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Valuing language in preschool curriculum

Compulsory school age is seven years in Finland. A national preschool curriculum for six-year-olds was released in the year 2000 and preschool is currently available for all six-year-olds. Language and communication have a central role in the curriculum. Every municipality has prepared their own curriculum that is based on the national curriculum. In Helsinki the main objectives concerning language are as follows: The development of the child's interaction skills, the awakening of the child's motivation for early literacy and literature, the enrichment of the child's vocabulary, and the child's practice in using different medias.

The National Board of Education states in the curriculum (The Core Curriculum for Preschool Education in Finland 2000, 11), that preschool education shall create a foundation for learning to read and write. The curriculum also stipulates that the basis for the beginnings of literacy is that children have heard and listened, they have been heard, they have been spoken to, people have discussed with them, and that they have asked questions and received answers. In such an environment, children will thus develop their vocabulary and literacy as if by accident.

The city of Helsinki has also created a preschool curriculum. The most important target according to this plan is the development of linguistic awareness. Thus a child must have experiences in the spoken language and in transforming it into written language and vice versa. When a child is interested in reading and writing, the teacher and curriculum must support it. (Helsingin kaupungin esiopetussuunnitelma 2001, 9.)

2 Language development and a beginning reader

2.1 A little reader

A child is born into a society which surrounds him/her with a complex network of signs and symbols. The environment is thus full of many different kinds of writing and images. When the child is very young, he/she already begins to recognize different signs. Perhaps the most important thing that researchers have discovered in the last decade is children's awareness of language. This means that a child understands that the shape and length of a word, and what the word includes, are two different things. Recent studies have stressed that it is very important to focus these studies on developing phoneme awareness (Barr 2001, 395-396).

Beginning reading has also been studied using tasks in which the children must give a name to the capital letters. A six-year-old child is by nature very interested in letters. A kindergarten teacher´s duty is to awaken an interest in reading, which can even help to minimise possible difficulties in learning to read. Adams (2001, 66) and Whitehurst and Lonigan (2001, 16) say for example, that knowledge of the alphabet at school entry is one of the single best predictors of eventual reading achievement.

When the discussion is centred on the beginning reader and writer, we must remember that educators many times, have outdated conceptions of learning and teaching. For example, teaching has often been understood in the context of a teacher who leads a group of nearly passive students – seen here as mere receptacles. Barr (2001, 407-408) points out that the assumption that researchers must choose between a focus on teaching and that of learning can be questioned; we learn most when both aspects of this interactive whole are implemented.

The Development of a reader is always thus more than a purely individual event. A change of wiewpoint influences the definition of literacy and even that of teaching, says

Kucer (2001, 3-6). Learning to read and write is a social thing. A child also develops as a reader and writer step by step. Likewise development features are also a part of the process.

2.2 Different perspective on early literacy

Many different perspectives on early literacy have arisen during the last 100 years. Barratt-Pugh talks about four perspectives on early literacy. During the early part of the twentieth century it was believed (for example Gesell) that children could only learn to read when they had reached a particular mental age, brought about through a process of biological maturation. The next perspective was developmental. Several pre-primary "readiness" programs were developed that involved highly structured, sequentially-organised, skills-based drills in the form of work books. During the 1970s researchers suggested that reading and writing were not a set of skills taught in isolation, but are rather an ongoing process which starts at birth and in which the child is an active participant. The emergent literacy is a process of the whole language. Early childhood professionals were encouraged to provide print-rich environments and a language-based curriculum, which emphasised the integration of reading, writing, speaking and listening. (Barratt-Pugh 2000, 2-3; see also Nurmilaakso 2004)

During the 1990s, following from emergent views of literacy, socio-cultural theories of literacy learning emerged, according Barratt-Pugh (2000, 4-5). She claims that there are several perspectives on what constitutes a socio-cultural view of literacy. After Barratt-Pugh we can identify six elements of a socio-cultural view of literacy:

1) Children learn about literacies and how to "do" literacy through participating in a range of activities in their family and community;
2) Literacy practices are carried out in culturally specific ways and contribute to children's developing sense of identity;

3) Children have different understandings about what counts as literacy and how literacy is done;

4) Literacy practices are carried out in specific ways for particular purposes;

5) The pattern of literacy learning differs between children, as they become relative experts within different literacy events;

6) Literacy practices are valued differently in different social and educational contexts;

And following Sperling and Freedman (2001, 373-374), over the past decade, newer – or newly recognised – social and cultural perspectives on language and learning have forced many researchers of writing to extend or offer alternatives to the cognitive theories of composing that previously attracted so much research attention. In particular, scholars have attempted to bring together cognitive, social, and cultural strands of research on writing and literacy to suggest sociocognitive (social cognitive) and sociocultural (social cultural) theories that may better explain the writing and learning experiences of diverse students working across diverse literacy and learning contexts.

In this study the National Core Curriculum for Preschool Education in Finland (2000, 11) and the Pre-school Curriculum of Helsinki have been analysed using with content analysis. Kyngäs and Vanhanen (among many other researchers) represent how to group the data into the content and then connect the things which seems to belong together (Kyngäs & Vanhanen 1999, 3-7; see also Silverman 2001, 119-124).

When a data was analysed, the target sentences were simplified into dendritically structured categories. The new aspects were: The cultural aspects of language, language development and education as well as other aspects which have been clearly taken into the City of Helsinki's curriculum from the National Preschool Curriculum. The frequencies are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. The different emphasis of objectives in the National and City of Helsinki City Curricula. Frequencies.

	The National Pre-school Curriculum	The City of Helsinki Curriculum
Cultural aspects of the language	1	11
The language development and education of a child	28	21
The curriculum of Helsinki and the National Curriculum	8	

As can be seen in Table 1, both the National and the City of Helsinki Curricula stress in their targets the importance reformulate which are near of the language development and education of a child. Especially in the National Preschool Curriculum the cultural aspects of the language reformulate great numbers. It has been found to illustrate the culture only the next sentence: "By this way the emotional life, creativeness and self esteem of a child have been verified". Instead of that the municipal preschool curriculum takes into account also regional aspects"." It is possible in multicultural and bilingual Helsinki that a child can see the written language Finnish and Swedish and he/she can also hear that people talk different languages in everyday situations ".

The curricula accentuate the development and education of a child clearly more as cultural aspects. In Finland the teaching of early literacy reformulate the primary school and reformulate. It states in the national curriculum, among other things however, that "The basis for the beginnings of literacy is that children have heard and listened, they have been heard, they have spoken and been spoken to, people have discussed with them, and that they have asked questions and received answers". The curriculum supports, in these ways, reading and writing readiness and linguistic awareness. The curriculum of the City of Helsinki City comes close to this conception, wherein it states that the "Childs interest in reading and writing has been supported".

3. Research problems and methods

In this research we have sought answers to four questions: 1) How do preschool teachers value different language objectives? 2) How do language goals relate to other educational objectives? 3) How teachers see the role of language in preschool? 4) How do teachers' language objectives reflect their everyday work?

In spring 2001, the "Helsinki project" was established at the Research Centre for Early Childhood and Elementary Education to explore the organisation and effectiveness of preschool education in the City of Helsinki (see Hytönen 2004). This research is a part of the "Helsinki project". In November 2001 a survey was mailed to the teachers in preschools in the Helsinki area concerning their background information, information concerning their kindergarten/school and the group they taught, their experiences in preschool and early elementary school, experiences in their working cultures, and their evaluations of the different preschool curriculum objectives. Hytönen (2004) reports results concerning the perceived achievement of the preschool objectives and the continuation from preschool to early elementary school. The survey and the procedures can be seen in http://www.malux.edu.helsinki.fi/okl/tutkimus/julkaisut/ (in Finnish). There were 554 preschool teachers in the Helsinki area and 411 teachers answered the survey, which is 74.2% of all teachers in the Helsinki area.

4 Results

In the survey, 56 objectives were extracted from the preschool curriculum of Helsinki. The teachers evaluated how forcefully each objective was emphasized during the school year. The scale was from 1 (unremarkably) to 5 (very strongly). After reliability analysis, twelve objective areas could be added together. The valuing of different objective areas can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2 The valuing of different curriculum-based objective areas (see also Hytönen 2004, 13)

Curriculum topic	Average	Std. Deviation
General objectives (see table 3)	4.21	0.56
Environment & natural history	3.92	0.75
Physical & motor development	3.78	0.83
Language & interaction	**3.77**	**0.64**
Mathematics	3.61	0.83
Ethics & Cultural conviction	3.54	0.76
Health	3.54	0.87
Manual skills	3.34	0.91
Visual arts	3.21	0.95
Religion	2.93	1.10
Music	2.93	0.99
Conviction	2.54	1.13

Language is the third most valued objective area of the preschool curriculum right after environmental studies and physical development. The general objectives were valued as the most important. To estimate the contents of the general objectives each general objective is described separately in Table 3.

Table 3 The valuing of general objectives

General objectives	Mean	Std. Dev.
Learn to consider others	4.49	0.68
Child feels the joy of doing and learning	4.42	0.68
The skills of working together	4.39	0.72
A positive self-concept	4.36	0.75
A responsible member of the group	4.24	0.79
Learns good behaviour	4.19	0.84
Learns to accept differences	4.17	0.84
Development of thinking skills	4.09	0.82
Stimulus for emotional development	4.03	0.84
Skills to control own way of life	4.00	0.78
Learning to learn	3.85	0.87

Socio-emotional general values were highly valued as was teamwork. Constructivist topics (learning to learn, development of thinking skills and skills to control own way of life) were not so highly valued.

The summary variable of language consisted of five objectives. These objectives and their valuing are described in Table 4.

Table 4 The valuing of different curriculum objectives concerning language

Language objectives	Mean	Std. Deviation
Interactive skills	4.36	0.69
Vocabulary enrichment and versatility	4.08	0.82
Interest in reading and writing	3.85	0.91
Interest in literature	3.70	0.91
Gets practice w. inform. & media tools	2.87	0.98

The language objectives concentrate on interactive skills and seem to be less concerned with cultural dimensions like literature and media. The language objectives correlated positively with other object areas as can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5 The language objectives correlations with other objectives

Objective areas	Corr. with lang. & inter.
Mathematics	0.71
General objectives	0.69
Ethics	0.59
Physical and motor development	0.55
Health	0.52
Music	0.51
Manual skills	0.50
Visual arts	0.49
Environment and natural history	0.48
Religion	0.44
Conviction	0.41

Spearman correlation coefficients, all correlation significances are .000

Language objectives were most closely related to mathematics and general educational objectives (see Table 3) and least closely related to religion and conviction.

A factor analysis (Maximum likelihood method, Varimax rotation) was conducted for the preschool objectives. In the factor analysis The KMO was .954 and Bartlett's test of spherity was.000, which indicates that the data is suitable for factor analysis. The location

of language objectives in the factor analysis shows the type of general ideas the specific language objective belongs in the minds of the respondents.

Table 6 Ten most important objectives in the two-factor solution

Objectives	Culture (aesthetic, arts)	Child development, education
Visual arts: Learns to value and foster aesthetic and cultural values	0.75	0.23
View of life: Readiness to meet convictional questions	0.73	0.17
Visual arts: Readiness to understand and enjoy visual arts is developing	0.73	0.15
Manual skills: Learns to value handicraft and its tradition	0.71	0.15
Physical dev.: Learns to keep fit according to own abilities	0.71	0.16
Visual arts: Development of visual perception	0.69	0.22
Health: Become aware of factors dealing with personal wellbeing	0.68	0.25
Manual skills: Gets practice to consider sustainable development	0.68	0.26
Music: Gets to know musical heritage (own & other children's cultures)	0.67	0.18
View of life: Learn to respect different convictions	0.66	0.22
Gen. obj.: Stimulus for emotional development	0.23	0.71
Gen. obj.: Learn to consider others	0.13	0.70
Ethics: Learns to solve conflicts constructively	0.25	0.69
Ethics: Learns to undestand and respect feelings and rights (own & others)	0.24	0.68
Language: Interactive skills	0.16	0.67
Gen. obj.: Development of thinking skills	0.27	0.67
Ethics: Learns to trust oneself & evaluate own actions	0.25	0.65
Gen. obj.: A positive self-concept	0.17	0.65
Math: Development in creative problem solving	0.37	0.65
Gen. obj.: A responsible member of the group	0.18	0.63

In the two-factor solution the two main factors were

1. Cultural orientation (aesthetic and arts)

2. Child development, education

The location of the language objectives in the two-factor solution can be seen in Table 7.

Table 7 The location of language objectives in a two-factor solution

Language objectives	Culture (easthetic, arts)	Child development, education
Interactive skills	.164	**.672**
Vocabulary enrichment and versatility	.281	**.585**
Gets practice w. inform. & media tools	**.483**	.417
Interest in literature	.411	**.481**
Interest in reading and writing	.261	**.407**

Extraction Method: Maximum Likelihood. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

a Rotation converged in 3 iterations.

In a factor analysis made of the twelve objective areas (see table 2) the cultural and educational factors are perhaps even more clear as can be seen in Table 7.

Table 8 Two-factor solution of the different objective areas

Objective areas	Culture (work and play)	Education
Visual arts	0.748	0.279
Manual skills	0.747	0.329
Conviction	0.710	0.265
Music	0.693	0.329
Health	0.672	0.393
Religion	0.664	0.308
Environment and natural history	0.660	0.346
Physical and motor development	0.620	0.401
Ethics	0.593	0.584
General objectives	0.309	0.788
Language and interaction	0.357	**0.761**
Mathematics	0.329	0.747

The first factor deals with cultural artifacts and action. The second factor puts the educational objectives together with language and mathematics.

The "interaction skills" objective correlated with the teachers' views of their work and education in many ways. The strongest correlation was "enthusiasm with preschool", The other four objectives had only one statistically significant correlation with teachers' views about their work, "enthusiasm about preschool", the same as the strongest correlation with "interaction skills". We can say that valuing language objectives and "enthusiasism about preschool" are related to each other.

Table 9 The language objectives' correlations with "enthusiasm about preschool"

The language objectives	Correlations with "enthusiasm about preschool"
Interactive skills	.393
Interest in literature	.280
Interest in reading and writing	.278
Vocabulary enrichment and versatility	.278
Gets practice w. inform. & media tools	.249

All correlation significances are .000

The strongest correlation is with interactive skills and the weakest connection is with media practice. "Enthusiasm about preschool" correlated with the factor (see table 6) "Culture (aesthetic, arts, ethics)" .147 and with the factor "child development, education" .450.

Table 10 The language objectives' correlations with general objectives

General objectives	Correlations with language obj.	The shift from general values (table 2)
Development of thinking skills	0.57	+7
Stimulus for emotional development	0.56	+7
Learns good behaviour	0.53	+3
Learning to learn	0.52	+7
The skills of working together	0.48	-2
Learn to consider others	0.47	-5
Skills to control own way of life	0.46	+3
Learn to accept differences	0.45	-1
A positive self-concept	0.44	-5
A responsible member of the group	0.42	-5
Child feels the joy of doing and learning	0.40	-9

Correlations are Spearman coefficients

Constructive objectives are heavily related to high esteem of language objectives, as thinking skills, learning to learn and skills to control own way of life (autonomy) have gained more importance when compared to the general valuing of the objectives (see table 2). Stimulus for emotional development is also strongly associated with language objectives. The joy of learning, concern for others and a positive self-concept have dropped most when compared to the general valuing of the objectives (Table 3).

Language seems to deal more with constructivism and less with joy and concern for others.

5 Discussion

In this study "language and interaction" correlated highly with "mathematics". The preschool teachers thought that these areas belong together. Teachers valued social objectives for example "learn to consider others" but they did not see that language and mathematics could belong together with culture objectives. This is typical for Finnish preschool education. Teachers see "language and interaction" as a cognitive activity, not a part of life in everyday preschool functioning. Even if Finnish students succeeded with fine results in the reading tests of the OECD study (Välijärvi, J., Linnakylä, P., Kupari, P., Reinikainen, P., Malin, A. & Puhakka, E. 2002), we must remember that we could do even better. One strategy is to understand how the culture about us interacts with the children's development. For example preschools could have initiate co-operation between libraries.

The constructivist paradigm (Vygotsky) fits well with the second factor of objectives. The focus is on the child developing with the aid of more skillful adults. Vygotsky saw the function of culture as that of mediating language skills during interaction. The child learns language through "internalization" (see Sinha 1999, 402). The first factor is different. It deals more with cultural artefacts and with concrete action. In the first factor it is also possible to see the child as a creative developer of culture. In the first factor the child can be seen as an active participator in the development of cultural artifacts. If the language is strongly seen through constructivist lenses, the children can become more like objects of language development, not creators of it.

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