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WHAT EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES ARE CONSIDERED IMPORTANT BY PRESCHOOL TEACHERS IN HELSINKI AND TALLINN?

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Abstract. The present article deals with the educational objectives of Helsinki and Tallinn preschool teachers. The national regulations and objectives of preparation for school of the capital cities of both countries – Estonia and Finland – are compared. The study is based on a questionnaire carried out among preschool teachers of Helsinki in 2001–2 and Tallinn in 2002–3. The term *preschool training* in the present context means the education given a year before the beginning of compulsory school education.

The authors of the present article view school readiness as a consistent process, taking place in the preschool period, which continues uninterruptedly in the context of school. The theoretical basis of the study relies on the principles of child-centred pedagogy. The comparative analysis is based on sixteen characteristics emphasising educational objectives, which were selected as a result of factor analysis. The common features of the preschool teachers of the two countries are high professional competence and adherence to the principles of child-centred pedagogy. As compared to Finnish teachers, Estonian teachers attach more importance to achieving concrete results when setting their objectives. As compared to Estonian teachers, Finnish teachers give stronger emphasis to developing a positive self-image in children and promoting their abilities necessary for learning.

Introduction

The role of preschool education and its influence on a child's ability to cope at school is considered important in many countries. Questions related to children's school readiness have become especially topical in the Nordic countries where compulsory school education begins later compared to many other countries. In some Nordic countries (Iceland, Norway) compulsory school education begins at age six, whereas in Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Estonia children go to school at age seven.

The aim of the present article is to compare the views of teachers living in Estonia and Finland, countries that have similar cultural space but different socio-

political backgrounds, about the teaching and development of a child going to school. The comparison is based on the principles of child-centred pedagogy. *The authors of the present article view school readiness as a consistent process, taking place in the preschool period, which continues uninterruptedly in the context of school.* Proceeding from this, it is extremely important for a kindergarten as well as a primary school teacher to become aware of the objectives of preschool education and the ways of achieving them. The term *preschool training* in the present context means education given a year before the beginning of compulsory school education.

There is no uniform understanding of school readiness and the methods of testing it. Shepard & Graue (1993:304) have noted that tests should not be applied to forbid a child entrance to school, to leave a child in kindergarten for a longer period or to send the child to a special class for risk-group children which has been separated from mainstream classes. The studies on testing school readiness by Shepard & Graue demonstrate that there exists a conceptual confusion while defining children in need of special training and those at risk because of their living environment. The various tests used do not allow differentiation because of their ambiguous objectives.

Parents, teachers and educational administrators may give different content to the 'readiness' and look at it from different perspectives. Different visions of school readiness may give rise to different courses of action, which mainly complicate the situation of the children who belong to the so-called risk group and need special measures to support their learning. Postponing the beginning of school is no longer considered the main way of achieving school readiness. Measuring school readiness helps class teachers to compile individual programmes for children based on their results, which will help to prevent further academic problems. At the same time, the results of the tests do not allow adequate assessment of the real school readiness of a child or whether the child is in fact ready to go to school.

In both Estonia and Finland the most essential requirements for the qualification of kindergarten teachers, teacher training and educational activity at kindergartens have been taken under state supervision and regulation.

The article gives an overview of the general pedagogical basis of the study, of state regulations and objectives related to preschool education, and the methods of research, as well as presenting a comparative analysis of research data.

Theoretical background

The objectives of preschool training include teachers' views of the ways children learn and of educational theories. The theoretical basis of the present article relies on the principles of child-centred pedagogy where compiling the curriculum and planning the activities proceed from the child and his/her character traits. Child-centred education has a long tradition (Hytönen 2001, Hytönen 2002),

which relies on respecting individuality and the idea of the equality of individuals: each child is considered good the way he/she is. Learning is viewed as an active process where cooperation with and learning from each other has an important role. Teaching has to be organised so that a child could learn in a situation of everyday life and teaching can take place together with play because while playing a child uses the existing experience, which gets continuously enriched when the child gets to know him/herself and the surrounding environment better. This kind of child-centred education has been convincingly described by John Dewey (Dewey 1963), whose influence on the Finnish and Estonian 'grand old men' of pedagogy Aukusti Salo (1935) and Johannes Käis (1946) is noticeable.

At preschool age learning is an integrated process and learning experience is more important than essential knowledge. Child-centred education approves of the active participation of the educator in the process of educating (Hytönen & Krokfors 2002, Pollard & Filer 1996, Talts 2003, Wood 2000), where it is possible to plan the activity in advance and set the priorities. Since 1999 Finnish educational scientists have distinguished from the child-centred pedagogy *the pedagogy proceeding from a child* (Hujala 2000, Kinos 2002). Although the source of both theories is respect for the child's distinctive character and individuality, the supporters of *the pedagogy proceeding from a child* do not consider necessary the intervention of the educator in the educational process. They stress that one has to believe in the child's voluntary wish and will to learn and develop. The role of an adult in the educational process of a child is that of creating a learning environment and supporting learning (Hytönen & Krokfors 2002).

Educational ideology proceeding from a child can acquire an individuality-centred form, which does not take into account that the objectives of preschool training proceed on the one hand from the individual opportunities of development and the learning skills of a child and on the other hand from the needs existing in society.

Regulation and objectives of preschool education in Estonia and Finland

Regulation. In both **Estonia** and Finland it has been established that each child receives preschool training for a year before going to school. In both countries there is a framework curriculum of preschool education, which defines the most important objectives of preschool education. Nevertheless there exist essential differences between the two countries. 1) In Finland preschool education is available to all children. In Estonia the availability of preschool education to all children has not been regulated at the state level although the involvement of children in the system of preschool education is very high, for example, 98.8 per cent of 6–7 year old children go to kindergarten in Tallinn. 2) In Finland preschool education is free of charge. In Estonia the training related to preparation for school is not separated from the daily routine of kindergarten and therefore parents have to pay for the whole time spent at kindergarten, including time spent on preschool training. 3) The

number of children in preschool training groups is different: in Finland the highest number allowed is 13 children; if there is an assistant teacher, the number can be as high as 20. In Estonia the size of a group taught by one teacher goes up to 20 children. 4) In Estonia very often a so-called double system exists where a child who receives preschool training at the kindergarten also joins a preschool training group at a school. The reason for this lies in the fact that the most popular schools of Tallinn have introduced entrance tests and many parents try to prepare their children as well as possible for these tests. Many preparatory classes have been formed at the schools in the centre of Tallinn, which are also attended by many children from other parts of the city and areas close to the city. Actually, education received at kindergarten should be sufficient for entering school and the preparatory classes of schools should be available to children who do not go to the kindergarten. Today's practice creates an unnecessary gap between school and kindergarten instead of coming to terms about mutually necessary levels and requirements. For a child such over-worrying is stressful since, in spite of attending several preparatory groups, he/she may not be admitted to the desired school and may receive a negative school experience even before the beginning of compulsory education. 5) In Helsinki an attempt has been made to combine in-service training of kindergarten and primary school teachers, which has not been considered in Estonia. 6) The rapid and integrated development of preschool training in Helsinki has been facilitated by the continuous interest and support of the city government. In Estonia the preparation for school at the senior stage of kindergarten has long-standing traditions, but considering the contemporary context it should be revised. 7) In Finland kindergartens are under the jurisdiction of the Board of Social Welfare, in Estonia they are subordinated to the Ministry of Education.

The objectives of preschool training. The essential objective of preschool training in both Estonia and Finland is to create favourable conditions for growth, development and learning for children (Framework Curriculum of Preschool Education of Estonia 1999); (The Curriculum of Preschool Education in Helsinki 2001). Comparative analysis of the curricula reveals several essential differences. For example, in Estonia considerably more attention is paid to *achieving the expected results in physical, intellectual and social development*. In Finland *promotion of children's learning skills* is emphasised as an important objective of preschool training. It is important to support children's healthy dignity through positive learning experience and to offer them options of versatile communication with other people. In the Estonian preschool framework curriculum the notions of *dignity* and *positive learning experience* are missing. This does not mean though that these qualities are not applied in everyday educational work. The difference mainly lies in emphasis. In Estonia more attention is paid to the acquisition of concrete skills, whereas in Finland it is considered important to create an environment of development which considers the needs of a child and where learning mainly takes place through play. In Estonia it is feared for some reason that the method of teaching at the kindergarten is too playful and does not prepare for "serious work" at school.

While summarising the organisation and objectives of preschool training in the capital cities of Estonia and Finland, we can note that in Helsinki preschool training is better regulated than in Tallinn: it is available to all children and free of charge. Parents in Tallinn often make their children attend preparatory classes at schools in order to grant their success at school entrance tests. There are also differences in the priorities of the curricula. The preschool training curriculum of Helsinki attaches importance to positive self-image and promotion of children's learning skills whereas in the respective curriculum of Tallinn training concrete skills is considered essential.

The empirical study

The sample. The **environment** of preschool training and teachers' priorities in achieving the objectives of preschool training were studied in Helsinki in 2001–2002 and in Tallinn in 2002–2003. A questionnaire was used to find out about the environment and objectives of preschool training in Helsinki and Tallinn and their relation to factors of the professional background of the teachers. In the present article the principal data used is that related to achieving the objectives of pre-school training in Helsinki and Tallinn. According to the Board of Social Welfare there was a total of 554 preschool teachers in Helsinki in the autumn of 2001. The questionnaire was completed by 362 preschool teachers or 65.3 per cent of the total number. According to the Board of Education of Tallinn there were 293 preschool teachers in Tallinn in October 2002. The questionnaire was completed by 231 preschool teachers of Tallinn or 78.8 per cent of the total number. The average age of the teachers questioned was 39 years in Helsinki and 42 years in Tallinn.

In both Estonia and Finland the number of participants was statistically significant, thus allowing us to carry out a comparative analysis.

Viewing the sample *from the aspect of gender* we can say that both capital cities are characterised by an overwhelming majority of female teachers. Nevertheless, there are 22 male preschool teachers in Helsinki (4.3 per cent of the total number), but at the kindergartens of Tallinn only female teachers teach children.

The requirements of the *professional training* of preschool teachers differ to some extent between Estonia and Finland. According to the new standards a person who has passed the relevant training can work as a preschool teacher. In Estonia the professional training of teachers working with groups preparing children for school meets the qualification requirements (ca 90 per cent), where the qualifications of a kindergarten teacher, Candidate of Pedagogy, MA in Pedagogy and class teacher have been taken into account. 79.1 per cent of the preschool teachers of Helsinki have passed the examination of a kindergarten teacher; the others have received a different pedagogical training.

The work experience at kindergarten or school of preschool teachers is characterised by the following characteristics:

Table 1. **Work experience of preschool teachers of Helsinki and Tallinn at kindergarten/school**

	Helsinki		Tallinn	
Work experience in years	**f**	**%**	**f**	**%**
More than 20 years	99	19.6	76	28.5
16-20 years	98	19.4	56	21.0
11-15 years	121	23.9	39	14.6
6-10 years	98	19.4	33	12.4
1-5 years	83	16.4	52	19.5
Less than 1 year	7	1.4	11	4.1
Total	506	100.1	267	100.1

It appears from the table that there are more teachers with longer work experience (16-20 years) in Tallinn, but the percentage of teachers with work experience of 10–15 years is higher in Helsinki.

Methodology. Preschool teachers were asked to assess to what extent they would prioritise general educational objectives and various content-related goals of preschool training. The assessments by the teachers characterising educational goals of preschool training were studied by means of factor analysis. From the statements characterising the objectives 16 characteristics were selected as the result of factor analysis. The statements and the scales of assessment have been given in sections D to K of the questionnaire (see Appendix 1). For the analysis of educational objectives of preschool teachers of Tallinn, the model of educational objectives of Helsinki preschool teachers was used. It appeared that the model was applicable to educational objectives of the teachers of Tallinn, as its reliability was considerably high (Cronbach's alpha was 0.74–0.93), thus expressing high inner congruence of the assessments given to educational objectives.

As the result of the factor analysis the dimensions of objectives became clear, which allowed us to introduce the following groups of dimensions. The assessments given to general educational objectives formed four independent dimensions of educational objectives: *self-image and emotions*, *altruism and accepting diversity*, *learning and thinking skills*, *sociability*. Three independent dimensions were related to ethics and attitudes: *appreciating different attitud*es, *ethical education*, *religious education*. Objectives expressing physical and motor development formed two dimensions: *basic movement and different forms of movement*, *motor skills.* Objectives related to art and culture formed three dimensions: *fine arts*, *music*, *manual skills. Language and communication*, *mathematics and natural history* formed separate dimensions.

To sum it up, from the statements chosen from the curriculum of preschool training, 16 educational objectives were selected as the result of factor analysis, the sum totals of which, as calculated according to the assessments given by the respondents, were used in the research as indicators characterising the emphasis of educational objectives. Since different objectives were characterised by different numbers of sentences, the sum total of points was converted to match the initial scales of the questionnaire (1–5), which allowed us to compare varying emphases on different objectives.

A standardised sum total of points was calculated for each participant of the questionnaire (scale 1–5), which indicates how highly each teacher assessed different educational objectives. The scales (1–5) provided the following options: 1–2 "weakly", 3–4 "more or less", 4–5 "excellently". On the basis of the answers given by the preschool teachers of Helsinki and Tallinn the mean of the sums of the points ($\bar{x}$) and standard deviation (s) were calculated.

Results: Comparison of educational objectives of preschool teachers of Tallinn and Helsinki. The following table gives an overview of educational values of Estonian and Finnish preschool teachers.

Table 2. Priorities of educational objectives of preschool training in Helsinki and Tallinn

		$\bar{x}$	s
1.Self-image and emotions	Tallinn	4.06	0.52
	Helsinki	4.20	0.60
2. Altruism and accepting diversity	Tallinn	3.99	0.55
	Helsinki	4.36	0.64
3. Learning and thinking skills	Tallinn	4.13	0.53
	Helsinki	3.97	0.76
4. Sociability	Tallinn	3.88	0.69
	Helsinki	4.24	0.79
5. Language and communication	Tallinn	4.12	0.52
	Helsinki	3.77	0.64
6. Mathematics	Tallinn	4.00	0.52
	Helsinki	3.61	0.83
7. Appreciating different attitudes	Tallinn	2.99	0.89
	Helsinki	2.73	1.07
8. Ethical education	Tallinn	3.73	0.58
	Helsinki	4.14	0.71
9. Religious education	Tallinn	2.66	1.09
	Helsinki	2.89	1.14
10. Environment and natural history	Tallinn	4.06	0.62
	Helsinki	3.92	0.75
11. Health	Tallinn	4.19	0.61
	Helsinki	3.54	0.87
12. Different forms of movement	Tallinn	4.48	0.64
	Helsinki	4.05	0.82
13. Motor skills	Tallinn	4.02	0.71
	Helsinki	3.37	1.02
14. Fine arts	Tallinn	4.07	0.56
	Helsinki	3.21	0.95
15. Music	Tallinn	3.94	0.82
	Helsinki	2.93	0.99
16. Manual activities	Tallinn	3.98	0.67
	Helsinki	3.34	0.91

Note. n (Estonia) = 230; n (Finland) = 374. All differences between groups are significant $p < 0.05$.

As the result of student test it appeared that in case of all educational objectives the zero hypothesis was refuted ($p<0.05$) and thus an alternative hypothesis was

formulated that the difference between the opinions of teachers of Helsinki and Tallinn is statistically significant.

The comparison of the priorities *of general educational objectives* (objectives 1–4) of Estonian and Finnish preschool teachers shows that preschool teachers of Helsinki assess the majority of the objectives of that group of objectives more highly than the teachers of Tallinn. The exception is the development of a child's learning and thinking skills, which is essentially more appreciated by Estonian teachers.

Estonian teachers consider *developing language and communication* (objective 5) and mathematical skills (objective 6) more important as educational objectives.

The teachers of both capital cities consider *educational objectives related to ethics and attitudes* (objectives 7–9) more important in the field of ethical education; they attach less importance to developing different attitudes and religious education. In this group of objectives the most significant variation appears in the attitude towards ethical education, which is appreciated more by the teachers of Helsinki.

Estonian teachers consider educational objectives related to *environment and natural history* (objective 10) more significant. They also attach more importance than Finnish teachers to *health* (objective 11), *different forms of movement* (objective 12), *motor skills* (objective 13), *fine arts* (objective 14), *music* (objective 15) and *manual activities* (objective 16).

The influence of work experience of preschool teachers on assessing educational objectives. In assessing the work experience of preschool teachers, the lowest level was work experience of less than one year and the highest work experience of more than 20 years. The scale of work experience was divided in two, taking into account possible proximity to the median value. The point of division appeared to be 15 years. Teachers with less than 15 years' work experience formed the group of short-term work experience, which comprised 59.6 per cent of Helsinki respondents and 49.8 per cent of Tallinn respondents. The proportion of teachers with more than 16 years' work experience was 40.4 per cent in Helsinki and 50.2 per cent in Tallinn.

The statistical mean of the assessments of Helsinki teachers with long-term work experience of objectives related to environment and natural history ($p < 0.05$), fine arts ($p < 0.05$) and manual activities ($p < 0.01$) was noticeably higher than that of the teachers with short-term work experience. In Estonia teachers with long-term work experience also emphasised manual activity more ($p < 0.04$); other objectives did not give statistically significant differences. Considering the aspect of age, younger teachers of Tallinn (younger than 42 years) assessed children's social development ($p < 0.4$) and accepting different attitudes ($p < 0.01$) more highly.

Conclusion and discussion

The characteristics and educational objectives of the teachers of the two countries – Finland and Estonia, which have a similar cultural space but a different ideological background – are relatively similar in many aspects. In both cities the professional background of preschool teachers is sufficient for realising the objectives of the

curricula. The teachers of both cities appreciate highly the principles of child-centred pedagogy and the pedagogical approach based on it. Taking into account the long-term isolation of Estonian society in the conditions of the Soviet regime, the views of Estonian teachers of educational objectives related to preschool children are surprisingly child-centred. Their pedagogical views have been shaped by recent opportunities to visit educational institutions of other countries and to take part in training courses. Our kindergarten teacher training curricula are open to new ideas, which reach older teachers through their young colleagues. In the more relaxed conditions it is also possible to revive the valuable pedagogical legacy.

Essential differences do still exist in the priorities of organisation of preschool training and educational objectives. The comparative analysis of the regulation of preschool training demonstrated that in Tallinn certain confusion and indecisiveness could be noted in the sphere of organisation of preschool training. Simultaneous preschool training takes place in the older groups of kindergarten as well as at many schools. A child often attends both of them. While in Helsinki preschool training is free of charge, parents have to pay for it in Tallinn. The success in the improvement of the system of preschool training in Helsinki is partly due to successful cooperation of the city council with educational scientists, whereas in Tallinn the Board of Education does not make a purposeful use of the information received as the result of research for improving the system of preschool training. One of the principal reasons for that is too little coordination between various links of the system of education at national level in Estonia.

A distinctive difference occurs in the priorities of educational objectives. Estonian teachers assess objectives related to skills more highly: language and communication, mathematics, environment and natural history (see Table 2). Although the child-centred attitude as an educational principle has been accepted, kindergarten teachers often have problems with simultaneously keeping in mind the level of development of each individual child as well as the expectations of parents and schools for concrete skills of each child. The Estonian national curriculum of preschool education sets high requirements for children's intellectual, social and physical development, which are listed in the curriculum as concrete skills. The aim of preschool teachers is to achieve these skills by the time children go to school. Parents also put their effort into development of children's skills by taking them to one or more additional preschool preparatory groups. Officially school entrance tests have not been approved, but due to pressure from parents schools have to carry them out. The contemporary situation of Estonian preschool pedagogy combines the characteristics of the recent totalitarian society and the attempt to achieve the level of the advanced societies at an accelerated pace. This results in the situation where general pedagogical objectives are not so clearly prioritised as by the teachers of Helsinki (see Table 2, points 1–4). In the assessments of the teachers of Tallinn subject-centred approach prevails, which is not in keeping with the development of preschool children. For example, teachers of Tallinn assess sociability as an educational objective considerably lower than teachers of Helsinki (in Tallinn $\bar{x} = 3.88$, in Helsinki $\bar{x} = 4.24$).

The question primarily lies in the use of child-friendly methods of teaching, which would help children to develop a positive self-image and learning skills. Finnish preschool teachers consider developing self-image and sociability more important than concrete skills (see Table 2). A considerable difference occurs in prioritising movement, fine arts and music, which are emphasised much more by Tallinn preschool teachers (see Table 2). This may be the result of a long tradition of preschool education in Estonia, where each kindergarten has its own music teacher and more recently also an art and a movement teacher. While in Helsinki musical and manual activities are integrated in educational and play activities, it is considered important to develop these skills separately in Tallinn.

The correlation between the age and work experience of the teachers and educational objectives demonstrates that older teachers in both Helsinki and Tallinn prioritise more than younger teachers those activities with long-standing traditions, such as fine arts, manual activities, environment and natural history.

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Appendix 1

Dimensions of educational objectives

GENERAL EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES

1. Self-image and emotions

"The positive self-image of the child strengthens"

"The child receives material for developing his/her emotions"

2. Altruism and accepting diversity

"The child learns to consider other people"

"The child learns to behave well"

"The child's ability to act together with the others improves"

3. Learning and thinking skills

"The child's learning skills develop"

"The child's thinking skills develop"

4. Sociability

"The child becomes a responsible member of a group"

5. Language and communication

6. Mathematics

ETHICS AND ATTITUDES

7. Appreciating different attitudes

"The child learns to respect different attitudes"

"The child learns to respect different views of life"

"The child learns to respect other people's opinions"

8. Ethical education

"The child learns to believe in him/herself and assess his/her activity"

"The child learns to settle disagreements in a constructive way"

"The child learns to understand and respect his/her as well as other people's feelings and rights"

9. Religious education

"The child gets acquainted with the content of his/her religion and religious festivals and their meaning"

"The child's religion-related questions are listened to and discussed with the child"

10. Environment and natural history

11. Health

PHYSICAL AND MOTOR DEVELOPMENT

12. Basic movement and different forms of movement

"Movement gives the child pleasure and he/she gets new experience from various forms of movement"

"The child practices basic ways of movement"

13. Motor skills

"The child learns to flexibly transfer motor skills to a new situation"

"The child learns to promote his/her health by means of movement according to his/her abilities"

ART AND CULTURE

14. Fine arts

15. Music

16. Manual activities