

Summary

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Pedagogical continuums and joy of expression! Pedagogy for five-year-olds and the current state of skills and art education in early childhood education and care

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This evaluation commissioned by the Ministry of Education and Culture examined pedagogy for five-year-olds as well as the current state and development needs of skills and art education in Finnish early childhood education and care (ECEC). The assignment had two objectives. The first objective was to produce a report on the current state of pedagogy for five-year-old children and its implementation nationwide in mainland Finland as well as development recommendations based on the report. The second objective of the evaluation was to map the current situation of skills and art education in early childhood education and care. Producing recommendations for developing skills and art education was also part of the assignment.

The evaluation was based on both quantitative and qualitative data gathered by means of a survey. The survey was addressed to ECEC teachers, social pedagogues, child carers, special education teachers and family daycare childminders in municipal and private early childhood education and care. A sample from all municipalities in mainland Finland was picked in two stages for the survey. The response rate was approximately 37 percentage for day-care centre personnel and approximately 34 percentage for family day-carers.

Regarding pedagogy, the focus areas of the evaluation included the implementation of the five learning areas set out in the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (2018), the planning and evaluation of the activities, and interaction between children and the personnel. While the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (2018) contains no specific objectives or operating methods for five-year-olds that would differ from those prescribed for other age groups, the activities must be age appropriate. The design of the evaluation focusing on pedagogy was based on examining the responses of those who worked with five-year-olds in relation to the responses of those who worked with other children at early childhood education and care age as a type of pedagogical continuum.

Five-year-olds participated in ECEC in groups with many types of age structures. For an examination by age group, four groups were formed based on the information provided by respondents. Responses to claims related to pedagogy were positive regardless of the child group's age structure. Interaction

between children and adults was considered good and among other things, children's relationship with nature was supported in the groups, and their independent and instructed physical activity was enabled. On the other hand, children's participation in planning and evaluating the activities and selecting working methods was realised less well than other areas. Similarly, respondents' assessments of how children's linguistic and cultural diversity is supported and how children are encouraged to interpret and describe their thoughts about experiencing art were less positive than in other areas.

In examinations based on child groups' age structures, those working with groups of children aged 5 and older were more positive about their groups' activities in their responses to some of the claims than those working with groups aged 1 to 4 and 1 to 6. In particular, respondents found that activities supporting children's participation were implemented better in groups of children aged 5 and older. According to the responses, specific activities planned by the personnel were also organised for most five-year-olds, regardless of the age structure of the child group.

In line with the definitions given in the guiding documents, the current state of skills and art education in early childhood education and care was evaluated by examining the implementation of the learning area *Diverse forms of expression*, the regularity of its implementation, as well as the personnel's competence and needs for staff training. Respondents found that skills and art education was mainly well implemented, too. Play as well as children's creative processes and independent activities in different areas of expression were emphasised. Of the diverse forms of expression, respondents found that activities related to crafts education were realised the least well. They also felt that taking culturally diverse art education and children's cultural backgrounds into account in pedagogy that guides skills and art education presented challenges. They found that musical expression as well as verbal and bodily expression were implemented well, especially spontaneously and as part of basic everyday activities and spontaneous moments. In examinations by age group, it emerged that musical expression was more commonly implemented in groups of children aged under five. On the other hand, the learning area of visual and crafts expression was implemented as guided activities planned by the personnel, and more often in groups of children aged five and older.

The evaluation was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, and this affected the daily life in ECEC in many ways. In the light of the evaluation findings, ways of enabling all children to benefit from high-quality and diverse ECEC pedagogy should be considered. Based on the evaluation, FINEEC issues the following recommendations for improving pedagogy for five-year-olds and the status of skills and art education:

1. Holistic pedagogy driven by children's needs is at the centre of the steering system of Finnish early childhood education and care. The current steering system has no separate objectives for different age groups, and the evaluation findings are consistent with this fact. In the light of the findings, pedagogy for five-year-olds, as well as early childhood education and care pedagogy as a whole and the education related to that, could be developed by the following means:
 - This evaluation supports the view that play is one of the strengths of ECEC. However, play and its significance in the pedagogic operation was mentioned a little less in the open answers of the interviewees working with five-year-olds compared to other age groups.

Also, in the future it must be ensured that children of five years and older continue to have a possibility to both spontaneous and directed, versatile play which is combined with the learning areas in the ECEC.

- **The development of the pedagogy for five-year-olds has to be based on the comprehensiveness of ECEC.** There was a variation in the five-year-old children's systematic observation and the arrangements of pedagogical objectives for the basic functions, such as eating and getting dressed. The pedagogy of the five-year-old does not solely consist of individual and directed moments. In addition to activities that are directed and potentially separated from other age groups, the pedagogy of the early childhood education based on the children's needs must be realized in all the moments of everyday life in ECEC.
 - **Participation of all children should be enabled in ECEC.** Respondents felt that children's participation was realised less well than many other areas. Especially those working with the youngest child groups found that children's participation is realised poorly. However, operating methods that can be seen as emphasising children's participation were described diversely and at length. The concept of participation is still quite recent, and its meanings in daily life need to be discussed.
 - **Pedagogical activities according to National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (2018) have to be implemented with children of all ages.** For the most part, there were no differences in the respondents' self-assessments examined by the age structure of the child groups they worked with. In many areas, however, respondents working with groups of children aged 5 and older were the most positive in their assessments of the realisation of pedagogy. While the personnel find that the objectives of the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (2018) are achieved especially with the oldest children participating in ECEC, more content related to pedagogy for the youngest children should be added to both basic and staff training. More extensive discussion of why activities prescribed in the ECEC plan are easier to carry out with children aged 5 and older would also be needed.
 - Many recent reforms of ECEC have targeted five-year-olds. **The evaluation findings point the way to developing ECEC as a whole, ensuring that all children participating in ECEC, including the very youngest, would be taken into account both at the national and local level as well as in the basic and staff training of ECEC personnel.**
2. In the self-assessments of the staff of the early childhood education and care, the learning area called diverse forms of expression was carried out the least in everyday life out of all the five learning areas. The task of early childhood education and care is to support the development of children's musical, visual as well as verbal and physical expression in a goal-oriented manner as well as to familiarise them with different art forms and cultural heritage (National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2018). Respondents' self-assessments indicate that while skills and art education was mainly well planned and implemented, there were variations in its delivery regarding different forms of expression. Based on these findings, the delivery of skills and art education and training for ECEC personnel could be developed by the following means:
- **The cultural diversity of both children and art should be taken into account in skills and art education for children.** Respondents felt that addressing cultural diversity in art education was realised less well than other areas. The results related to supporting children's linguistic and cultural diversity also varied regarding pedagogy. Every child has the right to experience and produce art and diverse culture. When planning and delivering

skills and art education, joint discussion and support is needed to clarify what diverse art education means and how an ECEC professional can deliver it to their child group. This includes addressing the topic in the personnel's basic and staff training and developing it in a goal-oriented manner at all levels of activity.

- **The right to diverse areas of artistic expression and the joy of expression belongs to children of all ages.** The evaluation found that music education, for example, was delivered diversely as a part of everyday activities and play situations, especially in groups of children aged 1 to 4. Music education should be delivered in a systematic and goal-oriented manner, ensuring that all children have a possibility to participate in it. In addition, skills and art education should be seen not only as intrinsically valuable but also as a method that offers an experiential way of integrating learning areas while building personal meanings.
 - **The status of crafts expression and the delivery of crafts education should be strengthened.** Within the learning area diverse forms of expression, respondents' assessments of the realisation of activities related to craft education were the least positive. Particular attention should be paid to allowing children to experiment, explore and express themselves using various craft materials and techniques. Both craft traditions associated with children's cultural backgrounds and local traditions can be utilised in the learning area of children's crafts expression.
 - **The ECEC personnel are responsible for providing opportunities for diverse experiencing and making of art for the children. Competence in skills and art education should be addressed in both basic and staff training for ECEC personnel.** Children should be offered diverse artistic and aesthetic experiences: possibilities to express themselves using different techniques and materials and to discuss the thoughts and emotions art and culture arouse in them. In addition, respondents felt that their greatest needs for staff training related to pedagogy which combines media education and art education as well as knowledge of art pedagogy, among other things. The personnel's competence in delivering education in verbal and bodily expression and crafts, in particular, was assessed as weaker.
3. The COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the daily life of early childhood education and care in many ways. The pandemic has brought not only several restrictions and challenges to bear on the realisation of pedagogy but also new operating methods. Lessons for future could be learned from the accumulated experiences:
- **From the perspective of equality between children and families, a discussion is needed about how remote ECEC is delivered and how professionals keep in touch with the families when ECEC cannot be offered normally.** It should be considered further whether more detailed national and/or local guidelines for delivering ECEC in emergency conditions are needed in Finland.
 - The COVID-19 pandemic has given rise to many pedagogical practices that have been found effective. **In ECEC, the ways of sharing the best practices should be developed.** This way, the lessons learned during the pandemic could be used as widely as possible in ECEC, today and in the future.

Keywords: early childhood education and care, pedagogy, skills and art education, National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education, in-service training, state of emergency