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CHAPTER

7

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND IMPACT OF THE EARLY CHANGE PROJECT: REFLECTIONS FROM THE FINNISH EXAMPLE

CHAPTER OUTLINE

- The Finnish Early Childhood Education context
- Background of the use of the ECERS-R rating scale in Finland
- Implementation of Early Change project in Finland
- Experiences and impact of the project

Chapter 7. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND IMPACT OF THE EARLY CHANGE PROJECT: REFLECTIONS FROM THE FINNISH EXAMPLE

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7.1 The Finnish early childhood education context

In Finland, early childhood education and care (ECEC) is facilitated, developed and evaluated by the municipalities. At a national level, ECEC is organised and controlled by the Ministry of Education and Culture. All children under school age have a subjective right to early childhood education and care. Furthermore, a mandatory and free-of-charge pre-primary school is provided in the year preceding the start of primary school at the age of seven. ECEC in Finland has two main aims, firstly to offer day-care and secondly to provide early childhood education for children under school age. The Curriculum Guidelines for ECEC (Finnish National Board of Education, 2005) emphasizes goal-oriented interaction and collaboration, where spontaneous play is of key importance. ECEC aims at promoting personal well-being, reinforcing positive interaction skills, and supporting the gradual building of personal autonomy. (Finnish National Board of Education, 2005.) The national core curriculum for pre-primary education underlines supporting children's individual development through playful learning (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014).

Finnish day-care staff is a multi-professional educator community in which all staff members are required to have an appropriate qualification (see e. g. Karila, 2012; OECD, 2012). One kindergarten educator out of three in any day care centre is required to hold a tertiary education level degree (bachelor or master in education, or bachelor in social sciences), and two staff members out of three are required to hold a secondary-school level qualification in the field of social welfare and healthcare (Karila, 2012). Demanded qualification for ECEC staff is provided by seven universities, 21 colleges and 70 vocational schools (Karila et al., 2013). After graduation in-service teachers' and other staff members' learning is supported through various professional development opportunities. Participation in professional development is mandatory for ECEC staff, and is mainly financed by the government and the employer. (OECD, 2012.) There are several recent research-based publications that specify the future needs for

developing ECEC in Finland (see e. g. Karila et al. 2013; Karila, 2016; OECD, 2012). Nationwide recommendations for developing ECEC education in Finland include further strengthening of the continuum of basic training and continuing education for in-service staff (Karila et al., 2013).

So far there has not been a systematic national assessment about the current quality of ECEC in Finland. Still the differences in quality of ECEC among municipalities are known. (Karila, 2016.) According to the new law for child care, the aim of ECEC assessment is to support the development of early childhood education and to enhance child welfare, development and learning. The early education providers are obliged to internal evaluation of the quality of ECEC it offers, and participate in external evaluation. Cities and municipalities have high level of autonomy in regards organizing the quality assessment. Thus, there are various assessment systems for the early education at the local level, including client satisfaction assessment and economic efficiency analyses.

The external evaluation will be carried out during 2016–2019 by the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC), which is an independent expert organization responsible for conducting and developing nationwide external evaluation of the quality of early childhood education in Finland. FINEEC was established in 2014 by combining the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council, the Finnish Education Evaluation Council, and the Finnish National Board of Education in order to consolidate evaluation activities crossing educational level boundaries. FINEEC's evaluation project for early childhood education includes drawing up a quality assessment model and constructing an audit system for evaluation of pedagogic practices and leadership (Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, 2016).

7.2 Background of the use of the ECERS-R rating scale in Finland

In Finland, the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-R) has not been systematically used as a whole in any cities or municipalities in Finland in order to assess the quality of early education and day care environments before the Early Change project.

Hence the research team comprising research experts in early education at the University of Jyväskylä and the Kajaani University of Applied Sciences were recruited to participate in the project. Also the cities of Jyväskylä, located in the central region of Southern

Finland with the population of 138.800 inhabitants, and Kajaani, located in the middle of Finland with the population of 37.500 inhabitants, agreed to join the project as operating bodies. As a result, 20 selected experienced kindergarten educators from 13 day care centres in Jyväskylä and 10 educators from 10 kindergartens in Kajaani joined the Finnish team, representing both public and private sector.

The Finnish university research team organised in total six one-day training seminars in Jyväskylä and three in Kajaani for the early childhood educators in order to organise the implementation of the ECERS-R instrument. Selected members of the research team also attended in three international ECERS-R project meetings in Greece and Portugal. Because the ECERS-R manual had not been used in Finland before this project, the translation process started immediately after the contracts agreements were signed among the participating bodies. An important impact target was also to initiate co-operation between early educators and university researchers. One doctoral student and several master students were involved in the project with the aim to prepare their dissertations based on the outcomes and experiences of the project.

Each participating educator assessed three to six classes or child groups, resulting in totally 123 evaluations in Jyväskylä, representing 42 kindergartens, and 36 evaluations in Kajaani, representing 19 kindergartens. In Jyväskylä there are 90 city owned and 39 private kindergartens, and in Kajaani 18 city owned and 14 private, respectively (Jyväskylä, 2016; Kajaani, 2016). The evaluations were done primarily during February - May 2013.

Early education educators observed and evaluated the activities and facilities in each child group from three to six hours. In addition to observation, they also interviewed the kindergarten staff in order to acquire additional information about matters that were not able to be observed. The evaluation and numerical rating were calculated from the basis of the ECERS-R rating instructions, by assessing if each individual assessment category met the criterion.

7.3 Learning experiences during the project

Considering the goal of the project, teaching kindergarten educators new skills to evaluate their work and education was successful. Getting to know ECERS-R as an assessment tool and to learn to use it with other colleagues was inspirational. Based on the experiences and the feedback received from the participating early childhood educators, it was evident that the professional qualifications of the participating Finnish kindergarten educators increased during the Early Change project and their pedagogical practices have improved significantly, based on the reflection they had from using the ECERS-R scale.

7.4 Evaluation of the project

The early educators participating in the project in Jyväskylä towards the end of the project assessed the ECERS-R quality evaluation measure using an evaluation form, consisting of six items analysing the perceptions of the Early Change project and the experiences about the use of the ECERS-R assessment tool. The responses were given using the 7-point scale anchored with 1=poorly/not useful/not satisfied/too little to 7= very well/very useful/very satisfied/too many. Furthermore, the feedback of the early education educators' experiences of the ECERS-R assessment tool and the evaluation process was systematically collected during the seminars organised at the end phase of the Early Change project.

In addition, the 30 kindergarten educators were asked about how often they have been evaluated by the employer. Five-point Likert scale was used (1= never, 2=less than yearly, 3=yearly, 4= monthly, 5=regularly). The mean was 3.38, showing that the kindergarten educators reported having been evaluated less than monthly, however more often than once a year. This fact seems to provide a challenge to the evaluation strategy of the cities, municipalities, and the Ministry of Education and Culture.

Based on the evaluation questionnaire it can be concluded that ECERS-R quality evaluation measure provides good information about the learning environments in the early education ("How well does the ECERS-R give information about learning environments of early education?" Mean 5.3, SD .70).

Early educators also considered the quality evaluation measure very useful in developing the early education ("How useful is this kind of assessment from the point of view of

developing early education?" Mean 6.0, SD .90). ECERS-R quality measure examined extensively the learning environments of the early education and helped small details, which may have received less attention during regular work days, to be observed. Especially the interaction component was perceived as an interesting and functional entity of the measure. Early educators also found the results of the measure useful. The results helped them to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of the kindergarten as well as the things that need to be improved in order to enhance the quality. The participants of the project considered the ability to compare the results internationally a great opportunity.

Early educators found the evaluation made with the ECERS-R quality measure very beneficial to their own learning ("How useful is this kind of assessment from the viewpoint of your own learning?" Mean 6.2, SD .90). The evaluation with the quality measure helped to consider new perspectives and to expand the concept of quality. The discussions related to the evaluation and the feedback given after the evaluations were also perceived beneficial and important to the early education educators' own learning. Using the measure and evaluating the quality also led the participants to reflect on their own actions and on how the early educators with their own actions might improve the quality of their kindergarten activities and organisation.

Early educators perceived the number of measured assessment categories as appropriate ("Is the number of assessment categories appropriate/good" Mean 4.8, SD 1.33). The scope and accuracy of the ECERS-R quality measure received positive feedback but it also received some criticism. The extensive measure gave a versatile picture of the learning environment, and the extensive evaluation scale as well as specific phrase descriptions helped to complete the evaluation. On the other hand, familiarizing oneself with the measure was perceived to take a long time, and performing a thorough evaluation was found very laborious and too heavy within the instructed time limits. Additionally, counting the minutes, the percentages and accurate quantities was perceived as too demanding and unnecessary. The early educators generally raised the question: "Is quantity a means of quality".

The early educators generally believed that the ECERS-R quality measure suits well for the Finnish early education culture ("How well does the ECERS-R assessment tool match with

Finnish early education culture?" Mean 4.3, SD 1.26). However, some participants brought up the opinion that the measure included a number of items that may not be considered as valid in the Finnish early education culture. For example, a typical Finnish kindergarten does not usually have a single room where the action takes place but the place consists of several small areas. Therefore, as the children spread out, some of them do not have an adult to look after them. This, however, is not considered a security risk in Finland but rather an indication of trust. Also, the emphasis on hygiene was considered frustrating, as the hygiene level in Finnish kindergartens is usually satisfactory. Furthermore, the scale was criticized for enhancing tolerance towards the behaviour of the children, as early educators perceived it to show too vague leadership style. Early educators also wished that the measure should have better considered the Finnish culture and living environment, such as the four climate seasons, causing major changes to daily activities and day care circumstances. On the other hand, the early educators recognized that adjusting the measure too much towards the Finnish early education and culture would eliminate the possibility of international comparison of the results.

The early educators were very satisfied with the training they received during the project ("How satisfied are you with the education you got in this project regarding running the assessment in kindergartens?" Mean 6.1, SD .90). The given familiarization and instructions were perceived to help complete the evaluation.

Additionally, early educators participating in the project wrote an essay in which they evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of the ECERS-R quality measure as well as its applicability to Finland. The measure was perceived to emphasize too much external factors defining the quality of early education, compared to the amount and details about evaluation of the interaction between the children and adults as well as between the children. Also, the children's and the parents' perspectives in evaluating quality were requested. Furthermore, early educators longed for more value of physical activity on the quality measure because in the Finnish early education the importance of physical exercise in children's development is acknowledged. Additionally, the value of play was perceived as low in the quality measure. Finally, according to the early educators, the quality measure also lacked the evaluation of

different work methods (e.g., the daily use of PCS images, documenting, cooperation with parents, and group size) and the staff (leadership and teamwork) as components of quality.

The overall perception about the evaluation process was that it was very laborious, and needed at least one half day per evaluator. However, the scrutiny was achieved after repeated evaluations. The kindergarten units were eager to receive the results of the assessment, and the staff reported to have got plenty of practical and concrete hints for improving their daily practices. The assessment revealed many differences between the quality criteria of the kindergartens. Also, the ECERS-R rating system was seen to reflect evident cultural differences between the US and the Finnish early education and kindergarten systems, stressing the need to apply the ECERS-R to the Finnish culture. Assessing the quality of other kindergartens produced useful ideas for the development of the policies and activities of the kindergarten of the evaluating early education educator.

7.5 Outcomes based on the project in participating cities and nationally

Both the cities of Jyväskylä and Kajaani have established a special team to be in charge of spreading the ECERS-R scale to cover all day care units in the respective cities. Also, the Department of Early Education at the University of Jyväskylä has established a specific course for students in order to teach them to assess the quality of early education using the ECERS-R tool. One important outcome was the collection of good practices during the ECERS-R assessment phase, resulting in sharing them fluently to early education staff through conversations at further education seminars and workshops in Jyväskylä and Kajaani.

Despite the positive experiences about the use of the ECERS-R rating scale in Finland, there is still a long road till it is utilized at a national level as an important instrument for early childhood education and kindergarten quality assessment. Due to the organisational change in the national evaluation organisation of education in Finland, resulting in uniting several previous national evaluation centres into one central national evaluation centre, the FINEEC, the future evaluation system has not been finally set up. While the FINEEC is about to create new national evaluating systems and methods, it would be worthwhile to examine if the ECERS-

R might have a central role as a key instrument in the national early education evaluation system.

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