

## CHAPTER 1

# Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care Leaders' Conceptualisations and Understandings of Pedagogical Leadership

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### Abstract

Since the 2010s, the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Finland has gone through several changes. Leaders working in ECEC have a crucial role in developing pedagogy and practices in their centres. Pedagogical leadership is one of the key concepts in educational discourse around leaders' work; however, the field lacks a unified definition for pedagogical leadership in terms of both research and practice in ECEC. Therefore, it is necessary to examine how leaders conceptualise pedagogical leadership and how they see their own roles as pedagogical leaders. The data are five focus group interviews

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with ECEC leaders (N = 15) that were conducted in 2019. The data were analysed by employing the discursive institutionalism approach. The discourse analysis revealed how ECEC leadership tasks were reflected in relation to the importance of pedagogical leadership competence and the use of ‘pedagogical lenses’. Further, leaders described the ECEC curriculum as a strategic tool. Pedagogical leadership was seen as a means for leaders and teachers to jointly interpret and implement the curriculum. In light of these findings, it may be stated that ECEC pedagogical leadership is a concept that appears to be taking shape theoretically in ECEC leaders’ discourses. However, its daily implementation requires clarification before a shared understanding of the matter can be reached.

**Keywords:** early childhood education leadership, pedagogical leadership, discursive institutionalism

## Introduction

The Finnish education system is characterised by equal opportunities for all children irrespective of background, gender, capability, ethnicity, and place of residence. Recent education policy changes in Finland have formed a national framework for more systematic practices in the realisation of early childhood education and care (ECEC). The National Core Curriculum for ECEC (Finnish National Agency for Education [FNAE], 2018) and the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (Act, 540/2018) are aimed at giving structure to and clear objectives for the pedagogy and care provided by public and private ECEC centres. These changes emphasise ECEC pedagogy and pedagogical leadership, and leadership as a concept has been connected to both ECEC centre leaders and teachers in the process of realising the curriculum (Soukainen, 2019). Consequently, the ECEC centre leaders are at the centre of leading and supporting the work community in the implementation of the new curriculum. In this study, we have used the approach of discursive institutionalism to examine the domestication of the governance guidance on implementing the curriculum (Schmidt, 2008).

Pedagogical leadership has become a central concept for educators working in Finnish ECEC; yet it is challenging to find a common way to define the concept (e.g. Male & Palaologou, 2017) and to understand it as a practice (Soukainen, 2019). Therefore, it is crucial to

examine how Finnish ECEC centre leaders, having a central role in leading the change, understand the concept of pedagogical leadership and how they perceive themselves as pedagogical leaders. It is necessary to depict the variety of aspects related to the concept if we want to support the creation of a common definition of the matter among leaders working in ECEC. Our investigation has been built on five focus group interviews with ECEC centre leaders.

## **Leadership in Early Childhood Education and Pedagogical Leadership**

Leadership in ECEC has a strong impact on the quality of the pedagogy and, through that, on children's learning and well-being (Fonsén et al., 2022; Keung et al., 2019). Leading the human resources and teachers' pedagogical work in ECEC centres is considered to be the main responsibility of the leaders (Hujala & Eskelinen, 2013). The National Core Curriculum for ECEC (FNAE, 2018) sets the guidelines for pedagogical work. The implementation of high-quality pedagogy in an ECEC centre requires mastery of pedagogical leadership from the leader (Fonsén & Vlasov, 2017). However, there seems to be less and less time for leaders to focus on pedagogical leadership (Hujala & Eskelinen, 2013).

Pedagogical leadership can be defined as the process of leading the implementation of the ECEC curriculum (FNAE, 2018). Lahtero and Kuusilehto-Awale (2015) use the concept of broad-based pedagogical leadership, which consists of elements of direct and indirect leadership that all focus on the pedagogical goals of teaching and learning. That is, school leaders need a pedagogical view on which they can base their leadership. Equally, the foundation for leadership in ECEC is on the leaders' pedagogical competence (Fonsén, 2013). Further, Fonsén (2014) argues that pedagogical leadership focuses on professional development and organisational learning. Moreover, pedagogical leadership, by its nature, needs to be distributed, which means that the responsibility for leading curriculum work and implementing pedagogical improvements is shared and enacted with the teachers (Cheung et al., 2019; Heikka, 2014). Pedagogical leadership requires human capital that is constructed with both knowledge of the curriculum and pedagogical thinking. Besides this, pedagogical leadership requires skills to manage and evaluate the pedagogy to be implemented, and

most importantly, the capability to argue for pedagogical values that guide the pedagogy (Fonsén, 2014).

## **Distributed Pedagogical Leadership**

According to Heikka (2014), distributed pedagogical leadership at the level of the ECEC centre is a shared understanding between all members of the work community concerning the purpose of the work and pedagogy. Therefore, because of their pedagogical knowledge, ECEC teachers have an important role in pedagogical leadership (FNAE, 2018). Teachers can absorb the role of a teacher leader and be significant actors in distributed pedagogical leadership (Heikka, 2014). Being a teacher leader has positive effects on the teachers themselves, their colleagues, and their community, as it improves atmosphere, democracy, and organisational commitment (Nguyen et al., 2020). In addition, teacher leadership can form a part of teacher professional development (Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019).

## **Research Question**

In this study, our aim is to clarify the concept of pedagogical leadership by examining Finnish ECEC leaders' discourses. The research question is: How do ECEC leaders describe pedagogical leadership and what discourses emerge from these descriptions?

## **Research Methodology and Design**

This study is based on five group interviews with ECEC leaders in 2019. The interviewees were recruited from a group of ECEC leaders participating in an 18-month in-service training programme about educational leadership targeted at leaders from all levels of the Finnish school education system (e.g. ECEC, upper secondary education). In the middle of the training, all ECEC leader-participants (N = 42) were sent an invitation to participate in the group interviews. Fifteen leaders responded to the invitation, and they were divided into five groups. The interviews were based on five themes: training of leaders, future directions of educational leadership, leading curriculum, pedagogical leadership, and leading change. The group interviews were aimed at creating a place for ECEC leaders to discuss and share their experi-

ences and knowledge in a safe environment. All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed for further analysis.

During institutional changes, the lenses of discursive institutionalism provide an approach for analysing conceptualisations of pedagogical leadership and curriculum implementation as a part of pedagogical leadership. Discursive institutionalism has an explanatory power for the domestication of cognitive or normative ideas (Schmidt, 2008). In the case of institutional speech, micro-level interpretations of leadership may differ from the macro-level understanding about an organisation's higher-level leaders. By using discourse analysis, the local meanings can be distinguished from the global interpretations of phenomena (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Schmidt, 2008). Further, at a time of pressure arising from neo-liberal governance, it is crucial to notice the impact of global financial and marketing policies for leadership in education (Moos, 2017). We used discourse analysis to trace the contextual meanings from the interviews, to identify the differences in the meaning-making of the leadership, and to find the contradictions in them that could be detrimental to the organisation's operations.

## Ethical Considerations

At the University of Helsinki, in which this research was conducted, researchers follow the ethical principles of research in the humanities and social and behavioural sciences issued by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK; <http://www.tenk.fi/en>). A statement of the ethics of a research design must be requested from the University of Helsinki's ethical review board if a study features any of the following items specified by the TENK: participants under the age of 15; exposure of participants to exceptionally strong stimuli; or research involving a risk of causing mental harm or involving a threat to the safety of participants or researchers or their family members or others closest to them. Our research did not include any of these items.

In this study, we have followed the process of informed consent. All the ECEC leader groups we interviewed were provided with information concerning their rights as research participants (e.g. the right to withdraw). The data have been pseudonymised, and all names (i.e. people, workplaces, cities) have been replaced with artificial identifiers. Leaders' voices are included in the findings by adding quotations,

and individual leaders are referred to by using their individual number (e.g. L3) in a certain focus group (e.g. FG2).

## Findings

### *Leadership Discourse through Pedagogical Lenses*

ECEC leaders defined pedagogical leadership as ‘looking at leadership through pedagogical lenses.’ Leaders considered pedagogical reflection on daily decisions and actions to be more important than the implementation of official regulations in employees’ activities. Furthermore, they appreciated their own presence in the centres and daily observation of pedagogical practices. Because of the child-centred nature of ECEC, leaders perceived pedagogy as the core task of their work.

It [pedagogical leadership] is the most important, including all dimensions of ECEC leadership. It is there when you recruit staff and build up the working teams. It is how you talk about matters and what you focus on in your leadership. It is embedded everywhere: the ECEC goals, centre structures, the discussions with the staff. (FG4, L1)

Mutual vision was seen as crucial for pedagogical leadership. Pedagogy was described as a ‘common thread’ for the ECEC leader and the ECEC teams being led by teachers. Pedagogy was also seen as one way to guarantee the quality of ECEC.

Leaders also pointed out that pedagogy covered only one part of their duties and that there was not enough time for pedagogical leadership, which is a well-recognised problem in the field (Hujala & Eskelinen, 2013). Moreover, leaders were concerned about how the Finnish Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (2018) shapes pedagogical leadership and about what changes the field will encounter in the near future.

Let us consider that regulations [concerning the qualification requirements for ECEC staff] come into full effect in 2030. I am very excited about the time before this: how changes in the staff structure will appear, how it is going to affect the ECEC leadership and how I’ll manage to go through all this in my own ECEC centre. (FG2, L1)

Questions and uncertainty arose as a result of the need for pedagogical competence and knowledge. Pedagogical knowledge was pivotal, but

at the same time the ECEC field suffered from a lack of qualified ECEC teachers. Having high-quality ECEC was seen to be based on teachers' pedagogical competence, as ECEC pedagogy is the core know-how of professional teachers. This caused hardship, especially in the recruitment process for ECEC teachers and in leaders' ability to share leadership and to lead the centre's pedagogics.

This first discourse constituted the basis of the strong pedagogical view behind leadership. It resonates with earlier research (Fonsén, 2014; Lahtero & Kuusilehto-Awale, 2015) that defined pedagogical view and competence form the foundation of leadership.

### *Pedagogical Leadership as a Means for Interpreting the ECEC Core Curriculum*

ECEC leaders stated that the curriculum facilitates pedagogical leadership and provides the basis for justifying leadership and leaders' decisions. The leaders considered themselves as pathfinders and role models in relation to the implementation of the ECEC curriculum. They also stated that leading the curriculum required the ability to inspire and motivate employees with a positive attitude.

The main work [is leading the curriculum]. The curriculum forms the basis for the leadership and our main duty is to lead the employees to realise the curriculum in their work. (FG1, L1)

ECEC leaders implied that the curriculum has provided a solid value base for pedagogical work and leadership in ECEC. The most important value was the children's overall well-being. Leader FG4, L1 narrated that every decision in her work should be based on child welfare and ECEC quality. Other significant values were equality, diversity, and a high-quality learning environment.

The staff turnover rate was seen as problematic from the perspective of leading the curriculum. When new employees entered, the curriculum work started all over again. Leaders said that leading the ECEC curriculum required ongoing daily discourse in the work community, not just in pedagogical meetings or during the community's in-service training.

The high staff turnover rate is a challenge. A person might not work longer than six months as a team member. We have to take the curricu-

lum work very slowly in order to become familiar with the curriculum. From a leader this requires continuous daily pedagogical discussion. (FG5, L3)

The ECEC curriculum requires pedagogical thinking from leaders and teachers, as it changes the roles of leader, teacher, and ECEC nurse. In these discourses, leaders expressed relief, as the idea of ‘everyone does everything’, irrespective of education and competence, was no longer recognised. Leaders argued that the curriculum had to be both the tool and the ECEC core to diminish the homogeneity of the pedagogical work and affect employee participation positively.

This second discourse arises from the understanding about the meaning of curriculum as a basis for pedagogy. The ECEC National Core Curriculum was seen as the main tool guiding pedagogical leadership and the leader was seen as being responsible for interpreting the curriculum for the work community. Leaders can justify their decisions with arguments based on the curriculum. Therefore, leaders need to have a background in the study of educational sciences, as that background forms the foundation for the extensive professional knowledge required in leading pedagogical practice and provides the ability to think critically about pedagogy and to interpret curriculum (see Autio et al., 2017).

### *Implementing ECEC Curriculum Through Distributed Pedagogical Leadership*

Distributed leadership practices were often mentioned as necessary tools for ECEC curriculum implementation, and leaders emphasised the role of ECEC teachers as executors of the curriculum at the level of pedagogical practice. Leaders also indicated the importance of being a role model. Discussions and pedagogical modelling were important when implementing the curriculum at the level of the ECEC centre. Planning, scheduling, and overall orderliness were at the core of the strategically led curriculum.

Because of the clarification of the teacher role and responsibility, the ECEC teachers’ pedagogical role and role as a team leader are highlighted. That’s a very important starting point to the reform. (FG4, L2)



Leaders stated that distributed pedagogical leadership played a key role in their work, since the workload had significantly increased in a number of ECEC centres. Discourses about distributed leadership varied, as some leaders indicated that distributed leadership was realised between leader and co-leader while other ECEC leaders said that leadership should be based on positions of administrative and pedagogical leaders in a joint leadership model.

I was just thinking about distributed leadership. ECEC centres are large at the moment. I think we need administrative leaders to help pedagogical leaders with this workload because in the near future everyone will die under this workload. (FG1, L1)

ECEC leaders argued that the teacher's role was to be both a team leader and a pedagogical leader, as teachers were responsible for pedagogical planning and for enacting their plans in their child groups. Teachers must be able to explain their pedagogy to the team, the leader, and the parents.

ECEC teachers are the pedagogical leaders of the team and they make sure that the things we agree on at the centre level also happen in the child groups. In the child groups, the teacher has to know the pedagogical actions: why and what we do and with whom. The teacher also carries the responsibility of the other team members and makes sure that their pedagogical contribution is along the ECEC curriculum. (FG3, L2)

The ECEC teacher was viewed as overseeing the whole team and its actions. ECEC leaders stated that team leadership involved seeing the strengths of the team as well as hearing several points of view in the team discussions. Leader 5 (FG3) clarified that group pedagogy was 'the holy Trinity' consisting of care, education, and teaching, all equally valued, as the key role of the teacher is to take care of pedagogy and teaching.

This discourse summarises how pedagogical leadership is seen not only as a leader's duty, but how the ECEC teacher is seen as being responsible for the pedagogy. The ECEC curriculum states that teachers are responsible for pedagogy at the team level, and therefore a teacher has an important role in pedagogical leadership (FNAE, 2018). This follows the definition provided by Heikka, Halttunen, and Wani-ganayake (2016) that distributed pedagogical leadership means having a shared understanding about the pedagogy.

### *The ECEC Curriculum as a Strategic Tool in Pedagogical Leadership*

Leaders said that leading curriculum work requires a sense of direction, a firm attitude towards leadership, and a strong vision concerning the centre's goals. In this discourse, leaders constantly used the expression 'common thread', which reflected the pedagogical orientation in ECEC leadership. Curriculum work was seen as a process leading to constant change, and change management skills were therefore important. The main challenge was to engage everyone in the core task mandated by the curriculum. To support this, leaders organised regional curriculum workshops to assure ECEC teachers of the importance of the curriculum and its implementation. Along with the curriculum work, developmental evaluation was one crucial element in the pedagogical discourse. It was important to experience and learn together, as this provides the opportunity to participate and to change the practices.

The vision is important to me, but also working and learning together, thinking how we should do it. It helps to engage everyone when you get to understand them. (FG4, L1)

Working culture was an element that emerged from the leaders' discourse. Leaders said that they needed curriculum competence to choose relevant themes that were already part of the community focus. This was essential to successful development work because of the need to consider staff motivation, and further, because it was impossible to take in the whole curriculum at once. Leaders also narrated how the ECEC working culture was already realising the curriculum. New concepts were confusing to teachers and nurses. The leaders saw it as their duty to help the staff to see how their centre's community working culture already had elements of the new curriculum.

Teachers and nurses tend to forget that the new curriculum is already living in the working culture but with different terms. It is important to open a dialogue about the curriculum to realise we are already on our way to implementing the curriculum. (FG4, L2)

Leaders stated that constant pedagogical discussion was an important part of leadership and curriculum implementation. Pedagogical meetings of the whole ECEC centre offered a good means of talking about

the curriculum. Attendance by the whole community was seen as essential for creating a common pedagogical discussion, to engage the members, and to lead the common pedagogical thread that consists of shared pedagogical values, goals, and obligations.

Leading the curriculum is a process. You have to tolerate the incompleteness and start from the beginning when new employees start, and people change, and the curriculum process starts again from scratch and from the beginning. It demands certain leadership skills: the ability to lead pedagogical vision, the competence to see essential parts of the curriculum and divide it into smaller pieces to focus on the important matters. In this process we promote our core task, the ECEC pedagogical work. (FG1, L3)

Leaders highlighted the role of leadership perseverance in moving forward with baby steps to achieve deeper understanding and deep, persistent change. Social competence was a big part of successful leadership, as it was important to understand people's reactions to different things and their ability to communicate with all sorts of people to develop curriculum in the ECEC centre. Leading the curriculum required tolerance of incompleteness, repetition, and slow progression as well as open interaction with the curriculum in the working community.

The discourse of pedagogical leadership using ECEC curriculum as a strategic tool consists of leaders' discussions about the techniques they used for leading pedagogy. Leaders highlighted the importance of vision in giving a direction to the work and to the whole work community. However, they did not argue that it is a mechanical, top-down process for transferring policymakers' ideas. On the contrary, interpretation and reformulation with pedagogical competence was used in the process. A similar finding in ECEC leadership was outlined in the study by Ljunggren and Moen (2019), in which they analysed the implementation of the Norwegian ECEC framework in relation to organisational and leadership translation strategies.

### *Pedagogical Leadership by Managing Structures and Methods*

In this discourse, pedagogical leadership happened in organised structures such as ECEC teachers' meetings. Successful pedagogical leader-

ship was present, as were positive feedback in the centre and the prioritisation of leadership tasks.

Leaders pointed out that some of their employees needed more guidance than others, and therefore leadership requires the ability to adjust actions to meet a certain context. Leaders stated that having a coherent framework with mutual pedagogical goals and vision was essential to the success of pedagogical leadership. Mutual conversation in the community about pedagogical values was also considered important, and was the foundation of goal-oriented work. The findings of this study were that there are several pedagogical leadership roles for the formal ECEC leader. The pedagogical leader is an enabler who creates the structures of the pedagogical core task and its development but also guides the community discourse in the professional pedagogical direction. Leader 2 in FG 3 pointed out that the ECEC leader has an 'observer' role, as having time to observe is essential for knowing how to carry out leadership work. The discourses on leadership above were considered to be the tools of pedagogical leadership, as they make pedagogical discussion visible and lead to the vision by providing positive feedback to the surrounding community.

Interestingly, in the last discourse, leaders saw themselves as formal leaders, enablers, and guides of the centre's pedagogical discourse *in theory*. However, when referring to their work *in practice*, they emphasised a 'go and see' type of practical leadership, guidance, observation, and path-leading in the everyday life of the centre. This is similar to Soukainen (2019), who has spoken about the difficulties of implementing the pedagogical leadership theory in practice.

## Discussion

In these ECEC leaders' discourses, lack of competence among personnel was named as a hindrance to pedagogical leadership and quality. However, Fonsén (2014) and Heikka (2014) argue that pedagogical leadership is a concept that refers to professional development and organisational learning. Leading pedagogically unqualified personnel requires strong pedagogical leadership and a great number of resources from the leader, as the leader must spend more time evaluating and developing pedagogy and leading the learning process of the organisation (Ahtiainen et al., 2021).

The big question in the future is how we will lead if we do not have enough qualified teachers. How can leadership be shaped to function in different contexts, and how can the competence of qualified teachers be utilised in distributed pedagogical leadership? Moreover, when looking through discursive institutionalism, leaders see themselves as interpreters of the curriculum, not just as implementers of national regulations. They see that through pedagogical lenses they have the competence to explain and channel the meaning of the curriculum to the work community (see Lahtero & Kuusilehto-Awale, 2015). With qualifications in the educational sciences, they have the competence to lead pedagogy and, further, can avoid the risk of using a mechanical top-down process in the implementation of the curriculum (see Autio et al., 2017). The ECEC curriculum provides them with a strategy, the tools, and a structure for pedagogical leadership and its distribution (e.g. Cheung et al., 2019). In light of our results, a common educational basis for ECEC leaders would be a step towards closing the gap in the conceptualisation of pedagogical leadership between—and also within—micro and macro levels of the education system (see Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Schmidt, 2008).

## Conclusions

This study considered ECEC leaders' conceptualisation of pedagogical leadership. The Finnish ECEC leaders see pedagogical leadership as an important resource, and the curriculum forms the basis for this leadership. Staff turnover and the lack of competent personnel challenge leaders' work and affect their motivation to persistently invest in maintaining and developing pedagogically well-functioning ECEC communities. However, pedagogical leadership should not be a question of favourable circumstances alone, as we must be able to shape the leadership and its goals to meet the requirements of the current situation. Therefore, we must start looking at our centres and their leadership from the perspective of the context and base our work on the strengths and available opportunities to enable us to maintain a strong pedagogical orientation and sense of competence.

## Limitations

Interview studies rarely provide results that can be generalised; nor do they aim to do so. Another limitation comes from the study design, with the focus group interviews arising from the in-service training programme. The participants represent a development-oriented group of leaders, and this may unify their attitude towards leadership. However, during times of reform, as is the case in this study, in-depth information gained through interviews with people working closely with the issues the reform touches upon can provide valuable information about the multifaceted nature of the reform (Schildkamp et al., 2014).

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