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Curriculum: How open and changeable can it be?

The National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) was published in September 2003. The main goals are to fulfill the day care needs of children under school age and to provide early childhood education. The curriculum guidelines aim to promote the provision if ECEC on equal terms throughout the country, to guide the development of the content of activities, and to contribute to developing the quality of activities by introducing uniform principles for organizing such activities.

The term ECEC describes the comprehensive character of the Finnish system. It describes the way in which Finnish early childhood pedagogy aims to combine care, education and teaching into a whole that is realized in daily activities. The Finnish document uses the term Core Plan in ECEC. The Finnish equivalent for 'curriculum' is not used so as to emphasize the holistic nature of ECEC.

An important part of the ECEC is the environment, which constitutes a whole formed by physical, psychological and social elements. The term 'learning environment' refers not only to learning situations but also to care situations, play, and nature and the environment at large. The ECEC emphasize a partnership between the staff and parents, including committed interaction and the experience of being heard and respected. In

Finland, day care centers have multiprofessional staff and there is variation among the staff. In family day care, the educator mostly works alone, or in the case of group family day care, together with another educator.

Although ECEC provides a notional tool for guiding early childhood education and care, the municipalities can largely organize their ECEC services so as to serve the needs of families. The municipalities are urged to draw up their own specified strategic guidelines to be taken into account in drafting local ECEC curricula.

The ECEC is a framework which should be discussed and further specified so as to formulate jointly agreed practices and principles for application in municipalities and units. In addition every unit (kindergartens and family day care) should prepare their own, more detailed and specific curriculum, describing a district's or a unit's special features and priorities. The unit-specific curriculum also includes specified goals for different service forms. As if this was not enough, an individual ECEC plan and an individual pre-school education plan are drawn for each and every child. It is drawn up jointly between professionals and the child's parents to provide a basis for the implementation of child's care, early education and pre-school education.

As Helsinki is the largest city in Finland, with 560 000 inhabitants, it is not an easy task to make an integrated whole of national, local, unit-specific and individual ECEC plans. The general national policy document provides national regulations. To make a practical tool of it for everyday use in varied settings is challenging. The process of unit-specified plan-making should include multiprofessional staff, parents and even children.

To create possibilities for everyone concerned, there must be enough room for the preparation process. There should also be room for real changes, if we are taking the participation of everyone involved seriously. On the other hand, the planning process should not be an end in itself. There are many valuable and subtly developed practices that should be maintained and kept up. We may 'not throw the baby out with the bath water'. We have to have a balance in the openness of the planning process. How can we

get everyone involved and still derive a unified and functional plan? There should also be a balance between maintaining and changing the ECE practices.

To accomplish a balanced curriculum in Helsinki Reunamo's model of agentive perception has been implemented (see Reunamo 2004). In the model it is presumed that our perception changes the things we see. Therefore it is not irrelevant what we see. Before planning we must look at things from different perspectives and specify our own position concerning our situation. The model is presented next below.

The model of agentive perception

The model is an adaptation of a model used with children. When we look at people orientating among others, we approach them as active participants in and creators of their relationships and social situations. The theoretical frame for this research is fairly simple. It includes the ideas of relative equilibration and agency. It has some resemblance to Piagetian structuralism but differs from it in at least one important way. When Piaget studies how people (children) change in interaction with the environment, in this research people's (children's) schemas can also change the environment. The children and adults share the same basic elements of equilibration (relative openness) and agency (the perception of potential change).

The theory of knowing, as first articulated by Piaget (e.g. Piaget 1970), is essentially biological in nature; that is, an organism encounters new experiences and events and seeks to assimilate these into existing cognitive structures or to adjust the structures to accommodate the new information. Accommodation happens when current experiences cannot be assimilated in to the existing schema. When someone encounters something new, he/she must either assimilate it into an existing scheme or create a new scheme to deal with it. In assimilation, people's schemas can be described as closed. During assimilation the schemas themselves are not changing. Whereas in accommodation people's schemas are open; they may change along with the interactive process.

Equilibrium can be described as a balance between accommodation and assimilation and it is illustrated in figure 1.
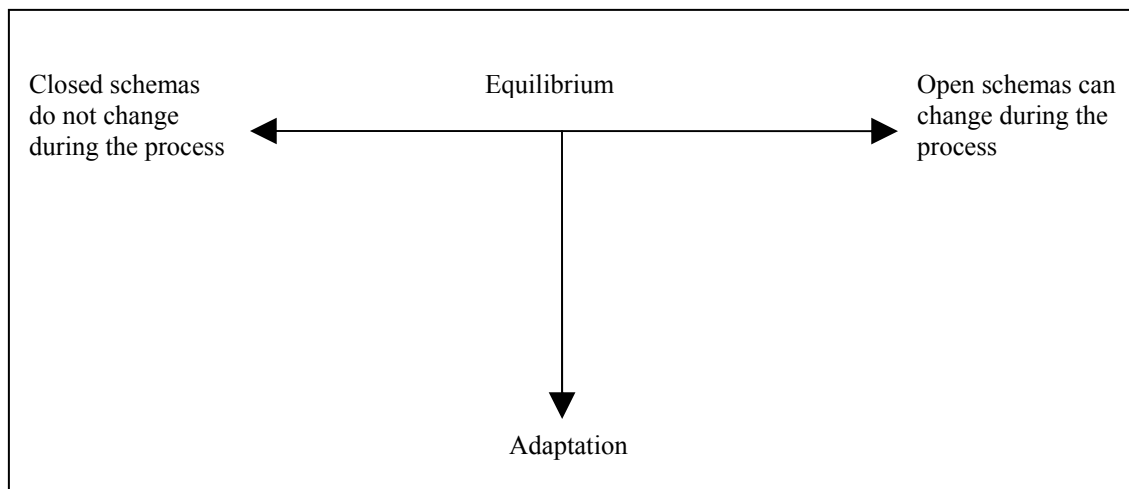
Figure 1 Equilibrium is a balance between open and closed schemas

Closed schemas do not change during the process	Equilibrium ←————————————→	Open schemas can change during the process
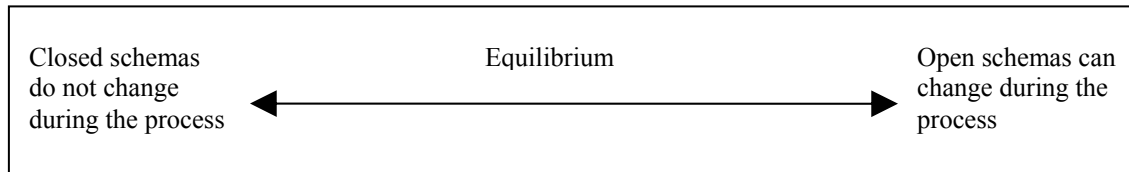
In closed schemas people's views do not change because of the events. Closed schemas fit in the same structure before and after the process. Open schemas include orientation towards the environment. The open schema has the possibility of the schema to change. When the schema is open towards an element in the environment, the phenomenon can change the schema.

Taken together, assimilation and accommodation make up adaptation, which refers to people's ability to more succesfully adapt to his or her environment in the course of development. Someone changes in the processes with the environment. On some occasions people's schemas are inadequate. If the schema is open the actor may adjust his/her schemas or create a new one. If the schema is closed, the actor uses his/her current schema and the discrepancy continues until he/she is ready to adapt more adequately to the environment. The adaptive process is presented in the figure 2.

Figure 2 The interaction between people (children) and environment is seen through people's (children's) adaptation

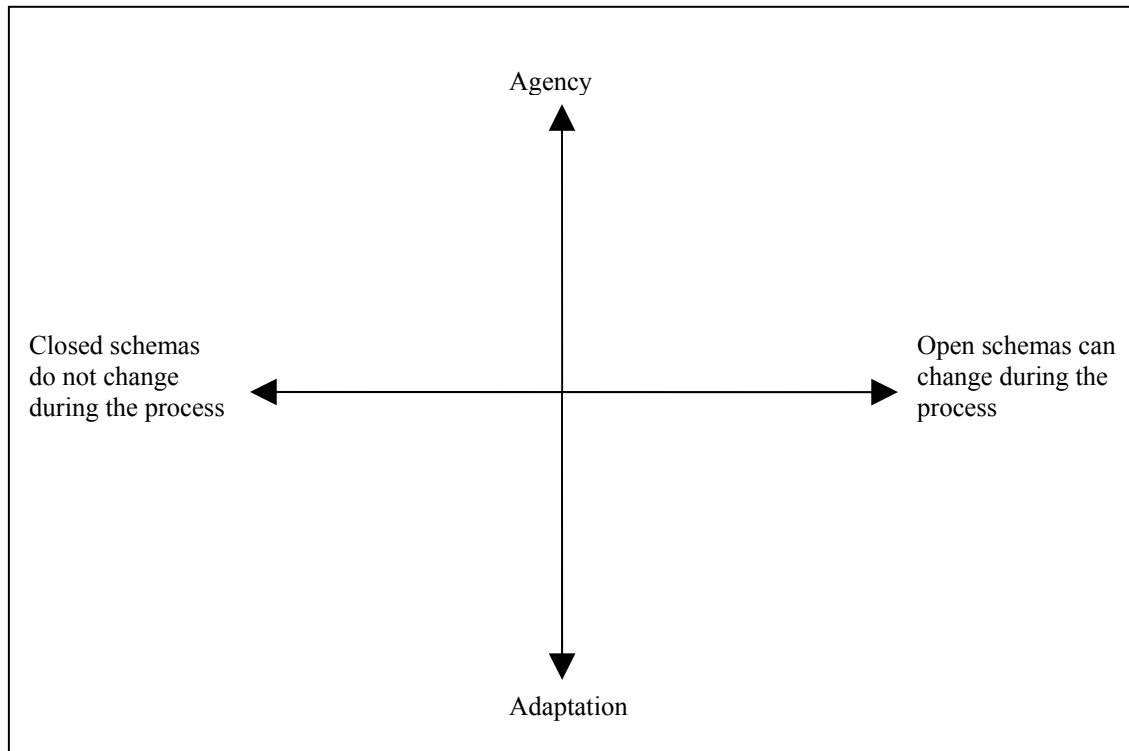|		
Closed schemas do not change during the process	Equilibrium	Open schemas can change during the process
	Adaptation	

Piaget also sees the social development through adaptation. Children's social activities are studied in the light of childhood development. It is the child that changes. Through interaction the child learns better ways to adapt to the environment. When the interactive process is studied, only the child's change is taken into account. The research and theory concentrates on children's logical, social and moral development. Vygotsky emphasizes more the social aspects of the interaction. In his idea of proximal development the child develops within the socially constituted settings, but even Vygotsky concentrates on the child's development. Vygotsky also looks at the child that is changing.

But as Cooney & Selman (1980) point out, children's Piagetian developmental patterns reflect their social interactions. Children's views are an integral part of the development of the social situations. In order to complement the relationship of cognition and interaction, we must also look at the cognition which changes the environment. It is not only the cognition that is changing (see Reunamo 1988).

People are potential agents of change in the situations within which they interact in their environment (see Reunamo 2005). People's schemas can also be agents of change. We need to complement Figure 2 so as to include the actor not only as perceiving adaptation but also as perceiving agency.

Figure 3 The children's views as potential agents of change

Agency

Closed schemas
do not change
during the process

Open schemas can
change during the
process

Adaptation

Piaget is interested in the process by which the schemas develop through adaptation. In this model the schemas change the environment too. The mental strategies have an effect on the action strategies but they are not the same thing. These mental images, schemas, or strategies, can have four combinations along the two continuums described in Figure 3. First in the southeast sector, the strategies can be adaptive and open, which means that people's schemas do not change the conditions of their situation, or in this case the curriculum, but the environment may change the people's view of the situation. Second in the northeast sector, the schemas can be agentive and open, which means that both the people's schemas and the environment may change. Third in the northwest sector, the people's schemas can be closed and agentive, which means that the people's view of things changes the environment, but the environment does not change the people's schemas. Fourth in the southeast sector, the schemas can be closed and adaptive, which means that people's mental images do not change the environment, and neither do their strategies change. This makes up the theoretical framework of this research, which resembles both the Piagetian ideas of adaptation and the Hegelian tradition in which the

process transcends both of the interacting phenomenon, which Engels describes in the following: "The great basic idea that the world is not to be viewed as a complex of fully fashioned objects, no less than the images of them inside our heads (our concepts), are undergoing incessant changes" (see Vygotsky, 1978). The theoretical framework can be seen as a whole in Figure 4.

Figure 4 The model of agentive perception
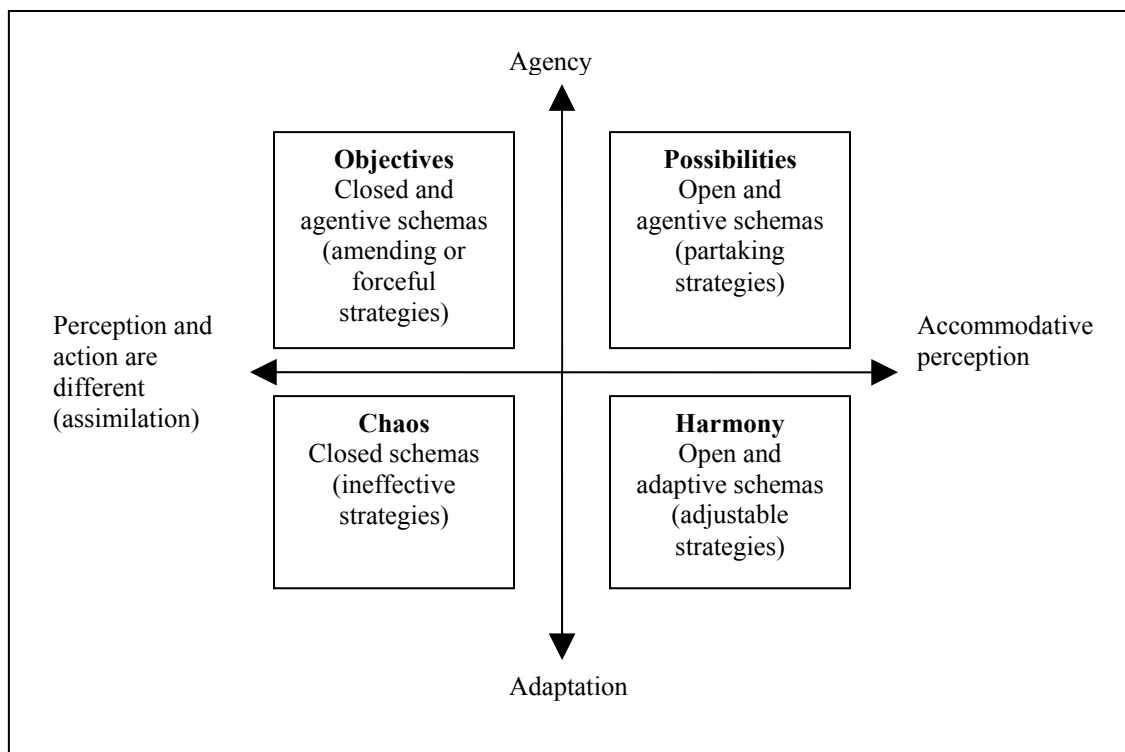
The addition of agentive schemas adds a new phenomenon to the equilibrium process. Both closed and open schemas may or may not change the environment. Piaget did not consider the possibility of schemas changing the environment.

Here we approach the Froebelian way of seeing. Froebel emphasized not adaptation but people's evolving understanding of their own potentialities and limitations. People grow up to deliberately and rationally foster the evolutionary process itself (see. Curtis & Boultwood 1958, 352-391). And it is important to notice that even the adaptive schemas have an effect on the environment. All this results in the four different orientations,

brings about four different relationships, and thus four different paths (changes and developments) as the educational course evolves. This is why the model is referred to as the model of agentive perception. In Figure 5 a model of agentive curriculum is presented.

Figure 5 The model of agentive curriculum

Objective

- Wanting something you do not have.
- Includes necessary skills, content areas, school readiness.
- Need to make agreements, arrangements and evaluation.
- Shared, clear goals and how to reach them.
- Direction of needs, motivation, affection and alertness to ensure success.
- Clear plans, age appropriateness, stages, appropriate degree of difficulty, autonomy, minimizing of disturbances.
- Encouraging, individual consideration and joy of success brings further boost.
- Objectives can also be overemphasized, which makes it hard to value present or surprises.

Possibility

- Testing reality; education is about finding & producing culture.
- Possibilities can be ideated in abundance. They do not obligate, but they can be used and spent at will.
- Action originates from children, free and cooperative play. Children take part in planning. Time for projects, joint research.
- Creativity, development, subtle or explosive growth.
- Relaxed, safe, exciting, playful approach.
- Adult prepares multiple ways and alternatives. Surprises during the process are anticipated, obscurity arouses curiousity.
- The opening of possibilities can also overwhelm us, and we complete nothing.

Change

Perception does not integrate with action

Perception integrates with action

No change

Chaos

- Adult should be like a fireman in a crisis: prepared for the worse, contacts clear (working relations, backup plans).
- Action is unnecessary, expendable, has too many queues, is instrumental, crushes, is deficient, where we have to endure.
- Getting the neighbors to help and divide.
- Using small groups, differentiating, varying.
- Having a margin for changes (replacements, sickness, security).
- Mapping, planning and stressing of resources (leadership, initiative).
- Not fulfilling the day.
- Chaos is often experienced as destructive, but unwinding and restructuring include the seeds for new structures to evolve.

Harmony

- Preventing the existing good from becoming self-explanatory, invisible, taken for granted..
- By valuing the present we value children, parents, our colleagues and ourselves.
- Independent initiative, unhurried schedule, valued basic care, flexible transitions, scaling, stories, nestling, resting, singing.
- Regularity, trust, acceptance, practice, revision, automation (in fall we invest, in winter we collect).
- The more routine the good things become, the more resources we have for other things.
- Harmony can also be excessive, when obsessive habits hinder the necessary change.

Research problems

The research problems have been practical. The main task is to discover the best practices, most chaotic situations, the important objectives and most promising possibilities. First we have surveyed the present state. It is not possible to know the way without knowledge of our position and surrounding territory. The research problems of the first phase of the research are as follows:

1. What are the best practices in the ECEC in Helsinki? What is going well and is being appreciated concerning the national ECEC curriculum? What is worth maintaining (**harmony**)?
2. What are the most chaotic situations in the ECEC in Helsinki? What situations are most unfocused, unpredictable, cluttered and uncontrolled concerning the national ECEC curriculum (**chaos**)?
3. What are the most important objectives in Helsinki ECEC? What does the staff want but does not yet have? What values are prevalent concerning the national ECEC curriculum (**objectives**)?
4. What possibilities do the ECEC staff in Helsinki find most promising? What are the phenomena that should be experimented with and tested most in the national ECEC curriculum (**possibilities**)?

The data for the first phase of the research have been analysed during the summer 2005. After surveying the present state of affairs in Helsinki it is time to consider actions and write them down in to the curriculum. The task is to decide what we shall do with our findings, refine theminto action and practice. The staff in the Helsinki ECEC seek answers to these questions in the autumn 2005. The data (the emerging curriculum) should be ready by 2006.

Research methods

The framework of the research is action research. The first phase was designed to survey the present state of the Helsinki ECEC. At the same time the staff had to familiarize themselves with the national ECEC curriculum themes and reflect upon their own standpoint and attitudes concerning the national ECEC plan. The first phase also helps Helsinki municipalities in the production of the local ECEC. The idea is to make a compact and relevant bond between the national, local and unit-specific ECEC plans. Eighty questions were sent to 328 kindergartens in Helsinki at the end of February 2005 and to all of the family care leaders. Here are the concise instructions for kindergartens for the first phase of the process in spring 2005. (The family care instructions had the same orientation but were somewhat different in practice: the space prevents us from dealing with them here.)

1. In the file Vasu-kartoitus.doc there are four sets of questions. In each of the sets the ECEC guidelines are considered from different viewpoints which are: 1) Good practices (harmony) 2) Conflicts (chaos) 3) Objectives and 4) Possibilities. In the kindergarten one member of the staff is liable for one set of questions. Altogether there are four people in the kindergarten to address one set of questions each.
2. Although one staff member is responsible for answering her/his set of questions, it is important to process and discuss the topics with colleagues (e.g. at coffee breaks, in teams and at meetings). If one has different opinions than one's colleagues, write down both opinions. One does not have to discuss with everybody in the kindergarten, but it is important that the opinions of different teams are written down.
3. The time to complete the processing of the questions is from 01.03-15.04.2005.
4. The first week is for considering the questions in general. These instructions are delivered to all the staff.
5. The second week the taking of one's own and colleagues notes begins.
6. On the third week the answers are written up.
7. Not later than week 15 one of the ECEC plan leaders writes up all four sets of answers into a form at the address http://www.helsinki.fi/~reunamo/vasu.htm . The viewpoints are left for all to read and comment (in the staff room, info board, copy to everybody etc.) The viewpoints are used as a starting point in the conducting of the ECEC plan.

By the end of the deadline, 243 kindergartens had sent in their answers. The Swedish-speaking kindergartens (n=40) decided not to take part in the process, because there was no satisfactory translation available. The percent of curriculum processed Finnish-speaking kindergartens was 84,4 %, which is satisfactory.

The data reading and analysis started right away at the end of March when the answers started arriving. A preliminary experimental interpretation and classification was done by the end of April. Because the schedule was very tight, with random sampling, a hundred kindergartens were chosen for a more closer examination. The analysis was based on the grounded theory and the idea was to present the staff's own views concerning the national ECEC curriculum. The analysis was done mostly using Microsoft Excel, but in the classification and grouping also Atlas.ti and SPSS. When the coding was finished the analysis resembled more content analysis with classification and numeration. The results mixed the themes of the national ECEC curriculum and the Helsinki ECEC emphasis which were presented in the sets of questions with the viewpoints of the staff. In June the themes were analyzed and organized according to the theoretical model of the research (see Figures 5, 6 and 7).

Results

The first research phase is complete. The kindergarten staff worked on 20 themes. The family care staff worked on 10 themes. The present space does not allow for discussion on all of them. Therefore only one (hopefully the most central) theme of both groups is presented here in the results section. The first theme presented is the model for *a kindergarten in the ECEC setting* (theme one of twenty). As the sample consisted of one hundred kindergartens, the number after the viewpoint indicates the percent of the sample which selected that viewpoint as an important.

Figure 6 The kindergarten in the ECEC setting

What are the most important objectives in your team, still not accomplished but which you are actively pursuing? What about the whole kindergarten? • Social and ethical objectives; 31 • Development of common rules and organization; 20 • Support of play; 20 • Own theme (toilet training, gymnastic exercises etc.); 19 • The functionality of meetings and collaboration; 18 • Use of small groups and differentiation; 18 • General functionality and clarity; 16 • Development of learning and working environment; 16 • Documentation and observation; 16 • Peace at work and an unhurried atmosphere; 14 • The development of planning- and evaluation practices; 13	What new innovations or experiments you are undertaking right now in your team? What about the whole kindergarten? • The development of learning- and working environments; 35 • Different clubs and workshops; 25 • More small groups and differentiation; 22 • Different projects and themes; 22 • Different methods (social, emotional etc.); 18 • Play (interactive play, picture play etc.); 17 • Children under three (early interaction, own nurse, guided learning etc.); 16 • The development of playing locations and role playing possibilities; 15 • The development of non-verbal communication (AAC); 14 • The enrichment of physical exercise, physical education projects; 13
What kind of things causes the most trouble and frustration in your work? What about the whole kindergarten? • The lack of substitutes; 39 • The absence of the staff; 26 • Hurrying; 25 • The turnover of periodic staff; 23 • The increasing of bureacracy; 21 • Planning is problematic; 18 • Challenging children, noise; 16 • The difficulty of family and parents' problems; 16 • The lack of resources; 15 • Atmosphere, the lack of functional collaboration; 15 • The confusion with rules and agreements; 15 • Children's sickness and turnover; 14	What are those practices that work best in your kindergarten? • Flexibility and helping others; 33 • Workday functionality and daily rhythm; 26 • The workshifts are fair and functional; 25 • Meetings are relevant; 23 • Sphere of responsibilities and division of labour function well; 22 • Community spirit and responsibility; 20 • Work in small groups; 19 • Planning; 18 • The atmosphere is good; 18 • (Common) singing session; 17 • Flow of information; 15 • Teamwork; 14 • Collaboration with families; 14

The family care theme presented here is *The praxis of family care* (theme one of ten).

Family care answers could not be gathered by a form in the web, because individual

family care-givers could not be required to have the equipment and knowledge to deliver them. Therefore the answers came through different medias: some as written papers, some as text-files and some as summaries from the family care leaders. The exact amount of answers is not known.

Figure 7 The praxis of the family care

What are the most important objectives that you are working on right now? Which things need improvement? • Social objectives, (good manners, considering others, rules, friends) • Individuality, the specialness of each child • The well-being of children, security and trust • Supporting children's initiative • A well-designed care-giving • Children's readiness (pre-school, skills) • Daily instructed and planned lesson • More salary, workroom compensation • Homelike and unhurried atmosphere • The division of children into age-groups (group family care) • To develop myself, own studying, taking care of myself	What new experiments take place in your group right now? How do you keep up experimental and explorative atmosphere? • Action connected to nature: Garden, plants, insects, exploration, earth, water, fire, air • Excursions, especially the forest: Metsämörri-club, adventure, physical exercise, seasons • Child-centered action: Listening to children's ideas and enriching them, shared development • Basic care, work education (initiative, domestic work, dish washing, helper, baking etc.) • Books: Reading, books available, library, pictures • Own studying, information • Expression: Singing, music, drama, storycrafting • The revision of own attitude, parents' ideas and wishes
What kinds of things have been causing most trouble and frustration in your work lately? • The turnover of children, the absence of children, shorthanded group • Perpetual cleaning, care of clothes, homework • Own sickness • Own inadequaey, children's troubles • Conflicts in work community or team • Oversized groups • Parents do not keep given things, the agreements do not hold • Parents do not care about their children's affairs • Challenging, difficult children • Too much hurry • Parents do not inform of abscences, irregular working and care hours • Family crisis, difficult families	What are the most satisfying things in your work? What things work best? What things you do not want to lose? • Work is independent, free, versatile and the schedule is in my own hands • The groups of children are sufficiently small and work well • Cooperation with workmates is satisfactory • Own professional skill is good • The possibility to work at home, homelike work • Children's play is rich and functional • Working with children is rewarding • Work has been continuing and regular • The work is flexible enough • The satisfaction and closeness of children • Every day the results of the work and learning can be seen concretely • Other: Possible to take care of own children, 'a family with lots of children', outdoor activities, nature

Discussion

The process has already produced many kinds of results. It has given insight for the best practices, the worst conflicts, the most important objectives and the most promising possibilities in today's ECEC practice. It has dissolved the barrier between the national ECEC core plan and the work praxis in kindergarten. The core plan themes are reflected through the praxis. The objectives and descriptions of good practice can now be seen through the concrete functions of everyday work.

In the autumn of 2005 the kindergartens and family care units start the second phase of their ECEC curriculum process. In the traditional educational model, the curriculum focuses on the objectives and on the good things. But this model calls for a different approach. Each viewpoint (**harmony, chaos, objectives and possibilities**) requires a different strategy (see figure 5). In a meeting on 15 August 2005 with the 30 Helsinki-curriculum tutors it became clear that the four orientations are not still familiar enough to the partakers. To bring the model of agentive perception in touch with the kindergarten staff and the staff's own way of seeing things, a teamwork model (or a practice) has been produced. The procedure is following:

> With this practice we can bring all the participants' opinions into view. At the same time, a balanced picture of the educational situation in the kindergarten unfolds before the participants' eyes.

1. On the wall there are four large sheets of paper (A2), which have been labeled **harmony, chaos, objective** and **possibility.** Objective and possibility are the upper pair and chaos and harmony are the lower pair (see figure 5). Every participant gets five pieces of paper (for example 6 x 20 cm) and stickers.
2. The participants write down one thing that they think works well in the kindergarten and which they feel satisfied with. The thing can be something already existing, already a fine working practice or phenomenon. At the time of writing there is no talking. Each participant fastens his/her piece of paper to the **harmony**paper on the wall. Now it is time to talk about the findings. The participants try to re-organize the similar and dissimilar things into their corresponding clusters. In addition the participants try to rearrange papers in such a way that the best practices are further down (southeast).

3. The participants write onto a second piece of paper one thing or practice that is controversial, unclear or messy. The participants feel they cannot get a hold of the thing or practice. Each participant fastens his/her piece of paper to the **chaos**paper on the wall. The findings are discussed. Is there any similarity among the topics? Which findings are the most conflicting? The pieces of paper are re-organized according to their similarity and conflict, with the more conflicting themes placed into the southwest corner of the **chaos**paper.

4. The staff write onto a third piece of paper one thing or practice they think is, or should be, very important in the kindergarten educational setting, but is not yet fully developed. What do we want but do not have? Each participant fastens their piece of paper to the **objective**paper on the wall. The objectives are discussed. Again the similar and different objectives are re-organized accordingly. Also the most important objectives are located into the northwest section of the objective-paper.

5. To get the creative ideas flowing with our possibilities we need some relaxation and looseness. (You can use some relaxation exercise, e.g. every other participant draws a landscape into the other's back. The other tries to guess if it is winter, spring, summer or fall in the picture. Then the drawer is switched.) The participants write on a piece of paper one thing that could enrich the kindergarten culture. What new things look tempting and might be worth experimenting with? What fruits are within reach and seem to be juicy? What seems promising but is still unexplored? Exaggerating is encouraged. After ideation each participant fastens their piece of paper into the **possibility**paper. The ideas are discussed and enriched. Each participant writes on a fifth paper a more elaborate idea enriching one already exhibited, and fastens it among others on an appropriate location. The pieces of paper can be fastened to each other.

The described process takes about two or three hours. The discussion can go deeper, if the participants fastens their pieces of paper in turn, but this arrangement makes the process longer. The number of participants can be anything from four to thirteen. If the kindergarten is large it is maybe better to have two separate groups. The four orientations can then afterwards be put beside each other (chaos beside chaos etc.). When the model is finished it is left on the wall for a month. During that time 'post-it stickers' could be added to the model by anyone of the staff. Pictures and lines can also be added. After one month the model should be elaborated further with all the staff present:

1. What does the whole picture look now? Is something crucial missing? Every member of the team removes one piece of paper that she/he feels is least important. What do others think about the removal?

2. Every participant changes the location of one piece of paper. The changes are discussed. Could there be better descriptions on some pieces of papers? Could the things be described in a way that does not offend any of the participants? The finished model is transcribed into one A4 paper by one staff member (the personal and intimate material may be removed at this phase, because the paper may be discussed publicly, e.g. with parents.)

3. In each group of children the preceding process can be reproduced with parents and children to find out the parents' point of view. (When applied with children the use of pictures and drawings can help the process. With children the questions are simple: What is the best here in kindergarten? What is the worst in kindergarten? What do you want to do? What is the most amazing thing that could happen here?)

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