

Preschool teachers' evaluations and explanations to changes in their work related difficulties: professionalisation as a symbolic capital

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In Estonia, the professional qualifications of preschool teachers have been raised in order to enhance the quality of preschool education. This policy has not been popular with all preschool teachers. Some welcome the changes, seeing them as a recognition of the preschool teacher as a true professional. Others see the rising requirements making their work more difficult and placing them increasingly accountable to external groups, such as administrators and parents (Bradbury 2012; Jackson 2017; Vlasov & Hujala 2016).

In this study, we aimed at elucidating the Estonian preschool teachers' evaluations and explanations of the changes to the difficulty of their work over the period of their tenure. We also aimed at a preliminary categorisation of the aspects that have made preschool teachers' work more difficult or easier, and to give policy recommendations and hints for further research on the professionalisation of preschool teachers.

First, we give an overview of the concept of professionalism and professionalisation that we use as the conceptual basis for our study. This conceptualisation was first launched by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) and has been further developed by Willem Schinkel and Mirko Noordegraaf (2011). Following Bourdieu, Schinkel and Noordegraaf observe professionalism as a form of *symbolic capital*, i.e. a capital containing social and cultural qualities that enable a professional group to establish its status in relation to other social groups. Schinkel and Noordegraaf (ibid.) consider professionalisation as a dynamic concept that expresses the relationality and instability of professionalism issues at any given moment and the continual struggle between, and within, different social fields for professionalisation-related status and symbolic capital.

By briefly overviewing the historical professionalisation of the preschool field in relation to the field of general education (Katz & Cain, 1988; Persson & Tallberg Broman, 2015), we next demonstrate how the professionalisation of the preschool field has been a complex struggle related to the symbolic capital and status, thus explainable by the Bourdieusian terminology. Over the last

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decades, the field has become more regulated (including the establishment of the national curriculum for preschool institutions), and the formal qualification criteria have risen so that they are now comparable to those of schoolteachers (Oberhuemer et al., 2010). Recently, similar developments have characterised the field of preschool education in Estonia (Mikser et al., 2018; Mikser et al., 2019). In terms of the added symbolic capital of the preschool teachers' profession, the struggle has been successful, since the quality standards in this field are now comparable to those applied to the schoolteachers (Van Laere et al., 2012; Neudorf et al., 2017).

Our empirical study included a written questionnaire focused on the respondents' evaluation of how the difficulty of their work has changed over the period of their tenure. We asked them to mark the most appropriate statement from the list below: (1) *the work has become substantially more difficult*; (2) *the work has become somewhat more difficult*; (3) *the difficulty of the work has not changed*; (4) *the work has become somewhat easier*; (5) *the work has become substantially easier*. Below the list, we asked the respondents to comment on their responses in a free form. 628 preschool teachers across Estonia answered the question, out of whom 420 (66.9%) added a comment. The second phase of the study included a life history interview with 15 experienced teachers (out of the 628) who had agreed to be interviewed.

Assuming that preschool teachers' views differed depending on their length of service, we divided the respondents to the written questionnaire into three groups according to the length of their professional experience: (1) *working experience up to 8 years* – have worked only according to the latest version of the national curriculum for preschool institutions; (2) *working experience from 9 to 24 years* – started working after the Soviet period; (3) *working experience of 25 or more years* – having worked during and after the Soviet period. Other socio-demographic data generally corresponded to the overall population of preschool teachers in Estonia (only 3 of the respondents were male, since the proportion of men among preschool teachers in Estonia is small).

In all the groups, roughly three quarters of the respondents evaluated the work as having become substantially or somewhat more difficult over the period of their tenure. Having obtained that knowledge, we then categorised the respondents' comments into three categories that represented the main reasons why the work has become more difficult: these were the changes related to (1) *children*; (2) *parents*; and (3) *work organisation*. Additionally, the fourth category emerged from the responses of those with more than 8 years' experience: (4) *changes in legislation, curricula and approach to learning*. The first category involved the respondents' general opinion that the students'

contingent (i.e. children) has become more diverse, including more children with special needs, whereas there is often no adequate support available from staff members with relevant special qualifications. The second category involved the respondents' comments that parents have become more demanding and self-conscious, often treating preschool teachers as waiters but not sufficiently contributing to educating their children themselves. The third category involved the alleged increase of bureaucratic duties or 'paperwork', meaning that written reports and assessments are required much more than before. This finding indicates that the trust in the professional competence of preschool teachers has decreased – higher professional preparation requirements have paradoxically been accompanied with more accountability.

In the face of these negative developments, our fourth category revealed that the respondents were very positive about the rise of their qualification requirements to the higher education degree and, in particular, about the renaming of their profession from the 'educator' (Est. *kasvataja*) to 'teacher', specifically because the latter name defines them as equal to schoolteachers. The respondents also expressed their satisfaction with the degree of freedom of professional decision-making granted them within the national curriculum for preschool institutions and other legislative documents.

To conclude, the answer to our first research question was that nearly three quarters of the preschool teachers found their work becoming more difficult over the period of their tenure. The answer to our second research question i.e. the reasons for their work having become more difficult, were manifold and can be classified into distinct categories. These reasons were substantially related to the *everyday working practices* of the teachers: dealing with the children particularly those with special needs, with the increasing demands of the parents, and with increasing bureaucracy. However, the aspects that the respondents found as facilitating their work were related to the status-bound factors that were more distant from their daily working practices, such as the legislative changes to raise their qualification requirements, to rename the professionals from *educators* to *teachers*, and to increase preschool teachers' freedom of decision-making as stated in the national curriculum and other legislative acts. This contradistinction, i.e. the aggravating versus mitigating factors can be regarded as the response to our third research question.

Our most important policy recommendation resulting from the study (i.e. the answer to our fourth research question) is the need to supplement each policy change in the preschool education with material resources that would adequately correspond to the presumed rise in the status of the preschool teachers' profession. This is most necessary for supplying the symbolic capital

requested by the preschool professional with the necessary economic capital for enabling the field professionals to perceive their professionalism as enhanced and recognised by other professional, public and political interest groups.

Keywords: professionalisation, changes, teacher, preschool education