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Aesthetic learning in early childhood education

Perspectives from ECE teachers in two Nordic international schools

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Aesthetics in early childhood education (ECE) provides a unique approach to the development of young children that is being adopted in schools across the world. Whereas a traditional approach to ECE focuses primarily on intellectual development, aesthetic education aims to develop a child intellectually, socially, emotionally and physically. Studies on aesthetics in ECE explore the way children learn through the senses, experiences, imagination, play, performance and creativity. While there are multiple terms used by ECE scholars that link to the overall concept of aesthetics in education, this thesis focuses on aesthetic learning (AL).

The research aim of this research-based thesis is to explore how ECE teachers in two Nordic international schools understand AL in an ECE context and apply it in the classroom. The more practical aim is to improve ECE teachers' understanding of AL and how it can be applied in the classroom. Through a web-based survey, nine ECE teachers from Copenhagen International School (CIS) and International School Helsinki (ISH) offered their own interpretations of AL as a pedagogical concept and gave examples of how this is used in their teaching. I used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to gain insight into how these teachers made sense of AL as it applied to their teaching.

The findings show that although these teachers did not directly use the term *aesthetics* or *aesthetic learning* (AL) in practice, they thought AL was a suitable overall concept for their understanding of aesthetics in ECE. The teachers indicated that they valued AL and made regular use of it in the classroom. However, overall their understanding of AL incorporated a mix of AL-related concepts and approaches that have been studied in ECE literature.

Keywords	Aesthetic learning, early childhood education, international schools, Nordic schools

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Estetiikka varhaiskasvatuksessa tarjoaa ainutlaatuisen lähestymistavan nuorten lasten kehitykseen, jota on otettu käyttöön kouluissa ympäri maailmaa. Kun taas perinteinen lähestymistapa varhaiskasvatuksessa keskittyy pääosin älylliseen kehitykseen, esteettinen kasvatus tähtää lapsen kehittämiseen älyllisesti, sosiaalisesti, emotionaalisesti ja fyysisesti. Tutkimukset estetiikasta varhaiskasvatuksessa tutkivat tapaa, kuinka lapset oppivat aistien, kokemuksien, mielikuvituksen, leikkimisen, esiintymisen ja luovuuden kautta. Vaikka varhaiskasvatuksen ammattilaiset käyttävät monia eri termejä, jotka liittyvät yleiseen konseptiin estetiikasta varhaiskasvatuksessa, tämä opinnäytetyö keskittyy esteettiseen oppimiseen (aesthetic learning, AL).

Tämän opinnäytetyön tavoite on tutkia, kuinka varhaiskasvatuksen opettajat kahdessa pohjoismaisessa kansainvälisessä koulussa ymmärtävät esteettisen oppimisen varhaiskasvatuksen yhteydessä ja soveltavat sitä luokassa. Verkkopohjaisen kyselyn kautta yhdeksän varhaiskasvatuksen opettajaa Kööpenhaminan kansainvälisestä koulusta (Copenhagen International School, CIS) ja Helsingin kansainvälisestä koulusta (International School Helsinki, ISH) tarjosivat omat tulkintansa esteettisestä oppimisesta pedagogisena konseptina ja antoivat esimerkkejä siitä, kuinka he käyttävät sitä heidän opetuksessa. Käytin tulkitsevaa fenomenologista analyysia (Interpretative phenomenological analysis, IPA) saadakseni käsityksen siitä, kuinka nämä opettajat ymmärsivät esteettisen oppimisen sovellettuna heidän opetukseen.

Tutkimustulokset osoittavat sen, että vaikka nämä opettajat eivät käytännössä suoraan käyttäneet termiä *estetiikka* tai *esteettinen oppiminen*, heidän mielestään esteettinen oppiminen oli asianmukainen yleinen konsepti heidän ymmärryksestä estetiikasta varhaiskasvatuksessa. Opettajat osoittivat, että he arvostavat esteettistä oppimista ja käyttivät sitä säännöllisesti luokassa. Kuitenkin, kokonaisuudessaan heidän ymmärrys esteettisestä oppimisesta sisällytti sekoituksen esteettiseen oppimiseen liittyviä konsepteja ja lähestymistapoja, joita on tutkittu varhaiskasvatus kirjallisuudessa.

Avainsanat	Esteettinen oppiminen, varhaiskasvatus, kansainväliset koulut, pohjoismaiset koulut

Contents

1 Introduction

I became interested in aesthetic education in early childhood education (ECE) programs when I took part in a student exchange program at a university in Denmark in Spring 2019. Aesthetic education in ECE was the main focus of studies during this exchange program. I discovered that aesthetics in ECE provides a unique approach to the development of young children that is being adopted in schools across the world. In contrast to a traditional approach that focuses primarily on intellectual development, aesthetic education has the potential to develop a child intellectually as well as socially, emotionally, and physically.

This thesis does not primarily address the teaching of aesthetics as a subject or topic of learning. Instead, the focus is on aesthetics as a unique pedagogical approach that guides the way teachers 'teach'. Education philosophers such as John Dewey, Rudolf Steiner, Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget have contributed to a foundational framework of aesthetic theory which has helped to form our understanding and appreciation of aesthetics in the classroom. The Reggio Emilia philosophy of ECE also borrows from a range of aesthetic ideas, such as those proposed by Piaget and Vygotsky.

There are multiple terms used in the literature on aesthetics in ECE that link to the overall concept of aesthetics in education. These include *aesthetic teaching, aesthetic experiences*, *aesthetic learning* and *experiential education.* In this thesis, I use the term *aesthetic learning* (AL). Some studies on aesthetics in ECE acknowledge that aesthetics can be understood from multiple perspectives because it is a broad concept without a single unifying definition. Studies on aesthetics in ECE refer to aesthetics in terms of children learning through one or more of the following ways: the senses, experiences, imagination, play, performance and creativity (e.g., through the arts).

The aim of this thesis is to seek to understand aesthetics in ECE through the perspective of ECE teachers in two Nordic international schools: Copenhagen International School (CIS) and International School Helsinki (ISH). Accordingly, this thesis explores the topic of aesthetic education within an ECE setting. The specific context is primarily from a Nordic perspective, and more specifically from a Danish and Finnish international school viewpoint. I chose this context because, first, teachers at international schools tend to have more flexibility in adopting new pedagogical ideas than government-run schools,

and second because I had been given the opportunity to work with ECE teachers at these two schools.

Through a web-based survey which incorporated open-ended questions, nine ECE teachers from CIS and ISH offered their own interpretations of AL as a pedagogical concept and gave examples of how this is used in their teaching. To make sense of these teachers' accounts, I used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a method that enables the researcher to gain insight into how an individual makes sense of a phenomenon she or he has encountered.

Findings from my research show that although these ECE teachers did not directly use the term *aesthetics* or *aesthetic learning* in practice, they thought AL was a suitable, broad umbrella concept for their understanding of aesthetics in ECE. Their responses to the web-based survey indicated that they valued AL and made regular use of it in the classroom. However, overall their understanding of AL incorporated a mixture of AL-related concepts and approaches that have been studied in ECE literature. It is hoped that this study will offer ECE teachers some practical ideas and conceptual insight into what is considered to be an ambiguous educational concept yet highly valued pedagogical approach.

This thesis is organized in the following way. It begins with a review of the literature on aesthetics in ECE, then moves on to a description of the methods used to collect and analyze the data, followed by an in-depth analysis of teachers' perceptions of AL and how they apply it in the classroom. The thesis ends with a conclusion that includes a discussion of some limitations and some ways in which future research could pick up on what this thesis did not do.

2 Aesthetic learning

2.1 Theoretical foundations

The word *aesthetic* is derived from the Greek word *aisthetikos*, which is defined as a perception of the senses, and which is derived from the word *aisthanesthai*, which means "to perceive (by the senses or by the mind), to feel" (Harper, 2001). Aristotle declared: "There is nothing in the intellect that has not first been in the senses". Although the word *aesthetic* is defined according to the Cambridge English Dictionary (2020) as related to

the enjoyment or study of beauty, ECE studies about AL do not place much emphasis on beauty in their interpretation of the meaning of AL.

It is very difficult to define exactly what *aesthetic* means as there are numerous ways to define the term. As Danish scholars Austring and Sorensen (2012) point out in their study titled 'A Scandinavian View on the Aesthetics as Learning Media', "you may get the impression that aesthetics have developed into an extremely airy concept, a 'hooray' word that covers anything tasteful, artistic, sensuous, harmonic, beautiful and experience-oriented" (2012, p. 1). They state: "That we have inherited, and still generate, so many different approaches to the understanding of aesthetics may seem bewildering." (2012, p. 1)

Aesthetic learning (AL) is an ambiguous concept and therefore difficult to define for an educational context. Contributing to its ambiguity in early childhood education scholarship and practice are multiple related terms used in early childhood education literature, such as *aesthetic learning* (Austring & Sorensen, 2012; Illeris, 2012; Lim, 2004*), experiential education* (Lim, 2004), *aesthetic experiences* (Bell, 2012; Johnson, 2007; Uhrmacher, 2009), and *aesthetic teaching* (Chen, 2014; Sotiropoulou-Zormpala, 2012). In this thesis I use the term *aesthetic learning* to refer to similar meanings behind all these terms.

Various interpretations of the concept from early childhood education studies are offered below. However, first I will begin with a general overview of the term *aesthetic*. Next, I will draw on the theoretical ideas of John Dewey, Jean Piaget, Rudolf Steiner and Lev Vygotsky to explore a foundational framework of aesthetic theory before finally moving on to more specific interpretations from an early childhood education (ECE) perspective. The aim of this chapter is to gain an understanding of what ECE scholars perceive aesthetics, and aesthetic learning in particular, to be. A secondary aim is to learn how these scholars think AL can and should be incorporated into ECE.

2.1.1 Theoretical ideas of Dewey, Steiner, Vygotsky and Piaget

Four scholars who offered significant contributions to aesthetic learning theory in early childhood education are Dewey, Piaget, Steiner and Vygotsky. Each of these scholars' theoretical ideas helped to transition Western education approaches away from a primary focus on rational, academic and technical methods towards a more aesthetic approach to education.

The research of American philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey during the late 1800's and early 1900's shows how experiential learning allows children to develop and grow without the boundaries that traditional education enforce. Traditional education is understood by Dewey as placing the focus primarily on children absorbing information through books and listening to teachers who transfer knowledge, while sitting at desks in a classroom. In direct contrast, Dewey focused his attention on the concept of allowing freedom for children to learn while connecting to the environment around them. According to Dewey (1938) "education should be flexible enough to permit free play for individuality of experience and yet firm enough to give direction towards continuous development."

Dewey emphasized a child-centred approach to education. For Dewey, this meant placing a primary focus on the child's interests and needs. Children learn best when they become involved in what matters most to them. Thus, Dewey advocated for an approach that begins with what is meaningful to the child. This is connected to his ideas about inquiry-based learning, which have had a significant impact on modern education approaches. He explained that a child's mind has four basic impulses: communicative, constructive, expressive, and inquiry. To place the child's interests and needs first is linked to the idea of empowering the child to determine where her inquisitive mind takes her.

Dewey's idea of education included freedom of movement, expression and creation and he believed that this was best achieved through an immersion in experience and in 'doing'. One of Dewey's most significant contributions to aesthetic theory in education is his concept of aesthetic experiences. Dewey (2005) understood aesthetic experiences, which turn ordinary learning experiences into heightened, sensory ones, as "the moment of quality when individuals realize the aesthetic potential of situations and the ordinary becomes noticeable, thus, they entail all the moments of feeling that provoke deeper inclination that is different from ordinary experiences" (Ko & Chou, 2014, p. 39). Dewey argued that the aesthetic experience, such as watching a campfire or looking at impressionist paintings, is not only a cognitive concept, but also a psychological, emotional, social and cultural one. He posited that the role of art, for example, is to enhance experience, which he described as a product of the process of art production and perception, doing and undergoing. In other words, aesthetic experience of art is

gained through doing and appreciating art and that the process of art creation is just as valuable as art as the end product.

When children explore and manipulate a variety of materials, they are undergoing aesthetic experiences. Dewey argued that aesthetic experiences help children become more active in the learning process. These experiences have proven quite successful, especially in the teaching of arts and even across disciplines (Harter, Leeman, Norander, Young & Rawlins, 2008). Teachers at all levels, including ECE, have been able to apply aesthetic experiences to enrich their teaching.

The Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner placed an emphasis on holistic education. In other words, to develop the whole child teachers need to develop their intellectual, creative, spiritual and moral dimensions in children (Gronbach, 2010). Such a holistic education would nurture the child's imagination and pictorial consciousness. Steiner argued that from birth to seven years of age, aesthetic development is rich through the use of twelve bodily senses: touch, life, movement, balance, smell, taste, sight, warmth, hearing, thought, word and I. He believed that real learning takes place when there is an interaction between oneself and the environment via these senses. According to Steiner, every child between the ages of 0 and 7 years is a wholly sense organ in all the dimensions, not just in the mind. Sensory experiences are crucial for long-term memory (Kandell, 2007); the more senses are activated during an experience, the stronger and longer brain neurons are stimulated and the more endurable the memories. Similar to Dewey's concept of 'doing', Steiner believed that young children learn through imitation rather than admonition and instruction (Tarr, 2001).

The aesthetic theories of Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky also contributed to progressive ideas about education in Western societies. Vygotsky's work highlights the possibility of providing high quality early childhood education, achieving academic skills, through aesthetic means. According to the Vygotsky approach, this can be achieved through engagement in mature make-believe play combined with the inclusion of adult scaffolding techniques (1967). Early childhood education and play complement each other and are often times one and the same thing.

According to Vygotsky (1978), children learn through interaction with others, and the 'zone of proximal development' occurs when a child is guided and encouraged to further their understanding and create deeper meanings when engaging with another person

who has more knowledge about the topic of interest. The following quote summarises the essence of Vygotsky's work, "what children can do today in social interaction they can do on their own tomorrow" (1978, p. 87).

Vygotsky emphasized the significant role of play in the education of children because he believed that teachers are meant to provide them with opportunities to play. Through play and imagination, children are able to grow and develop their conceptual abilities. Vygotsky invites children to be inspired by imagination and fantasy, for example in children's literature, to allow feelings like fear and joy to be explored in a safe environment. Vygotsky places great emphasis on the process rather than the product, especially in relation to children's art.

According to the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, whose work on child development contributes to our understanding of AL, learning comes from within. For instance, children construct their own knowledge of the world through experience and subsequent reflection. He said that "if logic itself is created rather than being inborn, it follows that the first task of education is to form reasoning." (Piaget, 2001, p. 43) According to Piaget's framework, teachers should guide children in acquiring their own knowledge rather than simply transferring knowledge. When understood in this manner, it can be clearly approached as a valid and perhaps an essential component of education itself.

2.1.2 Reggio Emilia philosophy and AL

Vygotsky's ideas also relate to the Reggio Emilia approach. The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education also contributes to a better understanding of aesthetic learning. One key principle of this approach is an acknowledgment of the rights of the child to learn. Accordingly, teachers must truly listen to the child in the process of teaching them. Another principle is that the child is an active constructor of knowledge. The child is viewed as an apprentice (Katz, 1993) rather than a target of instruction, and learning is enhanced when the child works alongside others in the discovery of solutions to meaningful questions and problems. It values the "processes of 'unpacking' or defamiliarizing everyday objects and events" (Katz, 1993, p. 23). That is, it emphasizes the importance of empowering students to analyse materials to help them discover knowledge. According to this approach, learning is something the child does rather than something that is done to the child (Firlik, 1994).

This Reggio Emilia focus on 'active education' is influenced by Jean Piaget. According to Piaget (1973), "A student who achieves a certain knowledge through free investigation and spontaneous effort will later be able to retain it" (1973, p. 93). John Dewey (1966) also had an influence on the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education, particularly the idea of the child as researcher, which is linked to Piaget's idea of children involved in investigation. Dewey stated: "All thinking is research" (1966, p. 148). Staley (1998) stated, "They [children] are natural researchers as they question what they see, hypothesize solutions, predict outcomes, experiment, and reflect on their discoveries" (1998, p. 20).

Another key principle of the Reggio Emilia approach is that the child is a social being who thrives in relationship-driven environments. This approach emphasizes the importance of children's social construction of knowledge through relationships (Malaguzzi, 1993a), especially within the context of collaboration, dialogue, conflict, negotiation, and cooperation with peers and adults (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1993; Gandini, 1993b). This Reggio Emilia emphasis on communication and language in learning was influenced by Vygotsky's ideas about how language and thought operate together to form ideas and a plan of action (Malaguzzi, 1993b).

A final contribution of the Reggio Emilia approach to our understanding of aesthetic learning in early childhood education is that teachers should draw on multiple forms of knowing. Within the Reggio Emilia approach, children are encouraged and facilitated as they represent their plans, ideas, and understandings using one or more "languages, or modes of expression" (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 1993, p. 3) including, but not limited to, sculpture, drawing, painting, dance, drama, writing, and puppetry (New, 1990).

2.1.3 Interpretations of AL from early childhood education studies

The work of Austring and Sörensen (2012) is very much focused on AL in an early childhood education setting. To these Danish scholars, aaesthetic learning incorporates using the senses, experiences and forming symbolic associations to create meaning to the life and environment surrounding children who are engaging and participating in these activities. Emotional connections made whilst experiencing aesthetic learning activities allows feelings to be communicated in a way that may not be possible otherwise (2015: 3). This is in direct contrast to traditional methods of learning that most often take an objective approach to gaining knowledge and understanding of the world. Learning language for instance is often achieved by focusing on the letters and forming words.

Austring and Sörensen (2012) give the example of a drum and how a young child interacts and learns with it in three potential ways. Empirical learning involves using the sense of touch and feel to explore the instrument's shape, texture, and size, for instance. Aesthetic learning takes empirical learning one step further, whereby the child experiences the instrument through discovering the sounds, tones, and rhythms that can be created by playing with it. This is a unique experience for each child, involves improvisation, and can be a form of communication in terms of emotional connection, social engagement, and participation with others. As the child develops, a third method of learning, discursive learning, takes shape. This involves learning about the notes and musical symbols, for instance.

Uhrmacher (2009) used John Dewey's ideas from *Art as Experience* as a framework to further develop theory of aesthetic learning experiences. The study proposed six themes that teachers can use to help students attain engaged learning experiences. The first theme is students' connections with their environment in emotional, intellectual, communicative, and sensorial ways. According to Dewey, "an aesthetic experience has the potential to begin when an individual interacts with the environment" (2009, p. 620). The second theme is active engagement with an object or idea of focus. The third theme is sensory experiences. Aesthetics is derived from a term that means 'capable of sensory perception', thus aesthetic experiences are sensory experiences (2009, p. 623). A fourth theme is perceptivity. Taking the example of art, Uhrmacher (2009) explained: "To perceive, one must really look, take in the qualities of the painting" (2009, p. 624). Perceptivity goes beyond just recognition of an object or idea. The fifth theme is risk-taking, which suggests that to truly gain aesthetic experience, a child must risk opening up to the experience of something new, of understanding someone else's experience, which Greene (1978) referred to as 'wide-awakeness'. The final theme is imagination. Wong (2007) suggests imagination as a tool to encourage aesthetic experiences; like a detective, students can spend time thinking about their feelings in a situation.

Uhrmacher (2009) proposed that teachers can use these themes in their planning process. For example, teachers can plan to include these themes when making lesson plans or they can be included in the moment if the lesson is not going as planned. When making lesson plans, teachers can ask themselves, Where is connection, active engagement and risk-taking in this lesson? Through adopting some or all of these

themes, teachers put themselves in a position to turn students' ordinary learning experiences into aesthetic ones, thus creating aesthetic engagement.

Johnson's (2007) study on aesthetic experience and early language and literacy development for an ECE context focuses on three key words associated with language and literacy development potential: engagement, personal agency, and reflection. Referring to the work of John Dewey and Maxine Greene, the author contends that engagement is a key factor of aesthetic education. She states: "For the active engagement in the creation, transformation, and sharing of meaning that is central for the child's communicative development also defines aesthetic experience" (2007, p. 316). According to Johnson, the themes of agency and reflection are also important in the generation of aesthetic experience; personal agency shapes the motivation for language and literacy development in young learners, and giving children time for reflection encourages development and expression of thoughts and feelings.

According to Johnson, providing children with 'open space' to stretch knowledge and understanding beyond its immediate context releases imagination, contributing to aesthetic learning. The author also highlights how an emotional response motivates a child to engage in meaningful experiences, and this contributes to aesthetic experiences that benefit the child. Giving children the opportunity to show what they have learned through a variety of ways other than verbal, such as visual art, shows the value of aesthetic learning. It gives children a voice they might not have been able to convey purely through vocabulary.

A study by Lim (2004) set out a foundational framework for aesthetic learning from the theories of Dewey, Steiner and Vygotsky and contributes to our understanding of an aesthetic approach to early childhood education. Although none of these three scholars were experts in aesthetics, they all emphasized the importance in education of the sense of childlike wonder and encouraged teachers to give children experiences involving the senses and enable children to express themselves. They believed that these aesthetic experiences would enhance development and learning in children (Lim, 2004).

Sotiropoulou-Zormpala's (2012) study examines the concept of 'aesthetic teaching' in the context of preschool education. Examples are given for enhancing core curricular through aesthetic teaching. For Sotiropoulou-Zormpala (2012), aesthetic teaching includes the use of the senses, emotions and the intellect as a framework for gaining

knowledge. The author uses musical, theatrical, visual art, and movement activities to show how these methods act as a catalyst for children's imagination to be ignited.

Sotiropoulou-Zormpala (2012) emphasizes the need for an aesthetic approach to teach core curricular subjects like language and math, which can be seen as boring and based on sitting at a table with a paper and pencil. The author describes examples of how language, and more specifically vowels, can be taught in aesthetic ways using plays, songs and conversations. According to Sotiropoulou-Zormpala (2012), the idea of teaching vowels in this aesthetic way provides a more child-friendly approach that takes the children away just listening to a teacher explain vowels on a blackboard while the student sits at a desk.

The author encourages the use of transdisciplinary and cross-curricular means to further enhance and encourage aesthetic teaching. She also suggests that aesthetic teaching improves students' motivation to learn, referring to research concluding that "aesthetic activities helped children enhance their motivation for learning, their self-esteem, and their relationships within the school group" (2012, p. 7).

A study by Samuelsson, Sheridan and Hansen (2013) sheds some light on aesthetic learning in early childhood education, albeit from a Swedish perspective and also for a preschool context (for example, aged 1 to 5). Samuelsson et al's definition of aesthetics in an ECE context is mostly limited to the use and expressions of creativity. They define aesthetics as "all kinds of creative work related to children's working with their bodies" and claim that aesthetics has had a long tradition in preschool pedagogy: "Traditionally, preschool aesthetics have been considered not only to be fun for children but also a part of their creative activity, communication and ways of learning by doing, enabling them to use all their senses and bodily movements" (2013, p. 1). They explain that the Reggio Emilia approach has become very popular in Swedish preschools because of the focus on aesthetics. Their study offers some practical application to ECE teachers, such as showing how aesthetic activities can be implemented by teachers.

A study by Illeris (2012) focuses on the Scandinavian educational context of aesthetic learning processes. The author explains how the term 'aesthetic learning processes' originates from Scandinavian research, with a specific impact on Danish schools and teacher education. Citing Hohr (1992), a theorist of aesthetic cognition, the study emphasizes the importance of feelings, analysis and experience in aesthetic learning

processes. Feelings refer to the cultural relationship between the child and their surrounding environment in the form of sense-based activities (2012, p. 12). Analysis is associated more with the individual components of a situation and organizing them. Experience binds feelings and analysis together, making it more closely associated with aesthetics and a sense of belonging to the world we live in.

The study develops the idea of aesthetic learning processes by exploring the concepts of subjectivation, positioning and performance. Subjectivation relates to the idea of youth having their own view and being true to themselves in what they do (2012, p. 15). Positioning, as described by Ziehe (2004, pp. 78-79), refers to being able to 'step out of one self' and challenge ones' own self-centredness (2012, p. 16). Performance further challenges one to sense, act, and in addition, see oneself act, or to perceive, choose, and to see oneself choose (2012, p. 17). This study offers a deep understanding of aspects of aesthetic learning and is therefore very theoretical; possibly because of this it does not offer practical applications of aesthetic learning.

Chen (2014) conducted a study on early childhood educators' aesthetic teaching beliefs and practices in Taiwan. The main idea discussed in this article is how early childhood educators in Taiwan understand aesthetic teaching and how it is used in practice. Interestingly, the study's definition of aesthetic education is primarily based on Chinese tradition: "A way to educate people to express aesthetic feelings, cultivate their temperaments, and help them to achieve happiness, delight, and a high quality of life" (2014, p. 23).

The study's findings show that Taiwanese educators see aesthetic education as important, that they hope to develop a child's aesthetic feelings by exploring nature and the arts, and that there is a lack of knowledge of the arts. Although the Ministry of Education in Taiwan places importance on aesthetics in ECE, the ministry's understanding of aesthetics seems to be based narrowly on the arts, rather than on a wider range of aesthetics, as well as on the arts as a subject rather than as a model for teaching.

Chen proposes that teachers should be educated on the importance of aesthetics in ECE, such as through local councils, the education programs for early childhood teachers, and also via more experienced teachers within the sector. This is a small study focused on ECE in Taiwan, however it is useful to see how early childhood educators in Taiwan place value on providing continual professional development regarding

aesthetics. Although ECE teachers perceive the importance of aesthetic education, there seems to be a lack of practical application of it due to limited knowledge about aesthetics. Accordingly, Chen urges more research into aesthetic learning to improve the practice of AL.

A lot of studies about aesthetics in ECE focus on the arts. One study with an aesthetic learning focus on art is by Bell (2012). Titled 'talking about art with young people', this study proposes conversational strategies for aesthetic learning in early childhood settings. The idea is that 'art talk' and 'art making' are mutually enriching for younger children. The study encourages ECE teachers to have conversations with their students about the arts even if they do not have specialist knowledge of art. The authors suggest that helping children to "grow from art producers to art appreciators can deepen their understanding of the world and enrich their lives" (2012, p. 14). The examples described in this study show how encouraging conversations about art can empower children to engage in and give thoughtful ideas about the subject. They state: "Facilitating thoughtful conversations encourages a mutually beneficial interaction between young peoples' language development, social interactive skills and aesthetic experience (2012, p. 14).

To summarize, aesthetic learning may be best understood as an umbrella concept that ties together multiple pedagogical concepts and approaches. The main concepts that appear in the above literature and that form this overarching AL approach include: the importance of play, including children's imagination and social interaction; sensory learning; student-led inquiry, incorporating the ideas of children's agency, self-directed analysis of materials and ideas, and experiential learning; and holistic education, which includes the child's intellectual, creative, spiritual and moral dimensions.

Just as AL contains a mix of multiple related concepts, so does the Reggio Emilia approach, which also seems to incorporate many of the above ideas, such as play-based learning, student-led inquiry, active collaboration and social interaction with peers and adults, discovery through analysis (including use of hypotheses), and use of multiple symbolic languages or modes of expression.

2.2 The Nordic context

Early childhood education in Nordic countries places a higher value on a holistic approach than a more traditional academic approach. It tries to achieve what the 1989 Committee of the Rights of the Child called 'the good childhood', which meant that

children in the care of ECE programs have to be active participants and have a voice in their own everyday life. ECE teachers in Nordic countries consider that it is unnecessary and even almost harmful for them to introduce 'school-readiness' too early in the lives of their students (Jensen, 2009, p. 11). Indeed, play is deemed in the Nordic countries to be paramount in the early childhood education of younger children (Alvestad et al., 2014).

In this way, the Nordic perspective to ECE is quite different to the Anglo-Saxon perspective. The dominant view in Anglo-Saxon countries is that children should develop academic skills and knowledge as soon as possible in their young lives. In Anglo-Saxon countries the emphasis is on ECE teachers using the same learning standards and all of them evaluating whether their students meet standardised objectives (Bennett 2006b; OECD 2001, 2006). However, in contrast, ECE teachers in Nordic countries oppose applying standards for learning too early in children's lives because they believe that such standards may limit children's free development (Jensen, 2009, p. 11).

In the Finnish National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care (NCGECEC 2005), aesthetic education is seen as a meta-level for various areas of education, such as arts education (Rusanen & Ruokonen, 2011, p. 73). For instance, it introduces arts education and artistic activities as part of aesthetic orientation. In Finland, the national curriculum revolves around cognitive, ethical, social, religious and aesthetic objectives (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Finland 2004, 24) and the teacher has to work towards these objectives (14, 16ff). About 40 years ago, based on the work of the Parliamentary Committee for Educational Goals in Day Care (1980, p. 33), Finnish legislation emphasized a view of the child, society, and culture based on educational objectives of "physical, social, emotional, aesthetic, intellectual, ethical, and religious education, taking into consideration for each domain the care and educational environments, the quality of care and education, and the child's own play activity" (Pulkkinen, 2012 p. 328).

According to Haikio (2020, p. 18), educational activities in Finnish preschools and primary schools with children up to 3rd grade use exploratory working methods and aesthetic learning processes. These preschools and primary schools have a cultural profile in which music, drama and visual arts are commonly used as a means to engage children in their own learning. ECE teachers in Finland make use of aesthetic learning

processes to inspire children towards more in-depth investigations of phenomena and the surrounding world (i.e., experience of meaning) (2020, p. 20).

Similarly, Danish legislation adopts a broad concept of learning based on a free and creative development of the child in a social context (Jensen, 2009, p. 12). The Danish national curriculum aims to enhance children's learning and development of competences through experiences, play and educational activities (Ministry of Family and Consumer Affairs, Denmark 2007, chapter 2, section 7, subsection 3). It also offers six learning plan themes that form the basis of the most important objective (chapter 2, section 8): children should acquire competences as well as the desire to learn.

3 Methodology

My thesis research is focused on aesthetic learning (AL) in early childhood education (ECE) in two Nordic international schools: Copenhagen International School (CIS) and the International School of Helsinki (ISH). My main aim is to gain an understanding of how ECE teachers in these schools understand the concept of AL. A secondary aim is to explore how these teachers apply aspects of AL in the classroom. In other words, the purpose of the study is to describe (1) these ECE teachers' perspectives of AL and (2) their experiences in applying it in the classroom. Thus, the method of inquiry was a generic qualitative descriptive study.

The primary research question guiding this research is: How do early childhood education teachers in Nordic international schools understand the concept of aesthetic learning (AL)? The secondary research question is: How do these teachers apply AL in the classroom?

I chose to explore how AL is understood and applied by ECE teachers in two Nordic international schools because international schools have more flexibility to adopt new ideas than government-run schools. I had the opportunity to meet some teachers at both CIS and ISH and came to realize that they seemed to integrate aesthetic education ideas into their teaching. I was excited by this because in Spring of 2019 I was on an exchange program at a university in Denmark and the program I was enrolled in there was focused on aesthetic learning in ECE. During that time, I had the opportunity to visit ECE teachers and their students at CIS, especially the grade one students. As part of the university exchange program, we had to put into practice what we were studying about AL and we

were able to do this at CIS. I therefore met ECE teachers at CIS and became motivated to learn more about how they use and integrate AL into their curriculum and daily activities.

Later I also chose to explore how AL is understood and applied in the ECE program at ISH because, like CIS, it is an international school and because I had the opportunity to do my internship there in Autumn 2019. At the time the school also offered me a one-year full-time teaching contract.

3.1 Data collection

I chose a web-based survey with open-ended questions as the method to collect my data. I utilized Google Forms as the platform to conduct the web-based survey using a questionnaire. I utilized email to introduce the survey to the participants, to give them the link to the online questionnaire in Google Forms, and to liaise with them in follow-up communication, such as to remind them to participate, to ask follow-up questions, and to thank them for their participation.

A web-based survey was particularly well-suited to my study because it is an appropriate way of producing rich written accounts of participants' perceptions of a pedagogical approach and of their classroom and curriculum planning experiences and memories that recollect their involvement in this process. There are quite a few advantages of web-based research methods, such as internet-based questionnaires and email interviews. A web-based survey taps into the potential of the computer as a methodological tool for research. One major advantage is that they offer a convenient and practical alternative to overcome geographical barriers and financial concerns that are a problem of face-to-face interviews (Walker, 2013). Participants can respond to internet-based data collection methods at their own convenience at a time that is suitable solely to them (Gibson, 2014). Accordingly, my web-based surveys were a convenient way to overcome scheduling challenges with busy teachers. The unique asynchronous nature of this method also gives participants more control over the level of their participation. They have more time to reflect on and craft their responses.

I acknowledge that there are of course limitations in the use of web-based surveys. Crafting written responses is by nature more time consuming than oral interviews (Fritz & Vandermause, 2017; Gibson, 2014). Consequently, another disadvantage of web-based surveys is the potential for short, concise answers. The limited two-way interaction

between researcher and participant also contributes to miscommunication and misinterpretation. Data obtained from web-based surveys lacks the spontaneity and richness of face-to-face interview data. Some researchers argue that the written responses of internet-based research methods such as web-surveys lack the social cues that can contribute to a deeper understanding of the participant's perceptions and experience. For example, if they had a question or concern about one of the questions, it would have been difficult and inconvenient for them to call, text or email me about that before they progressed to the next question. Accordingly, I tried to reduce miscommunication and ambiguity and improve specificity of participants' responses by making sure the questions were clear and brief and that the introductory email with participants contained all relevant information required for full and effective responses.

Within the survey I included five short-answer questions, one multiple-choice question, and six open-ended questions. These questions are placed in the Appendices. As recommended by Seidman (2006), the first questions for my investigation sought information related to the role of the participant in relationship to the research topic. Accordingly, the survey began with short-answer questions in the form of requests for participants to write their name, school name, role in the school, students' age group, and how long they had been an ECE teacher at their current school and overall. These five questions were designed to gain background information and were not vital to the main aim of this study.

The multiple-choice question was a follow-up question to ask how often they applied aspects of AL in the classroom. Response options included daily, once or twice a week, once or twice a month, rarely, and other. The purpose of this question was to gain an understanding of how important the application of AL was to the teachers. Here I linked importance to frequency of application.

There were six open-ended questions related to AL. These questions, and my reasons for asking them, are listed here:

> *Have you and/or your ECE colleagues at the school actively discussed AL or a related concept as part of the curriculum and/or lesson planning process?* I asked participants to elaborate on their responses as much as possible. I asked that if they referred to any other related terms or concepts used at their school to try to explain what they meant by them. This was

the first open-ended question and it was designed mainly to seek initial information about their level of understanding of AL.

What are your personal thoughts about AL? I suggested that they could comment on AL's *value* to student learning and its *challenges/obstacles*. I also asked them to explain their reasons for these perceptions. The purpose of this question was to draw out of them as much information as possible that would indicate their level of understanding of AL and descriptions of their personal opinion about AL.

Are aspects of AL incorporated into your ECE curriculum? I asked them to elaborate on their answer, such as by giving examples of AI in the curriculum. I suggested that this may also involve specialist teachers such as music, art, and drama teachers. I asked this question because I wanted to move beyond their perceptions to understand if and how they applied AL in the curriculum.

Are aspects of AL incorporated into your classroom? Like the previous question, the aim was to see if and how much they put AL directly into practice with students. This was also designed to gain a better understanding of how they perceive AL.

Can you give 2 or more examples of how it has been applied in the classroom? I wanted to collect examples from them to gain more insight into their understandings of AL.

How do you feel students responded to the use of AL in those examples? Can you describe their responses? It was important to me to gain insight into how teachers' use of AL impacted their students.

I requested the participation of all ECE teachers at both schools, which totalled twelve teachers. Thus, I adopted purposive sampling for this study. However, only nine participated. Four teachers were from CIS and five were from ISH. This sample size was adequate for the purposes of my study. Data collection for qualitative descriptive studies such as this one is typically through extensive interviews or in-depth questionnaires with a small number of primary participants (Sandelowski, 2000; Seidman, 2006). These

teachers participated in the survey in the final two weeks of the academic school year, during May 2020. Thus, the data was collected in May 2020.

The written responses were collated from the Google Forms and converted to a Word document where I separated their responses according to each question. In total, the complete transcript for my study was almost nine single-spaced (Times New Roman, 12-point) pages.

Ethical data collection and management was considered while planning my data collection method and process. A minimum amount of personal data was collected in the first place. As background information, the participants of this study were only asked about their name, school name, role in the school, age group of their students, and how long they had been teaching ECE. This information was used to generate an overview of the participant group.

Before answering interview questions, participants were advised to read a participant information sheet and a participant consent form, both of which included information about the purpose of the study and the researcher's contact information. The participants were informed of how and to what purposes the data would be utilized. Before continuing to the questionnaire, the participants gave their consent to use the data in the way described in the form. A copy of the participant information sheet and a participant consent form are placed in the Appendices.

3.2 Data analysis

For the purposes of this study I used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Interpretative phenomenological analysis aims to offer insight into how a given person, in a given context, makes sense of a phenomenon they have encountered. In IPA, researchers tend to collect qualitative data from participants using techniques such as in-depth open-ended questionnaires, interviews or diaries.

This type of analysis draws on the accounts of a small quantity of participants (between three and fifteen participants is an adequate number) (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005) describing their reflections or recollections of perceptions and experiences of the researched phenomenon. In this study, the participants were chosen because of their potential to offer some meaningful insight into AL in a Nordic international school context.

Research participants in an IPA study are expected to have certain experiences in common with one another.

The aim of this study was for ECE teachers to describe their understanding of a pedagogical concept as well as their experiences in using AL with minimal interpretation from the researcher (Sandelowski, 2000). A qualitative descriptive design as described by Sandelowski (2000) was utilized for my study because it was well suited to describing experiences from a phenomenological perspective. The teachers' responses offered a first-hand account of how they interpret and rely on AL at work.

Researchers using this method of analysis tend to approach their inquiry without a priori assumptions, definitions or theoretical frameworks. That is, they try to eliminate factors which disturb participants' perceptions. However, in this study I decided that I needed to at least offer them a broad understanding of what scholars mean by AL. As stated in the literature review chapter, there are many definitions and multiple terms related to AL (e.g., experiential learning, aesthetic learning experiences, aesthetic teaching, and aesthetic inquiry), making AL a very difficult concept to define. To increase the probability that all respondents understood the concept in similar ways, and so to ensure the reliability of the data as much as possible, I decided to include in the questionnaire some text about AL to enable participants to give me their considered, thoughtful responses to my questions. For this reason, before asking them the open-ended questions about their perceptions of AL I gave them a summary of characteristics of AL from AL-related studies as they relate to ECE. This background information about AL included conceptual ideas from Dewey, Steiner and Vygotsky. To offer more insight, I also gave them an example of how AL could be applied in the classroom. This text is shown in the questionnaire included in the Appendices.

Following typical steps used in IPA, I began by making notes within the written accounts of participants' experiences and perspectives of AL to look for units of general meaning that appeared common within most of these accounts. I looked for recurring patterns of meaning in participants' accounts. In other words, I examined participants' accounts to look for those things that seemed to be significant and that mattered to them (e.g., a concept, an object of concern, or a way of doing or applying something). To see if the meaning was important, I looked for the number of times a meaning was mentioned. As I did this, I did not try to link this with my research question, because I was simply trying to find the essence of the meanings expressed by each participant. As much as possible

I followed the normal coding process used in IPA: the researcher generates codes from the data itself rather than using a pre-existing theory to identify codes before the actual analysis gets underway. In other words, I tried to remain open, neutral and objective as I read through their accounts; I tried not to allow theory of AL to shape my interpretation of the data.

As a next step, I compared these *units of general meaning* with my research questions to determine whether what the participant actually stated related to and illuminated the main focus of my research. If it did, then I noted it as a *unit of relevant meaning*. In this way I gradually refined my analysis to ensure that it remained true to my research focus.

Next, I examined each of these units of relevant meaning to begin to determine if there is one or more central themes which expresses the essence of what participants were trying to say was important to them. I looked for the themes common to most or all of the participants' accounts. When a general theme emerged in most or all of the accounts, I coded these as themes and subsequently categorized them into superordinate themes (i.e., broader themes) and sub-themes (i.e., more specific themes relating to the broader themes).

As a final step in my analysis, I tried to match these themes with theory relating to AL. AL theory discussed in the literature review chapter informed this process and gradually thirteen superordinate themes emerged, including 'Student-led inquiry-based learning', 'sensory learning', 'holistic approach, 'play-based approach', 'transdisciplinary teaching', and 'Reggio Emelia approach'. I also identified sub-themes within most of these superordinate themes. For example, within 'Student-led inquiry-based learning' I identified sub-themes of 'agency', 'active partner in learning process', 'Testing own hypotheses', 'Curiosity, asking questions', 'Experiential learning', 'Student's interests' and 'Prompting questions (from teachers)'. In my interpretation, some of these sub-themes reflected ECE scholars' interpretations of AL. Although some sub-themes were duplicated within multiple superordinate themes, I felt that this duplication should remain because it reflected the insights of the teachers as they tried to express their understandings of AL within the context of their school.

Table 1 below offers a summary and textual example of themes identified in this study.

Table 1: ECE teachers' understandings of aesthetic learning

Superordinate themes	Sub-themes	Text examples
Student-led inquiry-based learning	Agency	“we hope to give the children agency in their learning space … which allows them ownership of their learning”
	Active partner in learning process	Students are ”active partners in their learning alongside their teacher/learner”
	Curiosity, asking questions	“a process whereby students generate questions”
	Testing own hypotheses	“when students can test their own hypotheses they find out what they want to know”
	Experiential learning	“provide them with experiences that they can explore to make better sense about the world around them”
	Student’s interests	“we tend to follow the questions and interests of the students”
	Prompting questions (from teachers)	“we prompt them with questions that they can find the answer for”
Sensory learning		“appealing to the senses” “naturally using their whole bodies and senses”

Holistic approach	Intellectual, creative, spiritual, moral	"supporting their development in every level (social, emotional, cognitive and physical)"
	Transdisciplinary teaching	"we also work collaboratively with our speciality teachers so the children get a holistic approach to the units we are covering"
	Child as a whole	"We think of the child as a whole"
Reggio Emelia approach	Student-led inquiry-based learning	"interest-based learning and following the child's own inquiry"
	Learning through play	"it is a central part of our 'learning through play' philosophy"
	Process over end product	"the process rather than the end product"
	Kinesthetic learning	"longer term projects which actively engage children through kinesthetic learning"
	Learning by doing	"learning by doing"
	Relationships	"the sense of community and group work"
Transdisciplinary teaching		"how the concept of *change* can be seen in language, physical education or music"
Play-based approach		"it is a central part of our learning through play philosophy"

Initially, I identified thirteen superordinate themes. However, I later realized that seven of them did not seem to be important to most of the participants, and so I removed them at a later stage of the analytical process, leaving just six superordinate themes. Some sub-themes did not appear in the literature review, such as 'kinaesthetic learning'. However, I determined that they were important to this study as they were mentioned multiple times by different teachers and they helped to illuminate important aspects of AL.

The 'Reggio Emelia approach' was identified as a sub-theme in this analysis because it was mentioned by multiple teachers, which indicated that this approach was important to them and shaped their understanding of AL. Thus, in this analysis I identified six sub-themes under this approach based on the accounts of the teachers. I also identified Vygotsky's and Dewey's influences on this approach.

Sensory learning seemed to be an important concept that the teachers identified with AL. However, I could not find any sub-themes from their accounts that would help to define it.

The play-based approach seemed to be strongly related to teachers' concept of AL and so it was listed as a superordinate theme. However, being a very broad concept, I could not identify any specific sub-themes that would help to define it.
In the next chapter I discuss the findings from this analysis and relate these findings to AL theory.

4 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Teachers' understandings of AL

Of the nine respondents, none of them said they directly used the term *aesthetic learning* (AL) in their curriculum and/or lesson planning process in their current schools. Instead, they offered other terms that they considered similar in concept. For example, one stated: "We don't use that term really. We talk about inquiry-based learning, which I feel is much the same." Another stated: "Although not discussed using the term AL, our school is centred on the child's agency particularly with regards to the inquiry cycle." Still another respondent said, "Normally I hear the term 'sensory learning' more than 'aesthetic

learning'." One teacher declared: "Although in our planning we never referred to AL, it is a central part of our 'learning through play' philosophy."

Even though one respondent said she does not normally use the term AL, she embraced the concept of AL as an overarching approach that she has adopted at her school: "I see AL as an umbrella under which you can find everything we should do in the classroom with the children in order to support their physical, emotional and cognitive development."

Not surprisingly, this same teacher combined multiple concepts and approaches within her understanding of AL. In fact, many respondents did this. One combined a play-based approach, a holistic approach, student-led inquiry and sensory learning in describing her pedagogical approach: "I believe in a holistic, play-based approach to early years education, one that allows each child to develop at their own pace, following their interests, and using their whole bodies." The phrase "following their own interests" describes a student-led inquiry approach, while "using their whole bodies" refers to sensory learning. This same respondent said that "AL is the foundation of my approach to teaching".

One teacher combined sensory learning, holistic, and student-led inquiry approaches into her overall understanding of AL: "Our goal is to plan multi-sensory, holistic learning activities … We hope to give the children agency in their learning space and their learning experiences, which allows them ownership of the learning."

Another teacher integrated the concepts of experiential learning and sensory learning into her description of what she understands AL to be, as seen in this statement:

> "Our classrooms are set every day with provocations that allow the children to interact with them at their own level. For example, one of our units of inquiry this year was about materials, so the classroom and community areas were set with many different kinds of recycled materials for the children to explore using their senses and their whole bodies. We documented how the children explored and interacted with the materials, looking for the connection they made between ideas and materials, and with expectations of a final product."

Her reference to "provocations" appears to relate to the AL concept of 'experiential learning' because provocations are designed to act as a catalyst to provoke a heightened

learning experience. In using the phrase “using their senses and their whole bodies”, she seems to be referring to sensory learning.

Next, I organize the discussion of my findings according to each superordinate theme described in the previous chapter.

4.1.1 Student-led inquiry-based learning

Most of the respondents referred directly to inquiry-based learning as similar to AL. In other words, to them inquiry-based learning encapsulated the idea of AL. These teachers described, in their own words, what they meant by inquiry-based learning. In answer to the question ‘Have you and/or your colleagues at the school discussed AL or a related concept as part of the curriculum and/or lesson planning process?’, one teacher stated, “I feel that … we don’t use that term really. We talk about inquiry-based learning, which I feel is much the same … Inquiry-based learning or AL is the base of the curriculum.” This same teacher subsequently described what she meant by inquiry-based learning:

> “We try to engage the children in deciding where their interest lies and provide them with experiences that they can explore to make better sense about the world around them. We prompt them with questions that they can find the answer for.”

This teacher’s responses indicates some of the various ways she makes sense of AL. As shown in the previous chapter, some of the sub-themes found in her response include ‘prompting questions’ and ‘experiential learning’, which fit into her description of inquiry-based learning.

One teacher stated, “As much as possible inquiry is at the centre of the learning throughout the year.” Another described her pedagogical approach as “following the child’s own inquiry”. Another alluded to ‘following students’ interests’ when she stated: “While there are big ideas/conceptual understandings that we wish for as we play, we tend to follow the questions and interests of the students”. This response fitted into the sub-theme of ‘following students’ interests’.

Another respondent compared AL with students’ agency (Johnson, 2007) in relation to inquiry-based learning, stating: “Although not discussed using the term AL, our school is centred on the child’s agency particularly with regards to the inquiry circle.” She described what she meant by “inquiry circle” as “a process whereby students generate questions, find out new information, and consolidate previous learning.” In this way she

referred to the sub-theme of ‘curiosity, asking questions’. She also described her understanding of inquiry-based learning as an approach in which the students are “active partners in their learning alongside their teacher/learner”. She explained it in more detail this way, alluding to the sub-theme of ‘testing own hypotheses’: “When students can test their own hypotheses they find out what they want to know according to their own knowledge-base.”

Another teacher also referred to the AL principle of agency in relation to inquiry-based learning: “We hope to give the children agency in their learning space and their learning experiences, which allows them ownership of their learning”. This AL-related concept of student agency is tied to inquiry-based learning, because students are empowered to determine what they will learn under the teacher’s guidance.

Following the child’s interests was a common theme for teachers describing inquiry-based learning. For example, one teacher stated: “Spaces are created following the child's interest, and developmental needs to allow the child to explore, interact and engage with materials in ways that are personally significant.” Another said she tries to get students to tell her what they are interested in learning and sometimes she prompts them with questions to help them decide. She described her inquiry-based learning approach this way:

> “An example would be the concept of living and non-living things. The children hear stories about plants, animals and maybe rocks. They get to explore plants through planting a seed or seedling and caring for it to understand what a plant (living thing) needs to grow. They record their findings and observations as well as make hypothesis about what is going to happen next and when. Some might be more interested in animals. We had snails in the classroom and read stories about baby animals growing into larger animals. Many students had their own pets at home and shared what they needed to grow and live. Then these findings are compared with the non-living things like rocks to see how they are same or different.”

In a later stage of my analysis I compared teachers’ responses to theory relating to AL. All the themes listed in Table 1 initially emerged from teachers’ ideas about AL, but some themes could not be linked directly with theoretical ideas explored in the literature review while others more obviously linked to these theoretical ideas. I found that the superordinate theme of ‘inquiry-based learning’ integrates theoretical ideas of ‘student

agency' (Johnson, 2007) and 'experiential learning' (Austring & Sorensen, 2012; Illeris, 2012), both of which were ideas put forward by Dewey, as well as 'active partnership in the learning process' from Piaget. Sub-themes under 'inquiry-based learning' that could not be linked directly to AL theory included 'transdisciplinary teaching' (although Sotiropoulou-Zormpala, (2012) explored aspects of this) which I placed under the superordinate theme of 'holistic approach'. I found a pattern of this 'transdisciplinary teaching' theme emerging amongst teachers' interpretations of a holistic approach. They tended to refer to transdisciplinary teaching when talking about an overall holistic approach to AL. Also, when talking about a holistic approach, they often referred to the idea of 'child as a whole', so I interpreted this pattern of understanding holistic education as a sub-theme.

Likewise, some teachers tended to make the point that students' curiosity and questioning about objects and ideas indicated a 'student-led inquiry-based learning' approach to AL. So, I included this as a common sub-theme of 'inquiry-based learning'. Another common reference was to the importance of planning AL through 'following students' interests' as well as 'prompting students with questions' to try to nudge students to follow certain lines of inquiry themselves. Thus, I included these two sub-themes under the superordinate theme of 'student-led inquiry-based learning'

4.1.2 Sensory learning

Sensory learning, a pedagogical concept which Steiner helped to develop and which was explored by Austring and Sorensen (2012) and Sotiropoulou-Zormpala (2012), was a common theme in the teachers' descriptions of AL. Four referred to sensory learning as similar in approach to AL. One described what she meant by sensory learning in this way: "what the child perceives and manipulates". She stated that the activities run by her and her colleagues are "based on the sensory". Another respondent mentioned a multisensory approach in terms of "appealing to the senses". A third respondent equated AL with sensory learning in this way:

> "I believe that AL is what describes the ideal learning experience for young children. They are naturally using their whole bodies and senses, they need to move and feel the things in their hands, they need to get emotionally involved in order to learn, make connections, and develop."

Another teacher equated AL with sensory learning and alluded particularly to the value of multisensory experiences: "I think we do need to consider these aspects as our

units change during the year… that we continue to cover and allow for these multisensory experiences throughout the curriculum."

4.1.3 Holistic approach

A few teachers referred to a holistic approach as comparable to AL. One referred to "multi-sensory, holistic learning activities in which children can interconnect what they already know and new concepts". Another described this approach as "supporting their development in every level - social, emotional, cognitive and physical". This response highlighted the 'holistic approach' sub-theme of 'intellectual, creative, spiritual, moral' which Steiner developed in his theoretical work. Another offered her understanding of AL in this way: "We think of the child as a whole and as individual learners who all bring their own experiences into their learning." Thus, she linked her perception of a holistic approach with the 'child as a whole' sub-theme. One respondent related a holistic approach with transdisciplinary teaching when she talked about ECE teachers collaborating with specialty teachers; she stated: "We also work collaboratively with our speciality teachers so the children get a holistic approach to the units we are covering. I do believe that we could benefit from more collaboration."

In comparing AL with a holistic approach, one teacher talked about transdisciplinary teaching:

> "We have been discussing on how to plan our activities to make sure that they are serving that purpose and also how the different concepts can be been seen as transdisciplinary across the curriculum e.g. how the concept of change can be seen in language, physical education or music."

For this reason, I included 'transdisciplinary teaching' as a sub-theme under the superordinate theme of 'holistic approach'.

4.1.4 Reggio Emilia approach

Two respondents said their program/curriculum is based on the Reggio Emilia approach, which they equated as similar to an AL approach. One stated, "Yes we continuously have these conversations, however mostly based around the philosophy of Reggio Emilia." She described what she meant by the Reggio Emilia philosophy in this way:

> "The process rather than the end product. Longer term projects which actively engage children through kinaesthetic learning. Learning by doing. The sense of

> community and group work. Interest-based learning and following the child's own inquiry."

In this description of a Reggio Emilia approach she referred to the following sub-themes that other teachers used in characterizing this approach: 'process over end product', 'kinaesthetic learning', 'student-led inquiry-based learning', and learning by doing' – another concept developed by Dewey. Included in this statement is a reference to the Reggio Emilia concept of community, which I identify as a 'relationship' sub-theme.

Another teacher who said her program is inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach stated: "Although in our planning we have never referred to aesthetic learning, it is a central part of our 'learning through play' philosophy." As discussed in the literature review, this idea of learning through play can be attributed to Vygotsky. One described the Reggio Emilia philosophy as focusing on "the process rather than the end product … learning by doing", thus referring to another theoretical contribution by Vygotsky. The other teacher described it as a "play based program".

When teachers described what they understood as the Reggio Emilia philosophy, they tended to talk about a variety of concepts or ideas, which I interpreted as seven different categories or sub-themes. Accordingly, I listed them as sub-themes under the 'Reggio Emilia approach' even though I placed some of them as sub-themes under other superordinate themes. I did this because this was how the teachers themselves perceived the Reggio Emilia approach to be. I do not consider this duplication of sub-themes as a problem in this study because the aim is not to avoid duplication but to capture how teachers understood various AL-related approaches and concepts, no matter how messy or duplicative their perceptions are.

4.1.5 Transdisciplinary teaching

In describing what they perceived to be an AL approach, five respondents referred to the integration of multiple disciplines or subject areas, which I have categorized as the superordinate theme of 'transdisciplinary teaching' which is explored in the study by Sotiropoulou-Zormpala (2012). For example, one teacher described it this way:

> "All teachers in contact with the children have the same base. Music and drama teachers collaborating with each other to work on the same story but different aspects of it to come together as a whole. Art and physical education working together with the homeroom teacher to build a bigger picture."

Another teacher also compared AL with the integration of specialist areas:

> "Our ECE curriculum has incorporated AL. The children have the chance to explore the concepts through various ways offered by specialist teachers. Our weekly schedule has drama, music, arts, physical education and our language and math sessions are often including elements of these as a way to make learning more playful and engaging."

Another respondent mixed these approaches too, stating: "I think it is absolutely key to student understanding and to help them construct their ideas about the worlds. They can learn in context, with skills and ideas that transcend across 'subject areas' in a more free-flowing way."

This is also demonstrated in another teacher's descriptions of the way she plans and applies her pedagogical approaches:

> "Every unit is planned with the different curriculums in mind i.e. connections through math, music and physical education if the concept is pattern, or connections with literacy, drama and art if the concept is imagination etc... It is an expectation that teachers plan this way, to help students understand a concept in different formats and situations."

Another teacher described it this way when discussing her AL approach: "The curriculum is also designed to be transdisciplinary so that students learn conceptually through different modes and media (e.g. music, drama, information communication technology)."

One teacher related transdisciplinary teaching with multi-modal learning, suggesting that one leads to the other: "Collaboration between specialist teachers and classroom teachers enables multi-modal learning."

4.1.6 Play-based approach

A few respondents equated AL primarily with the play-based approach developed by Vygotsky. In answer to the question, 'Have you and/or your colleagues actively discussed AL or a related concept as part of the curriculum and/or lesson planning process', one teacher stated, "We are a play-based program, inspired by the Reggio

Emilia approach". Another respondent who compared a play-based approach with AL stated that the play-based approach is incorporated into the classroom "most of the time".

4.2 How teachers apply AL

In this thesis I am primarily interested in how teachers understand AL. However, a secondary interest is in how they apply AL-related curriculum in the classroom. In the web-based survey I tried to capture their perceptions of AL by asking them questions about how they apply AL in the curriculum and in the classroom. The observations analysed above offer some insight into how the teachers both plan *and* apply AL. However, I want to also make the following observations.

All the respondents stated that they plan their ongoing curriculum through regular discussion with colleagues. For example, one stated: "We as a team discuss a lot about how we use the materials in class and how they should be accessible to the children." In other words, to her, discussion is an important part of planning and applying, probably because she treats her colleagues as a "team". Another stated: "We have been discussing how to plan our activities to make sure they are serving that purpose." Planning through discussion with team mates is important in the ECE setting because teachers have to make sure they are collectively teaching students in the same way and with the same approach.

Another observation is that many of the teachers referred to some challenges they faced with an AL approach. One problem brought up by a few of the teachers was parents' perception of AL, especially when aligned with a play-based approach: "Parents need to be educated as to why the teaching looks like play and how the children are learning. Parents have most likely not been brought up and taught in this way. Therefore, it is vital to educate them." Another referred a similar problem: "A challenge around working this way is that parents may see it as unorganised, unstructured, and not properly planned, whereas this is actually very complex and detailed planning and a lot of work goes into documenting understanding and formulating next steps." One of the teachers also felt that AL as a pedagogical approach can feel unstructured: "One of the challenges of having a sensory method is that it can be 'chaotic' and for this reason, the teacher must be flexible and understanding of the child's perception." In sum, because the application of AL in the classroom may appear unplanned and unstructured to observers, an AL approach needs to be explained to parents and teachers need to be able to be flexible to follow students' interests.

Respondents indicated that the application of their plans often is not an easy or simple process, especially when related to AL and similar concepts. For example, one of the respondents explained that when their daily activities follow what students themselves want to learn, which is the basis of inquiry-based learning in particular, teachers have to put “layers of understandings alongside this”. She explained it this way: “It means that teachers have to know their curriculum extremely well to plan this way, so that concepts are still taught but in a meaningful and timely context with students.” In other words, the teacher needs to have the knowledge and skills to make sure student-led learning contains some kind of balance with teacher-led guidance. Some teachers pointed out the challenge of finding the right balance between child-led and teacher-led learning: “From the teacher's perspective, it may be difficult to frame learning experiences in such a way as to allow enough freedom to explore but to also guide lessons to the higher orders of thinking.”

Another stated that more time is needed to observe, reflect and plan when applying AL: “The only obstacle I see is that the teachers need time to plan and reflect on what they see and observe.” They recognize that AL requires unique knowledge and skills related to observing students, reflecting on what and how students are learning, and planning accordingly.

5 Conclusion

The practical aim of this thesis was to offer ECE teachers a better understanding of aesthetic learning and how it can be applied in the classroom. The findings showed that ECE teachers at these two Nordic international schools not only highly valued AL as a way to teach their students, they also had a solid grasp of AL as it is understood in ECE scholarship on aesthetic education. The teachers’ responses to the web-based survey mostly seemed to reflect ECE scholars’ understandings of aesthetic education. They referred directly and indirectly to theoretical ideas about AL that are explored in ECE literature, such as inquiry-based, sensory, play-based, and holistic approaches. However, sometimes their understanding of AL concepts seemed to mix multiple AL-related concepts. For example, I found that sometimes when they were describing a holistic approach to ECE, they referred to the way students learn across a mixture of specialist subjects, from arts to mathematics and from physical education to information technology, which I term in this thesis as a transdisciplinary approach to AL. To Steiner,

a holistic approach involved the intellectual, creative, spiritual and moral dimensions of the child rather than learning through a mixture of different subject areas.

What was especially interesting were the challenges that these teachers pointed out when trying to teach younger children through an AL approach. For example, they described how some parents thought that the Al way of teaching children was too simple and ignored the teaching of important skills such as reading and writing. In other words, too much emphasis on a play-based approach gave parents the impression that their children were not learning essential skills. The teachers also felt that an AL way of teaching was difficult to navigate in practice. In other words, it was difficult to get the balance right between child-led learning and teacher-led learning.

5.1 Limitations and future research

There were quite a number of limitations to this study. Some of these related to methodological choices and these were addressed in chapter three. During this process I aimed for reliability and validity. Reliability and validity are especially important considerations in qualitative research because of its heavy reliance on interpretation of rich data. Validity, which is sometimes interpreted as credibility, refers to the believability and trustworthiness of the findings and depends more on the richness of the data gathered than on the quantity of data. This points to one of the limitations of this thesis: although I aimed for richness of the data by asking open-ended questions and encouraging longer answers to questions, this study was limited to just nine teachers' responses, and I acknowledge that longer answers would have contributed to a deeper understanding of ECE teachers' perception of AL. Nevertheless, the focus in this thesis was on the quality of analysis rather than the quantity of the data.

Transferability, which is related to validity, applies to whether a study can be replicated by other researchers and subsequently obtain essentially the same results. I acknowledge that there would be some differences between my findings and the findings of other scholars if they were to conduct the same study using the same methods. However, I contend that the findings in this study are a solid reflection of the accounts of the ECE teachers in this study; they reflect their perceptions of what AL means as a pedagogical concept and how they have applied it in their work.

Although the web-based survey asked teachers about how they applied AL in their curriculum and in the classroom, an analysis of their responses did not explore this in

much detail because it would have pushed the analysis beyond the planned scope of this thesis. It would have been interesting to dig deeper into how ECE teachers apply AL, so perhaps future research will do this in the context of Nordic international schools.

Another limitation of this thesis was that it only focused on ECE teachers at two specific Nordic international schools. (The reason for this choice of schools is explained in the introduction to chapter 3.) Accordingly, these findings should not apply to all ECE teachers globally or even to those in Nordic countries. Future research on ECE teachers' understandings of AL could examine this topic in other international schools in Finland and Denmark and in other Nordic countries as well.

In this thesis I examined perceptions of AL, which can be seen as a broad umbrella concept for all aesthetic-related concepts. It would also be interesting to explore a narrower focus on aesthetic education in the ECE context. For example, a study could apply one definition of aesthetic education (e.g. from Vygotsky) or one aspect of it, such as play-based learning or inquiry-based learning, and explore ECE teacher's understanding of this and how they apply it.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Questionnaire within Google Forms

Note: This questionnaire formed part of the web-based survey and it was placed within Google Forms.

Aesthetic Learning (AL) in Early Childhood Education (ECE)

Preliminary information about you

Your responses to these questions will be kept anonymous within the thesis.

Your name:

Your school:

Your role:

Your students' age group:

Your teacher qualifications (and the country where you studied):

How long have you been an early childhood educator (1) (at your current school and (2) overall?

About Aesthetic Learning (AL)

Before I ask questions 1 to 7 below, it would be helpful for you to know what I mean by Aesthetic Learning (AL). It is a very difficult concept to define (there are many definitions) and there are multiple related terms (e.g., Experiential Learning, Aesthetic Learning Experiences, Aesthetic Teaching, and Aesthetic Inquiry). However, I would like to offer you a broad understanding of what scholars mean by the concept so that you can give me your considered, thoughtful responses to my questions. So, here is a summary of characteristics of AL from AL-related studies as they relate to ECE:

Aesthetics is derived from the Greek word aisthetikos, which is defined as a perception of the senses.

AL takes a holistic approach to learning (according to Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner) – e.g., engaging the child in play, art, music, drama, story, and movement and giving the child the opportunity to interact with an object or idea through emotions, intellect, communication, and the senses.

Children are doers before they are knowers (according to American educational reformer John Dewey), therefore AL is primarily more about actively engaging children in the learning process than about the outcome or product (according to Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky).

A child's agency (the abstract principle that children are autonomous beings capable of acting and learning by themselves) is central to AL – e.g., it is about providing experiences that the child can independently learn from.

The modern perception of the world is to exclusively focus on the rational, academic and technical, whereas a child is more imaginative and pictorial than that (Steiner).

Example of the application of AL in the classroom: Rather than listening to a teacher explain how a plant grows, children can personally engage with a plant (e.g., plant a seed, water it, and observe how it grows) and then draw it, sing about it, tell a story about it, and so on.

Questions about your PERCEPTION of AL

Keep in mind that it is an ambiguous and loosely defined concept. I would value longer answers over shorter ones so that I can gain a deeper understanding of how AL is understood and applied in ECE in two Nordic schools.

1. Have you and/or your ECE colleagues at the school actively discussed AL or a related concept as part of the curriculum and/or lesson planning process? (Please elaborate as much as possible. If you refer to any other related terms or concepts used at the school, try to explain what you mean by them.)
2. What are your personal thoughts about AL? (e.g., Do you think it is important? You may wish to comment on its value to student learning and its challenges/obstacles etc and explain your reasons for these perceptions.)

Questions about APPLICATION of Aesthetic Learning (AL)

(Again, I would value longer answers over shorter ones.)

3. Are aspects of AL incorporated into your ECE curriculum? (If possible, please elaborate, such as by giving examples of AI in the curriculum. Note that this may also involve specialist teachers such as music, art, and drama teachers.)
4. Are aspects of AL incorporated into your classroom? (This may also involve specialist teachers)
5. If yes, how often is it applied in the classroom?

   Daily

   Once or twice a week

   Once or twice a month

   Rarely

   Other:
6. Can you give 2 or more examples of how it has been applied in the classroom?
7. How do you feel students responded to the use of AL in those examples? Can you describe their responses?

Thank you so much for doing this. I really appreciate your response.

Appendix 2: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of the study: Aesthetic Learning in Early Childhood Education

Location of the study:
Metropolia University of Applied Sciences
Name: Anita Badham
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Supervisor name: Satu Hakanen
Email: Satu.Hakanen@metropolia.fi

I [ ] have been invited to participate in the above research study. The purpose of the research is to gain an understanding of (1) Early Childhood Education teachers' *perceptions* about Aesthetic Learning and (2) if/how they *apply it* in the classroom.

I have read and understood the written participant information sheet. The information sheet has provided me sufficient information about above study, the purpose and execution of the study, about my rights as well as about the benefits and risks involved in it. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study and have had these answered satisfactorily.

I have had sufficient information of the collection, processing and transfer/disclosure of my personal data during the study and the Privacy Notice has been available.

I have not been pressurized or persuaded into participation.

I have had enough time to consider my participation in the study.

I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, without giving any reason. I am aware that if I withdraw from the study or withdraw my consent, any data collected from me before my withdrawal can be included as part of the research data.

By signing this form, I confirm that I voluntarily consent to participate in this study.

If the legal basis of processing personal data within this study is a consent granted by the data subject, by signing I grant the consent for process my personal data. I have right to withdraw the consent regarding processing of personal data as described in the Privacy Notice.

Date

_____

Signature of Participant

The original consent signed by the participant and a copy of the participant information sheet will be kept in the records of the researcher. Participant information sheet, privacy notice and a copy of the signed consent will be given to the participant.

Appendix 2. PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

This information sheet describes my study and your role in it. Before you decide to participate, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read this information, and discuss it with others if you wish. If there is anything that is not clear, or if you would like more information, please ask me. After that we will ask you to sign a consent form to participate in the study.

Study title: Aesthetic Learning in Early Childhood Education

Invitation to participate in a research study

I would like to invite you to take part in an email interview related to my undergraduate thesis at Metropolia University of Applied Science (Helsinki).

Voluntary nature of participation

The participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You can withdraw from the study at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. If You withdraw from the study or withdraw Your consent, any data collected from You before the withdrawal can be included as part of the research data.

Purpose of the study

The thesis is focused on Aesthetic Learning (AL) in Early Childhood Education (ECE), especially as it relates to two Nordic international schools: International School Helsinki and Copenhagen International School. The aim of the thesis and the interview is to gain an understanding of (1) ECE teachers' *perceptions* about AL and (2) if/how they *apply it* in the classroom.

Who is organising and funding the research?

This research is for my thesis. There is no direct funding for this research.

What will the participation involve?

I am inviting participation from approximately 12 ECE teachers at these two schools. The email interview would simply involve you answering seven (7) questions in an online Google Forms document. It may take you approximately 30 minutes, depending on how

quick you are and the length of your answers. I may contact you again with one or more follow-up questions.

Possible benefits of taking part

There are no direct benefits.

Possible disadvantages and risks of taking part

There are no disadvantages and risks for participants that I am aware of.

Financial information

Participation in this study will involve no cost to You. You will receive no payment for Your participation.

Informing about the research results

If you would like to see the findings of my research, I would be happy to share them with you.

Termination of the study

As the researcher conducting the study, I may terminate the study at any time. However, I do not envisage any reasons to do this.

Further information

Further information related to the study can be requested from me.

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