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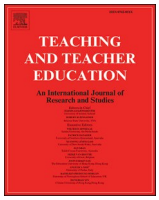

Research paper

Expectations of leadership in the changing context of Finnish early childhood education

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we explore the discourses and dilemmas embodying Finnish early childhood education leaders' expectations regarding their leadership. The data were collected in three focus group interviews with leaders in three municipalities. Four discourses were identified: the discourse of leadership in change, the discourse of leading an expert organisation towards a vision, the discourse of leadership style, and the discourse of leading the ECE mission. Contextual change is the framework in which expectations occur. Leaders experience many dilemmas affecting their leadership. The dilemmas focused on leading change in the administrative hierarchy, leading an expert organisation, approachability, and leading according to one's mission. Leaders themselves should identify the dilemmas. Strengthening leadership in a changing work context requires the identification of dilemmas.

1. Introduction

The operating environment of leaders working in Finnish early childhood education (ECE) is changing dynamically. The concept of leadership in the ECE context has been the subject of active definition and research (e.g. Halttunen & Waniganayake, 2021; Heikka, 2014; Hjelt & Karila, 2021). There are many external and internal stakeholders in ECE, and each of them has expectations regarding the quality of ECE and the leadership that takes care of its quality.

Various expectations may have caused by the several changes in 2010s in Finnish ECE. In 2013, ECE was moved from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to the Ministry of Education and Culture, which placed a stronger emphasis on pedagogy in the ECE services (Fonsén & Vlasov, 2017). Further, the National Core Curriculum for ECEC (FNAE 2016; 2018) has also emphasised pedagogy in guiding ECE work. The purpose of the National Core Curriculum is to guide the development of ECE quality and specify the key contents of ECE practice, and it also offers guidelines for municipal-level curricula. The ECE centre leaders' (later, ECE leaders) duty is to lead ECE quality. Moreover, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) gives guidelines for the ECE evaluation by building quality indicators (Vlasov et al., 2019). Furthermore, the law (Act on ECEC, 540/2018) determines the qualification requirements for early childhood teachers (later, EC teachers) and ECE leaders: it defines EC teachers to be responsible for the pedagogical activities, while ECE leaders have overall responsibility of the ECE centre (also FNAE, 2018). The new guidance presents a challenge to leaders. The emphasis on shared leadership means that also EC teachers have responsibility for leadership as a pedagogical leader in teams.

There has been relatively little research on leadership expectations. Also, the importance of context in shaping expectations has been neglected. In this study we explore discourses that embody expectations of ECE leaders and their leadership as they experience it themselves. To achieve its research goals, we review contextual conditions in ECE and organisational settings influencing ECE leaders' expectations. In this study, the discourses reveal the talk that ECE centre leaders produce related to expectations, in which they reflect on the expectations they have set for themselves, but also on talk that reveals what expectations ECE centre leaders perceive others place on them in the leader's position. Accordingly, our research questions are: What kind of discourses do ECE leaders produce regarding their leadership expectations? How do the ECE leaders address dilemmas according to the different expectations?

The discourse analytic approach has been earlier used in Finnish higher education institutes' leadership research (Tigerstedt, 2022), and it also provides a fruitful approach to investigate leadership in the ECE

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context. Fonsén et al.ś (e.g., 2021) earlier studies in ECE context have investigated discourses of ECE leadership in teachers' and leaders' pedagogical leadership.

We argue that *change* in ECE is a contextual condition under which different kinds of expectations are shared among. ECE institutions and professionals are governed by the political, social, and economic factors of society (Hjelt & Karila, 2017). Contextual changes include tightened municipal finances, and the economic downturn has increased pressure for savings in the education sector in many countries (Borgna et al., 2019).

Decision-making at the administrative level must be critically examined in order to assess whether increased economic pressures are more powerful than pedagogical values in leadership practice (Fonsén & Lahtero, 2023) Multi-level social ties manifest in the practices of ECE institutions and are ultimately reflected in interaction between children and ECE professionals. In Finland, municipalities have a relatively wide margin of discretion in the organisation of ECE and are responsible for organising the service and monitoring the quality of the service provided. ECE is therefore also subject to decision-making processes at the municipal level, so its priorities and ways of organising activities may vary locally (Hjelt & Karila, 2017).

Johns (2006, p. 386) states that the impact of context on organisational behaviour is not sufficiently recognized or appreciated by researchers, and he defines context as the "situational opportunities and constraints that affect the occurrence and meaning of organisational behaviour". The leaders' context is expected to shape the consistency of expectations leaders have about different work requirements. In ECE, this includes superiors, staff members, and others, like parents and families and children. In this study the context is Finnish ECE, and thus the study introduces contemporary views of Finnish ECE leadership and constructs an understanding of leadership in ECE.

2. Leadership in the Finnish ECE context

We begin by describing Finnish ECE, then ECE leadership in the Finnish context. In Finland, the concept of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is used to outline a goal-oriented system that consists of upbringing, education, and care (Fonsén & Vlasov, 2017). The Ministry of Education and Culture has the main responsibility for education policy, and the Act on Early Childhood Education (540/2018) provides a framework for the operation of ECEC. The Government Decree on ECEC (753/2018) contains provisions on the number and composition of staff in ECE centres. All staff members must be qualified. EC teachers must hold a post-secondary-level degree (a bachelor's degree in education or 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. After 2030, ECE leaders must hold a master's degree in education. ECE leaders must currently hold at least the same qualifications as EC teachers, and appropriate administrative skills are desirable. The National Core Curriculum for ECEC (2018) has been drawn up by the Finnish National Agency for Education, and all providers are required to write local ECEC curricula based on it. Municipalities are obliged to organise local ECE services.

In Finnish ECE, children are typically divided into groups by their age, primarily separate groups for 0–3-year-old children and 3–6-year-old children. In total, the group structure is highly dependent on the age structure of the children within one setting during the given year and pedagogical planning. For example, there can be so-called "flexible child groups" for 2–6-year-olds, in which the children can be divided into functional small groups for more specific pedagogical activities and aims. Pre-primary education is organised most often in separate pre-primary groups (for 6-year-old children) (Salminen, 2017; also, National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2018).

All ECE leaders are administrative and pedagogical leaders in their centres. In bigger municipalities, there may be area managers between the ECE leaders and municipal ECE leaders (FINEEC, 2021). EC teachers are team leaders and pedagogical leaders in educator teams at the child group level. A multi-professional personnel structure is stressed. The professionalism of ECEC staff is concurrently connected to a commitment to high quality and advocating for young children and their families (Kupila et al., 2018). Professionalism can be understood as something to be developed in terms of its reciprocal and manifold relations (Kupila & Millei, 2017). In addition to their colleagues, EC teachers have reciprocal relationships with other professionals, such as social workers, schoolteachers, health professionals, and special educators (National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2018).

Recent research has shown that EC teachers find that the constantly changing work and steering context create a demanding work environment and workload. EC teachers report facing increasingly complex demands, such as changes in the legislative and curriculum framework, and increasing documentation and additional time pressures (Kupila et al., 2018). Research has also emphasised novice teachers' need for support (Kupila & Karila, 2018).

The number of employees varies between municipal and private ECE providers. In the FINEEC (2021) study, ECE leaders (n = 1376) were asked how many employees they have. Municipal centre leaders (n = 1050) mostly have 21–30 (40.5%) or more than 30 (34%) employees, while private ECE centre leaders (n = 326) mostly have 1–10 (51%) or 11–20 (31.8%) employees. Hence, ECE leaders who work at the same time as an EC teacher, and the centre leaders are mostly from private ECE centres (private 58%, municipal 11.6% of leaders), and the leaders who are only administrative leaders are usually from municipal ECE centres (private 44%, municipal 88.4% of leaders) (FINEEC, 2021).

According to Hujala and Eskelinen (2013), the main leadership responsibilities and tasks of Finnish ECE leaders are pedagogical leadership and human resource management. The other tasks that are part of the leaders' duties are service management, financial management, network management, the leading of change, and daily managerial tasks. However, ECE leaders' tasks and responsibilities are not clearly defined, and workloads are not appropriately apportioned, and many ECE leaders suffer from a lack of time for pedagogical leadership (Fonsén, 2014).

Recently, leadership in ECE has been emphasised as pedagogical leadership, which is also required by the strengthened educational content in ECE (Fonsén et al., 2022). In this study, pedagogical leadership is seen as broad-based pedagogical leadership (Lahtero & Kuusilehto-Awale, 2015), which includes all leadership dimensions that support achieving the vision and basic mission of education. Direct and indirect pedagogical leadership together form broad-based leadership, where the direct focuses on the pedagogical goals while the indirect is built on human management and administrative and financial tasks with the aim of achieving pedagogical goals (Fonsén & Lahtero, forthcoming; Lahtero & Kuusilehto-Awale, 2015).

Organisational structures are moreover undergoing reconceptualization in Finnish municipal ECE (Halttunen & Waniganayake, 2021). Frequently one ECE leader must lead several ECE centres. Leadership in this kind of distributed organisation means a new definition for the ECE leaders' role and the need to clarify the ECE leaders' status of absence or presence in the units (Halttunen, 2009). The expectations of staff may demand the presence of the ECE leader even if it is not realistic.

In recent years, ECE leadership has faced many changes that have affected responsibilities as well as structures of leadership. Mäntyjärvi and Parrila (2021) describe leadership in ECE as a constantly evolving and reshaping process that requires constant dialogue and negotiation between participants. Fonsén et al. (2021b) argue that nowadays power and responsibility are ambiguous and need clarification. The distribution of leadership is not clear due to law and curriculum reforms. According to the Act on Early Childhood Education (2018/540, 25§), ECE centres must have a director responsible for operations. Nevertheless, in the National Core Curriculum (2018), the responsibility for the pedagogy implemented in groups of children is assigned to the EC teacher.

Looking at the frame of broad-based pedagogical leadership (Lahtero & Kuusilehto-Awale, 2015), the focus of leaders' responsibility is leading the functionality of the organisation in the sense of achieving the pedagogical aims, while distributed pedagogical leadership stresses the teachers' involvement and responsibility for the pedagogy alongside the leaders (Fonsén & Lahtero, forthcoming).

In addition, the economic challenges faced by the municipalities have broadened the responsibilities of ECE leaders, and the time for pedagogical leadership has become limited. This has increased the need to rethink the distribution of the leadership and roles of EC teachers and ECE leaders. As a result, expectations may also vary.

3. The complexity of the integration of expectations in leadership

Expectations play an important role in leadership (Rodgers et al., 2013). Vroom (1995/1964), argues that employees are motivated to act when there is an expectancy that their behaviour can result in the achievement of desired outcomes. Further, Vroom (1995/1964) argues that people consciously choose courses of action according to their perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs. Expectancy is defined by Vroom (1995/1964, 20) as "a momentary belief concerning the likelihood that a particular act will be followed by a particular outcome". Hence, expectancy theory emphasises individual perceptions of the environment and subsequent interactions because of personal expectations. Lawler (1973) claims that in any situation, the actions a person opts for are determined by their prevailing expectations and preferences.

Studies exploring expectations have focused on a variety of issues. Rodgers et al. (2013) confirm the importance of subordinates' expectations and indicate that a leader's position itself may allow for some self-benefiting without necessarily affecting commitment to the leader. Rodgers et al. (2013) have further explored how the relationship between leaders' behaviour and subordinates' commitment to them is influenced by the fulfilment of subordinates' expectations (i.e., expecting a certain behaviour, which occurs).

Normative expectations play an important role in the behaviours in which people choose to engage (Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2007). Staff in the ECE centres form expectations about how the local leader should behave, which further influences the staff's judgement of the leader's impressiveness. However, leader-staff role expectation gaps can be disadvantageous to outcomes (Hooijberg & Choi, 2000). The daily decisions that leaders make are also influenced by their own views of quality in ECE, and they impact how leaders choose to implement what they believe quality to be (Lesson, 2012). Schein (2011) argues that there is also a positive relationship between leadership style and organisational culture. Organisational culture in ECE is shaped by the mutual interactions between administrators, staff, children, family, and the environment.

Further, Olkkonen and Luoma-aho (2019) illustrate how expectations shape organisational relationships. They offer a conceptual elaboration of expectations as normative ideals (positive expectations), predictive realistic assessments (positive or negative expectations), and destructive misalignments (negative expectations), which each unveil a dimension that explains how expectations affect relationship formation, maintenance, and evaluation.

Seele and Eberl (2020) state leadership as a social relationship in which both participants are active. In ECE leadership, expectations must also be seen in the context of a co-evolving process within the community in which leadership can be seen as a process of reaching a common pedagogical understanding within the community (see Mäntyjärvi & Parrila, 2021). In such a community, expectations of leadership must be seen as subjective and contingent, not merely formal. The ECE community is a complex one, where leadership develops through dialogues and relationships between community members.

Further, role theory has described how expectations shape role behaviour and Dierdorff and Morgeson (2007) emphasise the necessity of discussing the nature of the role expectations that exist in organisational settings. Biddle (1986, p. 67) states that roles presume "that persons are members of social positions and hold expectations for their own behaviours and those of other persons". Biddle (1986, p. 69) goes on to state that, "Most versions of role theory presume that expectations are the major generators of roles, expectations are learned through experience, and people are aware of the expectations they hold". Subordinates as members of a role set each constitute expectations of what their leaders should or should not do in relation to various duties and responsibilities (Marginson & Bui, 2009). Hence, role set expectations represent a central element in influencing behaviours (Tsui et al., 1995). These expectations influence subordinates' judgements of the leader's efficacy. In ECE role perceptions, those with which ECE leaders specifically identify and the importance they attach to them may be influenced by their immediate context and environment, including how they interact "with children, families and other providers" (Hooper, 2020, p. 225).

ECE leaders, their superiors, and subordinates need common expectations for ECE leaders to lead effectively (see Sergiovanni & Elliott, 1975). Lack of clear expectations of a leader risks role conflict and role ambiguity. In either case, both the individual and the institution can be negatively impacted. Developing positive working relationships is an important part of leadership.

4. Study design

4.1. Research questions

The aim of this study was to investigate leadership by examining the expectations the ECE leaders have of leadership in ECE. The context is the leaders' work in a dynamic and constantly changing ECE environment. We study the discourses that embody expectations of ECE leaders and their leadership as experienced by themselves. The discourses reveal talk in which the ECE leaders produce the expectations they set themselves, as well as talk that reveals what expectations the leaders perceive others place on them in the ECE leader's position. The analysis concerns these discourses and the dilemmas found therein. The research questions are: What kind of discourses do ECE leaders produce regarding their leadership expectations? How do the ECE leaders address dilemmas according to the different expectations?

4.2. Conducting the research

This study is a sub-study in the international research *Discourses of leadership in the diverse field of early childhood education* led by the University of Jyväskylä. The Finnish participants are from the Universities of Jyväskylä and Tampere University.

The data were collected through focus group interviews in three (3) Finnish municipalities during January 2018. The municipalities were geographically located in different parts of the country. In total, thirteen (13) ECE leaders participated, and each focus group varied in size from two (2) to seven (7) participants. Ten (10) of the participants were ECE leaders and three (3) were assistant ECE leaders. All participants were legally qualified to act as ECE leaders. At the local level, research permits, and consent were obtained in accordance with the research practices in place at the time of data collection.

Participants in the focus group interviews were partly recruited on a municipality-by-municipality basis. In municipality 1, information from the research was disseminated at the municipal head level to the municipal ECE centres. Leaders were able to register for the research interviews based on their own interest. In municipalities 2 and 3, the head of the municipal ECE invited the leaders to participate in the research interviews by open invitation. As in municipality 1, leaders were given the opportunity to participate in the interviews based on their own interest. In municipality 1, as a facilitator, a university student studying a master's degree in early childhood education conducted the

interview. In municipality 2, a researcher conducted the interview. In municipality 3, the interview was conducted jointly by a researcher and a master's degree student as a facilitator. Later the Master's students wrote their thesis based on the interview data. As facilitators, the students were briefed on their tasks and the ethics of research.

The guiding questions for the interviews were:

- What is your vision of management and leading ECE?
- How do you support the staff?
- What are the expectations for management/leadership?
- What are your expectations for management/leadership?
- What do you want to change in ECE leadership? What do you want to do differently?

The division of labour between the two universities was such that in total three (3) university researchers were responsible for the acquisition of data, and each of them took responsibility for one municipality. After data collection, the researchers' joint review of the data and the resulting discussion led to the search for meanings in the transcribed data. This article focused specifically on expectations related to leadership.

The total duration of the interviews was 4 h and 38 min. The interviews were transcribed. In the discourse section, the symbols C1, C2, and C3 after the name of the interviewee represent each one of the three municipalities participating in the survey. The analysis process sought to identify the various expectations of leadership expressed by all participants in their speeches. Discourses and dilemmas were constructed based on the meanings of all participants, but not all participants are explicitly mentioned in the text.

Participants were assigned pseudonyms. Ethical research practices were followed regarding confidentiality and data protection. Participation was voluntary. To ensure anonymity, we omit interviewees' municipalities and ECE centres. We also do not report the leaders' positions or genders.

4.3. Methodology

The study uses social constructivism and linguistic representation of phenomena originating in the narrative turn in the social sciences (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen, 2009). Berger and Luckmann (1966) state that reality is a social construction and consequence of a common understanding of what knowledge and 'reality' are. Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) argue that language reflects reality in various perspectives, and discourses have the power to modify reality. In Foucault's (2014) thinking, power is strongly connected to the use of language and there is always controversy between different discourses. Language, through its power to produce meanings using speech in various perspectives, is a means to modify reality (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen, 2009). Fairclough (1992) describes language as a basis of social practice, and social practices as a part of language. In social practices, people create expectations for themselves and each other, thereby forming their identities. In this study, we used discourse analysis to conduct the analysis of data to find out the various expectations of leadership expressed in the speech.

In leadership and organisation research, discourses can be understood as established speech practices that contribute to the construction and produce the phenomenon that the discourse describes (Siltaoja & Vehkaperä, 2011). In this study, this refers to expectations related to leadership. Attention is focused on how something is said and then how it produces leadership expectations. Language produces action, so the meanings associated with and produced by leadership expectations are not irrelevant (see Siltaoja & Vehkaperä, 2011).

In this research, the data were analysed by discourse analysis where various elements from the speech of informants were taking under the investigation. The words, sentences, paragraphs, and overall structure were considered by relating them to attributes, themes, and patterns relevant to research questions. Discourse analysis is based on the interpretation of the researchers and explores meanings and interpretations that people produce in their speech (Jokinen et al., 2016). Pirttilä (2006) highlights the struggles for meaning in the organisations studied in discourse analysis. Certain discourses may also seek a leading or hegemonic position and sometimes even to subsume other discourses.

In our research, ECE leaders' talk is examined in the light of expectations they have for their own leadership due to these expectations modelling their role and work as ECE leaders.

4.3.1. Limitations

This study has potential limitations, such as the guiding questions of the focus group interviews, which may have had an impact on the discussions. We attempted to avoid this by giving accurate instructions to facilitators. Further, it was possible to participate in the interviews on a voluntary basis through personal interest, which may have a selection effect on the participants. Our data are also limited to ECE leaders in three Finnish municipalities. It is possible that these discourses would not appear in all Finnish municipalities or ECE leaders. The interpretative nature of the analysis means that the aim is not to explain everything, but to describe, interpret, and create an understanding of how leaders use language (see Jokinen et al., 2016). Still, Peräkylä (1995) speaks of the generalisability of possibility by drawing attention to what is culturally possible (Suoninen, 1997). Even a small dataset can reveal cultural patterns and discourses that tell us about certain possibilities, but Matikainen (1999) reminds us that small datasets do not directly tell us about the universality or pervasiveness of phenomena.

Context, such as local practices and policies, place constraints on the interview responses and thus on the discourses. The discourses that construct the social order of organisations are always products of a society and culture. Thus, the organisation is constructed by them while at the same time renewing and shaping the surrounding society and culture (Matikainen, 1999). Rapid contextual change can also be seen as a limitation. Even since the collection of this data, the context of the ECE environment has undergone many changes.

5. Discourses and dilemmas in the expectations perceived by the ECE leader

Next, we look at the discourses, which are leaders' interpretations and expressions of their expectations of leadership. We also consider the dilemmas faced by the ECE leader. The first research question explores what kind of discourses ECE leaders produce regarding their leadership expectations. The four discourses that emerged from the data are presented: 1) the discourse of leadership in change; 2) the discourse of leading an expert organisation towards a vision; 3) the discourse of leadership style; and 4) the discourse of leading the ECE mission. The second research question examines the dilemmas arising in these discourses. The dilemmas focused on leading change in the administrative hierarchy, leading an expert organisation, approachability, and leading according to one's mission. These dilemmas are discussed in more detail in the context of discourses.

5.1. The discourse of leadership in change

The discourse of change includes ECE leaders' talk of the expectations of advancing change, and how to work, lead, and act as a leader in contextual change. The leaders experience expectations due to the expansion of management entities in the operating environment, too. Still, there is a strong reciprocity of expectations between the leaders and their superiors and, likewise, between the leaders and their staff.

ECE leaders discuss their ability to act in and lead change, how the changing context places demands on their leadership, and how national and local changes like legislative changes in ECE impose new demands on their leadership. They argue that they must lead ECE forward alongside the new demands and requirements. They feel they need to

understand and interpret new regulations and act accordingly. In the following, Riia (C1) raises the issue of leading in the changing context:

> Riia, C1: As leaders, we must be all the time the first ones bringing forth the idea. We have to have an understanding of what this really means, because it is also the challenge when the new law comes in terms of how it appears in this society and what the legislators really think in it. When we have the laws and regulations, we need to know what's in there. Although we may have another viewpoint, we are the ones that have to make the change when the law comes into force here, and we must act accordingly.

ECE leaders also expected more concrete instructions from the operating environment and society. The ECE leaders expect the staff to be able to meet the requirements and develop ECE activities based on them. Anneli (C1) takes her previous speech forward, arguing that as an ECE leader, it is her job to involve the staff in change and, through the change, the development of ECE.

The reciprocity of expectations is present in the interaction with ECE leaders and their superiors. The ECE leaders argue about the administrative hierarchy and ponder how their superiors impose expectations and requirements regarding ECE organisation and its activities. Besides, ECE leaders' superiors impose demands and influence and direct ECE. ECE leaders, in turn, have expectations of their superiors. Virve (C2) stated that the expectations are two-way, and Mirjami (C2) added that there are also expectations arising from the local community.

> Virve, C2: We are not upper leaders, none of us. We all have our own superiors, and they will have expectations of us. Above us is our regional manager and above him/her is the Chief of ECE in the City. There will be a whole bunch of things for us, and it is expected that we will implement them in practice.

Virve (C2) continues that in situations of change, the staff also sets expectations for the leader, "that we do not implement everything we have been given by our superiors". Thus, "the expectations are a little contradictory".

ECE leaders expect their own superiors to support them. Likewise, they expect their superiors to trust that they can assess the situations and needs which arise from the ECE centre they lead, and that they are able to act accordingly. ECE leaders also expect their superiors to appreciate their involvement in decision-making and stress the importance of democracy in it. Moreover, they expect their own superiors from the upper echelons of the administration to set boundaries and take care of the ECE centre's staff resilience, resources, and staffing numbers so that the ECE leader does not always have to act according to the expectations and demands of the upper administration. Superiors were also expected to keep the development projects within a reasonable framework. In the next discussion, Karita (C2) and Sirpa (C2) raise the contradiction they experience in the matrix of expectations, realistic coping, and available resources:

> Karita, C2: (−) there is that discrepancy. We are expected to do this and at this (−) pace, and we are expected to be able to meet these expectations, such as the [child] groups are filled, and we are expected to have enough qualified staff. But, on the other hand, there are not enough resources, we cannot afford to take deputies, or we don't get deputies, so, the leader gets into …
>
> Sirpa, C2: To the intended crosslinking.
>
> Karita, C2: You must balance, and all the time as well with the feeling that you are not able to manage well enough. Between a rock and a hard place.
>
> Sirpa, C2: If you read the Act and the [City] curriculum, there is enough to meet the expectations. But if you think about our well-being, I get annoyed by the goal that is presented to me, for example, that I am not allowed to hire substitutes. Well, then I have my subordinates, so we're missing people from here so much that we can only survive. They're not happy, I'm taking the substitute, they [superiors] are not happy. And no one is happy. I can't bow in either direction. Who am I listening to? My boss? My subordinates? I have an expectation that I, as a representative of the organisation and the employer,must be able to take care of the working conditions, and structures and working hours. Where I have a small chance of having an influence.

The ECE leaders noted that, besides themselves, their subordinates also need to be flexible. Leaders are also expected to safeguard the staff's coping, occupational safety, and working hours. The leader's role is to look after his or her subordinates when faced with different expectations, as Salla (C3) ponders:

> Salla, C3: It is not always realised what everyday life is like with us [in the ECE centre]. I must prioritise and think how much the staff can be burdened. We have a very development-friendly administration, and we really have all kind of projects; the staff tends to be buzzing with new things and development. While we generally are very pro-development and involved in everything, we are a little in the middle of being expected from above [superiors] to take these things into day care. And then we try to find some sensible position on how much you can take there [into day care].

5.1.1. The dilemma in leading change in the administrative hierarchy

Dilemmas focused on working in an administrative hierarchy where ECE leaders' superiors set expectations and demands that were difficult to meet. Also, Heikka's (2014) research showed that ECE leaders and employees understood the basic role of ECE differently from the municipal-level officials. There was no common vision among the different levels of administration. In light of recent research (e.g. Authors, 2020; 2021), creating a common understanding and discourse between different actors is seen as a prerequisite for successful leadership.

In this discourse, neither the ECE leaders nor staff were always willing to put everything from above into practice. ECE leaders expected upper superiors to provide adequate support for staff resilience and adequate staff resources to ensure appropriate group ratios. However, everyday life did not always allow this to happen, nor was it always possible to act in accordance with the law and regulations. ECE leaders recognize that enablement also requires systematic work to create structures. ECE leaders also felt trapped between the ECE centre's staff and the upper management and felt unable to live up to both sets of expectations. ECE leaders felt an internal contradiction and frustration when they could not take care of working conditions and structures as they would have wished. The upper administration was pro-development, but the ECE leaders themselves had to consider how much they could burden the staff with development work. However, there were still a lot of ongoing development projects, and some of the ECE leaders felt frustrated because of them. Many of the ECE leaders experienced a contradiction in balancing and trying to find the right amount of development work.

The discourse of leadership in change indicates that leadership involves the ECE leader being able to identify contextual change and the resulting requirements. Likewise, Moos (2011), (158) argues that leaders "must be competent in understanding and prioritising political, educational, and administrative demands, and in motivating staff to make sense of the direction and to find ways of changing practices". The discourse reveals that ECE leaders are responsible for the internal processes in ECE settings to lead the ECE setting's pedagogical work.

In addition, it is important to perform externally oriented duties, like securing necessary resources and implementing the decisions of the national government. Furthermore, it is essential to build a relationship with the environment.

5.2. The discourse on leading an expert organisation towards a vision

The discourse on leading an expert organisation towards a vision includes talk that concerns how to lead an expert organisation towards goal-oriented work in ECE, as well as talk of competence and competence management in the ECE centre as an expert organisation. In an expert organisation, the leader relies especially on the skills of the EC teachers. The expectations of families and children are discussed, too.

ECE leaders produce talk of different educational backgrounds and different kinds of expertise in the expert organisation. The ECE leaders have a wide range of expectations because of this. Next, Anneli (C1) states that the nature of expert work influences her leadership, which is confirmed by Stella (C1):

> Anneli, C1: After all, we run an expert organisation, these [staff members] are experts in their field. We don't have that kind of competition thinking, but it's know-how in those houses, i.e., it makes leadership different. There are people with many educational backgrounds, that is, we still need to combine it as an activity in the best interests of the child, personnel with many forms of education.

> Stella, C1: Every employee starting from the special assistant onwards is hired for expert work.

ECE leaders felt they were expected to create and take care of the purposefulness of expert work. Riia (C1) highlights the importance of taking responsibility in advancing an expert organisation and, as a leader, sets the expectation of giving direction. Anneli (C2) compares this to being a pilot. Aada (C1) and Sirpa (C2) confirm:

> Aada, C1: Also, to a little broader view. Always be a year ahead, to know where this gang is going and the basics of it. And then informing the staff, and then moving on, through the positive feedback, but the threads stay in your hand.

> Sirpa, C2: I expect that my work community and I will be formed into an education team with a common desire, an outcome that we all have.

Next Riia describes the expectation of being able to lead the competence of the personnel, to develop it further, and, because of this, getting to know the employees well. The ECE leader is expected to find pedagogical and educational expertise in the organisation. The employees also know some things better than the leader him/herself.

> Riia, C1: The task of a leader is to find from his/her own ensemble the competence. And it is really a challenge to understand and develop it. Because we have such big entities. Maybe that's our challenge, that we get to know the people [staff] we lead.

One of the central experts in the ECE setting is the EC teacher. ECE leaders have a lot of expectations concerning the EC teachers' position. As Virve (C2) and Aada (C1) note next, in the expert organisation, the ECE leader focuses on the EC teachers' pedagogical competence and know-how. ECE leaders rely on the EC teachers' skills, and produce speech to help the EC teacher's position to become visible and clear in the ECE community:

> Virve, C2: EC teachers do not necessarily think that it is nice, "I am the one to take responsibility for pedagogy". It requires the intervention of a leader. But someone must take the reins and hold the ensemble in hand. That legitimate status must be given.

> Aada C1: I told the EC teachers that I have really high expectations of you. You are the engines that drive this ship forward. The pedagogical responsibility has been raised to the frame; EC teachers really are the experts in the [pedagogical] work.

The talk produced includes the staff's need for support. Many of the ECE leaders sometimes feel the expectations of the staff to be excessive. The talk includes the tools to use to support the staff, the creation of functional temporal structures, and the subordinates' own responsibility to sort things out.

In leading competence and giving direction to staff during change, the leader also expects him/herself to be able to inspire and take care of the atmosphere. This is seen in Karita's (C2) reflection:

> Karita, C2: I try hard to inspire, because we are constantly in the middle of change and we constantly must light new, little flames and lamps that now we go on with this, we are developing this. Such inspiration is quite important with us.

The position of leader is subject to many expectations from children, parents, and families. As ECE settings involve local communities and families and parents, leaders must be competent in legitimising the ECE work according to the families' and children's expectations. The organisation must be open to families and local communities and be able to communicate with them. ECE leaders must establish working relationships and be responsive to families' needs. However, one must be aware of one's own potential to influence matters. Next, Virve (C2) brings up the systemic connection with the administrative and municipal entity:

> Virve, C2: Parents have expectations for leadership. We have the situation in our area – as probably in the whole city – that there are not enough places [for children] available. So, parents may not realise that the leader of the kindergarten is only one part of the system and not everything is resolved at that level, for example, the number of places for children. We have a certain number that indicates how many children we can take in. It's good that there is a figure, because otherwise all sorts of solutions could be made in an emergency.

> Sirpa, C2: But it is true that it is difficult for the parent to understand the whole system.

> Virve, C2: The child's voice is carried out by the parents who contact the leader that our child has now had a concern. (−) parents and children are a whole in this sense.

5.2.1. Dilemma of leading an expert organisation

The discourse of leading an expert organisation towards a vision emphasises pedagogical and educational expertise in the ECE organisation. The ECE leader must help staff reach and maximise their full potential. Thus, the ECE leader must attend to staff needs and identify the various competences. This includes enabling staff to act. However, leading the competence in an expert organisation also produced a dilemma, as many ECE leaders have several units to lead and therefore a large staff. The large number of staff members does not make it easy to get to know the employees, and this makes it difficult to identify and find the skills and competences of the employees and make them available in the expert organisation. Consequently, ECE leaders are not able to ensure that staff are aware of their role and understand what is expected and how they fit into the vision, even though the importance of such actions has been emphasised (see Gonzalez, 2020). In addition, it is the ECE leader's responsibility to help staff set and reach their goals by providing the necessary tools and information needed. However, the discourse contains the dilemma over the opportunities to take this responsibility.

This discourse indicates that ECE leaders must create and inspire a shared vision in the changing context, and they must inspire the staff to meet that vision. The talk is in line with Moos (2011), who states that negotiating the direction of ECE development is the essence of ECE leadership. This involves understanding expectations and translating them into a meaning and direction for ECE through negotiations with staff. This also entails enabling the staff to act. While modelling the way, ECE leaders must be able to find their own voice and express it to others.

5.3. The discourse of leadership style

In this discourse, ECE leaders discuss the way how they lead, the change in leadership style from authoritarian and omniscient to more present, encountering, and conversational. It further includes the leaders' visibility and elements of personal leadership. Expectations focus on the EC centre's communication culture and discussion structures, the emphasis on listening to others, and the ECE leader's presence.

New expectations were raised for the leadership style. The former authoritarian leadership style no longer works. Aada (C1) reflects on the change in her own leadership over the years:

> Aada, C1: For many different reasons, for example legislation has tightened over the years, in the municipal and private side, we have gone forward from monopolistic leader, an almighty leader, who knows everything, to a leader who doesn't know everything. Instead, it's much more leadership sharing that is needed, when the leader can't be an expert in everything. If I think about my own career, (−) when there were small units, one leader in one house, the expectations were quite different.

Also, Eeli (C1) reflects on current practices and needs starting from the contradictions with the older generation:

> Eeli, C1: Quite many [employees] are still at different stages (−), [some] graduated in the 1970s. So are many leaders, too, and probably, maybe there is still these ideas of how he/she led in those days, and that is no longer the way nowadays. [There are] modern requirements and the employees' understanding or the perception of how, (−) what kind of leadership they expect today. From an omniscient to more listening and conversational direction, and the direction where employees' competence is valued.

According to the leaders, the staff is used to the fact that the leader is not visible or always present. Still, presence is what is expected and hoped for more than "we are able to provide" (Paula, C3). Annikki (C1) says she feels a sense of inadequacy. Riia (C1) continues that the creation of functional structures eliminates this problem. Presence did not necessarily mean physical presence. Anneli (C1), questions "genuine" presence:

> Anneli, C1: Presence in leadership. That does not necessarily mean that the leader is walking next to you, but how she/is he approachable, how to approach the leader whether the leader is available when I need him/her. There may be a leader who even if he/she sits all the time in the office, it could be perceived so that he/she is not present. What is genuine presence?

As a solution to the problem, the leaders consider making their own working hours and tasks visible and transparent. They also emphasised time management and prioritising tasks. The concrete way to do this was to display the calendar on the door to "dispel speculation about where the time goes" (Salla C3).

Next Aada (C1) and Riia (C1) continue to consider the change in leadership expectations relative to the leader's presence in the work community. Different ECE centre structures also impose different expectations:

> Aada, C1: Expectations have changed in the work community quite drastically, they [employees] are used to not seeing the leader that much. One day a week maybe, which is almost optimal already, I have time to be there. Those expectations are not static, they change. What the staff expects from the leader, how much [the leader] is willing to give or not willing to give, what he/she does, and where the leader succeeds and fails. Probably those expectations will change as well. To me, the realisation was in expectations of leadership where, when one employee said that even if you were not there in [child] groups and not watching us there, but when we know that you are sitting there in the office, it creates security for us.

> Riia, C1: It must (−) teach (−) that you can catch me right away.

This discourse examines the themes of approachability and accessibility and the *dilemmas* experienced concerning them. The talk contains the nature of the discussion structures between the ECE leader and subordinates, and the presence and the interest shown by the ECE leader to subordinates in their pedagogical work. Likewise, it includes the expectation of the ECE leader's feedback to subordinates. However, the ECE leaders felt that there was not enough time for them to get acquainted with the activities in the education team or the children's groups.

Visibility is one important part of the ECE leader's daily work, as Fonsén et al. (2021b) argue. Staff expected their presence and wanted more of it than the leaders felt they could give. In this discourse, the talk also included feelings of receiving conflicting messages regarding the need for presence. Fonsén et al. (2021b) emphasise the longing for the presence of leaders. Still, the ECE leaders experienced the dilemma wherein they did not see such presence as possible; it is needed more than it can be realised. What is possible? More presence and listening are needed, especially about the implementation of pedagogy. ECE leaders also felt that their duties were distancing them from the ECE centre's everyday life.

ECE leaders also discussed their personal leadership construction, stating that it emanates from interaction between the leader and staff. Expectations influence personal ways of doing things, and ECE leaders also imposed on themselves unreasonable expectations in terms of survival. Next, Sirpa (C2) reflects:

> Sirpa, C2: Leaders themselves expect that they do everything, and of course within working hours, and to resolve and manage and develop and care, etc. Also, you must be realistic that you do the things that are possible and in the order that is most important.

From the staff's side, ECE leaders experienced expectations of fairness, straightforwardness, honesty, openness, and flexibility. Also experienced was impartiality among employees, "fair play" (Salla C3), and "information flows sufficiently from top to bottom" (Paula C3). The position of the leader was seldom easy, although it brought great personal satisfaction. Yet the challenge of the work was also a motive for the career choice:

> Karita, C2: I expect there to be challenges. That is why I have chosen this job. I wouldn't like to have an easy job, I want my job to be varied and I want to solve problems.

The personal joy of work is important, as is the experience of doing important work:

> Karita, C2: I have always had the expectation of my work that it will somehow satisfy some needs in myself. I find it nice to do the kind of work that I feel that I can use my own strengths usefully. And this has been that kind of job.

The discourse of leadership style links the topic of the new kind of communication culture to the discourse. The talk of the nature of the communication culture is reminiscent of the work of Ruben and Gigliotti (2016), who emphasise it as being more than a leadership tool or strategy. Rather, it is an orientation, a world view, and a way of understanding leadership that focuses more broadly on the process of social influence itself.

5.3.1. The dilemma of accessibility and approachability

This excerpt includes leaders' dilemmas over how much they should be actively involved, their visibility, and the need to be visible at the education team and child-group level. The talk contains time resource use and being available and participating in the activities of the education team. The dilemma centres around whether the leader comes out of the office and stays connected, and what this means for the staff's motivation and satisfaction. The review of proximity concerned whether

the ECE leaders show interest in their subordinates and their work, and whether the leader is accessible. The leaders found a dilemma in the fact that they do not have enough time to be accessible because of the number of administrative tasks.

5.4. Discourse of leading the ECE mission

The discourse on the ECE mission produces talk about the value in high quality pedagogy, and, likewise, valuing early childhood education. The discourse includes talk of the profile of ECE leaders' expertise and the core of pedagogical leadership. Leading high-quality pedagogy was also seen as a personal mission and "passion" (Virve C2). Likewise, the talk includes reflections on the leaders' professional identity.

ECE leaders' talk highlights the importance of pursuing quality in ECE. Mirjami (C2) emphasises pedagogy "must be number one", thus "the interest must be transferred only to pedagogy". Sirpa, C2 notes that "standards must be high, because early childhood education is the most important thing in society". Virve (C2) underlines how "we have taken a huge amount of conscious action" and the "whole discourse is changing in the direction of pedagogy". Further, Virve (C2) illustrates how "enormously it has empowered her employees".

The talk also highlighted the relationship and interaction with the children. Daily encounters with children make work meaningful, even if other circumstances or situations were sometimes exhausting. Mirjami (C2) describes this:

> Mirjami, C2: I want to know how children are in day care. And I immensely love the situations where I meet children. I remember when my job was so busy that I never had time to play with children. There have been moments when I had just had enough of everything, all this circus maintenance, and then the kids have made me change my mind again. Because that is the mirror, that is the mirror of our pedagogy, how the children are. If I don't know it, then I can't judge at all if our pedagogy is going in the right direction, from the children we get honest, direct, and open feedback. And if there's something bad out there, in a [children's] group, you hear it from the kids.

ECE leaders were committed to developing ECE and emphasised the societal importance of their work, as evidenced by Sirpa (C2):

> Sirpa, C2: What is important to me is a job where I can really influence ECE for my part. And although it now applies only to those under my authority, so be it. I get satisfaction and joy from it. One of my biggest expectations for this job has been that the status and prestige of ECE would rise nationwide. With changes in the law, with a national curriculum. Concerning the broader perspective, I have a lot of expectations.

The discourse of leading the ECE mission includes values concerning ECE and its meaning. Values are based on the high quality of pedagogy before being able to guide the staff. ECE leaders try to follow through on their commitments and affirm the values they share with staff. This comes up in their talk about the high importance of the ECE work they do. Sims et al. (2015) argue that this is a positive step towards achieving the improvements in quality that are the stated outcomes of the current early childhood agenda.

5.4.1. The dilemma of a strong mission

The discourse highlights the ECE leaders' strong appreciation of ECE. It is important to influence the value of ECE more broadly in society. There are indications of the value of ECE as part of lifelong learning, but as such it was not identified nor highlighted as part of continuous learning or a continuum within the education system. The dilemma is that leaders had high expectations for their work and a great desire to raise the value of ECE. This can also lead to a conflict of values and roles, too. In ECE, change is framed by the reformed legislation on ECE, which strengthens the pedagogical aspect of the work. On the other hand, operations are governed by expectations related to the economic efficiency of public services (see Fonsén & Soukainen, 2020). Thus, if a strong mission is not realised, it can also be heavy and lead to burnout and frustration (see Paananen & Tammi, 2017).

6. Discussion

In this study, we explored the discourses that embody expectations that ECE leaders have for their leadership. The ECE work context and the change that takes place in it is the framework in which ECE leaders' discourses become real. The discourses highlight that the contextual change determines the work of the ECE leader when setting strong expectations for leadership. Further, discourses also reflect the current debate about the change in working life, where change refers to the constant change in work culture, work structures, and work contents (see Järvensivu, 2014). Likewise, the discourses with which ECE leaders identify their leadership are influenced by aspects of the ECE operational environment that are proximal to leaders, including how they interact with superiors, the staff, and families and children.

The discourses may also be seen as reflecting the set of expected activities for the ECE leaders. However, ECE leaders experience a lot of dilemmas in their leadership. ECE leaders have to make decisions under the pressure of conflicting requirements. Also, Hjelt and Karila's (2021) research shows that increasing quality and efficiency requirements are shaping leadership in ECE. Tensions are associated with both the ECE leader's own position as part of the organisation's broad decision-making system and the early childhood professionals' leadership expectations. Leaders have high expectations of doing quality work and contributing to the quality of ECE. At the same time, staff expect a lot from their leaders, thereby predisposing them to stress. It is important to be aware that experienced dilemmas and the role ambiguity included in these dilemmas can affect the ECE work and its quality (see Rodgers et al., 2013). Likewise, dilemmas can reduce well-being and endurance at work. Therefore, dilemmas should be highlighted and made visible, and negotiation concerning the dilemmas is necessary for progress to be made. It is important to move forward from the dilemmas and create an expectation that satisfies all parties.

Holden and Roberts (2004) note that middle managers feel trapped in many of the conflicting roles within the organisation and speak emotively of the varying degrees of isolation and professional and ethical dilemmas while trying to juggle the needs of their managers, employees, family, and personal conscience. Besides, Hjelt and Karila (2021) state that ECE leaders are actively looking for a balance between conflicting elements. This is possible when the influence is directed mainly at the leaders' own subordinates. Regulating two-way tensions related to both subordinates and the upper level of the organisation can be challenging and difficult to predict. Halttunen (2009) argues that clarifying the leadership and roles of the ECE leaders and simultaneously of all staff members is especially important for the functioning of the work community during change.

Both the discourse of leadership in change and the discourse of leading an expert organisation towards a vision reflect several educational policy reforms that have affected Finnish ECE and as a result ECE leaders' work in developing ECE practices. Global changes and crises also affect us all. Moreover, also expert work requires the leadership to engage in non-traditional hierarchical and leadership-centric activities to use all competences in the community. Besides, Weckström et al. (2021) state that traditional leadership, where power and responsibility are shared by one leader, undermines communality and participation. It is also underpinned by a shared appreciation of values and the definition of common values. Hence there is need for a common set of values without dilemmas. Could this be achieved through leaders' training, with dilemmas resolved by strengthening a common set of values?

The financial challenges faced by municipalities have broadened the scope of leaders' responsibilities, and new types of distributed leadership structures have become areas for development. However, the power and responsibilities of leadership are partly unstable and still need to be

clarified (Fonsén & Lahtero, 2023) Leadership is in a tense position, where it is seen both as an instrument of control and as a safeguard for the realisation of valuable goals. Structures of distributed leadership define ECE, as does the role of the EC teacher as the pedagogical leader of the educational team (National Core Curriculum, 2018), without the status of an official leader. The EC teacher's responsibility is pedagogy. Therefore, the EC teacher also has a responsibility to influence the behaviour of the employees in his/her team. However, the EC teachers' responsibility is different from that of the ECE leader. These features also make power relations unstable, as established institutional practices do not create unambiguous boundaries (Fonsén et al., 2021a) Fonsén et al. (2021b) emphasise that the power relationship is also linked to the definition of the basic mission of the ECE institution. The power struggle between different professional groups or educational backgrounds is about whose understanding of the basic mission is entitled to give meaning to the ECE practice and whose understanding is limited to the exclusion of action.

When considering the power relationship, it should be borne in mind that the responsibility for fulfilling the ECE's basic task belongs to all ECE professionals, although the form of the responsibility is defined differently depending on the task (Fonsén, 2014). The leader is responsible for the quality of ECE in the units he/she leads. Thus, the leaders' responsibility includes an effort to influence the actions of other employees, that is, to exercise power so that the objectives of the Act (540/2018) are achieved. Leadership takes place through the interaction of the work community, against the background of a set of commonly agreed values and a vision (see Fonsén et al., 2021b).

In the discourses, pedagogy is a strong feature. Pedagogical leadership is precisely the creation of opportunities for quality in pedagogy through appropriate organisational structures and resources. It has been found that the structures of pedagogical leadership distribution do not sufficiently support the implementation of pedagogy in the work of every employee and thus also in the daily lives of children (Fonsén & Lahtero, 2023) A theoretical understanding of pedagogical leadership is important to comprehend this process. Appropriate leadership in ECE seems to be supported by investing in the definition of the basic task and clarifying the leadership structure and related responsibilities (Lahtero & Kuusilehto-Awale, 2015). If the basic task is not clearly defined and the meanings associated with it are not shared, the meaning of leadership will also be blurred. It is therefore important to produce a common discourse of different actors about the basic task of the organisation. This was found also by Fonsén et al. (2021b).

ECE leadership takes an interesting position in the discourse of leading an expert organisation towards a vision and the discourse of leading the ECE mission, where it appears on the one hand as a tool of leading and on the other hand as a guarantee of the realisation of valuable ECE goals. These discourses become more pronounced with the ECE legislation (Act 540/2018) and National Core Curriculum reforms (2016, 2018) in ECE. Reforms have strengthened ECE as part of the education system and as the basis for lifelong learning. The results of this study indicated that ECE leaders can lead educational change. Still, Fonsén et al. (2021b) note that leadership requires strong knowledge and skills, which also means the need to train ECE leaders.

7. Conclusion

This study contributes to understanding leadership in ECE. Previous research (e.g. Fonsén & Soukainen, 2020) shows that the discourses used in organisations play a key role in the success of ECE leadership and in the well-being of the work community. Indeed, leadership manifests itself strongly as the leading of discourses. Discourses describe the perceived reality of an ECE organisation. It should be noted that the discourses also build the organisation at the same time.

Contemplating leadership expectations reveals the dilemmas arising when stakeholders follow and are ready for the changes in various ways. How can these dilemmas be resolved? Significantly, a leader needs support and help and cannot be left to cope alone. However, leaders should recognize the external expectations likely to cause them pressure. What role can the ECE leaders' superiors play here and provide help? What role can share leadership play in the cross-pressures of expectations? How can shared leadership provide support? In conclusion, a shared discourse is needed on the prime mission of ECE, pedagogy, and leadership. Further research is needed on the expectations of the educational teams in ECE centres and EC teachers due to the relational practice and reciprocity in ECE.

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Declaration of competing interest

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Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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