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# Creating Conditions for Reflective Practice in Early Childhood Education

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In this study, we describe the development of working practices in Finnish day care centers within the Helsinki metropolitan area, which has 500 day care centers. Every two years, 21 of them are selected for a study to be included in a development network. The Development Unit of Early Childhood Education (VKK-Metro), which includes the University of Helsinki and four municipalities in the metropolitan area, coordinates the development of working practices. The objective is to collaborate on the development of day care pedagogy. The objectives and operating structure of VKK-Metro and the principles of developing practices included within it are described and the operation itself is illustrated in the context of the research results. The leading idea is the development of working practices and pedagogy through a reflective and open dialogue. Research results will be utilized in the development of the day care network studied and in workshops arranged for educators in the region.

Key words: working practices, reflective practice, peer group practice, mentoring, support for teacher development

## The Context of Development of Early Childhood Education

In the past few years, many countries, including Finland, have tried to develop their systems of early education. Canada integrated the educational and care

related aspects of early childhood education. Good results were obtained on the transfer of goals into practical work through reflection and teamwork (Gananathan, 2011). A successful integration of teaching and care in Australia required the commitment of the entire early childhood education system to the development effort in 10 development projects implemented in that country. It was deemed that development became possible when work communities focused on supporting development of the professional competence of the educators (Press, Sumsion, & Wong, 2010).

Finnish day care has received recognition

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in a country report by the OECD (OECD, 2006) for the way it supports educators' opportunities to develop their professional skills via long-term continuing education throughout their careers. Attention was also paid to the number of educators in proportion to children in care, which is higher than in other OECD countries and stipulated by legislation in Finland. It states that, for every four children under the age of three or seven children over the age of three, the staff must include one educator with educational responsibility. It is common practice that a work team consisting of three educators is in charge of the groups of children. Finnish early childhood education is guided by two national documents, 'The National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care (STAKES, 2005)' and 'The Core Curriculum for Pre-School Education (National Board of Education, 2000)'. These documents also refer to the continuous development of early childhood education, which is predicated on correctly allocated, long-term development within day-care communities. Continuous development of educational practices requires a reflective orientation towards work.

Research on the development of working practices in early childhood education related to the deepening of reflective skills has been conducted in Finland (e.g., Järvinen, 1990; Karila, 2001) and other countries (Fenichel, 1991; Gettinger, Stoiber, & Lange, 1999) for a long period. The studies show that

reflection is an important tool in recognizing changing pedagogical practices (e.g., Chi, 2010; Hutton & Smith, 1994). Mezirow (2000) argues that social reflection generates changes in the participants' perspectives. They can share experiences, establish interpretations and question different options. Thus, they use the experiences of others in defining their own perspective and meaning. One recognized characteristic of reflection is the presence of problem solving (e.g., Hutton & Smith, 1994). Within this context, Pearson and Smith (1985) see that the essential target in reflection is that educators think about actions, not necessarily solve problems. Different characteristics can be detected in the nature of reflection, depending on the depth of the level to which the participant moves when reviewing an issue. Such levels include the technical listing, description, analysis, examination, and reflection on the bases for activities. Studies have also revealed that the depth of reflection varies even during the same discussion, and at an individual level. Reflection is a phenomenon that changes dynamically during discussions, when participants move on different reflection levels (Ojala & Venninen, 2011).

However, previous studies have usually reported on the development of reflective practices at a micro level, where individuals or work teams have reflected on their work, but not on a macro level. In this article, we illustrate the development of reflective work methods not only on the micro level in

day care centers, but also at a macro level, in both the administrative hierarchy on early childhood education in municipalities and in the cooperation network of four municipalities in the metropolitan area of Helsinki, Finland. We also describe the significance of support existing both within and outside the day care community and the success of the development process.

### **Principles of Development of Working Practices**

The area of operation of the Development Unit of Early Childhood Education of the Helsinki metropolitan area, established in 2007, is the capital city of Helsinki and its three neighboring municipalities (Espoo, Vantaa and Kauniainen). This is an urban operating area and the only metropolitan area in Finland. It constitutes the living environment of one-fifth of all Finnish children under school age (Suomalainen lapsi, 2007). The Helsinki metropolitan area, more than the rest of the country, is subject to different kinds of challenges owing to increasing immigration (Ministry of the Interior, 2009). Therefore, educators working on early childhood education need to be able to respond to constant change, which is evident as new challenges are directed toward them.

It has been challenging for the educators to make a commitment to the development of working practices, because the goals and methods of development processes have usually come from outside the

day care centers, and the same outside parties have assessed their success. Over the past few years, there has emerged increasing 'project fatigue' among day care educators in the Helsinki metropolitan area toward short development projects that have made the people in the field feel that major changes are expected from them with regard to the quality of the day care. From these starting points, support for development originating from the day care centers' own needs as well as progress with small steps toward self-specified goals were raised as the basic principles in day care operations in the metropolitan area. Press, Sumsion, and Wong (2010) emphasize that, for a development process to succeed, the participants must be listened to, have a dialogue between practical experiences, and be committed to the development process—not only as individuals, but also as a day care community.

The guiding principle of the Development Unit of Early Childhood Education of the Helsinki metropolitan area is to create conditions for the reflective and collegial development of working practices rising from the field of early childhood education that are also affected by the project financing received. Day care communities plan their own development tasks, which are related to the common theme of development. One general goal that transcends project periods has been the development of working practices of observation and documentation in early

childhood education. Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (1999) point out that, by using pedagogical documentation, an educator may manage to proceed from the observation of working practices as a social outsider to the construction of social contents of significance as a social insider. The importance of pedagogical documentation as an aid in reflection on an educator's own working practices is evident in the educator's capability to act as a researcher of his or her own work. Small, even individual, observations may gain a new significance when they are perceived as a part of the whole. Pedagogical documentation can act as an instrument that can be used to develop methods of reflective practice that examine deeper meanings in relevant practice. Documentation provides a concrete, visible method for discussing pedagogy.

For their development of working practices and research on early childhood education, municipalities taking part in the operation find it important to create a structure that encompasses operating day care centers in municipal day care, the educational institutions in the area, and the University of Helsinki as a guarantor of high-quality research. The municipalities in question have collaborated with one another and the University of Helsinki before, albeit on a small scale and infrequently. The Unit of Early Childhood Education at the University of Helsinki takes an active part in the development process and supports the operation with the University's resources. The development projects described in

our article were two years in duration, because of the funding, but their themes have continuity. Process-type research related to a development project, where the results are utilized in the advancement of development of working practices, has been shown to be very significant, in both the identification and systematic development of working practices on early childhood education (Corter & Pelletier, 2010).

Development projects (e.g., Corter & Pelletier, 2010) have revealed that dialogue between those involved in research and development of working practices is important. Parties in this development process want to use open dialogue to manage information obtained through research. The key objective in the development of working practices has been the desire of municipal actors to enable educators in early childhood education to have a firm connection to research. When research results are returned to the research day care centers actively and regularly, the continuous planning and advancement of development of working practices is facilitated. Thus, research results are made to seem like changing practices to customers of early childhood education, children and their parents. At the same time, operating methods created in the development process are distributed from the research day care centers to higher levels of administration as examples of inspiring and high-quality education in practice.

A key framework in the development of working practices consists of a

network of 21 research day care centers. Changing the network every two years is important from the perspective of the creation of a development-oriented network of day care centers. Becoming a research day care center is voluntary and based on descriptions written by them on what they would like to develop as well as why their particular day care center should be selected for the next network of research day care centers. The task of development must come from the needs of the relevant day care center, and it is important that all educators be committed to the project. The task of development must be related to the general theme of the project.

### **Supporting the Development of Working Practices**

In the development project, participants are not seen as individual educators or teams of educators, but rather as the day care center's entire work community. The new practices will be created in multi-professional development of working practices by utilizing the professional skills of educators with different areas of competence. Therefore, the growth and development of the children are taken into account as widely as possible (Gananathan, 2011). However, as far as the development of work is concerned, a day care center is more challenging than an ordinary work environment, because it is difficult to find free and available time to discuss development-

related issues. The daily practices of Finnish day care centers include educator-initiated and guided activities, such as reading to children, and materials-based learning. Activities like breakfast or lunch, dressing for outdoor activities, and naps are considered educationally valuable, and educators play an important role in these activities guiding and helping children. The noise coming from children playing, the liveliness of activities and various interruptions pose great challenges to joint interaction among educators. There are only a few moments during the day when members of the work community can gather to discuss matters without having responsibility for the children. Therefore, meetings are usually held with representatives from various groups, and the information educators receive in them is based on second-hand knowledge received through those representatives (Rodd, 2004). This increases the risk of misunderstanding and lowers the rate of commitment to development programs.

One challenge in the development of working practices in early childhood education in Finland is personnel turnover. The development of new teams is easily disrupted. Team members must earn each other's trust through interaction; this does not happen in an instant. Forming personal relationships require personal experiences of honesty, openness, consistency and respect. Another difficulty with regard to mutual trust in the team is that each member must build up trust with all the other members of the team. Changes of team members may

have a powerful impact on other factors within the team as well as on the roles, interaction and performance of the team (Keyton, 1998). It is preferable that the team shares a commitment to the reflective development of working practices; there should also be an opportunity to review the educators' actions in everyday situations with a new perspective. The recent study by Speir (2010) deals with the changing role of the educator through team discussions. Sharing observations and ideas with others produced new perspectives, and there was an effort to utilize them through professional discussions in order to implement concrete changes in practical work.

### ***Support Provided by Mentors and Directors for the Development of Working Practices***

A mentor supports the development of working practices carried out at each research day care center. At the beginning of the development process, a mentor working in the early childhood education organization of the municipality in question is designated for each research day care center. In their full-time positions, the mentors may be development consultants, designers, development managers, day care directors or experts. The mentors' activities in the research day care centers will be included in their official job description. They meet with the educators in the relevant research day care center on a monthly basis and allocate one day per month for their work as a mentor. It is the duty

of the mentors to motivate the educators to work on a task of development, selected in collaboration, and to help educators see the phases of the development of working practices and the benefit gained from the work. These solutions represent an effort to guarantee that the experience and knowledge accumulated during the development process remain in the organization. Another goal is to enable closer interaction amongst educators in the field as well as with those in the administration of the relevant organization. The educators appreciate receiving assistance from the mentors, as noted in this response from a participant.

*This is a unique experience in my work history; a total outsider comes, supports, and helps us in our work. It used to be the case that people came to us with their demands. All this has already been rewarding, having these discussions (Group interview with personnel, February/2009).*

Mentors are supported in their duties through peer group activities, which we will present later in this article. However, not all aspects of a mentor's task are easy to manage. One of the mentors describes the initial confusion that the educators experienced at a meeting with a mentor: *"Here, too, the beginning was one big hassle. Ideas and impressions were flying around, relatively unstructured. Some seemed very eager to focus on any random idea"* (Process follow-up, February/2010). Many

mentors have said that their method is occasionally close to work supervision. In their development processes of working practices, the educators highlight tacit information that is easier to acknowledge and conceptualize with the help of an outside mentor's questions and comments (e.g., Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Three months later, the aforementioned mentor described the benefit gained from such discussions in support of reflection.

*In my opinion, we did not merely delimit the object of development during this deliberation—instead, at the same time, there occurred a transfer of the development object from learning the techniques of observation and documentation to assessing the impacts of work done by an educator and developing their competence and their skills of observation, documentation and assessment. Therefore, the focus of the educator is transferred from doing the work correctly toward the possible impacts of the work. Opening this window seemed to invigorate the group and it may also have frightened them!"* (Process follow-up, May/2010).

Educators at the research day care centers find that the input of the director of the day care center is also quite significant for the success of the development of working practices. The director is in charge of pedagogic management at the research day care center, which must be in line with the development of the working practices done during the project. It is the

director's duty to arrange time for meetings of the participant teams or enable participation in common workshops. Educators also feel that emotion-based management is important, because encouragement and motivation are regarded as important duties for the director.

The teams were asked to evaluate the support received from the director and mentor during the past 18 months, by placing the five most important forms of support in an order of priority (by giving them marks 1-5). The figure below describes the weighting of the various forms of support given by the directors and mentors in the course of the development of working practices.

Educators felt that they received the greatest and equal amount of support related to encouragement and commitment from both the director and the mentor. The support given by the director was focused on support related to organization and approval: the educators did not experience receiving significant organizational support from the mentor. The support received from the mentor was focused on support related to structure, innovation and the orientation of working practices.

The director and mentor of the research day care centers constituted an important partnership. The director was responsible for the development of working practices in the research day care center, and the mentor's role was to support educators during the transformation of their own operating culture.



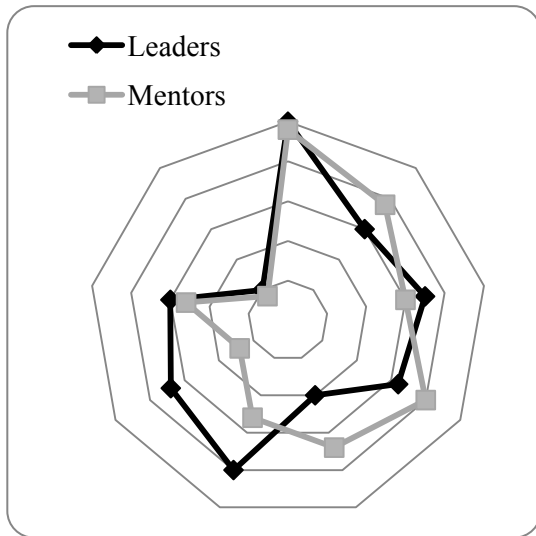


Figure 1. Team assessments on the support received from directors and mentors.

Educators are not the only people to benefit from the mentor arrangement. The mentors also appreciate the benefit derived from it and emphasize that guiding development of working practices supports their official duty, because it is *“an excellent way to keep oneself up to date on what is happening in the day care centers.”* (Process follow-up, March/2011).

Many directors feel that this project supports pedagogical management (Process follow-up, February/2011). They note that meetings with mentors at the research day care centers are particularly important. *“The regular meetings give a nice rhythm to the task of development and give us an appropriate amount of food for thought”* (Process follow-up, April/2011).

The university’s specific duty is to monitor the progress of the development process in terms of research and to produce evidence- i.e., analyzed research information- on the progress of the

development of working practices, to be delivered to the educators in the field for utilization in reflection and further processing of working practices with the support of the mentor. In addition, the university plans and implements studies concerning municipal day care as a whole on a subject related to the project period. This research information, too, will be provided to the day care sector in the form of public lectures, workshops and reports after proper analysis and summary.

#### ***Support Provided by Peer Groups for the Development of Working Practices***

Four peer groups support the development of working practices among project participants: the peer groups of mentors, directors, contact persons and document-writers. Each group has a representative from the individual research day care centers. The objective of each peer group is to build a field of reciprocal development, whereby the foundation of learning in the group is the sharing of experiences with the others. At the same time, each person is capable of reflecting on his or her own action. At its best, a peer group produces an investigative and deliberate discussion that involves the presentation and testing of hypotheses, deduction and argumentation as well as the planning and evaluation of problem-solving processes. Such work may lead to cumulative competence that exceeds the expertise of the group members. Such joint work may also encourage and increase the members’ self-

confidence toward the development work (Chan, 2001; Mercer, 2000). Dialogue is one of the tools used to construct common, shared understanding amongst educators who differ from each other in many ways (Peavy, 1998). Members of the day care community have the opportunity to learn from dialogue between individual groups of professionals as well as educators who are at varying levels of professional development. As we know, expertise develops in those communities that consist of people with experience at varying levels (Brown & Campione, 1994).

The success of peer group work requires that the group members are motivated and committed to the group work. Sharing experiences and reviewing them critically requires trust between group members. A confidentially protective atmosphere also makes it possible to review problematic situations and failures and learn from them, so the group members receive support from each other and become stronger professionally. Work is based on discussion, so it requires the ability to verbalize one's own observations and justify opinions. The duty of the peer group mentors is, first, to pose reflective questions (e.g., Huston & Weaver, 2008). Understanding one's own special competence has proven an essential factor in the various opinions of all the educators in the group. Shared expertise is based on an idea that every member of a work community has more expertise than the others have in some area, but no one has *all* the expertise.

Therefore, not every team member need possess the same knowledge and skills; instead, everyone's expertise can be developed in his or her own area (Brown & Campione, 1994).

*Mentors' peer group.* The mentors meet monthly to agree on common practical operating principles and consider the terms, objectives and challenges in the operation of the network of research day care centers. They also focus on reviewing the roles of the mentor and director.

*Directors' peer group.* At their meetings, the directors of the research day care centers discuss issues related to the management and development of the work community, such as how to motivate educators to develop work practices and work with resistance to change. They discuss the issuing of feedback to work teams and individual educators. Everyday obstacles to the development of working practices, such as a shortage of educators or the problem of educator turnover – are also addressed.

*Document Writers' peer group.* The aim of this group was to document the development of the working practices for distributing the results. For the documentation work for the project publication, one or two educators from each research day care center participated in regular meetings of the document writers' peer group. During these meetings, the target group of the articles was considered, along with the forms and contents of the texts, and the publication as a whole. For many

educators, writing is a challenge, because it is not part of their everyday duties at the day care center. Texts are read, commented on and perused by the peer group and in day care communities, where the objective is to enhance a spirit of community and commitment. In previous project periods, the output of the document writers' peer group has been a publication in which all 21 research day care centers tell their own story of development (e.g., Mäkitalo, Ojala, Venninen, & Vilpas, 2009). The publications have aroused a great deal of interest amongst educators working at various levels of the Finnish day care sector.

*Contact persons' peer group.* In addition to the support provided by the mentor and director, day care communities receive assistance from contact persons from each research day care center. The contact persons provide encouragement and install faith in people when they are overcome by fatigue. They also make sure that assignments related to the development of working practices are completed in time, and that all information concerning the project is distributed among all educators. In the contact persons' peer group, the subjects of discussion are topical questions brought up by the participants. Discussions that have emerged have been inspiring and empowering (Huston & Weaver, 2008). In addition to participating in joint meetings, the contact persons make peer-learning visits to other research day care centers in the network of research day care centers alone or with

their work community.

Regular feedback has been collected on the reflection of the peer groups. Below, we state a few examples of assessments by contact persons of the work done in the peer groups. The contact persons described that they had learned, through the peer groups, to bring up issues more boldly, put their own opinions into words and take a stand on conflicts in their own work community.

*I have learned a lot from other contact persons. I have obtained new ideas for my own work, and I have learned to review the development work in our own day care center from different perspectives. I have learned to reflect on my own work even more deeply than before. (Process follow-up, March/2011).*

The members of the peer groups also stated that they had learned to act as representatives of their communities and had gained an understanding of the operation of the early childhood education sector in the metropolitan area. For many people, the field of research in early childhood education has been opened up for the first time.

### ***Research-related Follow-up on the Development of Working Practices***

One of the cornerstones of development project operation is openness. For example, there is an agreement to respond to various enquiries with educators' own names by which respondents can then be asked more detailed, additional

questions in interviews conducted based on a follow-up compilation. The collection of information varies from one project to the next, but below is a list of examples of the methods used.

*The initial interview* is based on a group interview held in each research day care center at the outset of the project. The interview is conducted as a group interview of educators. The mentor and director also take part in the meeting and have an opportunity to hear the educators' thoughts.

*In the final interview*, the educators of the research day care centers reflect on the entire process. The directors and mentors participate in reflecting on the process. At the same time, the educators can review the issues they pondered during the initial interview. This is an attempt to express the progress that has been achieved in the educators' methods and professional growth.

*Process follow-up* is directed at individual educators or teams in the form of an electronic enquiry held at pre-arranged intervals. The enquiry is both a quantitative and qualitative collection of information. The questions deal with such topics as the atmosphere in the team, initiatives and their realization, successes and failures, and an assessment of the support provided by the director and mentor. Recurrent process follow-ups provide both researchers, and developers with information about the progress of the development process, enabling them to reflect on their own working practices. Records of the process follow-ups also serve as documents

of evolving pedagogy, attitudes and values.

*Research on the entire day care sector.* In addition to a study on the development process of working practices, the university conducts other research related to the themes of development in the project. Workshops based on the results, were offered for utilization by research day care centers.

Summaries of research interventions will be sent to the research day care centers immediately, so the information they provide can be utilized in the development of working practices. Assistance will be offered for the interpretation and utilization of the research results in the peer groups and lectures and workshops. Representatives of research day care centers and administrators can exchange ideas and reflect on the development of working practices and the functioning of discussion structures established for the purpose. Thus, research will serve development by helping 'research educators' to develop their work.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

In this article, we have reviewed principles of development of working practices and structures that support a reflective work method. These principles and structures have been used to support pedagogical development in the everyday life of early childhood education in the Helsinki metropolitan area. In our experience, it is essential to

utilize the subjective ideas and development needs of the participants in all development of working practices. This has become evident at the micro level as, for example, creative development of meetings with mentors for the needs of the relevant research day care center or as utilization of different documentation methods in joint discussions. At the macro level, reflection has been directed at a review of early childhood education practices in different municipalities and their possible integration to benefit development of working practices throughout the region. Sometimes reflection at the macro level has originated from reflection at an individual research day care center, based on a discussion held at a peer group meeting. This has been the case with the arrangement of a peer visit to another research day care center and, at a later stage, with the expansion of operation into working practices between municipalities. Press et al. (2010) drew similar conclusions in their research project. Development is based on teamwork, where the members review educational thinking, the content of development and the operating environment in a critical fashion.

During the process of developing working practices, we have obtained information, based on research, on how educators at the research day care centers adopted reflective development (Ojala & Venninen, 2011). In general, reflective discussions had four levels of deliberation (technical listing of activities, description of activities, analytic examination of activities and reflection on the bases

for activities). For example, educators may have reviewed the significance of haste as a technical listing, based on how many work duties were left undone each day or, they could consider the issue together, even at the level of bases for activities. In this case, one would begin to look at what haste means to today's children or educators who work with them and how its emergence affects the realization of the objectives in day care. In discussions like these, mentors have the opportunity to help the day care community achieve a new and broader perspective. Here, according to the feedback received, mentors have been assisted by training arranged based on the research results mentioned above. The peer groups also provided a forum for people to review their basic work. When the participants represented various work communities and municipalities with their background organizations, discussions in the peer groups often evolved and became multi-nuanced and rewarding.

Reflective deliberation is utilized in the project, both in order to develop individual educators' awareness of the influence, his or her own actions have on a group of children, and to share experiences and design and implement working practices. As the reflective understanding deepens, the educators will also develop their pedagogical observation that can be used to further develop the operation. Documentation has given an instrument for the educator to analyze the issues that are actually taking place in everyday

situations and educational processes (Dahlberg et al., 1999).

During the development project, we have summarized the principles we regard as key to the pedagogical development of day care as follows (Mäkitalo et al., 2009). These cornerstones of development of early childhood education at VKK-Metro are:

1. Development is part of the daily working practices with children.
2. Basis for developing comes from work community and the needs of the children.
3. The fact that development is slow and that progress takes place in small steps is accepted.
4. Educators, researchers and administrators are all involved in shared development of working practices.
5. Research, development and practical work support one another.
6. Openness, transparency, respect for all parties and appreciation of their work are emphasized in action.
7. Development entails both freedom and commitment to common agreements.
8. A varying network of research day care centers enables expansive development.
9. Students in the field also take part in development.
10. We pay attention to the various emotions aroused by the development.

Among the participants, the most important leading thought has become

that development should originate with the starting points of each educational community. As researchers, we can concur with this, because if this were not the case, it would also not be possible to act in the zone of proximal development of the children and the educators in day care community—in other words, in an area where the research day care center can develop and deepen its own working practices. Another leading thought of almost equal importance among the personnel concerns progress via small steps. With the idea they have highlighted, they say they obtain the ‘permission’ to focus on deepening their development duty in peaceful atmosphere, and we researchers learn to understand that the results of the development of working practices will not become apparent to us until after they have been sufficiently ripened in joint discussions and in educators’ thoughts. Based on the leading thoughts mentioned above, we wish to emphasize one more thing: research, development and practical work support one another.

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