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## Professionalism of preschool teachers in Estonia, Finland, Sweden and Hungary

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The current study investigated the ratings of Estonian, Finnish, Swedish and Hungarian preschool teachers and principals regarding the professionalism of preschool teachers within a cross-cultural context. According to reports commissioned by the European Commission and OECD, the professionalism of preschool teachers is a key factor in ensuring the quality of early childhood education. The study is based on the contextual approach in the bio-ecological theory and critical ecology theory of early childhood professionalism. The research question was: what are ratings of principals and teachers regarding the professionalism of preschool teachers in interaction and family involvement, the planning of education and the evaluation of children's development, using teaching strategies and support for professional development, creating a growth environment and the development of values. Structured questionnaires were conducted, the sample consisted of teachers and principals in Estonian (174/118), Finnish (82/84), Swedish (117/96) and Hungarian (111/99) preschools. In the comparison of the results from the four countries, there were similarities between the views of Finnish and Swedish teachers and principals and between Estonian and Hungarian teachers and principals. Differences between the countries were significant and depended on the context of the individual countries. Highest mean ratings were given by Estonian and Hungarian principals and Estonian teachers to creating growth environment. Development of values was evaluated highest by Finnish principals and teachers. Swedish teachers evaluated teaching strategies highly. The statements that got the lowest evaluation rate by all interest groups were family involvement and professional development.

**Keywords:** preschool teachers; professionalism; preschool principals

### Introduction

The aim of this study was to analyse ratings of Estonian, Finnish, Swedish and Hungarian preschool teachers and principals about professionalism of preschool teachers in cross-cultural context. The research is a part of the framework of the EDUKO project

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‘Supporting the professionalism of preschool teachers’. The countries were chosen because there is a long tradition of researching early childhood education practice between the neighboring countries of Estonia and Finland (Hujala et al. 2009; Krokfors, Talts, and Vikat 2003; Kikas et al. 2011; Lerkkanen et al. 2012) and between Finland and Sweden as Nordic countries (Dahlberg and Moss 2005; Oberhuemer 2005; Wagner 2006).

In all countries there is also an important cultural-historical context. Estonian, Finnish and Hungarian languages belong to the Finno-Ugric language group. Between Sweden and Estonia there is a cultural-historical link, as Estonia was a dominion of the Swedish Empire from the sixteenth to seventeenth century when the University of Tartu and the first teachers’ seminar in Estonia was established. Estonia and Hungary started to rebuild their democratic value based educational system in the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Estonia and Hungary belong to the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) that is implementing the Step by Step programme, with a focus on the child-centred approach and democratic values in preschool childcare institutions. A holistic, child-centred and value based approach also characterises the system of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Finland and Sweden, as democratic countries with long-established democracies.

### **ECEC in Estonia, Finland, Sweden and Hungary**

In all these countries ECEC is a first step in lifelong learning. In Estonia 76% of eighteen months to three-year-old children and 98% of four- to six-year-olds are attending a preschool childcare institution; in Finland 62% of one- to five-year-olds and 96% of six-year-olds; in Sweden 83% of one- to five-year-olds and 96% of six-year-olds; and in Hungary 92% of three- to six-year-olds. In Estonia, Finland, and Sweden there is a unitary system of ECEC for one- to seven-year-old children; Hungary has a split administration system of ECEC between Education (three- to five-year-olds in kindergartens) and social system (under three-year-old children in nurseries).

The principles for learning and teaching activities are formulated in national curriculum documents: in the Estonian National Curriculum for Preschool Child Care Institutions (Government of the Republic 2008); the Finnish Correction: National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland 2005; the Swedish Curriculum for the Preschool Lpfö 98 (Ministry of Education and Science 2010); and the Hungarian National Core programme for Kindergarten Education (Government of the Republic 1996). The different curricula models of Estonia, Finland, Sweden and Hungary are based on the country context, including responsibility of teachers and work teams in the interaction with children and family, the planning of education and evaluation of children’s development, using teaching strategies and supporting of the professional development, and creating the growth environment. The Swedish and Finnish curricula have a broad definition of the fundamental values. In all these countries, the qualification requirements of preschool teachers is higher education to Bachelor’s degree, in Finland and in Sweden accounting for between 30% and 60% and in Estonia and Hungary between 60% and 70% of all workers. Finnish and Swedish assistants of preschool teachers (nursery nurses, day-care attendants) have a vocational qualification at post-secondary and upper-secondary level.

According to the European Commission communication ‘Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC): Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow’ (2011) and based on the Starting Strong III Report (OECD 2012), well-educated, well-trained professionals are the key factor in providing high-quality

ECEC with the most favourable cognitive and social outcomes for children. The key to effective professional development is identifying the right strategies to help practitioners stay updated on pedagogical methods and curriculum subject knowledge while ensuring that staff needs are met.

### **The integrated approach to preschool teachers' professionalism in the frames of bio-ecological systems and critical ecology theory**

ECEC professional work is closely connected to society functions and is based on collaborative relationships inside society. The bio-ecological model is a theoretical model of gene-environment interactions that suggests that genetic influences on behaviour should be most evident when the environment is supportive, because there is greater actualisation of genetic potential in supportive environments. Bronfenbrenner also placed a greater emphasis on processes and the role of the biological person. In the Process-Person-Context-Time Model (PPCT) proximal processes are viewed as the primary mechanism for development. Person refers to the role that personal characteristics of individuals play in societal interactions. Context involves five interconnected systems which are based on Bronfenbrenner's original ecological systems theory. Time has a prominent place in this developmental model (Bronfenbrenner 2005; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006; Tudge et al. 2009). Professionalism of teachers we describe by seven processes: interaction, family involvement, the planning of education and the evaluation of children's development, using teaching strategies, support for professional development, creating a growth environment and the development of values. In the current study we understood teachers and principals as persons. Time was considered in the frame of the cultural-historical context of different countries.

In this perspective, human interactions and meanings form part of the workplace context itself, as systems interconnect and nest within the larger systems in which they act. An individual's own biology is a primary environment promoting his or her development. The interaction between a teacher's biology, her immediate community environment, and the societal landscape shapes his/her professional growth. The professionalism of early childhood teachers must consider not only the individual teacher, but also the relationships and environments that influence who the professional is as a person (Wagner and French 2010).

The practice of professionalism is shaped by the teacher's pedagogical awareness of children's developmental and pedagogical needs, parents' expectations, teacher's support from the context for growth environment of the child, parent-teacher partnership and the regulations of the curricula, including cultural-historical dimensions. The child as an active learning community member and the adult as the partner enabling the child's guided participation, create new challenges for consideration of education and teaching via child's growth and learning and through the new teacher roles, which this demands (Hujala 2002). Härkönen's (2009, 2010, 2013) pedagogical systems theory shows the holistic view on the various pieces of evidence that form a coherent whole. The entire pedagogical theory and model advance to understand historical, pedagogical, systemic, holistic and comprehensive, diverse and pluralist, interpretative and semiotic, egalitarian, democratic and tolerant values in education. This theory shows that holistic systems education can also, in addition to the above mentioned qualities, be sustainable and critical in its nature and values (Härkönen 2013).

The professionalism is part of a critical ecology of the early childhood field. A critically ecologic professionalism would actively be gathering, exploring, documenting,

disseminating and theorising ‘practice-based evidence’ with practitioners and local communities taking active roles in determining research and practice agendas (Dalli 2010; Dayan 2010; Kinos 2010; Urban 2010). Practice is a sphere where professional knowledge is produced – by practitioners who are in relationships with others, and from questions arising from the situations they are involved in. Professionalism then can be understood as an attribute of the entire system, developed in its reciprocal relationships (Urban 2010). Professionals engage in a process of constructing new knowledge and applying it to practice. Understanding the complexity of professional knowledge and practice is an important step for all practitioners wishing to improve the quality of their practice (Dayan 2010). Lazzari (2012) discusses how a complex conceptualisation of professionalism, building upon continuous learning in relational contexts, is currently challenged by recent neo-liberal influences. In facing these challenges a crucial role will be played by teachers’ collaborative practices in the workplace that, if reclaimed as a space for collective decision-making, could potentially become an arena for rethinking teachers’ professionalism in dialogue with local communities.

According to Urban (2010) and Dalli (2010), interaction is a key characteristic of professionalism, it does not just exist as a static quality within a person but rather in the interaction of that person in particular (collaborative) ways with others. Professional self-identity is constructed in the most immediate micro contexts in which practitioners are present. Professional self-identity is also constructed through the influence of macro structures and mesosystem dynamics. Professional practitioners continuously juggle multiple demands, and the ability to cope with them is a key characteristic of being an early childhood professional. The challenge is to work towards a critical ecology of the profession that is informed by the political and social realities, knowledge and practices.

According to Brock (2013), seven dimensions of knowledge (qualifications; training; professional development; skills; autonomy; values; ethics) have an equality of status, as all are necessary for a holistic view of preschool teachers’ professionalism.

The integrated approach of the current study is based on the national ECEC curricula and previous Estonian, Finnish, Swedish and Hungarian studies: Veisson, Kööp, and Nugin (2011), Öun, Saar-Ugaste, and Niglas (2008, 2010), Kikas et al. (2011), Hujala et al. (2009, 2012), Härkönen (2013), Lerkkanen et al. (2012), Sheridan et al. (2011), Sheridan, Williams, and Sandberg (2013), Johansson and Sandberg (2010), Kuisma and Sandberg (2010), Sandberg and Vuorinen (2008) and Szilagyi and Szecsi (2005). According to Kuisma and Sandberg (2010), the main areas of preschool teacher professionalism are working from an ethical base of respect for children, children’s development and learning, democratic values, interacting and communicating actively with children, colleagues and parents. The concept of professionalism stems from the possession of knowledge, practical actions in a competent way, ‘ability and experience’ (Kuisma and Sandberg 2010).

We used the ISSA standard (2010) as a structure for formulating the questionnaire. This is because the results of Estonian and several international researches (Havlinova et al. 2004; Kazimade et al. 2003; Rutar et al. 2012; Vonta 2004; Öun et al. 2010) have shown that preschool childcare institutions that follow the Step by Step programme, have better quality than other institutions. Key issues of the ISSA standard structure and of national curricula were included in the questionnaires of the current study, taking into account the cultural appropriateness of national ECEC curricula in data collection.

ISSA standards promote practices that are guided by humanistic and socio-constructivist principles, emphasising developmentally appropriate practices,

individualised approach, and the idea that learning occurs in interaction, and is a dialogue between children and adults, as well as between children, which is marked by respecting each other, stimulating and giving autonomy to the learner, and assuming that children are competent and full citizens even while they need support from adults (ISSA 2010).

### Methodology

The research question was: what are the ratings of principals and teachers about professionalism of preschool teachers in the interaction and family involvement, in the planning of education and evaluation of children's development, in using teaching strategies and supporting of the professional development, in creating the growth environment and the development of values according to the pre-set themes? According to ISSA (2010) we understand interactions as between adults and children, as well as peer interactions, where the role of the teachers is to provide opportunities for children to engage in interactions. Family involvement and partnerships among teachers, families, and other community members are essential for children's learning and development, where the different compositions, backgrounds, lifestyles and characteristics of the families and communities of the children must be taken. In the planning of education and evaluation of children's development teachers systematically observe children and use other appropriate strategies and create educational long- and short-term plans centred around the interests and needs of individual children and groups, providing both scaffolding and challenges for future achievement.

The strategies teachers responsible for making the decisions and choices about which teaching strategies provide the best support for each child to be successful as a learner and to achieve outcomes defined by national requirements and personal development goals. In their professional development teachers continually engage in ongoing professional and personal development, reflect on their practice, and work cooperatively with others modelling enjoyment of the process of lifelong learning. In creating the growth environment teachers create a physically and psychologically safe and stimulating environment that offer a variety of developmentally appropriate materials, tasks, and situations and encourage children's learning through independent and group exploration, play, access to diverse resources, and interaction with other children and adults. In the development of values teachers assure that through everyday experiences, children learn to appreciate and value diversity and to develop the skills to participate (ISSA 2010).

To assess this, we used a structured questionnaires, carried out with Estonian, Finnish, Swedish and Hungarian preschool principals and teachers. Responses ranged on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, where 1 = 'strongly disagree' and 5 = 'strongly agree'. The sample of teachers and principals is shown by country in Table 1.

Table 1. Numbers of participants in the study.

Country	Teachers	Principals
Estonia	174	118
Finland	82	84
Sweden	117	96
Hungary	111	99

Questionnaires were sent by post and e-mail to preschool institutions. Replies were anonymous. The questionnaire began with a description of the study and of ethical rules in social science research i.e. demands for confidentiality, consent, information and autonomy, making it quite clear that participation in the study was voluntary. Quantitative data analysis used the statistical programme SPSS 14.0, and for analysis of frequency, ANOVA was used.

## Results

The seven pre-set themes were: interaction, family involvement, planning of education and evaluation of children's development, using teaching strategies, professional development, creating growth environment and development of values. The manner in which these pre-set themes were manifested, however, reflected the differing context of each country. The reliabilities of areas of questionnaire were high: Interaction ( $\alpha = 0,92$ ), Family Involvement ( $\alpha = 0,88$ ), Planning of Education and Evaluation of Children Development ( $\alpha = 0,90$ ), Using Teaching Strategies ( $\alpha = 0,95$ ), Professional Development ( $\alpha = 0,93$ ), Creating Growth Environment ( $\alpha = 0,93$ ) and Development of Values ( $\alpha = 0,90$ ).

According to [Tables 2 and 3](#), in the comparison of ratings of different countries, differences were significant between all the countries. There were similarities between Finnish and Swedish teachers and principals and between Estonian and Hungarian teachers' and principals' ratings in the above mentioned areas. Estonian and Hungarian teachers' and principals' ratings were higher than Finnish and Swedish teachers' and principals' ratings. In the area of teaching strategies there were similarities between Estonian and Swedish teachers' and principals' ratings. In other countries there were significant differences. In the teaching strategies the highest ratings were of Hungarian teachers and principals, then Estonian and Swedish and lowest were ratings of Finnish teachers and principals.

In the pre-set themes of interaction, family involvement, the planning of education and evaluation of children development, creating growth environment (see [Table 3](#)), there were significant differences between ratings of teachers and principals only in Sweden. Swedish teacher's ratings were higher than principals, whereas in the other countries this was not significant. In the pre-set themes of using teaching strategies, professional development, and development of values, differences between ratings of teachers and principals were significant in Estonia and Sweden. Estonian and Swedish teacher's ratings were higher than principals. In Finland and Hungary there were no significant differences between ratings of teachers and principals in teaching strategies. In all countries teacher's means were mostly higher than principal's ratings, but in Finland principals' ratings were higher than teachers' in the pre-set themes of interaction, family involvement, the planning of education and evaluation of children's development and creating growth environment and in Hungary, principals means were higher in the area of interaction.

## Interaction

According to [Table 4](#), interaction got the second lowest rating of Estonian, Swedish and Hungarian teachers, but ratings of Swedish and Hungarian principals and Finnish teachers and principals were higher. Comparing ratings of teachers and principals of different countries, Hungarian teachers and principals ratings were highest in the

Table 2. Basic statistics and significant differences of areas of teachers' professionalism between teachers' and principals' opinions in the different countries.

Area of the teacher's professionalism	Participants	Estonia			Finland			Sweden			Hungary			EST		FIN		SWE		HU	
		Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	F	Sign	F	Sign	F	Sign	F	Sign
Interaction	Teachers	4.43	.34	174	4.16	.46	82	4.36	.48	117	4.46	.35	110	.55	.815	3.602	.059	6.381	<b>.012</b>	.012	.913
	Principals	4.42	.52	112	4.31	.52	84	4.20	.43	96	4.47	.44	97								
Family involvement	Teachers	4.14	.47	174	3.73	.51	82	3.82	.67	113	4.26	.44	111	.187	.666	2.705	.102	6.927	<b>.009</b>	3.763	.054
	Principals	4.11	.61	117	3.87	.57	84	3.59	.57	95	4.12	.53	99								
The planning of education and evaluation of children development	Teachers	4.47	.40	174	4.23	.42	82	4.40	.51	113	4.49	.35	110	.161	.688	1.972	.162	27.481	<b>.000</b>	.767	.382
	Principals	4.44	.47	118	4.33	.52	84	4.01	.55	96	4.43	.49	98								
Using teaching strategies	Teachers	4.60	.37	174	4.21	.46	82	4.64	.42	113	4.68	.31	111	5.053	<b>.025</b>	.004	.950	24.518	<b>.000</b>	2.502	.115
	Principals	4.48	.54	113	4.21	.58	80	4.32	.52	96	4.59	.53	99								
Professional development	Teachers	4.55	.37	174	4.02	.44	82	4.37	.53	113	4.55	.33	110	8.264	<b>.004</b>	.139	.710	13.328	<b>.000</b>	2.231	.137
	Principals	4.38	.63	118	3.99	.67	83	4.10	.54	95	4.46	.54	97								
Creating growth environment	Teachers	4.72	.28	174	4.33	.42	82	4.53	.44	114	4.72	.28	111	2.449	.119	.206	.651	11.980	<b>.001</b>	.057	.812
	Principals	4.65	.43	118	4.36	.50	83	4.31	.46	95	4.71	.41	99								
Development of values	Teachers	4.67	.33	174	4.40	.41	82	4.63	.43	117	4.60	.37	110	5.957	<b>.015</b>	.012	.913	26.017	<b>.000</b>	1.777	.184
	Principals	4.55	.48	111	4.39	.46	83	4.29	.54	96	4.52	.48	97								

Note: Significant differences in bold.

Table 3. Significant differences of areas of teachers' professionalism between the countries.

Area of the teacher's professionalism	Countries	Sign				All countries
		Estonia	Finland	Sweden	Hungary	
Interaction	Estonia		<b>.000</b>	<b>.001</b>	.350	<b>.000</b>
	Finland	<b>.000</b>		.237	<b>.000</b>	
	Sweden	<b>.001</b>	.237		<b>.000</b>	
	Hungary	.350	<b>.001</b>	<b>.000</b>		
Family involvement	Estonia		<b>.000</b>	<b>.000</b>	.167	<b>.000</b>
	Finland	<b>.000</b>		.128	<b>.000</b>	
	Sweden	<b>.000</b>	.128		<b>.000</b>	
	Hungary	.167	<b>.000</b>	<b>.000</b>		
The planning of education and evaluation of children development	Estonia		<b>.000</b>	<b>.000</b>	.916	<b>.000</b>
	Finland	<b>.000</b>		.204	<b>.000</b>	
	Sweden	<b>.000</b>	.204		<b>.000</b>	
	Hungary	.916	<b>.000</b>	<b>.000</b>		
Using teaching strategies	Estonia		<b>.000</b>	.180	<b>.044</b>	<b>.000</b>
	Finland	<b>.000</b>		<b>.000</b>	<b>.000</b>	
	Sweden	.180	<b>.000</b>			
	Hungary	<b>.044</b>	<b>.000</b>	<b>.002</b>	<b>.002</b>	
Professional development	Estonia		<b>.000</b>	<b>.000</b>	.492	<b>.000</b>
	Finland	<b>.000</b>		<b>.000</b>	<b>.000</b>	
	Sweden	<b>.000</b>	<b>.000</b>		<b>.000</b>	
	Hungary	.492	<b>.000</b>	<b>.000</b>		
Creating growth environment	Estonia		<b>.000</b>	<b>.000</b>	.558	<b>.000</b>
	Finland	<b>.00</b>		<b>.043</b>	<b>.000</b>	
	Sweden	<b>.00</b>	<b>.043</b>		<b>.000</b>	
	Hungary	.558	<b>.000</b>	<b>.000</b>		
Development of values	Estonia		<b>.000</b>	<b>.000</b>	.144	<b>.000</b>
	Finland	<b>.000</b>		.069	<b>.000</b>	
	Sweden	<b>.000</b>	.069		<b>.047</b>	
	Hungary	.144	<b>.000</b>	<b>.047</b>		

Note: Significant differences in bold.

following aspects: teacher support children's emotional development and children's independence and communicate actively with school teachers, enabling children's smooth transition from kindergarten to school (significant differences with the results of other countries), teacher enable children to make choices (similarities with the results of Estonia) and support children's initiative in communication (similarities with the results of Sweden). Finnish teachers' and principals' ratings were highest in the aspect of: teacher communicates actively with different community members (significant differences with the results of other countries); and Swedish teachers' and principals' ratings were highest in the aspects of: teachers' relations with children are caring and teacher promotes relations with the child's family (similarities with Hungary). Estonian teachers' and principals' ratings were highest in the aspects of: teacher support each child's participation in the decision making process (significant differences with the results of other countries), support finding a common point of view when children study together (similarities with the results of Hungary and Sweden) and communicate actively with teachers of other children's institutions (similarities with the results of Finland).

Table 4. Country comparison based to the teachers' and principals' evaluation mean results and sequence of areas.

Area of the teacher's professionalism	Estonia		Finland		Sweden		Hungary	
	Teachers	Principals	Teachers	Principals	Teachers	Principals	Teachers	Principals
Interaction	4.43	4.42	4.16	4.31	4.36	4.20	4.46	4.47
	6	5	5	5	6	4	6	4
Family involvement	4.14	4.11	3.73	3.87	3.82	3.59	4.26	4.12
	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7
The planning of education and evaluation of children development	4.47	4.44	4.23	4.33	4.40	4.01	4.49	4.43
	5	4	3	3	4	6	5	6
Using teaching strategies	4.60	4.48	4.21	4.21	4.64	4.32	4.68	4.59
	3	3	4	4	1	1	2	2
Professional development	4.55	4.38	4.02	3.99	4.37	4.10	4.55	4.46
	4	6	6	6	5	5	4	5
Creating growth environment	4.72	4.65	4.33	4.36	4.53	4.31	4.72	4.71
	1	1	2	2	3	2	1	1
Development of values	4.67	4.55	4.40	4.39	4.63	4.29	4.60	4.52
	2	2	1	1	2	3	3	3

The lowest ratings of teachers in all the countries were for: teacher enable children to make choices, support each child's participation in the decision making process, communicates actively with teachers of other children's institutions and school teachers, enabling children's smooth transition from kindergarten to school. Principals had lowest ratings for: teacher communicating with children individually, support finding a common point of view when children study together and communicating actively with different community members, in order to create diverse conditions for children's development.

### **Family involvement**

According to [Table 4](#), family involvement got the lowest ratings from all groups. Teachers and principals in Hungary and Estonia gave higher ratings than in Finland and Sweden. Similarities between Hungarian and Estonian principals and teachers' ratings and between Finnish and Swedish principals' and teachers' ratings were in the aspects of: teacher encourages family members to participate in learning and in educational activities, create possibilities for families to learn and support from one another, advice families creating a supportive growth environment at home. Ratings of Hungarian teachers and principals were higher in the aspects of: teacher makes sure that information about families is confidential (similarities with Finland), learns about the background of children's families (significant differences with the results of other countries), involves family members in the decision-making process about supporting child development (similarities with Estonia and Finland). Ratings of Finnish principals and teachers were higher in the aspects of: teacher involves family members in the evaluation of child's development (similarities with Estonia and Hungary). Estonian principals' and teachers' ratings were highest in the aspect of: teacher promotes family involvement in the community (significant differences with the results of other countries). In this aspect were also the higher ratings of Swedish teachers and principals (similarities with Finland).

The lowest ratings of the teachers and principals of all the countries were that the teacher encourages family members to participate in learning and in educational activities, create possibilities for families to learn and to support one another, promote family involvement in the community.

### **Planning learning and educational activities and evaluating child development**

According to [Table 4](#), planning learning and educational activities and evaluating child development, Finnish teachers and principals had the highest ratings and Swedish and Hungarian principals the lowest ratings. Finnish teachers' and principals' ratings were highest in the following aspects: the teacher set goals for supporting child's development together with family members, and drafts in cooperation with specialists and parents' individual development programmes for children with special needs (significant differences with the results of other countries). Estonian teachers' and principals' ratings were highest in the aspects of: teacher plan diverse learning and educational activities, which offer children new challenges for development (similarities with Hungary), encourage children to analyse their own behaviour, teaches children how to evaluate other children's learning and work (significant differences with the results of other countries). Swedish teachers' and principals' ratings were higher in the aspect of: teacher encourages children's self-evaluation (similarities with

Estonia). Hungarian teachers and principals were higher in the following aspects: teacher observes children, analyse activity of children in the learning and educational process (significant differences with the results of other countries).

The lowest ratings of the teachers and principals of all the countries were in the aspects of: teacher plans learning and educational activities in accordance with children's different learning styles, encourages children's self-evaluation, teaches children how to evaluate other children's learning and work, cooperates with specialists in order to evaluate and plan child's development, drafts in cooperation with specialists and parents individual development programs for children with special needs.

### **Using teaching strategies**

According to [Table 4](#), teaching strategies were evaluated highest by Swedish teachers and principals, and lowest by Finnish teachers and principals. The highest ratings of Swedish teachers and principals were that teacher uses different active learning strategies (similarities with Hungary), and offers children different possibilities to learn from everyday situations (similarities with Estonia and Hungary). Ratings of Estonian principals and teachers were higher in the following aspects: teacher offers children activities that encourage discovering, experimentation and being creative, support children's conflict solving skills (similarities with Hungary and Sweden) and understanding rules and limits (similarities with Hungary). Ratings of Hungarian principals and teachers were higher in the aspects of: teacher offers children activities that develop children's problem-solving skills and initiative of children (similarities with Estonia) and cooperation and positive relations between children (similarities with Estonia and Sweden). Between ratings of Finnish principals and teachers and other countries there were significant differences; Finnish principals' and teachers' ratings were lower than colleagues of other countries. Higher ratings were in the aspect that the teacher offers children activities that develop their self-regulation (similarities with Estonia).

The lowest ratings of the teachers and principals of all the countries were that teachers offer children activities that encourage discovering, experimentation, develop children's problem-solving skills and self-regulation.

### **Professional development**

According to [Table 4](#), professional development got the second lowest ratings of Finnish teachers and principals and Estonian principals; ratings of Estonian and Hungarian teachers were higher than others groups. Hungarian teachers and principals had highest ratings in the following aspects: teacher gathers feedback about the quality of learning and educational activities (similarities with Sweden); sets goals for his/her professional and personality development based on the results of the analyses; plans activities in order to meet the goals of his/her personality development; the leadership and work environment of preschool childcare institutions supports teacher's professional development (similarities with Estonia). Ratings of Estonian teachers' and principals' were higher in the aspects of: teacher understands the necessity of lifelong learning (similarities with Hungary and Sweden), plans activities in order to meet the goals of his/her professional development (similarities with Hungary), develops his/her critical thinking skills (similarities with Hungary and Sweden) and defines training needs (similarities with Hungary), is motivated to improve his/her professional knowledge

and skills, applies innovative ideas from further training in everyday work (similarities with Hungary). Swedish teachers' and principals' ratings were higher in the aspect of: teacher reflects on his/her own work (similarities with Hungary). Finnish teachers' and principals' ratings were highest in the aspect of: teacher defines his/her training needs (similarities with Sweden).

The lowest ratings of teachers and principals of all the countries were in the aspects of: teacher gathers feedback about the quality of learning and educational activities; plans activities in order to meet the goals of his/her personality development, participates in various community activities in order to improve the quality of his/her learning and educational activities. Principals ratings were also lower in the aspect of: teachers set goals for personality development based on the results of the analyses.

### **Creating growth environment**

According to [Table 4](#), creating growth environment had the highest ratings from Estonian and Hungarian teachers and principals, followed by Finnish teachers' and principals' and Swedish principals' ratings. Estonian teachers and principals had the highest ratings in the following aspects: teacher includes children in shaping the growth environment (similarities with Hungary) and in formulating rules (significant differences with the results of other countries), offers children various means for play and study, which depend on age and individual needs (similarities with Hungary). Ratings of Hungarian teachers and principals were higher in the following aspects: teacher creates a secure growth environment, where children can play and act in small groups (similarities with Estonia), shapes the physical growth environment according to the interests of the children (significant differences with the results of other countries), shows clear expectations towards children's behaviour (similarities with Estonia), uses consistently routine activities to encourage children's self-regulation (significant differences with the results of other countries). Finnish teachers' and principals' opinions were highest in the aspect of: teacher creates a playful growth environment for the children (similarities with Hungary and Estonia). Swedish teachers' and principals' ratings were higher in the aspect of: teacher cares about children by showing interest in their feelings, ideas and experiences and creates a growth environment, where children have diverse possibilities for free play (similarities with Hungary and Estonia).

The lowest ratings of the teachers and principals of all the countries were in the aspects of: teacher includes children in shaping the growth environment, uses consistently routine activities to encourage children's self-regulation and offers children various means for play and study, which depends on age and individual needs.

### **Development of values**

According to [Table 4](#), development of values had highest ratings from Finnish principals and teachers, followed by Estonian teachers and principals and Swedish teachers. Finnish teachers' and principals' ratings were highest in the aspects of: teacher avoids gender stereotypes in learning and educational activities (similarities with Hungary and Sweden) and takes into account children's special needs in learning and educational activities (similarities with Estonia and Sweden). Swedish teachers' and principals' ratings were highest in the aspect of: teacher encourages children to develop the skill

of expressing one's ratings (similarities with Estonia) and encourages different families to belong into a common community (similarities with Estonia and Hungary).

Estonian teachers' and principals' ratings were highest in the following aspects: teacher is aware of his/her beliefs, attitudes, and values that affect learning and educational activities (significant differences with the results of other countries) and avoids cultural stereotypes in learning and educational activities, strengthens children's respectful attitude towards different preferences and opinions (similarities with Hungary). Hungarian teachers and principals were highest in the aspect of: teacher enables children to take personal responsibility for creating a caring growth environment (significant differences with the results of other countries). There were no significant differences between countries in the aspect of: teacher treats every family with respect and dignity.

The lowest means of the teachers' and principals' ratings in all the countries were in the aspects of: teacher avoids gender stereotypes in learning and educational activities, encourages different families to belong into a common community and enables children to take personal responsibility for creating a caring growth environment.

## **Discussion**

The research question of the current study was: what are ratings of principals and teachers about professionalism of preschool teachers in the interaction and family involvement, in the planning of education and evaluation of children's development, in using teaching strategies and supporting of the professional development, in creating the growth environment and the development of values. Based on Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological PPCT, the results were related with cultural-historical context of different countries, including national curricula of preschool. Teachers and principals as people evaluated pre-set themes differently. All seven proximal processes are viewed as the primary mechanism for professionalism of teachers (Bronfenbrenner 2005; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006; Tudge et al. 2009).

### **What are ratings of principals and teachers about professionalism of preschool teachers in interaction?**

Teachers' and principals' ratings are similar in Finland and Sweden, and also in Estonia and Hungary. In Sweden and Finland the child–adult ratios are smaller than Estonia and Hungary. According to Dennis and O'Connor (2013), teacher–child ratio, a measure of structural quality, is also associated with process quality as measured by better teacher–child interactions, less restrictive teacher behaviour, and children engaging in more complex language interactions and play and be associated with more sensitive and responsive teachers.

Several researches have focusing on interaction between teachers, children and parents (Kuisma and Sandberg 2010; Sheridan et al. 2011, 2013; Vuorinen et al. 2013). Preschool teachers usually have a specific type of communicative competence that enables children and parents to feel confident in talking to them (Sheridan et al. 2013). According to Sheridan et al. (2013), central aspects of teachers' communication and interplay are what teachers communicate about and how they communicate about it. Teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge of the ways in which individual children learn a specific content is vital, and it is important to gain knowledge of children's learning process, the interaction and communication between teacher and

child. According to Öun et al. (2010), Step by Step teachers pay attention to peer interaction, creating opportunities for children to solve problems, learn in groups, listen to each other and wait their turn.

Based on the results of the current study, teachers need more competence, concerning how to enable children to make choices and support each child's participation in the decision-making process. For reflective practice it is useful that teachers communicate actively with teachers of other children's institutions and school teachers, enabling children's smooth transition from kindergarten to school.

### **What are ratings of principals and teachers about professionalism of preschool teachers in family involvement?**

We found ratings about family involvement were the lowest in all four countries; there were no significant differences between teachers and principals, except in Sweden where opinions of Swedish teachers were significantly higher compared with opinions of principals.

According to Szilagyi and Szecsi (2005), teachers in preschools in Hungary agree that regular communication between families and schools is vital. Therefore, parent-teacher conferences, both in groups and individually, are regularly scheduled to ensure the flow of communication. Strong parent-teacher relationships lead to increased parental involvement which has been shown to have a significant and lasting impact on children's academic achievement. Parents do indeed have different understandings of involvement in their children's education, suggesting that teachers acknowledge the need to communicate with parents regarding their perceptions of involvement so that teachers can use this knowledge when constructing avenues for parents to be involved, and recognising and valuing the ways that the parents are involved.

According to Hujala et al. (2009), Finnish teachers stressed more than other teachers that different skills were needed with various families, and Estonian teachers were more active in their efforts to involve parents in a partnership. However, the Estonian teachers oriented their focus mostly on advising parents about their parenting tasks. On the whole, national legislation, administrative structures and leadership guidelines define the basic tasks of preschool teacher professionalism in the involvement of parents in the preschool childcare institutions. According to Kikas et al. (2011), cooperation between parents and kindergarten teachers in Finland has changed towards placing a greater emphasis on family-focused practices and on parents' expertise with respect to their own child. Moreover, equality and partnership between teachers and parents are stressed, and teachers meet all parents individually, not only to talk about the child's problems but also with a view to developing a relationship with parents. In Estonia, the necessity of cooperation between parents and kindergarten teachers is stressed in official documents but the partnership model has not yet been put into practice. According to Vuorinen (2010) teachers bring their own experiences or the common wisdom to preschool and family partnership and this in some cases strengthening the collaboration between home and preschool and in other cases weakening it.

The results of the current study show that teachers need more knowledge and skills, concerning how to encourage family members to participate in learning and in educational activities, create possibilities for families to learn and to support one another, and promote family involvement in the community.

### **What are ratings of principals and teachers about professionalism of preschool teachers in planning of education and evaluation of children's development?**

Ratings about the planning of education and evaluation of children's development were similar in all countries, there were no significant differences between teachers and principals, except in Sweden where opinions of Swedish teachers were significantly higher compared with opinions of principals.

Johansson and Sandberg (2010) found that Swedish teachers needed to be more intentional and purposeful in their planning of the curriculum; they were not viewing teaching as problematic – meaning, problems that need to be solved to result in high-quality education for each child. The knowledge gained through documentation and evaluation is to be used to enhance preschool quality as a whole and, in this way, create better conditions for children to learn and develop (Sheridan et al. 2013).

According to Krokfors et al. (2003), achieving concrete, measurable learning results in terms of children's skill development is more important for Estonian teachers, whereas Finnish teachers place a stronger emphasis on developing children's positive self-concept and social skills and promoting their learning potential. Öun et al. (2010)' results indicate that the Step by Step teacher in their activities and work arrangement pays more attention to the potential and unique needs of each child. Such teacher's viewpoints and individual approaches to the child are essential and very important in the educational philosophy of the Step by Step programme. According to Szilagyi and Szecsi (2005) in Hungary, preschools are required to develop their own curriculum in compliance with the National Program of Preschool Education, which provides a flexible framework for education standards for children aged three to five. Early childhood educators are given the autonomy to design a culturally and individually appropriate preschool programme in their own communities.

Based on the results of the current study, the professionalism of preschool teachers needs more support in accordance with children's different learning styles and in encouraging children's self-evaluation. Teachers need more competence, concerning how to cooperate with specialists and parents in order to evaluate and plan children's development.

### **What are ratings of principals and teachers about professionalism of preschool teachers in using teaching strategies?**

Ratings about using teaching strategies were significantly different between all the countries, although Estonian and Swedish opinions were similar. Opinions of teachers of these countries were higher than those of the principals.

Johansson and Sandberg's (2010) results show that Swedish teachers often focus on sharing a common focus, learning objects, intentions, interests with the children and should be able to pass on knowledge and an ability to enable children to acquire new competences. According to Öun et al. (2010), Estonian teachers use more teaching methods which support children's opportunities to make independent choices; children can plan their activities and also initiate the subject matters connected with teaching. Teachers create more opportunities for the children's meaningful learning and different activities. Step by Step teachers attach more importance to giving assessments for the children, creating on the one hand an opportunity for every child to experience success while giving feedback to the child on their activities. In a cross-cultural comparison study, Krokfors et al. (2003) found that in both Finnish and Estonian kindergarten

traditions, high professional competence and child-centred teaching practices in which children are active learners are seen as important. Lerkkanen et al.'s (2012) results showed that Estonian kindergarten teachers tend to show more child-centred and child-dominated practices than Finnish teachers. Hujala, Fonsen, and Elo's (2012) results show that the teaching of linguistic skills is the pedagogical strength of the Finnish childcare. The weakness of the pedagogy of learning is connected to the children's mathematical learning. The curriculum content and pedagogy of learning are challenges in developing the quality of Finnish childcare.

Based on the results of the current study, teachers need more competence, concerning how to offer children activities that encourage discovering, experimentation, and develop children's problem-solving skills and self-regulation.

### **What are ratings of principals and teachers about professionalism of preschool teachers in supporting of the teachers' professional development?**

Comparison of opinions of different countries gave similarities only between Estonia and Hungary. Ratings about professional development of Estonian and Hungarian teachers were significantly higher than principals.

Reflection on practice is recognised as an important component in developing professional and pedagogical knowledge and in understanding practice. According to Oberhuemer (2005), informed professional action requires a willingness to reflect on one's own taken-for-granted beliefs and understanding that knowledge is contestable. Dalli's (2010) results show that professionalism is also perceived as something that exists in collaborative relationships with others in the work environment. In this way, professionalism does not just exist as a static quality within a person, but rather in the interaction of that person in particular (collaborative) ways with other. Considering the uncertain nature of social practices, professional development should include time to document educational practices and reflect on these with colleagues and families (Peeters 2012; Urban 2010). According to Sheridan et al. (2011), preschool is a learning organisation where teachers' competence and self-education are in focus. In that way, teachers become not only the consumers of knowledge, but also the creators of new knowledge.

The results show that teachers talk about reflection in terms of a cognitive tool that, in addition to their own working approaches, is used to gain deeper knowledge of different phenomena, situations, contents, children's learning and development. Reflection is mainly used in situations where documentation and evaluation are in focus and as a tool to enhance the preschool quality. This requires the competence to be able to make critical observations, the ability to discern and identify contents, situations and areas for improvement, and the knowledge of what to change and how. According to Oberhuemer (2005), not only do conditions in classrooms affect the ability of teachers to provide the best learning opportunities for children, but also the culture of the preschool institution. Early childhood pedagogues need to be able to openly reflect on their personal and professional beliefs, relating these to the expectations arising from the documented principles. They need to be encouraged to see themselves as interpreters and not as mere implementers of curricular frameworks. Such an individual and collective repositioning can be best achieved in a collaborative culture, in a spirit of what some researchers have called democratic professionalism.

The results of the current study show that teachers need more knowledge and skills, concerning how to gather feedback about the quality of learning and educational activities and plan activities in order to meet the goals of personality development.

### **What are ratings of principals and teachers about professionalism of preschool teachers in creating the growth environment?**

Ratings about the growth environment were highest in Estonia and Hungary. Estonian and Swedish teachers had significantly higher opinions than principals of the same countries.

Korkeamäki and Dreher (2012) describe how the learning environment and the activities are organised from the perspective of teachers, given focus on how teachers implemented the curricula. Curricula included also, what the children should be doing. For all children, the learning environment included mostly toys and equipment for construction, clay for modelling, and materials for learning colours, etc. According to Sheridan et al. (2011), teachers talk about the importance of organising an open, tolerant, dynamic and challenging environment for children's learning and development in preschool, as well as the need to provide constant variety. This thus involves the creation of an environment that is both safe and holds possibilities. It needs to be an environment that enables teachers to have a good overview of what is going on, as well as being one that is well structured and tailored to fit children's individual needs, interests, ages, initiatives and desired activities. It should be an environment that children feel that they are a part of and can exert an influence on.

Child-centred negotiating environments are said to be characteristic of preschools found to have satisfactory levels of quality and challenging learning environments are characteristic of preschools externally evaluated as having high quality. In the survey high-quality preschools are said to be rich in challenges and reciprocal learning encounters and to encourage children's participation in activities. The working team also uses documentation as a tool for reflection to create challenging learning environments in preschool (Sheridan et al. 2013). According to Öun et al. (2010) it became evident from the results that teachers in Estonia used teaching methods which support the child's sensible studying, paying more attention to the creation of the learning environment proceeding from the child's development.

Based on the results of the current study, teachers need more competence, concerning how to include children in shaping the growth environment, consistently use routine activities to encourage children's self-regulation and offer children various means for play and study, which is dependent on age and individual needs.

### **What are ratings of principals and teachers about professionalism of preschool teachers in development of values?**

We found opinions about development of values were similar between Estonia and Hungary and also between Finland and Sweden. Swedish and Estonian teachers had significantly higher opinions than principals of the same countries.

Dayan's (2010) research study on children's perspectives on early childhood teacher education and training, included an attempt to facilitate the participation of children in the supervising process. The results showed how each of these phases has contributed to framework for examining and enhancing the practicum supervisory process on the basis of humanistic-democratic values. Björk-Willén (2007) argued that to make

intercultural education an integral part of preschool teacher education programmes is one way to counteract this mode of thinking. The idea would be to anchor preschool teacher identity formation more solidly in terms of values of equality and respect for human diversity. Stier et al.'s (2012) results suggest that the preschool should counteract traditional gender patterns and gender roles. Teacher educators and teachers in general need to work more systematically with intercultural pedagogy and communication. If teachers do not scrutinise their cultural values, modes of behaviour and a priori understanding of what 'is' cultural behaviour they may, despite their sincere ambitions to do otherwise, sustain cultural stereotypes.

Based on the results of the current study, professionalism of preschool teachers needs more support, concerning how to avoid gender stereotypes in learning and educational activities, enable children to take personal responsibility for creating a caring growth environment and encourage different families to belong into a common community.

## **Conclusion**

Teachers' and principals' opinions were related to the national ECEC curriculum of each country. More differences between teachers' and principals' opinions were found in Sweden and Estonia; the reason may be establishment time of curricula. Estonian and Swedish curricula were established later than Finnish and Hungarian curricula. Curriculum implementation needs time, and results of the current study show that teachers' knowledge based on the curriculum are better than practice in everyday life. This is also the reason, why the principals are more critical than teachers. In every area we can see the differences and similarities between the countries, and in what aspects teachers and principals focused more. Based on the results of the current study, it is planned to carry out in each country focus group interviews with teachers and principals, and investigate how leadership influences preschool teachers' professionalism.

Similarities between Estonia and Hungary and between Finland and Sweden show that opinions of teachers' professionalism depend on the cultural and educational context. Similarities and differences are also found between the national curricula of countries; Finnish and Swedish curricula are more orientated to the learning process and Estonian and Hungarian curricula more to the developmental characteristics of the child. It can be that in Estonia and in Hungary teachers' and principals' opinions were higher because in those countries the Step by Step programme is used. The same results were found in studies by Vonta (2004), Rutar et al. (2012), Öun et al. (2008, 2010), Kazimade et al. (2003), Havlinova et al. (2004) and Lerkkanen et al. (2012). Differences were also found in the evaluation culture of countries, Finnish and Swedish teachers and principals are more critical than Estonian and Hungarian teachers and principals; this depends on the development of democratic values in the countries. The results of the current study will be useful for improving placement- and further training opportunities of preschool teachers in Estonia, Finland, Sweden and Hungary: and for preparing a model of preschool teachers' professional development and development of a professional standard for preschool teachers and training programme, involving the cooperation of these countries.

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