

# Religious Festivals in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Institutions: A Norwegian Case Study

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*Abstract:* This paper investigates how teachers at Norwegian early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions interpret the national curriculum's mandate that children should learn about religion and religious festivals. The results from an empirical study conducted in one religiously diverse ECEC, which is attended by children from both Christian and Muslim families, serve as the context for this analysis. The study identifies discrepancies between the ideal provided by the national curriculum and the reality described by teachers and parents. In the case of the ECEC studied, religion as such causes uneasiness among the teachers. As a result, Christian festivities focus more on traditions than religion, and Muslim holidays are ignored. Parents are largely uninformed about the purpose and content related to religious festivities at their children's ECEC. A starting point in addressing teachers' uncertainty over how to comply with the curricular mandate is to design pedagogical activities around religious festivities that aim to achieve learning and mutual understanding among the children.

*Keywords:* Christianity, ECEC Curriculum, Festivities, Islam

## Introduction

Norway's national curricular objectives for early childhood education and care institutions (ECECs) state that children shall learn about the role of religion in their society and learn about Christian holidays and festivals related to the religions represented in each ECEC. In this paper, I will present a small-scale case ethnographic study in one Norwegian ECEC and examine the teachers' attitudes towards religion and religious festivals as well as parents' opinions on the institution's activities which are related to Christian festivals<sup>1</sup>.

Religious festivities in Nordic ECECs have been subject to previous investigations. Jørgen Boelskov (2015) has compared Danish and Norwegian ECEC activities related to Christian and Muslim religious festivities. In Finland, Arniika Kuusisto (2011) has explored the responses of staff to traditional Christian festivities, while Arniika Kuusisto and Silja Lamminmäki-Vartia (2012) have investigated staff attitudes towards religious diversity in ECECs. Kari-Mette Walmann Hidle and Kari Krogstad (2015) have examined activities related to Muslim festivities in Norwegian ECECs.

No previous research has focused on parental perspectives on religious festivities in the Norwegian ECEC setting. This study is designed to introduce and provide up-to-date research on a topic that is under-researched and to present an angle which, until now, remains unexplored. This study is therefore necessarily exploratory and provides only preliminary findings. Nevertheless, these findings illuminate some important aspects of the topic and provide directions for further research.

The limitations of this study's design relate to the amount of information the analysis is based on: interviews with individuals associated with one particular ECEC. The individuals interviewed consist of six of the ECEC's teachers, including the director, and 12 of the parents of children attending the ECEC. These interviews focus on how this particular ECEC responds to religious festivities (particularly Christmas and Easter).

## *Purpose and Research Questions*

The purpose of this article is to provide insights into 1) what teachers find challenging about incorporating religious festivities within the ECEC curriculum and 2) the parents' opinions on ECEC religious festivities. The research is guided by the following questions:

*What are the teachers' attitudes towards religion in the ECEC context and how do they integrate religious festivities into the curriculum? What are the parents' opinions of the ECEC activities related to religious festivities?*

## *Norway's Kindergarten Act and Purpose Clause*

The Kindergarten Act (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research [NMER], 2005) and the Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergartens (Framework Plan; NMER, 2011) are normative documents for Norwegian ECECs<sup>2</sup>. The Kindergarten Act is concise and contains no clear guidelines dealing with religious diversity. Instead it uses the term 'cultural diversity' and states that ECECs shall take account of children's 'ethnic and cultural background' (NMER, 2005). However, the purpose clause does address children's backgrounds, which implicitly include religious affiliation: "The Kindergarten shall, in collaboration and close understanding with the home, safeguard the children's need for care and play, and promote learning and formation as a basis for all-round development" (NMER, 2005). If ECECs are to organize activities related to religious festivals in

<sup>1</sup> In this article, I use the term *ECEC* except in interviews with parents and fragments from policy documents which use the term *Kindergarten*.

<sup>2</sup> This study is based upon the Framework Plan from 2011 and not the new Framework Plan (2017) since the data gathering was conducted in 2015–2016.

“collaboration and close understanding with the home”, this means that ECECs must take into account the multi-religious composition of the children’s families.

The Norwegian Kindergarten Act states in section 1 (“purpose clause”) that ECECs “shall be based on fundamental values in the Christian and humanist heritage and tradition, such as respect for human dignity and nature, on intellectual freedom, charity, forgiveness, equality and solidarity, values that also appear in different religions and beliefs and are rooted in human rights” (NMER, 2005). Section 1a of the Act (“special objectives”) states that owners of private Kindergartens, in their statutes, “are at liberty to determine that the values referred to in Section 1 of the Act shall not be based on fundamental values of the Christian and humanist heritage and tradition” (NMER, 2005)<sup>3</sup>.

The Kindergarten Act (NMER, 2005) and the Education Act (NMER, 1998) in Norway have the same purpose clause (amended for primary and secondary education in 2008 and for ECECs in 2010). Earlier, both acts stated that ECECs and public schools should give children or pupils an upbringing in accordance with Christian fundamental values (named “the Christian object clause”). The reason for a new purpose clause was that the subject Religious Education (RE) in Norwegian public schools had received both criticism from the UN’s Human Rights Committee in 2004 and a negative judgement in 2007 from the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). Both pointed to the Education Act and the curriculum in RE and found that Christianity was given primacy over other religions and world-views (Andreassen, 2014, p. 265). The statement from the UN and the ruling in the ECHR also led to a Norwegian official report (NMER, 2007) recommending a change in the purpose clause for ECECs and public schools. The changes in the purpose clause (from “upbringing in accordance with Christian values” to “learning and formation” and “fundamental values”) may have influenced how staff in ECECs relates to religion, but this is just an assumption, since we do not have empirical findings on the topic.

### *Norway’s National Guidelines on Religion in ECECs*

The Framework Plan (NMER, 2011) provides guidelines for the practical pedagogical work, content and tasks taught in seven learning areas, one of which is Ethics, Religion and Philosophy (ERP). This part of the guidelines states that the ECEC shall ensure that children learn about religion as an aspect of culture and society and “learn about the Christian holidays and traditions and learn about traditions relating to the festivals of religions and ideologies that are represented in the group of children” (NMER, 2011, p. 40). In order to work towards these goals, staff must:

- allow Christian cultural heritage to be expressed through the celebration of festivals
- celebrate other religious, ideological and cultural traditions that are represented at the Kindergarten
- express the Christian cultural heritage by means of celebrating the religious feasts and to observe other traditions to do with other religions, beliefs and cultures represented in the Kindergarten (2011, p. 40).

In the Norwegian version of the Framework Plan (NMER, 2011), the word ‘to mark’ is used instead of ‘to celebrate’ (as in the English version) as a way of emphasizing the pedagogical purpose behind ECEC activities related to religious festivities and to clarify that they are not intended as religious celebrations. Families are free to engage in their religious practices at home, in the private sphere. The

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<sup>3</sup> This allows private ECECs and ECECs owned or run by congregations within the Church of Norway to decide special objectives related to religions or world-views – e.g. Christianity, Islam or Humanism. This foundational aspect of ECECs is laid out in sections 1 and 1a, which establish the role of values in all ECECs regardless of ownership (Thoresen & Winje, 2017, p. 34–35).

word ‘marking’ is used in the plan as a way of signalling that these activities should focus on learning about different religions. The staff is charged with familiarizing the children with the main content of their own religious traditions rather than re-enacting private family religious celebrations. Pedagogic activities related to different religious holidays are intended to promote both learning and socialization. The Framework Plan (NMER, 2011) calls for children to learn to respect, take an interest in and tolerate each other’s different backgrounds. Pedagogical activities related to religious holidays are one way to achieve this goal.

Research on how Norwegian ECECs respond to the Framework Plan (NMER, 2011) with respect to Ethics, Religion and Philosophy (ERP) suggests that they consider this learning area difficult to deal with compared to the other learning areas (Østrem, et al., 2009; Gulbrandsen & Eliassen, 2013). In my work on how Norwegian ECECs respond to the issue of religious festivals, I have found that they engage in many activities related to Christian festivals. However, they spend far less time on religious festivals of ‘other’ faiths, even when those religious groups are represented among the children attending those ECECs (Krogstad, 2014). The findings presented in this article relate to this previous work on how religion and religious festivals are handled in Norwegian ECECs.

Norway’s early childhood teacher education (ECTE) mirrors this emphasis on religion in Norwegian ECECs in that it addresses the issue directly. According to the national guidelines (NMER, 2012), students shall have knowledge of “the Christian faith and cultural heritage, the other world religions and different world-views”, along with “the skills to convey the stories of different cultures and, in collaboration with the home, to facilitate the marking of religious holidays and special days” (p. 17–18).

### ***Religion in Nordic ECECs and ECTEs***

ECEC curricula in other Nordic countries include learning about religion and marking religious festivities to varying degrees. In her comparative analysis of ECEC guidelines throughout the Nordic countries, Ann-Christine Vallberg Roth (2014) found that Finland and Iceland explicitly include religion (understood as the religious traditions of the children attending ECECs) in their curricula. She finds that Norway and Iceland distinguish themselves from the other Nordic countries in that their curricula state that “ECE practices should be based on the Christian heritage and tradition” (ibid., p. 14). In contrast, Christian tradition “is not something that is manifest in Danish, Finnish or Swedish policy documents and according to the Swedish Education Act, teaching should be non-confessional” (ibid., p. 11). Four of the countries have curricula as binding documents, and in Finland the curriculum serves as a non-binding set of guidelines (Vallberg Roth, 2014, p. 13).

Finland and Iceland both include religion in their ECEC curriculum learning areas. Finland’s ECEC guidelines explicitly mention religion as part of Religious-philosophical Orientations (National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland, 2004). The Finnish guidelines state, “interest is taken in the traditions, customs and practices of the child’s own religion or beliefs” (2004, p. 26), and “insights are gained into the customs of various religions and beliefs close to the child” (ibid., p. 26). In Iceland, Creativity and Culture is one of four learning areas. Its guidelines specify that “children take active part in shaping the culture of the preschool through festivities and events related to children’s culture” (The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Preschools, 2011, p. 45).

Iceland’s ECTEs do not include religious instruction as part of their official curriculum. Sweden’s ECTEs are, according to the Swedish Education Act, non-confessional (Vallberg Roth, 2014, p. 11). In Denmark, religion is not a subject in the ECTE (Boelskov, 2015, p. 111). Finland has no binding national ECTE curriculum: each teacher training institution determines its own content and has the option of offering studies that include religion.

What is distinct about curricular guidelines and teacher training for early education in Norway (as opposed to in other Nordic countries) is the emphasis on activities that reflect both Christian and ‘other’ religious traditions. Religious activities do take place in ECECs in other Nordic countries, as research from Denmark and Finland reveals, but religion is not explicitly part of the teacher training in their ECTEs. Although this article is not a comparative analysis of Finnish, Danish and Norwegian ECECs, empirical research on the activities related to religious festivities in all three contexts will be relevant to my findings. No research on religious activities in ECECs was available from either Sweden or Iceland.

### ***Pluralism and Religion***

Like other Nordic countries, Norway has a highly secularized society relative to the rest of Europe (Davie, 2007). Research on religiosity amongst the different nationalities represented in Norway indicates that ethnic Norwegians are the country’s least religious citizens, and people from Pakistan and Somalia are the most religious (Elgvin & Tronstad, 2013). Secularization can be seen as a political development whereby institutions become detached from religion, and while expressions of religious faith do not necessarily disappear, they become relegated to the private sphere, resulting in what is called ‘private religiosity’ (Botvar, 2010). We sometimes refer to individuals as secular to indicate that they are non-religious and understand the world without reference to a god. The term ‘secular’ can also be used to refer to those who do not practise an established religion; this includes even those with religious affiliations (e.g. non-practising Lutherans). The term ‘cultural Christian’ might also be an appropriate way of denoting secular people with Christian backgrounds who do not actively practise their religion (Andreassen, 2014). For the purposes of this article, I use ‘secular’ or ‘non-practising’ to describe the informants in this study for whom religion plays a minimal role in their daily lives.

In 2015, members of the (Lutheran) Church of Norway made up 72.9 % of Norway’s population; 15.2 % of the population did not adhere to a particular religion; and 11.9 % consisted of adherents to different religions and life-stance communities (Statistics Norway, 2016a; 2016b). The distribution of the 11.9 % making up this last group was as follows: 2.4 % were Muslims, and 5.6 % were Christians (mainly Roman Catholics and Pentecostalists). These numbers indicate that the overwhelming majority in Norway still belong to a culture that is strongly connected to Lutheran Christianity (Sagberg, 2015) and Christian traditions.

In the examined ECEC in 2015–2016, 40 % of the children came from family backgrounds that were not ‘native Norwegian’ and represented 14 different nationalities. The staff knew the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of their families but had almost no knowledge of their religious backgrounds except as they related to dietary restrictions.

The Framework Plan guidelines instruct ECECs to make annual plans appropriate for their local contexts: in other words, where ‘other religions’ are present, they should have pedagogical activities corresponding to the holidays celebrated in those religious traditions. Compliance with this guideline necessarily entails that ECECs become aware of which religions are represented among the children. I worked with the director of the ECEC on which this study focuses to collect the information needed to comply with the guidelines. The teachers were asked to gather information on the religious affiliations or life stances of the children’s parents by surveying the parents. At a meeting I attended to discuss how this would be done, where all staff members were present, one of the staff replied: “Do we ask the Christian [parents] as well?” One implication of this question is that Christianity is not a visible religion, as it does not signal its presence through clothing and dietary restrictions. To perceive a religion as such only when it is manifest in manner of dress or other features recalls a previous study in Norwegian ECECs where teachers stated that their only knowledge of whether parents were Muslims was based upon food restrictions and/or clothing (Krogstad & Hidle, 2015). The teachers in my study decided to give all parents a form to fill out with information about

their religious affiliations. Forty of the 58 parents in my study responded to the request: 62.5 % were from various Christian backgrounds (mainly Lutheran, but three were Catholic and one Orthodox); 20 % of the parents had no stated religious affiliation; and 17.5 % of parents were Muslim. According to the guidelines, the ECEC should have been including activities to mark Muslim festivities, but this was something they had never done.

Parental affiliation does not give a full picture of religious backgrounds because many members of the Church of Norway are non-practising (secular). Amongst the six teachers I interviewed, four were non-practising Lutherans whose religious activities did not extend beyond ceremonial commemorations of 'rites of passage' such as baptism, confirmation, marriage and funerals. Two of the teachers had no religious affiliation. Moreover, amongst the 12 parents I interviewed, representing six different nationalities (including Norwegian), four were practising Christians (one Orthodox, one Catholic and two Lutherans), six were non-practising Lutheran Christians, one was an agnostic and one was a non-practising Muslim.

Despite the presence of teachers in this study with ECTE training in religion, due to Norway's increasing religious pluralism, they may have perceived Christian (and particularly Lutheran) festivities as expressions of Norwegian cultural traditions rather than as religious rites. Parents as well may have considered Christian festivities an integral part of their children's ECEC attendance and seen these activities as reflections of the society's traditions. The question is how this attitude towards Christian festivities affects the objective of learning about other religions festivities that are not considered a part of the majority's culture.

## **Method**

The ECEC studied for this research is public and located in a municipality in the southeast of Norway. The municipality that owns the ECEC has become increasingly multicultural due to increased migration over the past few decades. In addition, the society is more pluralistic because of secularization within the native Norwegian population. Besides the female director of the ECEC (a teacher herself), the staff consist of 15 women and one man, with 50 % of them teachers. This percentage is higher than the average (33 %) in Norwegian ECECs overall (Statistics Norway, 2017). The ECEC has 68 children (from 58 households) and 4 sections: 2 for children aged 1–3, and 2 for 4–6-year olds.

For the last two years, the ECEC has offered spots to children from newly arrived refugee families in the area. The staff have had a rapidly increasing experience of working in a diverse setting: in 2011, around 10 % of the families came from non-native Norwegian backgrounds; in 2015, that figure was 40 %. As a response to this change, the director of the ECEC has employed assistants with non-native Norwegian backgrounds.

## ***Data Gathering Processes***

Qualitative methods utilize different data collection strategies primarily based on theories of interpretation (hermeneutics) and human experience (phenomenology) (Malterud, 2011). To collect rich descriptive data to provide insights into teachers' attitudes towards religion and integration of religious festivities into the curriculum and parents' opinions of the ECEC activities related to religious festivities, two qualitative methods were used: participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Participating observation general purpose is to describe what people say and do in the environment they are a part of which are not structured by the researcher (Fangen, 2010). The purpose of my observation in the ECEC was to see integration of religious festivities along with interacting with the staff and the parents. Semi-structured interviews has been used for the purpose to explore the meaning of a phenomenon (religious festivities) as perceived by the respondents in their context



(Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interview guide was semi-structured, with formulated main questions, where it was possible to change the order of the question, and formulate follow-up questions spontaneously.

I attended the ECEC three days a week over a period of three months (November 2015 to January 2016); in addition, I observed activities during Advent and before Easter and became a participant observer within the environment. This involved interacting with the ECEC staff and with the parents as they dropped off and collected the children. This time provided an opportunity for me to build familiarity with the families and the staff members. A reflective research journal was kept to record specific experiences, interactions and reactions, all of which have the potential to deepen the data sources. Interviews were conducted before, during and after the completion of my observation time at the ECEC. Interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and occurred at the ECEC. I first completed interviews with six teachers where the focus was their own world-views, their attitudes towards religion in the ECEC context, and their thoughts on how they were integrating Christian festivities into the curriculum. Then I observed different activities connected to Christmas and Easter and interviewed four of the teachers a second time based on my observations. The focus of the parental interviews was the parents' world-views, their opinions of the ECEC activities related to Christmas and Easter, and their thoughts on the curricular objectives of Muslim festivities and traditions. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

Interview data were analysed based on my observations of the ECEC Christmas and Easter activities, along with the teachers' and parents' responses during interviews to these activities. The analysis of observations, the reflective research journal and interviews were conducted in line with Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's (2006) recommendations for a thematic analyse. Braun and Clarke highlight the importance of visualizing the choices in the analysis process and presenting a methodology in the work of analyzing a total data material. My analysis consisted of reading and rereading data, then encoding content entities, identifying and reassessing themes, which ended with the themes and topics. Through this process, the guiding principle was to be close to the empirical material so that the analysis became as transparent as possible (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maxwell, 2005). The analyzes go from the descriptive, where the data is sorted and organized to reveal significant patterns, to the interpretation in which the patterns are discussed in the light of theory and previous research.

Regarding the data collection and analysis, I might have observed and recorded selectively, and perceived and interpreted within my interpretive framework (Denscombe, 2007). However, methods and sources of data collection across time were chosen in order to provide a detailed and rich description of the teachers' attitudes and the parents' opinions as well as the actual implementation of Christian festivities in the ECEC context. Through comparing and contrasting the data, I have aimed to acquire a more accurate and thorough understanding of teachers' reasoning behind integration (or lack of integration) of religious festivities in the ECEC curriculum, and parents' opinions of religious festivities.

The sample of individuals and observation period can be a limitation for the outcome. However, the data reflects the teachers' work and the parents' opinions. In a strict sense, the survey can only indicate trends in one ECEC, thus not forming the basis for generalization. At the same time, there are choices of strategies and reasons in the teachers' work with religious festivities that I believe can attach to overall and principal aspects of ECECs practices. A discussion and reflection on these general and principal aspects may have relevance and transfer value for other ECECs. Knowledge of how ECECs works can provide a basis for a reflection of their own practices and could lay the foundation for more conscious choices, thus contributing to the development and reflection of the teachers' professionalism (Øvrebø & Andreassen, 2017, p. 6).

In the presentation below, I delineate what the empirical data reflect about the foundations of

the teachers' attitudes towards religion and religious festivities and also what the data reflect about the parents' opinions of Christian and Muslim festivities.

## **Findings**

I have organized the results of this study into three sections: the ECEC activities at Christmas and Easter; the teachers' attitudes towards religion and religious festivals; and parents' opinions of religious festivities in the ECEC.

### ***Christmas and Easter Activities***

The activities related to Christian festivities differed according to age group. For example, the teachers took the oldest children (aged 5–6) to visit the local Church of Norway during Advent. The church arranged Christmas tableaux related to the gospels, and the children dressed up as Mary, Joseph and the angels. One of the teachers commented, "The children learn through play. I do not think of this as preaching, but as an experience for them." For Easter the oldest children visited a local Pentecostal congregation, where tableaux and stories were performed around the Passion and Resurrection stories of Jesus.

During Advent, all the ECEC sections lit the four candles, and the children learned or listened to traditional Christmas songs, decorated a Christmas tree, and adorned the windows with red hearts as a part of the Christmas calendar. The activities included little in the way of explicit religious content such as readings of biblical tales, gospel explanations, or nativity scenes. They had a Santa-day when Santa arrived with presents (candy and fruit), some of the children dressed in red costumes and all circled the Christmas tree singing Christmas carols before eating porridge. During Advent, all the children made gifts for their families. "We do not call them 'Christmas gifts' because of those who do not celebrate Christmas. It is customized to the Muslims," as one of the teachers explained.

The ECEC also marked the Catholic Santa Lucia Day on 13 December, when almost all the children dressed in white clothes and the oldest children had a parade and visited all the sections singing the Lucia song with electric candles in their hands. On this day the parents were invited, and after the parade, each section served cakes (including Lucia cakes) provided by the parents.

The activities before Easter lasted one or two weeks, and the theme was spring and renewed life (in nature), without emphasis on Jesus as a symbol of resurrection in Christianity, and without telling the Easter Gospel. The ECEC was decorated with Easter chicks, the children painted eggs, and on one designated day, the children hunted for eggs that had been hidden by the Easter Bunny.

The findings reveal that the ECEC's pedagogical activities related to Christmas and Easter combined Christian and secular traditions, and the ECEC's teachers chose to outsource some of the religious content to Christian communities.

### ***Teachers' Attitudes towards Religion and Religious Festivals***

The director of the ECEC did not ask parents about religious affiliation or life stance when she met them for the first time but instead asked them if there were 'special considerations' the ECEC needed to be aware of. According to her, parents usually responded in the case of religious dietary restrictions or food intolerance. On my question of how the ECEC worked with the guidelines in ERP related to religion, she explained:

We have tried to be as neutral as possible when it comes to religion. We almost don't know parents' religious affiliation unless we can tell from their clothing, and we don't ask them about it. It is a sort of privacy. My experience is that immigrant parents do not expect to get questions about religion, "because now we live in Norway", as many of them tell me.



In answer to my question to the teachers concerning how they approach the children's diverse religious backgrounds in their sections, the teachers responded along the following lines: "We do not talk about religion because we are afraid to proselytize and we do not want to offend anyone." Or: "We talk about religion related to those who are not Christian and make sure we respect their needs concerning food restrictions." One of them elaborated upon the fear of coming across to non-religious parents as someone who was trying to proselytize: "I think I shall not convert anyone to Christianity. If I have a conversation about God and Jesus with the children, I think, oy, do the children go home and talk about God and Jesus?" On the question of how they felt about activities related to Christian holidays in a multireligious ECEC, all of them answered that they saw the activities as a means of sharing traditions rather than spreading religion because they did not talk about the Christian underpinnings of the festivities. The ECEC had never had activities related to Muslim festivals, and one of the teachers elaborated: "We need help [in learning] how to explain Islam to children. I do not explain Christianity either because I find it difficult." Still, the teachers agreed that previously, before immigrants arrived in their ECEC, they had talked more explicitly about the Gospel in connection with their Christmas and Easter activities at the ECEC.

### *Parents' Opinions of Religious Festivities in the ECEC*

None of the parents of the children in the ECEC were familiar with the objectives in the ERP section of the Framework Plan, and for the most part they were unaware of the content of ECEC activities relating to Christmas and Easter. One parent (a secular Lutheran) supposed that "before Easter the children make drawings and the staff explain some stories related to Easter." Another parent (also a secular Lutheran) felt that the activities before Christmas were "a bit superficial and revolved around traditions involving food, porridge, Christmas calendars and gifts. On the other hand, [all of] this was very fun for the children, especially the Santa instead of Jesus." On the question of whether the children related anything about their ECEC Christmas or Easter activities at home, one parent (a secular Lutheran) explained: "I have never heard our child talk about Jesus at home, but of the Christmas calendar and Santa. I think it would have been nice if the staff had dared to talk a little bit more of the background of the festival in a child friendly way."

When it came to Christian festivities as such, one parent (an immigrant and agnostic) explained: "The traditions in Norway are similar to those I grew up with as traditions without religious content [but connected] to Christian holidays. I do not see this kindergarten connecting religion to Christmas and Easter." Regarding the Lucia parade, one parent (an immigrant and practising Catholic) said: "This is a tradition in Norway and has nothing to do with religion." Even though the Lucia celebration was not something this parent grew up with in his homeland, he remarked: "My children are born in Norway so I have to let them attend the Lucia parade."

I explained to the parents I interviewed that the teachers did not talk about the Gospel stories during the marking of Christmas and Easter, and I asked for the parents' reactions. One of them (a practising Lutheran) replied: "This doesn't bother me because we can tell the Gospel to our children at home or in the parish." Upon hearing an explanation of the curricular objectives of learning about Christian holidays in the ECEC, his reaction was this: "I think that most of the parents do not get into what is really happening in the kindergarten. We are content as long as our children are happy."

Concerning the curricular objectives of Muslim festivities and traditions, the majority of parent responses were positive, but some of the parents were not pleased with the idea. One parent (an immigrant and practising Catholic) voiced the opinion that the children should learn about only the Lutheran form of Christianity since that is the affiliation of the majority of the Norwegian population: "At home, parents can teach their child about Muhammed or Catholicism, but not in the kindergarten. If I as a parent do not agree, I have to let my child go to a private Catholic kindergarten." Another parent, an immigrant and secular Muslim, found it strange that the ECEC should have activities related

to Muslim festivals: “We live in Norway and have to adjust our life. We do not celebrate Christmas in our home, but we always have a Christmas tree, gifts and Santa on New Year’s Eve and Christmas decorations. Those are our traditions now.” Another parent (a secular Lutheran) said, “I would prefer that they celebrate Christian festivals rather than Muslim ones.” When asked whether this position was based on the fact that most Norwegians belong to the Church of Norway, she answered: “Yes, but maybe not in this kindergarten, where 40 percent are from other countries.”

Many of the parents appeared to have never questioned the reasoning behind engaging the children in different activities related to Christmas and Easter. Some of them stated that they themselves had an obligation to ask what was going on, but on the whole, the majority of the parents were content with the status quo. They received information ahead of the Lucia parade and the Santa-day posted in the ECECs wardrobe (e.g. they were told to dress their children in white and red, respectively, on those days), and they gave informal consent to their children’s visit to the church and congregation by signing notes given them prior to the visits. The collaboration between the ECEC and parents regarding Christian festivities took place for the most part through written information addressed to the parents and the parents’ responses in the form of their written consent.

My findings display discrepancies between the ideal provided by the curriculum and the reality described by teachers and parents. The topic of religion and its role in the ECEC appeared to create discomfort among the teachers, and one consequence was that pedagogical activities related to Christian festivities involved learning more about traditions than religions, and Muslim holidays were largely disregarded. Parents were for the most part uninformed about much of the purpose and content related to religious festivities.

## **Discussion**

My discussion and analysis of the findings of this study relate to how religion and religious festivities are perceived and incorporated into the ECEC’s pedagogical activities.

### ***Religion and Tradition***

Studies on ECECs in Finland (Kuusisto & Lamminmäki-Vartia, 2012) and Norway (Krogstad & Hidle, 2015) have concluded that ECEC teachers perceive religious diversity as more of a challenge than cultural diversity (which they can address through topics such as language, food, and ethnicity). Statements from teachers in the examined ECEC imply the same result. These teachers on the whole knew the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the children’s families but had almost no knowledge of their religious backgrounds. The director of the ECEC took a neutral approach to religion and adopted the attitude that religion was a topic best avoided.

In their responses, several teachers expressed a fear of being perceived as proselytizing and wanted to avoid giving offence. This reaction confirms the findings in studies of religiously diverse Finnish ECECs (Kuusisto, 2011; Kuusisto & Lamminmäki-Vartia, 2012). Kuusisto (2011) found that in the case of four multicultural ECECs studied, the staff had become “exceedingly sensitive to any hints of religion in order not to offend anyone” (p. 119). She found that the Lutheran ‘mainstream’ children in her study had fewer opportunities for learning about their religion than they had before the ECEC became religiously diverse, particularly concerning traditional festivities relating to Christmas and Easter. The use of “religious-based symbols, songs and games were restricted due to the [religious] plurality” in this ECECs (2011, p. 120). My study discovered similar undercurrents as some teachers revealed that they avoided referring to presents as Christmas gifts “because of those who do not celebrate Christmas. It is customized to the Muslims.”

In their study of five multi-faith ECECs, Kuusisto and Lamminmäki-Vartia (2012) found a tendency to avoid specific references to religious content for fear of giving offence or appearing insensitive to other cultures. The authors argue that the response to the challenge of ECECs’

increasing religious diversity on a practical level has not been to increase the visibility of religions. Rather, the opposite has happened: “The contents and methods [in religious education] that are regarded as unsuitable to any of the children in the group have commonly just been cut off by the staff as a response to increasing religious diversity” (2012, p. 7). In my study, the teachers, based on their fear of appearing to proselytize and to omit the Christian content in relation to Christmas and Eastern, have outsourced stories of Jesus to religious communities. This is a paradoxical solution, but it must be seen in relation to their statements that they find it difficult to explain any religion, whether it is Christianity or Islam, to the children because they are afraid of giving offence and/or they lack the training.

The teachers’ responses to questions about the role of religion in the ECEC reflect the pluralism of Norwegian society. Teachers are being asked to fulfil the objectives in the Framework Plan that require sensitivity to the religious traditions of the children in Norway’s increasingly multicultural ECECs. The outcome of the policies is at odds with what the policy seeks to accomplish, and as a result, ECECs are finding themselves in need of concrete advice on how to handle religious diversity. This dilemma is raised by one of the teachers: “We need help [in learning] how to explain Islam to children. I do not explain Christianity either because I find it difficult.”

### ***Pedagogical Activities Related to Religious Festivities***

In the ECEC on which this study focuses, pedagogical activities related to Christian holidays combine Christian and secular traditions. Cultural traditions are generally seen as harmless and less likely to offend than activities that might be perceived as proselytizing. In this ECEC, activities are generally reflections of the majority’s secular and folkloric traditions, with roots in an Evangelical Lutheran form of Christianity.

Boelskov (2015) labels activities related to Christian festivities in Danish and Norwegian ECECs as ‘folkloristic Christmas activities’ involving pixies, porridge and a Lucia parade (p. 117). The explicitly Christian activities he observed involved songs with Christian content, biblical tales read aloud, church visits, lighting the four candles at Advent, singing Christmas carols, and nativity scenes (p. 117). In his study, half of the ECECs where Muslim children were represented “celebrate the end of Ramadan by having a ‘cake party’ with cakes from the actual ethnicities represented among the children” (p. 118). However, Boelskov has no descriptions of other activities related to Muslim festivities as compared to the Christmas activities he observed. He concludes that as ECEC teachers have “more and more children from Muslim families, [their] teaching will reflect this and change accordingly, regardless of statutory regulations and dominating discourse in parliament” (p. 119). My findings are at odds with his prediction. In the ECEC I studied, a full 17.5 % of the families were Muslim, yet the teachers had never attempted to have pedagogical activities related to Muslim festivities and felt unsure about how to explain Islam to the children. In another Norwegian study, 73 % of the examined ECECs had Muslim families, but only 38 % of them had introduced activities related to Muslim festivities (Hidle & Krogstad, 2015). Thus, an increase in the representation of ‘other’ religions in ECECs has not automatically led to the religious diversity Boelskov (2015) anticipates in ECEC religious festivities activities.

In Denmark, ECEC teachers do not receive training in religion in the ECTE, but despite this, Boelskov (2015) found almost no difference between Danish and Norwegian ECECs in terms of their inclusion of activities related to Christian festivities. He explains the apparent failure of training to have an impact on the inclusion of different religious traditions in ECECs by pointing out that ECEC teachers who “[have] been brought up in a Christian-based culture ... cannot help but to perform [their] own culture when [they teach] culture” (p. 118). It is not an ECEC teacher’s “own culture” that is at stake, but how the ECEC curriculum lays out the premises behind the content in pedagogical activities with respect to religion. Nevertheless, if Christianity is defined as merely a tradition that

constitutes the ECECs annual rhythm corresponding to public holidays, it is not surprising that the studied ECEC outsources Christianity to religious communities. In such a context, the teachers' response to religion is to omit the religious content of Christian festivities and, for fear of offending anyone, not even attempt to mark Muslim festivities. Avoiding specific religious content in the ECEC effectively neglects the role of religion as an integral part of society and culture. The ECECs are the first step for children to learn about and come to respect each other's backgrounds, and pedagogical activities related to religious festivities are an opportunity to achieve this.

### ***Parents' Perspectives on ECEC Activities Relating to Religious Festivities***

Parents in this study are generally unaware of the national requirement that ECECs include activities that teach children about religion and religious festivities, and they typically interpret ECEC activities as being in tune with Norwegian secular traditions. Most parents express little concern with religious education in the ECEC, with the exception of those who voice a personal religious commitment and those who express scepticism about including Muslim festivities in the ECEC curriculum. Those who are immigrants tend to accept existing practices related to Christian festivities (e.g. with statements such as "we live in Norway and have to adjust our life", and "my children are born in Norway so I have to let them attend the Lucia parade"). In a study of Finnish ECECs by Kuusisto and Lamminmäki-Vartia (2012), one approach was that the staff took time to thoroughly explain the ECEC Christmas festivities to parents from non-native Finnish backgrounds. The parents wanted to become familiar with the Finnish traditions, "including the ways in which Christmas and Easter are celebrated in Finland" (2012, p. 9). I think the best approach is to explain to all parents the reasoning behind activities based upon religious festivities and not let them just assume or accept practices. In the ECEC upon which my study focuses, the staff inform parents of Christian festivities and special days through notes posted in the wardrobe. As my findings reveal, the reasoning behind these activities is not obvious for any parent, regardless of ethnic or cultural background or majority or minority status. Some of the parents assumed that religious activities that were not taking place were in fact part of the activities (e.g. "the staff explain some stories related to Easter"), or they wanted the staff to teach children the religious background of a given festival "in a child friendly way". The purpose clause in the Kindergarten Act says that the ECEC shall collaborate with the home. As a parent, one cannot collaborate with the ECEC without knowing what to collaborate on and why.

### **Final Remarks**

In the above sections, I have presented examples from my empirical data on the attitudes of teachers in one Norwegian ECEC toward activities relating to religion and religious festivities. Based on the examples, I argue that individuals (teachers and parents) are concerned about including religious content that reflects the diverse backgrounds of the children at the ECEC. Nevertheless, the attitudinal climate among teachers towards incorporating religious content within the ECEC curriculum is based on a conception of neutrality towards religion and traditions. The parents tend to be unaware of official guidelines and objectives that require the inclusion of diverse religious traditions in the curriculum as an aspect of teaching their children about different faiths, and the majority of parents express satisfaction with the status quo.

My study is a small contribution to an under-researched aspect of diversity in ECECs. In a pluralistic context in which religion and religious education are often perceived as presenting challenges, Norwegian policymakers have emphasized religion in the ECEC curriculum, but as my findings reveal, following up on the policymakers' intentions is not always easy.

In contrast to the other Nordic countries, Norway includes Christianity as well as other religions and the marking of religious festivities in both its ECEC curriculum and its early childhood teacher education programs (ECTE), and the country's guidelines direct educators to teach children

about religious traditions through pedagogical activities. In a world where religion can be the cause of tensions and mutual misunderstanding, it is all the more important for children to become familiar with the religious backgrounds of others in their communities during their early education. By addressing not only cultural differences but also the religious backgrounds of others, children can learn to tolerate and respect each other.

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