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# Chapter 1

## Introduction



**Raisa Ahtiainen, Eija Hanhimäki, Jaana Leinonen, Mika Risku,  
and Ann-Sofie Smeds-Nylund**

**Abstract** This volume provides a comprehensive overview and in-depth coverage of contemporary aspects of leadership in the field of education. It brings together scholars to explore critically and discuss leadership in education in the Finnish education system in relation to international discourses around the topic. The aim is to unravel the nature of the Finnish approach to educational leadership regarding theory and practice and to discuss the theme in various educational contexts; how the Finnish educational success and wellbeing of children, youngsters and educational communities can be supported and enhanced through leadership. Moreover, this volume sheds light on the national characteristics and composition of leadership, policy and governance in education, and at the same time bridges the Finnish and international discussions. The purpose is to increase the knowledge concerning existing variations between countries in terms of the development and position of leadership within educational policy and governance and to provide a reflection surface for both Finnish and international readers to examine their national educational leadership arrangements.

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## Leadership in Educational Contexts

The questions around the leadership practices and construction of leadership in different educational systems have been of interest to many scholars over the past few decades (Bush & Glover, 2014; Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017; Harris & Jones, 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020). For example, the nature of leadership and a leader's role in education (Drysedale et al., 2016; James et al., 2020) and the connection between the practice of leadership and the immediate organisational working environment (Goddard et al., 2015; Leithwood et al., 2020; Spillane & Healey, 2010) or a larger structure of educational governance as well as the relationship between leadership and educational policy (Pont, 2021) have been themes of inspiration for many researchers. Consequently, the literature concerning leadership in education introduces several conceptualisations created for depicting the phenomena, putting forward a variety of toolkits, models and approaches, yet the empirical support for them could be stronger (Harris & Jones, 2021).

Research on educational leadership in Finland has focused on change in the operational environment affecting education, educational organisations and educational staff (e.g. Risku & Kanervio, 2010). Evidently, the operational environment is being transformed into an increasingly complex and dynamic one, which is constantly off balance (Risku & Tian, 2020; Simola et al., 2017). How educational organisations and staff interpret, translate and enact transnational and national policies is transforming itself in several ways (Ball et al., 2012). Furthermore, the role of globalisation and the increased influence of supranational organisations are significantly affecting educational reforms and policymaking (Pont, 2021; Rinne, 2021). The phenomena and mechanisms of the Finnish policy and governance transformation are of international interest and significance because Finland has been in the role of the OECD's 'model pupil' in applying neoliberal innovations in education, especially through technical and incremental policy (e.g. Rinne, 2021).

During the past few years, many researchers have analysed the Finnish educational system and its success. One of them is Risto Rinne (2021) who examined the Finnish educational success through six explanatory factors of which one is sustainable political and educational leadership (Rinne, 2021, 57). Even if Finland has been the late comer in the family of Nordic countries in terms of industrialisation and urbanisation, the changes have taken place rapidly, and Finland has become one of the best educational achievers amongst OECD and Nordic countries during the past few decades. One of the main reasons for this is Finnish educational policy, which has emphasised the idea of raising the educational level of the entire population and importance of coherence creation instead of competition (Eisenschmidt et al., 2021; Sahlberg, 2014, 26–29). There are still many challenges, which must be solved, such as youth unemployment and the polarisation of young people into those who are coping well and into those who are at serious risk of social exclusion. In addition, the strong faith in national solidarity and educational equality has been challenged by the attitude to climate change regarding education in terms of economic investment and efficiency (Rinne, 2021).

If we look at the concept of educational leadership from the Finnish point of view, we can simply define it as studying, developing and educating the phenomenon of leadership in education (Risku & Alava, 2021). Both in educational leadership and in the educational system in Finland, certain values and ethical principles are present throughout. First, the fundamental ethical principle is striving for equality based on the Nordic welfare state ideology on all levels of our educational and societal system. Second, it is a characteristic of our system to take care of all individuals in their educational and life paths in accordance with their own needs and goals. Third, we have a long tradition of multi-professional collaboration to support the well-being and development of people of all ages in the Finnish educational system (Hanhimäki & Risku, 2021).

## The Aims of the Volume

This volume, *Leadership in educational contexts in Finland: Theoretical and empirical perspectives*, provides a comprehensive overview and in-depth coverage of contemporary aspects of leadership in the field of education. It brings together scholars to explore and discuss leadership in education in the context of the Finnish education system in relation to international discourses around the topic. This volume is an outlier amongst books on Finnish education for two main reasons. First, it looks at education in Finland from the perspective of leadership, which has been a neglected scope in the country regarding educational research. It does this by positioning educational leadership from the perspective of educational policy and governance. Second, this volume examines the key changes, strengths and challenges in terms of the conceptualisation and practice of leadership in the field of education and illustrates the present and future complex organisational, practical and social conditions educational leaders and teaching staff are coping with. This has been done by linking the Finnish understanding about the phenomenon with international theorising and research emerging through Finnish theoretical and empirical academic work.

One of the main aims in this volume is to perceive the nature of the Finnish approach to educational leadership in theory and in practice to uncover what leadership in various educational contexts in Finland is, and how it can support, enhance and sustain the Finnish educational success and wellbeing of children, youngsters and educational communities. Furthermore, this volume sheds light on the national characteristics and composition of leadership, policy and governance in education, and at the same time bridges the Finnish and international discussions. The purpose is to increase the knowledge concerning existing variation in transnational contexts in terms of the development and position of leadership within educational policy and governance and to provide a reflection surface for both Finnish and international readers to examine their national educational leadership arrangements.

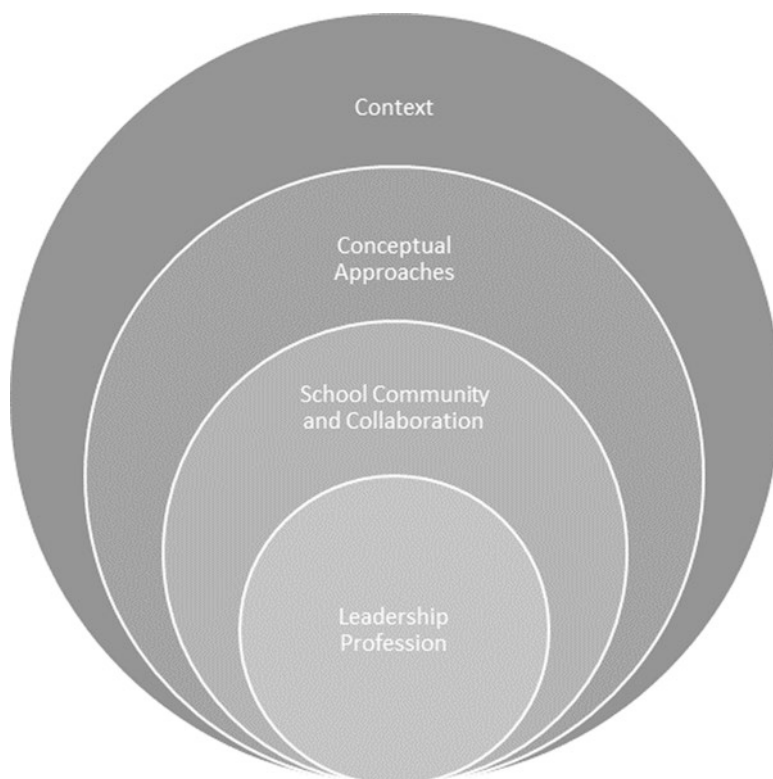
While leadership within education has been a field of interest for decades, there have been very few publications of the specifics of educational leadership with a wide-ranging perspective for the radically evolving operational environment written by researchers in educational leadership and governance. Due to the Finnish success in international evaluations (e.g. PISA), there is a rich literature in English on several aspects of the Finnish education system. However, leadership in educational contexts has almost been neglected. In addition, leadership within the system has been discussed internationally mainly by educators without a background in research on leadership in education. Moreover, the field has been largely ignored in Finland as well. Therefore, this volume conceptualises and describes the nature of Finnish educational leadership for international and Finnish audiences. Furthermore, this volume reflects on and discusses the solutions and ways to develop the field of educational leadership in the future.

## Overview of Sections

The volume is divided into four main sections with 17 individual chapters integrating three dimensions of educational governance through which leadership is reflected: *macro and policy dimensions* discuss international and especially national policy levels, *local and organisational dimensions* focus on municipal and school levels, and *a micro dimension* covers the individual level with demands for development of professional capacity and practices.

The four sections are organised to look at leadership theoretically and empirically through the perspectives of educational context, conceptual approaches, leadership profession, and educational organisation community and collaboration. The authors present a variety of theoretical conceptualisations and empirical findings around leadership and through that they bring out the polyphony in the scholarly approaches. After these four sections, there is a concluding chapter in which the editors of the volume sum up insights and conclusions based on the sections and chapters. The theoretical and empirical perspectives of leadership in education of this volume can be depicted through perspectives that are both separate and contained in each other (Fig. 1.1). That is, all these perspectives together compose an overarching overview of leadership in education.

The first section places the whole volume in a wider *context* both internationally and within Finland. A lot has been written on the Finnish PISA success. Typically, curricular elements and well-educated teachers are named as explanatory factors for the success. However, looking from the perspective of educational leadership, Finnish educational policy, governance and leadership stand up as significant enablers for students' learning outcomes and wellbeing. Through this lens, Finland does not appear to be as uniform as the image of Finland is typically presented. On the contrary, we see that Finland can also be described as a national experimental laboratory with a lot of diversity just below the surface. The first section of the volume starts by positioning and conceptualising the context of Finnish educational



**Fig. 1.1** Theoretical and empirical perspectives of leadership in education

policy, governance and leadership in the international setting. This includes looking at policy, governance and leadership at the conceptual level, separately and as the systemic entity. Furthermore, the section focuses on defining Finnish principalship and how Finland is developing a multi-form professional development for educational leaders as a joint national effort and research-based experiment. In addition, this section provides another example of experimental Finnish education culture how service design-thinking method can help educational leaders to solve common challenges. These chapters, too, include the international comparison, so that the volume serves the international readership purposefully.

The second section presents *conceptual approaches* to leadership in educational contexts. First, international educational leadership conceptions and models with reference to the Finnish context of educational leadership and management are considered in a literature review-based study. This section also conceptualises pedagogical leadership in the Finnish setting by positioning pedagogical leadership amongst other international approaches on developing educational leadership. Furthermore, the historical evolvement of pedagogical leadership is examined and linked to the educational policy and governance in Finland. In addition, the section deepens the understanding of pedagogical leadership in international education and

its meaning for high-quality education based on Finnish and international research. Also, the second section critically reflects and discusses a systemic approach of how school leadership needs to be theoretically based on education theory.

The third section works from the premise that educational leadership is not just educational administration, management or delivering school services. Instead, the chapters focus on *leadership profession* and dynamic, interactive and value-based aspects on educational leadership. In addition, this section emphasises interactive, communal and inter-organisational perspectives in solving complex problems. This section views educational leadership from moral, attitudinal and affective perspectives emphasising the experience-based view of leadership and micro-level action, yet at the same time examining educational leadership as a part of the collaborative governance. Theoretically, the section views educational leadership as social, relational and contextual governance. Empirically, the section forms a rich and multidimensional entity. The content of the section has an empirical foundation based on both quantitative and qualitative methodology and data collected from educational leaders, school principals and students studying educational leadership.

Finally, the fourth section continues with the theme of interactive processes initiated in the previous section and focuses on *school community and collaboration*. The discourse of collaboration is seen as an overarching and central element in educational leadership and governance, and this perspective emphasises practices around that theme and looks for further developmental steps of educational leadership profession. Thus, along with the theme of collaboration and organisational community, this section is connected to the perspective of leadership profession (Fig. 1.1). The authors of this section bring out structural solutions for organising collective practices and discuss goals, values and perceptions that stem from the contexts of schools and the wider communities around them. These approaches enlighten the education governance from the perspective of schools and municipal educational administrators. The focus is on various practices and professionals in various positions working in education. At the level of practices, the section discusses the means for sharing responsibilities and duties. Collaboration and opportunities for participation and interaction are examined through the perspectives of teachers, principals and municipal education administrators. The section shares the premise that working towards shared aims and common good requires the capacity of many, and people may have distinct roles depending on the task and their expertise. Furthermore, this section directs us to see student teachers as potential future leaders. Authors draw both from survey and focus group, thematic and semi-structured interview data to examine and discuss leadership distribution, multi-agency collaboration and student teachers' conceptions of leadership.

In the concluding chapter of the volume, we present the challenges and reflections for developing leadership in educational contexts in the future. We employed three main concepts – *sustainability*, *professional agency* and *holistic understanding* – that evolved from the chapters. We see these concepts as uniting signposts for the future and as ways to develop educational leadership. The educational leader has traditionally been a rule-oriented administrator following educational policies, rules and regulations and responsible for executing certain, addressed administrative

tasks. Today, the educational leader is first and foremost a collaborator and an enabler operating in a context of local governance solving various wicked problems in different networks and collaborative groups. In the preparing for the future and our work in development of leadership, we need to strengthen sustainability, professional agency and holistic understanding as the signposts of it at different levels from macro to micro dimensions and in relation to the educational policy and ideals.

## Target Audience of the Volume

This volume provides both theory-based understanding and empirical points of view to investigate and develop educational leadership for the future. The focus is on internationally timely issues around leadership in educational contexts with a Finnish twist. As stated above, our aim is to provide comprehensive understanding about the present and future complex conditions educational practitioners are coping with. Hence, the volume has been designed and written for a wide audience. First, the issues discussed in this volume will be of relevance to professionals in education. The volume will help all educational staff and leaders, teachers, day-care centre directors, school leaders, principals and administrators working in education to understand the specifics of the changing macro- and micro-level environments and its effects on leadership and school practices. Second, the volume is an essential textbook for all students on undergraduate and postgraduate courses in education and educational leadership. Third, the volume will be of interest to academics and researchers who are looking for new insights and ideas for their research.

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