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Contextually Defined Leadership

Eeva Hujala
University of Tampere
Finland

“Leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth.” (Burns, 1978, 2)

Abstract

The increasing number of children entering early childhood education and care (ECEC) services has formed a challenge to focus more to the quality of the programs. In this chapter leadership is seen to build a foundation for quality ECEC. Effective leadership is connected to the context of ECEC, and this defines the leadership culture. In contextual approach to leadership, the mission, core tasks, vision, and management of ECEC processes are integrated. Leadership has foundation on the mission, coordinates the quality of the core tasks, and develops ECEC processes towards the vision. Although leaders are responsible for the management of ECEC, leadership is defined as an interactive process, to which the whole staff is engaged. The challenge of leadership is to clarify the core tasks so that both leader and the followers agree with them. This enables the mission-based work in the organisation, and leading ECEC towards the vision. Contextually defined, distributed leadership improves the quality of ECEC.

Tiivistelmä

Varhaiskasvatuksen määrän lisääntyessä huoli varhaiskasvatuksen laadun ylläpitämisestä lisääntyy ja johtajuuden merkitys korostuu. Johtajuus on laadukkaan varhaiskasvatuksen ydintekijä. Johtajuuden kontekstuaalisessa tarkastelussa johtajuus rakentuu kiinteästi varhaiskasvatuksen arjen kontekstiin, mikä määrittää johtamistyötä ja johtajuuskulttuuria. Toimivassa johtajuudessa organisaation visio, missio, ydintoiminnot ja niiden johtaminen ovat toisistaan riippuvia. Johtajuuden perusta on varhaiskasvatuksen perustehtävässä, missiossa. Johtamistyö huolehtii ydintoimintojen laadusta ja vastaa varhaiskasvatuksen kehittämisestä vision mukaisesti. Vaikka

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johtaja vastaa varhaiskasvatuksen johtamistyöstä, johtajuus nähdään yhteisvastuuna pedagogisten prosessien kehittämisestä, johon osallistuu koko työyhteisö. Toimivan johtajuuden haasteena on mission selkiyttäminen niin, että johtajalla ja työyhteisöllä on siitä yhteinen näkemys. Tämä mahdollistaa kaikkien organisaation jäsenten toimimisen missioperustaisesti ja varhaiskasvatuksen kehittämisen visiota kohden. Kontekstuaalisesti rakentuva johtajuus kehittää varhaiskasvatusta ja sen laatua yhteisvastuullisesti.

Introduction

It seems that leadership research in early childhood education and care (ECEC) has found its place in European research practices. In the 2012 EECERA Conference appeared several sessions with leadership theme contrary to the situation ten years earlier, when only one of the sessions dealt with leadership. In European leadership research, leadership is seen as an inevitable part of the pedagogy and it is an indispensable factor in ensuring the high quality in childcare. In contrast, in the USA at the annual conference of the Association of Childhood Education International (ACEI) in 2012, leadership as a conference theme was quite rare. Does this imply that the focus of leadership by early childhood educators in the USA is perceived differently? In the USA, ECE programs are mainly privately run, and the fiscal management, such as student enrolment and budgeting, are maybe emphasised more than pedagogical issues of leadership.

Although EC leadership is understood as a key issue for improving quality, in practice it is still a quite indistinguishable phenomenon. ECE curriculums have been improved globally, but the significance of the leadership in curriculum development has not yet been made visible. In developing leadership practice to support ECEC centres, curriculum development has still remained marginal. Nonetheless, the prerequisite for successful ECE curriculum planning and implementation into practice is pedagogical leadership. Leading and steering the curriculum processes raise new kind of challenges for EC centre directors. Previous emphasis on administrative tasks must be re-evaluated. These new challenges must be taken into account when planning directors' training and professional development. Increasingly, global trends concerned with staff and managers, indicate the importance of being adequately trained in leadership issues (Taguma, Litjens, & Makowiecki, 2012). Waniganayake, Cheeseman,

Fenech, Hadley and Shepherd (2012) talk about ‘leadership specialisations’ in emphasising that EC leadership has a specialist nature (p. 241). Rodd (2013, 267) defines the nature of leadership as “subtle, complex, multifaceted and multidimensional and essentially holistic”. There are increasing complexity of the roles and responsibilities centre directors are expected to perform. This means that leaders need formal training and development on a continuous basis.

Several changes have taken place in the ECEC throughout the world both in the substance and in structure, which has brought pressure on developing leadership. Especially in Europe, ECEC has increasingly found its place in the life context of children and families. For example, in Finland, childcare is a subjective right of every child. Child care (ECEC) has an influence on many children and their families. One can also say that a society’s perceptions of children and education are influenced and developed through child care (ECEC).

Based on the Program of International Student Assessment (OECD 2005) results and Finland’s success, the importance of the high quality child care as a foundation for success at school is inevitable (OECD 2004). Along with the increased numbers and stabilization of the child care services the structural changes called for more emphasis on leadership in ECEC. In Finland, the administration and the steering of child care services have been transferred from the Ministry of Social Welfare to Ministry of Education and Culture. This reform is a challenge in developing both the structure and substance of EC leadership at national, municipal and child care center level. At the same time child care centers have been merged into larger administrative units, which has forced centre directors to find new distributed ways to lead (Hujala & Heikka, 2009; Halttunen, 2009). All of these changes have raised multiple contradictory expectations about directors’ work and increased confusion among EC staff. These negative perceptions have caused directors work related fatigue as well as have decreased work satisfaction among EC staff (Fonsén, 2013; Söyrinki, 2010). People have many opinions about leadership and they claim to ‘know’ what EC leaders should do, but to be able to fully understand leaders’ work and leadership as a whole, is not easy. In reality, leadership roles and responsibilities are difficult to comprehend even by the leaders themselves.

Contextually theorized leadership

Research on leadership has yielded many doctrines and theories during history. Salovaara (2011) claims that most of the earlier leadership theories represented leader-centric approaches more than a specific leadership approach. The leader and the followers were seen separate in many of the initial leadership paradigms. However several reasons emerged why the leader-centred theories failed to address all the questions about leadership needs (McDowall Clark & Murray, 2012; Ropo, 2011) such as the impact of globalisation, the rise of team thinking, avoidance of top-down and hierarchical models, and the shift into more strategic thinking in organisations. Although officially designated leaders and managers continued to be needed in the organisations, it has become necessary to adopt teamwork and shared leadership models as well (Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011; McDowall Clark & Murray, 2012; Spillane, 2006; Pearce & Conger, 2003). Shared and distributed leadership approaches constitute a clear shift in conceptualising the “leader-follower relationship” instead of the traditional manager oriented leadership (Harris, 2004; Shamir, Pillai, Bligh, & Uhl-Bien, 2007; Vondey, 2008). Hansen, Ropo and Sauer (2007) propose that when the earlier studies concentrated more on leaders, research focus has now shifted into exploring interactions between leaders and followers.

In many of the earlier EC leadership studies (Culkin, 2000; Jorde-Bloom, 1991) leadership was examined as a micro phenomenon. Researchers investigated leaders themselves or the immediate environments where the leaders were working (Jorde-Bloom, 2000; Jorde-Bloom & Sheerer, 1992; Hayden, 1998; Morgan, 2000; VanderVen, 2000). More recent EC research now focus on leadership on a broader scale. It has been seen as a challenge to find out the nature and significance of leadership within the context of a society as well as the roles and responsibilities attached to leadership (Aubrey, Godfrey, & Harris, 2013; Heikka, Waniganayake, & Hujala, 2013; Hayden, 1998; Nivala, 1999). Society embedded leadership research investigates leadership as perceived by those people who are involved directly or indirectly with child care. One of the broadest approach in studying society connections to leadership was examined in the International leadership project (Nivala & Hujala, 2002) implemented in Australia, Great Britain, Russia, USA and Finland. This global study was one of the first to compare society’s connections to leadership in different societies and

focused on pursuing variables that defined EC leadership practice within the cultural context.

Smircich and Morgan (1982) have examined leadership through the leading of the processes of organisation. They emphasised that leadership, like other social phenomena, is constructed through social interactions emerging as a result of the constructions and actions of both leaders and followers or those being led. In Salovaara's (2011) meta-analysis of recent leadership studies shows that leadership is bound to the local cultures and it is understood as a way of avoiding a leader-centric approach. This research orientation underlines the socially constructed nature of leadership in which the members of the organisation find themselves.

In this chapter, leadership is theorised as contextually defined (Nivala, 1999; Hujala, 2004; Hujala, Heikka, & Halttunen, 2011). Contextually defined leadership of an organisation is seen to be based on the same paradigm and same goals as the core tasks included in the mission of the organisation. Accordingly, it is proposed that leadership in early education is constructed and based on the theoretical understanding of ECEC.

Ontology

Osborn, Hunt and Jauch (2002) argue that leadership is always embedded in the context. That is, the leader is inseparable from the context and the effectiveness of leadership is dependent upon the context. According to Osborn et al. (2002) the macro views need increasing recognition, but to supplement rather than replace currently emphasised meso and micro perspectives (see also Hujala, 2004). In examining leadership contextually, the mission, core tasks, structure and management of the organisation are integrated (Hujala, Heikka, & Halttunen, 2011).

In this chapter, the ontological view of ECEC and leadership as part of it, is understood from the point of view of contextual theory of ECEC (Hujala, 2004). It sees that children's growth and the early education supporting it have their basis on the children's own life culture and the contextual reality where children live. The contextual thinking has its foundation on Bronfenbrenner's ecological psychology (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1989). It has been applied to ECEC context from a pedagogical point of view (Hujala, 1999). The contextual theory examines the pedagogical relationship

between the subject and the structure by defining the role of children and adults in pedagogical interactions. According to the contextual theory, teachers' role and professionalism in child care is derived from the functions of the micro systems, meso system as well as from other external systems that define ECEC reality. The practice of professionalism is shaped by teachers' pedagogical awareness of children's developmental and pedagogical needs, parents' expectations, parent-teacher partnerships as well as regulations that guide EC programs. Woodhead (1998) emphasised that the most important element in the implementation of ECEC is that it is contextually appropriate. In early childhood education this "contextually appropriate" practice perceives children as being part of their societal context. Thus, the point of departure for early childhood education is becoming aware of connection between the child and the context of growth, including cultural-historical dimensions. To be successful contextually, appropriate professionalism is developed, guided and supported by contextually appropriate leadership.

The theoretical approach by Nivala (1999) conceptualised leadership as contextually constructed and derived from the contextually understood core tasks of ECEC. Contextual leadership is considered as a micro level phenomenon in the ECEC organisation as well as a broader macro level issue reaching up to the legislation and back. The interactions and co-operation between the different actors at different levels of leadership are particularly meaningful for the success of leadership. These aspects frame the implementation of leadership practice and define the direction of developing ECEC (Hujala & Heikka, 2009; Nivala & Hujala, 2002; Halttunen, 2009; Akselin, 2013).

One of the founders of EC leadership, Jorde-Bloom (1991) defined her contextual approach by describing a leaders' work as a social systems model. The child care centre was viewed as a social system, taking into account both the structure of the centre and the processes of the people there. Also many factors in the external environment affect the implementation of ECE in the centres. The interaction of these contextual parts produced a particular culture within the child care program. Kyllönen (2011) and Osborn et al. (2002) have also examined leadership more broadly, as broader systemic whole. They considered leadership as a product of the organisation's history, and reflecting the values appreciated in the society. Kyllönen (2011) emphasised that the mission based, contextually determined leadership constructs the guidelines for implementing the core tasks aligned with the

goals of the organisation. From a contextual perspective, the mission and the leading, and managing of the organisation are interdependent. Clegg and Gray (1996) point out in their contextual approach that “*Leading must be seen in context and should not be considered separate from strategy, organising, learning and all those interactions that make organisations*” (as cited in Nupponen, 2005, 46). Osborn et al. (2002) outline that the mission, core tasks and the work of the organisation shape the leadership practices as well. Akselin (2013) agrees with this and continues that the mission, core tasks and leadership challenges shape each other dynamically.

Contextual model of leadership

Contextual leadership model in ECEC (see figure 1) defines the structural framework of the factors and actors related to leadership and leading. According to the contextual leadership model, leadership is perceived as a socially constructed, situational and interpretive phenomenon (Nivala,

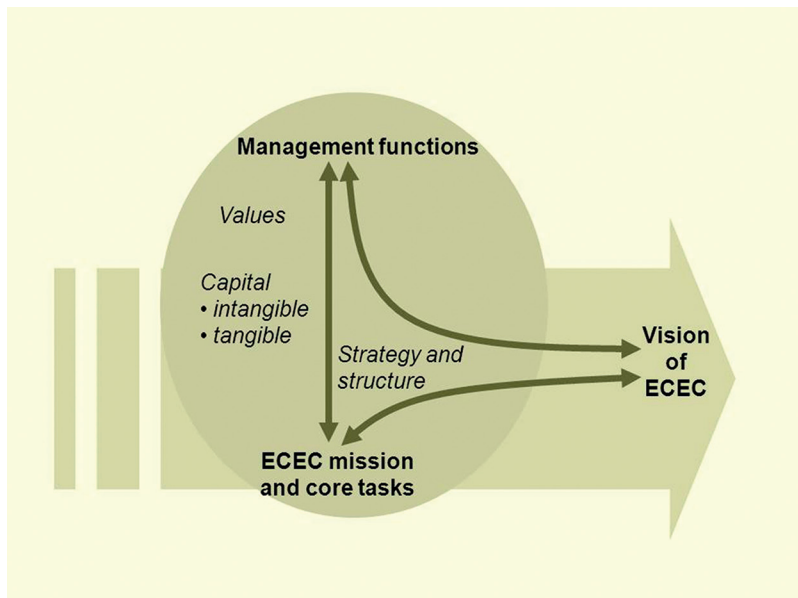


Figure 1. Contextually defined leadership in ECEC (modified from Nivala, 2010)

1999). The situational system means that leadership is influenced by social situations and by the operational environment as well as by expectations and traditions of the society. Accordingly, Giddens' (1984) structuration theory and Berger and Luckman's (1991) socially constructed reality are incorporated into the model to explore the dialogue between the actors and the structures. In ECE this means a dialog between the centre director and the organisational culture of the centre. Leadership as an interpretive phenomenon means that it is not only the leader's own ideas concerning the leadership but also the views of everyone involved with child care, including families and other stakeholders that define EC leadership in that society.

The foundation of the contextual leadership model is the mission and substance of early childhood education. Nivala (1999; 2010) defined leadership as interconnectedness between the substance of ECEC, the actors in the process and structures of the organisational environment. At the macro level of the system, societal values and institutional structures define leadership. Intangible and tangible capital empowers the organisation and its management functions.

Contextually derived leadership in ECEC comprises three dimensions:

- 1) ECEC mission provides the foundation for core tasks as well as for leadership,
- 2) director's management functions and administrative tasks, and
- 3) the vision for ECEC within the organisation

ECE strategy of the organisation towards the goals integrates these three dimensions. The contextual leadership model stresses the importance of managing and leading in itself as professional work. An EC leader's work is to guide and steer the mission and the core tasks. Akselin (2013) has found that effective leadership clarifies the mission and the core tasks as well as the definition of leadership as shared responsibility towards the aims in ECEC.

Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2003) approach EC leadership by separating the three key concepts: administration, management and leadership. All of these are defined from the point of perspective of the core tasks of ECEC seen through the roles and responsibilities, skills and dispositions of EC educators. Rodd (2006) emphasised the importance of engaging the staff with the program vision, mission and strategy so that these are implemented as guidelines for daily work. Hujala, Heikka and Halttunen (2011) see leadership domain as complex and more challenging nowadays, because the

mission and core task are rechanging, partly due to societal changes, and partly because of the new requirements set for ECEC programs. As such, the old distinctions between leadership connected to leading people and management connected to things is deleted by Sydänmaanlakka (2004). He argues that this distinction obscures the true nature of leadership and that management and leadership are bound to each other and must be seen as a whole.

Daily management and administration are terms which in Finnish education context, directors most typically use when they describe the leadership in schools. According to Pennanen (2007) those concepts reflect the reactive leadership which is needed to manage urgent everyday situations. Pennanen emphasised that leadership should be developed to be proactive instead: director must look into the future, listen carefully the weak signals, assess current situation and create vision. Rodd (2006) points out that changes in society and the need to develop flexible early childhood education services for families requires a proactive role from the leaders and other ECE practitioners.

Professional management practices have a foundation in raising a director's awareness of the core task of the organisation and the awareness of the director's own role in leading it. In practice, EC leadership refers to clarifying the mission and constructing the vision of ECEC, in collaboration with staff. All of these functions are anchored in strategy and in the assessment of the implementation of the goals aligned with the core task. The organisation's vision is connected with strategy, and redefines the core tasks and clarifies the mission and the leadership. In ECEC goals for leaders' work are based on the vision of the organisation and this vision is further developed by leadership. So the nature of leadership is always visionary and oriented to the future.

Closing

Based on a contextual leadership approach Hujala, Parrila, Lindberg, Nivala, Tauriainen and Vartiainen (1999) have described the leadership practice as engaging ECEC staff to maintain and improve centre quality. Recent leadership research (Halttunen, 2009; Hujala, Heikka, & Halttunen, 2011) perceive leadership as an even more broader arena, which combines people

involved with children and child care to be jointly responsible for improving the core tasks in ECEC. Sullivan (2003) emphasised shared values as a means by which a leader and staff together can achieve their goals and their mission for ECEC. The context of leadership defines the leadership culture and creates leadership discourse (Hujala, 2004), and determine what the development work based on that should be (Akselin, 2013; Nivala & Hujala, 2002; Halttunen, 2009). The challenges for leading the mission of ECEC emerge from children, education, families and partnership. Early education and care defines the roles of leadership and the skills and knowledges required by leaders in child care.

Seland (2009) found that EC management in Norway is dominated by administrative functions paying less attention to pedagogical issues. Educational organisations are increasingly forced to be led to meet the pressure of market economy, productivity and efficiency. EC leaders are urged to use the business leadership discourse more than before. In the research by Hujala (2004), centre directors recommended to staff that they also have to learn to use the financial discourse to gain an understanding and appreciation of their professional work in connection with the city council. Yet many Finnish researchers (Hirvelä, 2010; Söyrinki, 2010; Päivinen, 2010) have affirmed that municipal ECEC units as expert organisations expect visionary leadership connected with ECEC contexts instead of the traditional model that is usually a hierarchical, top-down administrative leadership (Ropo, 2011). Rajakaltio (2012) also suggests that the development of pedagogical leadership is a counterweight to the managerialist management authority in educational organisations. Visionary, contextually defined leadership discerns capabilities and potential in clarifying mission and developing the core tasks, ensures visioning the future and supports staff to develop their EC work, for themselves and their own wellbeing.

Leadership research as mentioned above indicate that the challenge for EC leadership is the clarification of the mission, and the definition of the shared vision of EC in a way where the director and the staff interdependently create and develop the structures and tasks of the leadership. Harris (2002) emphasised that one of the director's main responsibilities is to empower and engage the staff members in jointly to develop the core tasks. The time for leading alone and leading from top to down is past us. Shared strategic thinking and leadership roles support the accomplishment of the ECEC centre's mission, aims and vision. Likewise, improving EC leadership and

assessing the quality of leadership are bounded by the mission and the core tasks of ECEC centres.

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