

ASSESSING THE QUALITY OF PRE-SCHOOL ESTABLISHMENTS IN ESTONIA

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Abstract

The article describes theoretically the quality evaluation system of pre-school establishments in Estonia. According to the constitution of the Republic of Estonia (1992) the education is under the state surveillance. When in earlier years the state surveillance was performed in all the pre-school establishments at least once in six years, then since 2006 an internal assessment obligation was established in the pre-school establishments and the counselling on internal assessment issues shall be ensured on the state level. That means that the personnel of the pre-school establishments can plan and analyse their operation in all the areas, co-operate with interest groups and collect feedback from them about the performance of their work. The basis of the assessment is internal assessment criteria, the compiling of which has followed the principles of Total Quality Management. The internal assessment of pre-school establishments is supported by external assessment system, the aim of which is to support and counsel the development activity of the pre-school establishments. The article gives overview about opportunities and problems of quality measurement in pre-school establishments in Estonia.

Key words: *assessment, pre-school establishment, quality.*

Introduction

Quality has been the central issue in discussions about education throughout the world. Thus, the quality of pre-school establishments has been part of quality issues in education that was actively debated in the end of last century. The issues that were raised were - What is the influence of the quality of educational environment on child's development? What is an educational establishment of a good quality and how to assess it?

In order to discuss about the quality of educational establishments we should define quality. Most of the authors have emphasised on subjective, relative and contextual nature of quality. E.g. according to Terhart (2000) quality is never stable and unchanging, but its characteristics or combination of characteristics depends on assessment. Also Moss (1994) has mentioned a descriptive and assessing meaning of the definition. At the same time these two meanings can complement each other. Dahlberg, Moss & Pence (1999, p. 5) have stressed that quality is a relative concept by its nature that is based on values, beliefs and interests. The definition of quality depends on who is involved and how is it done. Hujala et al (1999) note that there is no single and unique objective definition of quality. The definition of quality is relative and depends on the interests, beliefs, needs and wishes of the definers. Harvey & Green (1993) suggest that we should talk about different qualities that are defined based on interest groups mainly. Exclusive and inclusive paradigms have been mentioned in analysis of the definition of quality (Moss, 1994). Exclusive paradigm means an approach of specialists towards understanding of quality, inclusive paradigm, in turn, tries to take into account the interest of different participants. There is also an approach

where the definition of quality concentrates on targeted activities, processes and quality improvement and guarantee. This is mostly used on the sphere of economy where the concept of quality was widely used thanks to the ideology of Total Quality Management.

Quality assessment in a pre-school establishment

Since 1990ies several countries have shown their interest in the topic of quality in pre-school establishments as more and more pre-school places are created that, in turn, increase an interest towards quality aspects (Eirich, Mayr & Oberhuemer, 1998). Several studies have shown a tendency that the time children spend in pre-schools is longer and ever younger children spend bigger part of their day in a pre-school (Fthenakis, 1998; Hautamäki, 2000; Tietze & Cryer, 1999).

Based on the claim that quality can be defined only from the point of view of somebody (Harvey & Green, 1993) in the centre of a pre-school establishment is a child - his/her development, individuality and necessary educational environment. The child is a member of a family, therefore it is important to take into account the needs, expectations and wishes of the family. Dahlberg, Moss & Pence (1999) are on an opinion that the definition of quality shall start with the questions concerning the child: how do we understand the child and childhood? Then we can ask about the educational establishment: what is its task? Hautamäki (2000, p. 18) says that today's children experience dual-socialisation. It means that besides the family a pre-school establishment plays an increasing role in child's development also. The quality of pre-school establishments should therefore be considered as a multi-level system that proceeds from the child (Kronberger Kreis, 1998).

The concept of quality should be measurable in order to use it in a pre-school environment. Hartmann & Stoll (1998, p. 15) say that there are two different approaches in the pre-school quality assessment. In the first case the quality assessment criteria will be created based on expert opinions. These questionnaires and evaluation scales can be used first of all as comparative measurement tools that can be used to carry out studies in different establishments. E.g. the scales ECERS (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 2005) and ITERS (Harms, Cryer & Clifford, 2006) that were created for quality assessment in pre-school establishments. In the second case the quality assessment criteria are created in agreement with interest groups. In that case the definition of quality is a continuous process. This approach means that no interest group can define quality and quality standards on their own, but definition of quality shall be a democratic process. This approach is followed by quality aims for pre-schools created by the European Commission (Qualitätsziele, 1996), Austrian quality standards (Hartmann & Stoll, 1998) and Katz five perspective model in quality (Katz, 1996). In recent years the dimensional aspects of the concept of quality have been emphasised on and respective structural-process quality models have been created.

Studies that have shown relations between the quality of a pre-school establishment and child development have significantly changed discussions on the quality of a pre-school establishment and the essence of different assessment models. During the last ten years there have been separate researches about how educational environment in a pre-school establishment influences child's development in relation to his/her success in a school. Children who have attended a pre-school establishment of high quality have better language and mathematical skills when they go to school (Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Bryant & Clifford, 2000; Pianta, LaParo, Payne, Cox & Bradley, 2002) and compared to other children they can better follow instructions, communicate with other children and participate in a learning process (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 1999). Children's results are most of all influenced by educational environment that a teacher has created and how he/she communicates with children (LoCasale et al., 2007). Therefore, while developing quality in a pre-school establishment it is important to follow different factors of educational environment that influence child's development.

Organisation of activities in Estonian pre-school establishments

Estonian early childhood education has developed within the general educational and cultural context of Europe. The development of early childhood education has been substantially influenced by Germany and Russia, including also fifty years of traditions of the Soviet education. After regaining independence in 1991, the Republic of Estonia initiated a reform of the whole educational system. Changes took place in the content of learning, in the system of educational establishments and in educational provisions. The organisation of work of early childhood establishments, its content and objectives were defined in Pre-school Childcare Institutions Act (1999) and Framework Curriculum of Pre-school Education (1999).

At the end of 2005 there were 516 kindergartens with 50,807 children, 9 crèches with 422 children. There were 80 kindergarten-schools with 3,151 children of kindergarten age. In 2005 180 children were going to kindergarten for handicapped children. 27 private child-care institutions with 1,031 children were operating. The share of children of preschool age attending pre-school establishments in the total number of children of the same age has been continuously growing since 1995. 56% of 1–6-year-old children were covered by pre-primary education in 1995, as compared to 71% at the end of 2005. In 2005, 57% of all 2-year-old children attended crèches, which is 1% more than in the previous year. The coverage of 1-year-olds has slightly decreased compared to the previous year (Rummo 2006, p. 27).

Quality assessment in pre-school establishments

Estonian pre-school establishments have external as well as internal quality assessment. Earlier, external assessment was emphasised on due to its control activity, now the importance of internal assessment is increasing gradually. External assessment supports internal assessment and has mainly a consulting not controlling role.

External assessment

According to the constitution of the Republic of Estonia (1992) the education is under the state surveillance. The assessment is given to the legitimacy and performance of the educational institution through the state surveillance and supervisory control. In order to ensure the legitimacy of the operation of the municipal childcare institutions the supervisory control according to the local municipality organisation act shall be arranged. Supervisory control is the control performed by the local municipality over the legitimacy of the operation of the institutions and their employees of the rural municipality or town. State surveillance on schooling and education of pre-school establishments is carried out by officials of the Ministry of Education and Research and county governor. The main aim of the state surveillance is to contribute to the acquiring of high-quality education and to ensure the efficiency and legitimacy of the schooling and education activity.

When in earlier years the state surveillance was performed in all the pre-school establishments at least once in six years, then since 2006 an internal assessment obligation was established in the pre-school establishments and the counselling on internal assessment issues shall be ensured on the state level. The aim of this amendment is to support the internal assessment of the educational institution and to create an external assessment system, which would counsel the childcare institutions. The aim of the counselling is to increase the objectivity of the assessment and to deepen the awareness of the educational institution of their actual state and to support and develop the carrying out of the internal assessment and the development of the assessment culture. The counselling will be carried out by the advisers, whose training was started in autumn 2006 in the framework of the project “Koolikatsuja (School explorer)”.

Since 2006 the state surveillance has been thematic, that means that in the framework of the surveillance the information is collected and the operation of the educational institution is inspected in a certain aspect. For example the theme of the early childhood education in the academic year of 2006/2007 is the supporting of the school readiness in the childcare institution. The minister of

education and research determines the sample of the educational institutions where the surveillance is carried out.

Internal assessment

Since 1 September 2006 the internal assessment in the pre-school establishments has been obligatory. It is a continuous process, the aim of which is to ensure the conditions that support the children's development, the consistent development of the establishment, finding out the strengths of the educational establishment and improvement areas. Internal assessment consists of internal audit and self-evaluation. Internal audit is an audit carried out in an educational establishment on learning and educational process that guarantees the fulfilment of requirements. Self-evaluation is a process where the staff of the establishment systematically monitors the activities and results of the educational establishment. Objects of self-evaluation can be the whole educational establishment, its personnel or a member of personnel. The main aim of self-evaluation is to favour learning and development at a personal as well as personnel level.

The basis of the internal assessment is the assessment criteria, which are given in the regulation No 23 of the minister of education and research „The counselling conditions of school and pre-school establishment and procedure in the issue of the internal assessment” 04.08.2006 (Kooli ja koolieelse, 2006). Perfection model of the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM, 2006) forms a theoretical background for internal assessment criteria. Based on that model the areas of internal assessment have been drawn up and educational establishments follow them in their assessment procedures.

The head of the kindergarten submits in the framework of internal assessment of the pre-school establishment once in three years an internal assessment report. This document contains the internal assessment principles and procedure of the pre-school establishment and the analysis of the last three years' operation. In the analysis the strengths that have come into view in the main areas and aspects that need improvement are pointed out. The following areas are analysed on the internal assessment:

1. Initiative and management.
2. Personnel management.
3. Co-operation with interest groups.
4. Resource management.
5. Schooling and education.
6. Results connected with the child, with the personnel and with interest groups.

Opportunities and problems in quality assessment in pre-school establishments

The quality assessment system that has been implemented since 2006 brings internal assessment of educational establishments in the centre of assessment. Internal assessment is compulsory in majority of EU countries by law (Evaluation of Schools, 2004). Estonian pre-school establishments have carried out internal assessment also earlier, but this activity was not systematic in all pre-school establishments. State supervision analysis from 2003 indicates that internal assessment is very good in 4% of pre-schools, good in 37%, satisfactory in 51% and poor in 8% of pre-school establishments. The results showed that training opportunities concerning internal assessment have improved (73%), internal assessment is planned, internal assessment system has been established (46%), educational personnel and parents have been involved in internal assessment (95%). Shortages were that personnel does not base their internal assessment on the objectives of the establishment (45%), documentation concerning internal assessment is insufficient (45%) and teachers' skills in self-evaluation need improvement (65%) (Ülevaade haridussüsteemi järelevalvest, 2004).

Compulsory internal assessment since 2006 gives a pre-school establishment an opportunity to

create its own internal assessment system and constantly analyse the results of learning and educational activities and management. Internal assessment plays an important role to guarantee and improve the quality of an educational establishment. As the aim of assessment has shifted from control to self-evaluation and self-development, it allows the whole personnel of the establishment to participate in an assessment process, communicate openly and be equally responsible for results.

In the framework of a new assessment system it has been discussed how to implement the EFQM model used in quality management ideology in internal assessment of educational establishments. The terms that everybody understands in the field of economy acquire completely different meaning in an educational context. What is an interest group, who is a client, how to define a product? Application of Total Quality Management in a school or pre-school needs thorough knowledge in education and pedagogical process and conformity to modelling (Türnpuu & Lõhmus, 2000). Implementation of quality management in the sphere of education might mean that the whole concept will transform in modelling and lose its initial ideology and meaning (Harvey & Green, 1993). But Esch et al (2006, p.112) think that the EFQM model is neutral and therefore it will be easy to apply it in educational establishments. The main problems are definition and application of technical terms in pedagogy.

In Estonia, one local government – the city of Tallinn – has experiences with assessing educational establishments based on the EFQM model. Since 2001 educational establishments in Tallinn have had the possibility to apply for Tallinn Quality Awards that have specially been created for educational establishments. This experience was taken into account also in drawing up the national internal assessment criteria.

Internal assessment criteria based on the EFQM model give pre-school establishments main areas of assessment, but do not specify certain quality factors that influence child's development. In order to guarantee quality in pre-school establishments it will be necessary to specify characteristic factors for pedagogical process in the frames of a wider model (EFQM) that should be taken into account in Estonian pre-schools.

Conclusion

In a rapidly changing Estonian society it is important for a pre-school establishment as an institution that supports families to bring its activities into conformity with time, react flexibly to changed expectations of families and children's development needs. The system of quality assessment and guarantee shall play a decisive role here.

The quality assessment system implemented in educational establishments since 2006 emphasises on the substantial role of internal assessment. The emphasis shifts from external control to the analysis of achieving the aims set by the educational establishment itself. External assessment of a controlling nature can't meet modern requirements set to educational establishments where keywords are lifelong learning, inclusion of interest groups, learning organisation, system and integrity. Focus on internal assessment helps the staff of a pre-school establishment to create and develop its own quality system, favours teamwork and targeted management.

As the requirement for internal assessment exists only from 2006, there are no broad studies that could help to analyse the strengths and problems of the new system. Based on the current practice it is possible to claim that the key question in quality assessment in Estonian pre-school establishments will be cooperation between a manager and personnel in implementation of an internal assessment system that would support children's development as well as the development of the whole establishment.

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