

Latvian Teachers' Perspectives on Early Childhood Educational Practice

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Abstract

The Education Law of Latvia recognizes early childhood education as an educational level in which multi-dimensional development of the child as an individual, strengthening of health and preparation for the acquisition of primary education takes place. Currently, early childhood education is undergoing considerable transformations and transition to a competence-based approach. Teachers' perspectives serve as significant indicators for analysis of current educational situation and therefore highlight the core areas for enhancing early childhood educational practice. The design of the study is based on qualitative research using data from a survey and focus group discussions. The aim of the study is to identify and analyse teachers' perspectives on early childhood educational practice. In accordance to the aim, the following research questions were posed: (1) what is early childhood teachers' personal meaning of good educational practice; (2) what factors could contribute to enhance the early childhood educational practice in future? To identify teachers' perspectives, a survey was conducted with early childhood teachers implementing curriculum in municipal early childhood education institutions around Latvia. The answers to two open-ended questions as a part of a larger questionnaire were analysed. The in-depth examination of perspectives was reached by implementing several focus group discussions. Data were analysed using the method of qualitative content analysis. The findings revealed wide diversity in teachers' personal meaning of good educational practice. The issues related to developmental psychology-based learning outcomes and school-readiness still dominate among teachers' perspectives. Postmodern views on a child emphasizing children's diversity and uniqueness were often mentioned as well. The factors contributing to good educational practice were categorized into four main areas such as organization of the pedagogical process, teachers' competences, environment of an early childhood setting, collaboration with parents. In general, Latvian teachers' perspectives demonstrate readiness for transition to a competence-based approach in early childhood education. However, identified contributing and hindering factors should be taken into account during the process of transformations.

Keywords: early childhood educational practice, Latvia, teachers' perspectives.

1. Introduction

The vision of the future of Europe is characterized by smart, sustainable and inclusive growth (European Commission, 2010). The improvement of quality of education is crucial for all the growth dimensions, starting from the first degree of education, i.e., early childhood education and care. Over the recent two decades early childhood education has become more and more important in the European educational policy. It is acknowledged that early childhood education, complementing the central role of the family, has a profound and long-lasting impact which measures taken at a later stage cannot achieve (European Commission, 2011). The necessary investments in early childhood education are often reasoned on economic grounds: investing in the development of a young child allows to save on the financial resources that would be necessary at later stages of education or life to correct an unfavourable situation. At the same time a rapidly increasing tendency to focus on the social aspects when measuring the positive impact of early childhood education is noted (Milotay, 2016).

High-quality early childhood education provides long-term benefits in terms of achievement and socialization during educational process as well as later in working life. If started in time, it facilitates individuals' later learning (Commission of the European Communities, 2006).

Simultaneously researchers admit that in general, Europe still lacks an established rule for affordable, high-quality early childhood education. One of the reasons for that is the absence of a politically powerful constituency as “children cannot vote, nor lobby, nor donate to political campaigns” (Milotay, 2016, 121). Therefore, despite of the consensus on the importance of early childhood education and its valuable contribution to child's development there is a belief among researchers that in Europe high-quality early childhood education has not taken root, “certainly not from a child's and child's rights perspective” (Milotay, 2016, 121).

In Latvia, early childhood education is given a significant place. Its status has been determined by the Education Law of Latvia recognizing early childhood education as an educational level in which multi-dimensional development of the child as an individual, strengthening of health and preparation for the acquisition of primary education takes place (LR Saeima, 1998). The play is defined as a basic teaching method in early childhood education. The State Pre-school Education Guidelines determine the focus on the promotion of comprehensive and harmonious development of a child as an objective of early childhood education, considering his or her development patterns and needs, the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes for an individual and social life (Ministru kabinets, 2012).

Early childhood education providers in Latvia are mainly municipal early childhood settings. Early childhood education can be acquired in groups at schools offering such curricula. Within the last decades the number of private early childhood settings has increased significantly, especially in the capital of the country.

All children are entitled to early childhood education from the age of 1,5. Thus, Latvia belongs to a small group of European Union countries where children have legal entitlement to early childhood education from a very early age (OECD, 2016). Participation in early childhood education is compulsory from the age of 5. Early childhood education is to a large extent responsibility of municipalities. According to the legislation, duty of the municipality is to ensure that children whose place of residence has been declared in the administrative territory of the municipality have the possibility to acquire early childhood education in the educational institution that is the closest to the child's place of residence (LR Saeima, 1998).

Regulations state that early childhood teachers should be trained at a higher education level. After graduation teachers are expected regularly to continue their professional development.

Currently, early childhood education is undergoing considerable transformations and transition to a competence-based approach. It is crucial that the need for a new approach naturally rises from educational practice. Teachers' perspectives serve as significant indicators for analysis of current educational situation and therefore could highlight the core areas for enhancing early childhood educational practice.

The aim of the current study is to identify and analyse teachers' perspectives on early childhood educational practice.

In accordance to the aim, the following research questions were posed: (1) what is early childhood teachers' personal meaning of good educational practice; (2) what factors could contribute to enhance the early childhood educational practice in future?

The key principles of high-quality early childhood education that regulate the European early childhood education and care system form the theoretical basis of the study.

2. Theoretical background

The European educational policy acknowledges that access to universally available, high-quality inclusive early childhood education and care service could be beneficial for all (European Commission, 2011) meaning not only children but also parents and other family members. Theoretically, the structure of the early childhood education quality can be divided in three inter-dependent components: (1) structural quality; (2) process quality and (3) outcome quality (European Commission, 2014).

The structural quality includes measures characterizing the general design and organization of the early childhood education and care system like regulations concerning the financing of the early childhood education, health and safety requirements, regulations related to the staff qualification, the design of the curriculum, the adult-child ratios. The process quality define the general principles underpinning the implementation of the curriculum like the child's participation, the role of the play, interactions between children and staff, peer communication, the parental involvement. The outcome quality includes measures of children's development, socialization, school-readiness, preparation for further learning and life. Thus,

the early childhood education quality becomes a complex concept underpinning all the areas in the provision of the early childhood education.

In addition, the following transversal principles of high-quality early childhood education have been declared: (1) a clear image and voice of the child should be valued, (2) parents are the most important partners and their participation is essential, (3) a shared understanding of quality (European Commission, 2014).

The European early childhood education is underpinned by strong quality framework. However, researchers mention the risk that quality could be understood very narrowly, i.e., as an attribute of services for young children that ensures the efficient production of predefined, normative outcomes (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006). Instead of technical fulfilment of requirements, the modern early childhood institution should be understood and developed "as a public institution, a forum and a children's space, a site encounter and relating, where children and adults meet and commit to something where they can dialogue listen and discuss in order to share meanings" (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2013).

3. Research design

3.1 Research instrument and procedure

The design of the study is based on qualitative research using data from a survey and focus group discussions. To identify teachers' perspectives, the survey was conducted with early childhood teachers implementing curriculum in municipal early childhood education institutions around Latvia. The answers to two open-ended questions as a part of a larger questionnaire were analysed. The open-ended questions were used in order to collect as many subjective personal opinions as possible. Further analysis of the survey data was focused on identifying the most essential ideas of good educational practice in teachers' view which afterwards were categorized in larger groups.

The in-depth examination of perspectives was reached by implementing several focus group discussions. The categories revealed by the teachers' survey were discussed in a focus group of experienced early childhood teachers.

The data from a survey and focus group discussions were analysed using the method of qualitative content analysis.

3.2 Research sample

180 early childhood teachers were involved in the study. Respondents had obtained the first-level higher education in early childhood pedagogy (35%) or had earned the Bachelor or Master degree (45%). Part of the respondents (20%) have been currently acquiring the qualification simultaneously working in an early childhood setting that is a common trait in Latvian educational situation. Teachers' experience of working with young children ranged from 0 to 36 years (mean time = 14 years). Although the respondents have been selected, using non-probability sample principle, the sample reflects the populations' diversity in such aspects as the urbanization degree of an educational institution, language of instruction, teachers' pedagogical work experience. Respondents represent all statistical regions of Latvia, but the majority (65%) represents teachers working in the educational institutions of the capital city.

All participants of the study were involved in the survey. For participation in focus group discussions a group of 9 experienced teachers was selected. The participants were teachers having received at least the Bachelor degree in early childhood pedagogy and having over 10 years of pedagogical work experience in an early childhood setting.

4. Results and discussion

The analysis of early childhood teachers' perspectives revealed wide diversity in teachers' personal meaning of good educational practice. The factors contributing to good educational practice were categorized into four main areas such as organization of the pedagogical process, teachers' competences, the environment of an early childhood setting and collaboration with parents.

4.1 Organization of the pedagogical process

To organize the pedagogical process successfully, most of the respondents point to the necessity to decrease the amount of children in a group. The optimal size of a group according to the teachers ranges from 10 to 12 children in groups under the age of 3 and from 15 to 18 children in groups for children from the age of 3.

Although there are no limitations for the group size at the legislative level, municipalities mainly can ensure the children living in their administrative territory the access to early childhood education only by organizing groups with a large number of children. Teachers admit that the group size in recent years has not decreased but rather has increased. In groups of the respondents participating in the survey, the number of children ranges from 15 – 16 children in the groups for children under the age of 3 to 18 – 24 children in the groups for children from the age of 3. The situation differs only in early childhood settings located in distant rural regions where all young children living in the administrative territory are enrolled in mixed-age groups that are comparatively small.

Teachers acknowledge that having a large group of children prevents them from taking every individual's needs into account. The large number of children makes it difficult to offer children various activities according to their abilities and interests. Teachers often avoid the inclusion of activities that require children to interact in subgroups or to conduct some exploring project actively because they recognize that the atmosphere in a large group, when actively acting, becomes too noisy and chaotic. Teachers admit that in larger groups it is difficult to ensure children's safety and discipline them by using positive approaches. The recent studies implemented in Estonia, Finland and Sweden (Ugaste & Niikko, 2015; Pramling, Williams, Sheridan, & Hellman, 2016) show similar teachers' perspectives towards the large amount of children in one group. Teachers emphasize the following reasons for having a smaller group: (1) focus on the individual child, (2) children's influence, (3) limited conditions for excursions, (4) time for documentation (Pramling, Williams, Sheridan, & Hellman, 2016), (5) difficulties in fulfilment of the curriculum objectives and the children's preparation for school, (6) time to concentrate and to observe the children individually and to take into account each child's personal and developmental needs, (7) overcrowding and necessity for precise planning and organising of activities (Ugaste & Niikko, 2015).

The teachers' opinions about the need for grouping children according to their age differ a lot. Teachers point out the benefits of working with age-homogeneous groups as well as with age-heterogeneous groups. In Latvia children are organized in groups by following either the school model grouping children together by age or the family model combining children of different ages (OECD, 2016). Despite of the fact that teachers recognize the individual traits of each child's development, the majority of teachers consider an age-homogeneous group being a better solution to meet children's developmental needs. Although there are no national assessments for monitoring children's developmental outcomes during or at the end of early childhood education the issues related to the developmental psychology-based learning outcomes and school-readiness still dominate among teachers' perspectives. Postmodern views on a child emphasizing children's diversity and uniqueness were often mentioned as well.

Teachers preferring to work with mixed-age groups emphasize the benefits like children's mutual cooperation in their daily life, faster progress of younger children in acquiring the early childhood curriculum, opportunity to pay more of individual attention to the children at the last school year before enrolling in primary education thus ensuring stronger school-readiness of children. However, several teachers working in mixed-age groups note difficulties to meet interests of all children if the age range is very broad (e.g., from the age of 2 to 6).

Teachers mention also homogeneity (or balance) of the group in terms of ethnicity that coincide with results revealed by recent research (Ugaste & Niikko, 2015; Pramling, Williams, Sheridan, & Hellman, 2016) but to a considerable extent contradicts to the growing multicultural trends in modern education.

Teachers also emphasize the need for a skilled teacher assistant that can fully support the children in their learning process. Although the title of the position called a nurse during the Soviet period now has been changed to a teacher assistant, they still mainly take care of children's daily needs and fulfil household tasks to ensure hygiene requirements. Even though professional development curricula has been offered for teacher assistants, there are no formal requirements for their qualification and professional development at the state level. An individualized and differentiated approach to the needs of children requires from the teacher assistant both involvement in activities with children, and support for the teacher in the preparation of teaching materials and organizing the pedagogical process, but often the competence of the teacher assistant does not meet the new educational needs.

Thus, organization of the pedagogical process, in teachers' opinion, includes the following categories to be enhanced: (1) group size, (2) homogeneity of groups, (3) skilled teacher assistants.

4.2 Early childhood teachers' competences

The European educational policy acknowledges that the quality of the early childhood practitioners and their pedagogical activities, interactions and knowledge have a major impact on children's well-being and development (OECD, 2015). However, the empirical experience shows that teachers often have insufficient knowledge and skills to meet the needs of rapidly changing society and education. Recent research on early childhood teachers' professionalism (Peterson et al., 2016) states that in terms of effective professional development it is crucial to identify the right strategies that help practitioners stay updated. There is no doubt that well-educated and skilled staff are able easier to overcome the difficulties which they encounter in their daily practice. Some early childhood teachers even believe that the teachers' competence could be a key factor to solving the problem of too many children in the group (Pranling, Williams, Sheridan, & Hellman, 2016). Compared with the Latvian teachers' statements, the above-mentioned research findings seem to have overestimated the significance of teachers' competence. Some respondents acknowledge that when starting their pedagogical work they often felt unprepared as started to work simultaneously acquiring the qualification or had an insufficient amount of practical seminars during their studies.

Although the state regulations determine that all the early childhood teachers should be trained at the higher education level, novice teachers point out the lack of practical skills of planning, working with documentation as well as managing behavioural problems of children. Teachers emphasize the increasing number of children with special needs as well as children having different ethnic and cultural background in their groups and therefore growing need for knowledge in these areas. The communication with parents has also been mentioned, especially concerning the interaction with parents behaving aggressively.

To sum up, according to teachers' opinions, during the initial education and further professional development more attention should be paid to the following areas of teachers' competence: (1) inclusion of children with special needs, (2) interaction with children having different ethnic and cultural background, (3) establishing successful communication with parents, (4) management of children's behavioural problems, (4) novice teachers' planning skills.

4.3 Environment of an early childhood setting

Environment of an early childhood setting was mentioned only in the meaning of physical environment and comparatively with other factors was pointed out less. Although the size of group space mostly is appropriate to the number of children as it is regulated by safety and hygiene requirements, several teachers state that they would like to have more space for organizing creative and active playing or learning activities for children. Teachers' desire to work with modern teaching materials and ICT resources was stated as well.

To sum up, the following categories concerning the environment of an early childhood setting were mentioned by teachers : (1) diversity of educational materials, (2) sufficient size of the group space, (3) use of ICT equipment.

4.4 Collaboration with parents

The majority of questioned teachers believe that successful collaboration with parents is an essential factor that promotes good educational practice. Parental involvement in preparing children for school, family-organized exercising to correct child's speech imperfections as well as organizational support from parents in activities like group festivities and field trips as well as investments in group space improvement and decorating, collecting nature materials for children's educational needs, the improvement of institution's territory are among the benefits that successful collaboration between an early childhood setting and parents can provide in teachers' opinion.

Simultaneously, teachers indicate the need for educating parents to promote their understanding about the aims and contents of modern early childhood education, children's psychological and intellectual maturing processes and comprehension about how parental interest or disinterest in their child's daily life and his or her development affects child's well-being in an early childhood setting. Teachers note that parents often don't understand or don't take into account children's needs, e.g., in cases when children are spending 10 or more hours in an early childhood setting daily. The international research similarly shows that more than 9 out of 10 children attend an early childhood setting for more than 30 hours per week (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014).

Typically for a post-Soviet state, the modern early childhood education of Latvia deeply roots in a long-lasting centralised and well-developed early childhood education system (Žogla, Černova, & Kalniņa, 2011). Similarly, in Estonia the educational work was based on centralized curricula and was at best only moderately adapted to local cultural contexts

(Kimer, Tuul & Õun, 2016; Tuul, Ugaste & Mikser, 2011). After the collapse of the Soviet Union and becoming an independent country in 1991, in Estonia (and similarly in other Baltic countries, i.e., in Latvia and Lithuania) a distinctive move from the old Soviet-style state-controlled models of pedagogy was implemented by developing principles of early childhood pedagogy that would match the renewed values and ideals of the society (Robertson, Kinosh, Barbour, Pukk, & Rosqvist, 2015). Despite of the changes in early childhood education contents, the well-developed system, that Latvia and other Baltic states had in early childhood education in the 50 year period from 1940's to 1980's, largely was saved. Researchers admit that the well-developed system cause also its "dark sides" like increasing parents' disinterest in children's everyday life, decrease of family responsibilities as well as heightened expectations for children's skills and achievements especially for literacy and numeracy that stem from parents' and grandparents' personal experience rooting in principles and requirements of the Soviet-period pedagogy (Žogla, Černova & Kalniņa, 2011). Flexible adaption to parents' needs like opening hours of most of early childhood settings from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., catering three times a day, the legal entitlement to early childhood education from the age of 1,5 as well as strong emphasis on children's school-readiness significantly facilitates parents' daily life at the same time redirecting a considerable part of parents' upbringing functions to the staff of an early childhood setting.

Some teachers believe that an increasing tendency to send children from ethnic minority families to early childhood settings where the language of instruction is Latvian, roots in parents' neglecting their children's needs as well. Teachers stress that the language barrier that these ethnic minorities children have, is negatively affecting their well-being, especially at an early age because the barrier does not allow them to integrate in the life of the group and pedagogical process. The above-mentioned factor is specific for the educational context of Latvia as well as other Baltic states. Since 2000 Latvian is the state language determined by the legislation but the general education up to the secondary education can be acquired in the state language and ethnic minorities languages of instruction (e.g., in Riga, the capital of Latvia among 150 municipal early childhood settings there are 71 institutions with Latvian as the language of instruction, 45 institutions with ethnic minority language of instruction, i.e., Russian, and 34 institutions carrying out both curricula). Parents are free to choose among the institutions offering curricula in Latvian or Russian. Teachers often meet a tendency that parents choose the curriculum with Latvian language of instruction for their children although the family does not speak Latvian at home. Thus, when the child enters an early childhood setting he or she is not familiar with the language of the pedagogical process. The teachers working in institutions with the Latvian language of instruction for the most part do not support such a choice of parents believing that children experience considerable difficulties by attempting fully to get involved in activities and collaborate with peers. Moreover, the children lose the chance to learn Latvian at lessons that fit their level of skills as it is in the curricula with ethnic minority language as the language of instruction.

Categorising the viewpoints it was concluded that in teachers' opinion, positive collaboration between the educational institution and parents fostering good educational practice includes the following factors: (1) parental involvement in preparing children for school, (2) parents' interest in child's daily life in an early childhood setting and his or her development, (3) understanding and taking into account children's needs, (4) parents' organisational support in carrying out educational activities, (4) practical contribution to institution's improvement.

4.5 Discussion

The early childhood education of Latvia is going through a considerable transformation that is still quite unclear for a lot of teachers in spite of the wide resonance in society, especially concerning the questions of the practical implementation. Focus group discussions of the current study revealed that teachers feel insecure in this situation and therefore are waiting not only for thoughtful decisions from the government but also fundamental support in areas of methodical recommendations and professional development.

Recently implemented and in the next school year upcoming changes like transition of full-staff teachers' workload from 30 contact hours to 36 contact hours per week, new state regulations on teachers professional work quality assessment as well as change of the starting age for the school to the age of 6 instead of the former age of 7 and new trends and requirements for the educational process and documentation in accordance with the transition to competence-based approach in the early childhood education, make many issues related to everyday educational practice very sensitive for practitioners, thus providing a risk that the voices of the teachers can be too critical and exacerbated negatively.

It is important also to point out that the results of the study cannot be generalized due to the use of a non-probability sample just to some extent representing the entire landscape of the early childhood education of Latvia as well as due to the fact

that teachers' perspectives represent very subjective self-assessment of their work and professional environment that might not completely correspond with the situations that can be observed in the practice.

Despite of the above-mentioned facts, in general, the teachers' perspectives on early childhood educational practice deeply root in general democratic tendencies characterizing the education of Latvia since 1990's on both – state legislative and institutional – levels and represent mostly child-centred beliefs (Ozola, 2017) thus demonstrating teachers' readiness for transformations and challenges of modern early childhood educational practice.

The studies recently carried out in the Baltic states (Kimer, Tuul, & Õun, 2016; Monkeviciene, Stankeviciene, Autuvekiciene, & Joniliene, 2017; Ozola, 2017; Peterson et al, 2016; Robertson, Kinos, Barbour, Pukk, & Rosqvist, 2015; Tuul, Ugaste, & Mikser, 2011; Ugaste & Niikko, 2015; Žogla, Čemova, & Kalniņa, 2011) demonstrate similar trends in meeting the challenges of modern educational practice in Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania.

5. Conclusions

The analysis of the early childhood teachers' perspectives revealed wide diversity in teachers' personal meaning of good educational practice at the same time showing similarities in their opinions. Based on the data obtained from the teachers' survey and focus group discussions along with the qualitative content analysis of the data, four main areas of the factors contributing to good educational practice were identified such as organization of the pedagogical process, early childhood teachers' competences, environment of an early childhood setting and collaboration with parents.

Although the results cannot be considered being completely reliable nationally, the collected teachers' perspectives highlight several characteristic trends concerning every of the above-mentioned areas.

Organization of the pedagogical process, in teachers' opinion, include the following categories to be enhanced: (1) group size, (2) homogeneity of groups, (3) skilled teacher assistants. The issues related to developmental psychology-based learning outcomes and school-readiness still dominate among teachers' perspectives. Postmodern views on a child emphasizing children's diversity and uniqueness were often mentioned as well. Teachers' statements demonstrate their motivation to carry out an individualised and differentiated approach considering children's personal and developmental trends. At the same time teachers express their desire to work with a homogeneous or balanced group concerning the age and ethnicity of children. Thus, some of perspectives to a considerable extent contradict to the growing multicultural trends of modern education.

According to teachers' opinions, during the initial education and further professional development more attention should be paid to the following areas of teachers' competence: (1) inclusion of children with special needs, (2) interaction with children having different ethnic and cultural background, (3) establishing successful communication with parents, (4) management of children's behavioural problems, (4) novice teachers' planning skills.

The following categories concerning the environment of an early childhood setting were mentioned by teachers : (1) diversity of educational materials, (2) sufficient size of the group space, (3) use of ICT equipment.

Teachers believe that a positive and successful collaboration between the educational institution and the parents that is fostering good educational practice, includes the following factors: (1) parental involvement in preparing children for school, (2) parents' interest in child's daily life in an early childhood setting and his or her development, (3) understanding and taking into account children's needs, (4) organisational support in carrying out educational activities, (4) practical contribution to institution's improvement.

In general Latvian teachers' perspectives demonstrate readiness for transition to a competence-based approach in early childhood education and represent general tendencies of democratization characterizing the education of Latvia currently. However, identified contributing and hindering factors should be taken into account during the process of transformations.

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