

# **Learning history in early childhood: Teaching methods and children's understanding**

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## **Abstract**

This article discusses the teaching of history in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) centres and children's understanding of history. Based on interviews with eight Norwegian ECEC teachers and on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the article shows how the ECEC centres teach history, how children respond to the teaching and what kind of understanding of history and historical time children express. The findings are discussed in light of theories of history didactics. The teachers had positive experiences with the implementation of historical projects and developed a variety of methods and teaching approaches. They also expressed a highly positive assessment of children's ability to acquire historical knowledge. In particular, it appears that physical and bodily experiences, along with teachers' storytelling, stimulated the children's interest and understanding of history. Some of the older children, the five- to six-year-olds, expressed an emerging historical consciousness. This indicates that although historical understanding in early childhood might be limited, the teaching of history in ECEC can lay the foundation for historical consciousness and its later development at school.

## **Keywords**

Learning history, teaching methods, history didactics, understanding of time, early childhood curriculum, interpretative phenomenological analysis.

## **Introduction**

*The Norwegian Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergartens*, laid down by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research (Ministry of Education and Research, 2012), imposes numerous requirements on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). It is a regulation to the Norwegian *Kindergarten Act* and has the status of a national curriculum for ECEC. The Plan establishes goals for children's learning in different areas, and there are also specific goals for children's learning of history. These goals are general and apply to the entire group of children from one to six years of age. The national curriculum states that ECEC centres should help to ensure that children 'learn about some historic changes to their local communities and societies, (and) develop an understanding of different traditions and lifestyles' (Ministry of Education and Research, 2012: 41).

Norway is not the only country with historical learning objectives for children in this age group. Many other countries have similar requirements and goals with varying content and levels of ambition. This reflects a view that history is important, even for small children, which is a debated topic (Cooper, 2007). Dixon and Hales (2014: 7) claim that 'history's aim is to make sense of the world, something that we all, from the very young to the old, engage in' and that, in this respect, there should be no age limit for learning history. Some countries go beyond the Norwegian curriculum and put forward goals that are even more detailed and

more ambitious. The education program for ECEC centres in Berlin, ‘Das Berliner Bildungsprogramm’, serves as an example. It states that children should have an integrated understanding of the world: ‘Verständnis von der historischen Gewordenheit der Welt entwickeln’ (Preissing and Dreier, 2004: 59). The German program also says that children should develop historical consciousness. This may seem somewhat ambitious when one considers that it applies to children in early childhood education and, therefore, one may question whether it is feasible to fulfil these requirements. Limited research has been conducted on the learning of history in ECEC centres; thus, there is little knowledge about how these goals can be reached or the extent to which it will be possible to achieve them.

This article discusses how ECEC history can be taught to achieve the goals put forward by the Norwegian Framework Plan. However, teaching history to satisfy the standards is not the primary subject here. The main goal is to gain knowledge about children’s learning of history. This will allow a discussion of whether the standards are reasonable and achievable. The article is based on a research project that examined how some selected ECEC centres conducted historical projects in practice. The purpose of the study is to investigate these experiences to analyse children's understanding and outcome of historical learning. These issues are examined using the following research questions:

1. *How is the teaching of history conducted in ECEC centres and which teaching methods stimulate children’s interest in and understanding of history?*
2. *How do children respond to this teaching and what kind of historical understanding do the children express?*

Interviews with selected ECEC teachers and theories of history didactics form the basis of the discussion.

## **Previous Research and Theoretical Framework**

In a recent book about teaching history in primary schools, Dixon and Hales (2014: 180) state that ‘relatively little has been written about young children’s learning in history’. Some research has been done on history education in school, but there has been less academic work conducted on the teaching and learning of history in ECEC. One of the main contributors to the field is the British historian and pedagogue Hilary Cooper (Cooper, 2012; Cooper, 2002; Cooper, 2007; Cooper, 2013; Cooper, 2004). Although she has written mostly about primary education, she has also given attention to the connection between historical learning in ECEC and in school and the ‘ways in which young children may be aware of the past when they begin school’ (Cooper, 2002: 7). In a review of research in the field, Cooper (2002) discussed children’s awareness of the past and concluded that earlier research shows that children aged 3 to 5 have some ‘embryonic capacity for historical thinking’ (Cooper, 2002: 39). They have some awareness of time, can recognize different interpretations of stories, and are capable of deductive reasoning in informal situations.

A recent pilot study conducted in Switzerland concluded that most 4- and 5-year olds in the study had gained knowledge of both historical facts and concepts. However, in regard to the more complex skills of historical reconstruction and deconstruction, their score was rather low (Kübler et al., 2013). This result can be viewed as a contradiction of Cooper’s conclusions, as Cooper is slightly more optimistic about children’s capacity for complex historical thinking. The contradictions in the field demonstrate that children’s historical understanding is a field that is open for more research. One of the Swiss researchers, Markus Kübler, states that,

'Amazingly, historical thinking in early childhood and primary school is rarely the subject of attention in research' ('Erstaunlicherweise ist historisches Denken im Kindergarten, in der Grundschule nur selten Gegenstand der Aufmerksamkeit in der Forschung') (Kübler, 2011: 181). Hence, it is necessary to conduct research on children's historical thinking, especially the concept of time and the awareness of a past reality, which can be viewed as a core skill in the learning of history (Wilschut, 2012).

One goal in the Norwegian Framework Plan is for children to develop an understanding of historical change (Ministry of Education and Research, 2012: 41); this objective may at first seem ambitious and demanding. To comprehend change, one has to understand that society or concrete phenomena might be different at different times. This suggests that the child must have a basic concept of time - the passage of time and an understanding of the past as different from the present. Therefore, a simple awareness of chronology is fundamental to understanding historical change (Cooper, 2012; Wilschut, 2012; von Heyking, 2004).

There is a substantial amount of research on children's concept of time; however, such research has mainly been conducted with older children in psychological studies. Previous research has argued that if one does not have a concrete understanding of chronology in a metric sense - clock time and dates - it is not possible for that person to develop any understanding of historical time (Wilschut, 2012; Brumlik, 2005). Jean Piaget outlined three stages through which children develop a perception of time (Piaget, 1969; Brumlik, 2005), and the first period, 4 to 8 years of age, is characterized by a non-existing self-concept of time. He believed that children in this age group lacked the ability to place events in sequences and develop narratives and that children could develop awareness of time only when it could be linked to places, people and objects (Brumlik, 2005). Due to Piagetian theories and child-centred notions that 'learning should always begin with the child', some teachers were unwilling to teach children about the distant past because it was removed from children's immediate experiences (Harnett, 2007). There is reason to fear that this may still be the view held by some practitioners in the field (Dixon and Hales, 2014), and there is evidence that some people believe that it is quite inappropriate for young children to learn history (Cooper, 2007).

Piagetian theories claimed that young children were unable to think in the abstract. More recent research, however, has opposed this view and suggested that children are more sophisticated in their thinking and are more capable of handling abstract concepts (Harnett, 2007). Piaget considered time to be a cognitive structure, as 'objectively determined, metric time' (Lippitz, 1983: 173). However, one's inability to develop a time concept according to Piaget's definition does not mean that one cannot grasp historical time.

*Time is a cultural construction with different aspects and there is no reason to assume that these cannot be learned independently from each other.* (Wilschut, 2012: 115)

As Barton & Levstik (1996) note, there is no empirical research that proves a necessary connection between the learning of clock time and calendar time and the ability to learn history (Wilschut, 2012; Cooper, 2002). Thus, children may understand historical time and a sense of chronology even if they do not perceive time as a measurable unit. Barton and Levstik (1996) show that even children in early childhood could distinguish between 'long ago and close to now' (p. 430), although they had not developed any concept of years or dates. This understanding of time is linked to the Dutch pedagogue Martinus Jan Langeveld (1960), who was in clear opposition to Piaget's view on the child's concept of time. According to Langeveld,

*... time is not primarily a cognitive structure, but rather a structure of the life world. Time is embedded in experiences and lived experiences in such a manner that it is not explicitly recognized as such. Children as well as adults live in it and with it.* (Lippitz, 1983: 175)

Thus, the argument that children need to have a concept of time and understanding of chronology to understand historical time does not refer to specific chronological time in the sense of clock or calendar time; rather, it refers to a sense of time as movement and that events occur in order. Therefore, the psychological research on the concept of time will not be further elaborated here; rather, the current paper considers theories of history didactics to discuss how children learn history and become aware of historical time. This focus is also based on recent research arguing that concepts of historical time develop ‘through a learning process, not a development process’ (Wilschut, 2012: 139). This notion underlines the need for research on the connection between teaching and children’s historical understanding.

‘Historical consciousness’ has been a key concept in history didactics for a number of years. The term was originally developed in Germany in the 1970s and later spread to Scandinavia. In the 2000s, it also became increasingly important in North America and the UK (Ahonen, 2005). In the education program for ECEC in Berlin, the term was used directly in regard to a goal that children should develop ‘Geschichtsbewusstsein’ (historical consciousness) (Preissing and Dreier, 2004), and the objectives of the Norwegian Framework Plan follow these lines. Historical consciousness could be defined as the ability to make a connection between interpreting the past, understanding the present and having a perspective of the future (Jeismann, 1979).

In an attempt to clarify and render this concept less abstract, Jörn Rüsen used another term, *narrative competence* (Rüsen and Rüsen, 2008: 48), which is the historical memory associated with the ability to ‘tell’ history. This is not meant literally, as a way to tell; rather, it is one fundamental way for people to acquire knowledge and understanding. The term ‘narrative competence’ is closely linked to historical consciousness and can be described as the ability to link the connections between past and present and to orient oneself in the present in one’s own life. Through stories related to memories - historical reminiscences - individuals and groups can place themselves in a time context related to the past and the future. Narrative competence is, according to Rüsen, linked to three skills:

1. *The ability to experience, which is related to past actuality.*
2. *The ability to interpret, related to the temporal whole, which combines (a) experience of the past with (b) understanding of the present and (c) expectations regarding the future.*
3. *The ability to orient, related to the practical need to find a path through the straits and eddies of temporal change.*  
(Rüsen, 2004: 80-81)

These three skills are closely related, and they express three core elements in the process of historical learning: to experience the past, to interpret it in the form of history and to utilize this interpretation for orientation in life. The findings are connected to Rüsen’s concept of narrative competence and form the basis of a discussion on children’s level of historical consciousness.

Over the last few decades, a substantial amount of research has been conducted on school children’s development of historical consciousness. There has been less interest in early childhood because of the widespread perception that children in this age group have little developed understanding of historical time and that even older children’s understanding of

time is limited. In essence, research has concluded that historical consciousness develops at a much later stage and that it is simply taken for granted that children in this younger age group are unable to develop in this way. Peter Schulz-Hageleit expresses this view very clearly: '*historical consciousness*' is anyway possible only at the age of puberty / adolescence (Schulz-Hageleit, 2006: 228).

There are, however, studies that have softened this view. The child and his/her family members' life stories can be a key to understanding time and change, and the development of historical consciousness. The Canadian historian Jocelyn Létourneau emphasizes narratives, and particularly the child's own life story, as essential for the child's understanding of chronology in a wider context. He argues that we can observe an emerging historical consciousness in children around the age of five or six years (Létourneau, 2001).

This can be connected to Rösen's concept of historical consciousness and narrative competence. It can also be linked to Langeveld's statement about time as a 'structure of the life world' (Lippitz, 1983). The concept of narrative competence and Rösen's three skills can serve as one way of approaching children's experience of history and their level or type of historical understanding. A final conclusion about the existence or non-existence of historical consciousness in children is outside the limitations of this study, but it might give an indication of the level of realism that exists in the ambitious requirements of the curriculum.

## **Research Design and Methodology**

This article analyses how the teaching of history is conducted in five ECEC centres, how eight teachers in these centres assess children's learning outcome and what kind of historical understanding the children express. The discussion will depend on ECEC teachers' experiences of the teaching of history and interaction with children; hence, the research is based on interviews with teachers and on qualitative research methods.

A phenomenological approach is relevant to examine teachers' experiences, and combining this method with hermeneutic tools allows for a descriptive and open approach in which the findings are subject to critical interpretation (Finlay, 2012). On these grounds, the research design is heavily inspired by *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (IPA). Interpretative phenomenological analysis is increasingly being applied in disciplines within the humanities and social sciences (Smith et al., 2009). Unlike traditional phenomenology but similar to discourse analysis, IPA is concerned with cognition, i.e., the person's formation of an opinion about the current topic (Brocki and Wearden, 2006; Willig, 2013), which makes it suitable for investigating informants' interpretations and experiences with children's responses to teaching.

The method utilizes an inductive approach with the goal of understanding the informant's experiences. The researcher's pre-understanding and the interaction between the informant and researcher are implicated in the interpretation (Smith and Osborn, 2008; Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014). The hermeneutic approach is understood as a sustained movement between the details and the whole, between theory and empirical data, and it consists of thorough reading, reflective writing and interpretation (Smith et al., 2009; Smith and Osborn, 2008). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis recognizes the fact that it is impossible to obtain direct access to the way things appear to the informants and that the analysis is influenced by the researcher's own thinking, assumptions and views (Willig, 2013; Smith and Osborn, 2008). It is a form of double hermeneutics in the sense that the researcher is attempting to

understand the participants, who are attempting to understand what is happening to themselves or a phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). There are interpretations on several levels. This approach is, therefore, viewed as ‘constructionist in its assumption that meaning is generated through interpretative processes for both the participant and the researcher’ (Dallos and Vetere, 2005: 58).

In addition to phenomenology and hermeneutics, ideography is the third pillar that supports IPA. This method is ideographic in the sense that it examines the particular, i.e., it stems from the desire to understand a phenomenon in the perspective of some selected individuals. This is why IPA is conducted with relatively few informants (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014; Finlay, 2012).

The selection of interviewees was based on a strategic selection of teachers in ECEC centres who have worked systematically with historical projects over a long period. The eight teachers had extensive experience in teaching history and in observing children's reactions. An obvious criticism could be made against using only teachers as respondents. One could argue that to obtain thorough insight into children's learning, it would be necessary to conduct observations or interviews with children as well. However, the starting point of this study was to investigate how ECEC centres work with the requirements of the curriculum and how teachers conduct historical projects to consider the level of realism in the curriculum. It is important to first consider the teachers' experiences; this might later be supplemented by other studies. A deeper exploration of children's understanding, through interviews and observations of children, is only possible in a far more comprehensive study. The teachers have valuable competence in teaching history and assessing children's responses, and little research has been conducted on teachers' experiences in this field. Although there are methodological issues connected to this collection of data, teachers have unique access to children's spontaneous reactions, which are not easily witnessed by a researcher. Additionally, teachers can observe children's reflections in retrospect, which might be expressed later in rather different situations. If children have developed some level of narrative competence, it should be possible for teachers who follow them closely on a daily basis to observe it.

An important part of the data is based on adult interpretation of children's responses. There is a danger that the teachers might misread the children's expressions and interpret them in a subjective way. There could also be a gap between the children's experiences and how they convey them to adults (Engel, 2005; Greene and Hill, 2005). These conditions gave even more reason to evaluate the material critically, particularly regarding statements about the children's competence and understanding.

Eight teachers were interviewed, all female, in five selected ECEC centres in three municipalities. Personal semi-structured interviews were conducted (Smith et al., 2009; Willig, 2013). Two interviews lasted approximately one hour and twenty minutes, the others a little more than one hour. The teachers were asked particularly about the content, methods and tools used in the teaching of history and about how children responded to the teaching spontaneously or in retrospect. All interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the interviewees, transcribed and analysed.

The analysis is largely carried out in accordance with the IPA method outlined by Smith and Osborn (2008) and Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014). Each transcribed interview was read several times, and statements, concepts and phrases relevant to the research questions were underlined and written down. In the first readings, the concrete statements were emphasized, and in the next step, these statements were clustered into prominent themes. The next step in

the analysis was to compare the themes in all interviews to see if there were areas that were congruent. Some themes were merged, and others were not. The themes that were considered most relevant to the research questions were given names and further studied, while other, less relevant themes were set aside (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014; Smith and Osborn, 2008). Finally, there were only some main themes that represented central parts of the contents of all eight interviews. This is what Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) call ‘Clustering of themes’. Subsequently, the results of this effort were analysed in light of theories of history didactics.

## Findings and Discussion

The findings were clustered in ‘themes’ in accordance with the IPA method. Four main themes and seven subthemes emerged from the analysis (Table 1). Themes 1 and 2 are connected to research question 1 about how the teaching of history is conducted, while themes 3 and 4 are connected to research question 2 about children’s response and historical understanding. However, it is neither possible nor desirable to draw very clear borders between the themes; they are interconnected and overlapping. Some of the subthemes could be linked to several of the main themes; this applies in particular to the subthemes connected to research question 2. All themes and subthemes are explained in the discussion, but there is special emphasis on ‘physical and bodily experiences’ and ‘sense of chronology’. These two themes appeared to be particularly important in the data material and for answering the research questions. Each theme and subtheme in the table is discussed below. The themes and subthemes connected to research question 2 are discussed together because they are closely interconnected. In the latter part of the discussion, the theme "sense of chronology" is further elaborated in relation to the theoretical framework of historical consciousness, in order to discuss the relevance and implications of the findings in this study.

**Table 1: Research questions, themes and subthemes**

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	THEMES	SUBTHEMES
1. How is the teaching of history conducted in ECEC centres and which teaching methods stimulate children’s interest and understanding of history?	Storytelling	- Combined with other learning activities - Long-term planning
	<b>Physical and bodily experiences</b>	- Use of resources in the local community - Meetings between children and elderly people
2. How do the children respond to this teaching and what kind of historical understanding do the children express?	Learning of historical facts	- Linking concrete persons or objects to history
	<b>Sense of chronology</b>	- A basic differentiation in time - The children’s own life histories

### Storytelling

All teachers expressed positive experiences with the implementation of historical projects and had developed diverse teaching methods. The respondents also expressed a very positive

assessment of children's learning and ability to gain historical knowledge. It appears that the various ECEC centres shared some important features, and there was consistency between the types of methods and tools used that enabled this success. Some of the most central methods that led to these positive experiences are presented.

The respondents stated that staff storytelling was very important for the children's growing knowledge and that stories were central in the preparation of projects and excursions. Many scholars have stated that stories are the essence of learning about the past for children (Farmer & Heeley, 2004). Thus, this theme is not surprising. However, the teachers had not learned this from didactic theories; rather, this insight was based on their own experiences in the field. The teachers told the children about their own childhood experiences and stories about past events in the local community. The children showed great interest in what the adults told them and provided responses through questions and by subsequently retelling what they had heard.

Children's retelling of stories is an important part of historical learning (Dixon and Hales, 2014; Cooper, 2004), and this was expressed in several ways. Some teachers were informed by parents that children were able to tell their families about historic sites or incidents in the neighbourhood, of which many parents did not have prior knowledge. This, in turn, led to children's experience of pride and feeling of having something to offer others. The children became a resource for their own parents and siblings. Some of the children actually insisted on taking a Sunday walk with their parents to a museum or to historic monuments that they had visited with their teachers so that they could tell their families about these items.

### **Long-term planning and combination with other learning activities**

This is an area of work that is easy to combine with other learning activities, such as outdoor activities, music, drama, art and literature, and these combinations were conducted frequently in the centres. This means the teaching has an interdisciplinary character with an emphasis on all-around development and holistic learning (Cooper, 2007; Harnett and Whitehouse, 2013). It is particularly common for the ECEC centres to link historical teaching with outings in the community, such that outdoor activities are combined with visits to cultural sites or buildings of historical interest. This makes the teaching of history more varied and interesting and, at the same time, supports different types of learning, e.g., communication skills or mathematical development. As Cooper (2007) noted, we can only learn about the past through developing communication skills and the measurement and ordering of events in sequence.

Long-term work and good planning are essential to achieving good results. As Cooper (2004) stated, 'planning for progression' is essential. Most of the centres carried out the same or similar historical projects every year; thus, many of the children participated in the same projects several times but at different ages. With this repetition over several years, the children's understanding developed gradually. The same stories were told repeatedly, the children visited the same sites, and knowledge developed from year to year. In this way, staff could also strengthen their own competence as well as the quality of planning and execution.

Although the teachers emphasized the importance of careful long-term planning, they also noted that the planning must not be overly thorough. There must be time and space for children to wonder, reflect and encounter history; thus, teachers must secure a certain amount of flexibility and room for improvisation so that the children can contribute and make decisions about the content presented. The children were quite inquisitive in their encounter with history, and all teachers suggested that it was important to allow children's questions to lead the way to a certain degree. This notion is supported by the Norwegian Framework Plan,



which emphasizes children's participation as a core value in ECEC (Ministry of Education and Research, 2012) as well as by recent didactical research (Dixon and Hales, 2014).

### **Physical and bodily experiences**

All teachers emphasized that, in particular, physical and bodily experiences stimulate children's interest and are important for the understanding of history. They stated that young children like to investigate small details and must be able to touch, smell and try for themselves because they need a concrete and vivid approach to learning. After listening to adult storytelling in the ECEC centre, the staff and children could see and experience the places they had discussed. At those places, the children experienced the smell of an old house, walk under an old barn bridge, and touch historic objects such as toys or tools. In addition, in a museum, they could taste food prepared like it was in the 'old days'. All five centres visited museums regularly, and all teachers emphasized, in different ways, how important it was for children to sense the history, and for it to be tangible and perceptible. This way of relating children's immediate experiences to distant historical times could be a means of overcoming Piagetian-inspired scepticism regarding the teaching of history in early childhood (Harnett, 2007).

One way of making history tangible is through dramatization. Drama in history teaching and dressing up in old costumes can inspire and motivate children (Harnett and Whitehouse, 2013). One of the centres, Centre A, performed a play for the parents. The play was about the life of children in the local community in 'the old days', i.e., in a farming culture. The children dressed in period clothes, which made a strong impression on many of them. In particular, they realized that not all children had shoes in earlier times, and when they felt what it was like to walk without shoes during the play, it made a strong impression on them. During the preparations for the performance, costumes were of great importance, and children could immerse themselves in the past by wearing these costumes. 'They realized that children's lives in the past were very different from theirs', one of the teachers explained.

The two teachers at Centre A interpreted the children's reactions to the dramatization as expressions of empathy with children in the past. A few of the other teachers expressed similar views, although not as clearly. The question of historical empathy has been controversial; some historians claim that it is impossible to achieve empathetic understanding of individuals in the past because we do not have direct access to their lives and experiences (Harnett and Whitehouse, 2013; Harris and Foreman-Peck, 2004). However, there are historians and teachers who support the view that 'empathy, as a teaching objective, is both desirable and feasible' (Harris and Foreman-Peck, 2004: 107). This disagreement is partly due to differing concepts of empathy (Foster, 2001), e.g., is it sufficient to 'feel like' those who lived before us, or does empathetic understanding '[demand] considerable thoughtful effort'? (VanSledright, 2001: 55). The question of empathy played a minor role in this study, and the findings indicate that historical learning may play a role in children's moral development.

All teachers noted that historical interest was stimulated when stories about life in past times were connected to concrete and material objects. The children were curious about what things people had and did not have in the past. One of the children explained the difference like this: 'They did not have a washing machine!', and another child bursted out: 'They had no lights !' Thus, historical knowledge could be a gateway to understanding that people's living conditions in past times and in the present differ (Cooper, 2007). This type of teaching could help the children to view the past as a reality and to differentiate between fact and fantasy (Farmer and Heeley, 2004).

## **Meetings with elderly and use of resources in the local community**

Dixon and Hales (2014) state that the involvement of family or community members ‘helps to bring history to life for children and to link it fundamentally to their own experiences’ (Dixon and Hales, 2014: 58). This strategy was widely adopted by the teachers in this study. They utilized resources in the community and met with people or visited institutions and places in the surrounding area. This was viewed as a means of building identity and a sense of belonging to a local community. Most of the ECEC centres had been visited by elderly persons from the community, but only one, Centre B, had a regular program of cooperation with the elderly at a community centre in the neighbourhood. The elderly told stories from their own childhoods; thus, children were able to have a direct meeting with the past and consider childhood in past times. These approaches to historical learning have proven to be a good way to connect with and utilize resources in the local community (Dixon and Hales, 2014; Cooper, 2007).

The two teachers from Centre B noted that a focus on history and traditional arrangements might strengthen ties between generations in an otherwise age-segregated society. ‘Good stories and common activities’, as one of the teachers stated, may result in people becoming inquisitive about people of other generations. The same teacher had experienced that the elderly had much to contribute and that such meetings stimulated children’s interest and understanding of the past and were mutually rewarding for both children and the elderly. This may also contribute to historical awareness and an understanding of time and chronology, as is discussed in the following section.

## **Learning of historical facts and sense of chronology**

The children demonstrated that they had learned many historical facts. However, is it possible to talk about a historical understanding that extends beyond the concrete historical facts? To grasp historical change and development, children need to have some sense of time and the passage of time. One can, therefore, claim that to fulfil the curriculum goals, the children have to develop an understanding of time that is connected to a historical consciousness and expressed as narrative competence (Rüsen, 2004; Rüsen and Rüsen, 2008). However, is this possible for a five-year-old child?

All teachers referred to one main distinction in children's statements about the present and the past: the differentiation between the ‘old days’ and the present, or the ‘new days’, as some of the children reportedly said. This distinction is well known from other studies (Barton and Levstik, 1996; Wilschut, 2012). The understanding of historical time is divided into two main categories, ‘now’ and ‘before’, and for most children, there is no form of differentiation between the two categories: ‘First they didn’t have cars and then they got cars!’ The children were able to grasp the differences between the present and the past, but everything that happened in the past was simply considered to have happened in the ‘old days’, regardless of whether it concerned Vikings, dinosaurs or the invention of cars. There was a less developed or completely absent understanding of chronology among the youngest children, but all teachers emphasized a change in children’s understanding towards the end of preschool age. There were individual differences between the children, but most of the teachers supported the following view expressed clearly by one teacher: ‘something happens when they are five to six years. They understand a bit more about distance in time, about very long ago and not so long ago’. Some children grasped the order of things, i.e., which things are the oldest and which are not so old, but they had no understanding of the length of the time span between different historical periods. One of the teachers explained this issue as follows: ‘Distance in time is difficult, even for adults, but I think they have a reasonably good understanding of the

order, e.g., that the Stone Age came before the Viking Age.’ Even the oldest children did not, in most cases, know *how* long. This indicates that they had a sense of chronology and could order historical facts, which can be interpreted as a form of narrative competence, according to Rösen’s first skill (Rösen, 2004). The children had an experience of the past and were able to make their own narratives when they were playing, talking about their experiences, or asking the staff questions.

Rösen’s second skill concerns connecting experiences of the past with the present and the future, and making narratives with continuity (Rösen, 2004). The strongest evidence of competence at this level is connected to the meetings with the elderly and awareness of the life history of family members. As noted earlier, a physical and concrete experience stimulated children’s interest in history. The same seems to occur in terms of the understanding of time and narrative competence. Objects, or especially persons, that children can link to history are important. This is especially true when the child him/herself, family members or other people they know are viewed as historical persons (Dixon and Hales, 2014). In this situation, some children showed expressions of chronological thinking, albeit at a simple level. During a conversation about the Stone Age, a four-year-old child stated the following to the teacher: ‘That’s a long time ago. It was even before you were born. Wow! That’s a long time ago!’ The children understood that a long time ago, their parents were young and that even further back, their grandparents were children. At least five of the teachers deliberately used the family in their teaching: ‘We try to hook it on the grandparents, great grandparents, etc., to place it in time.’ Still, none of the centres made systematic use of timelines, which could have been a helpful tool in facilitating children’s development of understanding of time (Cooper, 2012).

Children were also aware that they were once babies and are now bigger boys and girls. Statements such as this about changes in their own life histories reveal a consciousness about change and an awareness of a connection between the past and the present. This is reminiscent of Langeveld’s concept of time: ‘Time is embedded in experiences and lived experiences’ (Lippitz, 1983: 175). According to statements from teachers in this study, some of the children had this kind of experience of time even though they did not have an abstract or metric concept of time. Nevertheless, this could be interpreted as a sense of historical time (Barton and Levstik, 1996; Wilschut, 2012).

### **Sense of chronology and the development of historical consciousness**

Narrative competence and historical consciousness include the ability to connect the future to narratives of the past and present; only then do the children fulfil Rösen’s (2004) second skill of narrative competence. The teachers interpreted the children’s conceptions about the future as far more fluid, and this is not surprising because it cannot be concrete: it is centred on imagination rather than facts. All teachers reported that children understood they were going to become adults like their mother and father, and some of them talked about what they were ‘going to be’ when they grow up. However, none of the teachers heard much about this in connection with the teaching of history. As far as the teachers experienced, most of the oldest children were able to combine historical knowledge and understanding of the present, and they could make a chronological order of historical facts. However, the children’s ability to connect experience of the past, understanding of the present and expectations of the future was weak, according to the teachers’ observations and interpretations. Thus, the data from this study gives no clear evidence that children in this age group are able to fulfil Rösen’s second skill, making it very difficult for them to reach the third skill, ‘the ability to orient, related to

the practical need to find a path through the straits and eddies of temporal change' (Rüsen, 2004: 81).

Piaget argued that children needed places, people and objects as links to understand time (Piaget, 1969), and the findings of this research might support his view, as a physical approach to history stimulated both interest and reflections on history and historical time. However, the conclusions in this study are quite the opposite of those of Piaget. While Piaget (1969) concludes that small children under the age of eight do not have a self-concept of time, Barton and Levstik (1996) and Langeveld (1960) claim that there is another way of understanding time and that children are able to understand the order of happenings or objects even if they do not have a clear idea of the proportions of time. Létourneau (2001) emphasizes narratives, and particularly the child's own life story, as essential for the child's understanding of chronology in a larger context and stated that it is possible to observe a child's emerging historical consciousness when s/he is five to six years of age. Although it is not possible to make a decisive conclusion on the basis of this material, observations from the teachers lead in the same direction as Létourneau's conclusions.

The findings from this study indicate that young children have a greater potential for understanding historical change than developmental theories such as Piaget (1969) have claimed. With appropriate learning methods that are varied and adapted to the target group, historical learning can start early. Children's expressions of historical understanding indicate that they have a more advanced concept of time than Piaget's stages of development suggest. In addition, learning does not have to be solely about immediate experiences. This study showed that it is possible to connect the child's own experiences and close relations to learning about more distant subjects and abstract concepts.

An important insight that teachers gained is that repetition over time, year after year, produces results over time. Even if the children do not understand the concepts immediately, early experience can lay the foundation for later learning. A focused teaching of history in ECEC will most likely help to initiate the process and achieve the ambitious curriculum goals. This is supported by research showing that 'children's thinking about time depended not on maturation, but on teaching strategies, familiarity with the material, relevant experiences and interaction with other children' (Cooper, 2012: 45). Although it can be projected that the level of historical consciousness is at a relatively simple level, or perhaps absent among many children, it should be emphasized that historical learning and the aim to develop historical consciousness in early childhood can be viewed as a starting point for later development.

The teachers in this study were confident that children could enjoy and take an interest in history when the teaching methods are based on children's participation, play and activity, and when the content is made relevant to the children. This approach stimulated children's engagement in learning. When children are challenged and when teachers emphasize opportunities rather than the limitations of children's learning abilities, it is possible for children to achieve relatively advanced learning goals. If teachers experience, learn and reflect together with children and use history to 'make sense of the world' (Dixon and Hales, 2014: 7), they can make history both exciting and relevant to children's lives.

## **Conclusions**

The starting point for this article was the formal requirement for ECEC centres to teach history. The possibility of achieving these goals was questioned, taking into consideration the

children's young age. On the basis of this analysis, the goals still seem to be ambitious but not unreachable.

Due to the scope of this study and the methods used, it is not possible to make generalizations on the basis of these findings. The ECEC centres in this study have developed a diversity of methods in the teaching of history and have very positive evaluations of children's ability to gain historical knowledge. Adult storytelling together with a concrete and vivid approach to history was important. However, it appears that, in particular, physical and bodily experiences and a focus on the children's own life story have stimulated their interest and understanding of history.

Teachers have also observed expressions from some of the oldest children that can be interpreted as narrative competence at a basic level and an emerging historical consciousness. According to teachers, some children expressed an understanding of historical time that confronted earlier research about young children's perception of time. This indicates that historical teaching in early childhood education could provide a basis for the development of historical consciousness at school. It also shows that curriculum goals are realistic and underlines the importance of learning history, even at a young age.

On the basis of insights gained from this study, there is reason to more closely examine young children's historical understanding and ability to develop a historical consciousness. The ECEC teachers have valuable experience in teaching history and assessing children's responses, but a study based solely on teacher interviews has limitations. A combination of multiple methods, interviews with staff and children and researchers' observations would make it possible to provide a more comprehensive view of both the teaching and children's reception and understanding of history.

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## Appendix: Semi-structured interview protocol

- Background questions
  - Can you tell me about your background? What is your education?
  - How long have you been working with early childhood education? How long have you been at this centre?
  - Can you tell me about this centre? How many children and employees? How is the centre organized?
- Teaching of history
  - How would you consider the importance of teaching history in early childhood? Why have your centre chosen to put emphasis on teaching of history?
  - How do you consider your work in this field in connection to the requirements in the Framework Plan?
  - How do you plan your historical projects? Are the children involved in the planning? If yes, how?
  - How do you teach history in practice? What subjects have you emphasized? Which methods or tools do you use? How do you organize the projects? The teacher(s) role? Children's participation?
  - Is the teaching of history connected to other parts of your pedagogical work? How?
  - Do you involve other persons or resources? Parents, grandparents? Other people, organizations, resources in the local community? Do you visit historical sites or museums?
  - Do you talk about people's life history? The children, parents, grandparents, staff? Do you try to connect this to historical development?
  - Do you try to connect the past to the present? E.g. historical explanations of present conditions? Do you talk about time span, use timelines? Do you talk about the future in connection with this?
  - How would you consider your competence in this field?
- Children's response and understanding
  - How will you describe the children's reactions to the teaching of history? Is there something that especially catches their interest?
  - Can they separate reality from fantasy? Do they understand the difference between e.g. a fairy-tale and the historical reality?
  - What is your impression of the children's historical understanding? How much and what do they understand? What do they learn? Different between age groups?
  - Do they talk about the projects or their impressions afterwards? Spontaneously or upon request? What do they say? Do they take it into their play?
  - What is your impression of their concept of time? Today, yesterday, long time ago, very long time ago? Different between age groups?
  - Do they express any thoughts about the future? Or a connection between past, present and future?



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