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Author(s): Heikkinen, Kirsi-Marja; Ahtiainen, Raisa; Kallioniemi, Arto; Fonsén, Elina

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“I am the pilot, but i need a committed crew”: Researching early childhood education and care leadership by using the actantial model of power

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**Kirsi-Marja Heikkinen^{id}, Raisa Ahtiainen^{id}, and
Arto Kallioniemi**

Department of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki, Finland

Elina Fonsén

Faculty of Education and Psychology, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Abstract

Leadership in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is changing globally. We investigated ECEC leadership and leaders' interpretations of power and its realization between leaders and followers, a little researched topic in the field. Our theoretical framework consists of ECEC contextual knowledge and prior research attached with Michel Foucault's and Mary Parker Follet's perceptions of power as positive, relational and discursive microphenomenon. Our essay data ($N = 46$) was written by ECEC center leaders before participating in educational leaders in-service training. The method of analysis was Greimas' actantial analysis (1979), which enabled us to build two actantial models of leaders' perspectives and relation to power. Findings indicate that power is a leader-centered, unstructured and hiding concept needing conscious reframing and integration of positional and non-positional leader roles in the community.

Keywords

Early Childhood Education, Leadership, Relational Power, Actantial Model

Corresponding author:

Kirsi-Marja Heikkinen, Department of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki, PL9, Helsinki 00014, Finland.
Email: kirsi-marja.heikkinen@helsinki.fi

Introduction

The aim of our study is to investigate ECEC center leaders and their perspectives of stretching leadership and power with the ECEC working community. This growing field of ECEC power research is more than relevant as several reforms within the Finnish early childhood education and care (ECEC) have set new requirements for leadership and how it should be implemented in ECEC centers (Act 540/2018; Vlasov et al., 2018; Finnish National Agency of Education, [FNAE], 2022).

Before 2013, Finnish ECEC was part of the social services for families in which teachers were part-time leaders in small centers for 40–50 children. Today, ECEC is under the Ministry of Education and Culture and the first step in the Finnish educational system. Moreover, children have a subjective right to ECEC to learn and play as if ECEC is not just a tool to enhance family working life. Consequently, the children's participation rate, which has been relatively low in Finland compared to other OECD countries, has grown gradually between the years 2010–2018 from 73% to 82%. This has set more requirements both in ECEC quantity and quality but also need for competent leadership (Finnish Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021). In Finland, municipalities are responsible for funding and leading both private and municipal ECEC in centers which take care of around 120–250 children. These centers are guided by ECEC center leaders who are part of organizational middle management and hold the formal authority in the centers (Act 540/2018; Siippainen et al., 2021). ECEC center leaders usually have 1–4 separate departments to run with approximately 30–40 employees with different working roles. When having more than one unit to run, leaders usually share their working hours between centers according to center sizes and needs.

Leaders' work consists of several administrative and managerial responsibilities but according to the guiding documents (Act 540/2018;

FNAE, 2022), their core duty is to lead ECEC center's operational culture, namely the values, pedagogical praxis and the evaluation process of ECEC pedagogics (Ahtiainen et al., 2021; FNAE, 2022; Vlasov et al., 2018). Moreover, this responsibility is meant to be a shared task with the ECEC multi-professional community, combining the knowledge and skills of ECEC center leaders, teachers, nurses and child group assistants (Heikkinen et al., 2022). Different working roles and responsibilities are based on pedagogical education and knowledge. ECEC center leaders are masters/Bachelor of Education from the university with adequate leadership competence. ECEC teachers have a three-year university-level bachelor's degree with a strong emphasis on pedagogy and educational sciences from a university and they are primarily responsible for child group level activities. There are also ECEC nurses and group assistants working in child groups. They have vocational level education and carry responsibility of pedagogy and organize everyday life in the child group with ECEC teachers. ECEC center leaders are superiors to all these groups of staff (FNAE, 2022).

An OECD survey in 2012 introduced the need to develop ECEC leadership in Finland due to growing responsibilities in early childhood education and care (OECD, 2012). Since then, the significance of leadership has been recognized both in ECEC leadership research and national guiding documents (Act, 540/2018; FNAE, 2022; Fonsén et al., 2022; Heikonen et al., 2023). Competent leader is a key to both reaching the general objectives of ECEC but they also have a positive impact on the wellbeing of employees and children (Ruohola et al., 2021; Siippainen et al., 2021). However, ECEC center leaders are still without systematic leadership education. Leaders' opportunities for training are mainly based on their personal motivation and the willingness of municipal ECEC organizations to offer training. Earlier research has acknowledged that leaders need training for developing their generic leadership skills to be able to lead in a holistic

way (Ahtiainen et al., 2021; Fonsén et al., 2022; Gibbs, 2020; Heikonen et al., 2023). ECEC leadership seems to be most effective as shared between leaders and working communities yet, in practice, ECEC center leadership structures are based mostly on the model of one leader (Siippainen et al., 2021).

Our goal is to examine how ECEC center leaders stretch their leadership within their centers and what are the ideal circumstances for realizing leadership as shared. This is examined through the concepts of power and authority and how these appear in leader narratives. Our theoretical framework draws from the philosophical grounds of Michel Foucault (2000) and Mary Parker Follet (1940) who see power as a positive and relational phenomenon between people. We interpret that these relations form the foundation within which leaders stretch their leadership, that is stretch the power and involve more ECEC professionals in leadership in the ECEC working communities.

The concept of power in the ECEC context

To understand behavior in organizations, leaders need to understand power in their contexts and how changes in these power settings affect social structures (Flynn et al., 2011). However, power perception in the ECEC field seems constrained and invisible. One possible reason for this has been said to be the patriarchal echo power involved (Hard & Jónsdóttir, 2013). Traditionally power has been defined as an instrument and research has mainly focused on how power is achieved rather than how it evolves and affects people (Mélé & Rosanas, 2003). This perception of power does not seem to fit ECEC's sensitive nature (Hard, 2008; Hard & Jónsdóttir, 2013). Another reason could be ECEC claimed as a highly feminized, 'pink collar' field, in which leaders are seen as reluctant to discuss power and authority (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003; Hard & Jónsdóttir, 2013; Klevering & McNae, 2018). The

combination of these added with a strong ethic of care may contribute to passivity and the tendency to manage problems rather than solving them to avoid possible conflicts and using power (Lund, 2021; Moyles, 2001). Consequently, recent research states the need for strengthening leaders' awareness of their professional role and reconceptualization of leadership and power to manage the uncertainty and unwillingness power brings. In the complex reality ECEC center leaders cannot continue forcing equilibrium, harmony and stability (Douglass, 2018, 2019; Gibbs, 2021; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017).

Relational power concept serves as an alternative to traditional ECEC power perspective in order to enable leadership as shared. Power and authority are mobile and reversible and resonate with freedom and oppression in the community; they are not possessions, owned by anyone in a formal leader position (Ladkin & Prober, 2019; McNay, 1994). Foucault (2000) states power is always present in relations as we are formed through power discourse. This is remarkable because of the ECEC educational context where the emphasis is on pedagogical discourse as a key tool to establish both positive and negative meanings and have an impact on shared pedagogical work in the community (Fonsén & Keski-Rauska, 2018; Fonsén et al., 2021). Based on this perspective, pedagogical discourse has the power to produce, argue, and exchange pedagogical knowledge in the power relations between leaders and employees (McNay, 1994; Varis, 1989). Putting the perspective to ECEC center leader formal positions, they have an ability to both constraints and constitute the discourse reflecting valued, quality pedagogics among their working communities (Varpanen, 2020). This argumentation is a source for power struggles between professionals which also enables releasing power through the discourse. In other words, leader argumentation and employee resistance and vice versa don't exclude each other rather than create positive power of resistance which is freedom to

denote different pedagogical aspects (Foucault, 2000; Fonsén et al., 2021; McNay, 1994). However, power is not only visible discursive struggle. There are also less obvious and hidden ways affecting an employee's individual's capacity to function (McNay, 1994). Power today is a more democratic type of governmentality, guidance and control and use of power is sharing, empowering and giving autonomy (Miller & Rose, 2008; McNay, 1994). This is a modern way of controlling sensitively without subjunctive power and in this, certain types of discourse, knowledge and right to express opinions are in focus (McNay, 1994). Follet (1940) makes a distinction between *power over* and *power with*. Power with, emphasizes the working community's collaboration, empowerment and finding solutions without leaders' tight control. It is a tool to produce an integration of conflicting and differing viewpoints rather than trying to neutralize struggles. Instead, power over is leaders' coercion to compromises that have a risk of escalating later as discontent grows in working communities (Mélé & Rosanas, 2003).

Research questions

Our research aim was to investigate ECEC center leaders' perspectives of power and power relations in the ECEC working community. To find an answer to this problem two following research questions were proposed:

- RQ1.** How do ECEC leaders perceive power in their position?
- RQ2.** What kind of relations of power can be found in leader narratives?

Data

The data are essays written by ECEC center leaders ($N = 46$). We collected the data in August 2020 in a 15 course credits in-service training program which lasted 18 months. The

training was organized by the University of Helsinki (UH), and it was targeted to ECEC center leaders, comprehensive and upper secondary education principals. The training was voluntary in-service training for a year led by UH leadership researchers. Content of the in-service training considered research-based knowledge of leadership in educational context including pedagogical leadership and distributed leadership. We collected the data as pre-assignments in which leaders narrated their ideas of functional leadership distributed with the working community. Leaders were instructed to write 2000-word long text before the training and define a favorable environment that allows leaders to stretch leadership over larger groups of people and what is their role in this context. We received 48 essays in total and 46 essays were included in the study as two participants denied the use of their content.

Ethical considerations and validity of the study

At the University of Helsinki, researchers follow the Ethical principles of research in the humanities and social and behavioral sciences issued by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK, 2023). A statement of the ethics of a research design must be requested from the University of Helsinki, if a study meets any of the following items specified by the TENK: participants under age of 15, exposure of participants to exceptionally strong stimuli, research involving a risk to cause mental harm or involving a threat to the safety of participants or researchers or their family members or others closest to them. Our research did not include any of these items.

In this study we have followed the process of informed consent. All participants were informed along with ethical matters about the research components related to the training, and they were aware that leader pre-assignments were going to be part of the leadership study.

They had a right to withdraw the use of essays at any point of the research. When receiving essays, our practice of saving data has followed the scientific principles of carefulness and openness. The data was stored in a safe group space at the University of Helsinki to which only the researchers involved in the data collection have had access. Restricted access to the data has ensured the ethical handling of the essays. Before starting the analysis, essay data was anonymized, and researchers gave identification numbers to leaders to be able to organize and analyze the data reliably. Moreover, all other recognizable features such as work organizations were deleted from the content.

Methodology

Narrative research and Greimas's actantial analysis

Our study focused on ECEC center leaders' perspectives of power and power relations in the ECEC working community. The methodological approach of the study was narrative and written language was a tool to understand the phenomenon from the leader's point of view (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008). The aim and the focus in analyzing the data was to find deep narrative structures of ECEC center leadership, calling for close examination of how something has been said, not just reconstructing the surface of what leaders have narrated (Cortazzi, 1993). Consequently, narrative method Actantial analysis of A.J. Greimas (1979) was chosen to be able to reach deeper roles, relations, motives, tension and even contradictions when examining relations between ECEC center leaders and working communities. Moreover, based on analysis you can build a figure Actantial model, which compresses the results to a table with revealing visually the roles, relations, motives, goals and possible tensions and contradictions in these (Bouissac, 2007; Greimas, 1979; Wang & Roberts, 2005) (Figure 1).

Main principle of actantial analysis is that all actions can be broken down into six actants. Actants are related to each other, thus, the basic unit, the actant, is a category of a function, and should not be confused with the notion of a character. The actant may be manifested as anthropomorphic or zoomorphic characters or groups, concepts or abstractions. The absence of an actant (nonactant) is also a possibility and usually brings tension to the (Greimas, 1979; Toro & Hubbard, 1995). All actants are grouped based on their functions and thus, even if there are only six actants it does not limit the number of different actors that may be manifested in certain actions (Bouissac, 2007; Greimas, 1979). First, there is an axis of desire which is the subject is the central actor of the process desiring an object that can be individual, collective or abstract. Second, an axis of transmission, where the sender is a motivator, inspirer, essential for the subject's activity and forces the subject to reach an object. Receivers are those who benefit from the subject's desire and activity towards the object (Bouissac, 2007; Greimas, 1979). Finally, there is the axis of power. There are helpers who contribute to a goal and opponents who act in an opposite direction by resisting the subject's achievements. In practice, actantial analysis means converting actions through an actantial model by first defining the subject and the object, after these helpers, opponents, senders and receivers (Greimas, 1979; Hébér, 2019). In the beginning of the analysis process, data was systematically organized by coding 46 essays one by one with the help of Atlas.ti software. Based on this we built 46 separate Actantial models by placing actors to actants with a help of following questions below:

- Who catalyzes and innovates distributing leadership (sender)?
- Who benefits from distributed leadership in ECEC leadership (receiver)?
- Who are the actors that increase distributed leadership or suppress it (helpers and opponents)?

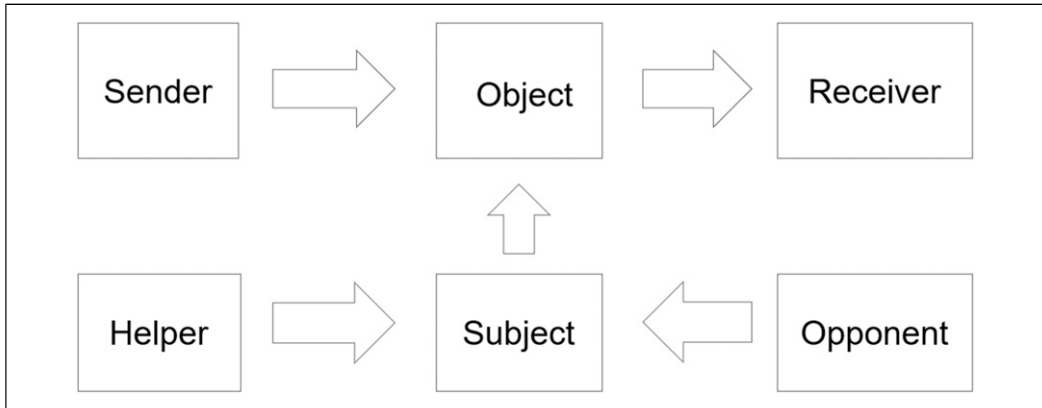


Figure 1. Actantial model.

- How are these actors and actants related to each other?

Next, we continued with examining thematized content of four actants but also the relations according to the axes of desire, transmission and power. This state of analysis revealed the leader's actions attached to the concepts of rights, duties, responsibilities and being in charge. Leaders used these concepts as substitutes or justifications in situations where they were supposed to use power and authority but also to release it and share it with the working communities. In other words, power and authority as concepts were found as a nonactant: as an unmentioned concept but relevantly present in actants and their relations. In Actantial analysis differences of desire that we found considering power and authority are called modalities of actions. In our analysis these modalities characterized leaders' dual desire for authority and power in relation to the ECEC working community. Based on this we built two actantial models of power presented below.

Results

Based on our analysis we built two models of power of ECEC center leaders (Figures 2 and 3).

In the results we explain and compare these models through actantial axes to create a coherent view of the ECEC center leaders' perspectives of power, authority and power relations in the ECEC working community.

The axis of desire to release power

The starting point for desiring an object was the same in both models power release and power control. All leaders perceived their formal position to be a justification for holding power as ECEC center leader naturally has the final word regarding the decisions made of the decision made in the center. However, leader must respect democracy in these processes in relation to ECEC teachers and nurses. However, there are decisions that are made without negotiation" (L6). The main difference between these models was the timing when power could be released. In the first model (Figure 2) leaders saw themselves as both **subjects** and **senders** who motivate and inspire power release. This was based on the moral obligation of leadership as a shared rather than a personal choice or option. Holding formal power was not a matter of possessing power, as leaders were responsible for promoting cooperation and communal learning, supporting Follet's (1940) idea of *power with*. This resonates with Bøe & Hognestad, 2017;

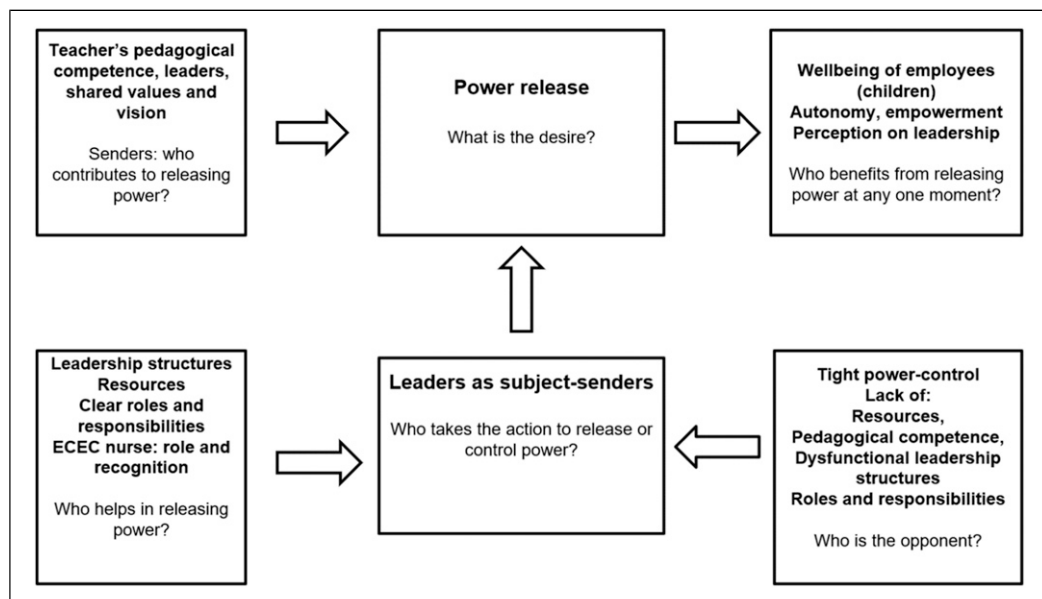


Figure 2. Power release.

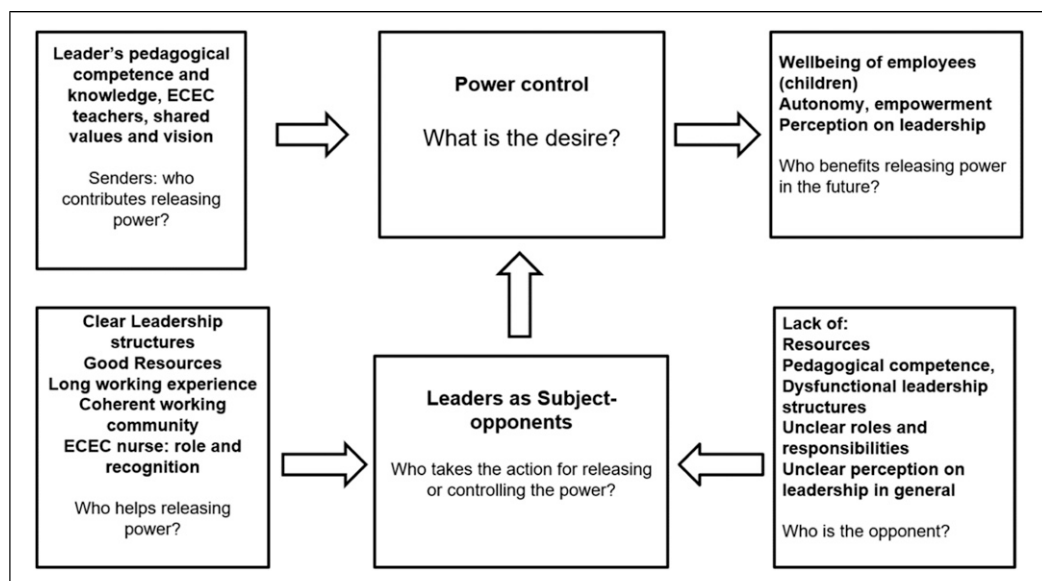


Figure 3. Power control.

Lund, 2021), who state that effective leadership is collaborative, increases employee satisfaction and creates a positive atmosphere in the community. In the second model (Figure 3) the time context of releasing power was a result of the community being ready to take up responsibility. Until that point, power was under the control of the ECEC leader. Existing circumstances were seen as impossible for de-control as there were many substitute teachers and a lack of pedagogical competence in the community as one leader puts it “I have to say that the current level of pedagogical knowledge, self-organizing and self-reflection skills are not on a such level that would enable sharing of leadership” (L47). In this situation delegation and power release were seen as a risk that could create uncertainty about ‘who is in charge’ and might destabilize the equilibrium of the working community.

The axis of transmission that promotes power release

In both models of power release and power control, releasing power was inspired by trust, positive cooperation and commitment between the leaders and employees of the working community, a notion that is also emphasized by Boje and Rosile (2001). Shared values and integrated views on quality pedagogical work along with the core curriculum were fundamental. Leaders held extensive discursive power as pedagogical leaders and influencers which required several skills from leaders. They saw themselves as mainly responsible for leading values, positive discourse and the quality of pedagogical work ensuring that the curriculum is in line with Act 540/2018 and the national curriculum (Act 540/2018; FNAE, 2022):

“Collaborative way of leading requires leader skills to delegate, trust in employees, ability to tolerate uncertainty, and capability to argue for your decisions and ways of working. Most of all

you must be able to coach employees, lead shared values and discussion in the working community” (L20).

The difference in the axis of transmission was the perception of competence and knowledge. In the release model, the communities’ collective competence and knowledge were the primary sender and a starting point for collective work. In the control model, the knowledge and competence of a leader were primary. The leader had a complementary role of introducing knowledge and knowledge that was lacking in the working community. Collective competence was a goal that relied on better future resources. Leaders stressed – in a similar manner as reported by Fonsén and Ukkonen-Mikkola (2019) – the importance of qualified ECEC teachers. Leaders wanted close pedagogical cooperation with teachers, and competent teamwork between teachers and nurses, whose cooperation assisted the implementation of the ECEC curriculum in the child group. This resonates with Kahila et al. (2020) study and the significance of teachers’ leadership. What was the purpose of power release, and who benefitted from the situation where leaders were able to release power? In both models power release was seen to promote employees’ and children’s wellbeing in the community. The ability to work independently and make decisions promoted feelings of involvement and agency and promoted collaboration in leadership:

“To be able to share leadership all participants must be enthusiastic and committed to joint work. In order to succeed, we need clearly defined responsibilities. Moreover, we need pedagogical knowledge and training and ability to support and coach others. We need shared vision that nourishes sense of belonging” (L14).

Leaders also emphasized the potential change in the general perception of leadership, which is in keeping with the earlier research of Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2003) and Hard and Jónsdóttir (2013). Functional power release could be

achieved by applying more collaborative approaches. This indicates that an understanding of leadership as a collective responsibility grows when power is released and when the community develops its shared leadership practices and structures.

The axis of power driving and opposing power release

In both models the main helpers for the de-control were functional leadership structures, as also argued by [Heikka et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Heikkinen et al. \(2022\)](#). Functional leadership structures were ensured by means of shared planning and close cooperation between leaders and teachers:

“To be able to work in cooperation we need clear rules and structures but also functional interaction between working community members. We also have to be able to reflect our work in relation to pedagogical goals set for ECEC. Everyone has their own roles and they want to share knowledge and good practices with colleagues” (L3).

Moreover, the weekly meetings of leaders and teachers and the team meetings of ECEC teachers and nurses were important structures to ensure good collaboration, shared views, and integrated practices at the center. General resources were a cornerstone in helping power release. Organizing time and effort such as scheduling the centers’ work shifts and pedagogical planning time for teachers were mentioned as important resources. In addition, time for pedagogical dialogue concerning values and pedagogical practices and for the goals of the national curriculum were seen as vital to build joint commitment and integrated views helping power release. When structures and time resources were well focused and planned, centers functioned systematically and employees were able to carry out their pedagogical responsibilities. Leaders emphasized clear roles and responsibilities for leaders, teachers and nurses. These were based on education and

working roles, but also on personal strengths and interests promoting motivation and commitment. What leaders hoped for was clarification and recognition concerning the important role of ECEC nurses as helpers in power release as “we must clarify the importance of the roles of ECEC nurses who work in cooperation with ECEC teachers. Although ECEC teacher is a pedagogical leader in the team, ECEC nurses share this responsibility and need to have their own responsibilities in pedagogical work” (L15). The role of nurses was generally underrated and unclear. There was a need to be aware of the systemic relations of multi-professional working roles. Although teachers were responsible for pedagogics, the process of planning and implementation was a shared task for both teachers and nurses. [Lund, 2021](#) has pointed out that hardship in ECEC is contextual in nature. Surprisingly, the opponents of both models were weak leadership structures, small resources, unclear roles and responsibilities with weak pedagogical competence. [Follet \(1940\)](#) builds her power theory on trust and leaders’ ability to give up positional power. Consequently, the primary opponent for power release was the leaders’ own tight control and a lack of trust and an inability to delegate. If leader de-control was only seen as an obligation or as a result of good circumstances, power release was impossible. Moreover, undefined roles and relations with badly organized resources were obstacles to power release. These led to a hectic and disorganized everyday life, which helped to justify tight leader control.

Discussion

An organizational understanding of power consequences is only remotely understood in ECEC, and the goal of our article was to increase knowledge of ECEC leaders’ perspectives over power and power relations in the working community ([Sturm & Antonakis, 2015](#)). A few earlier studies have created a picture in which power is seen to be an unfit or

unpleasant concept in the ECEC field (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003; Hard & Jónsdóttir, 2013). Our findings, however, support the notion that power is an invisible and incoherent concept, but reluctance seems mainly conceptual.

Our first research question was *How do ECEC leaders perceive power in their position?* When comparing the two actant models, leaders' power perception was closely attached to their position, education and knowledge of ECEC pedagogics. Power was implemented as pedagogical discourse and this discourse was required to interpret the national curriculum, control pedagogical quality and lead the community towards a shared vision – all of which constitute the main duty of ECEC leaders in Finland (Act 540/2018; FNAE, 2022; Fonsén et al., 2021, Varpanen, 2020).

Leaders did not show reluctance to implement power but the arguments to justify its use were attached to their formal position and right to lead. In other words, leaders were eager to control pedagogy and pedagogical work from their positions of power. The first priority in narratives seemed controlling pedagogical quality, but when going deeper in narrative relations, the goal was to avoid conflicts caused by “too many leaders” and to promote harmony in the community. What was absent was shared discussion to challenge and test leaders' opinions and to ensure that these opinions worked in cooperation with the community (Gibbs, 2021). When reflecting on Foucault (2000), he criticizes harmony through control. He states that power is less a possession than a relation that requires resistance to be able to exercise power.

Our second research question was, *what kind of relations of power can be found in leader narratives?* Although all leaders agreed that power release was important for the wellbeing and autonomy of employees, the result reflected conflicting opinions on releasing power and authority in community relations. Power release and control seemed to be attached to leaders' personal judgment and level of trust in the

working community. ECEC center leaders were not fully aware of multiple ways that power could be exercised in community relations. Moreover, it seems that leaders' right to govern and control pedagogical work from their position of power had not been fully challenged in relations between leaders and working communities (McNay, 1996). The risk in this scenario could be that different micro cultures can be created inside formal organizations and that one voice might well be the most dominant. To avoid this, we need a conscious counterforce to positional power and an awareness of relational power and how it is implemented in cooperative communities. This resonates with Follet (1940) and the need to exercise power in relations as a coactive, not coercive, force. In ECEC organizations this means a deeper understanding of the power of leaders and employees, but also closer relations between ECEC centers and local ECEC administration. This could be a tool to balance the power relations between center leaders and working communities and avoid the risk of isolation and concentration of power in a person or position (Hjelt & Karila, 2021).

Conclusions

When considering the recent developments regarding increased provision and consequent professionalization of ECEC nationally and internationally (OECD, 2012, 2022) in the light of this study, we see necessary to reflect the following three aspects. First, power, authority, roles and relations seem to be formed by individual leaders and their subjective actions rather than by leadership or collective aspects in the community (Gibbs, 2020; Toro & Hubbard, 1995). Second, power and its implementation create contradictory interpretations when ECEC center leaders consider the power control and release and their justifications to use authority. Third, ECEC power concept needs not only to reconceptualization but also recontextualization to encourage and enable a more coherent view that finds its way into the relations of an ECEC

(Flynn et al., 2011; Mélé & Rosanas, 2003). Based on our results it seems that ECEC center leaders have created an understanding of their special role and importance. To continue productively from here we need to develop consciousness of discursive power relations and ask: Who has the right to speak? Who has the right to knowledge? Who do we follow? As Sturm and Antonakis (2015) state, releasing power shapes people and creates confidence, belief in one's competence yet it also increases action orientation and encourages greater freedom of expression and ideas. When paying attention to increasing relational power we support the roles and carrying pedagogical responsibility of teachers and nurses which helps to shift away from an exclusive focus on official leaders. However, creation of a counterforce to positional power is needed to question and challenge without fear of consequences and to be able to stretch leadership over larger groups of people (Gillies, 2013; Hjelt & Karila, 2021). Leaders and communities who understand the necessity of power struggles and conflicting perspectives create professional possibilities that challenge managerial control, status quo thinking and a conservative culture (Kangas et al., 2015; McNay, 1996; Varis, 1989).

Limitations

The participants of our study were selected from an in-service training programme. They represent motivated and willing leaders who are committed to develop their professionalism, which may influence their opinions about power and leadership. To promote more validity, leader narrative data was collected before in-service training of educational leaders started in September 2020. Executing the essay as pre-assignment was a way to reduce the influence of our views as researchers that would possibly be more extensive during the in-service training. Because of the narrative approach and the small sample of the study, the results cannot be generalized to ECEC leadership nationally or

internationally. However, these results can be seen as a start to more vivid scientific discussion of ECEC power and authority to increase general consciousness on how leader power actions impact on working community relations.

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ORCID iDs

Kirsi-Marja Heikkinen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3262-4227>

Ahtiainen Raisa  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1925-6578>

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