

Sharing Paths

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Introduction

The aim of the project was to create a partnership between preschools and primary schools in Iceland and to promote educational continuity and flexibility in early childhood education. To this end, a group of preschool teachers and primary school teachers in the city of Reykjavik were enabled to work together in order to develop a unified approach and a common understanding of education that could be adopted within both educational levels.

Teachers from three preschools and three primary schools participated in the project and formed three school pairs, together with researchers at the University of Iceland. Three M.A. students were employed as research assistants and each of them served as a contact person for each school pair (table 1).

Table 1 – The groups and their members

| Pair I | Pair II | Pair III |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Three preschool teachers | Two preschool teachers | Two preschool teachers |
| Two primary school teachers | Two primary school teachers | One primary school teachers |
| Specialist in early literacy | Specialist in early literacy | Specialist in early mathematics |
| Specialist in play | Specialist in play | Specialist in play |
| Two specialists in outdoor teaching | | |
| Research assistant | Research assistant | Research assistant |
| Project leader | Project leader | Project leader |

Methods

In order to achieve the research aims, collaborative action research (Wagner, 1997) was conducted. The purpose of action research in schools is to develop and improve practice. Teachers who participate in action research focus on changing and improving their own practices. New methods that are developed in part by the teachers themselves are tested. Records are made of the actions that are taken, and data is gathered and analyzed throughout the study period (Koshy, 2008; McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 2003). In this project, preschool- and primary school teachers worked together with university researchers in developing a common ideology and pedagogical practice.

The study

The study was divided into four phases — preparation, planning changes, implementation, and evaluation — that fuse and become integrated with each other.

First Phase – Preparation

During the first phase of the study the participants were introduced to the concept of action research, and discussed the importance of continuity and transitions between the two school levels during whole-group meetings. The participants were given time and opportunity to discuss and reflect on their own work. Together the school pairs then made decisions about what each they would like to emphasize in their cooperation with the other school level.

When the school pairs had discussed their interests and considered possible collaborative projects, they decided on the following topics:

- Pair I: Early literacy, play and outdoor teaching,
- Pair II: Early literacy and play, and
- Pair III: Early numeracy and play.

Second Phase – Planning Changes

During the second phase of the study, the participants continued discussing ideas and ways to create continuity between the school levels. Ideology and pedagogical practices that were suitable for both school levels were collaboratively developed by the preschool teachers, the primary school teachers, and researchers from the university.

This second phase of the study was characterized by a lot of talking. The teachers had intense discussions about their practices and how to create continuity between the school levels. These discussions revealed different views and ideologies of the teachers of the two school levels. They also revealed that the teachers used concepts in different ways (e.g., play). This was a frustrating time for some of the participants, especially the preschool teachers who sometimes felt that the primary school teachers did not understand or value their work.

Third Phase – Implementation

During this phase the teachers concentrated on putting their ideas into practice. The school pairs tried out ideas and developed projects that they worked on with the children. During monthly common meetings they listened to presentations from other educators who had participated in action research studies. They were also introduced to ways to generate data in order to evaluate the changes and the new practices. The contact persons from the university also met with the teachers once a week in their schools to discuss how things were going and to observe their ideas in action. During joint meetings of the whole group, the teachers presented good practices that they had been trying out and they wanted to share with the others.

When the teachers started to work collaboratively with their ideas and joint projects, it became quite clear that both the preschool teachers and primary school teachers seemed to make a strong distinction between play and learning. For example, the preschool teachers' method to implement literary resources in the preschool was, in the beginning, to set up special lessons instead of integrating play and literacy. The teachers planned the agenda and started by doing school-like activities with groups of children. As a response to this the project leader prepared and distributed a booklet on educational play in Icelandic and a presentation on play and learning was given during one of the joint meetings.

Below are examples of activities from the teachers in group II who worked on play and literacy.

Storybooks.

The first grade children were used to “writing“ stories in personal storybooks, not only in school but also at home. The children then took turns reading their stories aloud for each other in a special “story chair.” The preschool teachers decided to use this idea in the preschool, but instead of an individual storybook the preschool children used one joint book in which they wrote after a common experience, such as field trips. The aim was to create continuity between the school levels. The children start on an activity, and when they come to primary school they continue with similar activity at a more challenging level.

Prop boxes.

The teachers in both primary school and preschool prepared prop boxes with the purpose of encouraging play and literacy. The prop boxes contained items related to certain themes. Grocery store was the first theme. The children and the teachers collected materials for the boxes together. The children brought materials from home, such as boxes from groceries and the teachers brought other things such as cash registers, calculators, and grocery bags. The children made money and credit cards themselves and the teachers copied play money for them to use in the store. The teachers also provided writing materials which the children used to write notes and memos and mark the prices.

In the beginning the preschool teachers played with the children and demonstrated the possible use of the materials. Then the children were given the opportunity to play themselves and be a model for the younger children. In the primary school the children had freedom to play freely with the theme box, with the teacher in the role of observing and asking questions if necessary.

Literacy activities in the play areas

In the preschool, the children could choose activities or play areas during the free play period. The preschool teachers decided to put literacy props into two of these areas: the block centre where the children play with unit blocks and hollow blocks, and the dramatic play area. In the beginning they demonstrated to the children how they could use the writing materials to label, for instance, their buildings. Later, the children were able to use the materials on their own and demonstrate to the younger children how to use them.

Playing with letters

The preschool teachers prepared small letters for the children to play with. In the beginning the teachers planned lessons where the children worked together to put letters together to make up words and names they knew. Later the children were encouraged to write down these words. When the children had been introduced to this new material through teacher-directed activities, the material was placed in the children’s play area where they could use it during free play.

Fourth Phase – Evaluation

The fourth phase of the study involved evaluation and reflections. During the project diverse methods were used to generate data. The data was analyzed during the project period and also at the end.

- *Observations.* The teachers observed their own practices and recorded what occurred in their classroom. Since it is often difficult to observe one’s own practice, the implementation of the new practices was also observed by the research assistants and the specialist from the university.

- *Photos* were used to show what was being done as well as what changes were made during the study. They were also used to document specific events and to present and reflect on what happened.
- *Video recording of best practices.* The teachers recorded elements of their best practices, edited the tape with the help of the research assistants and showed the videos to each other.
- *Video recording of new practices.* The teachers documented their new practices with video cameras, edited the tape with help of research assistants, and shared the videos during joint meetings.
- *Evaluation sheets* were developed to help the teachers evaluate specific learning experiences. The evaluation form for literacy activities developed by the EASE partners was one of these forms.
- *Journals.* Since the teachers who participated in the project were not only teachers but researchers as well, their diaries and reflections were important data. They were encouraged to document specific events or conditions and information about when, where, what, who, how, and why things were done like they were done. They were also encouraged write short anecdotes and to reflect on various issues concerning the implementation of the new methods. At the end of the Project, the teachers were asked to summarise their logs into a one or two A4 pages and evaluate the outcomes.
- *Interviews* were conducted with the teachers in the beginning and at the end of the project. The preschool teachers were asked what they saw as the main role of preschool education, if they thought that literacy and numeracy should be a part of the preschool program, and what their expectations were for the primary school. In similar fashion the primary school teachers were asked what they thought children should learn in first grade and preschool, if and how reading and mathematics should be taught and what they believed would be different from preschool for children in primary school.
- *Recordings from meetings.* The meetings were audiotaped and transcribed.

The next step in the study is writing a report on our findings and presenting it to practitioners in the field. Policy formulation will be developed based on the results of the project. The final product will be used as a curriculum framework for continuous early childhood education.

Conclusion

In this study, groups of preschool teachers and primary school teachers came together to collaborate on a project that examined ways of creating continuity for children from preschool to the first years of their primary education. Although the teachers were enthusiastic about the project and were interested in the challenge of creating continuity between school levels, the journey was not without its complexities. The most obvious was the difference of ideology and working modes and different understandings of concepts such as play. For the preschool teachers, play was something that belonged to the children, and which they were not eager to interfere with. They stated that children learn and develop through play. The primary school

had not considered play much and it was not a part of the curriculum. Both separated play and learning and struggled with finding ways to combine them. When they started to implement new methods, the preschool teachers began to plan lessons instead of finding ways to incorporate learning areas and play. Another constrain related to this action research project was time. The teachers had difficulties in finding time to fit the project in their daily schedule and they also had difficulties finding times to meet. Thus, they had a tendency to separate the project from the regular school curriculum. The third obstacle was related to the initial planning of the project, which was the initiative of the university personnel who invited the teachers to take part in the project. If it had been the other way around, the teachers might have regarded it more as their own endeavour, and the university specialists could have played more of a background role instead of acting as instigators and leaders. In the future there will be opportunities to address these issues to a greater extent; the teams that have been working together on the project have shown interest in continuing to work together on the goal of creating continuity in children's education, and examining the possibilities of integrating the concepts of play and learning.

References

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