Towards Flexible Pre- and Primary Education in Multicultural Contexts?

An Example of Collaborative Action Research in Finland

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Abstract

As in most European countries, the number of migrant children is increasing in Finnish schools. The 3-year research and development project "Flexible Pre- and Primary Education", funded by the Helsinki City Education Department (2007-2010), aimed to develop and test new models and methods enhancing children's general learning skills in preschool and grades 1 and 2, and to allow them to participate and engage actively in their learning environment. The project was also an attempt to enable pupils to move from preschool into primary classes within two to four years – without transfer to special education. Preschool education in Finland takes place at the age of 6 and becomes compulsory at 7 years old and is provided in daycare centres or in preschool classes operating in comprehensive schools. The data was collected through an action research strategy (Elliott, 1991) in three pre-/primary school units in the Helsinki area. In every unit approximately 30% of the pupils were of immigrant background. The results show that it is possible to enhance children's learning and social skills through the models and methods developed in the units, without placement in special education. Other significant results include: the development of multi-professional teamwork, teachers' deeper and long-term acquaintance with their pupils' "learning path", and increased co-operation between principals, between principals and staff. Based on our study, it appears imperative to take into account the children's backgrounds in shaping and altering also the physical learning environments of the school.

Introduction

As in many national and international declarations (e.g. The Convention of the Rights of the Child 1989, The Salamanca Statement 1994, The Charter of Luxemburg 1996 and The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006), the Constitution of Finland emphasizes equity and equality (731/1999, 6 § 2 mom.). For education this translates as equal opportunities, irrespective of domicile, sex, economic situation or linguistic and cultural background. As such, there are no sex-specific school services in Finland, and basic education is free of charge including instruction, school materials, school meals, health care, dental care, commuting, special needs education and remedial teaching (cf. The Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE) at www.oph.fi). In this chapter we are interested in equity and equality in Finnish pre- and primary education in multicultural contexts.

A few words about basic education in Finland are needed to start with. Basic education includes one-year preschool education intended for children of 6 years old as well as comprehensive and compulsory education for all children aged 7–16 years. Preschool (or *Pre-primary education* as it is referred to in the National Core Curriculum) is provided in daycare centres or in preschool classes operating in connection with comprehensive schools. Municipalities are obliged to provide preschool education but participation is voluntary. Almost 98% of the children are involved in preschool education (Ministry of Education, 2012).

The path from preschool to school should form a unified whole. This has been taken into consideration in the curriculum of preschool education and primary school education. According to the Core Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education (2010) the aim of preschool education is to help children to develop learning skills and positive self-image, to acquire basic skills, knowledge and capabilities in different areas in accordance with their age and abilities. In the Core Curriculum for Basic Education (2004) the focus of education lies in growth, learning and the development of a balanced identity in order to develop skills and knowledge needed in life. The aim of education is also to enhance readiness to study "lifelong" and to become an active citizen in a democratic society. Finally education should strengthen the language and cultural identity of every student as well as the development of their first language (Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2004).

The project that we present in this chapter, 'Flexible preschool and school', was a three-year collaborative action research and development project (2007–2010) funded by the Helsinki City

Education Department. The main purpose of the project was to develop and to test new models and methods in preschool and in primary classes (grades 1 and 2) in order to enhance children's general learning skills (especially social, linguistic, working and thinking skills, learning and working habits) and thus enabling them to pass on from preschool to elementary school within two to four years. The education department and social services department of the City of Helsinki thus established the project under scrutiny, Flexible Preschool and School project, in two day care center-school units[1] in 2007. A third unit joined the project in August 2008. At the same time our research project was connected to the units' ongoing development work. The aims of the project were formulated together with different actors from both departments of the City of Helsinki (education and social services). Representatives from the day care centres and schools took part in the project steering committee.

All the units involved in the project were located in areas with many immigrant families. The number of immigrant pupils was over 50% in some of the preschool and school classes. For these reasons every unit received "positive discrimination funding" for their operations (e.g. differentiation and extra support for special education). The project classes[2] were also resourced with special education teachers (from autumn 2007 in two units, and autumn 2008 in one unit) and with special kindergarten teachers (all three units in spring 2009).

The data was collected in three selected preschool-primary school classes by applying collaborative action research. In every class there were pupils with special needs and approximately 30% of the pupils were of immigrant background. In the first phase of the project (2008–2009) three of us[3] familiarized ourselves with the units' physical and pedagogical environment, staff and children and made ourselves known in the units. We also made preliminary surveys and the first interviews of the staff, observed and videotaped lessons in pre- and primary classes. In addition the learning environments were photographed. In the second phase of the project (2009–2010) the data collection continued, but the focus was on informant children, their activities and their experiences and opinions. There were four assessment days during the project to reflect and evaluate the work of the staff and pupils and also to plan for the future.

[1] In this article the word 'unit' refers to the combination of a day care center and a school chosen for this project. The criteria for choosing these units were: the amount of immigrant children and the location of the day care and the school in the same precincts.
[2] By 'classes' we refer to both preschool groups and primary classes 1 and 2.
[3] Kaisa Kopisto, Annu Brotherus and Heini Paavola.

In this chapter, we report on the influence of the collaborative action research on both the teachers and the pupils. The chapter proceeds as follows: first we problematize multicultural education in Finland and inclusion in order to introduce our study; the second section presents the design of the Flexible Preschool and School project including methods and action research strategies. In the third section we concentrate on the main findings: we present an analysis of the informant children's involvement in pre- and primary school activities as well as of the children's interviews. Based on these results we also examine their experiences and opinions of the activities they took part in during the project. Staff interviews are then reviewed to find out about their experiences. We finish with a few remarks concerning the learning environments.

1 Early Childhood Education, the 'Multicultural' and Inclusion in Finland

1.1 What is the 'multicultural' in education?

Finnish education has attracted worldwide attention over the last few years for its excellent results in most international rankings (Sahlberg, 2011). As a consequence, many researchers and decision makers are visiting the country to find out about the "Finland Phenomenon". Very few – if none at all – ever mention the state of multicultural education and especially the ideas of inclusion and social justice in relation to the 'Other' in this context (Dervin et al., forth.). Like most European countries, Finland has witnessed recently increased migration and discussion around these concepts is thus essential in order to introduce our project.

Multicultural education is not new as such in Finnish scholarship and practices (cf. Talib, 2009) yet there does not seem to be any agreement on what it actually means, on what it entails and on how it should be worked upon and implemented (Holm & Londen, 2010). Policy analyses of the latest national curriculum and "official" educational documents show that notions such as the "intercultural" or the "multicultural" are often used without being problematized (Riitaoja, forth.) – as if they were unambiguous. Yet researchers have showed how polysemic and problematic these are (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2003; Dervin et al., 2011; Dervin & Keihäs, 2012).

Current educational policies tend to consider the "multicultural" to refer exclusively to the 'Other', i.e. some categories of migrant pupils such as refugees. Yet they seem to ignore the fact that many a "Finnish" youths also represent *diversity*. The idea of Finland as a very homogeneous "culture" is widespread, even in research. The problem with this vision is that it gives a very essentialist and

"robot-like" image of the country and its people. The main reason behind this obsession with this image is probably related to the use, overuse and abuse of the "old and tired" concept of culture (Breidenbach & Nyíri, 2009, p. 10), which is omnipresent but rarely criticised. In Finnish education, the concept plays a major actor in discussions on inclusion of "multicultural" (or *diverse* in current parlance) pupils. Quite often, the *cultural* takes over and deletes other aspects of identity such as gender, generation, social class, language, etc. Yet the "multicultural" is always a point of view, a way of analysing interactions but not "a given of nature" (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2003). In this chapter, we take into account this shift and use the notion of the multicultural to refer to pupils beyond "foreign culture", i.e. any pupil in the units under scrutiny.

1.2 Problematising Inclusion and Pre- and Primary Education

In Finland, as well as in other Nordic countries, early childhood education and preschool pedagogy stress child participation, democracy, autonomy and freedom (Core Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education 2010; Jensen, 2009) which can be demanding for many children, who are seen as full agents in their own learning processes, as well as competent persons who are urged to engage actively in their surrounding environments (Brooker, 2005). In the Nordic countries, it has been argued many a times that children – from migrant background or not – may have difficulties to accommodate, integrate and perform linguistically, socially and also academically in schools (Griffin, 2008, p. 110; Jensen, 2009). Many scholars (e.g. Yelland et al., 2008, p. 82: Robinson & Diaz, 2006; Brooker, 2005) assert that educators should focus on collaborative ways of knowing and learning which could include other values and knowledge than the ones from the 'majority'. By e.g. decreasing competitive individualism in preschools and schools every child could have a real opportunity to be included, to participate and to be a member of schools as communities. Again this is central in the rationale of our project.

For Adrian Holliday (2010, p. 39), the *list-like* and descriptive approach to cultures (*Finns are… Russians do…*) that are presented and used in education is extremely ideological and too static to allow appreciating multiple identities and *diverse diversities* (Dervin, 2012). This is also related to another misconception, which Dervin (2012) has labelled a "differentialist bias". Cultural difference is often exclusively the basis of multicultural education in Finland. For Anne Phillips (2010, p. 20), cultural difference often leads to cultural hierarchy: "There are said to be 'better' and 'worse', 'more advanced' and ' more backward' cultures". What this approach ignores is the fact that "each of us live in a web of cultural references and meanings" (Phillips, id., p. 61), which makes it

difficult to define a difference as e.g. national, ethnic or cultural.

By insisting on "walling" pupils and students in certain cultures and geographical spaces (again, *a Somali does this, a Chinese person behaves like this*), educationalists can easily prevent inclusion into schools and societies. We argue that by privileging such approaches, inclusion contributes to "subconscious" exclusion, i.e. by placing boundaries between people – and thus hierarchies. The 'Other' is thus never allowed to play an active role in education – and indirectly in society as a whole – as discourses on "our" culture and "their" culture place them in a powerless position (Breidenbach & Nyíri, 2009, p. 340). Some of the differences that we define and use to work with immigrant children or "2nd/3rd generations" can be highly ideological. For example the idea that "Asian" pupils are collectivist and very little autonomous is a dangerous bias as these ideas are based on values to which we attach very positive elements. Holliday (2010) has showed for example that behind the "collectivist" argument laid an old stereotype which relates collectivity, community and group to "less intelligent". Quite revelatory is the tendency in Finland and elsewhere for example to amalgamate special needs education and multicultural education – as if the other was always "deficient". The widespread idea of "respecting other cultures" in education is ambiguous and potentially exclusionary as it is often difficult to find out who decides on cultural characteristics of the "other" (authorities?) and on what role the "other" is allowed to play in these decisions.

This is why social justice for all is a necessity in education, especially if it allows both teachers and pupils to move beyond these problematic issues. The development of complex identities (vs. "walled" identities, cf. 1.1.) in pre- and primary education needs to be supported. This challenges also teachers because they should provide an inclusive learning environment and encourage every child in her/his tasks. Including different kinds of daily practices and learning strategies is therefore needed. Besides teachers should reflect critically on their 'former' routines. Finally standardized measures, often used in pre-school settings in Finland, should be avoided as they can lead to situations where differences between children are seen merely as problems and overpower similarities (Yelland et al., 2008).

2 Applying Collaborative Action Research: Design, Methods and Data

The Flexible Pre- and Primary school project reported in this chapter took into account these criticisms of multicultural education and inclusion seriously. The project was organised in two different phases. The aim of the first phase was to describe 1) the structures, models and

instructional approaches used in the units (preschool and primary classes) and 2) the learning environments in units (preschool groups and primary classes). The target of the second phase was to develop new models and methods for preschool and primary education in order to enhance the children's learning skills (especially social, linguistic, working and thinking skills, learning and working habits) and to generate structures and working models to support the children's learning pathways during transition from preschool to school. Our study also focused on the structures and methods that the personnel in each unit created and tested in order to have functional and flexible preschool and primary education practices. One of our main aims was to advance working models and methods that enabled all the children to pass on to preschool and primary school within two to four years without transferring to special education. For defining more precisely the project's focus and aims we started with preliminary surveys and interviews and created the following figure to describe the project's design (figure 1).

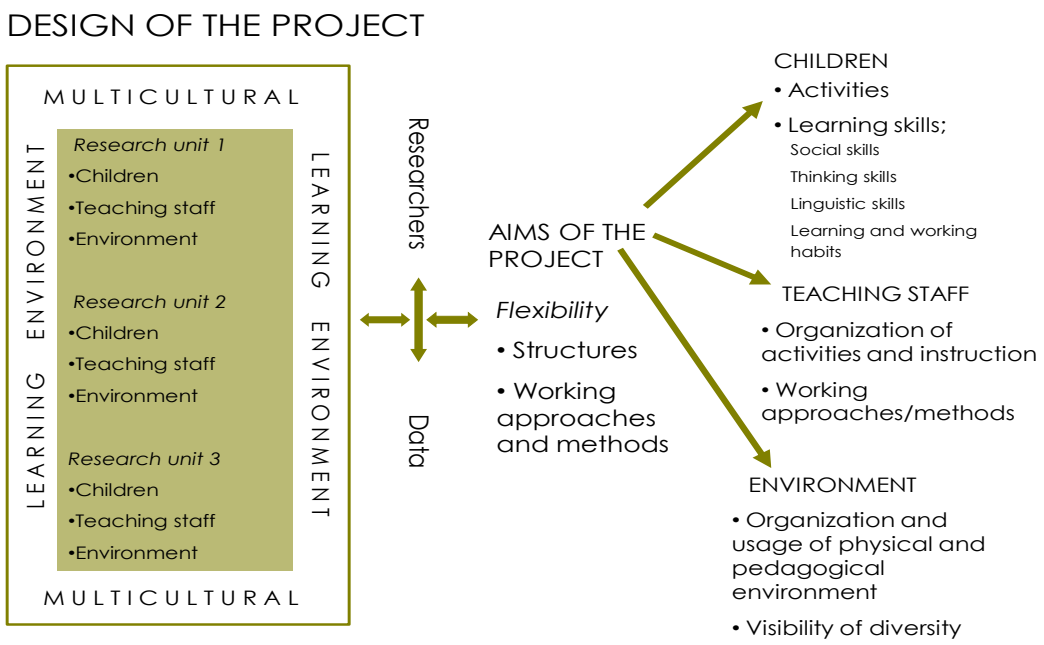

Figure1. Design of the Flexible Preschool and School project

The project was conducted in three school-daycare centre units (preschool groups and 1st and 2nd primary classes). The research participants consisted of preschool children and their kindergarten teachers as well as special kindergarten teachers, pupils in classes 1 and 2, their class teachers and special teachers. In one unit there was also a teacher of Finnish as a second language who worked as a team member during the project. For capturing the children's perspectives, we focused on certain informant children during 2009–2010, who were chosen by the personnel of the units. From

every unit we selected one child with immigrant background, one child with special educational needs and one child with neither immigrant background nor special needs. The total amount of the children participating in the project during 2008–2010 was 159. Table 1 presents the units, the personnel and informants in each of the units.

Table 1. Research units, personnel and informant children in each unit

INFORMANTS

Research unit	Teaching staff	Preschool groups and primary classes	Informant children
Unit 1	•2 kindergarten teachers •1 special kindergarten teacher •2 class teachers •1 special teacher •Finnish as a second language teacher	*From 2008 to 2010* Preschool group 1st grade 2nd grade	•Girl/preschool •Boy/immigrant,1st grade •Boy/special needs, 2nd grade
Unit 2	•1 kindergarten teacher •1 special kindergarten teacher •2 class teachers •1 special teacher	*From 2008 to 2010* Preschool group 1st grade 2nd grade	•Boy/preschool, special needs •Boy/1st grade •Boy/immigrant, 2nd grade
Unit 3	•2 kindergarten teachers •1 special kindergarten teacher •2 class teachers •1 special teacher	*2008 - 2009* Preschool group 1st grade *2009 - 2010* Preschool group 1st grade 2nd grade	•Boy/immigrant, preschool •Girl/special needs, 1st grade •Boy/2nd grade

In this project we applied a collaborative action research approach which allowed us to cooperate with the teachers in order to improve their teaching practices and to overcome the isolation they sometimes experienced (Ainscow et al. 2004). We were also interested in the children's learning. Figure 2 shows the cyclic proceeding of the project during 2008–2010. It also presents how we focused on targets and used data gathering methods during each cycle.

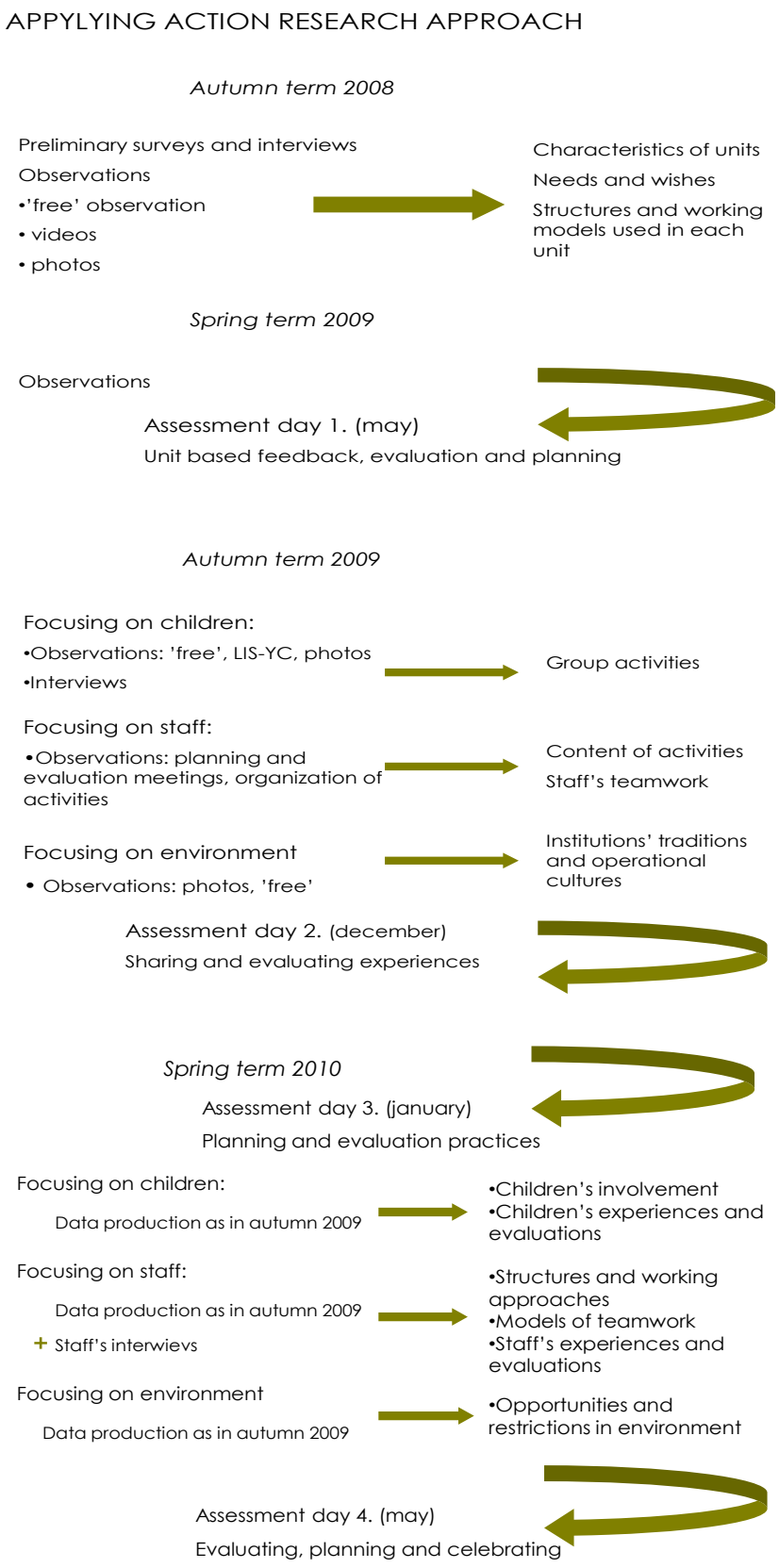

Figure 2. Action Research process, targets and data gathering methods during cycles

We planned the data gathering methods and schedule for using certain methods at the beginning of the project. During the process we evaluated and specified targets and methods several times both by ourselves and in collaboration with the staff. The data was gathered by three researchers[4] who mainly worked in pairs. One of us videotaped and photographed, another one made the LIS-YC-observations (cf. below), two of us interviewed the children and most of the interviews with staff were made by all of us, as well as observations at the beginning of the project.

A few words about the methods we used in this research: We observed the informant children's involvement in activities with "The Leuwen Involvement Scale for young children" process indicator. The LIS-YC process indicator has a scale of 5 different levels for observing the intensity of involvement. Level 1 represents a lack of activity; on level 2 a child's activity is constantly interrupted; level 3 means that a child is more or less continuously concentrating on an activity; on level 4 a child's activity includes intensive moments; on the fifth level the child is totally immersed in an activity. To us, a child who is involved in an activity has a large interest in his job and works intensively with persistence, energy and passion. Involvement is observable and can be recognized from e.g. the child's facial expressions and bodily movements (Laevers, 1997, p. 3, pp. 8–16). We observed nine informant children and the total amount of three-minute observations was 120 and ranged from 9 to 19 times per child. In order to increase the reliability of our measurements we also photographed the informant children during our LIS-YC -observations. The data was analyzed as follows: we counted the averages for every child, group, every research unit and finally for the whole data.

We also made thematic interviews with our informant children in order to explore their experiences and evaluations concerning the activities they had participated in. As an analysis unit we used the 'thought whole' expressed by the children. Note that as the children were young and sometimes their language skills were quite limited, the wholeness could be only one word (Brotherus, 2004, pp. 70–74; Kopisto, Brotherus, Paavola, Hytönen, Lipponen, 2011, pp. 48–49).

As far as the staff is concerned, we had everyday discussions while meeting them, and we also organized semi-structured interviews in spring 2010. Each occupational group had their own interview based on questions given to them beforehand. Through our questions we encouraged them to evaluate and reflect on the whole project, their own aims, and achievements. We also asked them

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to point out what could be improved and how, and to make plans for developing and carrying on with their common pre- and primary education practices.

We also videotaped commonly organized activities and photographed the physical learning environments. From the photos we produced photomaps (Collier, 2002, pp. 54–56; Brotherus & Kopisto, 2005, pp. 80–81) for answering the questions concerning the possibilities and restrictions of the environments. We were also interested in how multiculturality was present(ed) in the physical learning environments.

4 Main Findings

This chapter will not cover answers to all our research questions nor e.g. reflections on important ethical issues (cf. Kopisto et al., 2011). In outcomes we concentrate on organization and content of flexible activities in each unit, children's involvement in those activities and their opinions and wishes concerning activities and learning. We also present staff's evaluations, about the project and some main points about physical learning environments.

4.1 Organization and content of the Flexible Pre- and Primary Education in the Units

In this section, we discuss the activities in Flexible Pre- and Primary Education and show that they were organized and named differently in every unit.

In unit 1 the project lessons were called *Flexible Days*. Children were grouped into four mixed groups (children from pre- and primary classes) and the groups worked together for four weeks in some subject fields or themes two hours once a week. In the first phase of the project the main goals of the group work were to enhance the children's motoric skills, emotional skills, and language skills in Finnish, and in the second phase the focus was on developing the children's interactional, emotional and social skills. The groups were the same during the whole school year. In addition to this there were school clubs organized by special teachers, the aim of which was to enhance mathematic and language skills. During the years 2008–2009 a class teacher and a kindergarten special teacher co-organized music lessons.

In unit 2 the Flexible Pre- and Primary Education activities were named *Project Days*. During the years 2007–2008 the focus was on language skills in Finnish and social skills. The children were grouped into five groups according to their skills. In autumn 2008 the staff changed the focus to language, environment and natural studies, sports and handicrafts. One group consisted of the pupils from class 2, two groups of pupils from class 1 and preschool class and one group of pupils from preschool, classes 1 and 2. There were two teachers in the most heterogeneous group, a special teacher and a special kindergarten teacher. Because of the many changes in the staff members in this particular unit the new plan did not succeed and in spring 2009 the unit returned to the way they had been working in 2007–2008.

In the third unit the Flexible Pre- and Primary Education activities was named *Workshop Activities*. In this unit this kind of working model had been used already before the project but now they had also the opportunity to set up special teacher's school clubs thanks to extra funding of the project. Children were grouped into four groups according to their language skills in Finnish, and the workshop activities were organized once a week. The groups focused on one theme during four weeks with one teacher and after four weeks the teacher changed. The groups were the same during the whole school year. In this unit the children had also the possibility to take part in art and handicraft workshops once a week. There were five workshops with different content, and every child could take part in all of them during the school year.

4.2 The Children's Experiences of Flexible Pre- and Primary Education and Involvement in the Activities

Our first interest is in the children's perceptions and involvement in the organized activities. The informant children were interviewed twice in autumn 2009 and spring 2010. The interviews were always made by two researchers and videotaped. There were questions about teachers, activities and the learning environment as well as about the children's own wishes for learning. The interviews took half an hour on average.

The outcomes appeared to be quite similar between the units and among the preschool children and within primary school children in spite of their differences. Yet there were clear variations in the children's preferences concerning their wishes and self-evaluations of knowing and learning. When telling about their learning all the children referred to their teachers telling that they were fond of their teachers; teachers were nice, kind and patient. The preschool children's wishes for knowing

and learning were connected to goals other than academic. They linked their wishes for learning to playing and self-evaluations to their skillfulness in handicraft and physical education. A pupil (unit 3) told us that she wanted to learn to read and write. Another girl (unit 1) wished to learn to draw like other pupils in the school and a boy (unit 2) stated in spring 2010 that *"I can't do everything"*. Let us note that the children could not separate the activities related to project from other pre- and primary school activities. Only one girl (unit 1) mentioned that *"Project days are fun, sometimes we do gym!"*.

The pupils' wishes for learning in classes 1 and 2 were linked to subjects (mostly mathematics) – only one pupil told us that he was as fond of playing as of other schoolwork. Such activities like playing, games and fairy tales belonged to outside the school time. Both the pupils in classes 1 and 2 could not differentiate the project lessons and other schoolwork in the autumn 2009, while in spring 2010 they could. A boy (unit 1) told us that project lessons were more fun than ordinary lessons. Another one had noticed that *"It is different. Sometimes we have a competition."*

We now move on to the involvement of the children in the activities that were organized as part of the project. This was analyzed by means of the LIS-YC scale 1-5 (cf. previous section). The children in the pre- and primary classes were quite involved in the activities on average (mean 3.5). The children without immigrant or special needs backgrounds received the highest scores (mean 3.9). The mean score of children with immigrant background was 3.4 while the children with special education needs scored the less with 3.2.

The involvement of preschool children was the lowest (3.16) while the involvement of class 1 the highest (3.9). The lowest scores (2) in the whole target group were received by a preschool boy who had limited skills in the Finnish language and also had special needs. The immigrant boy from class 1 got the second lowest result (2.3). The mean of grade 2 pupils was good (3.5), but the deviation of the scores in the involvement between the pupils was the highest of all (deviation 1.9).

On the whole the involvement in activities was especially high in the special teacher's school clubs in the research unit 1. High involvement scores were also reached in the special teacher's and kindergarten special teacher's joint learning sessions in research unit 3. The aims for enhancing children's language and mathematic skills were reached well. Learning in small groups with the special teacher and, in some cases also, with two teachers, proved to be very beneficial. The

children had individualized learning targets, received special attention and learning in a familiar, supportive and positive atmosphere encouraged them to work actively and to express themselves.

4.3 Semi-Structured Group Interviews with the Teachers

4.4.1 Perception of the Beginning of the Project

In the final group interviews in spring 2010, the staff members recalled how confused they were when the collaborative action research project started. They also explained how it all became clearer when the research entered into development work through collaboration with the researchers and when they were presented with figure 1 (cf. section 2):

> *"It was positive that the researchers came along. You started to understand our context and recognize also the socioeconomic background of our pupils. You have seen what we do in this school. It has encouraged and made you and us closer… you know why we have chosen certain things, where and why we have started[5]." (Unit 1, class teacher)*

All the participants agreed that there had been an extreme need for support and knowledge especially concerning immigrant children and children with special needs. The motivation to participate in the project is reflected in the next quote:

> *"Because a special teacher resource was included in this project, of course we wanted to participate, it was a starting point, there was a real need for this kind of project!" (Unit 1, Finnish as a second language teacher).*

4.4.2 Hindering Factors and Co-Operation among the Staff

The Staff members reflected upon what kind of hindering factors or obstacles there had been during the project. Unit 2 had participated in another project and they found it hard to motivate themselves to take part in this new project. There were also many changes in the teaching staff during the project, which caused problems in planning and evaluating the activities. They felt they did not get enough support from the principal and new teachers did not get the information they needed to be

[5] Translated from Finnish by the authors.

fully involved in the project. Changes in unit 2 were shown clearly in their development work, there was neither a follow-on nor real progress during the project.

> *"The second year was a disaster! A lot of changes in the staff. Class 1 was terribly demanding, and we (in preschool class) also had a demanding group. We should have begun in a totally different way." (Unit 2, kindergarten teacher)*

> *"The organization should have been better! Quite a flop! When we already had been involved in the project for two years, the principal should have managed the timetable matters so that the project would have been possible to run" (Group 2, special teacher)*

According to the staff from units 1 and 3 they succeeded in developing especially co-planning, multi-professional teamwork and co-teaching. In these units the flexible timetable made the multi-professional team work possible and the teachers got extra time for planning and evaluating together.

> *"It is – I think – a very simple thing to organize. I make the timetables and mark there the joint lessons to be used for co-operation." (Group 1, principal)*

The implementation and understanding of the meaning of multi-professional co-operation was one of the most important outcomes. The teachers familiarized themselves with each other's work in the pre- and primary classes and learned to appreciate each other's work better. The amount and quality of discussions between the professionals increased a lot and co-operation became more systematic. The teachers also felt that multi-professional teamwork and co-teaching influenced their professional identities positively. Thanks to increased co-operation also the quality of the teaching intensified, which was seen in the children's achievements.

> *"We have worked on our practices, and moved on from quantity to quality." (Group 3, class teacher)*

4.4.3 Teachers' Achievements and Experiences

When the units were reflecting on the results and achievements of the project, unit 1 expressed their satisfaction with the results they had reached. According to the teacher, concentration on mathematics, and developing language, social and emotional skills represented sound and productive choices. They also succeeded to develop working methods and practices in the teaching of Finnish as a second language. In unit 2 the most important outcome was the development of the oral and written expression of the pupils. The teachers felt that children's individual needs were met, even though they asserted that they could not develop any "real" model or method during the project. According to the teachers in the third unit the children achieved their learning goals well. Especially co-teaching and working in small groups was experienced successfully. Like in unit 1 the staff in this unit mentioned that not only the immigrant children and children with special needs had benefitted from the project, but that all children gained from it. Teachers enjoyed the fact that especially those children who were in danger to drop out could be supported. Both pre- and primary school children had received the support they needed.

Both special teachers and class teachers experienced that their increased knowledge of pupils influenced the home-school co-operation in a positive way. Class teachers felt that their working skills – especially in differentiating teaching – had developed, and that made them more confident when meeting and interacting with the parents. Special needs teachers experienced their mutual co-operation as very fruitful.

4.4.4 Learning Environments

In every unit preschool and school were placed in the same location. In units 1 and 3 pre- and primary classrooms were situated close to each other, which facilitated co-operation. In unit 2 the preschool was situated on the ground floor and primary classrooms on the first. This was one big hindrance for co-operation during the whole project, because the floors were like two different worlds – according to the teachers.

> *"They are waiting that teachers from the school come to say… it is so hard to climb up the stairs." (Unit 2, special teacher)*

In every unit the planning of the learning environment was "the last aspect to concentrate on". Preschool classrooms resembled a "home" and were decorated with carpets, sofas, flowers etc. Tables and chairs were grouped, materials were located on shelves and closets and they were often thematically placed. Also primary school classrooms were typically arranged in a teacher-centered

manner: the children had their desks in rows or small groups, the teacher's table was placed in front or behind the room. Numbers and alphabets were placed on the walls as well as children's paintings etc. The pedagogical idea of the environment was clear but the diversity of the children was not taken into account. As such the equipment and teaching and learning materials reflected mostly "Finnish culture" and for example the children's paintings and handicrafts were often based on representations of Finnishness (animals, nature, national celebration days, national heroes, etc.).

No signs at all or only a few multilingual signs were visible on pictures, posters, playing material or books in the rooms. The only visible elements which hinted at diversity or internationality were large wall maps, globes and posters with flags in some classrooms. In one classroom in unit 1 there were small items referring to Sweden (*Pippi Longstocking*) and Russia (*Matryoshka dolls*) and to some more globally known figures (*Winnie the Pooh* and *Minnie Mouse*).

> *"We are not pleased with how the project has been made visible in our environment." (Unit 1, Finnish as a second language teacher).*

5 Conclusions and Implications

This chapter examined the influence and impact of a three-year project entitled 'Flexible preschool and school' on several educational institutions in Helsinki, Finland. Having argued for a new understanding and implementation of the notions of multicultural education and inclusion, we have described how some of these changes were taken into account in conceptualizing, implementing and developing the project. In our analytical sections, we have demonstrated the effects of our research on both teachers and pupils in the schools under scrutiny. Even though the collaborative action research between the teachers and us was short-term and somewhat limited, the staff noted positive improvement in the children's learning skills and social skills. It would thus be worth considering what more could be done with and for the children, if the possibilities for flexibility and multi-professional co-operative working methods were expanded and established consistently in everyday practices of pre-primary education.

Let us now conclude by underlying some of the key results and implications for preschool and school education.

First of all, our study has allowed us to identify key actors in flexible education. It became clear to us that the special teacher's (special teacher and special kindergarten teacher) role was crucial in all

the units where the research took place. Thanks to their educational background they had a deeper understanding of the children's differences and their knowledge was much appreciated in every unit. The special teachers also were key persons when the children were selected to differentiated groups or when they were grouped heterogeneously. They knew every child and could find a good solution for placement in activities. They were also leading the planning work and coordinated meetings with multiprofessional staff.

Another important actor identified in the study was the central figure of the school principal, who can make multi-professional work happen in preschool and in school. This is why time for planning and evaluating needs to be acknowledged by principals and reserved in staff's schedules. It is also up to the principal to evaluate critically and creatively traditionally different operational cultures (e.g. daily routines and practices, timetables, planning and evaluation procedures) in order to increase flexible mutual and productive working methods and possibilities for children to move 'smoothly' from one institution to another. Staff's motivation is connected to the circumstances in the working place and affects directly the children's learning achievements.

Also important is to bear in mind the children's uniqueness and thus the idea of differentiation. These were significant starting points in the project that were taken into account when planning the activities. In the project lessons children were grouped in heterogeneous groups and the main aim was to develop their social skills. An interesting outcome from the heterogeneous groups was that loyalty towards each other was not bounded to sex or age, but to the same culture and language groups. This was especially observed during the situations or lessons which were more "informal" and included more free activities. It may be interesting in a future study to look into the reasons for this phenomenon: did the children belonging to certain linguistic and cultural groups feel more at ease in more informal situations or lessons to claim their individual and collective identities? Were these children feeling that they were outsiders or left alone in situations where they were not the majority?

This leads us to an important issue in relation to inclusion. When children come to preschool with limited second language skills, groupings are necessary. In this project, during the special needs teacher's school clubs the children were mostly grouped according to their age and skills in the Finnish language and mathematics – which had a positive impact on the children. We believe that children should receive targeted teaching in language as it is the key to social interaction. At the same time it is highly important for them to get to know their peers in their class and also in other classes. In our project, it seems clear that when the children received extra individual attention and

were given the possibility to work with peer groups their involvement increased and they were able to reach their aims. Even though the involvement in the activities was good, the relatively low involvement of the preschool children raises the question of the suitability of the aims of the activities and methods for preschool children. For preschool children it is also important is to get a sense of the teachers, environments, lessons and activities in primary school. This may ease the transition from preschool to primary school.

Finally, some words about multicultural education. The teachers kept mentioning the children's different backgrounds and uniqueness, yet the "multicultural" was hardly noticeable in the classrooms. It was difficult for the teachers to understand that it is important for a child to "find" herself/himself e.g. on a picture or in a book or in the playing material used in class. It is thus important for all children not to feel 'otherised' as this can affect their identity, self image but also, most importantly, their learning (Nieto, 2004; Gay, 2005). The teachers were very much devoted to the learning atmosphere and methods, yet again the "multicultural" was not seen in the learning contents either. One of the possible reasons for the absence of the 'renewed multicultural' is that the Finnish Core curriculum for Pre-Primary education (2010) and Basic education (2004) are based on certain canonical images of Finland, the Finns and Finnish culture. The multicultural or its "acolyte", the intercultural, are just making an appearance on the educational scene in Finland. This will, no doubt, lead to developing some of the ideas that we have put forward in this chapter in the near future, and contribute to ease even more transition from Pre- to Primary education for all.

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