

## Dialogue about “learning” across the Northern Norway-Russia border: An analysis of textbooks in kindergarten teacher education



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### Abstract

*This paper is the first in a series of three studies that explore the pedagogy used in the Norwegian and Russian early childhood settings by examining texts that are part of the syllabus in two early childhood teacher education programs that participated in our project with student international exchanges. The study explores how Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of dialogue relates to the concept of 'learning' in the context of early childhood teacher educations in Northern Norway and Northern Russia. The data sources are textbooks used as syllabi for kindergarten teacher education in those countries. These national dialogues are understood as authoritative discourses on the concepts of learning to which the students in both countries have to relate. By being inspired by Bakhtin's notion of dialogue, we consider that the ideas in textbooks areas are in a dialogic relationship as they are parts of a regulating battle between centrifugal and centripetal forces. A constructivist perspective on learning and the division of the learning process into subject, knowledge and education areas are identified as the centripetal forces in the dialogue on learning. Activities, tools, and the role of adults are identified as centrifugal forces. Based on the hypothetical premise that textbooks influence practices and that practice may unfold as textbooks describe, we have created hypothetical discussions between educators and students in these countries. The study provides better insight on the premises for the dialogue about learning across international borders which can be useful in internalization and exchange programs in kindergarten teacher educations in different countries.*

**Keywords:** Learning, textbooks, early childhood teacher education, internalization, dialogism.

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## **Introduction**

The overall aim of this study is to shed light on the conditions for cultural transformation and dialogues across borders between Russia and Norway in the region of the Barents, regarding teacher education of the early childhood pre-service teachers. Moreover, the study brings forward a long-term pedagogical aim of nourishing dialogues and supporting friendship among the early childhood student-teachers and teacher educators across the border between Norway and Russia in the region of the Barents. By scrutinizing how the concept of “learning” is conveyed in most syllabus textbooks in Northern Russia and Northern Norway, the rationale is to ground our understandings of the discursive conditions of the student's professional development in these geographical areas. The Barents is a cornerstone of regional cooperation in the far north of Europe. Due to the more interconnected and interdependent world in which we live, the idea of “region” is becoming more elastic and porous. Regionalization is an evolutionary process that builds on existing realities and current initiatives. Therefore, it is useful to understand the kindergarten teacher's intercultural encounter as a dialogic and heteroglossia process (Holquist, 1981; Kirova et al., 2018).

This study, following a Bakhtin-inspired discourse analysis, begins with an assumption of difference and similarities as an integral part of cultural activity and its outcomes, such as textbooks in use

for professional education. In addition, we consider the co-created constraints, hypothetically locally situated that the students and teacher educators encounter while reading a textbook.

Studies situated in regional contexts have received increased interest, attracting more applicants to international studies in higher education (Altbach & Teichler, 2001). This is suitable when cooperation between educational institutions is part of an already-existing plan to develop a particular region (Knight, 2013). This study was situated in the region of Barents in the far North Europe. The background for studying how the notion of children’s ‘learning’ is conveyed in textbooks across the national borders of Northern Norway and Northeast of Russia, was the existing memorandum of understandings between universities in Barents; UiT- The Arctic University of Norway and Murmansk Arctic State University. In addition, the study was connected to KINDknow Research center’s goal of sustainable futures which includes value orientation in research to global and local awareness. Global awareness and resilience to conflict is emphasized in education for sustainable futures (UNESCO, 2016). Studies anchored in regional development can encourage internationalization.

Exposing pre-service teachers to diversity and provoking them to rethink their taken-for-granted assumptions about their neighbors were central to the pedagogical program included in the research design. The pedagogical program followed up the Norwegian policy on internationalization in higher education. It is stated that students should be introduced to and become a part of the international discourse on pedagogy to achieve a high international academic level. Furthermore, irrespective of the level of its use. It should be in the curriculums of study programs rather than in the institutions (NMER, 2017, p. 63). Internationalization is thus understood as a requirement for Norwegian kindergarten teacher education (UHR, 2012).

Similarly, internationalization is a part of a discourse on the modernization of higher education in Russia (Kukarenko & Zashikhina, 2017). In this perspective, international cooperation has become a resource and driving force of Russian university development.

There is a general expectation that internationalization and exchange in higher education contribute to mutual understanding and problematizing taken-for-granted assumptions and practices (Jones, 2017). Yet, a wide range of factors will impact the experience of students when they study abroad or in other ways partake in the exchange, dialogue, and collaboration across borders. Earlier studies point to the environmental factors arising from personal history, family context, institutional nature, country location of the study destination, and policy (e.g., Jones, 2017). Each of these has a role to play. However, this study aims to provide a premise for a more informed dialogue across the international borders of Norway and Russia on an epistemological level, in a much-needed area of research.

Driving our rationale for comparing the textbooks is the belief that comparison does not mean that one discourse is better than the other but rather the belief that by comparing the epistemological underpinnings of the concept of “learning” we can go beyond the surface of the understandings of what takes place in practice in the respective early year’s institutions. With this in mind, our aim is to open up discourses of learning in education. Knowledge of nuances in epistemology across borders can shed light and facilitate reflection on our educational curriculum and contribute to a more culturally sensitive form of teacher education and later teachers’ practices.

The main research questions in our study are as follows: What information on the concepts of learning is found in authoritative discourses on learning in textbooks used in kindergarten teacher education in Northern Norway and Northern Russia? And how can this information be used as the premise for cross-

border dialogue? The first research question will be addressed by answering the following two sub-questions:

1. What discourses about children’s learning in kindergartens can be identified in textbooks in kindergarten teacher education programs?
2. What similarities and differences exist in the concepts of learning found in the textbooks in the two countries?

The second research question will be addressed by, first, considering how the information about the concepts of learning in the two discourses relate dialogically to each other and then by discussing how these findings can be used to innovate the cross-border dialogue.

These questions allow us to perform a literature review drawing on the inspiration from Richard Andrews (2010). We compare and relate the contents of different textbooks dialogically, revealing similarities and differences in the perception of children’s role in their learning and the positions of the organizers of learning situations in kindergarten. Moreover, we identify various perceptions of the tools for children’s learning outlined in the textbooks. To that end, we recognize the centrifugal and centripetal forces (Bakhtin, 2012) enabling a cross-border dialogue among educators. The study is relevant for teacher education regarding the perspective of international understanding in general and cultural exchange in the region.

## **Earlier research**

According to Anders Holmgren (2011), textbook research is not a separate field of research because it has not an internal structure and autonomy. Today, it is a somewhat interdisciplinary research activity on the threshold between pedagogy and didactics.

There is no agreement about what the core content of learning should be, neither in Norway nor in Russia. A study of the syllabus literature in the area of children’s development, play, and learning in Norwegian kindergarten teacher education reveals that there is no canon of textbooks in Norway (Bjerkestrand et al., 2015; Sataøen & Fossøy, 2019). Both the content and scope of the syllabus literature vary greatly from institution to institution, and the authors question the disparities of the findings and ask whether the syllabus literature is too scientifically uncritical. They suggest that the reason for this might be that, yet no common teacher educational culture in Norway has been developed (Sataøen & Fossøy, 2019). In Russia, the main disagreement is about what kind of knowledge textbooks should contain, “the true knowledge” or different opinions on study subjects of different researchers (Galaguzova, 2018; Mirskij, 2004).

John Bennett (2010) concludes in a comparison between Russian and Nordic curricula that the Russian tradition of kindergarten has much in common with the Nordic, despite a stronger focus on health in the Russian kindergarten. In most regions, investment in young children remains high (Bennett, 2010). When it comes to structural aspects, such as the pre-service training of educators and the number of children per staff, the Russian kindergartens compare well with most Western countries. He finds that Russian kindergartens pay attention to the holistic development of young children. The curricula are child-oriented and based on a strong tradition of research. While the Russian tradition includes “a balanced mix of instruction, child-initiated activities and thematic work where adult purposes are foregrounded” (p. 21), the Nordic tradition includes mostly the child’s own strategies for learning through relationships and through play and through educator scaffolding at the appropriate moment.

In a study of how the concepts of *play* and *learning* were discussed and which of the two was the dominant concept in the national framework plans (curriculum) for kindergartens in Norway, China, Finland, and Hong Kong, Aihua Hu and Elin Eriksen Ødegaard found that the concept of learning is clearly present and multifaceted in all framework plans (Hu & Ødegaard, 2019). Nevertheless, the concept of learning was weighted differently and was given different connotations in the framework plans. “Learning to know,” “learning to do,” and “learning to be” have different positions in the four frameworks. The two Confucius frameworks pay more attention to “learning to know,” while the Nordic gives more attention to “learning to do” and “learning to be”.

The question as to how globalized concepts and discourses have a local impact in various local kindergarten teacher education programs was studied in three different kindergarten teacher training programs—a bachelor’s degree in Namibia, part-time education in an indigenous region of Colombia, and a workplace-based kindergarten teacher education for students having immigrant/refugee backgrounds in Canada (Kirova et al., 2018). This study showed how the expectations that the researchers describe as Western and related, for example, to describing children’s development and learning became difficult and almost impossible for some of the students. In Colombia, the students had a hard time comprehending how one could teach children something by playing with them. They described their own upbringing by adults who never played with children and how they had to change their attitudes and ways of being through education. They had to stop saying “no” to children and instead encourage them, and they had to unlearn the coercion of children. The researchers reflect on how some globalized, so-called *correct* kindergarten educational practices challenge or colonize local practices in several places in the world (Kirova et al., 2018).

Ole Erik Klingle’s (2016) study on the construction of the professional identities of students studying to become kindergarten teachers who have spent one semester studying in Nicaragua shows how students use traditional pedagogical discourses and concepts of play and teaching to construct dichotomies for their identities. The students used positively charged terms, such as recognition and participation, related to playing, and strongly identified with play as a learning method.

The research on management documents for kindergartens in different countries also shows that children’s learning is an important concept (Hu & Ødegaard, 2019). However, there is disagreement over whether there are common kindergarten practices and discourses related to learning across countries. Some researchers believe that diverse traditional pedagogy discourses exist (Klingle, 2016), while others question whether there are globalized discourses and practices related to learning (Kirova et al., 2018). Another important finding in these studies is the difference between the discourse of learning to know, learning for school approach, on one hand, and that of learning to do and to be, on the other hand, a *Bildung* approach, found in the Nordic countries. Of special interest here is Bennet’s (2010) study showing that the Russian and the Nordic kindergartens are not that different.

## **Perspective, sample, and analytical approach**

The data sources for our study are the textbooks used as syllabi for kindergarten teacher education in Northern Norway and Northern Russia. The textbooks were chosen because they are information and knowledge channels that all students and professionals in the education programs use. Such textbooks contain academic, authoritative ideas that are provided to all students through their education and to which they must relate. The textbooks always strive to convey a specific conceptual and value content (Andreassen, 2008, p. 49).

The concepts of the Russian philosopher, literary scholar, and educationalist, Mikhail Bakhtin are central in the analysis. Bakhtin (2012, p. 95) believes that the ideological becoming of the individual includes

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the process of acquiring the ideas of others. It is important to understand that the process of ideological becoming does not only include the process of acquiring the ideas of others. For us, however, due to the research questions that we are focusing on in this article, it is this process, as an element of the ideological becoming, that we want to draw the attention to, as it represents the authoritative discourse. The authoritative discourse, which the textbooks' texts represent, has an embedded authority that exists irrespective of the readers of these texts, the students. It is irrelevant for the content of this article whether the students recognize its authority or not. Bakhtin (2012, pp. 95–97) describes this discourse as “a religious, political, moral, ancestral, teachers', etc.” discourse and characterizes the meaningful structure of the discourse as motionless and dead since it is completed and unambiguous. Furthermore, Bakhtin writes:

The authoritative word comes compactly into our linguistic consciousness in the form of an inseparable mass. One must either acknowledge this discourse completely or reject it altogether. [...] The authoritative discourse is not produced, it is conveyed. (Bakhtin, 2012, p. 97)

The students' ideological becoming as professionals is possible thanks to the dialogue that occurs between the authoritative discourse and the inner persuasive discourse, the students' own opinion on the subject that includes prior knowledge and understandings. This dialogue causes the students to make choices between the meanings these discourses bring forth, and thus a new understanding is generated. Bakhtin (2012, p. 46) writes that the word makes sense only when we take it from the contexts created by others and make it our own.

The Russian concept of *learning* is different from the Norwegian concept of *learning*. Bakhtin calls the phenomenon of interdependence between concepts and contexts *heteroglossia*, the notion that every expression has different meanings in different contexts. A context means a set of conditions related to time and place that influence how utterances take on meanings. Notions of *learning* are uttered in a universe of opinions that already consist of different and contradictory utterances. The new utterances make sense based on the relationships with the previously expressed utterances in which they are included. Holquist explains the essence of utterances:

At any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions – social, historical, meteorological, physiological – that will ensure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions, all utterances are heteroglot in that they are functions of a matrix of forces practically impossible to recoup. And therefore, impossible to resolve. (Holquist, 1981, p. 428)

Any utterance is a response to someone or a response to something expressed in the past, and, at the same time, it has content created by the fact that it is aimed at a recipient (Ongstad, 2004). We examine the textbook texts as the authors' responses to the educational discourses in the students' respective countries of origin. In the dialogue on learning, the utterances or ideas in the Russian and Norwegian textbooks will be considered as being in a dialogic relationship with the students as they are parts of a regulating battle between centrifugal and centripetal forces. It is important to understand that our understanding of discourse and the use of the analytical tool of the centripetal and centrifugal forces are Bakhtin-inspired and not pure Bakhtinian. Bakhtin's centripetal and centrifugal forces are socio-logical characteristics of a spoken language. The centripetal forces “unite and centralize verbal-ideological thought” and centrifugal forces are responsible for “the uninterrupted process of decentralization and disunification” (Bakhtin, 1981, pp.270-272). The centrifugal forces make the utterances socially and linguistically different (Bakhtin, 2012, p. 24), ensuring the affinity of ideas to different discourses in different

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historical and social contexts, as well as for the potential to develop new ideas. These forces are in an unresolvable struggle that can only be experienced and studied. Furthermore, this struggle is not a dialectical struggle of logical contradictions or a struggle of individual wills but a permanent condition of a language (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 273). These forces are simultaneously present in any utterance and thus in a dialogue. To illustrate this struggle, we would like to cite the example from Schuman:

Bakhtin is parsimonious with examples, but, on the simplest level, when I say “tree,” I invoke the centripetal force of a stable, unified concept that involves a trunk and branches. When I invoke this concept, I want to be understood in a particular way by the listener to whom I am speaking. That desire, conditioned by the listener’s expected response, is also centripetal, insofar as it depends on some agreement between us authorizing a meaning for the word in our particular situation. In tension with these centripetal forces are the centrifugal forces of hundreds of types of trees, specific trees, specific experiences of trees (romantic interludes, childhood escapades, escapes, lynchings, crucifixions), metaphorical possibilities (the tree of life, family tree), slang (“up a tree”), and the listener’s receptivity (hostile, agreeable, tuned out). The word “tree” carries with it at all times all these possibilities and many more, and while the centripetal force tends toward one meaning (or a particular meaning at a particular moment), the centrifugal force of language tends to fracture meaning in many directions. (Schuman 2002, pp. 49-50)

While Bakhtin’s idea behind the forces was to use these to characterize any utterances from a socio-logical position on the level of words as they are dialogically both voiced and heard by particular people in particular situations (Schuman, 2002), we, inspired by Bakhtin, use the concepts of centripetal and centrifugal forces as the concepts to describe the forces of authorized meanings (Schuman, 2002).

In this study, we are interested in the concepts of learning that the textbooks in our selection convey to a student. Each concept of learning that each textbook contains is thus considered to be a force of authorized meaning. It is important to note that we do not analyze if these textbooks are written in such a way that they invite to a dialogue on learning and we do not doubt that there are countless struggles of the forces in a pure Bakhtinian understanding of the centripetal and centrifugal forces in every utterance on learning in these textbooks. However, we are interested in a dialogue that appears when a learner reads the textbook’s authorized meaning of what learning is. This dialogue is the dialogue between the texts and a learner is not a speech dialogue with spoken and heard utterances that Bakhtin’s concepts of centripetal and centrifugal forces were invented to analyze. We are interested in the dialogic relationships between a student and the discourses on learning represented in the Norwegian and Russian textbooks. We understand these relationships as relationships between the concepts with different ideologies and values. In relation to a student, each textbook’s concept of learning becomes an authoritarian monologic discourse that represents a centripetal force that pressures a student to believe in its message on what learning is and thus unite with it. This invitation to uniformity shared and common meaning, is met by the students’ meanings, that is a centripetal force towards diversity, as Gíslason (2019) puts it. Thus appears a dialogue on what learning is between the authoritarian discourse of the textbook and an inner persuasive discourse of a student.

By scrutinizing how the learning concepts are dialogically related to one other, we are able to provide better insight on the premises for the dialogue about learning across international borders among the students in different countries. We will relate the findings, the authoritative discourses, to each other and then discuss how these apply/relate dialogically to the inner persuasive discourses that the students might have when they relate to the authoritative discourses.

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We have analyzed the textbooks used in kindergarten teacher education in Russian and Norwegian part of the Barents region, Finnmark, Troms, and Nordland in Norway (the Norwegian group) and in Murmansk Oblast, Arkhangelsk Oblast, the Republic of Karelia, and the Republic of Komi in Russia (the Russian group). Our sample is limited to the books that have been used in the study programs in both countries since 2014. This choice was made due to political changes in kindergarten teacher education in both Norway and Russia. In Norway, a new kindergarten teacher curriculum was adopted in 2013, while Russia introduced a new educational standard for preschool teacher education in 2014. We have reviewed all the obligatory reading lists on the theme “Children’s development, play, and learning” or similar courses in the kindergarten teacher education program in Northern Norway<sup>1</sup> for the period from 2013 to 2017. Then we selected the books that are on the reading lists in all these educational institutions. In addition, in our sample, we included books that we considered to be trendsetters in the Norwegian study programs.

Our Norwegian group consists of the following textbooks:

- Askland, L., & Sataøen, S. O. (2014). *Utviklingspsykologiske perspektiver på barns oppvekst* (Developmental psychological perspectives on children’s adolescence). Gyldendal Akademisk.
- Rønning, G. S. (2013). *Rammeplan for barnehagen, hva så?* (Framework plan for the kindergarten, so what?). Cappelen Akademisk.
- Glaser, V., Solids, I., & Drugli, B. (Eds.) (2014). *Utvikling, lek og læring i barnehagen. Forskning og praksis* (Development, play and learning in kindergarten. Research and practice). Fagbokforlaget.
- Gunnestad, A. (2014). *Didaktikk for barnehagelærere: en innføring* (Didactics for kindergarten teachers: an introduction). Universitetsforlaget.

We sent requests for reading lists on children’s learning in kindergarten to all four higher educational institutions in Northern Russia<sup>2</sup> and received responses from Murmansk Arctic State University and Petrozavodsk State University. We selected the books used in both educational institutions. In addition, we used information on the reading lists that we found on the official websites of the Russian institutions. The Russian group consists of the following textbooks:

- Mikljaeva, N. V., Mikljaeva, Y. V., & Vinogradova, N. A. (2015). *Doshkolnaia pedagogika* (Preschool pedagogy). Jurajt. Moskva.
- Turchenko, V. I. (2013). *Doshkolnaia pedagogika* (Preschool pedagogy). Flinta. Moskva.
- Gogoberidze, A. G., & Solnceva, O. V. (2017). *Doshkolnaia pedagogika s osnovami metodik vospitania i obuchenia* (Preschool pedagogy with a basis for methodology in upbringing and training). Piter. Saint-Petersburg.
- Galiguzova, L. N., & Mesjerjakova-Zamogilnaja, S. J. (2017). *Doshkolnaia pedagogika. Uchebnik i praktikum* (Preschool pedagogy. Textbook and practical training). Jurajt. Moskva.

Our analysis consists of three steps. The first step is a literature review of the concepts of *learning’s contents* in each group of the sample we describe. We make a narrative synthesis of the narrative kind which might be better described as “a blended account of differences rather than as complete synthesis” (Andrews, 2010, p.405). In the second step, the results of the narrative reviews of the concepts of *learning* from the two groups are compared. The third step is a description of the dialogical relationships between the concepts.

For the selection of the sub-concepts included in the concepts of *learning*, we combine Knud Illeris’s notion of *learning* (Illeris, 2012) with Vygotsky’s concept of learning (Säljö, 2016, p. 112). Illeris understands *learning* as an interaction between the individual’s acquisition process and the social process of the context

<sup>1</sup> Nord University (Campus Nesna, Campus Bodø, and Campus Levanger); UiT Norges Arktiske Universitet (Campus Tromsø and Campus Alta).

<sup>2</sup> Murmansk Arctic State University (MASU), Northern Arctic Federal University (SAFU) in Arkhangelsk, Petrozavodsk State University, and Syktyvkar State University.



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where this learning takes place. The acquisition process includes the content (what is learned) and driving force (what initiates the acquisition process). The idea that individuals develop their mental functions by engaging in communication with their surroundings and familiarizing themselves with languages, thinking, ideas and practices is central to the socio-cultural understanding of learning attributed to Vygotsky (Säljö, 2016, p. 112). The texts in the textbooks are analyzed and presented in our literature review based on the following sub-concepts posed as questions:

- Learning activities: What are activities in which it is thought that kindergarten children learn? How should these be organized and implemented?
- Tools: What tools are children supposed to learn to use?
- Kindergarten teacher as an adult: What role should adults play in children’s learning?
- Other children: What role should other children play in a child’s learning?
- The learning child: What role should the child play in his/her own learning?

For that reason, we read books and highlighted all parts which could answer our questions. Then we read those highlights and made a conclusion on the main meaning that those highlights tried to make. For example, answering the question of what role should adults play in children’s learning in Askland & Sataøen (2014), we found followed excerpts:

The adults have to understand the consequences of their actions, and their influence on children’s development. Their need for education to make an environment of high quality (with references to Dalli et.al., 2011, p.17).

The goal is to understand what is happening to the child right now, more than to guess what is going to happen. This perspective must be a grounded perspective, for all who work with children (p.22).

The adults must react to an infant child, and structure the child’s relations to the environment (p.39). They must be able to understand child’s signals, initiatives, and reactions. (p. 51).

These excerpts conveyed the role of the teacher as responsive to the child’s signals, initiatives, and reactions. An attentiveness to the ‘here-and-now’ moment and a moral obligation for attunement to the child is emphasized.

We continued to write highlights until the end of the book. Then we made a conclusion which became a part of the text below: “Adults should actively try to understand the child’s way of expressing themselves, and their own professional ethical responsibility for the child.”

The second step in the analysis consists of an internal and external comparison of the various notions of the concepts of *learning*. In the internal comparison, we identify similarities and differences between the results of the analyses of the Norwegian and the Russian groups. The results of the internal comparison is the first step of our external comparison where we, drawing on the method of comparative inquiry proposed by David Phillips (2006), contextualize the findings from the analyses of the concepts of learning of the Norwegian and Russian groups and discuss what contributions the findings can make to the understanding of conditions for children’s learning in general.

In the third step, we relate the findings dialogically to each other by identifying the forces that can form the premises for the dialogue between the Norwegian and the Russian understandings of the concepts

of *learning*. We identify the authoritative discourses from two neighboring countries that interact with the students’ inner persuasive discourses.

## Results and discussion

*What authoritative discourses about children’s learning in kindergartens can be identified in textbooks in kindergarten teacher education in Northern Norway?*

In the book by Askland and Sataøen (2014), the focus is on the following learning activities: interaction, communication, social interaction with the environment, and daily tasks in kindergarten. The authors pay a great deal of attention to the language and its development in children. In addition, emphasis is placed on the mastery of interaction with others. The child should also learn affect regulation, the importance of feelings, task solving, and useful strategies for problem solving.

Aksland and Sataøen (2014) devote most of the pages of their book to discussions about the role of adults in children’s development. The adults should be active and engaged in communication and other types of interaction with the child. The adults should create a good emotional climate as such climate is a condition for the positive development of the child. The adults should actively try to understand the child’s way of expressing themselves and stay in certain situations somewhat removed to allow the relationships between the toddlers to appear and evolve. The adults should support the learning potential of all the children and perform scaffolding of tasks after the child’s zone of proximal development has been identified. The most important thing is that the educator be aware of their own psychological theoretical understandings, including their perspective on humanity.

Children should be encouraged to establish and maintain good relationships with other children, which is considered to be preventive regarding potential mental health problems. Children’s peers can also play important roles in scaffolding. The child is described as active, competent, inquiring, and socially participative. Moreover, Aksland and Sataøen (2014) believe that the child continuously constructs a story about him/herself, an understanding of oneself and one’s own knowledge based on one’s own experiences.

Rønning (2013) believes that children learn thanks to a multitude of opportunities that are found in everyday life. She believes that learning activities are part of the content of the kindergarten, which consists, according to Rønning, of everything that takes place in kindergarten, including activities and the adults’ ways of being with the children.

Rønning’s book presents principles for choosing learning activities. The activities are chosen based on an interaction between children, adults, and the ideas expressed in various plans (the framework plan, the annual plan, and the monthly plan). To provide information on the content of the activities, reference is made to the subject areas in the framework plan for the kindergarten’s content and tasks.

The adults should be receptive to the children’s input and interests. The employees of the kindergarten should ensure that the children are part of what is going on in the kindergarten and that they stay motivated. The employees shall have the competence to implement in practice the provisions described in the framework plan. The employees are expected to know how to facilitate learning for children in kindergarten. It is recommended that staff members agree on a basic view for the whole kindergarten.

The child is referred to as a subject. One sees the child as a “human being” and considers all children as co-creators and participants in a knowledge production process. Moreover, the child is considered as having agency in his own life and should gradually take responsibility for his own choices.

Rønning (2013) does not write about the tools children should learn to use or what role the other children should have in the child's learning.

Gunnestad (2014) uses the word “methods” when describing learning activities and writes that methods may have to do with both how the teacher plans to present a topic or an activity and the means the child uses to acquire the knowledge about a particular topic or problem area. Gunnestad (2014) specifies that the child uses an approach to process or capture a problem area and make it his own. This means that children's learning activities are defined as approaches that are used to acquire knowledge about a field. Moreover, Gunnestad (2014) believes that kindergarten has a rich range of methods that can be used. These include play (both facilitated and free), storytelling, dissemination, dramatization, the use of toys, walks, conversation, experiments, models, one's own activity, discovery learning, and demonstrations. In addition, music, arts and crafts, and other esthetic activities can be both methods (learning activities) and content.

Information about tools does not appear in the text. Kindergarten teachers are considered interactive partners for children and are responsible for didactic planning. The adults can have both an asymmetric and symmetric relationship with children in the learning processes. This means that the adults can take on a range of roles that allows both instrumental manipulation and facilitation for a real I–you relationship in a dialogue.

Gunnestad (2014) believes that interaction with other children has a decisive impact on children's development and considers children in general as active, inquisitive, and contact-seeking beings. The child should actively participate in his/her learning and acquire experience in socializing with both adults and other children and through experiences.

In the book edited by Glaser et al. (2014), the authors of chapters rarely recommend specific teaching plans for the development of a particular type of competence or skills. As a rule, reference is made to the framework plan (2011), and it is recommended that kindergarten teachers shall integrate activities that lead to development in play, experimentation, or everyday activities. The content of the chapters does not enable an answer to questions about tools that children should learn to use. The authors of the chapters believe that the learning activities in a kindergarten should be based on play. They mention both free play, which is important for emotional and social development, and facilitated play with the adult as an active participant, which is important for motor and linguistic skills development. For linguistic development, the importance of dialogic reading (reading in pairs or groups after each other) and facilitated play activities are emphasized. Although the authors believe that skills training is essential for children to develop skills, it is pointed out that the training should not be imposed but proposed to the children surrounded by encouragement and positive attention. It is also recommended to use joint reading sessions, both in kindergarten and at home, to develop literacy skills. The development of numeric and other mathematics-related skills should happen through facilitated play, everyday activities, and experimentation.

It is emphasized that adults should play an active role in children's development and that adults should facilitate and lead play, everyday activities, and experiments. Other children are considered to be especially important co-players when it comes to development and learning. The importance of friendship ties formed through participation in social interaction and different types of play is emphasized.

Throughout most of the book, children are referred to as participating agents who will learn and develop through play and their own experience. It is important to point out that the asymmetry of relationships between the adults (subjects), who facilitate, and the children, who participate in facilitated

activities, is not problematic. It is pointed out that a child shall participate as an equal partner, having real power to determine his/her own participation.

### *Internal comparison of the Norwegian textbooks*

All the Norwegian textbooks highlight exercises involving interaction in everyday life as important activities for learning. Adults should be active, interacting partners and facilitators in children’s day-to-day lives. The child is referred to as an active actor (agent, subject) in their own learning. As the authors of the books mainly describe principles for choosing learning activities, it is impossible to draw conclusions as to what tools the children are supposed to learn to use.

The differences between the contents of the books are mainly in the form of social interaction with the environment, such as language skills, play, and music activity and their importance for children’s development. There are also differences in how the other children’s role is discussed. In the book by Rønning (2013) there is no mention of the role of other children. We conclude that different elements of the sociocultural view on learning are given varying levels of emphasis in the books. Whereas Askland and Sataøen (2014) describe the role of adults in a straightforward and detailed way, Rønning (2013) and Gunnestad (2014) describe the role the adults play by pointing out their participation in determining the principles for choosing learning activities. Glaser et al. (2014) emphasize showing how and in what way different learning activities can promote children’s development.

### *What authoritative discourses about children’s learning in kindergartens can be identified in textbooks in kindergarten teacher education in Northern Russia?*

Gogoberidze and Solnceva (2017) use the term *activity* when describing learning activities. Children’s learning activities are divided into different types based on the various forms of activity content, the kinds of activities that are dominant in relation to age group, and who organizes or initiates the activities.

Activities may have different content depending on the educational area with which they are affiliated. Activities can be initiated and facilitated by either the educators or the children. Adult-led activities consist of organized educational activities and routine situations. A detailed, age-group structured overview of the number of educational situations per week and length of the facilitated activities is provided. Daily activities include free play, performing assignments and chores (e.g., covering the table), free communication between children, and that between children and adults. In these learning situations, children have their own experiences that can be used in organized educational activities. A child is also allowed to develop their own already-existing knowledge and skills in new situations as well as enhance their own independence and imagination. Among children’s own activities, play is mentioned as the predominant activity.

A detailed review of tools is provided for each area of education. The child should also learn to use tools when learning new knowledge or new skills. These consist of being able to observe, understand what the adults are saying, act on the utterances that the child receives from the adult, reflect the result of exploratory activities in language, and collaborate with peers.

The adult has a leading and central position in the children’s learning processes. The adult is described as a subject who interacts and develops with the child. The adult should be able to help the child to systematize and elaborate on his/her own experiences and place these within a context. The adult must be able to plan the educational process and the developing environment based on the needs a particular child has to ensure that the education process has the desired effect on the child.

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The child needs other children to gain experience in social behavior, which means communication and mutual understanding with other people and on demonstrating moral skills. The child is referred to as a subject in his/her own activity. This means that the child has values, interests, and freedom to choose. The child is viewed as an independent and autonomous being.

Galiguzova and Mesjerjakova-Zamogilnaja (2017) believe that children learn through the activities that are predominant for their age (i.e., discovery and play) and through interaction with other people. Play can include playing with objects and procedural play. Procedural play is an activity in which the child can act as a make-believe adult. Through this activity, the child can mirror the adult's activity process and imagine the result of the activity.

The activities that result in children's learning can be facilitated using various methods of upbringing and learning. The activities that should be facilitated include language activities (activities in which an adult explains or talks about something); sensory activities (activities in which the child sees, hears, and tastes); practical activities (activities in which the children themselves do something about things); activities where an adult sets a goal and shows examples; and activities where an adult sets a problem objective without offering a solution.

Learning how society works and the instrumental use of objects the child is familiar with are mentioned as predominant for this age. The most important tools the child should learn to use are cultural ways of exploring objects and the social world. Examples of these ways are observing, exploring, experimenting, solving problem situations, fantasizing, and communicating with adults and peers.

Kindergarten teachers are supposed to observe children's personality growth and development and set educational goals and methods of realization based on the child's individual interests. Kindergarten teachers are partners, models for imitation, and experts in assessing the child's skills and knowledge. Furthermore, it is stated that the kindergarten teacher is to have verbal interaction with the child in everyday contexts. The adults should get the child interested in the learning activities, too. The teacher should gain the child's trust, stimulate the child to participate in activities, and expand the child's experiences in five areas of education according to the Russian Federal Standard for Preschool Education.

The child needs other children, as playing with other children has a psychotherapeutic function for young children. Interaction with other children is a prerequisite for the development of an adequate self-image. The child can consider other children in the same way as objects. It is adults who help the child to discover objects. The child should be active in his interaction with others and in activities with objects.

According to Mikljaeva et al. (2015), the goal behind the organization of the interaction and teaching for children in a kindergarten is to facilitate children's physical, cognitive, social-communicative, ethical, and esthetic development. To promote physical development, it is recommended to use facilitated play. Cognitive development should be encouraged by organizing activities in which the child can apply their own knowledge, skills, and experience. Social-communicative and ethical development should be ensured by getting children involved in facilitated play; giving them opportunities for joint and independent work; introducing various forms of cultural expression (folk dance, music, movies); and excursions outdoors—in the micro-environment (the kindergarten itself, the surrounding streets), the meso-environment (the city, the region, the country), and the macro-environment (other nations, Earth as a planet, space). Esthetic development shall be ensured by involving children in various activities, including facilitated play; different types of work; teaching sessions where each child will be able to explore, use, and evaluate; the exhibition of children's work; excursions; and drama and music performances with children as participants.

Mikljaeva et al. (2015) mention the use of tools only in connection with the use of a form or method of teaching and development. The tool that is mentioned the most is a toy (often dolls or toys that represent real objects) that the child is supposed to manipulate to demonstrate or explain something to other children. It is also recommended to use puppets to play a character when the child participates in a theatrical performance.

Adults play an important role in children’s learning and development. The adult is responsible for the organization and exercise of all learning and development activities. Other children are described as important active agents in the relationship with the learning child (the learner). The role of the other children in the relationship with the learner is highlighted by the third stage of the knowledge style—self-control. It is recommended to encourage the children to provide feedback to each other on performance achievements. The other children are expected to contribute as learning subjects when they use visual and communicative learning methods and play.

As a starting point, Mikljaeva et al. (2015) believe that the child should be the subject, that is, be able to participate in his/her own decisions regarding the activities. Both reading activities and all the developmental- and learning-associated activities around the child should be facilitated by adults. Great emphasis is placed on the role of adults both in the kindergarten and outside the kindergarten. Free play as a phenomenon and its role and features are not discussed. The children should be able to express themselves in ways they choose, but these expressions should take place within the framework determined by the adult.

Turchenko (2013) presents five different approaches to early childhood pedagogy. Three out of five approaches allow for different levels of children’s own active participation. The first approach demands that children have their own time for free play that they themselves plan and participate in without adults being involved. In the other two approaches, it is expected that children have only limited opportunities to participate. The main activities promoting learning are facilitated play and organized sessions, both of which are led by an adult. The children are expected to actively use available toys and to be given opportunities to create their own objects. Otherwise, tools should be used so that children can acquire different types of knowledge.

The adult plays an important role. The adult is responsible for the organization, the implementation, and the outcomes of children’s development and learning. At the same time, the adult is also expected to be a partner. These expectations are described but are not discussed in relation to one another.

Other children also play an important role. They act both as triggers in each other’s development and as active, contributing agents in their own upbringing and socialization. Although the role played by other children is indicated, the relationship between this role and those of the adults is not elaborated on. The child is referred to as an object of research and as a subject in regard to the processes of upbringing, education, and socialization.

### *Internal comparison of the Russian textbooks*

We note that the contents in the Russian textbooks are clearly structured and classified according to the national framework plan (curriculum) for kindergarten (Federalnyj gosudarstvennyj obrazovatelnyj standart doshkolnogo obrazovanija). Gogoberidze and Solnceva (2017) and Galiguzova and Mesjerjakova-Zamogilnaja (2017) consider children’s activities as a basis for structuring the content of learning in a kindergarten. In the book by Mikljaeva et al. (2015), the child’s areas of development are emphasized. The main contents of the book by Turchenko (2013) entail educational approaches that should be used to facilitate children’s participation.

All these books mention all the basic elements in the concept of sociocultural learning. Learning activities are described as adult-facilitated activities. The tools that the children will learn to use are mainly linked to the acquisition of different types of knowledge. Other children play an important role in the child's learning. The child is referred to as a subject in his/her own learning.

The differences between the Russian books lie mainly in the reference to the role of toys as tools in children's learning.

### *External comparison of the Norwegian and Russian textbooks*

Comparisons between these two groups of books show that there are great differences between the books in each country. Books in both countries contain references to the government and management documents for kindergartner's where the concept of learning is clearly present (Hu & Ødegaard, 2019). The similarities and differences between the samples indicate that there are discourses that run across international borders, that is, traditional (Klingle, 2016) or global (Kirova et al., 2018) pedagogical discourses and local and national understandings of these.

There are many similarities between the books. The child is referred to as a subject in both samples. The other children are referred to as important and necessary partners in the child's learning. Kindergarten teachers are referred to as active and responsible for facilitating learning activities. Reference is made to the national steering documents for the kindergarten whenever the content of learning activities is discussed. This close link to the steering documents in both samples indicates a close connection to the professional field of work in kindergarten.

The differences seem to lie in the role of adults in children's learning and the focus on the tools that children should master. This means that the learning situation is understood differently in the two samples. In Russian books, learning is understood as a process that takes place mainly thanks to adult-centered activities. The primary concern is what tools the kindergarten teacher will teach the child to use. Learning activities in the Russian textbooks are described very systematically in that each learning activity is described based on the importance it has for learning. In the Norwegian books, learning should be woven into everyday life's routine situations, and the main focus is on the children's learning process, while the specific content the children should learn is arguably less important. This conclusion is in accord with Børhaug et al. (2018), who point out the fact that in Norway a holistic approach to learning is practiced, where the pedagogical practice is largely linked with everyday situations.

Based on Illeris' (2012) understanding of learning, we conclude that the Russian books emphasize the content and the results of the learning process. The most attention is given to which tools the child should learn to master and which learning activities the kindergarten teachers should make provisions for. In the Norwegian books, the emphasis is on the interactive dimension of the learning process (the interaction between the kindergarten teacher and the children and among the children themselves) and how the kindergarten teachers should create and maintain children's motivation for learning (what the child is interested in and how to sustain this interest).

The emphasis on the kindergarten teacher's tasks related to children's learning and on the systematic organization of learning indicates that the Russian textbooks conceptualize children's education as something that results from, first and foremost, teaching children rather than children's own learning. Ball and Forzani (2009) define teaching as what the teacher does to cause someone to learn something. Educators' teaching includes planning, implementation, and evaluation. A description of children's education that more or less resembles this Russian understanding of children's education can be found in only one book from the Norwegian sample, in the book by Gunnestad (2014).

It is interesting to note that all the Russian textbooks in the sample are textbooks in early childhood pedagogy. The theme “Children’s development play and learning” in the Norwegian kindergarten teacher education is also dominated by early childhood pedagogy. The dissimilarity we see here may also be linked with different understandings of pedagogy as subjects in kindergarten teacher education. It seems that pedagogy in the Russian textbooks is a subject primarily about teaching children in kindergarten—that is, more didactic oriented. In the Norwegian textbooks, it seems that pedagogy is a subject pertaining to how children learn and develop and how all kindergarten employees can understand, support, motivate, and lead the children.

*How can the findings—the concepts of learning—relate dialogically with one other?*

Our data represent two national dialogues on the concepts of learning. These national dialogues are authoritative discourses on the concepts of learning that the students in both countries have to relate to. Thus, the concepts of learning as authoritative discourses can influence students’ concepts, and, in some cases, may even overpower, or “kill” any inner persuasive discourses in which the students could possibly participate. To find out how the concepts of learning expressed in Norwegian and Russian textbooks relate to each other dialogically, we can distinguish similarities and differences in the two authoritative discourses and, thus, understand better, what students in each country have to relate to, or not. This knowledge, in turn, will inform the practices for developing values of diversity and pluralism, the practices and contents of the activities for the cross-border exchange programmes in the activities where students from both countries participate.

In all the textbooks that we have reviewed, learning is described as a process in which the child is an active player in a supportive or contributing environment of things and other people. These ideas belong to the constructivist perspective on learning (Illeris, 2012). Learning in kindergarten is divided into areas corresponding to their categorization in the governance documents in the respective countries. A constructivist perspective on learning and the division of the learning process into subject, knowledge, and education areas can be identified as the centripetal forces in the dialogue on learning. These are forces that can ensure that a common understanding is established and shared in terms of the discourses on learning in the Russian and Norwegian textbooks. According to Bakhtin, there is ‘...neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogical context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future) (Bakhtin, 1986:170). This means, for our study, that meanings found by students and educators in a textbook, can never be final once and for all. Signs, as letters and words in the textbooks, alter the intertextuality in the cultural place and time, but they will be altered again by the readers. Thus, the readers of these textbooks exercise centrifugal forces that situate this constructive perspective on learning. The results of this process may allow this constructive perspective to become a part of the shared meaning when a reader unites with the textbook and may evoke a reaction of critique and criticism and thus lead to the disunity with the authors of the textbook where this constructivist perspective is described. In both cases, there will be an alteration of the meaning, even in the case of unity as the reader always relates the message to their own previously acquired knowledge and meanings.

Activities, tools, and the role of adults are the categories in which differences are most evident in the textbooks. These ideas can be identified as the centrifugal forces in the dialogue on learning. To us, it seems that the adult has an indisputable role as leader and decision-maker in the Russian textbooks, while the role of the adult in the Norwegian textbooks varies between being responsive to children’s initiatives and interests in spontaneous events and one of a leader of pedagogical activities. To us, it seems that the tools in the Russian books are one of the main issues and thus they are much discussed, while in the Norwegian books, they hold a more peripheral position. There is a trend to prioritise the importance of the role of everyday activities and the importance of allowing the children to freely make decisions regarding these everyday activities in the Norwegian textbooks, while there is a clear classification and typology of all



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the activities in the Russian books. Both of these positions represent centripetal forces and invite the students to unite with their messages. If the differences of these discourses were to be addressed, their discussion could ensure that the dialogue between the discourses extends beyond the dialogue about both the constructivist perspective on learning and the division of children’s learning processes into areas of knowledge in kindergarten. We believe that such dialogues should be facilitated after the students are informed and acquired an understanding of both centrifugal and centripetal forces and their roles in the meaning making for a reader of a textbook. Understanding the ways of meaning making and the role of the centripetal and centrifugal forces becomes, thus, an important premise for cross-border dialogues between the students.

The common understanding of pedagogy as a subject matter about kindergarten practices conveyed in the textbooks in Russian and Norwegian discourses, creates opportunities for collaboration between educators across national borders in the Barents region. Based on the hypothetical premise that textbooks influence practice and that the practice may unfold as textbooks describe, we can create hypothetical discussions. Educators from both countries may choose to emphasize the active role of both children and educators as agents of learning in the educational process. However, since ‘learning’ in the Norwegian textbooks is conveyed as events that take place both in everyday and formal activities and in the Russian textbooks as taking place in adult-led formal activities, the dialogue on these issues will probably result in arguments about the views on the child’s position as an agent in their own learning as well as views on how preschool teachers’ practices may enhance children’s learning. It can be anticipated that there may appear desires to discuss autonomy of a child in their own learning versus autonomy of a teacher as a professional practitioner. The questions may appear of how children’s autonomy can be maintained in situations where learning content and results are predefined by adults and how preschool teachers can secure children’s organized learning when the learning content is mostly defined by the child/children. The contradictions between the two different understandings of autonomy and the balance between them in practice may become issues of discussions both within these two national discourses and between them.

In the light of heteroglossia, a collaboration between educators from different countries can be treated as a discourse within the same context or tradition with the presence of the unifying centripetal forces and the centrifugal forces that aim towards disunity of the meanings. There are always differences and similarities between understandings of pedagogy in different countries (Bennet, 2010; Hu & Ødegaard, 2019). There will also exist internal differences and similarities in the discourses in the different countries. In order for the cross-border dialogue to take place, there must also be voices within the partner countries that respond to the ideas that are created due to the process of cooperation.

It may be fruitful to organize a hypothetical dialogue on the issue of understanding of learning in preschool settings embedded in the sociocultural theory of learning. Our comparison of the two discourses shows that all the basic elements of the concept of sociocultural learning are mentioned in the Russian textbooks. However, the issues of tools (what children should learn to use) are almost nonexistent in the description of the theory in the Norwegian textbooks. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that sociocultural theory of learning is understood and practiced differently in two countries, which is not surprising and is also documented in the earlier research (Veraska & Sheridan, 2018). If such dialogue is organized within the context of collaboration, it may provide good opportunities to discuss the relationship between the elements of the concept including the relationship between the child and the contents the child should learn during the preschool years.

Another tradition that may be fruitful for the development of a cross-border dialogue between educators is didactics. The Russian authoritative discourse defines learning situations as the situations

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where children are primarily subjects to didactics-related knowledge, while the Norwegian authoritative discourse defines learning situations as situations where both teaching and learning contents are related to the area of the general didactics as described by Alexander Von Oettingen (2017). Von Oettingen describes several models or directions in general didactic. Thus, the ideas described in Norwegian textbooks are identified as the formative theory model where questions about why and what one wants to teach are fundamental for answers to questions about how and by what means one wants to present the content. Teaching that is offered in a Norwegian preschool has to be strongly connected with the child's life outside, and thus teaching must be an integrated part of the child's life in a preschool. This calls for the priority of the knowledge about a particular child and the priority of thinking of teaching as integrated in everyday activities rather than considering teaching as a separate self-contained activity that is not necessarily connected to what happens in a particular preschool. The understanding of learning in the Russian authoritative discourse can be characterized as an example of the learning theory model for didactics. Within this model, the child's knowledge construction takes place in communication with the outside world in specially designed adult-led learning activities. Thus, a dialogue about didactics' role in preschool can be organized as a dialogue between different types of didactics where meaning is constantly negotiated.

As we mentioned early, there is a difference between the discourse of learning to know, learning for school approach, and that of learning to do and to be, a *Bildung* approach that is popular in the Nordic countries. The first discourse can be understood as a discourse about teaching and education in preschool. The second discourse can be understood as a discourse about Building. The idea of teaching subjects in preschool is not foreign to the Norwegian context. The pedagogy as a scientific area in Norway has been recently dominated by the tradition of educational science (Brunstad et al., 2015). At the same time, there is opposition to this tradition. For example, Herner Sæverot (2017) believes that pedagogy with its basic value issues cannot be reduced to the understanding of this area suggested by the partisans of the science of education. Marte Eriksen (2018) also believes that the preschool pedagogy in early childhood teacher education should be a general subject embedded in the German *Bildung* tradition, rather than the science of education. These discourses, in other words, are based on similarities and differences between the German tradition of *Bildung*, on the one hand, and the science of education in the English-speaking world, on the other. It is possible to draw parallels here to a possible dialogue between Russian and Norwegian preschool educators where the formation theory and the learning theory of didactics in preschool are discussed.

In the Russian discourse, one can observe contradictions that can render fruitful ideas for the dialogue in the Russian-Norwegian cooperation in the preschool area. Pedagogical practice based on the formation tradition at its core is also found in Russia, but most of such practices are found in higher education areas (Mayer & Rakhochkine, 2018). Although the current guidelines in the new standard for preschool education include an expectation that a preschool teacher should follow up the child's initiative (Minobrnauka, 2013), the pedagogical practice in most Russian preschools is strongly influenced by the practices based on socio-cultural theory (Veraska & Sheridan, 2018). Thus, the ideas and results of the dialogues that may be organized as a part of the Russian-Norwegian cooperation may become sources for the development of ideas in the national discourses on preschool pedagogy both in Russia and Norway.

From the dialogical perspective, the goal in any collaboration is to maintain dialogue, and use the centrifugal and centripetal forces in dialogues for creating opportunities for the voices to become unique. In our study, we have described authoritative discourses about the concepts of learning found in the higher educational preschool textbooks in the northern regions of Norway and Russia. We have outlined issues in our findings that can be used to organize the dialogues in the area of preschool as a part of cross-border collaboration activities. Collaborations are always done by participants and influenced by environmental

factors like personal history (e.g., Jones, 2017), pedagogical discourses and concepts which are traditional for the participants (Klinge, 2016), and participants’ values. For a collaboration to be considered successful from the dialogical perspective, it is important to allow all the voices to be heard.

## Conclusions

We have analyzed a concept of learning presented in the textbooks used in preschool teacher education in Northern Russia and Northern Norway. This study contributes to the understanding of the concept of learning, one of the key concepts within the body of knowledge that can be found in the preschool textbooks in both countries and may be of value to those interested in the internationalization of pedagogical practices and the role of textbooks in the field of preschool education. We have also argued for the importance of cross-border dialogues between early childhood education students and teachers from both countries with a focus on understanding children’s development and learning.

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