

# Values Education in Steiner Schools: Teachers' Perspectives on the Physical Environment as a Pedagogical Resource

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**ABSTRACT.** This article explores the role of the physical environment in early childhood values education in Steiner schools in Norway, seen from the perspective of teachers. The design of the learning environment in first grade in Norwegian Steiner schools is intentionally aimed at enabling play and hands-on learning, in line with the pedagogical principles of Steiner education, contrasting significantly the learning environment in Norwegian public schools. The study examines how the physical environment functions as a pedagogical resource by enabling play, community building, and encouraging care for the surroundings. The research draws on qualitative data from interviews with six first-grade teachers from four different Steiner schools in Norway, providing insight into their perceptions of the physical space as a tool for fostering shared experiences and ethical reflection. The findings are analysed in relation to Steiner's educational philosophy, Merleau-Ponty's theory of the body in human consciousness, and Dewey's philosophy of experiential learning. This article contributes to a deeper understanding of early childhood values education and emphasizes the significance of the physical environment in shaping pedagogical experiences. The findings will be of interest to educators and researchers in both Steiner schools and public schools.

*Keywords:* physical environment, values education, Steiner pedagogy, early childhood education.

## Introduction

The intentional design of the physical environment in first grade in Norwegian Steiner schools is aimed at facilitating play and practical learning. In many aspects, the design is similar to the one used in Steiner kindergartens (Steinerskoleforbundet/The Steiner School Association 2020, p. 28). This design differs significantly from the physical learning environment in first grade at Norwegian public schools.

After the introduction of the «Six-Year Reform», implemented in 1997, the starting age for compulsory education was lowered from seven to six years in Norway. The intention behind the reform was to create a smoother transition from kindergarten to school, allowing for more play-based learning in the early years of schooling. However, the reform has since been criticized for reducing the emphasis on play, prioritizing learning outcomes and formal schooling (Becher & Høyland, 2021). The term «chairification» (in Norwegian: «*stolifisering*» Becher, 2018) refers to the increasing use of desks and chairs in first grade after the «Six-Year Reform» and indicates a growing emphasis on formal learning (Becher, 2018). In contrast,

Norwegian Steiner schools chose to maintain a kindergarten-like approach in first grade, in line with the principles of Waldorf pedagogy, prioritizing play and social skills, to facilitate a more age-appropriate early childhood education. This is reflected in the design of the physical environment (Stabel, 2023). The contrast between the pedagogical approach in first grade in public schools and Steiner Schools creates an interesting opportunity for an examination into how the environment plays a role as a pedagogical resource in schools.

The pedagogical design of the physical environment in preschools is given great importance in both public and Steiner kindergartens, based on an understanding of early childhood education as rooted in bodily and sensory experiences, as well as the value of free play (Kunnskapsdepartementet/The Norwegian Ministry of Education, 2017). However, this perspective seems to hold less significance in a school context (Becher & Høyland, 2021). The school's physical environment easily fades into the background of our attention. The surroundings «are just there», and so we seldom question them. Yet, the specific design of the physical environment plays a crucial role in either allowing or inhibiting certain uses or activities. In this way, the physical environment of the school can inform us about pedagogical values, expectations and attitudes.

In this article, I examine how teachers understand the physical environment as part of values education in first grade in Norwegian Steiner schools by posing the following research questions:

1. What constitutes the values education in first grade in Steiner schools?
2. How does the physical environment serve as a pedagogical resource in the values education?

The term «values education» is used to describe the ethical formation that is part of the subject *Religion and Ethics* at Steiner schools in Norway. One purpose of this subject is to provide practice in exploring existential questions and considering others' perspectives. The subject is intended to support ethical reflection, wonder, and philosophical conversation (Steinerskoleforbundet, 2020, p. 110).

The term «pedagogical resource» as used in this context aligns with Selander's definition, referring to a collective category of artifacts employed in education to support and enhance the development of pupils (Selander, 2003). Furthermore, the term «physical environment» refers to the physical design of educational spaces, both indoor and outdoor (University of Oslo, 2020).

To address the two-part research question, I will first provide an overview of the fundamental principles of Steiner pedagogy and examine some key aspects of first-grade education in Steiner schools. This discussion will be grounded in the governing documents of Norwegian Steiner schools and interpreted considering Steiner's educational philosophy (Steiner, 1985, 1986, 2010a, 2010b; Steinerskoleforbundet, 2020) as well as Merleau-Ponty's theory on the significance of the body in human consciousness (Merleau-Ponty, 1994; see also Low, 1994; Løkken, 2018) and Dewey's educational philosophy of experiential learning (1996). In accordance with the first part of the research question, particular emphasis will be placed on values education.

To further explore the research questions, I employ qualitative data from interviews with six first-grade teachers for different Steiner schools in Norway. These interviews provide insight into how educators perceive the physical environment in first grade as a space for play, community building, and care for their surrounding environments, and illustrate how these aspects foster shared experiences and create opportunities for ethical dialogue and reflection. The findings are discussed in relation to Steiner, Merleau-Ponty, Dewey and previous research on early childhood education.

The article presents findings from an interview study that was conducted as part of my master thesis (Stabel, 2023) and later presented in a chapter in the academic book «Early Education in *Religion and Ethics*» (Norwegian title: «Begynneropplæring i KRLE», Rosland, Iversen, & Eriksen, 2024). I have selected the excerpts that are related to the research questions.

Overall, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of values education in early childhood and highlights the physical environment as a potential resource in the educational process.

## Early childhood pedagogy in Steiner schools

A key principle of Steiner pedagogy is that thinking, willing and feeling interplay and should be addressed in a balanced manner in education. The development of a child's volitional capacities and emotional connection to their surroundings is considered essential for fostering independent thinking and sound judgment (Steinerskoleforbundet, 2020). Learning and development in Steiner education are structured around seven-year periods, each representing a distinct stage in a child's growth. According to Steiner (1985), it is only at the end of the first seven-year period that a child's thinking, willing and feeling become independent of bodily experiences.

Steiner (1986) compares the small child to a sensory organ, because the child experiences the world primarily through sensory perceptions (p. 104). This open and sensory-based mode of being causes children to unconsciously imitate and let themselves be shaped by the environment (Steiner, 2010b).

Steiner's definition of the environment extends beyond the physical surroundings to include everything children perceive through their senses, such as moods, attitudes, and the intentions of the caregivers (Steiner, 2010a). Steiner pedagogy is therefore founded on the idea that children up to the age of seven primarily learn by imitating adults and engaging with the world through play and exploration, rather than through intellectual stimulation (Steiner, 2010a).

An important distinction between first grade pedagogy in Steiner schools and public schools is the absence of formal lessons divided into specific time slots. Instead, the school day offers a wide range of activities that come together as a unified whole. (Steinerskoleforbundet, 2020, p. 28). Examples of these activities include play, music, outdoor activities, painting, handicrafts, games and practical mathematics, such as measuring and counting in the context of preparing food. Learning activities that require concentration and focus take place within this kindergarten-like pedagogical framework (Steinerskoleforbundet, 2020, p. 28).

Building on Steiner's description of the young child as a sensory organ, positive sensory experiences are considered crucial for well-being and development in early childhood education. The design of the pedagogical spaces is therefore given great emphasis, including aspects such as lighting, colours, textures, smell and temperatures. The surroundings should provide the children with a sense of safety and vitality (Frödén & von Wright, 2018, p. 1411). Grunelius (1979) describes a «homely atmosphere» as the ideal for the physical environment in early childhood education (p. 18). Dahlin (2017) emphasises the importance of creating a beautiful and well-maintained environment, where children are surrounded by playing materials that stimulate their imagination and invite them to be co-creators (p. 94). Learning through imitation with the educator as a role model is a central pedagogical principle during the first seven years (Steiner, 2010a, p. 15). According to Dahlin (2017), educators should therefore engage in practical work such as cooking and household tasks, as well as creative activities like handicrafts and painting. The work should be carried out with joy and enthusiasm, and the environment should facilitate opportunities for children to imitate the adults and participate according to their own abilities (p. 93). Tending to the surroundings, by repairing broken toys or decorating tables with flowers and candles, is seen as a way of showing respect, both for the environment, for others, and for oneself (Frödén & von Wright, 2018, p. 1412). This pedagogical approach requires well-maintained spaces that allow for both play and practical everyday activities (Steinerskoleforbundet, 2020, p. 28).

The holistic and embodied approach of Steiner education aligns with Merleau-Ponty's (1994) theory of the body's role in human consciousness. According to Merleau-Ponty, all learning is rooted in bodily interaction with the world; it is through movement and engagement with the environment that we experience meaning and gain access to the world (p. 94). Merleau-Ponty describes how humans are surrounded by occurrences that invite movement and action, and through such interaction, we experience ourselves as subjects in the world. In social encounters, we recognize each other's subjectivity, meaning that personal development occurs in the dynamic relationship between the body and the world (Løkken, 2018)

A similar emphasis on embodied learning is found in Dewey's (1996) experiential learning theory, which describes how learning is rooted in sensory impressions and emotions. Dewey argues that all learning must

be rooted in everyday experiences, since firsthand encounters serve as a crucial foundation for conceptual understanding and further learning. Løndal (2021) refers to this type of learning as «experience that embeds itself in the body» (p. 93). According to Krogstad (2022), this approach is particularly significant in early childhood education, as children's sensory faculties are still developing. Krogstad (2022) emphasises that children's motivation to learn depends on the extent to which new topics build upon their previous experiences. Krogstad cites Hidle, who argues that for children to reach their full learning potential, new subject matter must be meaningfully connected to their own lived experiences (Hidle, 2022, as cited in Krogstad, 2022, p. 29). Krogstad (2022) also emphasises the importance of learning progression in early education. According to Dewey (1996), a central premise for progression is that experiences and theoretical knowledge should be linked through conversation and reflection. Children must have opportunities to acquire rich and varied experiences, while teachers explicitly connect these experiences with theoretical concepts. Unhjem and Frenning (2021) describe these moments as «golden moments» (in Norwegian: «*gylne øyeblikk*»), i.e. moments with a special potential for reflection, grounded in shared experiences (p. 181, 186).

## Values education

The teaching of values is a key component of the subject *Religion and Ethics*, which is taught in Steiner schools. The Steiner school curriculum describes *Religion and Ethics* as a subject with strong interdisciplinary qualities. An important purpose of the subject is to «awaken reverence and awe for nature and for human dignity, and respect for the sacredness of life» (Steinerskoleforbundet, 2020, p. 109). The subject aims to cultivate ethical awareness in children, encouraging them to «explore existential questions and learn to understand the perspectives of others » (Steinerskoleforbundet, 2020, p. 109). Other important elements of the subject include wonder, ethical reflection, and philosophical dialogue (Steinerskoleforbundet, 2020, p. 110).

*Religion and Ethics* are not explicitly a part of the first-grade curriculum. However, the curriculum suggests that relevant themes from this subject are integrated in an interdisciplinary and practical manner. For instance, it describes how the children should engage in meaningful tasks that «create opportunities for valuable conversations» (Steinerskoleforbundet, 2020, p. 31). The children should also share new learning experiences and reflections with peers in conversations where they «practice sharing their feelings and opinions, listening to others, taking turns in conversation, and responding appropriately» (Steinerskoleforbundet 2020, p. 31). The teacher is expected to follow up on the children's initiatives and foster «conversations around what the children wonder about».

Throughout the early school years, storytelling plays a central role in the subject of Religion and Ethics. According to the Steiner curriculum, storytelling contributes to the development of the values education and introduce children to different religions and worldviews (Steinerskoleforbundet, 2020, p. 110). In the first grade, daily storytelling is considered a foundation for initiating conversations on ethics and morality (Steinerskoleforbundet, 2020, p. 31). The first graders also participate in the school's seasonal celebrations and religious festivals from different traditions. The spiritual and ethical aspects of seasonal celebrations are not to be explicitly explained to the children but be experienced and felt through participation (Frödén & von Wright, 2018, p. 1411).

Steiner (1922) argues that knowledge is based not only theory, but also on experience, and that concrete experience should be a starting point for educational processes. He stresses the importance of taking children outdoors to experience the beauty of nature as a foundation for knowledge (Steiner, 2000, p. 45). The first-grade curriculum emphasises outdoor activities and experiences in nature to foster care and reverence for the environment (Steinerskoleforbundet, 2020, p. 31) To summarize, an important principle in Steiner schools is that the teaching of values is not based on theoretical explanations but on the children's experiences, imagination, and emotions in encountering the world (Dahlin, 2017, p. 11). Within this pedagogical framework, values education in first grade seeks to foster values such as respect, empathy, care, and attentiveness to the shared social community.

## The importance of play

Free play has a central role in Steiner schools, especially in the first grade. The curriculum describes that through play, the children practice «advanced social interaction». The pedagogues are facilitators and role models through their «attentive and conscious presence». They participate in playing when the children need support and guidance but step out again when their help is no longer needed (Steinerskoleforbundet, 2020, p. 30). Play is considered crucial for developing social skills and empathy, and the pedagogues function as role models. This aligns with Steiner's idea that moral and ethical development cannot be achieved through theoretical insight but only through bodily experiences (Dahlin, 2017, p. 92).

(2008) emphasises the action-oriented aspect of ethical formation, advocating for «ethical individualism», the ability to act based on an inner ethical compass, rather than following external moral rules (p. 187). This resonates with Merleau-Ponty's perspective on ethical insight, as a capacity developed through bodily experiences and perceptual encounters with the world (Low, 1994). This perspective represents an alternative approach to ethics, moving beyond traditional moral rules or adhering to ethical relativism, instead emphasizing individual ethical choices based on experience and perception. Free play can be regarded as an important setting for values education in first grade where children develop ethical insight through interaction and imitation.

## Interviews with first grade teachers

When selecting participants for my interview study, I employed a purposeful sampling method (Svenkerud, 2021, p. 98). The aim was to capture the variations among first-grade teachers in different Steiner schools. I considered factors such as class size, group organization, and the location of the school, ensuring representation from both urban and rural schools. The teachers were required to have at least two years of experience from working in first grade, ensuring they had sufficient practical experience to provide insightful descriptions of the physical environment's role in the learning process. I interviewed both male and female educators of varying ages to ensure a diverse range of experiences.

The interviews followed an interview guide but were semi-structured, functioning as conversations between the informants and the interviewer (Svenkerud, 2021, pp. 95–96). The interview guide was organized around three main themes: (1) the physical surroundings and daily routines in first grade, (2) pedagogical intentions and values, and (3) the pedagogical significance of the design of the surroundings. All interviews were conducted in the first-grade learning environments.

I transcribed the interviews and conducted a content analysis (Bakken & Andersson-Bakken, 2021), looking for connections between learning activities, pedagogical intentions, and the physical environment. I coded the text based on the following analysis categories which were considered essential to values education by the teachers: caring for the physical environment, community building, and play. These categories were chosen because they closely align with the values that first-grade education seeks to cultivate—namely respect, empathy, care, and attentiveness to the shared social community. Caring for the physical environment allows children to develop respect and care; community building fosters cooperation, empathy, and attentiveness to others; and play provides a context for practicing these values in concrete social interactions.

As an introduction to this section, I provide a characterization of the physical surroundings in the first-grade classrooms based on my own observations and the interviewees' descriptions. I then highlight findings related to the themes of care for the surroundings, community building, and play, showing how these themes are relevant for values education in first grade.

## The Physical Environment

The learning environment in the schools I visited had several common characteristics and a rather similar interior design. The following elements were present in all the schools: a cloakroom, a kitchen, a long table,

and an indoor play area equipped with a varied selection of toys made from natural materials, as well as games and books. The toys were organized in shelves and baskets at child height. The walls and furnishings were either natural wood surfaces or painted in soft, warm colours. Furniture and interiors were primarily made of natural materials. The indoor play area offered generous open space. The rooms had a holistic and orderly appearance resembling a kindergarten more than a traditional classroom. The interviewees used words such as «inviting» and «homey» to describe the physical environment in their first-grade groups.

The outdoor areas had plenty of vegetation, climbing elements, and open spaces with grass or gravel and access to vegetable gardens. Two of the schools I visited had farm animals that the children helped take care of. The respondents described the outdoor areas as varied, with good access to natural elements. They highlighted that the outdoor areas should offer the children a rich variety of play opportunities. All first-grade groups went on field trips every week to the local forests. The respondents viewed nature as a particularly important and suitable play arena for six-year-olds, describing it as an extension of the school's outdoor space.

### **Arena for Values Education**

The interviewees emphasise the importance of the physical environment providing opportunities for play, movement, and interaction, experiences that form a natural starting point for conversations and guidance. They give multiple examples of values education, both during group activities, in spontaneous conversations, and during play. They describe their role as guides and role models, rather than conventional teachers. Several of them point out that real-life experiences and activities where the whole class participates together provide opportunities for collaboration and value-building conversations:

The fact that we do something together, we collaborate, we make food, we do handicrafts, then we collaborate [imitates two first-graders working together] 'Now it's my turn to help you and then you help me afterwards.' We have such amazing conversations.

### **Caring for the Environment**

The teachers I interviewed were unanimous in their view that the aesthetic and sensory qualities of the physical environment hold significant pedagogical importance. The physical surroundings were described as a fundamental premise for the pedagogical approach in first grade. According to the respondents, it is largely the physical surroundings, with their invitations to move and play, that form the basis for the children's learning.

The interviewees stated that the physical environment has a direct impact on the child's well-being and development. They emphasised that the surroundings should be inviting and well-maintained. One interviewee explains that a lot of thought has been put into the design of the environment: «Everything from the colour of the walls to the decor, lighting, and play materials» He describes it as a pleasant experience to enter the first-grade classroom because it is so aesthetically appealing, «it smells good and... it looks nice». He emphasises the value of taking good care of the surroundings and keeping them well-maintained in the first-grade classroom. Several of the interviewees express that the environment affects the group of children and influences the overall mood. One of the respondents says:

I think it's important that it's nice in here, that there are nice colours, it smells good, and it's taken care of. If it's messy and dirty and smells stale, then the children will be the same, I think

Several of the interviewees describe the physical surroundings as a manifestation of pedagogical attitudes and intentions. One says: «I believe there is a close connection between intentions and design in the first grade... I think that's unique, that things are so well-kept and well cared for» Another describes it this way:

There is certain reverence here, even for small things. Taking care of things is given a greater meaning. It's not just use-and-throw. If something is broken, we try to repair it. We show respect, both outdoors and indoors, for what is around us. I think that's pedagogically important.

The interviewees highlight that the environment in the first-grade classroom should be «genuine», «alive» and «not institutional». Surroundings that require maintenance are described as pedagogically significant for the teaching of values because they give the children firsthand experiences in exercising care, thereby creating a foundation for ethical reflection. One of them says it is important that the surroundings require continuous care, as it provides opportunities for practical tasks in which the children can participate. He believes that these valuable learning opportunities would be lost if the environment were maintenance-free.

The respondents experience that being mindful in caring for the surroundings impacts the children's relationships both with each other and with the physical environment. One interviewee says:

We take care of the classroom, but we also look after the plants and flowers. We tidy the sandbox every day when we're finished, ensuring all the toys are returned. I believe it's part of the pedagogy, learning to care for things, which in turn teaches you to care for others

As mentioned earlier, all first-grade groups have access to a vegetable garden, and two of the schools have animals that the children assist in taking care of. The respondents experience that taking care of plants and animals helps the children develop empathy. One notes that restless or anxious children who struggle socially benefit greatly from participating in animal care. Another interviewee says that having responsibility for something living helps the children develop compassion and consideration for their surroundings: «When a tree has branches that are too thin, we must wait to climb it, otherwise, it will develop open wounds». One respondent mentions that taking care of the hens is part of the daily tasks and reflects on how this impacts the children:

Taking care of something, and that reverence or respect... Some haven't quite developed it yet; they just come barging in. Then the adults must also be there to show that 'now we are in the hens' house, this is their home, so we must be kind to the hens'... This attitude, I think, is transferable to other things as well.

He points out that learning to behave with respect and care when tending to animals has transferable value to other situations, and he emphasises his role as a model for the children.

## **Building Community**

The interviewees express that they place great importance on value development in first grade. One of them states that everything that happens throughout the day is equally important, whether it's the conversation while getting dressed for outdoor activities, gathering around the meal, or story time at the end of the school day. They place great emphasis on value-building conversations within the group. As one educator explains:

It's not about being the best, or the fastest, or the most skilled child, but that on the day you're sick, we miss you and we sing your name. We send a greeting home that the clouds can carry, and maybe the window to your room is slightly open... And the other children hear us say this, so they know that when they are sick, we will mention their name in the circle.

It's clear that the respondents believe the social education that happens in first grade is of great importance for the children's future school experiences. One says, «The whole purpose of school is to become part of the group... and if they don't manage that, we need to help them» The interviewees experience that many children need to practice this when they start in first grade. The children must experience that «they are part of a whole. [...] Learning to be one of many, I think that is really important».

## **Play... once more**

The interviewees' accounts of the daily rhythm reveal that play is the primary activity in first grade, while teacher-led activities appear as elements that frame and create rhythm in the flow of free play during the school day. Play is described as crucial for developing the children's social competence and building a safe community among the children. As one interviewee states:

If they were in a setting where they weren't allowed to play like they do here, I doubt... these are just my thoughts, but I don't think they would have developed the same sense of community that they have in this group... They really get to know each other well, both on good days and bad, if you know what I mean.

She believes that play strengthens the relationship between the children and helps them become better at interpreting each other's signals: «They develop social antennas, in a way. reading others and understanding how they feel is achieved through play». Another respondent states that play strengthens empathy because «there is so much social development in play». Although the interviewees all emphasise free play, they also stress the necessity of being present as helpers and guides. One of them states:

I'm not saying play should always be completely free. I don't believe that. Some children might handle it, but in other groups, it's required that the grown-ups assist and guide them in terms of inclusion and social interaction.

He describes his role as «a guide into play and into the community» Several interviewees mention that the children need opportunities to practice problem-solving and conflict resolution on their own. One of them shares:

Sometimes, when I hear they're having an argument, I choose not to intervene immediately. I give them some space to work things out on their own. And often, most of the time, they manage it! [Imitates children talking] 'Oh, look, now she's feeling sad!' 'Well, then she can have my building block!' They help each other and have become good at understanding each other's feelings. I think that's because they've been given that space. But at the same time, I've had to guide them to help them reach that point.

The teachers highlight that the physical surroundings are crucial for the quality of play in first grade. As one of them says: «No, seriously! With desks and all that? I don't think it would have been the same. Here, play has a much wider... range». This statement indicates that a vibrant and varied learning environment provides a broader space for creativity and interaction than a traditional classroom. They also note that the environment allows children to explore and to express themselves freely during play without feeling «watched» by the grow-ups, while at the same time having them close by to assist when needed. This suggests that a balance between freedom and support fosters the child's social and ethical development. In addition to a physical environment designed for play and practical tasks, several pedagogues also mention that the absence of academic expectations, allows them to prioritize play and social development: «I think we make time for this in first grade because there are no demands or requirements related to formal subjects» as one respondent puts it. The lack of academic pressure provides a foundation for a more situationally and spontaneous values education.

The findings of this interview study show that values education in first grade is based on the children's play and interactions with the environment. Ethical reflection and discussion are facilitated by the pedagogues drawing on the children's real-life experiences during the school day. A stimulating and well-kept physical environment provide a necessary foundation for this pedagogical approach.

## Discussion

The pedagogues in the study describe care and maintenance of the physical environment as an important aspect of their pedagogy, not only because well-maintained and inviting surroundings affect the group positively but also because the children are given the opportunity to practice caregiving by imitating the adults in their daily tasks. Their statements align with Steiner's (1986) view of the importance of sensory experiences in child development and the emphasis on the environment in the first seven years of life.

The interviewees state that if the children learn to take care of the physical environment, it influences the way they behave towards each other. This description resonates with Frödén and von Wright's (2018) assertion that taking care of the environment is an expression of respect for the environment, other people, and oneself. This type of values education can be described as implicit and experience based. The approach aligns with Dahlin's (2017) description of values education in Steiner schools, where the focus is on children's experiences and encounters with the world rather than on theoretical explanations. Play has a central role in first grade and is considered by the interviewees as crucial for developing social competence and a

creating a safe community among the children. Additionally, the interviewees emphasise the importance of practical work and activities that provide opportunities for shared experiences and ethical discussions. A varied and rich physical environment is essential for the quality of play and for providing meaningful tasks. The surroundings, therefore, indirectly play a key role in values education in class one.

The respondents express that children gain ethical insights through action and experience, with adults acting as role models. It appears that the goal of the pedagogue is to foster ethical reflection not as a response to external requirements or theoretical instruction, but as a natural outcome of the children's real-life experiences. This aligns closely with Merleau-Ponty's (1994) description of perceptual encounters with the world as the foundation for ethical formation and Dewey's (1996) experiential learning theory.

The interviewees state that they serve as guides and role models for the children in values education. This aligns with Steiner's (2010a) view of the child in the first seven years as a sensory organ that unconsciously imitates and is formed by the environment. Steiner (2010a) sees the environment as more than just the physical space; the atmosphere in the room and the pedagogues' attitudes and intentions are also part of the environment. Considering this, and based on the findings from the study, the pedagogues' attitudes and actions can be viewed as an integral part of the environment.

Krogstad (2022) argues that a prerequisite for progression in early education is that the experiences children bring with them are repeated and expanded upon, and that new topics are connected to prior experiences. The Steiner schools' approach to values education in first grade is built entirely on the children's growing experiences, thus facilitating progression. Another key premise for progression is that experiences and theoretical knowledge are linked through conversation and reflection (Dewey, 1996). Findings from the study suggest that the first-grade teacher focus on using the «golden moments» (Unhjem & Frenning, 2021, p. 181) that arise during the school day as opportunities for ethical discussion and reflection.

There is a noteworthy alignment between the interviewees' descriptions of the physical environment and values education in first grade and Steiner's pedagogical theories on child development, as outlined in the curriculum and Steiner's own statements. However, the pedagogues rarely reference Steiner's pedagogical theory in their statements. This suggests that they primarily rely on their practical experiences as justification, but it can also be interpreted as a deep internalization of Steiner's pedagogical ideas. The teachers express that the pedagogical approach in first grade is highly successful. The absence of critical remarks raises the question of whether the pedagogues' views and observations are influenced by Steiner's pedagogical ideas, potentially resulting in a lack of critical reflection on their own practices. The fact that they perceive it as particularly effective may also contribute to their reluctance to question their pedagogical methods.

The view of learning as being bodily and emotionally grounded is widely recognized in the field of early childhood education and guides both the methods of work and physical spaces in kindergarten (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017). However, this perspective appears to have less prominence in the school context (Becher & Høyland, 2021). Several researchers have pointed out that early childhood education in schools often places limited emphasis on play and bodily learning (Becher et al., 2021, p. 19). The pedagogical approach in first grade of Steiner schools, therefore, appears to stand out as an exception, where early education is grounded in bodily experiences, free play, and emotional engagement, forming the foundation for cognitive understanding.

In summary, the teaching of values in first grade is not based on formal learning situations but rather centred around the children's encounters with their environment. Ethical reflection and conversation are facilitated based on the children's genuine experiences and interactions throughout the school day, during free play, community-building activities, and while maintaining and caring for the physical environment. Rich and well-maintained physical surroundings provide a necessary foundation for this pedagogical approach, as the environment offers children experiences that serve as a basis for ethical reflection and dialogue in their daily activities with the pedagogues serving as role models.

Research on early education in Steiner schools is limited, and this study provides only preliminary insights. It would be valuable to examine first-grade practices in Steiner schools in greater detail, for example, through

observational studies, to uncover aspects that may not emerge through interview-based research. Such an approach would offer a richer, more nuanced understanding of how Steiner's pedagogical ideas are translated into practice. Additionally, it would be interesting to further explore the interviewees' descriptions of the physical environment as a manifestation of pedagogical attitudes, as well as their statements that children's ethical understanding develops through the care and nurturing of their surroundings. This could provide deeper insights into how the relationship between the physical environment and ethical development unfolds in the everyday life of first-grade schooling.

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