

SUMMARY

VKK-Metro was an early childhood education development and co-operation network in the Helsinki Metropolitan area. The development theme for 2014-2016 was play and playful learning environments. The main objectives were to develop playful environments for early childhood learning and active and sensitive roles for adults in play, as well to strengthen the development skills of the staff of the day-care centers and to increase the appreciation of play in families with children. Research was an essential part of the development project, the purpose of which was to increase the dialogue between practice, research and the VKK-Metro actors. In total, 25 development units from Espoo, Helsinki, Kauniainen and Vantaa participated in the study.

The study looked at the educator's role in promoting or limiting play, as well as the changes that took place during the development period in the culture of play in the kindergarten. The study was practice-oriented and the research data consisted of interviews with the participating development units at the beginning and the end of the project, materials from peer group meetings, as well as descriptions of the play produced by the educators themselves.

The role of the educator was found to be a factor in the promotion and limitation of play in three dimensions: attitudinal, structural and functional. If the educator's attitude towards play was positive and the value play was a clear, the educators were significantly more involved in the children's play, assuming different roles depending upon the age of the children and activities engaged in. If, on the other hand, the educator was unsure about the value of play, it was seen to be more an activity between children and consequently adult participation was lower. The structural dimension to the educator's opportunities to participate in children's play was considered mostly through scheduling, facilities and other tasks. The operational level of interaction and the practices of guidance were found to be of great importance in promoting and limiting play. Changes took place in all dimensions during the development period. The educators' attitude towards play and how it was valued became clearer and in many cases improved. Structures were modified so that they became factors promoting play instead of being factors limiting it. Interaction improved on many levels: within the work community, between children and adults, among children and when communicating with families. The sensitivity of adults and support for children's participation increased in the practices of guidance and contributed to the promotion of play and playful learning environments.