

The transition to Estonian-language instruction: expectations, challenges, and concerns of preschool leaders, teachers, and parents

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Summary

Introduction

Early language learning, which begins at home or in preschool, should support children's agency and inclusion, while promoting positive peer relationships, collaboration, and freedom of choice (Knoll & Becker, 2023). When organizing language instruction in early childhood education institutions, it is essential to ensure teachers' professional preparation, enabling them to effectively develop children's general and domain-specific competencies and collaborate with colleagues and parents (Beacco et al., 2016; Goullier et al., 2015). The Constitution of Estonia (1992) prioritizes the preservation of the Estonian language, which enables active participation in society. Despite challenges, Estonia has developed immersion programs and second-language education options. Its experience provides valuable insights for other countries working on education and language policies for minorities. The Estonian Education and Language Development Plans (2021) jointly aim to create a common cultural and value-based space by ensuring high-quality education and instruction in the Estonian language. As part of this vision, Estonia is set to transition fully to Estonian-language education. By 2035, all in-state and locally funded schools and kindergartens will have teaching conducted in Estonian. In 2024, Estonia transitioned to Estonian-language education in preschools, offering a model for supporting linguistic minorities, particularly Russian-speaking students. During the transition to Estonian-language education, it is important to examine the expectations and concerns of parents and teachers, as these influence the quality of language learning and the success of its implementation. Parents' attitudes and awareness determine how they support their children, while teachers' experiences and needs shape the everyday learning process.

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In addition, the support of preschool institution leaders is crucial, as they create the conditions necessary for the successful implementation of language instruction. This study examined the expectations, challenges, and concerns of preschool leaders, teachers, and parents in kindergartens with Russian or Estonian-Russian language of instruction, regarding the transition to Estonian-language instruction in early childhood education institutions in Estonia. This research focused on the following research questions: What are the expectations of leaders and teachers towards kindergarten staff and parents? What expectations do parents have regarding the kindergarten staff, the support for their child's mother tongue, and the requirements placed on teachers? What expectations do leaders, teachers, and parents have towards the state? What challenges and concerns do leaders, teachers, and parents have regarding the transition to Estonian-language education?

Methodology and sample

The data for the present study were collected in 2023 as part of a nationwide survey in Estonia, and the analysis is based on written survey responses from 583 parents, 231 teachers, and 26 preschool leaders. Most respondents were affiliated with kindergartens located in Harju County or Ida-Viru County. The questionnaires were developed with an eight-member research team and the Ministry of Education and Research. They included 17 questions for leaders, 18 for teachers, and 16 for parents, in addition to background information.

Key findings

The results show that preschool leaders expected teachers to have Estonian language skills and use Estonian consistently in everyday interactions. Leaders emphasized cooperation with families, teachers' professional development, and participation in training. Teachers expected supportive leadership, a safe work environment, and continuous professional growth. Parents were expected to support the language transition at home, be involved in preschool activities, and maintain communication. Parents must understand the broader cultural context to support their children's emotional and linguistic development. Parents wanted teachers to use precise language, be patient, and explain learning materials. Many suggested using both Estonian and Russian during the transition phase. Parents emphasized the preschool's responsibility to provide learning materials and information in both languages. They valued teachers who were both professionally competent and empathetic. All respondent groups expressed expectations towards the state: leaders stressed the need for quality teacher education, in-service training, recruitment support, and access to learning

materials. Teachers wanted at least one Estonian-speaking teacher per group, smaller groups, and support for children with special needs. Parents expected Estonian courses to be free, financial assistance for tutoring, and psychological support. Key challenges highlighted in the study included the shortage of qualified teachers, the impact on children's well-being, the need for adequate support for special needs children, and the complexities of home–preschool cooperation. These challenges led to concerns among parents about their children's academic progress, emotional well-being, and the risk of losing their native language. The findings suggest that continuous investment in teacher training, validating tools to assess Estonian as a second language in early childhood, supporting parents in fostering language learning at home, and involving local communities are also essential for a successful transition.

Discussion and conclusions

This study explored the expectations and concerns of kindergarten leaders, teachers, and parents about the transition to Estonian-language instruction. Leaders expect teachers to have the required language skills, use Estonian daily, collaborate with families, and engage in professional development. Teachers value leadership support, a safe work environment, and resources for language learning (Vanahans et al., 2023). Parents are expected to support language learning at home, engage with teachers, and understand the cultural context (Sawyer, Manz & Martin, 2017). Parents' expectations include clear communication, access to materials in both Estonian and Russian, and the teachers' ability to explain content clearly. Klaas-Lang et al. (2025) found that parents want professional, empathetic teachers who respect children's needs. Key challenges and concerns include the shortage of qualified teachers (Bernstein et al., 2021), children's well-being, stress, and potential native language loss (Piller & Gerber, 2021; Klaas et al., 2023). All groups stress the need for state support—teacher training, resources, and services to ensure a smooth transition to Estonian-language education.

Keywords: transition to Estonian-language education, preschool institutions, parents, teachers, leaders