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# **Pedagogical leadership among directors and deputies in early childhood settings in Australia, Finland and Norway: A summary of a small-scale study**

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## **Introduction**

Pedagogical leadership in this chapter is understood as a broad concept enacted within Early Childhood Education (ECE) centres. Involving several actors, who they are can vary according to the country or local context. The extent to which the distribution of leadership can influence core pedagogical tasks and program quality is not yet fully understood in the early childhood sector in Australia, Finland and Norway. Although in these three countries there are other leaders in ECE centres who are responsible for leading pedagogy, this paper focuses on how pedagogical leadership is shared among Centre Directors (Ds) and Deputies (DDs). Although there is some research on the Centre Director's role in pedagogical leadership (Heikka & Suhonen, 2019), the role of a Deputy Director is vague and under researched. In addition, there is no research about how Directors and Deputies collaborate as partners when leading pedagogy. It is also yet unknown if the establishment of the roles of Director and Deputy Director creates the right conditions for cultivating pedagogical leadership.

This chapter examines the practices of pedagogical leadership among Ds and DDs across three countries to explore the impact of different contexts on practice. The following sections offer a brief note on the lack of research about deputy leadership and a broader consideration of pedagogical leadership in ECE settings. This is followed by an explanation of the contexts in which the research was conducted. Our

findings about pedagogical leadership are then highlighted in each context and discussed in relation to each other. Overall, we argue that pedagogical leadership must be understood in context and cannot be considered a singular, universal construct.

### **Deputy Leadership**

The enactment of leadership practices among deputy leaders is a forgotten area of educational research (Cranston et al., 2004). There is a lack of research about deputy principals in school education, although the tradition of the deputy position is older and more established than in the early childhood sector (Barnett et al., 2012). Consequently, research on deputy leadership in early childhood is extremely limited. Our previous research suggests some tensions in tasks performed by ECE centre directors and deputies in Australia, Finland and Norway (Halttunen et al., 2019).

We found the highly localized nature of allocating leadership roles and responsibilities within each setting, particularly within Australia and Finland where there were no legislative guidelines about the appointment of deputies as is available in Norway. In this chapter, we go further in exploring the pedagogical aspects of the work of these directors and deputies in each of the three countries. As a pioneering study, however, the goal is not to compare these three nations, but to ascertain insights about current developments in an area of leadership and pedagogical leadership in ECE.

### **Pedagogical leadership**

Directors (D) and Deputy Directors (DD) have multiple responsibilities including those of line management, administration and pedagogical leadership. Pedagogical leadership means leading professional work towards organisational goals (Heikka and

Waniganayake, 2011). Research indicates that effective pedagogical leadership results in teachers feeling greater commitment (Heikka et al., 2019), improved quality of ECE (Douglass, 2019, Melhuish. et al., 2006, Sylva et al., 2010) and improved well-being of children (Fonsén et al. 2020). Pedagogical leadership includes leading the daily pedagogical activities and curriculum work in ECE settings. It also includes leading pedagogical reflection and assessment as well as enhancing pedagogical and professional development in line with core values and ethical practices (Bøe and Hognestad, 2017, Corrick and Reed, 2019, Heikka et al., 2019). A pedagogical leader has the responsibility to support and inspire educators and shape a learning organisation (O'Sullivan, 2009, Stremmel, 2019). Pedagogical leaders can do this in several ways, for example, by influencing the curriculum decisions and facilitating and directing pedagogical discussion of the educators (Waniganayake et al., 2017).

Classical conceptualisations of pedagogical leadership (e.g. Sergiovanni, 1998) focus on teaching and learning. Contemporary research is based on understanding early childhood pedagogy as a holistic phenomenon, integrating education and care, and the community aspects of leadership. Heikka and Waniganayake (2011) considered that the term is connected not only with children's learning, but also with the capacity building of an early childhood professional, and the values and beliefs about education held by the wider community. According to O'Sullivan (2009), pedagogical leadership is enacted by different facets of service and the relationships within the wider community.

In a narrower sense, pedagogical leadership can be understood as the work of people who hold managerial positions at the upper levels of the organisations and who are seen to have the responsibility for setting education goals (Atkinson and Biegun, 2017, Soukainen, 2013). However, leading an ECE centre is a joint task that involves centre

directors and other leadership stakeholders, such as deputy directors and teachers. Pedagogical leadership is separately enacted by formal and informal leaders but interdependently through organisational contexts. Leadership structures, routines and tools mediate distributed leadership functions. Interdependence between the stakeholders involved in leadership is crucial for the achievement of organisational goals (Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2001; Spillane 2006).

According to Heikka (2014), Heikka and Suhonen (2019) and Heikka et al. (2019), distributed pedagogical leadership functions include firstly, the enhancement of shared consciousness of visions, goals, and values for ECE within the centre. It also means the distribution of responsibilities for pedagogical leadership as well as distributing the enactment of pedagogical improvement within ECE centres. This can be promoted by focusing on the roles and responsibilities of the Ds and DDs in pedagogical development and negotiating how they facilitate the learning and expertise of educators aligned with centre goals. The authority is shared as the Ds work independently but interdependently as supporters of educators in the centre. It is also important to enhance the DD's participation in decision-making and enhancing efficient and participatory decision-making among all staff in a centre (Heikka et al., 2013). Well-planned, goal-oriented and regularly assessed strategies assist in achieving co-operation (Heikka et al., 2013). In addition, competences required from the directors include both knowledge of ECE and broader leadership skills (Muijs et al., 2004). It is clear from the literature that there are different ways in which pedagogical leadership is perceived and enacted, and this variation is accompanied by different understandings of the responsibilities of both Ds and DDs in leading pedagogy. Exploring the contexts in which the different understanding operates will

help to clarify the concept of pedagogical leadership, which ultimately may lead to improvements in practice.

### **The contexts**

In Australia, in 2012, the *National Quality Framework* (NQF) established the legislative framing of all ECE services in Australia, including introducing the idea of ‘educational leadership’ (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2019). This term is used widely in this country, rather than the alternative term, ‘pedagogical leadership’ as used in this paper. However, pedagogical leadership was not clearly articulated in the NQF and for some years was interpreted and enacted in different ways (Harrison et al., 2019, Sims and Waniganayake, 2015, Waniganayake and Sims, 2018). This confusion continues to blur the boundaries between pedagogical leadership and line management responsibilities.

It is not uncommon in Australia for centre owners to be untrained, yet they operate as line managers, whilst another staff member (usually, but not always, one with an ECE degree rather than a vocational diploma - Harrison et al. 2019) takes on the pedagogical leadership role. However, where managers have an ECE diploma or degree qualification, they will often perform the pedagogical leadership role together with managerial responsibilities, creating their own synthesis of line management and pedagogical leadership.

Regulation 118 of the NQF specified that the service “must designate, in writing, a suitably qualified and experienced educator, co-ordinator or other individual as educational leader at the service to lead the development and implementation of educational programs in the service”

(<https://www.legislation.nsw.gov.au/view/whole/html/inforce/current/sl-2011-0653>).

Educational leadership was further articulated in Quality Area 7, Standard 7.2.2 in the NQS, as a role responsible for supporting and leading the “development and implementation of the educational program and assessment and planning cycle” (ACECQA, 2011 [updated 2020]).

Seven years after the introduction of the concept, a substantive guide around the expectations and requirements of the role was introduced (ACECQA, 2019). Here it is argued that educational leaders play a central role in supporting a culture of continuous improvement, empowering centre staff to strive towards practice that consistently delivers the best outcomes in terms of children’s learning and wellbeing, and communication with families and the community. The implication is that such improvements are reflected in quality assessment and service accreditation.

In Finland, pedagogical leadership is enacted by diverse ECE stakeholders, including the Ds and ECE teachers as well as municipal level ECE leaders. Teachers’ engagement in pedagogical leadership is essential because the implementation of national curriculum reforms requires the commitment of teachers as developers of ECE pedagogy (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018 [Varhaiskasvatuslaki 540/2018], Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI), 2018). The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) (2018) launched quality indicators for ECE according to which leadership of ECE should be planned and goal-oriented. High quality pedagogical leadership comprises evaluation and development as well as taking care of educators’ professional learning.

The municipalities and private ECE organisations in Finland are free to decide the procedures of pedagogical leadership, resulting in considerable variation in leadership practices and arrangements. The qualification requirement for the ECE centre D was

a Bachelor's degree in ECE until year 2018 when the qualification requirement was raised to a Master's degree (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018). Until then, notions of ECE leadership in national policy documents were limited. In 2018, FINEEC stated that the aim of ECE leadership is transferring pedagogical goals into ECE practice. Distributed leadership is emphasised as a strategy for high quality pedagogy. However, teacher leadership is also considered important. The *National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care* (2018) states that "the head supports the community's development into a learning community where competence is developed and shared...the head is also in charge of ensuring that shared working practices are made visible and regularly examined and assessed" (p.31). These national documents do not however use the term 'pedagogical leadership', but rather focus on describing the responsibilities of the leaders.

In Norway, pedagogical leadership is understood in relationship with the roles assigned to leaders. The Kindergarten Act (The Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2005) states that centres must have *adequate* pedagogical and administrative leadership. The D has the overall responsibility for the tasks required by law and *National Framework Plan*. This concerns both the direct tasks of the D, and the responsibility of the D for all the centre's tasks, including those performed by the other staff. Centers must have a D who is an ECE teacher with a Bachelor Degree or another education qualification at a tertiary level relevant for working with children and including pedagogical expertise. One of the government's strategies is to increase the effectiveness of ECE leaders and their capacity to lead based on a leadership qualification at a master's level. For this purpose, leadership education programs for Ds and DDs are offered by Norwegian higher education institutions (The Norwegian



Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). These consist of a three-semester, Master's level course (30 credits) completed while working part-time.

Pedagogical leadership includes collaboration with the owner, teacher leaders and other staff as well as with relevant institutions. It contains following up on the planning, documentation, evaluation and development of the pedagogical content and working methods and ensuring that all staff are involved in this work. Expanded governance of ECE, in particular through extensive capacity building such as pedagogical leadership (The Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2018) emphasize that Ds have an increasing responsibility for pedagogical leadership.

Depending on size of the centre, ECE centres may have a full-time DD position or less, to meet the requirement of *adequate* pedagogical and administrative leadership (over 100 children=full time deputy position). In the *Framework Plan* for the content and tasks of kindergartens (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017) including pedagogical leadership responsibilities of the owner, D and pedagogical leaders are clarified and emphasized. The DD is not a formal leadership position described in the *Framework Plan*. That is, the DD's roles and responsibilities and how they enact their leadership is not clarified in the Plan. A DD is appointed by the owner to assist the director of an ECE centre.

In order to understand more about the roles of Ds and DDs across the three contexts, we engaged 10 Ds and 7 DDs in semi-structured interviews. Participants were all women, ranging between 31 to 60 years old. The majority (n=10) were highly experienced ECE practitioners with 20 years or more employment in the sector.

## **Theoretical underpinnings of the study**

The theory of practice architectures was initially developed by Kemmis and Grootenboer (2008) and is built on the practice theory of Schatzki (2002). For the purpose of this study, we used the definition introduced by Kemmis et al. (2014). Practices are understood, communicated and enacted within a cultural and organisational culture that has its own history and materiality and can be examined through an analysis of participant 'sayings', 'doings' and 'relatings', which reflect already existing, external cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political arrangements. This theory has been applied in previous studies focusing on ECE leadership (Barnes et al., 2019, Hognestad and Bøe, 2015, Rönnerman et al., 2015, Rönnerman et al., 2017).

According to Kemmis et al. (2014), cultural-discursive architectures are the resources in practice that create, construct and enable the language, knowledge and ideas used in the practice and in sayings about the practice. Cultural discursive conditions are mediated through language in a semantic space, e.g. languages, discourses, cultures and thoughts. Through material-economic architectures, the resources that make possible or hinder the actions in practice are made visible. Material-economic conditions are expressed through actions in a physical space, such as time, material, room and the artefacts. Socio-political architectures contain dimensions such as power, hierarchies, and solidarity between participants in a practice. Relationships can be shaped through roles, experience, competence, and education of participants as well as through political architectures. Practice architectures allow us to understand the conditions that enable and constrain the DDs leading practices through their own expressions, described activities and how they relate to the D and other staff in a practice.

## Findings

We outline the key elements arising from the data analysed for each country, reflecting practices associated with pedagogical leadership in Australia, Finland and Norway.

From Australia:

- There was a strong association between improving pedagogy and improving documentation of children's learning in the data from both Ds and DDs. Interactions with children were not identified as elements in improving pedagogy.
- There was an absence of an explicit link between pedagogy and leadership evident in the ways in which leadership and pedagogy were discussed separately.
- Leadership matters focused on macro-level functions connected with staff support and relationships with families.
- There was a lack of clarity between leadership and management roles, and for DDs, there was a confusion between their role as a DD and their role in working directly with children.
- There was evidence of a clear hierarchy with DDs ceding power to Ds (and consequently, sometimes feeling powerless) accompanied by a lack of clarity around the division of responsibilities.

From Finland:

- Both Ds and DDs emphasized that the role of the DD focused more on administrative tasks and not pedagogical leadership. Ds did not expect to share pedagogical leadership with their DDs.

- Ds direct pedagogical leadership activities were, for example, being responsible for structures which supported pedagogical development, bringing new pedagogical knowledge and ideas, being an example for the staff, and visiting teams.
- DDs were indirectly sharing pedagogical leadership through being members of the leadership team. They joined the team meetings and discussions but did not have a leading role in pedagogical leadership at the centre level.
- DDs' relatings with the staff were not directly related to pedagogical leadership but more focused on taking care of the wellbeing of others. They valued being present and close to the colleagues which made them more able to sense what was going on at their centre.
- DDs were at the same time teachers of a group of children. They were active pedagogical leaders in their own team and in their role as the ECE pre-school teacher who is responsible for the pedagogy of the team.

From Norway:

- DDs acted as leaders at the Ds' leadership level participating in pedagogical leadership activities and pedagogical improvement.
- How pedagogical tasks were shared between Ds and DDs depends on the Ds' workload, needs and wishes. However, division of pedagogical work was shared through a negotiating process between them.
- DDs acknowledge the Ds' positions as overall leaders, and they felt comfortable not being accountable for the whole centre leadership functions. DDs relate to the D as an assistant.
- Pedagogical collaboration involved tasks that facilitated pedagogical improvement. While the Ds had the overall pedagogical responsibility for

thoughts and visions, the DDs acted as a bridge between visions and everyday practice.

- Collaboration was built on a trusting relationship and mutual support.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Our findings indicate clearly that pedagogical leadership is enacted differently across the three countries in the study, indicating that the concept is fluid, and its enactment is somewhat dependent on the cultural/economic/social/political context in which it is operating. The Australian data pinpoints that pedagogical leadership is aimed at improving quality as identified in the quality assessment process defined in national ECE policy. In this context, pedagogical documentation is seen as crucial and pedagogical leadership tends to focus on the inspection and improvement of this documentation. In Finland and Norway, pedagogical work is understood as enhancing quality where both directors and teachers have a significant role. In Finland, the DDs' actions in leading pedagogy merely took place when they were working directly with children as teachers. In Norway, the DDs led at the centre level in collaboration with the D.

Compared to Finland and Norway, the Australian data demonstrated a completely different approach. Here Ds and DDs positioned themselves as key pedagogical leaders whose role it was to ensure that teachers implement the correct pedagogical approaches. The data suggests perceptions of a hierarchy, with Ds positioned at the apex. DDs are positioned below them, with the consequent responsibility functioning as a channel between staff, families and the D. This hierarchy brings with it an assumption that Ds, at the apex, are the experts when it comes to pedagogy, with DDs

following them and staff in positions where their pedagogical knowledge is perceived as sufficiently limited as to require supervision, mentoring and correcting.

The Finnish data demonstrated the importance of pedagogical leadership being shared across all those who work with the children and families. In Finland, teachers with at least a BA degree in ECE studies are expected to lead pedagogy with their group of children. In this context, it is therefore understandable that Ds may take more of an overview role in relation to pedagogical leadership. They ensure that all those working in the centres have access to the latest information, and that the work environment creates the right context (processes and structures) to support their teachers to lead their own pedagogy effectively. Perhaps because of this distributed leadership around pedagogy, there appears to be little for DDs to undertake in terms of pedagogical leadership. Rather their leadership roles, as in the case of Australia, tend to focus more on administrative work. It is worth noticing that in Finland, there is a tendency to have, for example, a separate position for a pedagogical leader who works at the centre level leading pedagogy.

If Finland is positioned at one end of a continuum of distributed pedagogical leadership, and Australia at the other, it might be argued that Norway fits somewhere between. Here the DD appeared to take a stronger hands-on role around pedagogical work and staff work with the DD in teams. The D appeared a little more distanced, and functions to provide an overview of the ways in which the pedagogical work of the leadership teams meets required national standards in each country. Norwegian DDs also appeared to be more involved in pedagogical work than the Finnish DDs. There appeared to be more flexibility for the leadership dyads to negotiate their roles in Norway than in Finland or Australia. In the latter, this is likely related to the stronger sense of hierarchy evident in the Australian data that may preclude perceptions of

DDs' capability to take on what might be perceived as a higher level of responsibility. In Finland and in Australia, this may be because the role of the DD appears to be more strongly identified with administration rather than pedagogy.

This study demonstrates that there is not a universally understood concept of pedagogical leadership, nor a universally enacted structure that defines the roles of the D or the DD in pedagogical leadership. It is crucial to remember that cultural-discursive, economic-material and social-political differences between countries will always create different contexts into which ideas are enacted. Cultural-discursive arrangements are resources to make possible the language and discourses. This leads us to consider how official documents or daily discussions interpret and justify the work of those with a leadership position. Material-economic arrangements are resources enabling and constraining activities. A critical question is, for example, do DDs have time for sharing pedagogical leadership with the D or other staff at the centre? Kemmis et al. (2014) note that these three arrangements and practices do not appear separately. It seems that social-political arrangements including aspects of power and solidarity have a significant role in what actually happens in practice. There is a need to consider the resources existing within centres, what relationships are possible and if organisational functions, roles and rules support or restrict the relationships and work related to pedagogical leadership. Seeking to determine a universal constant that operates independent of these influences is not useful as it is the richness of different contexts that provides opportunities for learning.

Pedagogical leadership is better understood in the context in which it is enacted, rather than seeking to determine a global universal approach. However, examining understandings of pedagogical leadership in different contexts creates opportunities to challenge one's own perspectives, and perhaps broaden understanding and change

practices towards what might be considered more desirable outcomes. In that light, we challenge early childhood professionals to reflect on the following questions: what is it that we want good pedagogical leadership to achieve? Better outcomes for children and families? Better recognition by a quality assessment and regulating body? And does achieving the latter automatically mean achieving the former for all children and families?



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