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Chapter 15. Practices of planning as a reflection of teaching and learning concepts in ECEC: The cases of Finland and Slovenia

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Abstract
The aim of this study was to identify pedagogical planning practices and thus recognise the prevailing teaching and learning concepts in ECEC in Finland and Slovenia. Pedagogical planning is one of the key elements of quality for ECEC in both countries. The study followed a qualitative paradigm. Data were collected by carrying out semi-structured thematic interviews with ECEC teachers in Finland and Slovenia and analysed using content analysis. Regarding the planning practices, the results show that ECEC teachers (i) mostly plan in teams or tandems and (ii) consider the curriculum, that is, the ECEC national document, as well as the children's voices, in planning. Through an analysis of pedagogical planning practice, three learning and teaching concepts were recognised (i) transmissive pedagogy; (ii) constructivist-developmentalism, with a transmissive notion of the aim of education; and (iii) participatory pedagogy.

Introduction

According to Farquhar and White (2014), pedagogy addresses a wide scope of educational questions, such as the following: what does it mean to teach? What does it mean to learn? What does it mean to be human? What and whose knowledge is important? They noted that pedagogy reflects the conceptualisation of teaching, learning, knowledge, society, and politics. It involves a vision of society, people, and knowledge. More specifically, early childhood education and care pedagogy emphasises children's activity, play, and participation, and it is implemented in cooperation with parents and experts (Alila & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2018). The way in which an ECEC teacher interacts with children and their families derives from the teacher's teaching/learning concepts and professional identities within different discourses, which are significantly developed in the process of pre-service training (Miller Marsh, 2002). Teachers' pedagogical work involves designing and planning learning activities and environments, interacting with children, and cooperating with personnel (Karila, 2012). Pedagogical documentation and planning must be linked (Alvestad & Sheridan, 2014).

To ensure planning is a participatory process, teachers must consider children's agencies and the entire learning community (teachers, children, and parents) by linking children's initiatives and the curriculum (Fonsén, Heikka, & Elo, 2014; Kangas et al., 2015; Karila & Kinos, 2012; Rutar & Štemberger, 2018). Even though observing, planning, and intervening form an inseparable part of high-quality educational interventions (Lemay et al., 2018), we focused mainly on planning practices in ECEC, specifically recognising teaching and learning concepts in Finland in Slovenia, which both have integrated systems of education and care organised under a ministry responsible for education. Although pedagogical planning is one of the key elements of quality ECEC, little is known about how teachers make their decisions regarding what to teach and how to teach (Ryan & Goffin, 2008).

ECEC legislation framework for pedagogical planning in Finland and Slovenia

In Finland and Slovenia, the values of pre-primary education are based on international agreements and declarations that ensure the provision of equal access to education and support for all children's growth and learning in the best possible way. The main principles of these conventions are to 'ensure children's non-discrimination, equal treatment, the child's right to life and full development' (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). Children's views should be considered, and their voices should be heard on issues concerning them. The ECEC legislation and steering documents in both countries are based on these conventions, but they have different emphases.

In Finland, the goal of ECEC is to promote children's holistic growth, development and learning in collaboration with their guardians (parents). Another goal of ECEC is to promote equality and equity among children, prevent their social exclusion and strengthen children's participation and active agency in society. The renewed ECEC curriculum emphasises interaction and pedagogy, especially participatory pedagogy (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2018). In Slovenia, the objective of ECEC is to enhance respect for children's rights and consider children's diversity (Eurydice – The Education System in the Republic of Slovenia, 2019). In both countries, the curricula provide guidelines regarding how to cooperate with parents, as well as how to arrange and use the learning environment (Eurydice – The Education System in the Republic of Slovenia, 2019; Finnish National Agency of Education, 2018). Children are understood as active participants in the process; they develop new skills and knowledge by exploring, experimenting, and making choices (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2018; Kurikulum za vrtce, 1999).

In both countries, all preschool children under school age have the right to high-quality early childhood education and care (Kangas et al., 2015; Eurydice – Slovenia, Fundamental Principles and National Policies, 2020) within a unitary system of early childhood education and care. Early childhood education and care welcomes children aged 10 months in Finland and 11 months in Slovenia (Eurydice – The Education System in the Republic of Slovenia, 2019; Kangas et. al., 2015). These children remain in ECEC until they enter compulsory pre-primary education in Finland and basic school in Slovenia. Preschool groups are organised according to age in both countries. The first age groups include children under 3 years, and the second age group includes children aged 3 years to 5 in Finland and children aged 3 years to 6 in Slovenia, where pre-primary education is not compulsory.

In Slovenia and Finland, curricular goals and principles are defined as a framework for pedagogical planning. The principle of teamwork planning and the implementation of preschool education and professional training (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2018; Kurikulum za vrtce, 1999) stipulate that professional staff cooperate in the planning process within the group (teacher and teacher assistant), between groups, within the preschool, among preschools, and with other educational and professional institutions. In the curricula, (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2018; Kurikulum za vrtce, 1999) the principles of critical evaluation, the development-process approach, and active learning assume that the preschool teacher observes the development and learning of each child and uses the data from observations for the planning and implementation of goals, activities, the educational process, and individualisation (Ukkonen-Mikkola & Fonsén, 2018; Vidmar et al., 2017). In both countries, children and their parents can participate in planning, implementing, and assessing early childhood education (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2018; Kurikulum za vrtce, 1999). In Finland, an individual ECEC plan is prepared for each child, together with the child's guardians and educators. The objectives written in the plan concern pedagogical activities (Finnish National

Agency of Education, 2018). Legislation, steering documents, and some relevant statistical information for Finland and Slovenia are presented in Table 15.1.

Table 15.1 ECEC system in Finland and Slovenia (NIHW 2019; Ministry of Education and Culture 2020; The Education System in the Republic of Slovenia 2019).

Issue	Finland	Slovenia
Ministry responsible for ECEC	Ministry of Education and Culture, since 2013	Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, since 1993
Key Legislation	Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (2018)	Organisation and Financing of Education Act (1996/2017) Kindergarten Act (2016/2017)
Curricula	The National Core Curriculum for ECEC (2018) The National Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education (2014)	Kindergarten curriculum (1999)
Use of public ECEC services	83%	94.4%
Participation rate (children aged 1–6 years)	74%	81.7%
Qualifications of ECEC professionals	Teachers: Bachelor's degree Nurses: three years of upper secondary school	Teachers: Bachelor's degree Teacher assistants: four years of upper secondary education
Professional development	Voluntary	5 days/year obligatory
Educator-to-child ratio	1:7 for children over 3 years 1:4 for children under 3 years	1:12 for children over 3 years 1:7 for children under 3 years
Compulsory/voluntary	Compulsory for 6-year-olds	Voluntary
Children start basic education	7 years (9 years of basic education)	6 years (9 years of basic education)

Teaching and learning concepts as a reflection of ECEC pedagogy

In this chapter, the term 'ECEC pedagogy' is conceptualised as a theoretical framework for planned, goal-oriented, interactive, and reflective institutional activity. It emphasises children's activity, play, and participation, and it is implemented in cooperation with parents and experts (Alila & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2018). However, education and pedagogy are socially and culturally constructed (Siljander, 2014) and may range from teacher centred/transmissive pedagogy to child centred/participatory pedagogy.

Transmissive pedagogy can be understood as adult-oriented, adult-initiated, and teacher-led ECEC pedagogy. Kinos (2002) defined adult-oriented pedagogy as didactic and technical action implemented by personnel and based on the concept of behavioural learning. In

transmissive pedagogy, the concept of knowledge is static, the child is understood as an object of care, and childhood is viewed as a 'lack of adulthood' (Kinos, 2002). The teacher's role is to transfer information according to the curriculum aims, making the children into passive objects of the teaching activities (Edwards et al., 1995; Rinne et al., 2004).

In ECEC settings, constructivist-developmentalism has, for many decades, been regarded as a theoretical approach to defining practice (Edwards, 2007). According to constructivist-developmentalism, knowledge construction is an individual process, which mainly depends on the child's development. This theory was reconceptualised and problematised within sociocultural interpretations of knowledge construction. Mercer and Howe (2012, p.12) believe that 'knowledge is not just an individual possession, but also the creation and shared property of community members, who use "cultural tools" (including spoken and written language), relationships and institutions (such as schools) for that purpose.' This leads to the understanding that learning and development should be viewed as the integration of individual and collective knowledge. In perspectives on teaching and learning, McLachlan, Fleer, and Edwards (2013) describe developmental theories as focusing on describing and understanding the process of change, which is usually framed around normative ages or stages of development. In turn, using sociocultural or cultural-historical theories, they interpret learning as a process of change, in which development is foregrounded through children's social and cultural situations in families and other community interactions and relationships.

Child-oriented, child-initiated, and participatory pedagogy (often used as synonyms for the pedagogy of listening, with the child at the centre of pedagogy) is implemented as a creative and experimental process, and it is based on the sociocultural and socio-constructivist theory of learning. The concepts of knowledge and pedagogy are dynamic, allowing for the influences of diverse circumstances and situations to affect practices. Teachers and children are equal agents in child-oriented, child-initiated, participatory pedagogy. The teacher's role is to support children's interests, and the children are considered active and competent agents (Edwards et al., 1995; Kinos, 2002) in pedagogical discussions. However, Kinos et al. (2016) stress that teachers must document and analyse children's initiatives when designing the pedagogical processes and also reflect on documented pedagogical processes with children (Rutar & Štemberger, 2018). Langford (2010) proposed that instead of naming and framing child-centred concepts of teaching and learning, the term and concept 'democratic-centered pedagogy' should be used. Lanford (2010, p.10) defined democratic-centred pedagogy as a pedagogy

> *"where learning becomes understood as a process whereby both, the child and teacher and children as peers are actively engaged in events that can be initiated by the child, by peers and by the teacher within an environment that has been set up collaboratively by children and teachers respond to children's interests and build on their existing knowledge."*

We believe that democratic-centred pedagogy (Langford, 2010) could, in practice, be recognised as a type of participatory pedagogy, in which according to the contemporary sociological approach to childhood, children are recognised as active social agents and citizens (Corsaro, 2011). The children are regarded as subjects that interact with other people and the environment (Rogoff, 2008; Pramling-Samuelson & Sheridan, 2010), and child participation is viewed as a multidimensional issue in ECEC, an important criterion of children's well-being (Smith, 2002; Sandseter & Seland, 2016) and high-quality preschools (Sheridan & Pramling-Samuelson, 2001; Sheridan, 2007).

Nevertheless, children's participation is often understood in quite narrow terms, as only listening to the children's voices (Venninen & Leinonen, 2012), and does not always incorporate children's perspectives in decisions. This prevents the children from becoming constructors and co-constructors of knowledge, culture and values in education (Dahlberg et al., 2007; Van Krieken Robson, 2019).

Like today, in the past, there was not only tension between the developmental and sociocultural interpretations of knowledge construction but also a discussion and reconceptualisation of the goal of education, the image of the learner, the image of a teacher, and the role of participation. Formosinho et al. (2016) recognised all these dimensions in transmissive and participatory pedagogies. As they stated, transmissive pedagogy is focused on the knowledge that is to be conveyed, while participatory pedagogies focus on the key stakeholders who co-construct knowledge by participating in the learning process. As Kinos et al. (2016, p.353) have already reported, "a clear tension exists between those who value more democratic approaches to early childhood education and those who believe that children must have direct instruction determined by the adults in their lives."

Pedagogical planning in participatory pedagogy – the planning practice that we strive for
When planning the educational process, ECEC teachers should consider curricula, children's individuality, children's initiatives, learning environments, cooperation with other teachers and parents, and many other factors (Fonsén et al., 2014; Kangas et. al., 2015; Karila & Kinos, 2012). They must consider children's agencies to ensure planning is a participatory process.

Planning practices that consider children's interests and opinions support children's participation (Batistič Zorec, 2015) and reflect teachers' democratic beliefs and attitudes (Turnšek & Pekkarinen, 2009). Teachers who adopt participatory concepts of learning emphasise children's role in planning regarding their age and abilities (Turja & Vuorisalo, 2017). However, this does not imply solely the teachers' interpretation of children's abilities but mainly listening to the children's voices/initiatives, which can significantly differ from normative developmental expectations. When children play in small groups, teachers can listen to and observe them, as well as support their agency (Fonsén, et al., 2014). Roos (2015) points out that listening to children's voices helps teachers understand their perspectives. In terms of child-initiated planning, it is the teacher's task to enhance participation and create an environment that is suitable for participatory activities (Ahn & Kim, 2009). Venninen and Leinonen (2012) point out that while teachers have sought children's opinions and ideas during planning processes, the effects of such have not truly been observed in long-term planning.

Children's participation in pedagogical planning supports their self-concepts and sense of responsibility (Turja & Vuorisalo, 2017), agency (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011), and metacognitive skills (Jones, 2004). It is essential to focus on children's initiatives because these encourage and promote their agency and motivation within early childhood education (Kangas & Lastikka, 2019). Helavaara Robertson et al. (2015) state that children want to view themselves as competent experts in ECEC and that teachers are partners who can provide ideas and suggest ways to further progression. However, the children must be actively involved in the (1) planning, (2) implementation, and (3) evaluation/reflection of the process, which empowers them to learn, make choices, express ideas and views, and develop a positive self-image (Rutar, 2013; Rutar & Štemberger, 2018; Sommer et al., 2013). Participatory pedagogical planning involves child-adult–child/child–adult/child relations and pedagogical practices in which preschool professionals (teachers and assistants) make pedagogical decisions

together with children, not for children, keeping 'with the child in mind' (Rutar, 2013) by interpreting children's developmental needs and cultural features (Rutar & Štemberger, 2018).

Research questions

The aim of this study is to investigate ECEC teachers' pedagogical planning practices and thus recognise the teaching and learning concepts behind these practices in Finland and Slovenia. In this paper, we address the following research questions:

How do teachers plan pedagogical processes in ECEC in Finland and Slovenia?

Which teaching and learning concepts can be recognised in ECEC planning practices in Finland and Slovenia?

Methodology

The research followed a qualitative paradigm of educational research. Data were gathered by carrying out semi-structured interviews with ECEC teachers in Slovenia (n = 10) and Finland (n = 10), who were educated to at least at the level of a bachelor's degree. The interviewed teachers worked in public ECEC centres. The interviews were recorded and transcribed; data were analysed using content analysis, which allowed us to categorise data from a systematic perspective and generalise the studied phenomenon. Through content analysis, we have focused on the essential core of the data (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). The analyses proceeded in an inductive manner.

The research followed the guidelines for responsible and good research ethics given by the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (2012) and the ethical standards in research of the University of Primorska- Etični standardi v raziskovanju UP (2011). Conducting a cross-cultural study required exact designing and reflection before, during, and after the research process (Vlasov, 2018). The questions used for the interviews were the same in both countries. During the analysis and writing process, the researchers reflected on and thoroughly discussed the findings. Participation in the study was voluntary, instructions on how to opt out of the study were provided, and the informants' anonymity was protected. The participants were informed of all issues related to the objectives and implementation of the study, as well as the data management practices. All quotations have been anonymised, and the names of the participants' workplaces have been withheld.

Results

Planning pedagogical process in ECEC in Finland and Slovenia

In both countries, teachers learn how to plan within initial teacher education and continuing professional development programs, but mainly, they learn from one another. In both countries, the pedagogical process is planned together with other teachers, parents, and children.

The planning process is based on observations, children's ideas, wishes, needs, strengths, and challenges. In addition, the ECEC curricula are the key source of pedagogical planning in both countries. The national curricula goals and content are combined with children's ideas and suggestions. In Finland, children's individual ECEC plans, which are written together with parents for every child, are also considered when planning the activities.

Teachers and teams are responsible for long-term planning, and the plans are reviewed together with colleagues, teacher assistants/child care workers, and children on a weekly basis. Teachers described the planning as an endless process:

The planning process is a continuous activity. I sometimes get ideas when I am at home, and I have to write them down. (Teacher from Finland, 21 years of work experience)

Teachers in Finland and Slovenia appreciate the co-construction of knowledge and meaning with colleagues, but they also mentioned that shared values and teaching/learning concepts are important for successful cooperation in tandem. They believe that discussions with other teachers and teamwork are of great importance in planning the pedagogical process. This can be recognised from the following quotations:

I wait for ideas from my colleagues, common and open discussion and sometimes even disagreement, so we can develop our practices. We have to trust each other. (Teacher from Finland, four years of work experience)

If you have a colleague in a tandem with whom you can talk about work, it is good… the best situation is when I can discuss with the colleague and when we share our observations… I express my ideas. He/she expresses his/her own ideas and perspectives regarding some events, situations… this is the best. But it is not always so. It depends on who you work with. (Teacher from Slovenia, 25 years of work experience)

Regarding the question of whom ECEC teachers plan with, it has been recognised that there are a variety of planning approaches in Finland. The ECEC centres convene a variety of meetings: whole-unit staff meetings, educators' group meetings, teachers' pedagogical teams, and child care workers care-teams. Teachers from Slovenia reported that they start planning the pedagogical process together with the teacher assistant, who they work with in the same class. Only a few reported that the planning process includes colleagues from other groups as well (planning on the level of ECEC settings). Some teachers mentioned that those kinds of meetings take considerable time and are challenging to organise.

In contrast to Finland, where parents are encouraged to participate in pedagogical planning and the activities are collected from parents through discussions, parents' evenings, and questionnaires, parents in Slovenia are usually informed and consulted but not included as partners. Parents in Finland are also included in preparing the children's individual ECEC plans, which is not the case in Slovenia. Nevertheless, teachers reported they are confident about the inclusion of parents' thoughts and wishes in pedagogical planning.

The analysis shows there are two important elements considered within the process of pedagogical planning in ECEC: the organisational context (who ECEC teachers plan with) and the content context (where ECEC teachers derive content from).

Recognised teaching and learning concepts in Finland and Slovenia

Based on the analysed results, three teaching and learning concepts underlying the pedagogical planning practice were recognised (see table 15.2): transmissive, constructivist-developmentalism, and participatory pedagogy.

Table 15.2 Teaching/learning concepts recognised in Finnish and Slovenian ECEC

1. Transmissive notion of the aim of education	2. Constructivist-developmentalism with a transmissive notion of the	3. Participatory pedagogy

	aim of education and 'with the child in mind'	
The main source of planning is the curriculum (ECEC national document); the teacher decides what is appropriate for the children. Topics are discussed with colleagues in teams, but not with the children.	Teachers organise activities according to the findings from observation/assessment and their interpretation of children's needs by taking the curriculum (ECEC national document) into account. Teachers decide about the appropriateness of the activities for the children together with colleagues, but the subject is not discussed and the plans are not developed with the children.	Teachers, together with children and other colleagues, identify topics that are important and meaningful to children (derived from observation/documentation of children's learning in a sociocultural context, incorporating children's experiences, knowledge, ideas, and interests). They also follow/incorporate the curriculum (ECEC national document).

We recognise that teachers in both countries are sensitive towards children's ideas. However, their learning/teaching concepts derive from different discourses (transmissive or participatory), which defines how the planning process starts, who is included in the planning process, and how they are included. A transmissive notion of the aim of education begins with the responsibility to cover curriculum expectations, as well as the understanding that curriculum itself covers all children's learning needs.

The following quotation shows a teacher's transmissive planning in their deriving planning from the curriculum:

> *We work according to the curriculum; we have goals, thematic units, six curriculum domains (math, language, society, science, art, movement). For each domain, some goals and activities… from Monday to Friday… and for the whole month, I plan activities… but I also change the plan if it is needed… if I recognise the needs in circle time. (Teacher from Slovenia, 11 years of work experience)*

It is difficult to identify constructivist-developmentalism with a transmissive notion of the aim of education and keeping 'the child in mind', as illustrated in the following examples.

> *We try to utilise the children's individual pedagogical plans and curriculum and their needs when we construct the children's small groups. It is challenging. (Teacher from Finland, 15 years of work experience)*
>
> *(have in mind)… children's age, their developmental level, where they are, what needs to develop… I use observations to see their interests… then, I define long-term goals; each week has to contain the goal for each curriculum domain…(Teacher from Slovenia, 20 years of work experience)*

Within this approach, constructivist-developmentalism with a transmissive notion of the aim of education, teachers use observation findings in planning, but they interpret these findings by themselves and do not discuss them with the children. Teachers use their expert knowledge in planning and deciding what is appropriate for the children, but they do not ask the children about their perspectives or listen to their voices.

Teachers who implement participatory pedagogy begin their planning based on observation findings/documentation and listen to and consider children's interests and ideas, but they also consider the curriculum (ECEC national document) as well. They plan with children and

colleagues in order to co-construct knowledge. Teachers who practice participatory pedagogy also reflect their educational practice to a large extent. The plans are not static; they are open to unpredicted daily situations in groups.

> *We listen to children's wishes and interests, and then, we modify the learning environment together with children. They are very creative, and they have good ideas. (Teacher from Finland, 21 years of work experience)*

> *I recognised that when children learn that they can participate with their own ideas, they want to do it all the time… and also, that it is not necessary, that what you, as a teacher have in mind, is good for them. I'm worried, and I wonder all the time if the activities are challenging enough for children to go further… I'm also worried if the work is too difficult for them. Many times, the work that is organized is appropriate for older children, but I do encourage the younger children to go as far as they can. (Teacher from Slovenia, 25 years of work experience)*

In both countries, teachers mentioned that different concepts of learning, teaching, and relationships between personnel cause confusion and problems in professional communities. In addition, teachers also expressed uncertainty regarding how and the extent to which children and parents should participate in planning activities. This concern is evident in the following quotation:

> *We have heard how they (in other ECEC centers) just do not plan activities in advance; they take ideas daily from children. Nevertheless, yes, we are still clearly planning our team meetings once a week. (Teacher from Finland, 8 years of work experience)*

Teachers from both countries stated that similar values, learning/teaching concepts, and a sense of belonging to a teacher's team are the most productive part of their work and inspire their planning activities. Teachers find it easier to handle challenges connected to children and parents if they can reflect on these in a team.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to identify teaching and learning concepts in pedagogical planning practices in Finish and Slovenian ECEC. The planning practice in ECEC in both countries is based on three main concepts of teaching and learning.

- Teachers are curriculum focused (transmissive: to achieve goals, planned in advance, derived from a national curriculum).

- Teachers follow constructivist-developmentalism with a transmissive notion regarding the aim of education, keeping 'the child in mind' (teachers interpret children's needs without asking or consulting children and without planning together with children).

- Teachers, together with children and other colleagues, are focused on children's strengths, previous knowledge, and initiatives (and also the learning process, recognised through pedagogical documentation), which are incorporated into the planning process (participatory pedagogy) and combined with national ECEC curriculum guidelines.

All three approaches to planning are practiced in both countries, but in the process of realisation, when goal realisation and planned activities begin, teachers are most commonly sensitive to children's expressions, suggestions, and comments. Lynn Brownlee et al. (2016) emphasise that

teachers require a better understanding of and more discussion about how their personal epistemologies, values, and beliefs relate to their practices, a finding which was also confirmed in our study. Due to conceptual and pedagogical changes concerning ECEC, negotiation in ECEC communities is essential (Ukkonen-Mikkola & Fonsén, 2018).

However, a participatory approach is most frequently used as a basis for planning the ECEC educational process: planning predominantly includes personnel teamwork planning and, at the same time, child participation. In the planning process, the national ECEC curricula are also regarded as an important guiding element when planning the pedagogical activities in both countries.

There is also one distinctive difference between the two systems: teachers in Finland reported that planning predominantly derives from assessment, reflection, and documentation. Gathering and analysing information about children is more common in Finland than in Slovenia. In Finland, observation and documentation are understood as parts of an ongoing educational process that includes planning, realisation, documenting and evaluating children's learning and teaching process (see Alila and Ukkonen-Mikkola 2018). Even though a development-process approach and active learning in the national curriculum in Slovenia assume that the preschool teacher observes the development and learning of each child and uses the data from observations for the planning and implementation of goals, activities, the educational process, and individualisation (Vidmar et al. 2017, p. 27), improvements in this educational element are needed. Moreover, in Finland, each child has their own individual pedagogical plan, which is developed in cooperation with teachers, parents, and children. This is not the case in Slovenian ECEC.

In general, learning and teaching concepts, as well as practices, are shifting toward child-oriented, participatory pedagogy in both countries. These are promising findings because children's participation is regarded as an important issue in their well-being, learning, competence skills development, self-regulation, and self-motivation in high-quality ECEC, (see Rogoff, 2008; Kangas, 2016; Kangas & Lastikka, 2019; Pramling-Samuelson & Sheridan, 2010; Smith, 2002). Additionally, Rutar (2013) and Rutar & Štemberger (2018) identified the existence of a problematic approach to planning: the organization of activities according to the findings from observations/assessments and based on teachers' interpretations of children's needs, specifically by taking the curriculum (ECEC national document) into account, which was also recognised in the present study. One problematic aspect of this process is the fact that the teachers themselves (without the children) interpret observations and make decisions about the appropriateness of the activities "with the child in mind" but without planning the entire process together with children. Another problematic aspect of this approach is the fact that the children only passively (even though they are actively involved in interesting activities) follow the plans and activities organized for them, creating the illusion of participation. This kind of practice is less transparent, more difficult to recognise, and more challenging to transform into democratic, participatory practices.

There are certain limitations to consider concerning the validity and ethical issues involved in this study. One potential limitation is related to language: understanding educational concepts can be challenging, even in one's native language, and translating the answers from Slovenian and Finnish into English may lead to different interpretations (see Vlasov, 2018). To avoid misinterpretation, researchers discussed the content extensively and used language experts to enhance understanding. In future studies, it will be essential to explore the effects of learning environments, assessment, and documentation on planning processes in cross-cultural contexts.

Conclusions and recommendations

Pedagogy and pedagogical planning are an essential part of teachers' work in ECEC. Our study aimed to recognise teaching and learning concepts in teachers' planning practices in Finnish and Slovenian ECEC. Those concepts define teaching and children's learning and relationships with personnel and, hopefully, reflect an awareness of children's rights if children have opportunity to participate (see Kangas, 2016). All these conceptions affect pedagogical planning.

In both countries, ECEC planning practices are developing in the direction of participatory pedagogy and demonstrate the awareness and implementation of children's agency in the educational process. This research gives us insight into the fact that practices in both countries require constant professional discussion. Some teachers participating in the research expressed the view that participation, as well as their own verbalisations regarding their work, gave them an opportunity to reflect on their practice.

It is very significant for teachers and teams to be conscious of their values, conceptions, and beliefs, which influence choices in everyday pedagogical work with children. To be aware of this, time for professional discussion is required. Organising time and space for conversations is a challenge for the working community and also for leaders in ECEC centres, who must encourage teachers to dedicate time to continuous professional development and enable them to learn by creating a supportive organisation for learning (Hitt & Tucker, 2016; May et al., 2012; Sahenk, 2010 in Daniëls, Hondeghem & Dochy, 2019).

The daily work should be organised in such a way that teachers have enough time to plan pedagogical activities with their colleagues, other staff, children, and parents. Teachers require time to reflect on pedagogical documentation and search for ideas for varied pedagogical activities together with colleagues, parents, and children. A creative and safe working and professional learning community is a good starting point for a successful planning process. When planning, teachers must take into account both- short-term and long-term goals for individuals and groups of children based on the curriculum, the children's potentials, and children's initiatives, as derived from teaching and learning discussion.

We believe that it is the responsibility of pre-service teacher training programs in both countries to support undergraduate and graduate students to become aware of, identify, and develop their learning and teaching concepts and also to reflect on the effects of such on their pedagogical work, especially when making decisions in ECEC. These conceptions are often hidden (see Schein, 1989), but they are manifested directly in teacher practice. Additionally, in-service training for teachers and other staff is necessary because traditional conceptions and routines may be deeply ingrained, especially if there are no expectations, places, and times to reflect them.

Finally, 1) pedagogy (theory) and 2) the pedagogical planning (practice) are significant elements of teachers' work. Consciousness of the aim of ECEC in society (the best interests of the child and the family) and awareness of the presence of teaching and learning concepts in pedagogical planning are two of the core elements of teachers' professional knowledge and identity, along with professionalisation and the quality of early childhood education and care.

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