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Perspectives from curriculum work – Evaluation of the implementation of the national core curricula for pre-primary and basic education 2014

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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 curricula for pre-primary and basic education. This evaluation is realised as four subprojects. In this report, we look at the evaluation results obtained in the second and third subproject. The results concern the functioning of the curriculum processes in pre-primary and basic education at the local level. Attention is paid especially to how the processes of preparing and implementing the local curricula steer the development of work in pre-primary education units and schools from the teachers' point of view. The evaluation was targeted at factors that promote and prevent the achievement of the content-related objectives of the curricula in the everyday life of pre-primary education units and schools.

The evaluation material from the second and third subproject of the evaluation consists of notes made during the visits to pre-primary education units and schools, the surveys directed at teachers at the units and schools visited, and the local curricula and annual plans of these units and schools. A total of 33 evaluation visits were carried out in spring 2018 and spring 2019. During these visits, discussions were conducted with the teachers in pre-primary and basic education, the headmasters of the schools and the directors of pre-primary education units. In addition, teaching and learning situations were observed. The units and schools visited were selected from the pre-primary education units and schools that participated in the first sub-project of the evaluation. Approaches of enhancement-led evaluation were used in the evaluation.

According to the evaluation results, an atmosphere favourable to development in the pre-primary education unit or school, pedagogical leadership and internal cooperation promote the achievement of the content-related objectives set in the curricula. The curriculum reform of 2014 has increased teachers' reflection on their own work, the development of working practices and the use of different learning environments and teaching methods. The activities in line with the of learning concept have been realised as interactive learning and the strengthening of the active agency of the children and pupils, among other things.

Based on the evaluation visits, the implementation of (in basic education, multidisciplinary) learning modules may at best become a collective learning process that supports the development of the operating culture. Learning modules have increased cooperation, collaborative planning and participation in the pre-primary education units and schools. On the other hand, local actors have varying interpretations of the norms of the multidisciplinary learning modules and of the objectives of transversal competence. A more in-depth consideration of transversal competence as an objective of pre-primary and basic education would require more time for shared discussions and sharing of good practices between teachers.

In the schools and units visited, the development of the learning environments and the use of different learning environments has supported a pedagogy that is in line with the conceptions of learning in the national core curricula. However, teachers mainly refer to physical space solutions when they talk about learning environments, although it would be important to also pay attention to the psychological and social dimensions of learning environments in the development work. Clear communication, diverse discussions and a shared understanding of learning environments that support learning are required between different actors at the national and local levels to enable the development of the learning environments.

At the preparation and implementation stages of the curricula, special attention should be paid to instructions and training related to the key reforms. The implementation of the curricula for pre-primary and basic education is a long-term process, in which time is required for diverse discussion and cooperation. According to the results of the evaluation, the constant rush, the small amount of shared discussion and the abstract and idealistic nature of the curricula prevent pre-primary education units and schools from achieving the content-related objectives set in the national core curricula. The implementation of the curricula can be supported by familiarising the entire personnel of the pre-primary education unit and the school with the objectives of the curricula and by creating a shared understanding of the directions in which teaching will be developed. To enable the curriculum to become a "living" document, it is necessary to discuss its objectives and key content on a regular basis.

At best, the national core curricula, the local curricula and the annual plans together make up a coherent whole and support the implementation of everyday pre-primary and basic education. However, the support provided by participation in the local curriculum work and the importance of curriculum work in a teacher's work should be emphasised more. This way, teachers' perception of the importance of the documents and their commitment to the implementation of the curricula can be strengthened.

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

1. Support and guidance for the implementation of the curricula must be increased and strengthened.

According to the results, the norms of the curricula are interpreted in various ways at the municipal level and it may be difficult to find a shared understanding. The implementation of the curricula is a long-term process in which support, guidance and staff training are required. The Finnish National Agency for Education must therefore clarify the concepts used and ensure that support is provided after the implementation. At the municipal level, on the other hand, sufficient discussion must be conducted on the content and key concepts of the curricula. Allocating resources to wide-ranging communication and provision of information during the implementation of the curricula will help to clarify the direction and the objectives of the reform to all participants.

2. The education provider must together with the managements of the pre-primary education units and schools ensure that clear pedagogical leadership is shown during the development process.

Pedagogical leadership creates the preconditions for the development of pre-primary and basic education. The education provider and the management of both the pre-primary education unit and the school play a central part in following through the content-related objectives set in the curricula. This requires an understanding of the content of the curricula and the objectives set in it. The management of change requires a strategic plan, time, development of the personnel's competence and discussion. Pedagogical leadership enables changes in the operating culture and promotes the implementation of the curricula in the everyday work of pre-primary education units and schools. In addition, the community's positive attitude towards development supports the pedagogical reform.

3. Participation, interactive activities and cooperation should be increased in pre-primary and basic education.

According to the evaluation results, cooperation in pre-primary education units and schools promotes the change of the operating culture, the development of teaching and the achievement of the content-related objectives set in the curricula. The curriculum reform is a learning process in which the education provider must systematically engage the entire personnel. Pre-primary education units and schools must ensure that sufficient time is provided for collaborative planning and increase the use of interactive working methods both between the personnel and in teaching. This requires pedagogical leadership, scheduling and allocation of resources in pre-primary education units and schools. Based on the evaluation results, it can be concluded that the participation of pupils and guardians is not yet realised as required so that the objectives could be reached.

4. Teachers' wellbeing and coping in pre-primary and basic education should be taken care of.

In addition to the curricula, many changes in society and municipalities challenge teachers to reflect on their working methods and change them. According to the results, teachers in pre-primary and basic education are busy in their everyday work and do not necessarily have enough time for following through curriculum-related reforms in the desired way. The education provider can alleviate the busyness and the sense of rush through the allocation of resources, while the pre-primary education units and schools can do it by organising the work, planning the use of time and collaborating. Development activities in which attention is paid to teachers' coping and wellbeing promote a positive atmosphere in pre-primary education units and schools.

5. The physical, psychological and social dimensions of learning environments should be paid attention to in the development of learning environments.

According to the results, in pre-primary education units and schools, the discussion on learning environments focuses mainly on the limitations and deficiencies of the physical facilities. When examining the physical learning environments, more attention should be paid to space solutions that promote learning even in challenging facilities. When the topic is discussed in pre-primary education units and schools, more attention should also be paid to the importance of the development of physical and social learning environments as separate entities. This would support the achievement of the content-related objectives of the curricula and make it easier to pay attention to the concept of learning in the pedagogical activities.

6. The importance of curriculum work must be emphasised more in the development of school work.

The curriculum for basic education should serve as a tool for developing teaching. According to the evaluation results, some of the teachers in basic education do not find the national core curriculum, local curriculum or the annual plan very important in the development of teaching. The Finnish National Agency for Education can promote their commitment to the document through clear communication and training. Education providers must ensure that teachers are engaged in the curriculum process. It is important that values, the conception of learning and the objectives set in the curriculum are discussed in schools and everyone strives for an atmosphere that is favourable for development. Every teacher is personally responsible and the teaching community jointly responsible for the adoption and utilisation of the curriculum. In addition, the use of research and evaluation data related to curriculum work must be increased especially in basic education.

7. The importance and objectives of transversal competence and multidisciplinary learning modules must be clarified in pre-primary education units and schools.

The development and implementation of transversal competence and multidisciplinary learning modules has started well in pre-primary education units and schools. However, the shared understanding of their objectives and importance varies. Transversal competence is an objective that should be taken into consideration in all their activities by pre-primary education units and schools. This can be promoted by recurrent shared discussions about its importance. If planned and implemented in cooperation, multidisciplinary learning modules increase participation and develop a communal operating culture. According to the national core curriculum for pre-primary education, pre-primary education as a whole should integratively consist of multidisciplinary learning modules. According to the evaluation results, this aim has not been fully realised as yet. Both pre-primary education units and schools should therefore pay attention to the implementation of the objectives of multidisciplinary learning modules.

8. Providers of pre-primary and basic education must ensure that sufficient resources are reserved for the implementation of the curricula.

In municipalities, the ongoing curriculum reform, changes in the population and school structures, and the limited resources cause pressure for change. The budgets of municipalities have been tight during the implementation of the curricula and pre-primary education units and schools have to operate with very different resources. To promote the implementation of the curricula in the best possible way with the scarce resources, pre-primary education units and schools should be engaged in planning the allocation of the resources. In the allocation, some leeway should be reserved for the possible new needs emerging as the implementation progresses, such as the staff training needs observed in the pre-primary education units and schools.

Keywords: Pre-primary education, basic education, national core curriculum, implementation of the curriculum, the conception of learning, transversal competence, multidisciplinary learning modules, learning environments, collaboration between teachers