

Level of transferable skills according to three assessment tools in three and four-year-old Estonian children

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Summary

Estonian kindergarten teachers have a responsibility to assess the personal development of children in every school year and to give an overview of their progress to the children's parents. Teachers rely on the kindergarten's curriculum to assess the development and level of transferable skills of three and four-year-old children. Curricula are developed separately in each of the kindergartens and teachers themselves are taking part in the development process. To do so, they can use some reference books that have been published by the government. They can also, use the official preschool age state curriculum, where the level of transferable skills is specified for the six and seven-year-old children. In Estonia, the research about the actual level of transferable skills at earlier ages has been sparse and our aim is to fill a part of this gap.

Applied research to collect data about Estonian preschool children's knowledge and transferable skills was led by the University of Tartu researchers between 2014 and 2016. We describe here one part of the data collection and present results from that part of the research regarding transferable skills of three and four-year-old children. To collect data about social and reflexive skills we used the Social Skills Questionnaire for the teachers. The Social Skills Questionnaire is developed in the University of Tartu and teachers can use it to evaluate how often they have seen children to use social and reflexive skills. We collected data from 450 children by using the Social Skills Questionnaire. To collect data about cognitive and learning skills we used the Strebeleva method and collected data from 262 children. To collect data about cognitive, motor, and learning skills we used Psychoeducational Profile 3rd edition for 127 children. Data using Strebeleva method and Psychoeducational Profile were collected via testing each participant individually. Different children participated

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in data collection with different assessment tools. All the children attended regular kindergartens, they were healthy, they did not need any special needs support, and had Estonian as their native language according to their parents and teachers. The participants were recruited from all over Estonia.

The results showed that social and reflexive skills listed in the Social Skills Questionnaire can be divided into five factors. The factors were the following: academic, self-management, peer-relations, motor, and assertion. We did not find significant age differences or systematic gender differences in the teachers' evaluations of children's social and reflexive skills. At the same time their self-management, motor, and assertion skills had yet to be developed and none of these specific skills appeared to be in regular use. Teachers evaluated the frequency of three and four-year-olds to talk about recent events, to be polite, to follow the game rules, to start conversations, to be able to make up with peers, and to ask an adult for assistance to be high. Children were also evaluated frequently to laugh when others made jokes and to play role games. Teachers evaluated the frequency of three and four-year-olds to keep their distance from peers to be rare. At the same time children's self-management, motor, and assertion skills were evaluated not to be in a regular use.

According to the results from the Strebeleva method we found that three and four-year-old children are able to name the objects they see in the pictures but are unable to describe or discuss what is presented in the picture without additional help from an adult. We also found that Estonian children had difficulty assembling pictures if the parts had straight edges, compared to assembling pictures from the pieces that had particular shaped edges.

According to the Psychoeducational Profile 3rd edition the motor skills of the three and four-year-old children are well developed. They are able to handle balls in multiple ways and use scissors, also the coordination between the leading hand, leg, and eye has been developed. They are able to draw simple geometrical shapes such as circles and lines. They also imitate movements, two-part actions, and verbally presented sentences that contain three to four words. Transferable skills are best observed during play behaviors. According to the teachers three and four-year-old children like to act together with their peers, they enjoy role play that includes everyday activities, and are able to follow game rules. The children are also able to use everyday items in their games and imitate how these items are used by people during their daily activities.

We compared the descriptions of transferable skills given in the reference books and kindergarten curricula with the results from our study. We found that some of the expectations described in these materials were consistent with the skill levels that we found. For example, three and four-year-old children are described as talkative and have the ability to start conversations easily. At

the same time, the guideline materials included some learning outcomes that we found to be beyond children's comprehension. For example, children are expected to compare squares and rectangles but these terms are not in their vocabulary, and they are unable to imitate drawings of those two shapes. The main problem with the materials is that they are presented in a general way that makes it difficult for a teacher to design transferable skills assessment. In addition to this, the materials should be reviewed in the future when research has provided more specific evidence about the transferable skills development.

Our main conclusion stresses the importance of knowing what is to be expected from three and four-year-old children regarding their transferable skills. When teachers know what to expect, they are able to concentrate on the skills that need developing. Also, it is necessary to keep in mind that children need constant encouragement in order to practice the tasks they need developing. If this fails to motivate them they need verbal instruction. When this is not helpful enough, the next step would be to provide children with a model and actions that they can imitate. It should be kept in mind that in order to develop new skills children need teachers to take the lead and to use well planned teaching activities.

Keywords: transferable skills in kindergarten, social and reflexive skills, cognitive skills, learning skills, play skills, three and four-year-old Estonian children