

## Language Objectives in the Finnish preschool curriculum

### Abstract:

In Finland a national preschool curriculum for six-year-olds was released in 2000 and preschool is currently available for all six-year-olds. Language and communication have a central role in the curriculum. In this research we have sought answers to two questions: 1) How do teachers see the role of language in preschool? 2) How do teachers' views relate to the sustainable development? The research method used was a survey. Teachers saw language more as relating to child development than as a cultural phenomenon. The teacher's valuing of language objectives reflected their enthusiasm about preschool. The results reveals the question, is the teachers' academic emphasis narrowing language as something that must be learned. If this is the case, the children may not adopt a participative and creative role in sustainable development.

Keywords: Sustainable development, early childhood education, curriculum, educational objectives, learning

### Introduction

As Bulajeva, Duoblienè and Targamadzè (2004) suggest, the importance and value of human life and welfare now and in future is emphasized in the concept of sustainable development. The question, however, is whether it is possible to simultaneously project our mind on life now and in the future. (Bulajeva, Duoblienè & Targamadzè 2004, 24.) Young children need secure and sufficiently permanent surroundings for a balanced development. Long-term relationships and good daily routines are foundations for a healthy childhood. Perhaps it is because young children themselves change so quickly in their early years that they need relatively stable conditions for their upbringing. On the other hand, our world changes faster every day. On consequence, children must have early experiences of such change to adapt to the processes of change. The more used the children are to participating in the processes of his/her surroundings, the more prepared they will be for participating also as adults.

Sustainable development requires our constant participation. To really take our fate in to our own hands we need to have the tools and skills to take part in the development of our culture and environment. With such an object in view, language is the primary tool in remoulding

our culture. This includes children. We need to see the children as active participants in the process of cultivating our culture and environment. The Oxford reference dictionary defines change as the act or an instant of making or becoming different. So when we say that the child is changing, it should mean so in both ways: The child can change or the child can be an agent of change. The sooner children have the possibility of taking part in the development of our society, the better their skills and motivation will be in that process.

When the discussion is centred on the beginning reader and writer, sometimes educators 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.

A balanced amount of openness is needed to let educators, children and families take part in the development of their community without losing the delicate existing social structures that have been built throughout the years. A balanced amount of change is also necessary if we take children's and families' participation seriously. The possibilities in early childhood education are enormous, but an endless number of possibilities can also prohibit us from ever finishing anything, or lead us to chaos. The existing social practices we have with children should be perceived and maintained, but they can also hinder the needed change. Chaos is usually seen as destructive, but it can also have a refreshing unwinding effect and reveal the seeds of new things to come. This article concentrates on language values, and more precisely on language itself as a cultural tool and as a factor in children's development. (Reunamo 2004.)

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

In Finland the preschool curriculum outlines general objectives and subject fields to be addressed in early years settings, emphasizing the need for preparation for school. It is the task

of local government, known as municipalities, to contextualise these general objectives. Further, each early year setting or group of settings within a particular locality must devise their own curriculum. (see Moriarty 2000, 236.)

The city of Helsinki has also created a preschool curriculum. An important target according to this plan is the development of linguistic awareness. Thus a child must have experiences in transforming spoken language 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.)

### A different perspective on early literacy

The development of a reader is always more than a purely individual event. A change of viewpoint influences the definition of literacy and even that of teaching, observes 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 developmental features are also a part of the process.

Many different perspectives on early literacy have arisen during the last 100 years. Barratt-Pugh (2000) talks about four perspectives on early literacy. During the early part of the twentieth century it was believed (for example by 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” programmes were developed that involved highly structured, sequentially organized, 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 of children is a process involving the whole language. Early childhood professionals were encouraged to provide print-rich environments and a language-based curriculum, which emphasized the integration of reading, writing, speaking and listening. (Barratt-Pugh 2000, 2-3.)

During the 1990s, following from the emergent views of literacy, the socio-cultural theories of literacy-learning emerged, according to 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 literacy 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 assumptions 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.

Following Sperling and Freedman (2001, 373-374), over the past decade, newer – or newly recognized – 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 the cognitive, social, and cultural strands of research on writing and literacy to suggest socio-cognitive (social-cognitive) and socio-cultural (social-cultural) theories that may better explain the writing and learning experiences of diverse students working across diverse literacy and learning contexts.

The 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. Every municipality has prepared its own curriculum based, in turn, 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 (Helsingin kaupungin esiopetussuunnitelma 2001, 9).

### Research problems and methods

In this research, we have sought answers to two questions:

- 1) How do teachers see the role of language in preschool?

## 2) How do teachers' views relate to the sustainable development?

In the spring of 2001, the "Helsinki project" was established at the Research Centre for Early Childhood and Elementary Education to explore the organization and effectiveness of pre-school education in the City of Helsinki (see Hytönen 2004). This research is a part of the "Helsinki project". The research method used was a survey. In November 2001 a survey was mailed to the teachers in pre-schools 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 (see Hytönen 2004). 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.

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

## Results

### *Content analysis*

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

Table 1 The different emphases of objectives in the National and Helsinki Curricula: Frequencies.

	The National Pre-school Curriculum	The City of Helsinki Curriculum
The 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	

Both the National and the City of Helsinki Curricula stress the language development and education of a child. In the National Preschool Curriculum the cultural aspects of the language are more frequent. The municipal preschool curriculum, moreover, takes into account the regional aspects. "It is possible in multicultural and bilingual Helsinki that a child can see the written languages Finnish and Swedish and he/she can also hear that people speak different languages in everyday situations". The curricula accentuate the development and education of a child more than cultural aspects.

### *Survey*

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	<b>3.92</b>	<b>0.75</b>
Physical & motor development	3.78	0.83
Language & interaction	<b>3.77</b>	<b>0.64</b>
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

As can be seen, ‘*environment & natural history*’ is the most valued objective area right after ‘*General objectives*’. The ‘*environment & natural history*’ objectives includes also sustainable development: ‘*The child learns to take care of his/her environment and act in it in a responsible way*’. Language is the third most valued objective area of the preschool curriculum 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 educational objectives

General objectives	Mean	Std. Dev.
Learning 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
Learning good behaviour	4.19	0.84
Learning to accept differences	4.17	0.84
Development of thinking skills	4.09	0.82
Stimulus to emotional development	4.03	0.84
Skills to control one’s own way of life	4.00	0.78
Learning to learn	3.85	0.87

General socio-emotional values were very important as was teamwork. Constructivist topics (*'learning to learn'*, *'development of thinking skills'* and *'skills to control one's 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  $<.0005$

Language objectives were most closely related to mathematics and general educational objectives (see Table 3) and least closely related to religion and conviction. As we can see, language is not strongly related with *'Environment and natural history'*.



A factor analysis was conducted for the preschool objectives. In the factor analysis, the KMO was .954 and Bartlett's test of sphericity was  $<.0005$ , which indicates that the data is suitable for factor analysis.

Table 6 The ten most important objectives in the two-factor solution

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

Extraction Method: Maximum Likelihood. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. Rotation converged in 3 iterations.

In the two-factor solution, the two main factors were:

- 1) Cultural orientation (aesthetic and arts);
- 2) Child development, education.

The only objective directly related to sustainable development in the pre-school curriculum is '*Manual skills: Gets practice to consider sustainable development*' and it is clearly located in the cultural factor. Interactive skills were the most important language variable in the factor solution.

The location of language objectives in the factor analysis shows the type of general ideas, to which the specific language objective belongs in the minds of the respondents.

These can be seen in Table 7.

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

Language objectives	Culture (aesthetic, arts)	Child development, education
Interactive skills	.164	<b>.672</b>
Vocabulary enrichment and versatility	.281	<b>.585</b>
Practices with inform. & media tools	<b>.483</b>	.417
Interest in literature	.411	<b>.481</b>
Interest in reading and writing	.261	<b>.407</b>

Extraction Method: Maximum Likelihood. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. Rotation converged in 3 iterations.

The location of the language objectives are in the developmental factor. The only exception is '*practices with information and media tools*', which is related a little bit more on the cultural factor. 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 8.

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	<b>0.660</b>	0.346
Physical and motor development	0.620	0.401
Ethics	0.593	0.584
General educational objectives	0.309	0.788
Language and interaction	0.357	<b>0.761</b>
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 *'Environment and natural history'* objectives, which are closely related to sustainable development, are more a part of the cultural factor.

The *'interaction skills'* language objective correlated with the teachers' views of their work and education in many ways. The strongest correlation was *'enthusiasm with preschool'*, The other four language 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 *'enthusiasm about preschool'* are related to each other, as can be seen in table 9.

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

Correlations are Spearman coefficients. All correlation significances are  $<.0005$

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)'*  $r(372) = .147$ ,  $p = .005$ , and with the factor *'child development, education'*  $r(372) = .450$ ,  $p = <.0005$ .

*'Enthusiasm about preschool'* correlated with the language object areas (all language object values added together)  $r(400) = .391$ ,  $p <.0005$ , and with *'manual skills: Gets practice to consider sustainable development'*,  $r(404) = .174$ ,  $p <.0005$ . The message is quite clear: *'Enthusiasm about preschool'* is more related with individual language objectives than cultural sustainable development.

When we look at the language objectives' correlations with general educational objectives (see table 3), we see their importance according to language objectives. There are

interesting changes in the order of these general educational objectives when compared with the order of correlation strengths as can be seen in Table 10.

Table 10 The language objectives' correlations with general objectives

General educational objectives	Correlations with language obj.	The shift from general values (table 3)
Development of thinking skills	0.57	+7
Stimulus to emotional development	0.56	+7
Learning good behaviour	0.53	+3
Learning to learn	0.52	+7
The skills of working together	0.48	-2
Learning to consider others	0.47	-5
Skills to control one's own way of life	0.46	+3
Learning 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. All correlation significances are  $<.0005$

Constructive objectives are heavily related to teacher's high esteem of the language objectives, as '*thinking skills*', '*learning to learn*' and '*skills to control one's own way of life*' (autonomy) have gained more importance when compared with the general valuing of the objectives (see Table 2). '*Stimulus to 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 2). Language seems to correlate more with constructivism and less with joy and concern for others. For example the correlation for '*development of thinking skills*' was statistically significantly more than the correlation for '*child feels the joy of doing and learning*',  $t(403) = 3.91$ ,  $p = <.0005$ .

## Discussion

In this study *language and interaction* correlated highly with *mathematics*. The pre-school teachers thought that these areas belong together. Teachers valued social objectives, for example *learning to consider others*. 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 as a part of life in everyday preschool functioning. Teaching methods that are oriented towards acquisition of knowledge create consuming attitude and limit the discovery of real world and requirements for changes, thereby they do not further education for sustainable development (Kudiņš & Klepere 2004, 43). Even if Finnish students succeeded with outstanding results in the reading tests of the OECD study (Väljjarvi, Linnakylä, Kupari, Reinikainen, Malin, & Puhakka, 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.

The constructivist paradigm (Vygotsky) fits well with the developmental factor objectives. The focus is on the child developing with the aid of more skilful 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 cultural factor is different. It rather addresses more the issues of cultural artefacts and concrete action. In the cultural factor it is also possible to see the child as a creative developer of culture. Moreover, in the cultural factor the child can be seen as an active participant in the development of cultural artefacts.

The children's language development is not important only because we need to understand how children view things or how they develop, but also because we need to understand how the subjectivity of the self takes shape. At the heart of studying human subjectivity – in the genesis of personal motivation and goals – it is not only to see how children develop, but to see how the interaction between children and their environment develops (see Reunamo 2004, 109).

The National Board of Education in Finland stresses the view of seeing language as developmental. In addition those teachers who are enthusiastic about pre-school, stress more the learning aspects of language and less the fact of language as a tool for cultural development. This view has consequences for the conditions of sustainable development. If children are not seen as builders of our culture and environment, we cannot help children acquire the needed tools for the process. It is important to see sustainable development as something we can work on, not something that is given to us. The change in our culture depends on the context. From this perspective, change has no absolute value. Nevertheless when we need change, we should have the vision and tools for producing it.

In general Finnish pre-school educators value highly environmental objectives (see table 2). But there seems to be a tendency that educators enthusiastic about new pre-school curriculum are more interested in language as an individual development and less interested in fostering sustainable development. There is also a danger that language is seen in pre-school as an independent subject without connections to sustainable development. As the United Nations' Commission on Sustainable Development (1996) points out, it should be important to reorient education to address sustainable development. The alternative to this, to create an entirely new discipline and try to find room in already crowded timetables and create teacher-training courses based on a nebulous concept would have been a tremendous waste of resources. Concerning language this means that we should not treat teaching language as such, without cultural and behavioural consequences. We should not consider language only as something that must be taught and learned as perfectly as possible. While concentrating on the development of children's language abilities, we miss the connection between language and cultural evolution. We must realize that language is the main tool as we create new patterns of behaviour for individuals, groups and society as a whole towards the environment (see United Nations 1996, see also Ojala, Karevaara and Reunamo 2004.).

The cultural participation is in the core of sustainable development. The standard definition (see Morris 2004) of sustainable development (or sustainability) is that of the Brundtland Commission (1987): "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". If the children do not practice their language to meet the community's needs today, they lose the ability to meet their needs in the future.

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