

The preschool teachers' beliefs about children's general skills according to the Estonian national curriculum: an added explanation to the causes of the "schoolification" of early childhood institutions

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Summary

Over the last two decades or so, the field of early childhood education internationally is marked by the discussion over the phenomenon of *schoolification*. By definition, schoolification is the process of formal early childhood education becoming more school-like. The most characteristic aspects of schoolification, as noted by several authors internationally, are to establish national curricula for preschool education institutions (Bennett, 2005; Oberhuemer, 2005a; Urban & Dalli, 2008; Urban *et al.*, 2012), to focus more intensively on learning activities and the preparation of children for schools of general education (Clausen, 2015; Gunnarsdottir, 2014), to more strictly regulate the professionalism of early childhood educators to professional standards and other regulations (Osgood, 2009; Urban, 2008), and to evaluate children's learning outcomes by standardised evaluation principles (Gunnarsdottir, 2014).

An essential question that is relevant in this context is the relationship between the traditional responsibilities of early childhood education – the *care* and play – and relationships-oriented broad education and, on the other hand, the newly empowered focus on learning and other academic activities. However, whereas the external pressure of schoolification-like activities is increasing, the preschool teachers themselves still tend to value the traditional relationships and play-oriented mentalities and activities.

The aim of the present study is to exemplify, on the basis of a questionnaire survey with Estonian preschool teachers ($N=729$), that in part at least, the phenomenon of schoolification in Estonia is due to the Estonian preschool teachers' internally inconsistent beliefs, rather than the external educational political factors. More precisely, we studied the preschool teachers' beliefs about the *value* of the general skills presented in the national curriculum of early

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childhood education institutions and, alternatively, beliefs about teachers' *self-efficacy* to find activities to develop these skills and to evaluate the attainment of these skills. We maintain that to succumb to the schoolification is not fully explainable by the out-of-kindergarten education policy reforms – as is argued by some researchers in this field, notably Osgood (2009) and Moss (2007).

For more specific design of our research, we focused on the particular aspect of preschool teachers' professionalism that distinguishes between the *beliefs* and the *self-efficacy* of preschool teachers (Kowalsky et al., 2005). Applying the classical considerations of teachers' beliefs and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; Pajares, 1992; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998), we have distinguished between the *belief-oriented* research questions (the first question) and the *teacher efficacy-oriented research questions* (the second and the third question).

As becomes evident on the basis of our results, the evaluations of the Estonian preschool teacher are internally inconsistent to a degree, which at least in part can explain the easy acceptance of the *schoolification* tendencies by the Estonian preschool teachers, even though they are generally critical accepting these tendencies.

We set the following research questions:

- 1) How important or *valuable* are, according to the evaluations of the Estonian preschool teachers, the general skills presented in the national curriculum for Pre-School Child Care Institutions (Koolieelse lasteasutuse riiklik õppekava, 2008) (hereafter referred as NC 2008).
- 2) How easy/difficult it is for preschool teachers to find activities for formation of the general skills and to evaluate the acquaintance of the general skills presented in the NC 2008?
- 3) Whether and to what degree are the beliefs about the value of the general skills (1st research question) and about the teachers' self-reported self-efficacy (2nd research question) mutually consistent?
- 4) What are the differences between teachers representing different background characteristics (age, level of education, language of instruction in the kindergarten)?

In line with the theoretical presuppositions of this article (Simpson, 2010a), we analysed the data according to the *activist perspective* of the early childhood educator, which means that the professionalism of an early childhood educator is not fully reducible to outside, policy-driven factors, but are in part dependent on characteristics inherent to teacher professionalism in general. From our perspective, the most important of these characteristics is the consonance between preschool teachers' value-oriented beliefs and beliefs about the self-efficacy of teachers concerning the general skills presented in early childhood curriculum (Kowalsky et al., 2005).

The results revealed that generally, the respondents regarded the general skills presented in the national curriculum (Koolieelse lasteasutuse riiklik õppekava, 2008) most valuable. However, there were differences between the general skills that the respondents regarded the most valuable and the general skills that the respondents found the easiest to find activities to develop and to find measures to evaluate the achievement of the general skills. It appeared that teachers evaluated play skills as the most important of the general skills presented in the national curriculum (Koolieelse lasteasutuse riiklik õppekava, 2008). However, in terms of the easiness to find activities for formation of the skills and for formation of the skills, teachers reported that *learning and cognitive skills* were the easiest.

We conclude that the discrepancy between the declared most valuable skills (*play skills*) and the most easily applicable and evaluable skills (*learning and cognitive skills*) presents the threat that although teachers value the play skills the most, they are succumbed, if unconsciously, to develop the learning and cognitive skills the most – just because these skills are the easiest to find activities for and to evaluate. Therefore, the further pre- or in-service training of preschool teachers would necessitate not so much to persuade teachers in the value of the play skills (because they are already convinced about that, but rather to develop the teachers' skills to find activities for developing, and measures to evaluate, these skills. This is a potential but yet insufficiently recognised way to reduce the implicit and unwilling schoolification of early childhood education.

Acknowledgements

Authors gratefully acknowledge support from the European Social Fund programme EDUKO (grant no TA/7610).

Keywords: early childhood education, schoolification, teacher's professionalism, self-efficacy, beliefs, national curriculum, general skills