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Discussion paper

Advocacy and leadership

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THE NATIONAL STEERING OF QUALITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN FINLAND

In this review I first clarify conception of Finnish early childhood education (ECEC). Then I'm moving on to consider shortly two main themes of my study; quality and steering. After that I present restrictions, aims and tasks, material and methodology of my study. I finish by telling preliminary results and conclusions.

Background

The research comes together to very important basic services in Finland; day care and Early Childhood Education (ECEC)¹. The goal of this study is to describe and clarify nationally how quality has been steered through steering documents, actions and directions. Aim of this research is also clear up how quality is seen in those steering documents. This study allocates to time between the birth of Day Care Act 1973 and present time (2007). The program of Government² promises that Day Care Act is renewed until year 2011. That gives interesting view to this study.

There are two main areas of interest in this study: quality and how has it been steered nationally. There is very few research on quality³ and no research at all on steering/guiding system in Early Childhood Education in Finland. Also there is few theoretical analyze⁴ of what quality is in ECE in Finland. This research is important for the development of the quality and steering in ECEC both in national, communal and also international level.

Early Childhood Education in Finland

Early childhood education have been conceptually determined in Finland for the first time in years 2001 and 2003, when was published two important documents concerning Finnish ECEC and it's

¹ See brochure of Finnish ECEC: <http://varttua.stakes.fi/EN/index.htm>

² The Program of The Prime Minister Vanhanen's second Cabinet 2007-2011.

³ Parrila 2002, Tauriainen 2000

⁴ Hujala 1995

quality: Government resolution Concerning the national Policy Definition on Early Childhood Education and care⁵ and National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education in Finland⁶. Before that determination there was no consensus between different parties on what that concept of ECEC should contain. It is more than obvious that discussion of that determination is still strongly going on

ECEC is, according to Curriculum Guidelines educational interaction taking place in young children`s different living environments, aimed at promoting their balanced growth, development and learning. In order for the educational efforts of families and educators to form a meaningful whole from the child`s point of view, close co-operation, i.e., an ECEC partnership is needed between parents and educators.

Publicly operated, supervised and supported ECEC comprises care, education and teaching. ECEC is systematic and goal oriented interaction and collaboration, where the child`s spontaneous play is key importance. It is built on a holistic view on children`s growth, development and learning, drawing on a wide range of pedagogic knowledge, cross-discipline information and research and expertise on pedagogic methodology.

A central resource for ECEC is competent staff maintaining a high quality of ECEC requires that both educational communities and individual educators have a strong professional awareness.

ECEC services are provided in accordance with the national policy definition, the most importance activities including day care centres, family day care and various community based activities. The services are provided by municipalities, organisations, private sector service providers and parishes.

Pre-school education is systematic teaching and education intended for children who will start their compulsory education next year. ECEC and basic education form an integrated whole that ensures consistence and continuity in the child`s development. ECEC also covers childrens subject to compulsory education if they use ECEC services.

⁵ Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. 2002:9

⁶ Stakes 2003

Quality

Developing quality has been central theme in public and in private sector from the early years of 1990's. The concept of quality is very complex, ambiguous and unclear....and therefore so very interesting and most capturing!

It is very complicated and maybe even impossible to find one and only and objective definition of quality. Quality has to be defined in every substance individually and separately. From that individual point of view of quality arises the essential question: what is quality in early childhood education and care? How is it defined? Who can define it? On what grounds and premises can it be defined?

Different facets (actors) and disciplines have their own viewpoints on quality and quality managing and different ways to act accordingly (Hujala 1999, 55.). Sarala & Sarala (1996) tell us that understanding the different kind of definitions and viewpoints of quality is necessary when we are interested in developing the quality. Quality has to be seen from the different points of view to get as many-sided picture from the phenomenon of quality as can be possible.

In order to define quality in ECEC you always have to have a conception of what good early childhood education is. In Finnish ECEC the conceptual analyses of quality has been very modest, and it has not been connected to general theories of quality, conceptions of quality-experts or basic-assumptions in science of philosophy (Parrila 2002, 41).

So far the only Finnish theoretical disposition on quality in ECEC is from professor Hujala. It was presented in year 1995 (Hujala-Huttunen 1995). Four years later, in 1999, theory was modified in University of Oulu. According to that theory there are four different kind of quality-factors in ECEC: foundation factors, indirect factors, process factors and impact factors (Hujala 1999, 79.).

There is still too few research, discussion, debate, literature and developing projects concerning the quality in ECEC in Finland. Anyhow, there has been published a few doctoral thesis on this matter in last few years (Parrila 2002, Tauriainen 2000). Also the information-steering towards municipalities has risen due to increase of ECEC quality literature.

There have been very many reforms of Day Care Act since 1973, but it is undoubtedly truth that the act has become old. Up-to-date law is important because it defines the minimum standards of quality in Finnish ECE and therefore influences to steering of quality.

Steering

The Finnish Government has steered (managed, guided) ECEC by laws and regulations. (Pihlaja, P. 2004, 15.). In addition to norm-steering other forms of governmental steering are resource-steering and information-steering. (Alila, K. 2004). Strong governmental norm-steering changed and was called off in beginning of 1990`s. Government started to emphasize autonomy of municipalities. That shift created a completely new situation of steering of Finnish ECEC.

The change referred, that government moved instead of strict norm-steering towards to information-steering. The structure of steering changed and new steering parties was slowly born. Nowadays from this situation is nearly twenty years. It hasn't been easy years concerning the steering or thinking especially quality-steering. It has been difficult to know (for municipalities and other sides too) who is steering who, in what matters and in what way. This period of over ten years has said to be quite confusing. Strongest opinions are saying that there was a few steering what so ever for several years connecting to quality in ECEC⁷.

In couple last years there has been a new change going on in steering. Steering by information has found more of it`s channels and methods both in communal and national level. In years 2001 and 2003 were published two important information-steering documents concerning Finnish ECEC and it`s quality: Government resolution Concerning the national Policy Definition on Early Childhood Education and care⁸ and National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education in Finland⁹. Those documents aim to guide and develop content and quality in ECEC.

Very interesting and longlasting (over 20 years) debate in Finnish history of ECE have been the discussion what is the best place for ECE administratively. Is it ministry of Social Affairs and health or is it ministry of Educations? In this moment we have in Finland very confusing mixed model, where Ministry of Social Affairs and Health steers ECE, but Ministry of Education one part

⁷ Kananaja, A. et.al 2007.

⁸ Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. 2002:9

⁹ Stakes 2003.

of it; preschool¹⁰. The Government Program promises that this placement of ECE is being clarified during this Government. For municipalities it has been possible for couple of years to decide where ECE is placed in communal level, social welfare or in sector of education. As a conclusion, you might easily say that Finnish steering system is not clear and systematic.

Restrictions of study

In study, it is obligatory and necessary to make some restrictions in order to execute research securely (in time) and economically. Restrictions of this study are as follows:

<i>The nature of study:</i>	Quantitative, describing and mapping.
<i>Securely:</i>	From the birth of Finnish Act of Day Care 1973 since 2007. (34 years)
<i>Administrative:</i>	National level Steering and administrative documents of Social Welfare.
<i>Elements of Steering</i>	The steering by norms and information in ECEC.
<i>Methodology:</i>	Content analyze.

Objectives and tasks

The central aim of my doctoral thesis is to produce new knowledge of how quality has been defined and what are quality conceptions and meanings in national steering documents of ECE in social welfare. This study aims to clarify relationship between conceptions of quality in steering by norms and information in the process of national steering in years 1973 - 2007. Study combines themes of quality and steering in ECE by asking enclosed questions.

Objectives on this research are to describe

- 1) how quality is defined in Finnish normative and informative steering of ECEC?
- 2) what are the aims and expressions linked to conception of quality on those documents?
- 3) what is the relationship between conceptions of quality in steering by norms and informative?
- 4) how can the steering of quality seen as a form of leadership? What is the connection of steering and leadership?

¹⁰ In Finland preschool is year before school. School starts at age seven.

Material and Methodology

Quantitative material consist of the National steering and guiding documents (norms and informative) in Early Childhood Education from year 1973 to year 2007.

Documents of steering by norms

- The Act of Day Care (all changes and background materials)
- General Instructions on Board of Social Affairs (1973-1991)

Documents of steering by information

- The National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland (2005)
- Government Resolution Concerning the National Policy Definition on Early Childhood Education and Care (2002)
- The Report of Committee of Aims in ECE (1983)

This study uses quantitative methods and content analyze as a methodology.

Preliminary results and conclusions

Analyzing the material is uncompleted and results are still very preliminary.

General results of analysing the material:

- theoretical definition of quality is insufficient
- there is lot of general discussion of quality
- elements of quality in ECE is unformed

Amount of quality-concepts in material

- quality is mentions all together 75 times
 - in information-steering documents 42 times (56%)
 - in the norm-steering documents 33 times (44%)
- quality appears 1973-2007
 - info-documents:
 - 1980`s 14 times,
 - 1990`s 0 times,
 - 2000`s 11 times
 - norm-documents:

- 1970`s 2 times,
 - 1980`s 8 times,
 - 1990`s 9 times,
 - 00`s 14 times
- In 1970`s mentions of quality are very few (norm 2)
 - ⇒ Steering by information isn`t yeat strong
 - ⇒ Quality as a concept isn`t yeat familier: there wasn`t knowhow to speak about quality.
 - In 1980`s mentions of quality grows strongly (22).
 - ⇒ Steering by information grows
 - in 1990`s fewer mentions of quality than in 1980`s and no mentions at all of quality in steering by information.
 - ⇒ Steering by information is week, but inside the norm-steering: many changes in law.
 - ⇒ In Finnish society deep economical depression: no discussion of quality
 - In the early years of 2000`s mentions of quality rises considerably
 - ⇒ New information-steering documents are published and implemented

Thematic appearances on conceptions of quality

THEME	AMOUNT OF MENTIONS	MENTIONS
General discussion of quality	18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - development of quality (2) - guarantee of quality - quality of ECE - quality and quantity (8) - aims of quality - requirements of quality - conditions of quality - impacting quality - qualitativly good ECE
Day Care as service / Day Care as system	13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - amount and quality (3) - equality in quality - equality of accessibility - freedom of choice to families - functioning steering system
Quality and assessment	11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - assessment of quality - management of quality (4) - methods of quality assessment

Personnel	9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - sufficiency - accessibility - education/training - professional capability and awareness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - capability of management of quality and assessment
Education and care	9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - play, care and education - physical care - transition to preschool and school - educational methods - aspects of health - security
Groupsize of children	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ratio - maximum size - groupsize
Planning	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - planning ECEC - developing the curriculum
Environment	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - environment of care and education - development of environment - requirements of environment
Co-operations	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - co-operation with parents - co-operation in planning
Childrens development	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - supporting child´s development - quality of childrens individuality
Costs	2	
Others	2	

Relationship between conceptions of quality in steering by norms and informative

- there is not systematic relationship between steering by norms and steering by information
- themes of steering by norm-steering are not transmitted automatically or systematically to information-steering
- steering by information don't necessarily support steering by norms
 - ⇒ these two ways of steering should support each other better and goal-directed
- when norm-steering was strong, information-steering wasn't used to implement norms
- when information-steering got stronger, norm-steering was decreased considerably.
 - ⇒ steering by information needs sometimes norms for support
- grasp the insignificance of information-steering and meaning of development it's methods is relevant.

Steering as a form of leadership. Connection of steering and leadership.

- steering should be seen clearer as a form of leadership
- strong, systematic, coal-directed and multifaceted steering is basic elements of good leadership
- the structure of steering should be explicit, it helps leadership to function.

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