Research topic/Aim: Our concern in this study is the content of learning in preschool that seems to become more and more academic and differentiating play from learning. However, contemporary pedagogy in Nordic preschool education – Developmental pedagogy – provides a theoretical basis for consolidating play and learning. A recent project investigates this theory as a framework for developing preschool didactics where learning content is on equal footing with play. Our aim with this study is to take the example of mathematics and study how mathematical learning content is made possible to consolidate with and in the context of children’s play. Interaction between teachers and children and in particular dialogues where the meaning of mathematical concepts is challenged is at the center of attention in our investigation.

Theoretical frameworks: The theoretical orientation is Developmental pedagogy. The underlining theory has a focus on the learner’s perspective as a necessary starting point and outcome of learning. The learning content (what to learn) is intertwined with how to learn, emphasizing variation as a necessary condition for learning. The teacher’s role in early childhood education can be understood as supporting children’s awareness and sense-making of a wide repertoire of phenomena, for example emergent literacy and different mathematical concepts. Within this perspective, playing and learning are seen as intertwined. Metacommunication is a key concept, used in the frames of play to open up for negotiations of meanings and frames. To establishing intersubjectivity – coordination of perspectives – is considered central to support children’s learning as well as play and is therefore a key concept within this theoretical framework.

Methodology/research design: This study is one of several studies conducted within a collaborative project including researchers and preschool teachers investigating and developing play-based preschool didactics. Our analysis focuses on the interaction between teacher and children, to identify in what ways the mathematical learning content is framed within or outside the play-frame. Specific attention is directed towards the intersubjectivity, whether it is established between the participants or not and the consequences for the development of the child’s play. The results presented here are based on analysis of observations from a sample of teachers’ documentations of their play-and-learning activities with preschool children.

Expected conclusions/Findings: Our analysis of the documentations of play-and-learning activities reveal two dichotomies in approaches: One way of introducing mathematics to children in their play transforms it into isolated mathematical tasks outside the frames of the play, whereas the other way promotes mathematics that is relevant to the child’s play and opens up for further exploration which develops the child’s play. These different ways to approach mathematics are discussed in terms of consequences for how children respond to the content and what is made possible to learn.
Relevance for Nordic Educational Research: Play and teaching in preschool is an issue of current debate in the Nordic countries. Our study will contribute to this debate by pinpointing what characterizes approaches that integrate content for learning in play, for the sake of the play.