

## Teachers' pedagogical leadership in early childhood education

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Although the contexts, structures and administrations of early childhood education (ECE) may differ internationally, effective pedagogical leadership remains an essential component in supporting young children's development and learning. This paper reports on a comparative study which considered ECE in two different settings, Finland and Florida, providing insight into teachers' perspectives on the characteristics of pedagogical leadership.

**Purpose:** This study sought to investigate and compare the perspectives of ECE teachers and directors in Finland and Florida via their discourses about teachers' pedagogical leadership. The goal was to provide an overview of the ECE teachers' and directors' discourses in each location, in order to allow comparison and a better understanding of the influence of aspects including locational contexts, curricular guidelines and teacher preparation on the ECE teachers' and directors' perspectives.

**Method:** A comparative case study design was used. The data consisted of semi-structured focus group interviews and individual interviews with ECE teachers and centre directors in Finland and in Florida. Data from the two locations were first analysed separately to identify the main discourses; secondly, discourses were compared collectively to reveal major themes.

**Findings:** The analysis indicated a similar conceptualisation of distributed pedagogical leadership. However, differences were identified in teachers' expectations of independence in instructional decisions, and the extension of pedagogical leadership practices within and beyond the ECE centres. The analysis of discourses led to the identification of three major themes, which generated implications for teacher preparation, curriculum development and implementation, and ECE programme directions.

**Conclusion:** The study enables a more comprehensible conceptualisation of teachers' pedagogical leadership as it emerged from teachers' and directors' discourses across two locations. Pedagogical leadership is recognised as an indicator of high-quality pedagogy in early childhood education and the findings highlight the need to continuously support and strengthen teachers' pedagogical leadership.

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## Introduction

Leadership in early childhood education (ECE) has become a widely discussed phenomenon in recent decades, especially in the context of the ongoing societal transformations that impact pedagogical and organisational structures in ECE (Fonsén 2013, 2014; Heikka 2014; Lahtero and Kuusilehto-Awale 2015). Effective leadership in early childhood centres is essential to maintain the quality of ECE programmes to support children's growth and learning (Gibson et al. 2020; OECD 2019). In particular, pedagogical leadership is crucial for ensuring high-quality ECE programmes (Cheung et al. 2019; Fonsén et al. 2022; Ruohola et al. 2021). Specifically, Fonsén and Soukainen (2020) suggested that pedagogical leadership should enhance the mutual understanding of values and vision of pedagogy holistically. In addition, pedagogical leadership combines leadership and management functions: that is, direct pedagogical leadership (e.g. curriculum work and development) and indirect pedagogical leadership (e.g. administrative and human resource management) (Lahtero and Kuusilehto-Awale 2015). The theoretical approach of pedagogical leadership is built on the values of the educational mission; therefore, the main purpose of early childhood programmes is always the children's social, physical, and emotional wellbeing and learning. All leadership functions and management actions aim to optimise children's development. In this sense, while the centre directors are responsible for pedagogical leadership at the centre level, teachers apply it to their classrooms and within the educator team level (Fonsén and Ukkonen-Mikkola 2019; Heikka 2014; Heikka, Halttunen, and Waniganayake 2016; Heikka et al. 2021). Thus, as ECE leaders wear pedagogical 'lenses' when making decisions, it follows that pedagogical leadership includes the need for skills and attitude development and to expand teachers' leadership potential in the classroom (Armstrong, Kinney, and Clayton 2009; Douglass 2018). In this study, pedagogical leadership is specifically seen as a shared responsibility for implementing high-quality pedagogy.

Notably, the concept of pedagogical leadership, its content, application, and interpretation are affected by contextual factors, such as the structure of ECE, including its policies, curricular guidelines, and the overall cultural and societal contexts in different countries (Hujala 2004; Nivala 1998). For this reason, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of teachers' pedagogical leadership, it is necessary to examine the perceptions of teachers' pedagogical leadership in the discourses of teachers and directors in different international locations. In our study, through the application of a comparative case study to analyse and uncover the different layers of conceptualisation of teachers' pedagogical leadership, we aimed to investigate the perception of teachers' pedagogical leadership among teachers and directors in early childhood centres in Finland and Florida. As the early childhood education systems, their policies, curricular guidelines, teacher preparation programmes, and school demographics are different in these two locations, it was meaningful to compare the extent to which the perceptions and discourses of ECE teachers and directors are similar or different in terms of pedagogical leadership. The aim here was to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon.

Therefore, in this article, we report on the findings of the comparative case study in which teachers and directors in Finland and Florida shared their views about teachers' pedagogical leadership in ECE in their respective locations. The study formed part of an

international research collaboration with participants from Finland, South Africa, Japan, the United States, Germany, and Singapore, which aims to develop ECE leadership by deepening the understanding of the concept of pedagogical leadership and leadership practices<sup>1</sup> (Fonsén et al. 2019). With these purposes in mind, the study findings reported in our paper are offered as a contribution to the aims of pedagogical leadership: staff empowerment and wellbeing in the workplace, and, ultimately, good quality early childhood education for every child.

## Background

### *ECE and leadership in Finland*

In recent times, Finnish ECE has been shaped by many structural changes, including changes in the administrative sector, from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to the Ministry of Education and Culture (in 2013) administrative sector and the new Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018). These changes have strongly defined ECE as part of the education and teaching sector, in contrast with its previous alignment with day care within social services. At the same time that the ECE Act was reformed, the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care was updated (FNAE 2018). Currently, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) emphasises a goal-oriented perspective focused on the child's growth and learning, and consists of upbringing, education and care. Also, the Act highlights the pedagogical responsibility of ECE teachers in offering opportunities for children to learn (FNAE 2018, 2022). The Act on Early Childhood Education (Act 540/2008) and the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (FNAE 2018, 2022) have set the guidelines for pedagogical leadership as a shared responsibility between teachers and centre directors for the quality of pedagogy. Underlying these reforms was a policy to unify the national level curriculum from ECE to basic education. This means that ECE was acknowledged as part of the lifelong learning path, in which early childhood education, and primary and elementary education together form an integrated and progressive entity (Eurydice 2016; Fonsén and Vlasov 2017).

According to the Basic Education Act (628/1998), compulsory and free preschool education must start at the age of six, and elementary school at the age of seven. Early childhood education (for children aged about ten months to the age of five) is not compulsory, nor is it free of charge. Finland's welfare state policy guarantees every child a right to early childhood education and the municipalities are mandated to provide childcare services for a low fee to all families (Fonsén and Vlasov 2017). The Act on Early Childhood Education Fees (1503/2016) states that fees are calculated according to family size and income; at the time of writing, low-income families have no fees to pay.

After the parental leave period (when children are approximately ten months old) and before school age, every child is entitled to receive municipality-organised ECE services. ECE services are provided mainly by the municipalities' own ECE centres (76%), but private ECE services have been growing recently (NIHW 2020). Nevertheless, municipalities are obligated to provide services by themselves or through vouchers for private service providers. Both private providers and municipal ECE centres are required to follow the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (FNAE 2022).

All staff members in ECE centres have to be qualified (Act 540/2018; FNAE 2022). ECE teachers must hold a post-secondary-level degree (a bachelor's degree in education or the social sciences, or a master's degree in education). Pre-primary teachers are required to have either a bachelor's or master's degree in education. Starting in 2030, the centre directors will be required to have a master's degree in education. Furthermore, ECE centres rely on multi-professional personnel groups that employ a range of competencies to promote the children's development (FNAE 2022). The ECE Act (540/2018) stated that all ECE centres need to have a centre director whose responsibility is to ensure the centre's quality of education.

In Finland, ECE leadership researchers have followed a contextual leadership model (Hujala 2004; Nivala 1998). Pedagogical leadership has emerged from the understanding that the substance of ECE determines leadership as providing the way to meet the mission and vision of the organisation (Nivala 2002). Ahtiainen, Fonsén, and Kiuru (2021) argued that leadership has altered because of several changes that the Finnish ECE system has undergone. Leading educational institutions with its curriculum, instead of social services for families, has become crucial. Furthermore, the adoption of shared pedagogical leadership practices among ECE teachers and directors has increased (Heikka, Halttunen, and Waniganayake 2016). However, despite a growing interest in teachers' pedagogical leadership in Finnish ECE research, the role of ECE teachers is still unclear (Heikka et al. 2021). In addition, questions about power and responsibility point to the need to clarify the roles of the teachers and directors, as well as the organisational structures of leadership in ECE (Fonsén et al. 2021).

### *ECE and leadership in Florida*

In the United States, each of the 50 states regulates education, which impacts ECE settings, programmes and operations considerably. Therefore, ECE programmes vary widely between the different states. In this study, our sole focus is on ECE specifically in Florida, rather than in the other states. Provision includes half-day and full-day programmes at public and private institutions such as the childcare centre, day care, pre-school, kindergarten, and even the first three grades of elementary school, with programmes for children from birth to age eight. In terms of the cost of ECE programmes, there is an expectation that families will pay for the services. Therefore, most Florida preschools for children aged two to five years of age charge tuition fees, although grants and funds are available to finance some programmes, assisting families. For example, federally funded programmes (e.g. Early Head Start and Head Start) serve infants, toddlers, and three-to-four-year-old children from low-income families (Office of Head Start). In addition, state-funded programmes for four- and five-year-old children (e.g. prekindergarten and kindergarten) are often part of the public school system. In Florida, where attendance of the prekindergarten programme is voluntary, parents decide whether they want their children to attend the three-hour daily programmes. In 2019–2020, 71% of four-year-old children attended prekindergarten in Florida (About Voluntary Prekindergarten).

Requirements for early childhood teacher preparation also vary across the 50 states. In Florida, teachers in prekindergarten, kindergarten, and elementary schools must hold a bachelor's degree in early or elementary education and a teaching certificate from the

state. In addition, some preschools might require a bachelor's degree in early childhood, and those beyond the public school system may employ childcare professionals who hold solely a Childhood Development Associate (CDA) credential, which is a 45-hour training programme in early childhood and early literacy topics ([Requirements for early childhood education jobs in Florida](#)). The wide content and competency variations between the requirements for childcare professionals, therefore, can impact programme quality (Saracho and Spodek 2007).

As with the Finnish pedagogical leadership ideas referred to earlier (Fonsén and Ukkonen-Mikkola 2019; Heikka 2014), in the United States, ECE leadership studies have focused on leadership building, professional development, and their benefits for children's development and success. Foundationally, ECE leadership is grounded in humanistic, transformational, principle-centred, and value-based attributes that involve the inclusion of teachers as well as individuals in administrative or managerial positions (Carr, Johnson, and Corkwell 2009). For example, the Whole Leadership Framework has been developed in the United States (Abel, Talan, and Masterson 2017) to encompass ECE leadership at the programme level, including formal and informal leadership roles within the ECE centres (Abel 2019; Abel, Talan, and Masterson 2017; Kagan and Bowman 1997). Specifically, the Whole Leadership Framework embodies the multifaceted nature of early childhood education, including administrative and pedagogical leadership, as well as the essential skills, personal dispositions, and behaviours required for leadership practices (Abel, Talan, and Masterson 2017). Although this framework exists as a conceptual structure, there is no policy requiring centres in Florida to apply the Whole Leadership Framework.

Furthermore, scholars have indicated that ECE leadership must be the foundation for promoting and sustaining high-quality ECE practices, while impacting and empowering children and their families (Souto-Manning and Mordan-Delgadillo 2016). Notably, distributing leadership from ECE directors to teachers, children and families has been regarded as a way to help target inequities and social injustices experienced by children, including children with disabilities, and children of Hispanic and Haitian immigrant communities (Halpern et al. 2019; Halpern, Szecsi, and Mak 2020; Movahedazarhouli and Banerjee 2020; Nash and Sosinski 2016; Souto-Manning et al. 2016; Souto-Manning and Mordan-Delgadillo 2016). This focus on culturally diverse families is relevant for the context in Florida, where children who are culturally and linguistically diverse represent the majority in many centres and classrooms.

### *ECE leadership: Finland and Florida in comparison*

As evident from the overviews above, the context of ECE and the concepts, structures and administrations differ between Finland and Florida. Through comparison, we may find similar and different characteristics of ECE leadership in Finland and Florida which will contribute to our understanding of pedagogical leadership. A comparative qualitative case study between Finland and Florida could provide fruitful insight to the essence of leadership, and leaders' and teachers' perceptions of pedagogical leadership in both locations. By identifying these different strengths and challenges, new knowledge can be created about the leadership of early childhood education and, thus, help to develop early childhood education globally.

## Purpose

As mentioned in the introduction, this study formed part of an international research collaboration with the aim of contributing to a better understanding of the various meanings and expectations attributed to leadership in ECE in different international locations. By clarifying leadership concepts and structures, wellbeing in the workplace and pedagogical quality may be developed, according to earlier research (Fonsén et al. 2021). The specific purpose of the sub-study reported in this paper was to investigate and compare the perspectives of ECE teachers' and directors<sup>2</sup>, through their discourses about teachers' pedagogical leadership in Finland and Florida. The goal was to examine these two international locations: first of all, separately in order to provide a rich overview of discourses in each place, and then comparatively, to allow a better understanding of the influence of national/geographical contexts, curricular guidelines, teacher preparation, and demographic characteristics on the ECE teachers' and directors' perspectives. We sought to answer the following research questions: (1) *What are the perspectives of teachers' pedagogical leadership identified in the teachers' and directors' discourses in Finland?* (2) *What are the perspectives of teachers' pedagogical leadership identified in the teachers' and directors' discourses in Florida?* (3) *What are the similarities and differences between the perspectives of teachers' pedagogical leadership as identified in teachers' and directors' discourses in Finland and Florida?*

## Methods

### Ethical considerations

The research study was designed with the ethical research guidelines in both locations (Finland and Florida) in mind. Ethical decisions were made with respect to the voluntary nature of the participation in the study and to ensure the anonymity of the participants (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). Therefore, the identities of the participants and information about the centres were known only by the researchers. The only background information on the participants collected concerned information that was necessary for the study (Patton 2015; Roller and Lavrakas 2015). In Florida, approval was obtained from the university's institutional review board (Protocol ID #2018-04) before the data collection process started. In Finland, in accordance with prevailing research practice at the time of the study, approval was obtained from the municipalities before the data were collected. The interviewees' willingness to participate in the study was verified and their awareness of the voluntary nature of their participation was ensured. In Finland, the invitations for interview were sent directly by email, or in other cases, area directors forwarded them to the ECE centres. In Florida, the participants signed an informed consent form before the interviews that ensured the confidentiality of their names and information, and the use of codes to protect their identities. The informed consent forms also guaranteed the participants' rights of non-response and to withdraw from the study without penalty at any time.

### Research design

This study used a comparative qualitative case study research design, collecting and analysing data from two bounded systems or cases: that is, of ECE centres in Finland and in the US state of Florida (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). The comparative method

allowed the researchers to identify the macro-level contextual aspects as well as the culture-specific and universal aspects of each case. Then, the cases were compared, while taking into account the common theoretical framework: teachers' pedagogical leadership, and on comparing equivalent conceptualisations (Esser and Vliegenthart 2017). In other words, the comparative case studies were analysed in two stages – that is, within-case and cross-case. The comparative case studies approach can increase the study's credibility, trustworthiness, and stability of the findings, due to the supporting data collected from more than one case (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2014). In the first stage, each case was analysed separately and comprehensively, while the cross-case analysis stage required researchers to compare the cases to build general explanations based on similarities noted in both cases (Yin 2018).

### *Data collection in Finland*

The participants were centre directors and ECE teachers from centres located in three cities in Finland. In all, 13 centre directors and 15 ECE teachers participated, including four male and 24 female Finnish participants. The ECE centres were chosen to represent several parts of Finland, and they exemplified diverse residential zones including small, mid-sized, and large municipalities. All the centres followed the National Core Curriculum for ECEC. All the ECE teachers and centre directors had ECE teaching qualifications: that is, a bachelor's degree in education or the college level degree (previous training requirement level before 2005). In addition, the centre directors were required by the ECE Act (540/2018) to have appropriate management skills in addition to an ECE teaching qualification.

Five focus group interviews and one individual interview were conducted with the aim of providing a commonly shared understanding of the ECE reality and context. In each city, there were separate interviews for teachers and directors, with participants from several ECE centres. Although it had been originally intended that all the data would be collected in focus group interviews with multiple participants, for practical reasons, one of the sessions was carried out as an individual interview with one participant. While the total duration of interviews with the centre directors was four hours and 38 minutes, the interviews with teachers lasted three hours and 38 minutes.

Following Parker and Tritter (2006), the participants were encouraged to discuss specific topics, including underlying issues, their norms, beliefs, and values. The semi-structured interviews were conducted by researchers from the research group and included general guiding questions about their perceptions of leadership; for example: *What is your vision of management and leading the ECE? What are the expectations for leadership? What would you like to change in the leadership of ECE?* All the interviews were conducted in Finnish and audio recorded. Data were then transcribed verbatim in Finnish, taking account of the different vocalisations, gestures and facial expressions. Selected, direct quotations from data were translated into English in order to complete comparative analysis after the research group had undertaken the analysis and discussed the findings.

### *Data collection in Florida*

Teachers and directors from two ECE centres in Florida were invited to participate in the study. Centre 1 was a university-based day care centre that served children aged from six weeks to five years who were mainly children of university faculty, staff, children, and some children from the community. Centre 2 was a community-based centre that served economically disadvantaged Hispanic and Haitian children from immigrant backgrounds aged between six weeks and five years and their families who lived at or below the federal poverty level. The cases were selected according to their partnerships with the researchers' university, and they served as sites for student teacher internships. The two centres represented different contexts, which allowed us to gain data from vastly different situations in order to better reflect the variety of settings in Florida.

Purposive sampling was used and 11 participants across the two centres participated in the study. In total across the centres, there were four directors and seven teachers, including one male and 10 female, two Hispanic and nine non-Hispanic participants. Of the four directors, two held doctoral degrees, one held a master's degree and the other held a bachelor's degree in education. Of the seven teachers, four held bachelor's degrees in early childhood education, two held an associate degree in early childhood and one held a 45-hour training certificate in early childhood education. The data collection involved semi-structured individual interviews with the participants. In addition to the established list of questions, which was identical to the list of questions in Finland, follow-up questions were asked based on previous responses. The interviews were conducted at the ECE centres and each lasted approximately 45 minutes. These were conducted in English and audio recorded. In addition, observational field notes were taken to document the participants' non-verbal behaviours and other reactions concerning the topics under investigation (Patton 2015). It is important to note that no focus group interviews in Florida were conducted, due to participants' unavailability at a commonly shared time. We acknowledge that data from individual interviews could have been enriched with data from focus group interviews. However, this did not challenge the trustworthiness and credibility of the current data set.

### *Data analysis*

The basis of the discursive research approach employed in this study lies in the socio-constructivist theory that views reality as constructed in social interaction (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Language and speech are the main instruments for building the understanding of reality (Jokinen, Juhila, and Suoninen 2016). Linguistic developments in the post-modern era have given rise to a special interest in discourses in organisational research (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000). While comparing phenomena in different international locations, the researchers considered cultural and societal aspects as well (Alexander, Broadfoot, and Phillips 1999). In this study, the analysis of discourses was undertaken by searching the discourses that participants produced in their discussions about the ECE teacher's role, position and responsibilities in pedagogical leadership. Thus, through the detailed analysis of discourses, we detected the meanings that emerged through speech (Pietikäinen and Mäntynen 2009). As a result, four particular discourses were identified in both national discussions. Using a cross-cultural comparative method,



these discourses of teachers' pedagogical leadership at the national level were compared to uncover new perspectives, in order to increase our understanding about the phenomenon of teachers' pedagogical leadership. After analysing data from both countries, we compared the findings, searched for similarities and differences and conducted the comparative analysis. Research partners had several discussions about the discourses in both locations. Importantly, the four discourses were discovered to be from similar *themes* in both international locations, but variations were found in the meaning of the themes. Through comparison, it is possible for the general, specific and clarifying phenomena under investigation to be reached. When phenomena were compared in different locations, we carefully considered the cultural and societal aspects (Alexander, Broadfoot, and Phillips 1999). As Vlasov (2018) has pointed out, in cross-cultural research, the reflection of local interpretations needs to be applied to researcher interpretation and the contextuality needs to be considered when comparing phenomena.

## Findings

Using the comparative qualitative case study design set out above, we were able to investigate and compare the perspectives of ECE teachers' and directors' discourses about teachers' pedagogical leadership in Finland and Florida, thereby addressing our research questions. In this section, we present the findings, firstly for Finland and Florida separately; the specific discourses that were identified will be introduced. Subsequently, we report on and discuss the findings of the comparative analysis and the identification of major themes. Where relevant, anonymised quotations from the data (in translation where appropriate) have been included to illustrate particular aspects.

### *Teachers' pedagogical leadership in Finland*

From our analysis of the data from the Finnish ECE teachers' and directors' interviews, the following four discourses were identified: (a) teachers' pedagogical leadership is recognised, (b) teachers' pedagogical leadership is based on pedagogical expertise, (c) teachers' pedagogical leadership is distributed, and (d) teachers' pedagogical leadership is implemented inside the ECE centre. These four discourses are detailed in the subsections below.

#### *Teachers' pedagogical leadership is recognised*

In the discussions with teachers and directors about leadership in ECE, the topic of teachers' leadership was raised and recognised by all participants. Above all, teachers' leadership was described as *pedagogical* leadership. As one teacher noted:

ECE teacher leadership is leadership in the classroom. It is exactly pedagogical leadership. Decision making and expertise are related to that.

Additionally, the teachers and directors highlighted the significance of ECE teachers' pedagogical leadership and described it as a requirement for the teachers' work. The National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (Finnish National Agency for Education [FNAE] 2018) was regarded, too, as requiring teachers' pedagogical

leadership and something which had attributed the formal role of team leader to teachers.

However, it was also observed that teachers' pedagogical leadership could vary across teams and ECE centres. In some centres, teachers mentioned that more support from the centre director for their role in distributed leadership would be beneficial. In some other centres, though, directors contended that teachers should take responsibility for team leadership and take on a leadership role in a team by themselves. Overall, the analysis suggested that teachers' pedagogical leadership was recognised but not implemented in all centres. In some cases, the power and responsibilities seemed to need clarification.

### *Teachers' pedagogical leadership is based on pedagogical expertise*

The participants emphasised that ECE pedagogical leadership by teachers was based on pedagogical expertise, and it must be developed by following early childhood development research and current scholarship. According to participants, ECE teachers' pedagogical leadership was implemented by maintaining and sharing expertise with the other teachers at the ECE centre during the pedagogical team meetings in the ECE units. Pedagogical leadership was also implemented in particular situations at the centre. Such situations were usually described as taking place when the director was not present, and teachers took responsibility for matters within the organisation in addition to their own work.

ECE centre directors and teachers highlighted the need to make teachers' pedagogical leadership more visible, in consideration of the expertise acquired in teacher training. In other words, the participants felt that teacher training sustained pedagogical expertise and knowledge. As one director noted, 'Well, training includes only pedagogy, unlike any other [professional group's training]'. Therefore, it was perceived to be significant that ECE teachers had a role as pedagogical leaders in a team of educators. Pedagogical expertise was regarded as a way of improving the implementation of ECE and giving teachers the ability to view all the actions in a classroom from a pedagogical perspective.

### *Teachers' pedagogical leadership is distributed*

Pedagogical leadership was described in different ways by ECE teachers and ECE directors. With teachers not having the same position as a leader (in the sense of a director), the content of their leadership was regarded as different from ECE directors' leadership. According to the analysis, ECE teachers experienced pedagogical leadership to be like a balancing act, due to the collegial nature of work. As pedagogical work was implemented in cooperation with the team, it was felt that ECE teachers needed to recognise the situations when pedagogical decisions would have to be made and when responsibility could be shared with the other team members. One teacher commented as follows:

Are you making decisions by taking the position of a pedagogical leader or taking a conversational role in a team. Responsibility also needs to be shared, it is significant that everybody knows being important.

Besides pedagogical leadership, smooth cooperation and having a good working atmosphere in a team were also described as important factors. Moreover, the participants reflected that getting support from the director and the other educators was meaningful, in addition to the teachers' own responsibility to take leadership. In the team of educators,

teachers described a collective effort to create pedagogical guidelines for the actions and functions used in the classroom, including the compliance with the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, and the centre's pedagogical guidelines and organisational goals set together by the centre's director. In addition, ECE teachers and directors drew attention to the significance of long-term goals as well as the daily goals of pedagogy.

### *Teachers' pedagogical leadership is implemented inside the ECE centre*

According to participants, the ECE teachers' pedagogical leadership was implemented at several levels, from the classroom to the educators' team and the centre. ECE teachers' pedagogical leadership was described as the teachers' responsibility and leadership over the educators' team and the pedagogy of a classroom. As one put it:

In many places, an ECE teacher is the one who guides the team and is a team leader. In the end, the ECE teacher is the one responsible for the pedagogy in a classroom.

Participants considered that teachers were responsible for planning, implementing, and evaluating actions in a child group. Maintaining children's wellbeing, development, and learning was noted as being the main goal of ECE teachers' pedagogical leadership.

At the classroom level, teachers were taking responsibility for the pedagogical practices and organising activities. ECE teachers were, in effect, the ones in the team guiding the pedagogy into practice. Hence, teachers' pedagogical leadership responsibility included pedagogical solutions in the classroom, being responsible for pedagogical functions and activities, and arranging children into smaller groups during the daily activities. However, because teachers had the main responsibility for pedagogy, it was perceived to be important that responsibilities were shared among team members and that the whole team of educators was involved in implementing ECE together. Participants considered that maintenance of pedagogical conversations with the educator team by a teacher would ensure the success and quality of the activities and pedagogy.

### *Teachers' pedagogical leadership in Florida*

The analysis of data from the teachers' and directors' interviews in Florida led to identification of the following discourses: (a) teachers' pedagogical leadership is collaborative, (b) teachers' pedagogical leadership is built on professional development (c) pedagogical leadership empowers teachers, and (d) teachers' pedagogical leadership extends beyond the classroom. Although the participants in the two centres demonstrated a range of levels of familiarity with pedagogical leadership concepts, their overall discourse indicated their shared perception of teachers as leaders. These four discourses are presented in the subsections below.

### *Teachers' pedagogical leadership is collaborative*

Teachers and programme directors agreed that teachers' pedagogical leadership is collaborative, shared, and distributed. It was evident from the analysis that teachers felt that they acted as leaders in their classrooms: they used their child development knowledge and careful observation of children to plan and implement activities and

interactions that responded to the children, and to family and cultural backgrounds. Teachers emphasised that they practised leadership in collaboration with other teachers and directors. For example, teachers at Centre 1 noted that they shared responsibilities, and coordinated lesson planning, activities, and other tasks in the classroom. In addition, they described how teachers across the whole programme maintained a collaborative and distributed leadership approach and benefitted from the shared knowledge. All teachers in Centre 1, and some in Centre 2, expressed the need for a more extensive collaborative relationship with the directors. Aligned with the request for a closer partnership between teachers and directors, the directors at Centre 2 elaborated on their presence in the classroom, giving support and modelling for teachers. Overall, all the teachers and directors noted that optimal collaboration could only be achieved through effective communication among the teachers, and between teachers and administrators.

### *Teachers' pedagogical leadership is built on professional development*

Teachers and directors indicated that intentional professional development was an important building block for pedagogical leadership. As noted earlier, the initial professional preparation of these teachers varied from a 45-hour early childhood education training programme to a bachelor's degree in early education. Though no participants received any training in leadership in their initial preparation, it was interesting to note that those with a bachelor's degree felt more confident about their competence to act as a leader in pedagogical tasks such as planning, teaching, assessment, and relationships with parents, whilst others had more hesitancy about their pedagogical decisions.

In both centres, in-service professional development was available. However, at Centre 1, these opportunities were not as systematic and without purposeful alignment with the centre's goals (e.g. conferences, symposiums, and occasional workshops). On the other hand, at Centre 2, the professional development related to leadership was intentionally structured to address the mission and vision of the centre. In particular, teachers and directors participated in a specific programme which aimed to develop and/or strengthen leadership skills. In addition, one of the directors at Centre 2 described the specific professional development in pedagogy as follows:

We have professional development days throughout the year, and these are specific training towards the curriculum we are using, the conscious discipline we are using for our behaviour.

Overall, a sense of the importance of intentional in-service professional development as supplementary training opportunities to fill any gaps initial preparation emerged from their discourses.

### *Pedagogical leadership empowers teachers*

The participants emphasised that leadership was meant to empower teachers in their classrooms, giving them autonomy and the freedom to make pedagogical decisions that would benefit the children. Notably, the teachers at Centre 2 felt that they were given more opportunities to be leaders, with the guidance and support from their directors. The discourses indicated that even pedagogical leadership could emerge in a hierarchical fashion, as directors guided them in pedagogical issues. For example, one teacher at Centre 2 reflected:

Leadership is about empowering you. They [directors] assist me, follow up, and come behind me. They raise me up, continually encouraging me and being positive.

Directors echoed their roles as modelling leadership qualities for teachers and children, with the idea that the teachers would grow into the role of leader in the classroom. While most of the participants emphasised that pedagogical leadership should empower teachers in their classrooms, their experiences were not unanimous concerning the actual practice of leadership. For instance, while the teachers at Centre 2 considered that they experienced modelling and support that reinforced their feeling of empowerment in their classrooms, the teachers at Centre 1 seemed to associate leadership more with the director's position, noting that leadership was something that 'they [directors] take care of for us'.

### *Teachers' pedagogical leadership extends beyond the classroom*

The participants from Centre 2 expressed the view that pedagogical leadership should start in the ECE classroom to foster the children's development, and that it should extend beyond the classroom's boundaries to affect their families' lives. Consequently, at Centre 2, the participants appeared of one mind in their belief that any child, and their parents, could become a leader, rather than only the ECE directors and teachers. Therefore, parents and children were continuously encouraged to take on activities, such the children helping the teachers organise learning centres or parents invited to develop mini-projects. Such engagements exemplified Centre 2's commitment to promoting ECE leadership intentionally, in order to impact the children's learning journey. As one teacher at Centre 2 explained:

We believe that any child can be a leader. So, every week in every classroom, there is a [child] leader. So, if we work from the very beginning, we'll have more leaders in the world.

The teachers and directors, alike, at Centre 2 agreed that pedagogical leadership included modelling leadership in the classroom to the children and parents with the purpose of encouraging parents to infuse these practices at home as well. Teachers and directors felt that children's learning was much stronger when they were able to transfer leadership skills beyond the classroom. As a participant noted, 'they [children and parents] are the leaders of their own lives; they are in control of their destiny'. Notably, the last theme was confined to Centre 2: leadership practices there were deeply embedded in the organisation, in its practices, and in training offered to staff, volunteers, parents, and children that aimed to help integrate and address the needs of the culturally and linguistically diverse immigrant population they served.

### *Teachers' pedagogical leadership: comparative analysis*

Comparative analysis of the discourses resulted in the identification of three major themes. These were: (a) mutual understanding of teachers' pedagogical leadership, (b) professional and educational preparation and the teacher's role and (c) the extent of the implementation of teachers' pedagogical leadership. Each theme is introduced briefly in the paragraph below, before being presented in detail further below, in the Discussion section.

First, mutual understanding of teachers' pedagogical leadership indicated that participants from both international locations perceived teachers' pedagogical leadership as a shared phenomenon in ECE centres. While Finnish participants described it as 'distributed leadership', the participants in Florida defined it as 'collaborative leadership'. Shared knowledge and vision of pedagogy were, similarly, noted in both locations as a key phenomenon in distributed pedagogical leadership. Secondly, in terms of professional and educational preparation and the teacher's role, the Finnish participants' discourse indicated that pedagogical leadership was based on teachers' professional expertise. In Florida, meanwhile, pedagogical leadership was envisaged as empowering teachers. All participants highlighted the strong professionalism and its connection with pedagogical leadership. Finally, the extent of the implementation of teachers' pedagogical leadership within the various contexts in Finland and Florida revealed some interesting differences. Although teachers in all participating early childhood centres tended to lead the pedagogical activities within their classrooms and with their children, it was notable that the teachers at Centre 2 in Florida expanded their pedagogical leadership beyond the classroom.

## Discussion

As explained above, our in-depth analysis of interview data with ECE teachers and directors in Finland and Florida led to a comparative analysis where three major themes were identified. Exploration of these themes can contribute to our understanding of teachers' pedagogical leadership. Our interpretation of the themes was that teachers' pedagogical leadership is impacted by a range of factors, such as curricular guidelines, teacher preparation, and child and family demographics in Finland and Florida. By identifying the similarities, we gained insights into the phenomenon, taking account of the contextual reflections of the participants' speech (Vlasov 2018). Our findings expanded our understanding of the concept of pedagogical leadership, offering additional layers, components and characteristics of pedagogical leadership through the identification of discourses that could potentially impact ECE practice. In the subsections below, we explore each of the three major themes that were identified and consider their implications for ECE practice, in the context of other relevant research.

### *Mutual understanding of teachers' pedagogical leadership*

Our findings from both countries suggested that teachers were considered to have pedagogical leadership and that it was, in particular, *distributed* pedagogical leadership. Likewise, earlier studies confirmed the importance of collaborative shared vision and interaction (Harris 2004; Heikka 2014; Heikka, Halttunen, and Waniganayake 2016). Furthermore, participants assigned certain leadership roles to directors beyond pedagogical leadership; teachers were not involved in those tasks (e.g. financial and other administrative tasks). Thus, the teacher's role in distributed leadership was confirmed, especially as distributed *pedagogical* leadership, where the emphasis was on shared responsibility for pedagogy (Abel, Talan, and Masterson 2017).

### *Professional and educational preparation and the teacher's role*

Teachers' pedagogical leadership requires strong professionalism, as our findings indicated. The Finnish participants' discussions raised the notion of teachers' responsibility for pedagogical solutions in a classroom, with directors being responsible for pedagogy at the centre level. In Florida, participating teachers' different perspectives on their leadership role might possibly have reflected, in part, their different educational backgrounds. Unlike the situation in Finland, where teachers are required to have a bachelor's degree, ECE teachers in the United States can teach with diplomas at various levels, according to the requirements within each state. Whilst teachers' pedagogical leadership seems to be strong in Finnish data, Fonsén and Ukkonen-Mikkola (2019) and Halpern, Szecsi, and Mak (2020) have argued that ECE teachers' initial training was insufficient for the ability of pedagogical leadership and further training was needed to ensure professional growth in developing teachers' pedagogical leadership. Furthermore, Fonsén et al. (2021) have contended that the roles of the teachers and centre director, as well as the organisational structures of leadership in ECE, need more clarification in Finnish ECE.

It is evident that pedagogical leadership needs to align with the contemporary nature of education, fostering collaboration and change while creating and sustaining effective leadership environments and pedagogical communities that address the many challenges experienced by educational leadership (Male and Palaiologou 2012). Moreover, by fostering pedagogical leadership, ECE directors can create opportunities to empower teachers' leadership potential and provide them with resources to develop professionally, through mentoring and modelling, in order to take on responsibilities to supervise and direct programmes (Fonsén and Ukkonen-Mikkola 2019; Souto-Manning and Mordan-Delgado 2016).

According to the participants in centres in Florida, the pedagogical tasks were not carried out independently but in close and hierarchical relationships with directors. However, directors in these two centres in Florida were engaged in curriculum decisions, and even in instructional decisions. For example, at Centre 2 there was three-layered administrative leadership above the classroom teachers. These directors were responsible for long-term planning, curriculum, and daily supervision. The directors were also responsible for evaluating teachers and their pedagogical work. Therefore, the teachers seemed to anticipate guidance and supervision rather than autonomy in their decision-making. This approach to leadership seemed to be closer to instructional leadership, which maintains the traditional power base of directors, rather than pedagogical leadership, which is collaborative and empowering of teachers (Webb 2005).

### *The extent of the implementation of teachers' pedagogical leadership*

The impact of diversity in the national contexts was evident in our findings concerning the extent of teachers' pedagogical leadership. The ECE leadership at Centre 2 was identified as crucial to addressing the needs of the growing communities of culturally and linguistically diverse children and families (Halpern, Szecsi, and Mak 2020; Nash and Sosinski 2016). The persistence of English-only monolingual early childhood education programmes can significantly impede the preservation of families' cultures, heritage language, ethnic identity, and integration, often leading to the complete loss of the first

language (Nash and Sosinski 2016; Wong-Fillmore 1991, 2000). With this in mind, the ECE teachers and administrators at Centre 2 felt it was essential to extend leadership beyond the classroom to the children and their families, aligned with the core of the centre's mission and values. Consequently, these teachers practised pedagogical leadership with the goal of transmitting leadership skills to children and their family members, nurturing dual language learning environments, promoting language equity through bilingual education, and treating bilingualism and children's cultures as assets. Therefore, teachers' pedagogical leadership was combined with culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogies to serve the growing population of Spanish-speaking children and their families, teachers, staff, and community (Nash and Sosinski 2016; Souto-Manning et al. 2016; Souto-Manning and Mordan-Delgado 2016). Thus, the impetus for Centre 2 to extend leadership beyond the centre can be explained by contextual factors. Centre 2 served primarily families with limited English proficiency and often of lower socioeconomic status who recently emigrated from Central and South America; therefore, the leadership skills transferred from teachers to parents and children aimed to empower families in the new culture. Furthermore, although quality ECE programmes in the United States are expected to promote effective home-school communication and relationships (National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)), the intentional practice of fostering pedagogical leadership beyond the classroom at Centre 2 was noteworthy. In other words, teachers' pedagogical leadership was a critical aspect that helped Centre 2 directors encourage and empower teachers' voices to take on socially just actions towards children with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, who are often marginalised from opportunities to attain academic and social success in their communities (Bryan et al. 2016; Halpern et al. 2019; Halpern, Szecsi, and Mak 2020).

Although the Finnish administrative and curriculum reforms referred to earlier in this paper have placed strong emphasis on education and children's individual educational plans, it was interesting to note that discourse about the role of families was largely absent from the interviews. Nonetheless, the Finnish National Core Curriculum emphasises parents' involvement in pedagogical planning (Finnish National Agency for Education [FNAE] 2018, 2022). Finnish teachers stated that ECE leadership practices were confined to the ECE centres, highlighting the educational policies in place to pave the way for children from ECE through the basic education levels (Fonsén and Vlasov 2017; Finnish National Agency for Education [FNAE] 2018, 2022).

Overall, crucial to achieving the transformational benefits of ECE leadership practices appears to be the role of professional development training for ECE directors at various levels, with the goal of promoting integration, visibility, and shared leadership knowledge within the ECE centre. In addition, practices aimed at encouraging the application of leadership skills and competencies to promote socially just actions towards children of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and those with marginalised opportunities to enhance their development and their social and academic success are also vital (Armstrong, Kinney, and Clayton 2009; Bruns et al. 2017; Bryan et al. 2016; Henderson 2017; LaRocco et al. 2014; Myers and Palmer 2015). Above all, ECE leadership must be responsive to diverse populations of children, as well as to early childhood workers, confronting issues of power, agency, identities, and knowledge, while promoting 'more collaborative, ethical, inclusive and socially just communities' (Davis, Krieg, and Smith 2015, 145).



## **Limitations**

A limitation of the study was that different types of data collection were employed. The Finnish research design planned for the use of focus group interviews, while the researchers in Florida conducted individual interviews. Although the semi-structured interview protocol was the same in both international locations, it must be recognised that the focus group discussion interviews might have expanded the scope to the areas which did not occur in the individual interviews. Nonetheless, both types of interviews were suitable for the exploration of rich, detailed discourses about the teacher's pedagogical leadership.

As is the case in cross-cultural research, the contextual and cultural differences were investigated. However, some additional culturally specific factors could have been considered, too. Because the researchers lived and worked in their respective countries, we assumed that we practised the optimum consideration of the country-specific contexts, but this might not be the case.

Rather than aiming at generalisation, the purpose of this comparative case study was to better understand the perspectives of ECE teachers and directors in two different international locations by examining the concept of teachers' pedagogical leadership in teachers' and directors' discourses. The comparative case study approach allowed for a type of generalisability at the conceptual level of teachers' perceptions of their pedagogical leadership (Yin 2018); also, the comparative case study method enhances the validity and credibility of the findings (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). Despite its limitations in scope and design, the strength of the study lies in the insights gained and the lessons learned from in-depth, qualitative analysis of the rich data.

## **Implications**

Interpreting and reflecting on the findings has led us to suggest some implications. It is important to note that the cross-case comparison structure allowed us to identify some lessons learned from each case and the teachers' discourses (Stake 2005); therefore, this study offers a contribution to the knowledge base about the concept of teachers' pedagogical leadership identified in individual cases and their comparison. The specific implications that we identified are detailed in the subsections below.

### ***Strengthening skills for collaboration in pedagogical leadership***

It was evident from the study findings that teachers in both locations found collaboration, teamwork, and sharing professional expertise to be the essential contextual elements which allow distributed leadership to be effectively implemented. This suggests that it is important for teacher preparation programmes and ECE centres to create and maintain a professional collaborative atmosphere, in which each teacher is considered to be an equal and essential member of the community. This draws attention to the need for teacher educators and centre directors to ensure that preservice and in-service teachers are provided with opportunities to practise professional collaboration. Moreover, it is essential that teachers mutually scaffold and support each other via collaboration so that they can enact distributed pedagogical leadership in an optimal way.

### *Offering strong, comprehensive teacher preparation*

Teachers' discourses in both contexts suggested that their pedagogical foundation may play a part in the extent to which they practised pedagogical leadership independently, without directors' supervision. It was evident that teachers needed directors' support to a varying extent while working. Teachers with strong initial preparation or intentional in-service professional development for pedagogical leadership appeared enabled to take part in distributed pedagogical leadership. Our research highlights the crucial role of teacher development opportunities (initial teacher education programmes and continuing professional development) in preparing teachers for practising distributed pedagogical leadership based on solid pedagogical knowledge and competence.

### *Increasing the involvement of families*

Perhaps due to strong emphasis on educational issues, children's families received less attention in the Finnish ECE discourses analysed in our study. This became all the more visible in the comparison with one of the centres in Florida, in which pedagogical leadership was intentionally extended to families and children. As detailed earlier in the paper, this centre served families including those with newly-arrived immigrant backgrounds who had limited English proficiency. This example draws attention to how extension of leadership activities could contribute to families' acculturation in a new country. Internationally, it is imperative to explore how immigrant families can be best served; sharing pedagogical leadership with these families might be one way for supporting the families' resettlement in the new culture. This example also underscores the value of expansion of leadership to all families, regardless of their backgrounds. The more that families become familiar with and engaged in pedagogical issues, the more likely it is that they will be able to support their children's education.

## **Conclusions**

Overall, this comparative case study has provided rich insights into the conceptualisation of teachers' pedagogical leadership in ECE as it emerged from teachers' and directors' discourses across the ECE settings in Finland and Florida. In previous studies (Fonsén et al. 2022), pedagogical leadership was recognised as an indicator of high-quality pedagogy in ECE; the findings of the current study also point to the importance of strengthening teachers' pedagogical leadership. ECE teachers and directors in both Finland and Florida recognised the value of pedagogical leadership and its shared nature. Clarification of shared leadership with centre directors supports taking responsibility for high quality pedagogy. Furthermore, the study draws attention to the importance of initial teacher preparation and training for ECE teachers, as well as continuing professional development, in order for teachers to develop and practise pedagogical leadership. Overall, it became evident in both locations that professional development which addresses pedagogical leadership encourages teachers to carry out their role as a team leader with a collaborative style, involving their colleagues as well as expanding it to children's families. It is important to note that although the context of the two settings – Finland and Florida – are significantly different in terms of aspects including ECE programmes, curriculum and policies, teachers shared many similar perceptions of their role as leaders in the ECE centres.

For further research, it would be meaningful to explore the possibilities of a cross-cultural comparative study examining ECE teacher education programmes in detail: what they offer in terms of the development and content of studies in pedagogical leadership competence. In addition, with family engagement in mind, it would be valuable to explore families' perspectives and understand aspects that may foster or hinder families' participation in pedagogical leadership.

## Notes

1. <https://www.helsinki.fi/en/researchgroups/leadership-in-educational-contexts-research-group/research/international-early-childhood-education-leadership-research-discourses-of-leadership-in-the-diverse-field-of-early-childhood-education>.
2. The term 'director' as used in this paper includes ECE director roles and other leadership roles such as programme leadership/coordination roles.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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