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RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Drama and theatre in a Nordic curriculum perspective – a challenged arts subject used as a learning medium in compulsory education

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to present a Nordic curriculum perspective on drama and theatre in education ranging from preschool to upper secondary education and cultural schools. Underlined in the Nordic welfare model is an equity, inclusive and democracy perspective, which guarantees free access to compulsory education and to upper secondary education. How is drama/theatre presented and positioned in the national curriculum frameworks of the Nordic countries? This comparative analysis concerns drama and/or theatre in the curricula in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden.

### KEYWORDS

Drama; curriculum; Nordic countries; critical pedagogy; democracy; and equity

## 1. Introduction

In Nordic educational systems, there is a long tradition of including music, visual art, and handicraft in the form of wood, metal, and textile work in the syllabus. Theatre in school has also a long tradition as a once or twice a year event. Looking outside compulsory education, there are rather strong traditions for amateur theatre as part of liberal education in leisure time for 'ordinary people'. During the twentieth century, waves of children's theatre, community theatre, group dynamics, and free groups devising plays have had an influence on education. When looking back to the 1970s, many efforts were made to introduce drama into the school curriculum, and up to the 1990s, a knowledge base was built for drama and theatre in education, strongly influenced by American and British traditions of drama, and by theatre theory and philosophy, with both Brecht and Stanislavsky receiving attention. In Finland, the tradition of speech and drama has been rather strong in teacher education, and a contribution from Denmark is theatre anthropology with Barba. Continental philosophers and theorists such as Iser, Luhmann, Fischer-Lichte, Derrida, and Lehmann are visible in the Nordic educational as well as in the research literature about drama and theatre, with concepts such as aesthetic doubling, feedback loops, emerging aesthetics, performative turn, post-dramatic theatre, and hybridisation. From the 1990s and onwards the struggle for claiming a place for drama, theatre, and dance as bodily oriented art forms has been elaborated with knowledge based on research, and with a developed professional vocabulary. The discourses

promoted by drama and theatre education have not been strong enough and not in accordance with strong new management curriculum philosophies. However, the research within the field is quite extensive. During the last 20 years, more than 60 doctoral theses have been produced in the field of drama and theatre education in the Nordic countries. A meta study (Østern 2015), identifying the knowledge contribution from 42 doctoral theses defended in Finland, shows strong perspectives:

- Articulating forms of learning
- Knowledge production – the performative turn
- Applying concepts from theatre/drama to new sites
- Equity agenda, participation, collaboration
- Not art for art's sake but art for a more human society, art for cultural development, art for cultural literacy, and for subject formation.

Persisting tensions in education still produce questions of whether drama, theatre, and learning in school fit together. The current trends in politics do not favour arts subjects, and the management trends demanding evidence of learning do not allow much space for the arts.

The status of drama in education varies among the Nordic countries, and the development points in different directions. In Iceland, for example, drama was introduced into the compulsory school curriculum as one of the arts subjects in 2013, while in Sweden drama is less visible in the latest curriculum than in the previous one. An ongoing discussion regarding drama in education concerns the concept of 'aesthetic learning' as a common area, versus subject specific learning in each art form. Another issue concerns drama as an art form versus drama as method for learning in other school subjects. A Norwegian White Paper (NOU 8 2015) describes the pillars of education for tomorrow. One pillar is called the practical-aesthetic subjects. A critical stance is taken by the arts subjects, commenting that every subject has a practical dimension and likewise an aesthetic dimension. A long-time debate concerns the relationship between drama and theatre. We will look at these issues, and trends regarding drama in current curricula.

Sternudd (2000) has conducted a study of drama in four previous Swedish national curricula for compulsory school (1962, 1969, 1980 and 1994). She formulated four perspectives: the artistically oriented perspective, the personal development perspective, the critically liberating perspective, and the holistic learning perspective. Her work contributes to an integrative view, where drama is recognised as multifaceted. In Finland, Østern (2000) has studied genres in drama education in Nordic curriculum frameworks, and Dahl (2005) has made a thorough analysis of aims and contents in curricula for drama and theatre in the Nordic countries (not Iceland). She complains in her study about the inconsistent use of concepts, which makes comparisons difficult. Dahl mentions as curriculum aims to promote empathy, communication skills, aesthetic, and ethical education. Dahl (2005, 102, our translation) concludes:

In this critical analysis of the curriculum frameworks, an unsystematic and dispersed use of the methods of drama to promote other learning aims has been uncovered. In upper secondary, though, the four countries have some kind of systematic description of what teaching in drama and theatre embraces.

Dahl suggests more international cooperation around these questions in order to raise the status of drama and theatre as school subjects.

## 2. Drama contexts in the Nordic countries

The Nordic countries are similar in many respects, but there are differences as well. For example, the population in the Nordic countries varies significantly.<sup>1</sup> The Nordic countries share cultural traditions, but they are becoming increasingly multicultural. The Nordic welfare model ensures that childcare and medical care are available at low costs. Compulsory and upper secondary education is free of charge, as is university education, based on the core value that education has to be available for everyone. This view is also reflected in the folk high schools, originally created as 'peoples university', a possibility for adults to study.<sup>2</sup> Also the Music and Cultural schools, which offer after-school classes in the arts, are a manifestation of the idea that education of all kinds should be available for all children and youth. Earlier, participation used to be free of charge, but that is no longer the case.

In all Nordic countries, there are national branches of the international drama and theatre in education association IDEA, and every third year a Drama Boreale conference is arranged in one of the Nordic countries. Four of the Nordic Drama and Theatre Associations have Journals, with DRAMA, the *Nordic Journal for Drama Education*, as the oldest one, existing since 1972 with a Nordic editorial board. Norwegian Niels Braanaas was for many years the chief editor. He has also written a much used university level book about the theory and history of drama in education (Braanaas 1985/2008).

Our aim is to answer the following questions: How is drama/theatre presented and positioned in the national curriculum frameworks of the Nordic countries? What are the characteristics of drama and theatre curricula in the Nordic countries? Below, we will provide a brief introduction to the drama context in each country, followed by a description of the situation for each level or form of education in all countries. Coming from a Nordic context, our understanding of *Curriculum* is a formal, written document, negotiated, decided, and valid at the national level. The study is mainly based on such National curriculum documents, accessible in the Internet.<sup>3</sup>

### 2.1. Denmark<sup>4</sup>

According to the Danish national curriculum for preschool, teaching is, as far as possible, given in the form of play and other developing activities. Drama is explicitly mentioned in relation to preschool classes, with specific goals regarding knowledge and competencies. In primary and lower secondary education, drama is mentioned as a learning medium for all students. Drama is also a subject possible for students to choose in grades 7, 8, and/or 9. The aim of the subject is to make the students acquainted with dramatic expressions. The subject 'dramatik' is offered in certain upper secondary study programmes. The students are expected to have a basic knowledge of lower secondary school drama when choosing drama in upper secondary school. Music and Cultural schools (extra-curricular) offer a wide range of theatre courses. In Denmark, also some folk high schools offer extensive programmes in drama and theatre. In teacher education, it is possible to study drama as a specialist subject, and three colleges offer a diploma in drama. There are several master's degree programmes in drama and theatre education, and dramaturgy and theatre studies, at Aarhus University, its School of Education, at Copenhagen University

and at Metropolia University College. It is also possible to achieve a Ph.D. focused on drama and theatre, dramaturgy, or theatre studies.

## 2.2. Finland<sup>5</sup>

In Finland, drama and theatre education is not obligatory at any stages of education, but as an optional choice, there are a large variety of courses. Drama as learning medium is mentioned at all stages of education as recommended or expected to be used. In early childhood education, the notion of fantasy, imagination, and play is put forward. In primary school, creative learning mediums and drama are included in the curriculum, mainly as part of mother tongue (Finnish, Swedish, Sami, and Romani) and literature, and as a learning medium in cross-curricular projects. In the Finnish national framework curriculum for basic education (grades 1–9) from 2014, drama as a learning medium is included in most subjects, and multi-literacy is emphasised. In upper secondary school, drama as a literary form is included in courses in mother tongue and literature. As optional courses, schools can offer drama and theatre in primary and secondary school. At upper secondary level, theatre arts can be chosen as a special course portfolio, leading to a diploma in theatre arts. At upper secondary vocational education, circus art can be one option. Basic education in the arts (cultural school) outside the ordinary school can be offered within liberal education (organised by municipalities in adult education institutes). There are many and extensive courses in theatre. The Finnish Open University and some teacher education departments in universities offer studies in drama education at basic and subject level (for teachers mostly). Finally, courses in amateur theatre, drama and theatre can be offered in adult education and liberal education (especially folk high schools). Theatre instructors (bachelor level) for cultural schools are educated at university colleges. Theatre education up to master's and Ph.D.-level can be studied at the Theatre Academy in Helsinki, and at the University of Tampere. A Ph.D. in education can be focused on drama and theatre education.

## 2.3. Iceland<sup>6</sup>

In Iceland's national curriculum framework, six pillars are mentioned, on which all education is based. These are literacy, sustainability, health and welfare, democracy and human rights, equality, and creativity. In preschool, play is emphasised as a central activity, while dance and language are mentioned as dramatic expressions. In the Icelandic national curriculum with subject areas for compulsory education (grades 1–10), arts and crafts are divided into performing arts (dance and dramatic arts), visual arts and music, and crafts (home economics, design, and craft and textiles). The timetable for arts and crafts should be 15.48% of the weekly classes. Each compulsory school decides if subject areas should be taught separately or be integrated. Education in dramatic arts includes training pupils in the methods of the art form, but also in dramatic literacy in the widest sense, enriching the pupils' understanding of themselves, human nature and society. According to the subject description, Dramatic Arts encourage the pupils to express, form, and present their ideas and feelings. In addition, Dramatic Arts constantly test cooperation, relationships, creativity, language, expression, critical thinking, physical exertion, and voice projection. This is all done through play and creative activity. There

is no general option of drama/theatre in upper secondary education. However, three (out of 35) upper secondary schools offer extensive courses in theatre. There are some after-school options in drama and theatre for children and young people, but there are no national guidelines for drama or cultural schools. At the School of Education, University of Iceland, it is possible to study drama as part of teacher education, and the Iceland Academy of the Arts has graduated actors as qualified drama teachers since 2009. The School of Education in Reykjavik also offers specialisation studies of drama in education. It is worth noting that this small island country has managed to establish dramatic arts as an aesthetic subject and key learning area in compulsory education.

#### **2.4. Norway<sup>7</sup>**

In Norway, there are many teachers with competence to teach drama and theatre as a subject. Still at no stage in primary, secondary, or upper secondary education is drama/theatre taught as a compulsory subject, but it is used as a learning medium. In kindergarten, dramatic play is part of the framework, and 'art, culture, and creativity' is a defined learning area. In primary and secondary school, drama and theatre can be an optional choice, dependent on the school's profile. In secondary school, the optional subject 'Audience and stage' (Norw. 'Sal og scene') can be used for theatre projects or musicals.<sup>8</sup> At upper secondary level, every county is obliged to offer an extensive course in music, dance, and drama at least in one upper secondary school. Here, Norway offers drama/theatre education, with over 1000 lessons during three upper secondary school years. In after-school activities, Music and Arts schools offer courses in theatre, both at the basic level and at the demanding talent level. This school form is not free of charge, unlike the above-mentioned forms. Many Norwegian folk high schools offer specialisation in theatre subjects. Drama and theatre teachers are educated at several university colleges and universities. It is possible to achieve a Ph.D. in drama and theatre education, and in theatre studies in Bergen, Oslo, and Trondheim. In Norway, there is a handful of professors appointed in drama and theatre (education). The trend was positive for drama in compulsory education until drama was removed as an obligatory subject in general teacher education (from 2004).

#### **2.5. Sweden<sup>9</sup>**

In Sweden, drama and theatre education is not mandatory at any level of education, but is an option in varying educational contexts. In the national curriculum for preschool, drama is mentioned in one of the goals. In the national curriculum for compulsory school (1–9), drama is mentioned as a learning medium in general, particularly in Swedish and English. Outside the formal curriculum, it may be an independent subject, depending on the schools', and students', choice. Some compulsory schools have chosen drama to be part of the school's profile, throughout all nine years, and in, for example, Steiner schools, students create performances several times during 9 or 12 years of schooling. In upper secondary school, theatre is an option. Students who choose 'The Arts program – Theatre' will study theatre courses up to 50% of the time during three years, around 1.100 hours. This study programme is not offered by all upper secondary schools, and the number is decreasing. Drama/theatre is the third largest subject in the after-school activities

organised by Cultural Schools with fees –which is an exception from all formal education in Sweden. Almost every municipality has a Music or Cultural school, but the availability of drama/theatre varies. At the university level, drama courses for teachers and others have been severely cut, or even closed down, in recent years. In pre-service teacher education, drama has almost vanished. Since the late 1970s, vocational education for drama-pedagogues has been available at folk high schools. For many years, only one of formerly three sites remained, but in 2016, a new one will be established. Some folk high schools and Örebro University offer education for theatre pedagogues. Gothenburg University offers teacher education in theatre, valid for teaching at upper secondary level. The first professor in educational drama was appointed in 2015, at Stockholm University, where a new, three year bachelor education in drama/theatre will be in place 2016. A Ph.D. in educational sciences can be focused on drama and theatre education.

### 3. Comparative overview of drama and theatre curricula

In this section, we present a comparative description of drama and theatre in National curricula for different levels of education. [Table 1](#) presents drama/theatre in compulsory education. [Table 2](#) presents the upper secondary level, and [Table 3](#) presents cultural schools. A brief summary of drama in preschool curricula is also presented before the tables.

#### 3.1. Drama in the Nordic curricula for preschool education

In the Nordic countries, early childhood education is widespread. Parents have to pay a fee, related to income. The staff consists of trained preschool teachers, and the quality is generally considered to be good – a majority of all preschool children goes to day care centres for a few years before school. The last year before grade one is called the preschool class (or in Denmark kindergarten class). It can be organised within day care centres or connected to the primary school. Children begin school at the age of 6 (Iceland, Norway) or 7 (Denmark, Finland, Sweden).

**Table 1.** Drama in compulsory education; primary and lower secondary school.

Country	Subject name	Work form connected to	Aesthetic approaches, Multimodal approaches	Arts subject in its own right
<b>Denmark</b>	Drama	Danish (mother tongue)	Aesthetic approaches used	Grade 7,8 and/or 9 (optional)
<b>Finland</b>	Drama	Mother tongue, Handicraft, Health, History, Languages, all Religion, Science, Societal knowledge, and further as cultural knowledge, communication, and expression	Aesthetic and multimodal approaches used	Explicit part of mother tongue and literature (grade 1–9), optional subject (7–9) Not all schools offer the optional subject
<b>Iceland</b>	Dramatic Arts	Dramatic literacy, in a wide sense	Integrated	Independent arts subject for all students in grade 1–10
<b>Norway</b>	Drama-activities Dramatisation	Norwegian, and other subjects (e.g.) History	Multimodal and aesthetic approaches used	‘Audience and Stage’ (grade 8–10) optional for schools and students
<b>Sweden</b>	Drama (1–9) Dramatisation	Swedish, English (and any other subject)	To be applied throughout the curriculum as ‘aesthetic learning’	Not part of the National Curriculum. Optional for schools (rare) and students

**Table 2.** Drama/Theatre in upper secondary education.

Country	Name of study programme and/or the subject	Obligatory or optional	Amount of teaching	Examination	Teacher qualifications
<b>Denmark</b>	'Dramatik'	Mandatory for two years, but only if you choose a special direction for your studies	C-level 75 hrs. From C to B-level 125 hrs (Total = 200 hrs)	Oral examination (graded)	Master's or bachelor's degree in dramaturgy, theatre science, drama/theatre education, or actor training
<b>Finland</b>	Theatre art	Optional throughout the 3 years	1–15 courses One course is 38 hrs. In a few schools it is possible to choose up to 10–15 courses = 380–570 hrs.	Examination: performance, interview, written task (graded Theatre Diploma based on at least two courses passed)	Master's degree in some subject with a specialisation in drama/theatre; master's in theatre education; actor training
<b>Iceland</b>	Drama and theatre	Mentioned in the national curriculum as specialisation. Three schools offer drama and theatre specialisation	Maximum 840 hrs. In a few schools it is possible to choose 48–144 hrs.	Examination: performance, interview, written task	Master's or bachelor's degree in drama/theatre education; actor training
<b>Norway</b>	Drama	Optional, although if chosen it is mandatory throughout 3 years; offered in at least one upper secondary school in every county.	Minimum 812 hrs; maximum 1288 hrs over three years	Formative and summative assessment. Performance, written tasks, oral examination	Master's or bachelor's degree in drama/theatre; actor training
<b>Sweden</b>	The Arts programme – Theatre	Optional, although if chosen it is mandatory throughout 3 years; not offered in all upper secondary schools	650–1350 of totally 2500 credits, appr. 500–1100 hrs	Formative and summative evaluation. Performing, analysing, oral and written tasks	Teacher training valid for upper secondary school with specialisation drama/theatre
	Drama pedagogy (new)	Optional for students in the Child- and recreation programme	100 credits, 80 hrs		

Preschool education is not based on subjects, but builds upon learning areas, personal development, forms of expression, etc., with play as a central aspect. Drama is mentioned in all Nordic countries' curricula for preschool. The Danish curriculum for preschool class stands out, as drama is described by specific knowledge goals and competencies. The Swedish preschool curriculum points out drama as a learning content, a learning medium, and as part of a cross-curricular approach. The Finnish and Norwegian preschool curriculum defines the arts, including drama, as a learning area. The Icelandic preschool curriculum emphasises the value of play and creativity, and the importance of democracy and equality in all school activities. Drama is mentioned in connection to language and dance as 'dramatic expression'.

There are no regulations for the amount of drama in preschools, and no specific teacher qualifications related to drama, but drama is usually part of preschool teacher education, to some extent.

**Table 3.** Theatre in Cultural schools – an after-school activity with a fee.

Country	Name and conditions	Types of courses in Drama/Theatre	Teacher qualification	Which authority decides on the frames?
<b>Denmark</b>	Music and Cultural schools; 'Den musiske skolen'	Many different courses in theatre	Competence in arts subject, often a five year education	Each municipality (98) is obliged to offer this school type, often in cooperation with basic education; frames given by the National Cultural Board Some local arrangements for drama/theatre
<b>Iceland</b>	Music schools (689 students), but no national organisation of Cultural schools.			
<b>Finland</b>	'Basic education in arts'; theatre arts Basic course: 540 hrs. Advanced: 760 hrs. (together 1300 hours)	Introduction for young children aged 3–6 years Basic theatre course Advanced level theatre course	Competence in drama/theatre as 'instructor for theatre expression' (a 4 year education) or teacher education, or actor education	The National Board of Education decides upon the framework curriculum. Every municipality decides upon local arrangements and costs, including hiring of teachers
<b>Norway</b>	Cultural school Normally hours once a week.	Many courses in theatre and circus art; Basic programme (open) Core programme (open) with introduction and in-depth study course Advanced level (audition)	Bachelor's or master's in the subject taught, and teacher qualification	Framework curriculum by the National Board of Cultural Schools (under the jurisdiction of law for education). Every municipality (418 cultural schools) decides upon local arrangements and costs, including hiring of teachers
<b>Sweden</b>	Music or Cultural school Subject courses open (but not all children can have a place). Normally once a week. In 2014, 13,511 pupils were enrolled in drama/theatre courses	Different drama and theatre courses Cooperation with formal education in 'Creative school' projects	Drama and theatre pedagogues, many educated at folk high schools, often also hired into school projects	No national framework (yet). School owner is the municipality (290). Every municipality decides upon local arrangements and costs, including hiring of teachers

'Drama', including a couple of variations, is the term used in the compulsory school context. The exception is Iceland, where 'Dramatic Arts' is used, in line with its status as arts subject. The most common position concerns drama as mode of working, connected to learning in other subject areas, mainly mother tongue, although the Finnish curriculum explicitly mentions drama in relation to learning in nearly all school subjects. Drama is an optional, independent school subject in the lower secondary school curriculum in all countries (except Sweden), although it depends on what the schools choose to offer. Iceland is the only Nordic country where drama/dramatic arts is one of the arts subjects. It should be taught for all children during compulsory school, and it is evaluated in grades 4, 7, and 10. Dramatic arts can also be part of the teaching methods and integrated with other arts subjects. If, in the Nordic countries, the school play typical of amateur theatre was prominent in earlier days, nowadays musicals and other forms of devised theatre and collages are prominent in secondary school theatre.

Drama/theatre constitutes a substantial part of upper secondary education for students who choose this study profile, particularly in Norway and Sweden, where Theatre courses may constitute 50% of the studies. The study programmes are organised in courses or units, and a quick glance reveals a rather similar content for all Nordic countries, for

example: improvisation, performance training, theatre production, actor training, theatre traditions, and director training (Finland, Denmark), acting training, improvisation, performance training, theatre history, theatre production, voice and directing (Iceland), actor training, movement, performance, theatre history, theatre production, stage communication, drama education and storytelling (Norway), acting, theatre history, dramaturgy, physical theatre, sound and light, directing, voice, and also educational drama in another study programme (Sweden).

In upper secondary education in the Nordic countries, the subject is clearly an arts subject focused on performance, but also on collaborative forms of theatre making, as well as dramatic expressions of democracy in forms offered by post-dramatic genres. The students who choose to specialise in drama and theatre are as a rule very motivated and devoted to their studies. The amount of teaching is the highest in Norway and Sweden. The teachers are usually qualified for their work in these specialised groups. Criteria for assessment are clearly defined. The specialisation in drama and theatre qualifies the students for academic studies.

The Music and Cultural schools in all of the Nordic countries are dominated by music as the main subject (music caters for about 80% of the activity in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark), but drama, theatre, and circus art are gradually coming in – likewise visual art, dance, and expressive writing. In Denmark, Norway, Finland, and Sweden cultural schools are mentioned as resource centres for primary and secondary school, and this resource is being used, for instance, in arts projects. This extra-curricular education, arranged by local authorities, is strong and growing.

#### 4. Discussion of findings, trends, and tendencies

In this final section, we will revisit our research questions, and also have Dahl's critical conclusions from 2005 in mind. Is there a notable difference when comparing the status for drama in Nordic curricula in 2005 with the status in 2015? Has something developed into a more coherent and agreed upon conception of the art form drama and theatre in school? One important finding in this study is the great amount of developed curriculum frameworks for drama as an optional subject in lower secondary school, and for extensive upper secondary school courses. Criteria for assessment, both formative and summative, have been developed. In the curriculum texts, however, it is possible to find concepts connected to a critical stance, regarding becoming aware, and reflexive. The drama and theatre teacher profession has been actively engaged in developing the curriculum plans; they are formed based on research and relevant concepts are used. The strongest upward trend is towards cultural schools as resource centres for schools. As long as these options are open for all students without cost, they are in line with the Nordic welfare, equality, and democracy model, but this is not always the case. The qualifications of specialist teachers are good, at least in some countries, and course books and course materials have been developed to some extent. Also research in the field contributes to the knowledge base for drama and theatre in education. Below, we will make a brief summary of our findings and the developmental tendencies for all levels of schooling (Table 4).

Preschool education is outlined as learning in terms of personal development and forms of expression, with play as a central aspect. Drama is mentioned in all the Nordic

**Table 4.** Developmental tendencies for drama in previous and current curricula in the Nordic countries.

School form	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
<b>Preschool</b>	Positive trend Specific goals for drama	Stable	Stable	Stable	Stable
<b>Compulsory school</b> , including primary and lower secondary school	Stable Drama – an arts subject (optional) grade 7, 8 or 9	Positive trend Drama-work is connected to most subjects	Positive trend Dramatic Arts – compulsory subject in grade 1–10	Negative trend with one exception: 'Audience and Stage' optional Grades 8–10	Negative trend Drama is only mentioned in Swedish and English.
<b>Upper secondary school</b>	Stable	Stable	Positive trend 3 out of 35 schools offer Theatre education	Stable/mixed programmes threatened with being closed down, due to fewer applications	Stable/mixed programmes being closed down in some places due to fewer applications
<b>Music and Cultural school</b>	Positive trend	Positive trend	Positive trend	Positive trend	Positive trend

countries' curricula for preschool groups. Denmark has stated specific knowledge goals and competencies for preschool class, which can be interpreted as giving equal status to all subjects including the arts, or an adaption to the current focus on learning outcomes or both. The Icelandic curriculum mentions dramatic expression, while the Finnish and Norwegian preschool curricula define the arts, including drama, as a learning area. Swedish preschool curriculum points out drama as a learning content, a teaching method and as part of a cross-curricular approach.

Only Iceland has declared drama as one of the arts subjects that should be taught to all children in compulsory school, but this is in a fragile stage because of the school principal's power to choose if the subject should be taught separately or integrated with other subjects; in separate short-term courses that are allocated more hours in the timetable for a certain period of time or continuously throughout the school year. Nevertheless, it is a great achievement that Iceland, as the first Nordic country, has managed to establish drama as a new arts subject in compulsory education. In the other countries' curricula for compulsory school, drama is presented as a learning medium, most frequently connected to mother tongue. This might be related to research pointing out a definitive correlation between drama in education and increased language skills (Podlozny 2000; Ragnarsdóttir and Thorkelsdóttir 2013; Winner, Goldstein, and Vincent-Lancrin 2013). Drama has also been recognised to enhance students' learning, social skills, and motivation (e.g. DICE 2010; Lee et al. 2015).

Drama/Theatre in upper secondary school is fairly strong, although study programmes in the arts have been threatened, for example, in Sweden a few years ago. The critique was that most of the students did not work in the specific art field three years after graduation. However, thanks to strong public support, the Swedish arts programme could continue. The criticism is quite puzzling, as arts studies, like drama, according to the students are highly rewarding and meaningful (McCammon and Österlind 2011; Österlind 2011), increase study motivation, and may even reduce the risk of dropout (cf. McLaughlan 2010; Rasmussen and Khachik 2000).

Drama and theatre at the cultural schools is a thriving sector of arts education, although some problems are obvious. The main problem is that families with limited economic and/or sociocultural resources will not be able to send their children to cultural schools to the

same extent as parents in more privileged situations. This inequality is inevitable as long as access to cultural education is dependent on 'choice', involves waiting lists, and only comes with a fee.

## 5. Conclusions

The optional choices in Finland, Norway, and Sweden are remarkably good, especially regarding theatre subjects. Still here are several challenging issues. One is that generalist teachers in Norway since 2004 can choose to have no arts subject in their teacher education. Even worse, in Sweden, teachers in grade 1–3 are *unable* to choose any arts subject as part of their teacher education. Despite educational policies about creativity, entrepreneurship etc., at the rhetorical level in all Nordic countries, the arts subjects in compulsory education are squeezed into small numbers of lessons (or none for drama and dance). The optional courses might be a reason for not emphasising the arts, but other forces, like adapting to the international comparison and testing culture (e.g. Programme for International Student Assessment) and the increasing demands for 'employability' may also be at play. When there is a positive development in terms of more drama in the curriculum, it concerns subject-specific learning in drama as an art form – the development in Iceland is an outstanding example. When it comes to drama as an art form versus drama as a learning medium in other school subjects, the latter is the most common regarding drama in compulsory education, with Finland taking the lead, connecting drama to nearly all subjects. As long as cultural schools are not free of charge, with waiting lists being common, it is a school form that excludes many children and young people. The notion of the cultural school as a resource centre for schools is an interesting possibility, as it reaches all students, and may strengthen the teaching of arts in schools. Some schools with upper secondary level study specialisation in drama/theatre can be considered a positive tendency. Norway, in particular, can also point at a large number of qualified drama and theatre teachers, and researchers.

We could not see any signs of conflict between drama and theatre in the formal curriculum documents. Drama is by far the most common term, and specific theatre skills are not being introduced until lower secondary school, except in cultural schools. It also seems to be an 'interpreter's community' that this subject is based on theatre as an art form, and this is the strength. Aesthetic approaches are receiving more and more attention, often combined with multimodal approaches, variation in teaching, and even connected to embodied learning, but not yet in the curricula. Traces can be found in the concept 'aesthetic learning processes', applied in the Swedish curriculum discourse, and in the general part of the Norwegian curriculum framework, where the students are supposed to 'learn about artistic expression'.

The development is slightly paradoxical. Research in the field is growing – large-scale studies (DICE 2010) and meta-analyses (Lee et al. 2015; Winner, Goldstein, and Vincent-Lancrin 2013) present positive results, evidence for the usefulness of drama for learning. At the same time, drama has been severely reduced in teacher education and professional development courses. This does not make sense. The corporeal turn and research in embodied cognition as well as multimodal approaches offer new opportunities for a subject where thinking and feelings are combined in embodied learning (cf. Kress 2010; Sheets-Johnstone 2009; Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1993).

If and when drama eventually becomes an arts subject, new challenges will appear (cf. O'Toole, Stinson, and Moore 2009), such as grading students in drama and giving them homework, in order to adjust to the general school policy. Such demands seem strange compared to the situation when drama only appears now and then in the classroom, without any strict regulations. But given increasing control systems, more regulated teacher education programmes and professional development courses, and strong emphasis on tests and international comparison, it has become increasingly difficult to be part of compulsory school practice without having the status of a formal subject. In the current situation, it seems more important than ever for drama to become a school subject – for the benefit of *all* children.

Dahl (2005) noted inconsistent use of concepts and unsystematic use of drama to promote other learning aims, and asked for more international cooperation regarding drama curriculum. In a case study about successful strategies for long-term advocacy to get drama into the Australian curriculum (Österlind 2015), one of the respondents expressed the same need and suggested an international research project to outline the progression in drama, dealing with questions such as what is the foundation and the developmental sequence in drama. How does learning in drama progress? Another highly relevant question, raised by another participant in the same study, concerns how to train the teachers, and find ways of professional learning that are genuinely efficient and effective. Of course, this is facilitated if the core and progression is further elaborated. Perhaps the time has come to make a joint effort to explore and express the learning content in drama as an arts subject in its own right?

## Notes

1. Denmark: 5.6 m., Finland: 5.4 m., Iceland: 330,000, Norway: 5.1 m., Sweden: 10 m.
2. A folk high school is a school for liberal education. The ideology was formed by Danish N. S. Grundtvig as a school for life. The first folk high school was founded in Denmark 1844. Nowadays, students usually stay for one school year after graduating from upper secondary school, but also adults attend these schools with a large freedom to choose what you want to study.
3. We have also had mail contact with university staff, persons from boards and ministries as well as teachers in schools, in order to obtain updated information.
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8. The optional subject (introduced 2012) can be used also for film-making or music ensembles performing for an audience. The amount of hours devoted to this subject is 57 hours. The aim is to create and to communicate artistic work.
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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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