

# The experiences, expectations and evaluations of pre-school teachers as developers of curricula

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## Summary

There is a growing tendency around the world to establish national curricula for early childhood and general education (Oberhuemer, 2005a; Westbury, 2008). Simultaneously, attention has been increasing to teachers' curriculum ownership and to engagement of teachers as curriculum developers because of the recognition that this is essential for a successful implementation of a curriculum in a classroom or pre-school group (Kirk & MacDonald, 2001; Westbury, 1994). This makes the topic of teachers as curriculum developers important for educational research.

The aim of the present study is to explain the experiences, expectations and evaluations of Estonian pre-school teachers about the curriculum compilation process in early childhood educational institutions on the basis of the National Curriculum for Pre-school Child Care Institutions established in 2008. Another aim is to explain the experiences, expectations and evaluations of teachers about the way in which the participation in this process has influenced their professional development and the advancement of democratic professionalism. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 32 teachers who had participated in pre-school curriculum compilation in their institutions. We used thematic analysis to analyse the collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

As for the theoretical framework of the study, we first provided an overview of the notion of teachers' curriculum ownership and of its importance. We also explained the importance of engaging teachers in curriculum development in order to achieve this ownership (Westbury, 1994). Secondly, we demonstrated how the engagement of teachers in curriculum development is closely connected to the way in which teacher professionalism is understood and defined. In particular, we demonstrated how in the conditions of the state-based curriculum development, the previous prioritisation of

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teachers as autonomous professionals has changed to prioritising teachers' *democratic professionalism* (Oberhuemer, 2005a). Thirdly, we provided an overview of the tradition of developing early childhood education curricula in Estonia, demonstrating the new expectations to teachers as democratic professionals expressed in national curriculum documents (Alushariduse raamõppekava, 1999; Koolieelse lasteasutuse ..., 2008).

As generally agreed, the notion of *teachers' curriculum ownership* means that teachers feel entitled to make decisions regarding how curricular problems are solved (Ballett & Kelchtermans, 2008; Kennedy, 2010; Westbury, 1994). Authors also agree that starting from the late 1960s, the necessity of teachers' curriculum ownership for a successful curriculum implementation is widely recognised. It is also generally agreed that the main precondition for attaining this ownership is to engage teachers as curriculum *developers*. Yet studies from many countries have revealed that in practice, engaging teachers as curriculum developers often fails to provide them with the feeling of curriculum ownership (Kennedy, 2010; Kirk & MacDonald, 2001; Lundahl, 2005; Westbury, 1994).

Most of the studies on the teachers' experiences and expectations regarding curricular issues have been conducted at the general education level. However, the tendencies that started to prevail in general education in the 1980s – particularly the standardisation and accountability – have recently emerged also in the pre-school education level (Oberhuemer, 2005a; Osgood, 2009). This sets growing expectations to early childhood educators' professionalism and makes the early childhood field even more comparable to that of general education (Tuul et al., 2015). This concerns also the necessity to engage pre-school teachers as curriculum developers.

In Estonia, the aim of the education policy carried out after regaining independence has been to combine central control over curriculum with teachers' engagement as curriculum developers. Therefore, teacher representatives have been engaged in the working groups compiling national curricula for general education and pre-school education. Even more importantly, in the national curriculum documents teachers have been defined as the main responsibility carriers for compiling and developing the school or pre-school curricula in their institutions.

We defined our research questions as follows:

- 1) What are the Estonian pre-school teachers' experiences of the process of compiling the pre-school curriculum on the basis of the National Curriculum for Pre-School Child Care Institutions (accepted as the Regulation of the Government of the Republic in 2008)?

- 2) What are the teachers' expectations of the pre-school curriculum development process?
- 3) How do teachers evaluate the participation in the curriculum development process having impact on their professional development and on the advancement of democratic professionalism?

As an answer to our first research question, we found that the Estonian pre-school teachers' experiences of the curriculum compilation process generally support the national curriculum policy aim to engage teachers as curriculum developers for enhancing their curriculum ownership. Before the beginning of the compilation process, teachers lacked self-confidence and the necessary prior information about the process. They were also doubtful about the necessity to change the existing curriculum. Yet, due to the collegial support, as well as the supportive overtone of the 2008 national curriculum regarding teachers' curriculum development initiatives, teachers gained positive experience from the development process.

As an answer to the second research question, we found that teachers' expectations for the curriculum development process were largely connected to the length of their teaching experience. Less experienced teachers prioritised relevant professional training and the existence of guiding materials before starting the process. More experienced teachers, however, prioritised clear argumentation for the necessity and feasibility to change the existing curriculum. Yet, both teacher groups similarly emphasised the necessity of democratic, and at the same time directing, leadership and collegial support throughout the development process. It is important to note the hierarchical mode in regard to who was seen as the major source of support: more experienced teachers primarily sought support from the institution leadership, whereas less experienced teachers sought it from the more experienced colleagues. This reveals that more experienced teachers are a promising source of support for the leadership in managing the curriculum development process in their institutions. Whereas directing leadership is expected by teachers all through the process, many leadership tasks can be delegated to the most experienced teachers in an institution.

As an answer to our third research question, it emerged that participation in the curriculum compilation contributed to a teachers' professional development in a number of aspects. Above all, there was an added understanding of the essence of curriculum and curriculum compilation process, but also an added motivation for continuous curriculum development. The participation in the process also added to the development of collaborative working culture and the enhancement of democratic professionalism. Yet another aspect of professional development was an added resilience and an

understanding that a certain level of anxiety is a normal condition before starting the curriculum compilation process.

Our study has a number of political and practical implications. It generally confirms the feasibility of the existing curriculum policy direction which preserves the framework curriculum defined centrally at the national level, but simultaneously attempts to enhance teachers' curriculum ownership by engaging them as curriculum developers. It also demonstrates that it is important for teachers how the curriculum compilation process is organised in pre-school education institutions after the establishment of a new national curriculum. It indicates the necessity for ongoing professional training in curriculum issues, particularly for the less experienced teachers. But it also shows that the teachers' potential for curriculum development and their motivation for curriculum change are important resources that have not been effectively used. This particularly concerns the more experienced teachers. Teachers' own experiences and self-confidence are resources to be used to enhance democratic leadership and democratic professionalism in pre-school institutions. The finding that a thoughtful and well-prepared engagement of teachers in curriculum development is, in their views, contributing to their professional development is potentially significant at the international level.

For further research, our study implies that teachers' own experiences and expectations are an important clue to explain why national curriculum policy initiatives succeed or fail. This information needs to be triangulated further with other sources of information and research methods, such as an observation of teachers' classroom practices, an analysis of curriculum policy documents, or historical analysis.

*Keywords:* early childhood education, curriculum development, teachers' curriculum ownership, teacher professionalism