

Perception of Step by Step and non-Step by Step preschool teachers about the child-centred activities

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Summary

Introduction

In Estonia, the need to move from adult-directed education to child-centred education has been emphasised for more than 20 years. The transition has been supported by promoting the child-centred Step by Step programme as well as by the introduction of the principles of child-centred education in the national curricula of Estonian preschool education (Tuul, 2017). Preschool child care institutions started to implement the renewed curriculum in 2009, and it was assumed that teachers' understandings of how to manage a high-quality learning process as well as how to improve their teaching practice by the help of the new curriculum would soon become similar. However, in a written questionnaire to 25 teachers and observations of their activities demonstrated that teachers were applying the principles of child-centred education only partially, although in their own words, their pedagogical work was primarily based on the child-centred approach (Kimer et al., 2016). Since the number of participants in that study was small, the question emerged about the extent to which the findings of this study reflected the general tendencies in the field of preschool education. If research confirms the teachers' belief that their everyday work is consistent with the principles of child-centred education, then the result that teachers' activities reflect child-centred education only partially indicate that teachers might lack the necessary knowledge and skills to change their pedagogical practice (Spillane et al., 2002).

Therefore, we decided to repeat the study conducted in 2008 based on the ISSA standard to find out: 1) What are the teachers' assessments of their own work in five areas: communication between the teacher and the child, cooperation with parents, the planning of the teacher's work, the use of child-centred teaching methods and the development of the learning environment? 2) What are the differences between teachers following the Step by Step approach and

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those not following it? 3) How do the results of the 2016 study differ from the results of the 2008 study? Based on the findings of the aforementioned study (see Kimer et al., 2016), as well as the results of a written survey of 347 class teachers conducted in 2013, according to which teachers were in general very satisfied with both the national curriculum of preschool child care institutions as well as with the curriculum of their kindergarten (Tuul et al., 2015), we hypothesized that 1) teachers' assessments of their activities in the context of child-centred education are high and 2) there are no significant differences between teachers following the Step by Step approach and teachers who do not follow it.

Methodology

Since we wanted to conduct a comparative study, we then used, similarly to the previous study (see Õun et al., 2010), a structured written questionnaire compiled on the basis of the international standard of assessing the activities of teachers following the Step by Step approach (ISSA, 2002). The questionnaire consisted of 67 questions (divided into five areas) about teachers' activities assessed on the 5-point Likert scale where the teachers had to assess the frequency of their daily activities on a scale from "1-never" to "5-always".

The sample was selected by following the principles of the study in 2008. Namely, we attempted to send the questionnaire to as many teachers as possible who followed the Step by Step approach, and the teachers not following the approach we chose from the same regions. Ninety-nine Step by Step teachers and 106 teachers who did not follow the Step by Step approach responded. By their work experience, age and educational level both groups of teachers were relatively similar. The data were analysed by the statistics programme SPSS 19.0. We used descriptive statistics, the Student's *t*-test and Chi-square test, and calculated Cohen's *d*. The reliability coefficient Cronbach's Alpha was used to form the aggregate variables of areas.

Key findings and discussion

The study revealed that teachers assessed their pedagogical activity in the context of child-centred education very highly in almost all studied areas ($M \geq 4.4$ in 5-point scale). Thus, in general, we can say that the first hypothesis was confirmed. The only exception was the cooperation with parents, where teachers' mean score on the 5-point scale was 3.7. The tendency of preschool teachers in Estonia assessing their cooperation with parents lower than their activities in

other areas of their work also appeared in the study by Peterson et al. (2016). As some researchers (Edwards et al., 2008; Powell et al., 2010; Sylva et al., 2004) have pointed out, the inclusion of family members in the activities of the preschool has a positive impact on the adaptation of children and on their social and cognitive achievements. Thus, the cooperation with families is an area that needs further examination.

The comparison of the assessments of the teachers following the Step by Step approach and those not following this approach revealed that their assessments were similar, so the second hypothesis was also confirmed. Compared to 2008, in 2016 the assessments of those teachers not following the Step by Step approach were statistically significantly higher in all areas, and the assessments of teachers following the Step by Step approach were statistically significantly higher in the areas of planning teachers' work and communication between the teacher and the child. The greatest progress in the assessments of teachers not following the Step by Step approach could be seen in the area of developing the learning environment and cooperation with parents, in which the scores were the lowest in 2008. While in the area of developing the learning environment, the assessments of teachers not following the Step by Step approach are also higher regarding all variables in 2016 compared to 2008, it is not the case with cooperation with parents. Namely, the participants of the 2008 study marked more often than those in the 2016 study that they are attentive and polite with all parents, that they consider the specificities of every family, that they greet and advise parents and visit children's homes. The respondents in the 2016 study said that they almost never visit children's homes, and parents are advised and the specificities (nationality, religion, special needs) of every family are only sometimes considered. Such a result may partly be explained by the increasing number of children with a different native language and cultural background at preschools. Studies (Berthelsen & Karuppiah, 2011; Jokikokko & Karikoski, 2016; Nagasa, 2014) have demonstrated that teachers need additional knowledge in supporting children with a different linguistic and cultural background.

To summarise, the results of this study are consistent with the results of the study conducted in 2014 by Kimer et al. (2016) and suggest that all teachers, regardless of the programme used, have adopted the principles established in the national curriculum for preschool child care institutions. However, some international studies (see Kwon, 2003; Niikko & Havu-Nuutinen, 2009) indicate an inconsistency between teachers' beliefs and work practice. A high assessment of child-centred education does not automatically mean that teachers also follow these principles in their work. Thus, in the interests of implementing the national curriculum, it is important to continue observations of

teachers' work in order to see whether the inconsistency is present only in the case of single teachers or whether it is a widespread problem. In the latter case, it is important to ascertain the reasons for this inconsistency, and based on this information choose a strategy to support teachers.

Keywords: teachers' assessments, Step by Step, child-centred education, pre-school, preschool education