

# Concluding Words

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With this publication, the International Leadership Research Forum – Early Childhood Education (ILRF–EC) has collected research articles into a research publication for the fifth time. The previous publications were published in 2013, 2015, 2019, and 2023. These publications aim to fulfil the purpose of ILRF–EC, which is to provide a learning space to bring together those interested in early childhood leadership research from around the world.

The strength of this book is the bringing together of diverse contexts, studies, and perspectives on ECEC leadership. In addition, the book integrates new knowledge that researchers and both practitioners and policymakers can draw on to improve leadership and management in early childhood settings. We are proud to be able to provide the most recent research findings and theoretical underpinnings of ECEC leadership in this publication.

The book is divided into three thematic parts, with the first part contributing the theory of leadership in ECEC. The conceptualisation and interpretations of ECEC leadership are built from the theoretical understanding of educational and pedagogical leadership with a foundation in educational sciences. ECEC leaders need competence to lead pedagogy and curriculum implementation to avoid the risk of using a

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mechanical top-down process in the implementation of the curriculum. An inclusive education approach challenges us to think about the purpose of ECEC, how we understand childhood and education, and the purpose, goals, and values of ECEC. The deepening theoretical understanding supports leading those dimensions to fulfil the purpose of ECEC: the best possibilities for every child's learning, development, and well-being.

Team leadership, the diversity of team members, and the question of diversity management are topical questions to clarify in rapidly changing global environments. To support understanding teacher leadership and teachers' ability to take part in distributed leadership, we clarify leadership structures through the research provided in our book. Furthermore, theoretical understanding of ECEC leadership is beneficial for clarifying the positions and responsibilities of centre leaders as well as for clarifying their relations with their immediate superiors in the leadership and management hierarchy. The clarification of leadership theory and roles and responsibilities, in turn, enhances understanding of ECEC leadership in theory and practice. Finally, our shared wish is that politicians and administrators would utilise this knowledge to support resources for ECEC.

The second part of the book comprises chapters concerning how to enhance the professional development of leaders and teachers—and through this—high-quality pedagogy. For the professionalism of ECEC leaders, it is evident that peer mentoring facilitates leadership in ECEC and supports leaders' professional development. The roles and responsibilities of all professionals, including leaders, need to be clearly defined. This supports the effectiveness of work but also the occupational well-being of all participants. This kind of theoretical knowledge benefits both practical work and leadership education when clarifying the content and responsibilities of work, as well as being conducive to ideas for further ECEC leadership training.

One enormous global issue is the lack of an ECEC workforce. This includes ECEC centre leaders. Expressions of power and agency are seen as factors that can influence leaders' experiences of working in ECEC and their decisions to leave or stay at work. ECEC leaders frame the reality in terms of their self-identity and form their own narratives where they either succeed well or not so well. It is useful to understand this narrative perspective for professional development and, with this, to enhance the retention power of the profession.

High-quality professionals are required to provide high-quality education. All professionals need understanding of the principles of inclusion and, in addition, of barriers to inclusion at the practical level. The research-based recommendations and solutions are provided in the current book. It is interesting that attitudes to the use of digital technology may also be seen as a question of equality in learning. It is not evident that using digital equipment is an equal right available to all children.

The last part of the book examines the governance and policies of ECEC leadership in various countries and how these influence ECEC. Inclusive education is not possible without the support of administration. National legislation and administrative premises, operational culture, the evaluation system of quality, and curricula, etc. affect and modify the reality of ECEC in each country in a unique way. We may ask what kind of steering system best supports high-quality pedagogical work in ECEC. The current book provides examples from various countries of how policies, governance, steering, and evaluation support the leading of high-quality ECEC.

Leading ECEC in an effective way in children's best interests is our shared mission!