



ESTONIAN STUDIES IN EDUCATION

Edited by Jaan Mikk, Marika Veisson and Piret Luik

Volume 3

Jaan Mikk / Marika Veisson / Piret Luik (eds.)

PRESCHOOL AND PRIMARY EDUCATION



PETER LANG

The studies in this volume explore a number of issues in education today. One paper reveals what actually motivates teachers to develop their career, another, how to teach primary teachers to talk about visual art. Children's artworks were explored in one article to see how they relate to their adjustment to school. In another, a case study was successful in developing reasoning in primary school students. The measurement of mathematics achievement revealed no difference between Estonian speaking and Russian speaking schools. Performance-related goals were shown in another article to be associated with the self-concept of the students. The learning disabilities of children were analysed, and the production of narratives by children with language impairment. The analysis of aggressive behaviour in children in Estonia and Finland indicated gender and country differences in their behaviour.

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Preschool and Primary Education

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PETER LANG

Frankfurt am Main · Berlin · Bern · Bruxelles · New York · Oxford · Wien

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Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften

Bibliographic Information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available in the internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Cover illustration:
Printed with kind permission
of the University of Tartu, Multimedia Center.



E-ISBN 978-3-653-01199-9

ISSN 1868-744X

ISBN 978-3-631-62092-2

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Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften
Frankfurt am Main 2011
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Content

Preface	7
---------------	---

PRESCHOOL TEACHERS AND EDUCATION

Maire Tuul, Tiia Õun, Kristina Nugin, Kaisa Kungus Kindergarten Teachers' Assessments of the Opportunities for Development of Their Professional Career in the Context of Attestation	11
---	----

Edna Vahter Problems and Opportunities in Teaching Primary Teachers to Talk about Visual Art.....	28
--	----

Kati Mäesaar, Marika Padrik, Merit Hallap Assessment of the Coherence of Preschool Children's Picture-Elicited Narratives	42
--	----

Kristiina Tropp, Eeva-Liisa Kronqvist Parent and Teacher Ratings of Preschool Boys' and Girls' Aggressive Behaviour – a Comparative Study in Estonia and Finland	59
---	----

LEARNING IN PRIMARY SCHOOL

Kai-Liis Gramakovski, Eha Rüütel Relationship Between First Grade Students' Adjustment to School and Creativity	77
--	----

Reelika Leopard, Noona Kiuru, Anu Palu Success of Third-grade Students in Solving Different Types of Mathematics Problems in Estonian-speaking and Russian-speaking Schools	91
---	----

Anna-Liisa Jõgi, Katrin Mägi, Eve Kikas

Maths-Specific Performance Goals, Interest and Self-Concept, and Their Relationship to Previous Task-Avoidant Behaviour and Maths Skills	106
--	-----

Egle Säre, Piret Luik

A Case Study Analysing the Appearance of Reasoning in Primary Students' Class Discussions Using the Philosophy for Children Programme.....	121
--	-----

Angela Jakobson, Mairi Männamaa, Ene Raudla

Learning Ability of Children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: Improvement of the Integration Capacity of Verbal Information Over Time	135
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Preface

The focus of this book is on preschool and primary education, which form an important basis for the lifelong learning process. Early childhood education and preschool education have been important aspects of education since 1840, when the first day care groups were established in Estonia. Today kindergartens and day care centres educate 0–7-year-old children. Preschool teacher education was started in 1905 at professional secondary and in 1967 at university level. Primary teacher education has a longer history. The first primary schools were already established in the 17th century.

Study programmes for Preschool and Primary Education at the BA level are currently important for both Tartu and Tallinn Universities and their colleges in Haapsalu, Narva and Rakvere. The MA level is an important part of Tallinn University and the University of Tartu and its Narva College.

Preschool institutions base their work on the state curriculum (2008), which determines the principles of preschool curriculum development, educational goals, organisation of educational activities, presumed general skills of 6–7-year-old children, the educational goals and content of different fields, the presumed results of 6–7-year-old children, and the principles for the evaluation of child development. At the first school level (primary school), studies focus on the state curriculum (2010).

The main research areas in preschool and primary education in Estonia have included individual and age-related characteristics in student cognitive abilities and school readiness, play as a child's main activity, the importance of play in attaining the readiness for school, preschool education in the context of the Estonian national culture, the history of kindergartens, preschool education in the context of the Estonian traditional culture, the development of personality in preschool through the curriculum, the impact of the growth environment on the child's intellectual development, the developmental problems of gifted children, children with special needs, cooperation with parents, teacher professionalism and the early childhood curriculum.

The current book is devoted to recent research by our professors and doctoral students, and a range of issues and problems have been explored. For example, performance goals and the subject-specific self-concept in students, task-avoiding and aggressive behaviour in children, maths skills in third grade students from Russian and Estonian-speaking schools, contemporary visual art education, learning disabilities in children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and class discussions among primary students within the programme "Philosophy with Children" among others.

There was considerable interest in publishing articles in this collection. We received 17 proposals; however, not all exhibited the required scientific rigour. All papers were blind reviewed by two specialists, one from Estonia and the

other from abroad. Nine papers successfully passed the review and redrafting process and are published in this collection.

We thank our language editor Michael Haagenzen and formatting specialist Tiia Ilus for their outstanding work. This collection is published thanks to financial support from the Doctoral School of Educational Sciences (ESF project nr 1.2.0401.09-0070), and the Institutes of Educational Sciences at the University of Tartu and Tallinn University.

PRESCHOOL TEACHERS AND EDUCATION

Kindergarten Teachers' Assessments of the Opportunities for Development of Their Professional Career in the Context of Attestation

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Abstract

In 2009 an external evaluation by the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research was carried out in preschool establishments. This showed that most teachers had not been paying attention to their professional career development, a tendency that could prevent the practical development of preschool education. The main aim of the present study was to assess kindergarten teachers' opportunities for development of their professional career in the context of attestation. The study was carried out in 2010 and 126 teachers participated. The most important factors that encourage teachers to improve their career are self-motivation and the desire for self-development. Factors that have hindered teachers' professional career development are lack of time and the complexity of compiling teacher attestation documents.

Keywords: *kindergarten teacher, professional career development, teacher attestation*

Introduction

The idea of what it means to be a teacher is undergoing development and being reconceptualised. Teachers feel the need to grow in their competencies; they want to transform experiences into thoughts, thoughts into reflections, and reflections into new thoughts and new actions (Edwards et al., 1998). In recent decades more attention has been paid within the field of pedagogical studies to the study of the teacher's life and career. Research has been done into how teachers imagine their professional careers and how their career influences their lives (Goodson, 1992; Pomson, 2004). Factors shown to have an influence on a teacher's career include teacher training, practical training and the novice teacher's initial experiences. Research also shows that collaboration between student teachers, mentor teachers and university supervisors creates a supportive

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network that helps novice teachers during their career. Learning communities provide crucial career development support for beginning teachers (Mitchell et al., 2009; Cornu & Ewing, 2008). Research findings also show that it is hard for novice teachers to meet the needs of exceptional students and to communicate with parents, and they stress the need for teachers to have a competent mentor who can support them in the early stages of their career (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009). A study previously conducted in Estonia has also pointed out that the level of professional mentoring and support received by a novice teacher depends on the school's culture. Attention needs to be directed toward school leaders because it is in their interest to promote a collaborative culture in which knowledge is shared and developed together (Löfström & Eisenschmidt, 2009). Research shows that four major factors have a positive influence on novice teachers in schools: students, colleagues, school culture, and parents. Novice teachers need to be understood by those who can influence and support their emerging careers (Wildman et al., 1989).

Several models for the development of a teacher's professional career have been developed. Research indicates that teachers develop from novice to master at different intervals over time, taking from five to eight years to master the art, science and craft of teaching. Teachers with more than three years of experience are more effective than those with three years or fewer, but these differences seem to level off after five to eight years (Viskovic, 2009). Huberman (1995) has emphasised that in addition to this time scale, social and public implications that concern the teacher also have to be taken into account. For example, it is important for teachers to have good collegial relationships, and society's view of the teaching profession is also important. The models of teacher development adopted by policymakers do not adequately address teachers' learning needs over the course of a career, nor do they enhance motivation or the commitment essential to raising standards in the classroom. Researchers suggest that universities have a moral commitment to develop new kinds of sustained knowledge, creating roles with schools and teachers through which teachers' active professionalism will be enriched (Day, 2002).

A teacher's activities in Estonia are stipulated by the teacher's professional standards (Kutsekoda, 2005). The teacher's main activities are planning and controlling the learning process, supporting the learner's development, analysing and assessing the learning process in cooperation with colleagues and constantly reflecting on the activities used. An attestation system to support the professional careers of teachers has been created in Estonia. It is a common system for kindergarten and general education teachers. The aim of this system is to promote the development of the teacher's career and to assess teacher performance and its conformity to the requirements of the profession. By participating in attestation, teachers may achieve the rank of *novice teacher*, *teacher*, *senior teacher* or *teacher-methodologist* (Pedagoogide, 2002). In order to pass the

attestation, the teacher has to comply with the officially established requirements, work in the educational establishment effectively and have at least 160 hours of in-service training. The attestation regulations comprise 10 criteria, from which the teacher has to choose 6 that he or she complies with. The criteria include: acquiring an academic or professional degree; supervising pedagogical practice; participating in the development of an educational establishment; compiling a research paper; conducting an in-service training; organising events for pupils; instructing students who have attended competitions; publishing teaching material; speaking at conferences and to the press; managing pedagogical associations; and supervising a youth association.

Results of the external assessment of the Estonian educational system (Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium, 2009b) indicated that attestation in early childhood education is rarely seen as an opportunity to support teacher development and motivation, especially when compared to general education schools. In the school year 2009–2010, among all the teachers of early childhood establishments (6428), 475 teachers had the professional rank of novice teacher, 5820 had the rank of teacher, 464 had the rank of senior teacher and only 14 teachers had the rank of teacher-methodologist. One of the aims mentioned in *The Estonian Teacher Education Strategy* (Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium, 2009a) is a systematic and continuous support of the teacher's professional development. With all of this in mind, the focus of the present study is on how kindergarten teachers evaluate opportunities for the development of their professional career. Which factors do teachers see as promoting or hindering their career? The main aim of the present study is to compare kindergarten teachers' assessments of professional development opportunities in the context of attestation.

Research methodology

Method. A written survey was chosen as the study method. The questionnaire was developed by the authors of this article and was based on the teachers' attestation requirements (Pedagoogide, 2002). The questionnaire was divided into five areas: (a) teacher's motivation to develop his or her career (10 statements; $\alpha = 0.901$); (b) the role of the kindergarten recognition system in motivating teachers (2 open questions); (c) teacher's awareness of the content of the attestation (8 statements; $\alpha = 0.829$); (d) teacher's assessments of compliance with, and amendments to, the attestation requirements (14 statements; $\alpha = 0.834$); (e) the factors that promote (19 statements; $\alpha = 0.860$) and hinder (13 statements; $\alpha = 0.897$) the teacher's career.

Four-score Likert-type scales were used in the questionnaire to assess the importance of responses (4 = very important, 1 = not at all important) as well as

respondents' agreement with the prompted statements (4 = I agree, 1 = I do not agree). The teachers were asked to assess the opportunities for complying with the attestation conditions (2 = I am able to meet, 1 = I cannot meet). In addition to structured questions, the questionnaire also included open questions to elicit the respondents' reasoning behind their assessments. The study was carried out in 2010. Information was processed with the help of the SPSS 16.0 program. For the data analysis an ANOVA test was used to find any significant overall difference between the groups. If an overall difference was revealed, the Bonferroni (equal variances assumed) or Games-Howell (equal variances not assumed) post hoc test was used to pinpoint which of the differences between particular pairs of means were contributing to this overall difference. Arithmetical mean, standard deviation and percentage analysis were used to describe differences between the groups. Content analysis was used for open questions.

Sample. The study data was collected in Tallinn and Harjumaa. The questionnaires were distributed randomly to 50 Estonian-medium establishments in Tallinn and 10 in Harjumaa. A total of 126 kindergarten teachers participated in the study, with 20 at a rank of novice teacher, 69 at teacher and 37 at senior teacher (Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the sample

	Novice teachers	Teachers	Senior teachers	All teachers
n	20	69	37	126
Age (years)				
Mean	25	37	48	38
SD	4.45	11.08	9.04	12.31
Min	20	22	27	20
Max	37	62	61	62
Length of pedagogical work experience (years)				
Mean	1.5	12	23	14
SD	0.96	9.35	9.64	11.1
Min	0.5	1	7	0.5
Max	3	34	41	41
Education (%)				
Higher	60	86	76	79
Secondary-specialised or unfinished higher education	40	14	24	21