the outcome of this paper. The aim of our data analysis is to critically analyze and examine the literature and the main ideas and relationships of pedagogy [34]. The conceptual structure of the topic of an integrative literature review often requires the adoption of a guiding theory, a set of competing models, or a perspective on the topic [35]. Further, the author argues that there is little guidance on how to write an integrative literature review. Our integrative literature review was conducted in three phases. The first phase was to collect data. In the first phase, the scientific papers ( $n = 62$ ), doctoral theses ( $n = 9$ ), and research reports ( $n = 4$ ) were acquired through an advanced search of the Helka primo and ERIC database search engines with the keywords “early childhood education pedagogy.” From the search results, a total of 41 scientific papers and reports were selected. The selection criteria for the literature were based on their central role in Nordic discourse of the definition of early childhood education pedagogy that was assessed through the frequency of references in other scientific publications and/or national curriculum and steering documents.

To answer the research question, in the second phase of the integrated literature review, we applied a thematic content analysis to the textual data. We divided the notions that came up repeatedly under the same theme. Leedy and Omrod [36] describe content analysis as “a detailed and systematic examination of the content of a particular body of material for the purpose of identifying patterns, themes, or biases” (p. 155). We were able to identify a total five themes across the documents describing approaches to pedagogy from different viewpoints (Table 1). These approaches to pedagogy were pedagogy through (1) interaction, (2) scaffolding, (3) didactics, (4) expertise, and (5) future orientation. In the third, phase a team of 8 researchers met online and critically examined and discussed these approaches to pedagogy. This was done to have a shared understanding of each approach to pedagogy. According to Leedy and Omrod [36], this type of approach leads to the highest level of objective analysis as the identification of material can be studied and discussed, allowing the quality examined to be mutually agreed upon.

**Table 1.** Approaches to the pedagogy of ECE.

Thematic Approach to Pedagogy	Keywords Describing the Approach
Pedagogy through interaction	Care, sensitivity toward the child, belonging, interaction, personal well-being, sense of security, safety, care
Pedagogy through scaffolding	Support to expand learning, children’s agency, co-operation, zone of proximal development, participation, shared meaning-making
Pedagogy through didactics	Subject orientation and management, curriculum, traditional teaching, self-regulation, cognitive learning
Pedagogy through expertise	Profession, knowledge, know-how, competence, skills, methods
Pedagogy through future orientation	Curriculum, goals of education, sustainable education, future teachers, innovations, transversal competencies

## 5. Results

Each of the five approaches to pedagogy (Table 1) of ECE serves as a lens to critically evaluate pedagogy in the early childhood education setting. We will explain each approach, its highlights, and identified tensions in this section.

### 5.1. Pedagogy through Interaction

Pedagogy through interaction can be understood to focus on a child's personal wellbeing, sense of security, safety, and care. According to Pursi and Lipponen [31], pedagogy is understood as an interactional resource between children and teachers. When teachers participate and learn to observe children's play signals and moments, they can transform this knowledge into concrete pedagogical practices. From ECE pedagogical perspectives, these integrative and interactional practices create the quality of ECE pedagogy. Pedagogical interaction, especially with young children, demands sensitive observation, responsiveness, and sensitivity during the pedagogical moments. Further, ECE pedagogy is holistic in its nature; thus, there are also many studies concerning the integrative nature of early childhood pedagogy [37]. An essential aspect of pedagogy is formed through carefully planned and structured goal-oriented interaction between children and teachers [32]. Emotionally supportive teachers are warm, sensitive, and responsive to children's needs, and they provide children with appropriate levels of autonomy [38]. In this definition, the belonging and an interaction-oriented approach to pedagogy are relevant. Together with teacher-child interaction, teachers' role as an influencer in children's peer relations is an essential part of pedagogy. Through this, it is aimed to increase togetherness and teachers aim to scaffold interaction between children, reduce disruptive behavior and bullying [39], and support shared meaning-making processes and relations [40].

Pedagogy cannot only be about spending time together with children, and it has been questioned whether this kind of interaction and belonging-oriented ECE truly follows the national curricula. Several analyses of these guidelines show that educators in the Nordic countries are struggling with uniting the concepts of care, upbringing, and education, also known as *Educare* [41]. It is also criticized for the home-like design and features, where teachers' work is similar to that of nannies. Lembrér and Johansson [42] discuss the tension in the ECE environment that exists between the natural development in home-like settings versus the schoolification in classroom environments that see the child as either being or becoming.

### 5.2. Pedagogy through Scaffolding

Pedagogy through scaffolding can be understood to focus on supporting the learning through non-direct facilitation of children's competencies and existing knowledge through enhancing the children's participation. The task of ECE in the Nordic context is to consciously guide children in forming their personal identities so that the children learn to recognize the impacts of their actions on other people and their surroundings. Thus, the concept of learning in ECE is viewed as a dynamic process where the children are gradually socialized into the culture of their society, its practices, and its values through active meaning-making [43]. Scaffolding is universally associated with socio-cultural theory. According to the Vygotskian approach, learning first takes place on a social level, before it takes place on an individual level. Learning is at its best when it occurs within the learner's zone of proximal development, which means the area between an actual and a potential level of development [11]. By scaffolding, a more experienced member of the society can support the child through pedagogy to expand their learning and competencies. Scaffolding is seen as a situation-specific, dynamic, and interpersonal process in which both children and teachers are active participants, showing initiative and making decisions [26]. Sheridan et al. [44] have highlighted the interrelatedness of children's and teachers' roles in learning.

Identified tensions: The concept of scaffolding has become unclear when scaffolding is understood as support [45]. This can lead to the use of scaffolding as a teacher-initiated,

directive instructional strategy that contradicts the more responsive socio-historical background for the metaphor. Van de Pol et al. [46] found that there is no consensus with respect to the definition of scaffolding, which means that the definitions of pedagogy through scaffolding vary. Mastering long-term goals requires optimal scaffolding over an extended period, and this demands a dynamic approach to pedagogy. Besides the teacher, the learning environment is a significant agent in scaffolding that must be organized to meet children's needs [47]. Hakkarainen and Bredikyte [48] have shown how creating the zone of proximal development should combine teaching and peer group functioning. Participation and interaction in various common activities, especially play with peers, creates learning potential. However, a participatory pedagogy that aims to enhance children's agency and participation is shown to take place only through free-play activities in Nordic ECE [12].

### *5.3. Pedagogy through Didactics*

Nordic countries [24]: Initially, pedagogics referred to the study of child-rearing, whereas now the connotation is more connected to the disciplinary field [15]. Didactics, then referring to competence and illustrating [49], refers to the disciplinary study of examining teaching. Thereby, didactics can be understood as the competence of illustrating something for someone else or the "art of pointing something out to someone" [50]. Brostörm and Veijleskov [50] understand didactics as the creation of the environmental preconditions for children's learning, acknowledging the various contents and their elements. Teacher's competencies entail didactic skills, which refers to the ability to create preconditions for the children to learn various contents. In early childhood education and care, didactics has its specific meaning. Didactics, there, includes interaction and communication between the teacher, the child, and the contents that are being learned [44]. Where two parties can focus on and share their attention with something, it generates an educational event or situation [49]. Didactics and pedagogical quality are phenomena centered around the various environmental factors related to children's learning and their relationship to the general aims and goals of early childhood education and care.

Identified tensions: When we discuss didactics, we consider enhancing "subject matter" competency in children. The OECD, together with ECE scholars, has expressed concerns about the risk of too much emphasis on formal teaching and other "schoolification". Referring to the Convention on the Rights of the Child [51], the OECD advocates an understanding of the curriculum in which the children should have a high degree of initiative and stresses reinforcing "those aspects of curriculum that contribute to the well-being and involvement of the child" [9] (p. 7) and recognizes the child as an active meaning-maker of educational processes and practices [26]. For example, Bodrova [52] has shown that in the Nordic and Central European context of ECE, the time focused on free play and playful activities has been reduced over the past decade and replaced with teacher-focused learning, such as reading activities. She raises a warning that the teaching of young children should not only be focused on academization and pedagogy should be a process balanced between play and more formal activities.

### *5.4. Pedagogy through Expertise*

Pedagogy through expertise focuses on the practitioners' beliefs and values about pedagogical competence. Pedagogy is understood to refer to the teachers' and educators' professional skills and competencies, in other words, their pedagogical expertise [44]. The emphasis of pedagogy in the entity of early childhood education and care requires pedagogical expertise as well as the personnel's shared understanding of how to best promote children's learning and well-being [40]. Teachers' pedagogical practices are framed by personal values, epistemologies, and core conceptions about knowledge and perception of the children [53]. Additionally, the teachers' enthusiasm and self-conception play an important role in pedagogy [54]. When pedagogy is viewed through expertise, it is always culture specific, influenced by the teacher's own history of education and training and



the context in which the teacher operates. Theoretical understanding and interpretations of pedagogy adapt to the teacher's practice in relation to social situations (such as curricula) [55]. Interpretations about the role, goals, and values of ECE influence how pedagogy is understood and what emphasis is placed on different approaches [16,56]. Continuing development of the expertise is essential. Ukkonen-Mikkola and Fonsén [57] state that pedagogical expertise is not merely a skill learned from teacher training programs but further in-service training supports the promotion of pedagogical quality where the professional development and reflection of ECE teachers have a positive impact on pedagogy.

Identified tensions: Depending on the time and place, the different training of the teachers led to difference in expertise. Experts of ECE cooperate in multi-professional teams, where the expertise is shared relationally [57,58]. All professionals are required to have a wide range of pedagogical knowledge and skills, but it has been debated whether the national training program covers all these [21]. Multi-professionalism is interpreted as an ideal and equal situation between ECE professionals or as a conflicting practice [59]. Through the experienced goals and personal values, different teachers emphasized children's social skills, attention to school maturity and the teaching of academic skills, cooperation with multi-professional organization, or co-operation with parents [40]. Professionalism has been interpreted so that the diversity of skills and the starting point for pedagogical work are equal. This can lead to the ambiguity of the professional identity, the multiplication of roles, different interpretations of the values and concepts of learning, inefficient work organization, and finally reduction of the pedagogical expertise itself [57]. Finally, it has been criticized whether the training gives the experts enough skills for life-long learning and aiming the pedagogy toward the future.

### *5.5. Pedagogy through Future Orientation*

The field of ECEC is in constant development. The future of education has been of interest to many global influencers, but it has been little researched. For example, the OECD [60] and the World Economic Forum [61] listed future skills and competencies that future citizens should have. The OECD Education 2030 project stated that education should embrace three further categories of competencies, called transformative competencies. These include adopting new values; reconciling tensions and dilemmas; and finally taking responsibility for oneself, the environment, and others [60]. According to Kangas and Harju-Luukkainen [62], the solution for addressing these transformative competencies to support children in becoming innovative, responsible, and aware is the notion of play: to see (all) play as a learning arena instead of teacher-led learning in front of the class activities. In this, the teachers' role must change as well. Teachers should scaffold children's learning, social relations, and competencies in the classrooms. Further, teachers are challenged to implement pedagogical methods to support children to become active agents of their learning [29]. Further, teachers should be active agents in their professional development [63]. In all this, research-based teacher education in the Nordic countries has an important role in developing critical thinkers for future professions. Finnish teachers' competencies and quality of teaching are defined in recent policy documents that introduce the future competencies of teachers, including expertise agency and an innovative approach [64].

Identified tensions: Teachers are given many different roles as well as values across different documents, regarding future skills and competencies. Teachers are asked to be more of everything in the future. Teachers should, for example, be aware of the psychological, physical, and social development of children and be competent to use this knowledge to support children individually as well as in shared interaction. Further, teachers are expected in the future not only to follow the curriculum or school operational culture but also to actively develop and change it through critical notions and analysis. Teachers should be able to lead educational teams to make the "needed" changes. This was in some research seen to be possible through critical and reflective development. According to Kangas and Harju-Luukkainen [62], teachers in ECE are seen as "miracle makers" of the future but without proper resources and education.

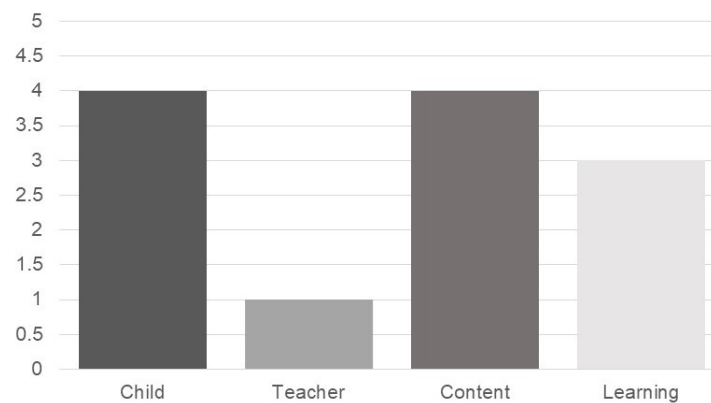
## 6. Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to deepen our understanding and reconceptualize the Nordic early childhood education pedagogy with the help of an integrative literature review. As a result, we were able to identify five approaches to pedagogy and their tensions in the ECE literature. These approaches to pedagogy were pedagogy through interaction, scaffolding, didactics, expertise, and future orientation. As Alila and Ukkonen-Mikkola [32] have stated, the pedagogy of ECE should always be based on scientific knowledge and follow the national goals, contents, methods, and learning environments of education. In everyday ECE work, pedagogy is defined through the existing tensions, different theoretical approaches, and the values as well as the beliefs of the individual teachers, but also through policymakers' intentions and guidelines that are visible in different policy documents. Pedagogy is both individually and collectively conceptualized. Therefore, it is essential that the concept of pedagogy is explored and re-defined repeatedly by everyone within the ECE context, and with this model of approaches to pedagogy the shared as well as different elements of the pedagogy can be identified. In early childhood education, learning and teaching are perceived as an entwined, dynamic entity where the child and the teachers are both active agents participating in the meaning-making and creating of the joint understanding around the concept [7,13,19]. In this paper, we have analyzed a substantial amount of literature concerning the ECE pedagogy in Nordic countries and conclude that a critical understanding and reconceptualization are needed to increase dialogue and shared meaning-making among researchers, teachers, students of ECE, as well as policymakers and other stakeholders of early education internationally.

The Nordic social pedagogic approach has found support in other disciplines, such as sociology, developmental psychology, and cultural studies, related to historical, cultural, political, social, and societal factors of education and society [13]. According to the previous literature, pedagogy can be understood as a multidimensional concept where the different definitions of pedagogy create tensions. Therefore, there is a need to take a closer look at these pedagogical approaches. As explained above, the pedagogy of ECE has been explained through different models, for example, the didactical triangle [15], where the aim is to reduce the multidimensional tensions into simplified two-dimensional orientations through hierarchical visualization. It is important to note that in our suggested approaches of pedagogy, it cannot lose its multidimensional and dialogical nature. Further, this is also the reason why the elements of pedagogy have been presented without which pedagogy cannot exist in a dialogical model and that can be considered as "sine qua non" premises for pedagogy despite its definitions, dimensions, or approaches used.

How should all this be understood in an everyday ECE context? The five approaches to pedagogy and their tensions are visible in all pedagogical activities in ECE. However, these do also have shared elements that are cross sectional. We were able to identify these elements of pedagogy of ECE as Child, Teacher, Content, and Learning. These areas are all needed when pedagogy is implemented and developed, but they are as essential also when pedagogy is considered and discussed as a theoretical phenomenon through a dynamic Nordic dialogue. The areas are not hierarchical but parallel: they exist next to each other in a horizontal framework and cannot be stacked. These areas are also dynamic, and they change over time, situation, and participation. This kind of model has previously been used by Thomas [65], who has introduced it as the model of a child's participation in the context of children's social services.

In Figure 2, these four elements are presented in a tentative framework. The role and approach of each different element vary among different situations within the pedagogical practices or literature. Figure 2 could, for example, showcase an example where child-initiated play and exploration is the practical implementation of the pedagogy of ECE. Here the role and perspective of children and the content are strong, while the learning is mediating and the teacher has a minor role.



**Figure 2.** Four elements of pedagogy in a tentative framework.

In the shared elements of pedagogy, Child represents the active learner, who is understood to participate in the ECE through the whole child approach [12], or as the object of a teacher's expertise and pedagogical actions [18] is nevertheless a necessary element of the pedagogy. Through the interaction and scaffolding approaches, the teacher–child interaction has been understood as a central element of pedagogy, but children should not be placed below teachers or content, as in Kansanen's [15] model. In the Nordic dialogue, children's perspectives of learning, participation, play, and peer relations have been the focus of Nordic pedagogy research [2].

Teacher represents a person who has pedagogical training, especially specialized in the ECE. A teacher's values, curriculum, and concepts of a child; the teacher's learning; and the relationship between a teacher and a child guide the pedagogical decisions. Learning is often associated with strategies and contexts connected to learning or the teacher [15,16,24,27]. A teacher implements pedagogical activities in practices with a team, the whole ECE unit, and guardians and promotes the dialogical understanding of pedagogy. The teacher promotes children's learning, well-being, and participation through developing, designing, implementing, evaluating, and developing the ECE practices [13,40,57].

Content represents the curricular-based materials; therefore, it represents the multidimensional nature of pedagogy. Traditionally, it is explained that the teacher masters the pedagogical content through substance knowledge and transforms it to operational knowledge [63]. However, the social pedagogical approach in the Nordic countries sees the child as an active content user and producer who has competencies to make meanings and through interpretative reproduction act as a content master [13,25]. The holistic and multidimensional nature of pedagogy needs critical evaluation and reconceptualization of the content. However, the content is essential in pedagogy and differentiates pedagogy from other adult–child interaction.

Learning represents not only the intentions to learn but also the tensions that the curricula and different understandings of learning itself create [9]. Theories of children's development, such as learning through imitation or intent of participation, underpin responsive pedagogy built on principles specified in contemporary curricula, such as relationships, family, and community. There is always some understanding and approach about learning existing with pedagogy in ECE, but to reconceptualize and thus understand it and the values and goals requires more critical considerations. It has been shown that children's interest in and relationship to the content of the learning form the learning relation [43]. This relationship of learning manifests itself in the selected forms of learning [15].

While developing policy documents for education, implementation processes, and practices, often politicians, managers, teacher trainers, or practitioners are not familiar with different discourses influencing their understanding of ECE pedagogy. Therefore, the policy document and everyday practices do not always integrate in the way it was

intended [19,21]. Therefore, it is important to develop the understanding of ECE pedagogy through dialogical and critical discourse in the forthcoming years.

Scholars defining and exploring ECE pedagogy should critically reflect their individual perspectives. Different approaches toward pedagogy exist and define the ways the scholars, educators, and policymakers understand and value pedagogy [14,66]. Different underlying values and theoretical conceptions behind the concept of pedagogy can cause biases if they are not critically and dialogically considered. It is important to note that approaches presented in this paper should be understood as parallel not hierarchical. As Atjonen [67] states, “pedagogy is in and hot—now and especially in the future.” The tentative framework of pedagogy as multidimensional, dialogical, and dynamic, changing over time, situation, and the participants involved, allows the scholars as well as policymakers, teachers, and other stakeholders of the ECE to review and critically evaluate the values and goals of the current pedagogical approach.

## 7. Concluding Thoughts

ECE pedagogy builds the future of children and societies. However, its definition has been vague. Different values and theoretical conceptions behind the understanding of pedagogy can cause biases if they are not critically and dialogically considered. In this paper, we have presented five different parallel approaches to ECE pedagogy. The five approaches to pedagogy and their tensions are visible in all pedagogical activities in ECE. However, these do also have shared elements that are cross sectional. We were able to identify these elements of pedagogy of ECE as Child, Teacher, Content, and Learning. These can be implemented as suggested in a tentative framework. This type of understanding and perspective of pedagogy is needed not only for critical evaluations of individual approaches and an understanding of pedagogy but also to further develop early childhood education.

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