



## Research paper

Profiles of teaching practices and reading skills at the first and third grade in Finland and Estonia<sup>☆</sup>Xin Tang<sup>a,\*</sup>, Eve Kikas<sup>b</sup>, Eija Pakarinen<sup>c</sup>, Marja-Kristiina Lerkkanen<sup>c</sup>, Joona Muotka<sup>a</sup>, Jari-Erik Nurmi<sup>a</sup><sup>a</sup> Department of Psychology, University of Jyväskylä, P.O. Box 35, FI-40014, Finland<sup>b</sup> School of Natural Sciences and Health, Tallinn University, Narva mnt 25, 10120, Tallinn, Estonia<sup>c</sup> Department of Teacher Education, University of Jyväskylä, P.O. Box 35, FI-40014, Finland

## H I G H L I G H T S

- Using person-oriented approach to identify different profiles of teaching practices.
- Child-centred style was most beneficial while child-dominated style was least beneficial for reading skills.
- Mixture of child-centred and teacher-directed style was beneficial in grade 3.
- Extreme-child-centred style did not guarantee reading fluency in grade 3.
- Less beneficial styles showed more in Estonian teachers than in Finnish teachers.

## A R T I C L E I N F O

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## A B S T R A C T

The Early Childhood Classroom Observation Measure was used to observe 91 first-grade and 70 third-grade teachers in Estonia and Finland. Using a person-oriented approach, four profiles of teaching practices were identified in grade 1: the child-centred style, teacher-directed style, child-dominated style and a mixture of the child-centred and teacher-directed styles. An additional profile, the extreme-child-centred style, was found in grade 3. Children taught by child-centred teachers showed the highest reading skills, whereas children taught by child-dominated teachers showed the lowest skills. More Estonian than Finnish teachers applied the child-dominated style in grade 1 and the extreme-child-centred style in grade 3.

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There is substantial evidence to show that teaching practices play an important role in early learners' academic performance (e.g., Early et al., 2007; Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Lerkkanen et al., 2016). Teachers' practices are typically based on their own beliefs

and philosophy of teaching, as well as their education and experience (Stipek, Daniels, Galluzzo, & Milburn, 1992; Stipek, Givvin, Salmon, & MacGyvers, 2001). Although the associations between teaching practices and child outcomes have been studied in authentic classroom settings, only a few studies have applied a person-oriented approach to identify subgroups of teachers who show different teaching practices. By going beyond a variable-oriented approach and by using person-oriented methods, the present study aimed at identifying subgroups of teachers in Finnish and Estonian primary school classrooms on the basis of their teaching practices as measured by the Early Childhood Classroom Observation Measure (ECCOM; Stipek & Byler, 2005). The study further examined the extent to which these subgroups differed in terms of children's reading skills in the first and third grades.

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## 1. Teaching practices and reading skills

Teachers vary in the practices they use when interacting with pupils and instructing them in the classroom (e.g., Connor, Son, Hindman, & Morrison, 2005). The previous literature has typically focussed on child-centred and teacher-directed practices when analysing the role of instructional approaches in children's skill development (Lerkkanen et al., 2016; Pressley et al., 2003). Recently, child-dominated practices also have been under investigation (Kikas, Peets, & Hodges, 2014; Kikas, Silinskas, Jõgi, & Soodla, 2016). *Child-centred* practices, which are based on the constructivist theories of learning and teaching (Piaget, 1985; Vygotsky, 1978; for an overview, see Bransford, Brown, & Rodney, 2000), are based on the assumption that children are active learners who construct knowledge based on their prior understanding and experiences. Children's initiatives and interests are emphasised and children are given an appropriate level of autonomy and an active role in decision making in the classroom. Teachers also actively use guidance and scaffolding to assist children in developing their own knowledge and understanding and provide possibilities for children to explore and manipulate objects (Stipek & Byler, 2004). In turn, *teacher-directed* (i.e., didactic) practices, with an emphasis on concrete and rote learning (Stipek & Byler, 2004), stress that teacher make most of the decisions, control the instructional activities, and emphasise the importance of facts and training basic skills. In child-centred practice and in teacher-directed practices the teachers' role is active in guiding and instructing children. By contrast, in *child-dominated* practices, teachers provide children with little direction, control or feedback (Kikas et al., 2014; 2016; Stipek & Byler, 2005). The classroom rules are often unclear and there are no systematically designed learning tasks present. Teachers, however, may interrupt and control activities when the children's behaviour is out of control (Stipek & Byler, 2005). In the present study, we examined teaching practices in light of the above-mentioned three definitions, using an observational instrument developed by Stipek and Byler (2004; 2005), the Early Childhood Classroom Observation Measure (ECCOM see Table 1).

Because teachers who use different teaching practices have been shown to vary in their instructional emphases (Stipek & Byler, 2004), it can be assumed that each teaching practice plays a different role in different reading skills, that is, in basic skills, such as decoding, and in more advanced reading skills, such as comprehension. Previous studies have shown that the beneficial effects of different teaching practices on academic outcomes vary depending on the skill domain, skill level, and on the age of the children. For example, child-centred practices, in general, have a positive impact on kindergarteners' reading performance (Marcon, 1999), first graders' reading fluency (Lerkkanen et al., 2016; Perry, Donohue, & Weinstein, 2007), and the development of reading comprehension (Block, Parris, Reed, Whiteley, & Cleveland, 2009). Teacher-directed practices, in turn, have been found to be beneficial for kindergarteners' and first graders' basic reading skills, such as letter knowledge and word recognition skills (Stipek, Feiler, Daniels, & Milburn, 1995; Stipek et al., 1998). However, little research has been conducted on the effect of teacher-directed practices on more advanced reading skills, such as reading comprehension. A recent study by Kikas et al. (2014) showed that the effect of child-dominated practices was moderated by children's skill level in the classroom. In classrooms with high initial math skills, child-dominated practices were positively associated with spelling skills and task-persistent learning behaviour, while in classrooms with low initial math skills the impact was negative. Given the importance of reading development at this age (e.g., Adams, 1990; Landerl & Wimmer, 2008), the present study focusses on the development of reading skills during the early school years.

## 2. Teaching styles

In authentic classrooms, however, teachers' use of teaching practices is more complex. Instead of employing predominantly one practice, they may use a combination of different practices (Pressley et al., 2003; Rasku-Puttonen et al., 2011). The predominant use of a specific teaching practice or combinations of different teaching practices can be described as teaching styles (Kikas et al., 2016). Teaching styles refer to patterns or profiles of teaching practices. However, most of the previous research has been variable-oriented and has examined teaching practices in terms of specific dimensions. Studies aimed at identifying different teaching styles and their combinations are rare. As far as we know, only two previous studies have sought to identify subgroups of teachers with different profiles of teaching practices as measured by the ECCOM (Kikas et al., 2016; Rasku-Puttonen et al., 2011). In both studies, one in kindergarten and another in first grade, four teaching styles were identified: the *child-centred style*, *teacher-directed style*, *child-dominated style* and a *mixture of the child-centred and teacher-directed style* (*mixture teaching style*). Both studies also found that most teachers showed a child-centred style. The second largest group was those with mixture teaching style. Furthermore, Rasku-Puttonen et al. (2011) found that more kindergarten teachers used the *teacher-directed style* and *mixture teaching style* in Finland than in Estonia, and that more kindergarten teachers used the *child-centred style* and *child-dominated style* in Estonia than in Finland. So far, teaching styles have not been examined in later primary school grades using the ECCOM procedure.

## 3. Educational system and reading acquisition in Finland and Estonia

The Finnish and Estonian school systems are rather similar. In both countries, compulsory formal education consists of nine years of comprehensive school, beginning in the year the child turns seven and continuing with the same class teacher for the main subjects. In addition, the academic demands in the early years of primary school are similar in both national core curricula (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014; Vabariigi Valitsus, 2011/2014). For example, in both countries, initial reading instruction in these transparent languages is based on phonics. Both countries emphasise practice in reading fluency and comprehension in grade 1 and their curricula include 6–7 hours of literacy lessons per week during the first two school years.

Teacher training is also similar in both countries. Constructivist learning theories and related teaching methods are introduced, and the individualisation of instruction is valued. However, Estonia and Finland have experienced very different histories, which are reflected in their educational systems. Until 1991, when Estonia was part of the Soviet Union, authoritarian management practices and teacher-directed teaching methods were commonly applied in schools. Even in primary schools, teacher-directed methods (e.g., whole-class teaching, teacher-talk and assessing factual knowledge) were the predominant modes of instruction (Ruus et al., 2008). Although reforms in schools and teacher education institutions have taken place over the last two decades, changes in values, beliefs and practices take time. Empirical studies have shown that Estonian teachers hold a variety of child-rearing values (Tulviste & Kikas, 2010) and that teachers' preference for teacher-directed teaching methods depends on their age and experience: teacher-directed approaches are favoured more by older and more experienced teachers than by younger teachers (Palu & Kikas, 2007). In Finland, child-centred practices, adaptation of instruction according to students' skills and individualised support for learning are highly valued and also evident in primary school

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