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One of the tasks set for the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre in the National Education Evaluation Plan 2016–2019 is evaluating the implementation of the national core curriculum for pre-primary and basic education. This report examines the evaluation results of the first subproject of the evaluation. The results concern the functionality and effectiveness of the steering system for education, and the factors promoting and preventing the achievement of objectives set in the curricula.

The education provided in pre-primary education units and schools is steered by the general objectives determined in a Government decree (422/2012). These are made concrete by special objectives included in the core curricula, local curricula as well as annual plans. The key task of the curricula is steering the pedagogy and contents of the teaching and education implemented in pre-primary education units and schools. They also aim to ensure the implementation of equality in education.

The evaluation concerned all pre-primary and basic education providers in mainland Finland as well as the pre-primary education units and schools selected for the study sample. In the autumn of 2017, basic data was collected of the processes of preparing the national core curriculum for pre-primary and basic education as well as the achievement of the content-related objectives set in the curricula. The subproject also included interviewing specialists from the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish National Agency for Education who were involved in preparing the national objectives, distribution of lesson hours or the core curricula. The interview data was primarily used as support for interpreting the results of the evaluation. As its document data, the evaluation also utilised documents related to preparing the national core curricula, material from the OPS 2016 website as well as local curricula for pre-primary and basic education. The evaluation data was analysed qualitatively and quantitatively.

According to the evaluation results, the national and local steering system of education supports the implementation of pre-primary and basic education. The national objectives set for education promote the cohesiveness of pre-primary and basic education, the development of a local operating culture, and strengthening transversal competence. The results indicate that while the distribution of lesson hours supports the achievement of the objectives set for subjects and grades in the national core curriculum for basic education, it fails to sufficiently promote the achievement of the goals set for transversal competence or the development of teaching. The work of pre-primary education units and schools is best supported by local curricula and annual plans.

An atmosphere of positivity towards development, involvement and cooperation between different actors increases and fosters the success of local curriculum preparation and introduction processes. According to the evaluation results, not all education providers have reserved enough time and resources for the curriculum processes. Particular attention should also be paid to information provision and communications.

In pre-primary and basic education, achieving the objectives of the curriculum is promoted most by cooperation between teachers and readiness for change. According to the groups of respondents from pre-primary and basic education, the achievement of the objectives set in the curricula is prevented by facilities and resources and an atmosphere and attitudes that hinder change. In pre-primary education, the poor availability of qualified early childhood education and care teachers is also an issue. Factors important in promoting the school culture include encouraging the members of the school community to engage in collaboration, team work skills, and joint objectives.

Steering and education related to the implementation of the national core curricula have supported the preparation of local curricula by clarifying the general policies and changes included in the reform. However, the results of the evaluation indicate that there is a need for more practice-oriented and targeted training to support the development of pre-primary and basic education and the change in the school culture. The key concepts of the core curricula should also be more carefully integrated into practice to increase mutual understanding

The assessment group has prepared the following development recommendations based on the evaluation results:

1. Transversal competence and division of subjects should be further harmonised in the national core curriculum for basic education.

Clear objectives support the development of basic education at the practical level. Combining transversal competence and the division of subjects has proven challenging in the development of basic education. Although transversal competence has been integrated into the objectives set for the subjects, their connection is left open-ended or subject to interpretation at the practical level of teaching. This openness to interpretation does not promote the desired renewal of learning and teaching.

2. Renewing the distribution of lesson hours and the national core curriculum for basic education side by side would better support the development of education at the local level.

The distribution of lesson hours is prepared several years before the national core curriculum, as a result of which these may be difficult to reconcile. Preparing the distribution of lesson hours and the curricula simultaneously could better support the processes of preparing and introducing the national core curricula.

3. The concepts included in the national core curricula for pre-primary and basic education open to multiple interpretations must be made clearer.

The extensive concepts open to multiple interpretations included in the core curricula have been interpreted in different ways at the local level. This openness to interpretations causes a lack of clarity in the work at pre-primary education units and schools. Clearly determining the concepts supports the preparation and introduction of local curricula, and promotes forming sufficient mutual understanding at all different levels of operators. Support and guidance should also be systematic in the context of the interpretation of concepts.

4. The staff training concerning the curricula must be timely, correctly focused, practice-oriented and equally available for all.

The evaluation results emphasise a wish for training promoting the implementation of the national core curricula. The training should pay careful attention to different target groups (e.g. education providers of different sizes) and their needs. The method for education provision should be particularly considered in terms of contents and implementation methods: for instance, online training could provide a good means for improving accessibility.

5. Interaction between actors at the local level is important and must be increased.

According to the results, education providers perceive the functionality of the steering system more positively compared to pre-primary education units and schools. Reflecting on personal work, sharing of information and versatile interaction ensure that the objectives for local development work are shared.

6. Versatile cooperation practices must be promoted at the level of pre-primary education units and schools. Emphasis should also be put on the role of cooperation and a positive atmosphere in supporting the achievement of the objectives set in the curricula.

Cooperation between various actors, discussion of issues such as the conception of learning, experiences of involvement and an atmosphere positive towards development promote the achievement of the objectives set in the curricula. Small education providers particularly need cooperation networks for preparing and implementing curriculum work.

7. The effectiveness of communications and information provision must be improved in both work reforming the curricula as well as that related to local curricula.

Sufficient resources must be reserved for the provision of information and communications at both national and local levels. Digitalisation must still be utilised as part of the curriculum work in the future, and the previously created systems (e.g. the OPS 2016 website and ePerusteet) must be developed. Successful communications lay a foundation for appropriate public discussion in both national and local media.

8. Sufficient time and resources must be reserved for planning the processes related to the curricula for pre-primary and basic education as well as preparing and introducing the curricula.

At both local and national levels, sufficient time and other resources should be reserved for different actors throughout the course of the entire curriculum process. There is a need for support and training both before the adoption of the national core curricula and local curricula as well as long after this.