

**Document analysis: Comparing and contrasting the early years education of Estonia and England to highlight the similarities and differences and impact of respective countries children**

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**Abstract**

The aim of this research is to compare the early years education systems in England and Estonia in terms of similarities and differences and evaluate the impact they have on children. This study is conducted through document analysis of England's early years education guidance: 'Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage' (DfE, 2014) and Estonia's guidance: 'National curriculum for early years institution (Koolieelse lasteasutuse riiklik oppekava)' (Vabariigi Valitsus, 2008). The research approach adopted in this paper includes document analysis and thematic analysis. The findings provide evidence of child-centred practice in both countries who view children as individuals which have unique set of needs and provide support accordingly. England's education system has further evidence of in-depth practice with regards to children's personal, social and emotional development and inter-agency work. There is evidence of the benefits of inter-agency work and assessment with regards to children's transition into compulsory education. The study recommends Estonian pre-schools to focus more on effective inter-agency work and children's emotional and social development. In addition, the Estonian government uses early years education to promote Estonian values and language.

**Introduction**

The importance of early years education and care (EYEC) has been recognised in past years (DfE, 2015b). Quality EYEC has shown to benefit countries' socio-economic status and improve academic results in the long term (OFSTED, 2015, Hujala, Niikko, 2012). The compulsory legislation and guidelines that guide EYEC settings in England and Estonia, are provided by the current political power (Macey, Thorius & Skelton, 2012). That means government values are reflected in the values that are present in the countries EYEC education.

This study has been produced, as there are few international comparative studies around early years curriculum and practice in Estonia. As England has emphasised the early years education sector through improvements of staff qualifications, curricula and quality assurance processes, it was chosen as a country to study in parallel to Estonia (DfE, 2015b).

The overall aim of this research is to advance an understanding of EYEC systems aims and values in Estonia and England, and analyse the effect it has on the respective countries' children. The countries' government official early years education guidance was analysed. For England: 'Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage' (DfE, 2014) and for Estonia: 'National curriculum for preschool education' (Koolieelse lasteasutuse riiklik oppekava) (Vabariigi Valitsus, 2008). These studies are beneficial, as international studies can provide new perspectives on practice and lessons can be learned through other countries' successes and mistakes (Baribalt & Cloyde, 1999). Findings of such studies can help develop more successful future practice.

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## **Review of literature**

### *Early years education in Estonia*

During the years of development, the education system has been influenced by many foreign powers including Germany and Russia. As a result, Forbel and other Russian psychologist thinkers have had a great influence on early years education development (Koop, 2013). During foreign rule, Estonian teachers did not openly embrace changes that were introduced and developed their own, individual programmes and kept their nationalism at a high level (Koop, 2013).

In 1940 the Soviet Union occupied Estonia and the education system was changed to follow the principles of soviet pedagogy (Krull & Trasberg, 2006). In soviet pedagogy, great attention was paid to early education, as a result all children were provided a place with good special and material conditions (Tuul, Ugaste & Mikser, 2011). From that era Estonia benefited from many new and spacious pre-school buildings that are still in use currently (Krull & Trasberg, 2006).

In 1985, Perestroika programmes of reform were established. This meant policy and practice of restructuring and reforming the economic and political system (Tuul, Ugaste & Mikser, 2011). After the fall of communism Eastern-European countries, including Estonia, moved towards the Western social, economic and cultural model (Birzea 1996 & Scott, 2002). The goal appeared to be the 'radicality of changes' and to contrast with the Soviet-era's unitary and centralist approach (Tuul, Ugaste & Mikser, 2011). This also included changes in educational approaches and aims in EYEC.

Estonian pre-schools moved away from Soviet period approach in which studies were directed and controlled by teachers and moved to the overriding principle of individual child development (Koop, 2013). Pre-school reform was made the responsibility of the location, which legalised through democratisation opportunities taken at a lower level (Ruus & Sarv 2000). The importance of children of the same age being together was recognised and, in addition to social needs, attention was paid to individual needs. Instead of subjects, free play was emphasised (Koop, 2013).

At present, the compulsory school starting age is seven years, higher than many other countries (Sharp, 2002). Also, municipalities have an obligation to guarantee a place in a pre-school child care institution for all children aged between 1.5-7 years (Republic of Estonia Ministry of Education and Research, 2014). Parents can choose between private and municipal institutions. Children start formal education at the age of 7 (Sharp, 2002).

### *Early years education in England*

In 1997, the government recognised that children benefit from early years education and expanded its availability (Association of Teachers and Lecturers, 2003). In 1998, free part-time education places became the entitlement of all four-year-olds whose parents wanted it (DfE, 2010a). From 2013, all 2-year-olds who met the eligibility criteria were entitled to 15 hours of funded early education per week for 38 weeks of the year (DfE, 2016).

England has developed its early years education through home-grown programmes and 'grafting' – the adoption of approaches from other countries (Froebel, Montessori and, more recently, HighScope and Reggio Emilia) (Payler, Georgeson, Wickett, 2013).

In 2008, all registered early years providers and schools were required to use the EYFS programme as it was shaped through changing government agendas (Payler, Georgeson, Wickett, 2013). This document recognises the importance of play and a balance of adult-led and child-initiated activities. It promotes balance between the development of academic and literacy skills, socio-emotional development, and creative and physical development, in addition it encourages practitioners to

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adopt a wide range of domain-specific learning techniques (Wall, Litjens, Taguma, 2015). The theorists that have been mentioned to have influenced curriculum and pedagogy in England are most often Piaget and Vygotsky (Wall, Litjens, Taguma, 2015).

England has a number of different early years learning settings. These settings have different finance streams (public, private, voluntary, and mixed funding), different session times, different kinds of buildings, and employ staff with a bewildering array of different vocational and academic qualifications (as well as some staff with no qualifications) (DfE, 2010b).

England has one of the earliest school starting ages in European Union (Sharp, 2002). Children have to start school the term following their fifth birthday as it was established by the government in 1880 in hope of decreasing child labour (Parliament.uk, 2016). Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, children have started attending school from the beginning of the school year in which they become 5, joining the 'reception class' (Payler, Georgeson & Wickett, 2013).

*The importance and influences of early years education*

Early years is a very important period with regards to learning and development. The brain increases its size by up to 3 times by the first birthday and starts making new connections, during that time the brain has twice the amount of connections compared to an adult (Stilles, 2012). This period is called the 'sensitive period' (Knudsen, 2004). The foundations of brain architectures are put in place early in life through interactions between 'genetic influences' and 'environmental conditions and experiences' (Prado & Dewey, 2014). Early years education settings play an important role in providing an enabling environment to promote healthy brain development.

Previous studies have found that children who have participated in early childhood education are more successful in future education and have fewer behavioural problems at school than others (Hujala, Niikko, 2012). But at the same time the education received must be good quality, otherwise it would not have much benefit. Studies show that children are more likely to have language, social and development problems in low-quality provision (OECD, 2001 and 2006). One of the features of high quality early years education is that it has a focus on both academic and social skills (American Educational Research Association, 2005).

Estonia and England both have a good level of education outcomes. According to PISA (2015) England is performing average in Mathematics (27<sup>th</sup>) and Reading (21<sup>st</sup>) and above average in Science (15<sup>th</sup>). The performance of students in Estonia, is among the best in Europe and has improved significantly in the last few years (3<sup>rd</sup> in Science, 6<sup>th</sup> in reading and 9<sup>th</sup> in maths) (PISA, 2015). However, the gender gap in Estonia is among the widest in the OECD area, with a much greater proportion of women completing a tertiary qualification (Santiago, 2016). This could be influenced due to the fact that a majority of Estonian pre-school teachers are female. The proportion of females in 2012 reached 100% in pre-primary education (against an OECD average of 97%) (Santiago, 2016). Compared to Estonia, England has a gradually lowering gender gap rate (PISA, 2015). The long term effects of early-childhood education in terms of school achievement has been found to exist. The European Commission (2013) found that children who had joined early education performed significantly better in mathematics in secondary school and pupils who did not attend any pre-primary school showed a clear skill disadvantage. On the other hand, international PISA tests cannot be fully reliable, as the countries' education official may provide short term fixes to climb the ratings by influencing policy and the knowledge measured is very contextual, ignoring other aspects such as emotional and physical development (Volante, 2016).

Early childhood education is culture bound and requires understanding within the social, historical, political and economic context of each country (Hujala, Veisson & Smith, 2011). Both Estonia and

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England have developed their version of developmentally appropriate curriculum. While looking at the curriculums, the context of learning has to be considered. Woodhead (1998) replaced the conception 'developmentally appropriate' with the conception 'contextually appropriate' stressing that everywhere in the world children have a fundamental need to identify with the culture in which they live (Hujala & Niikko, 2012)

Both, England and Estonia emphasise the importance of age-appropriate pedagogy and content (Wall, Litjens, Taguma, 2015). Previous versions of the English curriculum were found to be too prescriptive, and based on staff needs, the framework was revised to leave more room for interpretation and adaptation (Wall, Litjens, Taguma, 2015). English practitioners follow the goals set out by the EYFS guidelines, but these guidelines do not give strict guidance on what activities need to be carried out, this provides flexibility in planning everyday activities and an opportunity to adapt learning with regards to children's abilities. In previous decades the disadvantage of the Estonian curriculum has been the teacher-centredness, with little attention paid to the formation of democratic relationships and to attaching value to Estonian culture (Niikkoo, Ugaste, 2016). Currently the Estonian curriculum is flexible as in the pre-school childcare institution teachers are free to choose the methodology of instruction, considering the theories of development and learning by Piaget, Vögotski and Dewey (Unesco, 2006). Early years education in both countries promotes structured play-based learning and a mixed approach of child-centred and staff-initiating practices (Wall, Litjens, Taguma, 2015).

Integration of immigrants and their children has increased in past decades and it is a topic that is current in England and Estonia (OECD/EU, 2015). Early education practitioners need to be prepared to work with children of different cultural, socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds, and pedagogical practices need to be adapted to their diverse needs (Wall, Litjens & Taguma, 2015). As children who arrive at early education settings from different cultural backgrounds are likely to bring different ways of making sense and engaging (Miller, 2010).

England and Estonia both have government legislation that promotes equality and diversity in early years provision. The Republic of Estonia Equal Treatment Act (Riigikogu, 2008) aims to ensure the protection of people against discrimination on grounds of nationality, race, colour, religion or other beliefs, age, disability or sexual orientation. In England, the Equality act 2010 (Government Equalities Office, 2013) legally protects people from discrimination in the workplace and in wider society, including early years setting.

According to the study carried out by Santiago (2016) the integration of students with special education needs into mainstream education remains limited in Estonia. During the writing of the literature review no specific documents were found that would promote interagency work between different people and agencies around a child. This could be one of the influences to limit integration. England's educational system has put great focus on inter-agency work as they have produced specific policies. The main document used is 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' (DfE, 2015a). According to the House of commons, Education and skills committee (2006) England would ideally like to place children with special educational needs into mainstream schools. Similarly, in Estonia a pre-school child with special needs is generally placed in a mainstream nursery school, and in certain cases in one of three special pre-primary institutions (European Agency for special needs and inclusive education, 2016).

Good quality early years education can provide a strong base for future development in all areas from health and social behaviour to employment and educational attainment (Dickell, 2011). Highly qualified practitioners are vital as early childhood education today requires more profound

## MULLER: DOCUMENT ANALYSIS: COMPARING AND CONTRASTING THE EARLY YEARS EDUCATION OF ESTONIA AND ENGLAND TO HIGHLIGHT THE SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES AND IMPACT OF RESPECTIVE COUNTRIES CHILDREN

knowledge than before and better understanding that education is multi-dimensional and has complex growth environments and networks (Hujala, Niikkoo, 2012). Practitioners in early years should be experts on the age range, as the teaching styles used on young children should differ from styles used to teach older children and adults (Chung and Walsh, 2000).

The design of early education programmes and the approach to pedagogy and curriculum are crucial to success (Centre for research in early childhood (CREC), 2013). The added value to the early education is adults' goal orientated supervision and the peer groups in which children learn many things that may not necessarily be possible at home environment (Hujala, Niikko 2012). A mixture of information has been received through literature about the quality of early years settings in England. The CREC (2013) study implies that many targeted early education programmes do not meet the criteria of quality and efficiency and many programmes are often temporary projects and vulnerable to economic trends (CREC, 2013). In later reports by OFSTED (2015) it was stated that among all types of early years settings more than 80% are now rated good or outstanding.

While coverage rates for pre-school children have reached good levels. England's and Estonian governments spend considerably less, as a proportion of GDP per capita, on pre-primary education than other levels of education (Santiago, 2016; HM Treasury, 2016). As a result, this might have possible implications on the quality of the services offered (Santiago, 2016). In both countries there is a problem with low salaries for pre-primary education teachers (Santiago, 2016, OECD, 2016a). Higher wages would motivate the current staff and attract highly motivated and qualified professionals to the sector (NIEER, 2003). It has been found that factors such as staff knowledge, initial education qualifications and content, training and their competences and skills influence staff pedagogy (Wall, Litjens & Taguma, 2015).

On a government level, raising attention towards early years education is based on growing evidence that demonstrates its social and economic benefits, as globally it is seen as a social investment (Georgeson, Payler & Campbell-Barr 2013). It is also noted that an investment in EYEC will enhance later learning and that 'investment in the young will provide greater economic returns than investment in the old' (Heckman, 2000 cited in Georgeson, Payler & Campbell-Barr 2013).

At present, both countries have a high rate of children living in poverty. In England, 2014-2015, 19% (2.5m) children were living in relative poverty (Department for Work and Pensions, 2016). In Estonia, in 2013, 20,2% of children aged 0-17 lived in relative poverty (Statistics Estonia, 2016). Early education for low income and ethnic minority children can help battle educational disadvantages if certain criteria are met (CREC, 2013). Regarding Estonia, it is found that the level of education significantly affects the risk of falling into poverty (Statistics Estonia, 2015). Estonia faces a challenge in terms of demographic change across the country, as quality basic education has not been provided to all children close to their home (OECD, 2016a).

Children's participation in early childhood education and care is a significant promoter of social equality (Woodhead, 2005). The attendance levels in both countries are high and rising. In 2010, 80% of 3-6 year olds attended pre-schools and in 2010 1/5 of under 2 year olds attended pre-school in Estonia (Statistikaamet, 2011). In England, in 2013 the number of children attending has increased as the introduction of funded provision for disadvantaged two year olds seems to have had an impact (DfE, 2013).

### *Transition to compulsory education*

Estonia has some inflexibility in terms of transition between the levels of education. There is separation between pre-primary and primary education (Santiago, 2016). It is said that a smooth

## MULLER: DOCUMENT ANALYSIS: COMPARING AND CONTRASTING THE EARLY YEARS EDUCATION OF ESTONIA AND ENGLAND TO HIGHLIGHT THE SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES AND IMPACT OF RESPECTIVE COUNTRIES CHILDREN

transition from kindergarten to school is emphasised in Estonia, but actuality school entry exam training is taking place at some schools, especially in the capital (Tallinn) which has introduced entry level exams at the age of 7 (Koop, 2013). In England, the transition between the two education stages is smoothed by adopting the early years curriculum in school reception classes (ages 4-5). This helps children become familiar with school and prepares them for more formal learning (Wall, Litjens, Taguma, 2015).

### *Previous studies on curriculum*

In terms of Estonian early years education, it is stated that 'the early childhood strategy is associated with the parents' needs and support, instead of an early preparation of children for starting school like in most other countries' (Ojala, Talts, 2007). But when comparing Estonian pre-school education with Helsinki, Ojala and Talts (2007) came to the conclusion that Estonian teachers emphasised mainly achieving concrete results rather than promoting children's positive self-image and ability to learn. It was found that the Estonian pre-school curriculum 'sets high requirements for children's intellectual, social, and physical development'. As a result, educators feel pressured to push children up to these levels through continuously drilling of the required skills—numbers, letters, writing, etc.

An older study carried out by Morrison (1995) analysed the National Curriculum in England and came to the conclusion that it is heavy on technical and 'hermeneutic' aspects but very light on the 'emancipatory' aspects and this supports the reproduction of social inequality. Since then, there has been lot of changes to the curriculum, but it can still be argued that the curriculum is too technical through the study conducted by Soler and Miller (2003). Their study showed that in the English Foundation Stage Curriculum guidance children are considered as future pupils. This may pressure teachers to focus on numeracy and literacy to prepare for formal education. The link between what is an assessable outcome and what is regarded as quality provision runs the risk of undermining the full range of outcomes that early years care contributes towards (Campbell-Barr, Leeson & Ho, 2013). There is limited availability of studies that discuss the Estonian early years curriculum and studies that compare Estonian and English early years education.

### **Methodology**

While conducting a study involving social science it has to be considered that the question does not have one answer. Instead there are alternative approaches and each approach rests on philosophical assumption (Neuman, 2014).

### *Methods used*

In this study I am going to compare and contrast the early years education in Estonia and England through differences and similarities and analyse the impacts education has on the countries' children. Because of the broad and complex research question, choosing the most suitable methodology was difficult. After collecting data and analysing similar research I decided to use a mixture of document analysis (Bryman, 2012) and thematic analysis (Matthews & Ross, 2010). One of the strengths of using document analysis is that it is stable and can be reviewed repeatedly. It is 'an unobtrusive' method because no observation of human behaviour is involved (Yin, 1994 cited in Mohamad, 2003). Another benefit is the availability and low cost (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). At the same time bias exists across all research designs and is difficult to eliminate as the researcher's personal feelings may get involved in the findings (Smith & Noble, 2014). I had to be very careful not to apply personal bias in the analysis and document interpretation section as I may unintentionally leave some information out. I have close ties with Estonia as I was brought up and educated in Estonia; this may influence my ideas as a researcher. At the same time, this unique relationship with the culture and school system may also serve as a contribution for this study as I

## MULLER: DOCUMENT ANALYSIS: COMPARING AND CONTRASTING THE EARLY YEARS EDUCATION OF ESTONIA AND ENGLAND TO HIGHLIGHT THE SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES AND IMPACT OF RESPECTIVE COUNTRIES CHILDREN

have experienced it first-hand, as I was enrolled in Estonian pre-school education from ages 3-7 and familiar with the culture and environment (Mohamad, 2003).

A number of researchers have used document analysis successfully to research education development in various countries. Bignell (2005) used a document analysis and questioners' when studying the Republic of Tajikistan education policies. Mohamed (2003) studied Malaysian Educational reform transformation initiative and used document analysis to come to successful findings about the themes and characteristics of the government legislative documents. He used interdiscursive analysis, linguistic analysis and intertextual analysis. My study is not going to analyse the documents as detailed. I will use thematic analysis to provide knowledge of the policies in both countries.

A semi-structured interview (Bryman, 2012) with an Estonian first grade teacher was conducted to discover perspectives about the transition into compulsory education in the discussion section. The interview can add insight to the implementation of legislation and get a personal opinion on the subject. On the other hand, it was not possible to organise an interview with a teacher in England and this may provide unbalanced arguments to the discussion.

### *Data selection*

There are preliminary issues around determining the authenticity of the document; that is verifying the author, place and date of its production (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). While selecting data, the reliability and relevance of the documents were considered. The appropriate documents were gathered through government online databases. Both of these documents are published by the government and are the latest issues. Both are available electronically and in print. The data analysed in this instance was an electronic material. The document analysed with regards to Estonian preschools is in its original language, Estonian, as an official English translation was not available. According to Biribili (2000) collecting data in one language and presenting the findings in another involves researchers taking translation-related decisions that have a direct impact on the validity of the research and its report. As I, as a researcher am also in charge of translating the documents, bias may occur to make the data 'fit' with the rest. It has to be considered that when translating the document into English and comparing Estonian legislation to England's, different terms may occur, information may become lost in translation. Some of the aspects of the texts may be oversimplified (Mohamad, 2003). On the other hand, using documents that are in its original language can give more detailed and deeper understanding as it is the original source.

Purposive sample (Bryman, 2012) was used for the data selection for the interview. The idea was to get insight of the outcomes of early years and get information about the transition between education levels on a personal level. An Estonian rural primary school first grade teacher fit the profile. Ethical principles were considered before conducting the interview. No sensitive or personal questions were asked about the interviewee. The participant was provided with an information sheet and they were entitled to withdraw data at any stage. The information received was kept confidentially in the researcher files and any personal information was eliminated.

### *Data analysis*

By studying curriculum models in Estonia and England and comparing them to each other, it is possible to discover values, principles and also aims and goals which create the basis for the curriculum and represent the attitude of the nation towards early years education. This study analyses the reoccurring and highlighted themes of both documents. The emerging data is going to be analysed in order to elicit meaning and gain understanding of the early years fundamentals (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Exploring documents requires on focusing on what is said and how a specific concept is developed, but at the same time focusing on what is not said (Rapley, 2007). In

## MULLER: DOCUMENT ANALYSIS: COMPARING AND CONTRASTING THE EARLY YEARS EDUCATION OF ESTONIA AND ENGLAND TO HIGHLIGHT THE SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES AND IMPACT OF RESPECTIVE COUNTRIES CHILDREN

this analysis the documents are also investigated with regards to differences and recognising the areas that might not be mentioned in either of the documents.

Curriculums were analysed by using thematic analysis (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Fereday & Muir-Cochrane (2006) define it as a form of pattern recognition within the data, where emerging themes become categories for further analysis. It allows exploration in the way that each document presumes early childhood and education. In this qualitative document analysis, the data analysis is more of a reflexive rather than completely accurate representation (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011). The disadvantage of this method is that it may be atheoretical, as the emphasis is put on what is measurable rather than what is theoretically significant (Bryman, 2012).

Themes were picked and connections between them have been made by using 4 principles by Neuman (2014): 1) recognising patterns in documents: in this study I annotated the documents and highlighted the patterns. 2) Thinking in terms of systems and concepts: The themes that emerged from the study were analysed so links and comparisons could be conducted. 3) Having in-depth background knowledge. In depth literature review was conducted before the study. 4) Possessing relevant information. The information in the literature review was relevant to early years practice and recent. It has to be considered that the researcher can also introduce bias in data analysis when analysing data in a way that fits the research hypothesis unintentionally (Simundic, 2013). Boutillier et. al (2011) used document analysis successfully to identify 'the key characteristics of recovery-oriented practice guidance' and used thematic analysis to analyse the data. The study successfully identified key themes and ideas that emerged from the documents. My study has used the same method to come to the research findings.

### *Document analysis findings*

The study focuses on legal government documents that guide the early years education in the country. For Estonia it is 'The national curriculum for pre-school institutions (Koolieelse lasteasutuse riiklik oppekava)' (Vabariigi Valitsus, 2008) and for England it is 'Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage' (DfE, 2014). The aim was to compare and contrast the early years education in Estonia and England to highlight the similarities and differences and the impact of respective countries' children. This document analysis is designed in a structured way. Themes have been conducted purposely through the analysis of the literature review and consideration of the research question. The themes that were picked were:

1. Individuality of the child,
2. Assessments,
3. Teaching and learning styles,
4. Working together and,
5. Emotional development.

The themes that emerged provide understanding of the key aspects that the respective countries' early years focus on. These key themes influence the quality of development of the children in EYEC setting.

### *Individuality of the child*

Both, Estonian and England's early years programmes focus on the individuality of the child and child-centred practice. They also promote children to be in charge of their own activities. Development in different rates and needing different kinds of support is acknowledged. In both countries the practitioners are the ones who are in charge of creating enabling environment for each child. Differently to Estonia, England assigns a key person for each child who is in charge of tracking the development of that specific person.

## MULLER: DOCUMENT ANALYSIS: COMPARING AND CONTRASTING THE EARLY YEARS EDUCATION OF ESTONIA AND ENGLAND TO HIGHLIGHT THE SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES AND IMPACT OF RESPECTIVE COUNTRIES CHILDREN

### *Assessment*

Both countries use simple day-to-day observational assessments in early years to track development. England has more focus on the assessments as they have observational day-to-day assessment as well as 2 mandatory written assessments. In addition, England uses assessments for a smoother transition process into the formal education.

### *Partnership work*

Both curriculums emphasise working in partnership with parents. In England's document, it is emphasised that parenting and early years learning together provide the foundation children require to make the most of their abilities and potential as they grow up (DfE, 2014). In Estonia the participation of practitioners and parents is responsible for conducting the learning and development plan and general daily routine together. England has additional legislation and wider guidance on how to work together with all partners that are around the child with reference to an additional government document 'Working together to safeguard children (2014)'.

### *Patriotism*

Across all areas of learning and development, Estonian documentation has more focus on traditions, patriotism and democratic values. Children are expected to know national holidays, traditions, symbols, Estonian folk songs and poems by heart, locations, famous people and famous athletes. At the same time children are taught about kids in other countries and general human values. In England's curriculum, children are taught more about tolerance and differences between families, communities and traditions.

### *Emotional development*

Emotional development runs through all areas of learning in both early years education systems. England has emphasised it more clearly through a separate learning area for emotional development: 'Personal, social and emotional development' (DfE, 2014). This area is one of the prime areas of development. Estonian curriculum highlights 'Social skills' and 'Self-management' as part of the 4 general skills acquired in early year

### **Discussion**

Early years education is growing in importance with regards to poverty reduction, as more children are attending early years education. Good quality early education can be used as a promoter of social equality (Woodhead, 2005). Although attendance in early years education is high in both countries (Statistikaamet, 2011, DfE, 2013), England and Estonia still have a high rate children living in poverty (Department for Work and Pension, 2016; Statistics Estonia, 2016). Estonia and England both attempt to promote good quality education in all early years settings through legislation. England has introduced 570 hours of state funded provision for all 3-4 year olds to tackle child poverty (O'Kane & Murphy, 2016). The data reveal that the UK remains at the bottom of international league tables for social mobility, as measured by income or earnings (OECD, 2010). In terms of early years education being important, both governments have not provided much funding, as a result the more qualified and motivated staff may not want to work in that field (Santiago, 2016; OECD, 2016a). This can influence the quality of education in the country and the quality of the provision is an important factor of educational outcomes (Peisner-Feinberg, 2007).

From the document analysis, it can be detected that both countries have a similar principle of the individuality of the child and different ways and rates of learning. From that it can be implied that Estonian early years principles have moved away from teacher directed and towards child-centred

MULLER: DOCUMENT ANALYSIS: COMPARING AND CONTRASTING THE EARLY YEARS EDUCATION OF ESTONIA AND ENGLAND TO HIGHLIGHT THE SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES AND IMPACT OF RESPECTIVE COUNTRIES CHILDREN

practice. These are considered as the fundamental aim of early years education. It can be perceived from the analysis that Estonian education has moved towards England's 'Western philosophy' of Education (Tuul, Ugaste & Mikser 2011). This finding is supported by Talts and Vikat (2004) as their study found that the views of Estonian teachers' educational objectives related to pre-school children are surprisingly child-centred, even though the education system has recently changed its learning approach. From the analysis child centred practice can be considered to be beneficial for both countries, as children learn and develop in different rates and ways (Shute & Slee, 2003), although practice of this approach can be considered to be more thought through and guided in England. English documentation provided more in depth guidance as children are provided with a 'key person'. Practitioners benefit from clear guidance about the issues that they need to consider for successful implementation (O'Rourke, 2010). This approach can promote equal opportunities in the setting as the practitioners have the role to help ensure that every child's care meets their individual needs (DfE, 2014). The key person will have some knowledge about their key child before they even start at the setting, from the home visit or the registration information (Brodie, 2013). This approach can be beneficial for the emotional development of the children, especially in the case of some children who would lack a strong emotional connection with an adult in their home environment. It provides an adult figure with which the child can form a positive and productive learning relationship (Lemos, 2012). In the UK 21.5% children live in a household with only 1 parent (OECD, 2016b) and 21.8% of households in Estonia are single parent households (OECD, 2007). These children may benefit from having another reliable and supportive adult that they can develop relationship with.

From the document analysis it can be concluded that even though emotional and mental development is mentioned in both countries, England has more specific focus on it, as it has a specific learning area ('Personal, Social and Emotional development') dedicated towards emotional development. It is greatly focused on building up an emotionally healthy and independent child. Promoting mental health and wellbeing of parents and children in pre-school can prevent health and social problems later in life (Department of health and Public Health England, No Date). The focus on mental and emotional help in England has had an effect on the happiness level of their students. England's students are above average (32<sup>nd</sup>) and Estonian students are one of the least happy (62<sup>nd</sup>) among the OECD countries (OECD, 2012). Similarly, to this document analysis, Ojala and Talts (2007) found that the concrete results of the children were emphasised more than intellectual, social and physical development in Estonia. It can be concluded from the document analysis and the literature that Estonian early years programme should focus more on the emotional and mental development for of the children.

The document analysis states that the learning is a mixture of a mix of adult-led and child-initiated activity. From that it can be verified that both countries emphasise the importance of age-appropriate pedagogy and content (Wall, Litjens, Taguma, 2015). The teacher's role is to be the guide to children's development and recognise the amount of support children may need. Early years guidance in both countries is flexible, as the practitioners are given the authority to organise the learning on the basis of the curriculum and according to children's needs. Flexibility is important, as educators should work on the basis of experiences that the students bring to the setting, rather than impose a curriculum document that might reproduce social inequality (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). In addition, when an increasing number of children from different backgrounds attend (OECD/EU, 2015) and governments want to integrate special educational needs children into mainstream education (HC/ESC, 2006, EASNIE, 2016) flexibility in teaching becomes very important. At the same time both countries' guidance has learning goals that are expected to be reached by the end of early years education by all children. This may contrast the child-centred, individual development as teachers try to reach these goals that are the same for all children, as in Estonia

MULLER: DOCUMENT ANALYSIS: COMPARING AND CONTRASTING THE EARLY YEARS EDUCATION OF ESTONIA AND ENGLAND TO HIGHLIGHT THE SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES AND IMPACT OF RESPECTIVE COUNTRIES CHILDREN

where there may be entry-tests for some schools (Koop, 2013). Some pre-schools might feel the need to train children for these tests to prove to the parents, that they are good quality. There are noticeable differences in mathematics learning goals. In England children are expected to count reliably 1-20 and add and subtract single digit numbers by the age of 5, but in Estonia children are only required to know how to count to 12 and add and subtract numbers up to 5 at the age of 6-7. Although children learn numbers earlier in England by the age of 15 children in Estonia are on higher level of mathematics (PISA, 2015). This could show that children are considered as future pupils (Soler and Miller, 2003) This could put England's mathematics high learning goal under question, as children could be using that time to develop more general and practical skills and still be successful in mathematics in later life.

Both countries have 7 learning areas that emphasise learning outcomes that need to be achieved by the end of the programme. In England at the age of 4 and in Estonia at the age of 7. All areas of learning and development link to each other. Both countries areas are similar with few emerging differences. One of the differences is the focus on countries nationality. Throughout the Estonian document the overall theme of nationality and patriotism emerged. In all learning areas there was specific knowledge children had to acquire. For example, Estonian; culture, symbols, traditions, poems, folk songs and famous athletes. This might be influenced by the recent change of power in Estonia and government emphasising nationalism and culture (Tuul, Ugaste & Mikser, 2011). Estonia is a small country trying to preserve its nationality, language, culture and development through education (Vabariigi Valitsus, 2011). This can provide children the sense of their background and nationality. England's document has more of an emotional development side included.

The document analysis results show that the children's assessment is taking place continuously in both countries through daily observations by teachers. In addition, Estonian teachers need to hold meetings with the parents once a year. The aim of the meetings is to give feedback about the development of the child and give the parents an opportunity to provide their development expectations for their child (Vabariigi Valitsus, 2008). England has further assessments as they have both day-to-day and two mandatory assessments. Children are being assessed first through daily activities between the ages of 2 to 3 where teachers provide short written summaries to parents regarding their child's development. A second assessment is carried out when children are around the age of 5. An EYFS profile is conducted to ensure successful transition to formal education. Through the second mandatory assessment the transition between education levels has been made smoother. Professionals share development information with each child's year 1 teacher. The English education system has also provided a reception year, which is considered as the first year of primary education for children aged 4-5 to also smooth the transition into formal education (O'Kane & Murphy, 2016). The Estonian curriculum does not give much guidance towards transition between pre-school and primary school. From the interview with the first grade teacher it was implied that the school and pre-school do not cooperate and teachers only receive a 'very general' profile about the development of the child that often is not accurate or not detailed enough to construct same ability groups. In contrast, from the study conducted by Sofre et.al (2002), 77% of England's reception class teachers always discussed each child's progress with their future Year 1 teacher before the children moved on.

While conducting this literature review, no legal document promoting inter-agency work was found with regards to Estonian early years. This could possibly affect the quality of safeguarding children in Estonia. England has focused on interagency work through government guidance such as 'Working together to safeguard children' (HM Government, 2015). In document analysis it was implied that both countries value cooperative work between the pre-school and parents. From the study it can be noted that Estonian pre-schools emphasise working with parents and only mentioned inter-

## MULLER: DOCUMENT ANALYSIS: COMPARING AND CONTRASTING THE EARLY YEARS EDUCATION OF ESTONIA AND ENGLAND TO HIGHLIGHT THE SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES AND IMPACT OF RESPECTIVE COUNTRIES CHILDREN

agency work with regards to SEN children. In Estonia, the selection of parents (Board) is included in the settings decision making process with regards to activity planning for the setting. Although it is beneficial that the parents are involved in the process, as they recognise their children's abilities and needs the best, it is not infrequent that educational decision-making is based on the expression of personal opinions rather than on the research-based knowledge of experts (Krull & Trasberg, 2006).

### *Evaluation of the study*

The aim of this study was to compare and contrast the early years education of Estonia and England, to highlight the similarities and differences and discover the impact it has on the respective countries' children. The document analysis and literature review constructed knowledge about the legislation and previous studies. A strength of the study is that the document analysis is stable and it can be reviewed repeatedly (Yin, 1994 in Mohamad, 2003).

The limitations of this study are: (a) This study does not provide any evidence about the implementation of these particular government legislations. (b) Only one interview was conducted with an Estonian first grade teacher to get their professional opinion about the pupil's transition to compulsory education and no interviews were conducted with an English teacher. (c) The researcher was responsible for translating Estonian documents. As a result, bias in the data analysis cannot be excluded, as the researcher may unintentionally use bias to fit research purposes (Simundic, 2013). (d) Only one person was responsible for conducting the thematic analysis and theme selection process. Some themes could have gone unnoticed or unintentional bias might have been used.

### *Future study recommendations*

Suggestion 1: In future studies, using document analysis could be combined with a questioner or an interview with pre-school teachers in Estonia and England to make connections between the policy and practice. This could provide information about the shortcomings and strengths of the policy with regards to implementation. Interviews that involve stories of personal experience could offer a different perspective (Mears, 2009).

Suggestion 2: Multiple legislative documents could be used to evaluate other influences or contradictions of policies (Macey, Thorius & Skelton, 2012). For example, about child protection or professional requirements in early years.

Suggestion 3: In future studies, multiple researchers could conduct the study to ensure that no themes go missing and that the translation is not biased. Ideally the translator could be an external person not connected to the study.

### **Conclusion**

The overall aim of this research was to advance an understanding of EYEC systems aims and values of England and Estonia particularly in relation to the effect it has on the respective countries' children. The specific research objectives were, within the context of EYEC, to:

1. Identify the themes driving the EYEC in the settings and the barriers to successful delivery of EYEC.
2. Evaluate critically the connection between the statements in the documents and literature review.
3. Formulate recommendations on EYEC practice.

The findings of the research conducted indicated that:

MULLER: DOCUMENT ANALYSIS: COMPARING AND CONTRASTING THE EARLY YEARS EDUCATION OF ESTONIA AND ENGLAND TO HIGHLIGHT THE SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES AND IMPACT OF RESPECTIVE COUNTRIES CHILDREN

- a. Compared to Estonia, the England EYEC programme is more focused on individuality and healthy mental development. As a result, the happiness level (OECD, 2012) in England is much higher than in Estonia and this can prevent mental illness among young people.
- b. England focuses on inter-agency work and their transition to primary education is smoother as a result of EYEC professionals and primary teacher's cooperation. In England year 1 teachers are more likely to meet with the EYEC practitioners than in Estonia.
- c. England's EYEC professionals focus more on mandatory assessments than their Estonian counterparts. At the same time they both practise day-to-day observation.
- d. Estonian EYEC focuses on the preservation of nationality.
- e. Both countries' EYEC settings promote high quality education, but low funding is not attracting highly qualified staff.
- f. England and Estonia promote child-centredness and developmentally appropriate practice through the use of a 'Key person'.
- g. England and Estonia have flexible learning with a mixture of adult-led and child-instated activities. This can promote equality in the setting.

*Influence on my future practice*

This study has influenced my practice by making me more critical with regards to government legislation and made me focus more on what the individual child needs currently. This study has informed me of the importance of the promotion of mental health from a young age. I will make sure that I will not focus only on the empirical, measurable skills in my practice, but combine the learning with social, emotional and personal development. This study has also made me think about the importance of inter-agency working with regards to SEN children as they would need multiple professionals around them to work together to help them integrate into mainstream education.

*Recommendations*

It is recommended, that more focus on mental and social development could improve the happiness level in Estonia. Estonian EYEC could adopt a similar learning area that England has ('Personal, Social and Emotional development', (DfE, 2014). Estonia could also improve their policies with regards to inter-agency working to improve the transition between education levels. The transition could also be improved by introducing more accurate assessment system at the end of EYEC. The notion of having a 'key person' could be beneficial with regards to building strong relationships between children and practitioners.

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MULLER: DOCUMENT ANALYSIS: COMPARING AND CONTRASTING THE EARLY YEARS EDUCATION OF ESTONIA AND ENGLAND TO HIGHLIGHT THE SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES AND IMPACT OF RESPECTIVE COUNTRIES CHILDREN

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MULLER: DOCUMENT ANALYSIS: COMPARING AND CONTRASTING THE EARLY YEARS EDUCATION OF ESTONIA AND ENGLAND TO HIGHLIGHT THE SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES AND IMPACT OF RESPECTIVE COUNTRIES CHILDREN

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MULLER: DOCUMENT ANALYSIS: COMPARING AND CONTRASTING THE EARLY YEARS EDUCATION OF ESTONIA AND ENGLAND TO HIGHLIGHT THE SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES AND IMPACT OF RESPECTIVE COUNTRIES CHILDREN

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MULLER: DOCUMENT ANALYSIS: COMPARING AND CONTRASTING THE EARLY YEARS EDUCATION OF ESTONIA AND ENGLAND TO HIGHLIGHT THE SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES AND IMPACT OF RESPECTIVE COUNTRIES CHILDREN

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