

CHAPTER 16

Integrative Leadership Framework for Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care

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Abstract

Several changes have taken place both in the content and structure of early childhood education and care (ECEC) throughout the world, which has led to a need for developing leadership and quality evaluation strategies in early educational settings. Recent changes call for understanding leadership as part of comprehensive ECEC governance. The purpose of this conceptual chapter is to describe how governance, leadership, and operational culture in the ECEC context are integrated and how they provide the foundation for examining quality in ECEC. The aim of the chapter is to introduce a comprehensive approach to ECEC leadership, called an integrative leadership framework, devel-

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oped in the Finnish ECEC context. The integrative leadership framework introduces the dimensions affecting operational culture in ECEC leadership and curriculum implementation when developing quality of ECEC services and their pedagogical practices. Legislation and administrative premises provide the frame for the leadership and management functions, as well as for quality management. The integrative leadership framework combines the dimensions connected to leadership to provide high-quality ECEC services.

Keywords: early childhood education and care, leadership, management, quality evaluation

Introduction

The national steering system of Finnish early childhood education and care (ECEC) has undergone major paradigmatic changes in recent years: ideological, legal, conceptual, pedagogical, and administrative (Alila & Eskelinen, 2021). Following the administrative change in 2013, the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018) was reformed in 2018 and again in 2022. In line with the reform, the new National Core Curriculum on Early Childhood Education and Care (2018; renewed in 2022) began to steer the development of ECEC in a more goal-oriented and mandatory manner than previously. In addition to the changes in the governance of ECEC, the amount of ECEC research conducted by Finnish scholars has significantly increased over the past two decades. According to Alasuutari and Raittila (2017), this occurred after pedagogically oriented ECEC teacher education was transferred to the universities in 1995.

The changes in Finnish ECEC reflect international trends, as ECEC has become a subject of political and research interest in many countries and institutions. It has been argued that high-quality ECEC enhances children's cognitive development and is linked to their later academic success (Sylva et al., 2010; Hall et al., 2013). Quality ECEC has also been shown to benefit the development of social skills and self-regulation skills (Sammons et al., 2014). Consequently, ECEC has been seen as an efficient investment in the future (Heckman, 2011), and it can be seen as effective, for example, in preventing social exclusion of children (Sipilä & Österbacka, 2013; Sipilä, 2020).

One of the changes brought about by the reform of the Finnish ECEC steering system concerns evaluation. In the Finnish context,

municipal ECEC organisers and private service providers are required to plan and carry out self-evaluations as part of their more extensive system of quality management (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018; Vlasov et al., 2018).

The reforms, as well as the overall development of ECEC, aim to strengthen the pedagogy of ECEC and increase the quality of services. The paradigmatic changes have also had an impact on ECEC leadership (Granrusten et al., 2018; Strehmel et al., 2019). Currently, the importance of ECEC leadership is acknowledged, and it is widely understood that leadership is a significant driver for developing the quality of ECEC services and implementing changes (OECD, 2020). Even though the significance of leadership has been acknowledged in Finnish ECEC, until recently it has not been mentioned in the official steering documents. For example, the previous National Core Curriculum (2003) did not mention leadership. As Douglass (2017) has stated, leadership in the ECEC sector has long been invisible and undervalued.

The theoretical foundation for examining leadership in this chapter is based on contextually defined leadership (Hujala, 2013), where leadership is perceived to be embedded within the context of ECEC. Contextual leadership has its roots in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory, where the macro level of the system, societal values, and institutional structures define leadership on the micro level. Intangible and tangible capital empowers the organisation and its management functions. In ECEC, contextually defined leadership considers the mission, core tasks, vision, and management of ECEC processes as integrated (Hujala, 2013). The purpose of this chapter is to analyse how governance, leadership, and operational culture in the ECEC context are intertwined and how these different aspects build the foundation for examining ECEC quality in each society. Legislation and administrative premises are seen to provide the framework for leadership and management functions, and thus for quality management. This conceptual chapter introduces a comprehensive approach to ECEC leadership, called an *integrative leadership framework*, developed in the Finnish ECEC context. The integrative leadership framework is seen to combine different dimensions connected to leadership to provide high-quality ECEC services.

Context of Finnish ECEC Leadership

The reforms in Finnish ECEC date back to 2013, when the administration of ECEC was transferred from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to the Ministry of Education and Culture. With this administrative shift, the societal focus of ECEC changed to one that emphasised the right of children to early education and learning. Previously, the roots of ECEC had been deeply grounded in social welfare and labour force policy (Alila & Kinos, 2014). In the legislation (Act on ECEC 540/2018), ECEC refers to a systematic and goal-oriented whole consisting of education, instruction, and care, with particular emphasis on pedagogy. Thus, ECEC is now officially acknowledged and considered as the first phase of formal education within the system. The primary focus of planning, delivery, evaluation, and development of ECEC should be in the child's best interest. Additionally, the law stresses that every child has the equal right to receive support for their holistic development and growth, learning, and well-being regardless of their background (Act on ECEC 540/2018; the renewal of the Act 1183/2021; Alila et al., 2022).

Since the pedagogically demanding law came into force, and implementation of the curriculum became mandatory, the Finnish government has understood the significance of leadership as a foundation for quality improvement. The government demonstrated strong support to ECEC by allocating financial resources for the development of leadership and quality improvement. This is crucial, as the law states that new ECEC leaders, starting from 2030 onwards, are required to have a master's degree in education, to include appropriate ECEC teacher competence and leadership experience.

It is widely understood that having qualified and competent ECEC staff is crucial and plays a significant part in providing high-quality ECEC (OECD, 2020). In the new legislation, the nomenclature for ECEC staff has been revised to emphasise both the core content and the task of ECEC. The multi-professional team of adults working in a child group should consist of a tertiary trained ECEC teacher, a social pedagogue trained in a university for applied sciences, and an ECEC caretaker with a diploma at upper-secondary level from a vocational college. Currently, ECEC teachers as pedagogical experts have strong research-based training. This presents a challenge to strengthen the roles and responsibilities of ECEC leadership so that they become

instrumental in fulfilling teachers' expectations and supporting them in their pedagogical work.

Although ECEC legislation emphasises leadership and appropriately points the way for its implementation, the wholeness of leadership is quite confusing for many ECEC professionals, according to Naskali (2020). Sihvonen (2020) affirms that along with the reforms of the municipal organisation, the job description of ECEC centre leaders has expanded, with an increase in financial and administrative work. ECEC centre leaders both in Finland and elsewhere have experienced a conflict between pedagogical leadership and the day-to-day management of ECEC. Leaders often feel that their working time is spent mainly on maintaining structures rather than on developing pedagogy (Hujala & Eskelinen, 2013; Palethorpe, 2019; OECD, 2020; Siippainen et al., 2021). This is quite contradictory, as the staff expect leadership for pedagogy and everyday support in their work (Fonsén, 2014; Palethorpe, 2019). There has been a feeling that managerial leadership has overtaken visionary and development-oriented objectives (Siippainen et al., 2021). Instead, the goal of leadership development should be to direct ECEC leadership so that it becomes strategic and proactive (Hujala & Eskelinen, 2013). The OCED (2020) states that the complexity of leaders' work and expectations for leaders have been growing exponentially. The changes in ECEC policy and changes in leaders' workload require clarification of leadership and the leadership framework. More clarification is needed on how the guiding documents direct different areas of leadership and management and how they, in turn, guide the quality management and development of ECEC.

Leadership as a Pathway to Quality in ECEC

One significant issue challenging the development and leadership of ECEC concerns the current changes in the definition of ECEC quality as well as the evaluation of quality. In Finland, the evaluation of the ECEC sector is relatively new and has been a statutory task since the new Act on ECEC was launched in 2015. International trends and a focus on evaluation in ECEC, including research-based evidence of the impacts of high-quality early education (Sylva et al. 2010; Goff, Evangelou, & Sylva 2012; Heckman, 2013; Sammons et al., 2014), have

created a need to develop the evaluation of ECEC services, and thus leadership practices.

Creating an efficient and reliable national evaluation system based on the principles of trust and enhancement-led evaluation is not an easy task. In previous years, Finland has lacked a nationally shared perspective on quality factors in ECEC as well as a suitable quality evaluation system (Alila, 2013; OECD, 2016). Additionally, the absence of efficient training of ECEC staff in evaluation and monitoring has been a challenge. To address the national need, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) is currently in the process of creating a national ECEC quality evaluation system and evidence-based instruments to support quality management at the local level (Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, 2021).

According to today's ECEC paradigm, parents' role in evaluating quality and—through that—being partners in leadership, has been seen to be increasingly crucial in ECEC practice. The core issue in leadership is to engage the staff to understand, maintain, and improve ECEC quality. Fonsén (2014) emphasises shared values as a means through which a leader and staff can work together to achieve the goals set for ECEC. To develop high-quality professionalism (Peterson et al., 2014) and to strengthen the distributed leadership in ECEC (Heikka, 2014), the leaders' challenge is to involve teachers in evaluating and developing ECEC practices. This will lead to genuinely distributed pedagogical leadership, which is the pivotal characteristic of leading ECEC expert organisations.

The curriculum—which emphasises teachers' self-reflection on the pedagogical processes, and therefore demands leadership for pedagogy—implicitly contains the idea of teacher leadership (Heikka, Halttunen, & Waniganayake, 2016). Teachers in multi-professional teams lead the pedagogical work and are thus responsible for the quality of everyday work in ECEC child groups. According to Heikka, Halttunen, and Waniganayake (2016), the implementation of teacher leadership in ECEC centres is dependent on the conditions and structures created for teacher leadership as well as the teachers' attitudes in leading and improving pedagogical practice.

Integrative Framework for Leadership to Achieve ECEQ Quality

As described in the previous sections, the reformed ECEC policy has emerged as a result of large and paradigmatic changes, and a more obligatory and demanding framework for conducting ECEC has been developed. This creates a need to examine ECEC leadership from a new perspective. The changes have led to a demand for an emphasis on the meaning of leadership, for the development of know-how and practices in leadership, and finally for the formation of *a new kind of leadership culture*. One could argue that the changes—and the impact of those changes—have been a driving force for the ECEC sector and its leadership renewal.

To enhance understanding of the new kind of leadership culture, this chapter introduces an integrative framework for leadership. In this chapter we define the integrative framework for leadership as a conceptual model, which clarifies the connections between ECEC policy, research on ECEC and leadership, and leadership and management functions, as well as quality evaluation in ECEC. It is understood that

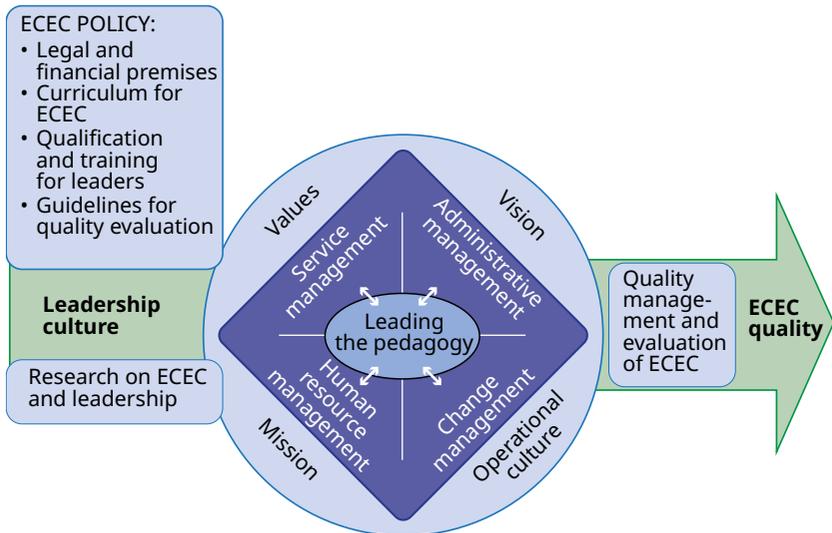


Figure 16.1: Integrative framework for leadership and management functions to achieve quality in ECEC.

the model is not just linear, and that the connections between the different areas are integrated. The integrative leadership model described in [Figure 16.1](#) explains how reforms in ECEC policy and new research on ECEC and leadership lead to new demands for leadership and management functions. ECEC pedagogy has strengthened as a result of the revised law and curriculum. The definition of quality, as well as procedures of evaluation, have been specified (Vlasov et al., 2018). As a result, the new governance offers a unified framework with which to examine ECEC leadership. In the model, the context for leadership is based on the mission and operational culture of ECEC. The future way for leadership is defined in vision and developed further according to Finnish ECEC values. Quality management in ECEC is a final dimension in the integrative framework model. The new leadership culture shows the way for quality in ECEC. Next, we will explain the integrative model of leadership in more detail.

The Legal, Financial, and Pedagogical Premises of ECEC Policy

In the model, the legal, financial, and curriculum-based premises of ECEC policy are seen to build a structural framework for the leadership culture and the implementation of ECEC (Alila & Eskelinen, 2021). These structural factors of quality steer how ECEC services should be organised and therefore direct the way in which leadership should be conducted (Vlasov et al., 2018). Structural factors remain rather stable, as they are defined in laws, curriculum, resources targeted to ECEC, and documents regulating the operational culture of ECEC. Quality policy and guidelines for evaluating the quality provide direction for high-quality ECEC.

In Finland, qualifications for ECEC leaders and personnel are defined in legislation (Act on ECEC 540/2018). Qualification requirements have been changed along with the reform of legislation, as the societal demand to develop ECEC and to enhance children's well-being has increased. The new requirements aim to strengthen the skills and competence of ECEC professionals and thus raise the level of pedagogy (Alila & Eskelinen, 2021). Qualification requirements, as well as ECEC research, form the basis for both basic and in-service training of professionals. Raising the level of basic leadership training is perceived

to be important nowadays, as is investing in the continuous learning of the leaders (OECD, 2020; Siippainen et al., 2021).

Changes in ECEC policy affect the context of leadership work and how leadership may be implemented. In Finland, for example, ECEC leaders had to take over the reformed administration of ECEC, the revised legislation, and a curriculum emphasising pedagogy in a rather short time. In addition, the strengthened perspective on ECEC quality and its evaluation and an increased amount of research have led to pressure on leadership. It can be said that the changes in ECEC policy have a significant impact on the value base, vision, and mission in the implementation of ECEC, as well as on the operational culture. This is also reflected in the implementation of various aspects of leadership and the development of quality.

Research on ECEC and Leadership

Research on ECEC and leadership has increased during the last few decades (Douglass, 2019). Research theorising on ECEC, curriculum, and evaluation policy, as well as research on leadership, provides a foundation for implementing, evaluating, and developing leadership and management practices. Research has produced theoretical knowledge to strengthen teachers' pedagogical thinking. It gives a strong basis for renewing the practice of ECEC (Alasuutari & Raittila, 2107). In Finland, recent PhD studies have focused more on ECEC leadership. Finnish leadership studies, especially PhD studies and their results, have been recognised by the OECD and EU (OECD, 2020), whose reports have acknowledged Finnish leadership research as valuable in developing international leadership governance and practice.

The first Finnish PhD thesis on ECEC leadership was conducted by Nivala (1999). He studied the phenomenon of Finnish leadership in ECEC and found that there was a struggle between leaders' pedagogy-oriented and care-oriented interests in leadership. Akselin (2013) suggested that a leader's crucial skills are to be an example, an inspirer, and a presenter of possibilities. Theses by Halttunen (2009) and Soukainen (2015) perceived leadership as a broad arena that requires people involved in ECEC to be jointly responsible for improving the quality of ECEC core tasks. Heikka (2014) studied different ECEC stakeholder groups who all agreed that the main leadership responsibility in ECEC was that of leading pedagogy, although there was insufficient

sharing of leadership responsibilities among stakeholder groups. Fonsén's (2014) thesis focused on pedagogical leadership, and she defined it as advocating for the appreciation of ECEC, enhancing the quality of the services, and promoting the best interest of the child. In her thesis concerning change management, Sihvonen (2020) found that to implement change, the prevailing operational culture needs to be open, to ensure that all the members of the organisation understand the language used in change management. Rytkönen (2019) examined servant leadership in ECEC. Findings indicate that ECEC leaders found a humane perspective on leadership and daily management practices to be the most important aspect of their leadership. Tiihonen (2019) found that ECEC leadership takes place in different forms of interaction. The relationships allow for the sharing of leadership skills and knowledge. She described the following leadership relationships: leadership as an interactive relationship, leadership in confidence, leadership in partnership, and leadership as an authority relationship. In reality, relationships are interrelated and implemented holistically (Tiihonen, 2019).

Leadership research gives tools and understanding to evaluate and develop leadership practices in ECEC settings. Additionally, research helps in developing ECEC governance and new training programmes for leadership. The Finnish National Agency for Education (FNAE) has chosen leadership as one of the main themes for in-service training in ECEC. A new leadership training programme for basic and in-service training as part of the Finnish government's Right to Learn development programme will be launched in January 2023 (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020). The programme will also provide tools to evaluate leadership, create networks for researchers and leaders, and offer a variety of support material for leaders—for example, how to best implement the curricula. Additionally, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre is carrying out a national evaluation of the current state of Finnish ECEC leadership (Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, 2021). The purpose of the evaluation is to examine the state of ECEC leadership and local management systems and their connection to the realisation of equality and the best interests of the child in municipal and private ECEC. The evaluation aims to benefit the management system on both national and local levels by providing information on the current state of the leadership system and its strengths and areas for development (Siippainen et al., 2021).

Leadership and Management Functions

The ECEC setting, defined in its mission and vision, based on Finnish values, and operationalised in the operational culture of ECEC, provides a context for ECEC leadership and management functions. ECEC policy regulates the organisation of ECEC, whereas research builds the vision for the ECEC mission, which is the core of the integrative leadership model. ECEC policy is based on Finnish values, administrative regulations, professionals' qualifications, and training. In addition, research creates an operational culture based on the mission and vision of ECEC. Operational culture has its foundation in the context and cultural history of the organisation. Therefore, it can be said that operational culture implicitly defines the curriculum implementation and leadership. The leader is in the central role of creating a professional and versatile operational culture (National Core Curriculum on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2022).

The new National Core Curriculum on ECEC (2022) aims to strengthen pedagogy. Thus, the core issue in leadership is that all management functions should support *leadership for pedagogy*. The curriculum defines leadership for pedagogy as leading, evaluating, and developing the entity of ECEC as a goal-oriented and systematic leadership activity. While leadership significantly affects the operational culture of ECEC, its development, and quality (Granrusten et al., 2018), the preconditions for developing the operational culture include leadership for pedagogy. It includes all actions in creating good working conditions for personnel, the utilisation and development of professional competence and training, and pedagogical activities. ECEC leadership aims to promote the well-being and learning of every child (National Core Curriculum on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2022).

In researching the leading of pedagogy, Naskali (2020) found that the definition of 'pedagogical leadership' is ambiguous even for leadership experts in ECEC. The experts in the study were researchers, administrative heads, managers, and teachers. Some of them comprehended leading the pedagogy simply as one of the tasks of leadership. Some experts understood it as an umbrella concept for all leadership and management functions. Experts perceived that leaders must have an in-depth knowledge of pedagogy and therefore place pedagogy at the heart of leadership along with other managerial responsibilities.

However, according to ECEC experts, leading pedagogy was seen primarily as a shared task.

In the study by Heikka et al. (2020), leadership for pedagogy in Finnish ECEC centres focuses on leading the pedagogical processes and taking care of the structures for pedagogical development. The main purpose is to develop the centre's pedagogical quality and children's development and learning. According to Heikka (2014), leadership for pedagogy is seen to be aligned with children's growth, professionals' capacity building, and societal educational values (Heikka, 2014). Leadership for pedagogy aims to support the staff to implement and develop the ECEC curriculum and pedagogical practice (OECD, 2020). The National Curriculum for ECEC and the local curricula are crucial tools for ECEC leaders. The curriculum provides the foundation and goals for leaders' work. Leadership for pedagogy and leadership for curriculum share similar features such as a commitment to change, progress, development, capacity building, and the prioritisation of the promotion of quality education in ECEC. Fonsén (2014) emphasises that a strong leadership for pedagogy is needed to enhance the competence of professionals by empowering them as continuous developers of pedagogical practices. The renewal challenges ECEC professionals to assess their professional thinking and to create a shared and mutual understanding of the values and theoretical views that guide their work. The old operational culture and pedagogical practices need to be constantly reflected upon and revised to meet the new challenges. The key to strengthening ECEC in its attempts to maintain and develop pedagogical quality together with the educators is strong, distributed pedagogical leadership (Fonsén & Vlasov, 2017; OECD, 2020). That is why the leadership for pedagogy to support professionals in developing their pedagogically focused operational culture is now more important than ever before.

Administrative Management

In the model presented, ECEC legislation, quality policy, and curriculum guidelines are perceived as administrative regulations. Administrative management coordinates laws, regulations, and guidelines and transforms them into pedagogical practice. Based on his school leadership study, Pennanen (2006) argues that administrative leadership is more reactive, while other leadership functions are more proactive.

Administrative leadership takes care of tasks that are needed while managing everyday situations in the ECEC centre. Administrative management includes financial management and management of public relations, as well as cooperation with stakeholders. It provides the foundation for other ECEC management functions such as leadership for pedagogy, human resource management, service management, and change management (Eskelinen & Hujala, 2015).

Human Resource Management

Human resource management and leadership for pedagogy are embedded with each other. Strehmel (2016) argues that human resource management focuses on taking care that the personnel are strongly committed to reaching the objectives set for ECEC and to developing pedagogical practices. The main prerequisite of quality ECEC is that professionals undertake the actual pedagogical work. The work well-being of the personnel influences the entire ECEC setting. Professionals can feel that their work is meaningful when they can develop their work and help children enjoy their life in ECEC. The challenge to enhance the quality of ECEC through leadership and management is to engage the entire professional community in the ECEC centre to strengthen the operational culture for children's well-being and early learning (National Core Curriculum on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2022).

Change Management

As described earlier in the chapter, there have been several changes in Finnish ECEC in recent years. This requires leadership that involves influencing change (Douglass, 2019). Fullan (2007) states that leaders need to understand the necessity for the change if they are to manage the change phenomena. Change is currently constant in the Finnish ECEC system. Some reflects a change in policy from childcare to early childhood education; a change in the theory of instruction from didactic discourse to the discourse of pedagogy for early learning; a change in the paradigmatic thinking from child-centredness to the paradigm of participative pedagogy; and a change from family-focused childcare to a participative parent–teacher partnership. Changes in leadership have shifted from focusing on administrative management to leading

the pedagogy (Fonsén, 2014; Hujala & Eskelinen, 2013). Additionally, there has been a change from hierarchical leadership to collaborative leadership, which is referred to as teacher leadership (Heikka et al., 2016). One of the biggest changes concerns the new culture of evaluation and quality management in ECEC, and how to adopt and implement it in practice (Vlasov et al., 2018). In addition, management of support and inclusion has arisen lately as a new theme of leadership in ECEC (Hautakangas & Laakso, 2022). All these changes require active change management in centres as well as in the whole steering system by every stakeholder (Alila, 2013).

The revised ECEC policy and changes in curriculum challenge leaders to develop the operational culture of their ECEC centre. According to the curriculum (National Core Curriculum on Early Childhood Education and Care 2022, 30), the leader's responsibility is to:

... promote an operational culture that encourages active participation by creating structures for professional discussion. The leader supports the community's development into a learning community where competence is developed and shared. The aim is that the shared operational concept and the goals of the activities are apparent in the practices. The leader is in charge of ensuring that shared working practices are made visible and regularly examined and assessed.

Service Management

The challenges for leading today's mission in ECEC, as well as the skills and knowledge required from the leader, emerge from the early learning needs of children, including parent–teacher partnership. The parent–teacher partnership has always been emphasised in Finnish ECEC, but the understanding of its role in ECEC has changed considerably. Previously, parents were seen as recipients of ECEC services, in contrast to the current situation, where the policy dictates that parental participation is emphasised (Vlasov, 2018). The reformed Act states that the best interests of the child and the right to early childhood education must always be at the centre of the leader's activities as part of family service guidance and management-related decision-making. Research by Kuukka, Siippainen, and Alasuutari (2019) has highlighted that service guidance in ECEC must be developed and managed consciously. Through the government's Right to Learn pro-

gramme, ECEC service guidance has been developed and researched on a term basis in 2020–2022 (Alasuutari et al., 2022).

Quality Evaluation and Management

Quality management comprises ECEC leadership, planning, and evaluation of ECEC, as well as continuous improvement of services. Quality management refers to the different strategic actions that guide the organisation's quality work (Vlasov et al., 2018). The purpose of quality management is to enhance the quality of ECEC and promote the preconditions for children's well-being, development, and learning (Act on ECEC, 2018). With a purposeful and well-functioning quality management system, ECEC organisations can ensure that evaluation data is circulated throughout the entire organisation, including at the highest levels of management and decision-making.

Local authorities organising ECEC have a legislative responsibility to evaluate their services regularly and take part in the external evaluation of the provision. Self-evaluation processes are steered, but not controlled, from the national level by an independent expert body called the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre. The evaluation process and the methods used may be decided on the local level yet ensure that all the stakeholders involved—for example, local authorities, ECEC professionals, parents or custodians, as well as children—have up-to-date information about the implementation of the services and the quality thereof. Self-evaluation is thus considered to be a significant part of the management system and a leadership tool (Vlasov et al., 2018).

In Finland, evaluations at all levels of education are based on the principle of enhancement-led evaluation (Patton, 1997), which emphasises trust between the evaluator and those participating. This enhancement-led evaluation aims to build an evaluation culture in which evaluation is based on open discussion and dialogue rather than on control or accountability (Vlasov et al., 2018). The purpose of this kind of evaluation culture is to help organisers and service providers to identify development areas in their activities but also good practices that promote ECEC development. The main goal is to support the commitment and motivation of the staff or entire work communities and to help them develop their practices (*ibid.*). According to the National Core Curriculum on Early Childhood Education and Care (2022), the objectives of the evaluation are set for the educators and their peda-

gogical work in such a way that they support the child's learning and development. In contrast to many other countries, children's learning outcomes are not assessed in Finnish ECEC.

ECEC Quality

As Douglass (2019) and Strehmel (2016) have stated, the quality of leadership supports the development of quality in ECEC. The discussion about quality has remained important while developing ECEC and ECEC pedagogy and leadership. The definition of quality provides the framework for quality management. It is widely recognised that quality is a complex phenomenon (Alila, 2013), and that quality is formed by process and structural factors, which should be realised at the national, local, and pedagogical activity level to deliver ECEC with an impact (Vlasov et al., 2018).

Leadership connected to quality has been a theme of interest in the EU and OECD in recent years (Douglass, 2019). Both the European Commission (2014) and the OECD (2012, 2016) have published definitions for quality in the ECEC sector to be used in quality development at national level. The definition of ECEC quality is closely tied to societal and cultural values that indicate what ECEC aims for and why something is considered important (Vlasov et al., 2018). While quality has traditionally been considered important and has been stressed in ECEC steering documents, defining it in unambiguous terms is challenging. Quality is a relative concept, as it is always connected not only to time but also to the surrounding society and culture, and the meanings produced by them (Pence & Moss, 1994; Alila, 2013). Furthermore, the definition of quality is regarded as one that is formulated in a shared democratic negotiation influenced by the prevailing values of society and the multiple meanings brought to bear on the definition by different parties (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007; Hujala, Fonsén, & Elo, 2012).

Leadership is seen as an important part of quality development work (OECD, 2020). High-quality ECEC includes the teacher's commitment, sensitivity, and ability to respond to the feelings and needs of a child, as well as creating an atmosphere that strengthens togetherness and participation (Hujala et al., 2019). Instead of maintaining strict learning goals for children, ECEC aims to promote child-specific growth and children's health and well-being, and to support the pre-

requisites for life-long learning. Because of that, aims are set for pedagogical activities, staff, and the environment to support every child's learning (Vlasov et al., 2018).

The national evaluation conducted by FINEEC (Repo et al., 2019) indicates that the level of quality varies in Finnish ECEC. In a large proportion of ECEC centres, the objectives set for ECEC in the curriculum were mainly achieved well, whereas in some centres and family day-care groups, their achievement was poor. The evaluation showed that the implementation of the national curriculum was facilitated by good pedagogical leadership. Curriculum implementation was also promoted by correctly targeted continuing education for the ECEC staff. Nevertheless, the shortcomings in leadership practices and the pedagogical competence of the staff members, as well as a shortage of pedagogically trained professionals, lowered the level of quality (Repo et al., 2019.)

Final Word

This chapter argues that leadership and its premises should be considered as central factors in the enhancement of quality in ECEC. The integrative framework for leadership is introduced to achieve quality in ECEC. This framework examines all the crucial elements of leadership. It offers a conceptual framework to examine the wholeness of governance and different management functions, including quality and the evaluation of quality. Education policy, legislation, and curriculum are integrated with ECEC research. The implementation of the leadership framework becomes actual and valid in leadership culture.

The traditional way of thinking about children's participation in ECEC as being beneficial for a nation's economy by releasing women to work has changed to seeing children as democratic citizens. The renewed ECEC legislation in Finland emphasises pedagogy, and the new curriculum defines the operational culture from children's perspectives. Today, the entire governance system perceives ECEC as an early educational service for children, while children are strongly seen as agents in their own lives.

The Finnish ECEC curriculum challenges the stakeholders on all levels to develop the delivery of services. The curriculum appreciates trained professionals' knowledge and competence as ECEC specialists. It trusts staff members to implement the objectives set out in the cur-

riculum. While the curriculum is broad, it gives teachers a fair degree of freedom to implement it to support children's learning challenges. However, local authorities and service providers need support in their quality management tasks as well as training and support for the implementation of their self-evaluation tasks.

The integrative leadership framework envisages leadership as wholeness, beginning with legislation and covering all the management tasks serving the implementation of the high-quality mission of ECEC. Based on ECEC leadership and its policy, legal, and curriculum premises as introduced in the integrative leadership framework, we pronounce the vision of Finnish ECEC and its leadership to be as follows:

Pedagogically oriented ECEC professionals and leaders, supported by policymakers and politicians, take a joint leadership to strengthen the role of ECEC, and further develop the mission and quality of ECEC to support children's well-being and early learning.

Early education is economically and socially effective. Children's participation in early childhood education is a significant promoter of social equality. (Sipilä, 2020.) As stated earlier, ECEC has been shown to have a positive effect on later academic success. However, the positive effects are dependent upon ECEC being of good quality, which again requires a new kind of integrated leadership.

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