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# Dimensions of Pedagogical Leadership in Early Childhood Education and Care

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## Abstract

The purpose of the research was to clarify the phenomena of pedagogical leadership and to investigate the implementation of pedagogical leadership by childcare centre directors. The research was connected with the University of Tampere's Development Project on pedagogical leadership carried out in seven municipalities in Finland. The project reflected an inclusive and participatory action research study. The ontological premise of the research is narrative where knowledge is seen as a socially constructed process. The study was based on the contextual leadership theory by Nivala (1998) which emphasises the importance of the core task of early childhood organisations. The data collection methods comprised questionnaires, development plans drawn up by the childcare centre directors and teachers, and narratives written by the directors. The main story reflected a shared understanding about the phenomena of pedagogical leadership. It can be seen that in Finnish childcare centres, pedagogical leadership is understood as a contextual and a cultural phenomenon.

## Tiivistelmä

Tutkimuksen tavoitteena on selvittää pedagogisen johtajuuden ilmiötä, käytännön toteutusta sekä sen kehittämishaasteita. Aineisto on kerätty seitsemästä suomalaisesta kunnasta Tampereen yliopiston varhaiskasvatuksen johtajuuden ja laadun kehittämishankkeessa. Metodologisesti kehittämishankkeen läsnäolo tuo tutkimukseen toimintatutkimuksellisia piirteitä. Ontologisesti tutkimusta voidaan luonnehtia narratiiviseksi. Tutkimuksen teoreettinen perusta rakentuu kontekstuaaliseen johtajuusmalliin, jossa organisaation perustehtävä määrittää johtajuutta (Nivala, 1998). Tutkimusaineistona on päiväkodin johtajien kehittämissuunnitelmia, pedagogisen johtajuuden päiväkirjoja ja kyselyitä. Narratiivisella analyysillä luodaan kuvaa peda-

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gogisesta johtajuudesta. Hyvärisen (2006) mukaan yksilöllisten tarinoiden kautta muodostuu päätarina, joka edustaa kulttuurisesti jaettua ymmärrystä kuvatusa ilmiöstä. Tällä luodaan kuvausta suomalaisessa varhaiskasvatuksessa kulttuurisesti ja kontekstuaalisesti jaetusta käsityksestä pedagogisesta johtajuudesta.

## Introduction

To provide high quality early childhood education there is a need for pedagogical leadership. Previous leadership research in Finnish early childhood education contexts confirmed that teachers expect pedagogical leadership from their centre directors. Research also indicates that directors reported the lack of time for pedagogical leadership. It has also been indicated that it is difficult for directors to define the content of pedagogical leadership. (Fonsén, 2009; Hujala, Heikka, & Fonsén, 2009.) In addition pedagogical leadership is a complicated concept that has several definitions (e.g. Kurki, 1993; Nivala, 1999; Their, 1994).

When conceptualising pedagogical leadership the phenomena of early childhood education and care (ECEC) pedagogy in Finnish context needs to be defined. Pedagogy of ECEC combines education and teaching, as well as caregiving. Curriculum is seen as age-related and child-centred, where the participation and engagement of children are emphasised. The partnership between parents and teachers has a crucial role as it goes further than just co-operation. Partnerships can be formed and maintained by drawing up individual ECEC plans for children, which influence how teachers design and implement programs. Also early recognition and effective pedagogical interventions of individual learning difficulties are important. With individual pedagogical solutions, the needs of children can be met and the optimal foundation for developmental growth and effective learning can be ensured for each child (National Curriculum Guidelines on ECEC in Finland 2003).

The meaning of pedagogical leadership in Finnish ECEC is specific when compared with other educational contexts. The purposes of the Finnish ECEC are twofold. As with other Scandinavian ECEC systems, it combines education and caregiving. It is called the Educare system (Hujala, Puroila, Parrila-Haapakoski, & Nivala, 1998, 4). On the one hand, ECEC is part of the education system and on the other hand, it comprises social services provided for families. For ECEC leadership, this presents two kinds

of challenges (Nivala, 1998; 1999): the challenges of managing the child care as a service system for meeting the requirements of law, and providing a good service for parents as clients. These tasks are challenging because in Finland, parents have a legal right to municipal child care for children before starting school. Another challenge is how best to lead child centres care as part of an education system. The responsibilities of curriculum implementation, required under the National Curriculum Guidelines on ECEC in Finland (2003) raise the need for pedagogical leadership within ECEC settings. Therefore the quality of early childhood education and pedagogy forms a central focus of childcare centre directors' work in leadership.

Recently, the pedagogical aspect of ECEC centres has been raised in Finland. As a consequence of these discussions over half of the municipalities in the country have shifted the municipal administration of early childhood education from the social services council to the education council<sup>1</sup>. In the Government Program of Prime Minister Jyrki Katainen (2011) a proposal was recorded to shift the ECEC services' legislation, administration and steering from the Ministry of Social Services and Health Care to the Ministry of Education and Culture. The change was implemented in January 2013.

## Methodology and data

The data for this study was collected as a part of the University of Tampere's Development Project in seven Finnish municipalities. The researcher was a project coordinator and collected the data from directors of early childhood education, who were responsible for preschools, childcare centres, family day care and group family day care. The Project started in August 2010 and ended in June 2012. There were a total of 134 centres and 105 directors who participated in this research.

The Development Project as a context for the study determined the nature of the research as action research. The Development Project comprised the following phases: at the beginning of the project, child-specific assessments of the ECEC quality were conducted in every ECEC centre included in the

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1 In Finland municipalities' local government has responsibility to provide day care for families. Municipalities can decide in which administrative organisation is the council of early childhood education.

study. On the basis of these results development plans were formed as a joint process with the stakeholders and the researcher. Development activities were then established according to the development plans. The researcher provided both consultancy advice and in-service training for the directors to assist with implementing the development plans and activities. In the last phase an evaluation of the effectiveness of the development process was carried out by assessing the quality of the pedagogy at each centre.

The main distinction between action research and other types of research is the implementation of an intervention. In action research the researcher makes an intervention and investigates the influences of the intervention. Kuula (2006) argues that in addition to investigating the changes following an intervention, it is essential to investigate the reasons or factors that contributed to the changes, especially if there are no changes arising through the intervention. Jyrkämä (2010) emphasises that the epistemological background of an action research is pragmatism. Theoretical knowledge is always connected to and actualised in practice. According to Kemmis (2008) and Kuula (2006), Kurt Lewin the father of action research, propose that the 'action research spiral' is characterised as research for social management or social engineering.

The methodological approach of the study can be defined as narrative research. Narrative diaries were one set of data in this research. The narratives proposed from the directors included semi-structured questions exploring the concept of pedagogical leadership and the development of the director's own understandings and skills of implementing pedagogical leadership. Due to the 'narrative' or 'linguistic turn' in the social sciences, narrative studies are currently enjoying a growth in popularity. In order to understand narrative inquiry in research we need to understand the characters of the stories. As Hyvärinen (2006) defines, stories are not only subjective but also imply a shared understanding of life. Hendry (2010) suggests that all research is narrative based on the assumption that a narrative is a basic human way of making sense of the world. Using narratives or stories, people can create order and structure in their lives; and hence, this can be seen as a way of 'meaning-making'. Hyvärinen (2006) applies narrative analysis in making a main story from the small stories of the data. After collecting the narrative data from the informants, researchers can construct their own narratives of the study, using techniques such as having a scene and a plot.

As developed by Labov (1997) and Waletzky (1967), the structural analysis method was originally intended for oral narratives. Labov's definition of a narrative analysis consisted of the structural types of narrative clauses, i.e. abstracts, orientations, complicating action and codas. According to Hyvärinen (2006) the structural analysis of narratives could be defined as an introductory analysis. By using content analysis the themes and theoretical constructions of the studied phenomena can be detected. The strength of the narrative method is that it highlights the factors which prevent or promote the implementation of the phenomena. The idea and *tellability* of the narrative is often based on the narrative clauses of 'complicating action'.

In this research the structural narrative analysis method was adapted to the analysis of the narrative diaries with an orientation clause that defines which phenomena belong to pedagogical leadership in the stakeholders' definitions. How the 'complicating action clauses' make a contribution or prevent the implementation of pedagogical leadership was conceptualised. In the last phase of this study, by 'result clauses' was investigated, how the stakeholders perceived the development of pedagogical leadership.

## Results

The results of this research indicated that there were clear dimensions connecting theory and practice (Table 1) reflected in the analysed data. These dimensions are context, organisational culture, professionalism of directors and management of substance. Context is the primary determinant of leadership. Clearly defined core tasks can support the enactment of pedagogical leadership and the structure of organisation can either prevent or promote it. According to the contextual leadership model, leadership is related to the purposes of the work. The aims of the leadership should arise from the core tasks connected with the purposes of work (Nivala, 2002; Hujala, 2004; Hujala et al., 1998). As in contextual leadership model, the results of the present study indicate that in the macro level, how the municipalities organises and resources ECEC services were crucial to the successful implementation of early childhood education in childcare centres in Finland. At the national level the government's intention to provide high quality early childhood education as part of a lifelong learning path

modifies the success of the whole pedagogical systems operating within municipalities.

**Table 1. Dimensions influencing the success of the pedagogical leadership**

DIMENSION	PHENOMENA	THEORY
THE CONTEXT	Micro level: Structure of organisation, Definition of the core task Municipality's resources and structure of ECEC organisation Macro level: <i>The intentions of the national government</i> , situation, place, time, the values and attitudes in society	Contextual leadership model
ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE	Interaction and work community Distributed leadership	Leadership as cultural phenomena Distributed leadership
DIRECTORS' PROFESSIONALITY	Management skills, Leadership role and style Managing work tasks Time management	Transformative power of leadership Transformational leadership Pedagogical leadership as competence of leadership
MANAGEMENT OF SUBSTANCE	Pedagogical competence Management and development of the core task of organisation Theoretical and practical knowledge about ECEC The desire for personal development and pedagogical development	Educational leadership Pedagogical leadership defined narrowly

Organisational culture is another important dimension. As Sergiovanni (1984; 1998) has shown, in his studies that interactions within a working community should be respectful and appreciative. Leadership within a community is built around the values and virtues that are shared and pedagogical leadership should be seen as developing the social capital of whole community. Sergiovanni (2001, 54) uses the term “*ideal based leadership*”, which means value based and shared leadership. Questions about distributed leadership that emerged from the analysis of the results can be connected with the research reported by Heikka and Waniganayake (2011) who investigated distributed perspectives of leadership within ECE organisations. These questions included can the director share leadership

and trust with teachers? Is the responsibility of the program quality shared amongst everyone in the organisation?

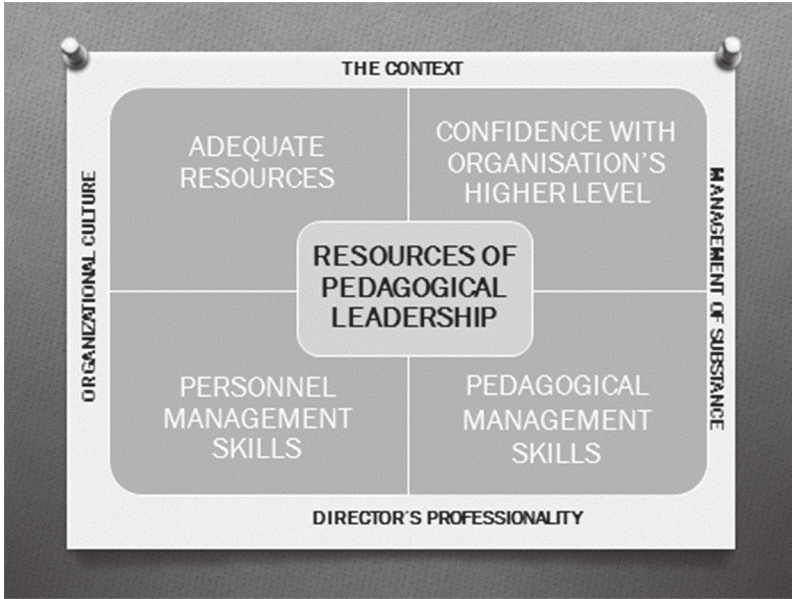
The director's professionalism and the way she or he can carry out the role and the authority is the third aspect determining the pedagogical leadership. Directors need leadership skills and they are responsible for the functionality of the organisation. They need to know how the vision, mission and strategy should be formed, so that the curriculum can be implemented. The style of leadership needs to be visionary and have transformational power (Bennis, 1989; Shields, 2010) and the leadership should also be active and not passive, as Sergiovanni (2005) has defined.

The fourth aspect seemed to be the director's pedagogical competence. Some crucial questions comprise: do the directors have a will to develop their own knowledge? Are they open to learn new things and do they try to develop the pedagogy in their centres? Are they ready to invest in teachers' pedagogical development? The pedagogical competence of the working community is also essential, and the pedagogically trained teachers are a pivotal resource for sheared pedagogical leadership. Those with limited understanding and lower level of education within a working community can create challenges for director's pedagogical leadership. Nivala (1999) has proposed that directors' pedagogical competence sets limits for pedagogical leadership. Instead of pedagogical orientation it seemed that they were more oriented to administrative or economic tasks.

The resources of pedagogical leadership located through this study were formulated on the basis of the thematic narrative analysis (Figure 1). Derived from directors' narratives there were story lines found, where the pedagogical leadership was defined either as being successful or ineffective. Narrative analysis was used to find 'complicating clauses'. Certain phenomena were identified which either contributed to or prevented the implementation of pedagogical leadership. Figure 1 was developed to reflect these contributions and preventions.

Adequate resources (enough personnel, time to work, not too large responsibility areas) are one part of pedagogical leadership resources. Without pedagogically educated personnel there cannot be good pedagogy. Having sufficient staff is essential. Substitutes are needed to replace absent staff, for example, those on sick leave. Adequate resources consist of materials as well as time. That is, directors should be resourced with sufficient time resource to perform their roles in pedagogical leadership effectively. This





**Figure 1. The resources of pedagogical leadership**

includes time to explore the pedagogy in centers and to discuss with the staff about it. Directors also require support for themselves and this is one of the crucial parts of pedagogical leadership resources. It is necessary to gain the confidence of their supervisors and other management. The confidence of administration is also a prerequisite for adequate resourcing.

Personnel management skills are another essential dimension of pedagogical leadership resources. Personnel management skills are needed in order to engage staff with the values and pedagogical commitments of the center. Pedagogical management skills include the knowledge of pedagogy, and knowledge of recent research findings in the ECEC sector. It also includes the tools to lead the pedagogy. Management of ECEC curriculum processes require certain tools, such as planning sessions, shared understandings and tools to assess the pedagogy that has been implemented. Directors must have sufficient pedagogical knowledge to be able to argue the need for sufficient resources.

Directors want to develop the content of their profession. There is a need to clarify and prioritize the tasks of an ECEC director's position. Directors

call for more time resources and possibilities for pedagogical discussions. They mentioned that the discussion structures should be strengthened. They want to develop their own skills for personnel management and skills to implement pedagogical leadership in order to engage the staff with the center's values and core tasks. One of the challenges was increasing the appreciation of the director's pedagogical expertise necessary to achieve the confidence of senior management as without this, it was not possible to obtain better access to more resources.

Participation in the Development Project affected the directors' views about pedagogical leadership. It became deeper and more accurate. Many directors said that pedagogical leadership was very important for them already but the meaning became clearer because of their involvement in this project. The results of the quality assessment of pedagogical leadership and the ECEC quality increased from first assessment in the beginning of the project to the reassessment at the end of the project. This indicates that the development work was profitable and that pedagogical leadership can be developed through effective participation in professional learning opportunities such as those provided through the Development Project.

## Conclusions

The practical applications of the results of this study can be used to develop the education of ECEC teachers and directors. Even at the basic level of ECEC teacher education there should be more studies on leadership, because of the importance of the teachers' role as pedagogical leaders in their centre teams. The directors need more in-service training on leadership skills. Childcare centre directors must have a strong sense of pedagogical competence in order to be pedagogical directors and they need to have a consistent and reflective will to promote pedagogical development within their centres.

The municipalities can benefit from the results of this project as well. Results indicate that the responsibility area for one director cannot be too wide. Ways of implementing a distributed leadership model require further investigation. The knowledge of pedagogy and the appreciation of pedagogy as the basis for making administrative decisions should be enhanced by strengthening the pedagogical leadership of centre directors.

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