CHAPTER 8

Shadowing Centre Directors as Pedagogical Leaders in Early Childhood Education Settings in Finland

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Abstract

This chapter investigates the implementation of pedagogical leadership by Finnish early childhood education (ECE) centre directors. The study focuses on the key pedagogical leadership responsibilities of three centre directors and how leadership structures and approaches influence the implementation of pedagogical leadership in ECE set-

tings. Qualitative shadowing was employed to investigate the directors' leadership practices on pedagogical leadership in selected settings. The findings reflected three main areas of responsibility for pedagogical leadership: leading pedagogical activities and curriculum work within the centre, leading professional development of educators, and leading pedagogical assessment and development. Furthermore, it was revealed that leadership structures in the municipality and leadership approaches of the centre directors significantly influenced the implementation of pedagogical leadership. This study's findings can inform and promote the implementation of pedagogical leadership and can enhance the preparation and training of ECE leaders who can guide the quality provisioning of ECE programmes that impact children's learning outcomes.

Keywords: early childhood education, pedagogical leadership, centre directors

Introduction

Pedagogical leadership is still evolving within early childhood education (ECE). The present study broadly refers to the concept of early childhood education as both the systemic entity and the pedagogical practices within it, as current conceptualisations are based on understanding ECE pedagogy as a holistic phenomenon in which education and care are integrated (e.g. Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 540/2018). The concept of pedagogical leadership is connected to children's learning and development but also to ECE professionals' capacity building and to the wider society's values and beliefs about education (Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011). Research indicates that the functioning of pedagogical leadership determines the quality of ECE (Douglass, 2019; Sylva et al., 2010). It also enhances ECE teachers' commitment to pedagogical development in their child groups (Heikka et al., 2021) and promotes the children's well-being (Fonsén et al., 2022).

In Finnish ECE settings, centre directors are responsible for the implementation of pedagogical leadership at the level of the whole unit. This is a challenging task, because directors usually have multiple services and task areas to operate. It is therefore important to examine the responsibilities of pedagogical leadership of the centre directors and their fulfilment in real leadership contexts.

The aim of the present study was to investigate implementation of pedagogical leadership in three ECE settings. The research questions were as follows: What are the key pedagogical leadership responsibilities of the centre directors in ECE settings? How do leadership structures and approaches influence the implementation of pedagogical leadership in ECE settings? First, as pedagogical leadership entails various aspects of centre functioning, this study investigates the pedagogical leadership responsibilities of ECE centre directors in their settings. Second, as leadership contexts and skills are crucial for pedagogical leadership practice, the study examines how local leadership structures and the leadership approaches of the centre directors influence the implementation of pedagogical leadership in ECE settings.

Theoretical Framework

Pedagogical leadership is highly influenced by leadership structures and strategies. According to O'Sullivan (2009), leaders enable pedagogy and learning by considering different facets of service and relationships within the wider community. In Finland, pedagogical leadership is challenged by complex organisational structures: ECE leadership is distributed between diverse stakeholders, including directors and teachers, in addition to municipal-level ECE leadership and government steering and policies. In such contexts, pedagogical leadership is conceptualised within the framework of distributed pedagogical leadership and teacher leadership to emphasise the situational entity of pedagogical leadership practice. Leadership is enacted separately but interdependently at different levels of the ECE centres' functioning (Heikka, 2014; Heikka et al., 2018; Heikka et al., 2021; Heikka et al., 2020).

Diverse understandings of the concept of pedagogical leadership reflect the different perceptions regarding pedagogical leadership and the professionals enacting it in ECE organisations. More specifically, a pedagogical leader can be understood as a manager of a pedagogical organisation (Soukainen, 2013). This reinforces conventional leadership thinking about the leaders and the followers.

Distributed pedagogical leadership (see Heikka, 2014) instead includes multiple actors enacting pedagogical leadership. For example, the centre directors operate on the whole-centre level, whereas ECE teachers lead pedagogy aligned with their own staff teams. Heikka

and Suhonen (2019) identified functions in distributed pedagogical leadership between the centre directors and teachers and revealed that constructing shared visions and values for ECE in the centre, developing ECE pedagogy, facilitating the learning and expertise of educators, building the operational culture of the centre, and enhancing efficient and participatory decision-making among centre staff reflected interdependence in the enactment of pedagogical leadership by the centre directors and the teachers. The interdependence between the leadership enactments were created between the centre directors and the teachers through shared discussions that were organised regularly and held also in daily encounters. Artefacts, such as curricula and agreements between staff, created interdependence by aligning goals and visions.

Pedagogical leadership of the centre directors is implemented by organising and directing centre-level processes—for example, curriculum work and pedagogical development—by assessing functioning of the staff teams, and by guiding pedagogical practices of the staff, thus driving the centre towards the common vision (Heikka & Suhonen, 2019). Leaders can also participate in and influence curriculum decisions and discussions in the staff teams (Waniganayake et al., 2017). Leading professional work towards organisational goals and visions entails leading the centre's daily pedagogy, following its core values and ethical practices, and also leading pedagogical reflection, planning, and professional development (Corrick & Reed, 2019; Heikka, 2014; O'Sullivan, 2009; Stremmel, 2019). Pedagogical leadership demands well-planned and structured strategies and tools and clear leadership policies (Heikka et al., 2021). Research also reveals that leaders need training to develop their leadership capabilities (Heikka, 2014). The leaders' required competences include both knowledge of ECE and broader leadership skills (Muijs et al., 2004).

Methodology

The study data were collected via qualitative shadowing, where the researcher follows and observes participants constantly in their work with a video camera, like a shadow (Czarniawska, 2007; Gill et al., 2014). Researchers also simultaneously took notes about the participants' actions. Observation and shadowing results in rich and var-

ied data about leadership practices in the ECE context (see Bøe et al., 2016).

Shadowing requires high ethical consideration and sensitivity throughout the data collection and analysis (see Bøe et al., 2016; Johnson, 2014). The process was thoroughly explained to participants on the first day of data collection. Because shadowing is intensive (Johnson, 2014), it is important to maintain a safe atmosphere and ensure a mutual understanding of research aims and the process procedure.

Participants and Empirical Data

Participants were selected first by consulting municipal ECE leaders and then by accepting ECE directors who volunteered. Participants were university-qualified ECE centre directors and had several years of work experience and permanent positions as centre directors. Three directors from three different municipalities in eastern Finland worked in municipal ECE centres. These ECE centres included two to nine child groups; in other words, there were two to nine ECE teams. One participant worked as an ECE director in two ECE centres. Even though this participant usually worked in both centres during the week, the director stayed in just one ECE centre for the shadowing data collection. This could be a limitation of the study, because longer presence in the other centre might have affected the director's actions.

Data was collected in autumn 2018. Each director was shadowed for three days. Bøe et al. (2016) state that long-lasting shadowing can produce ethical challenges when conducting research. In this study, three days were considered sufficient to obtain varied data without burdening participants or creating situations that could affect the participants' behaviour or the researchers' objectivity. However, the timing can also be regarded as a limitation, since shadowing describes situations and tasks in the work of directors that—in other times and with other participants—could manifest differently. For example, development and assessment did not feature significantly during shadowing, but directors referred to them as part of an extensive project and process.

While shadowing, researchers distanced themselves from the participants and stayed quiet to avoid interaction and distraction. Questions for directors were posed only if something needed clarification—for example, if they were working on a computer. However, participants were encouraged to ask questions at any time. The researcher must be

very sensitive when shadowing, constantly evaluating the appropriateness of the recording and being present while observing the situation; in some situations, researchers determined whether it was appropriate to continue recording and making notes. In total, there are 29 hours and 10 minutes of video material from all three ECE directors in situations where video recording was possible.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed by qualitative, inductive content analysis (Kyngäs, 2020). The three researchers shared the video material. First, each researcher analysed videos of one director alone, guided by the following questions: What was the situation, event, or activity in which the leadership occurred? What was the focus of the leadership activity? Who was involved in the situation? What kind of leadership was manifested in the situation and by whom? How was the leadership responded to? First, the videos were watched repeatedly. Next, the researchers organised and narrowed down the data by excluding parts of the videos without pedagogical leadership observations. Then the videos were transcribed into episodes of pedagogical leadership guided by the research questions. Overall, 72 episodes were outlined. An episode was defined as a situation or action in which a certain type of pedagogical leadership activity or model occurred; one video could include several episodes. The transcriptions were carefully studied and
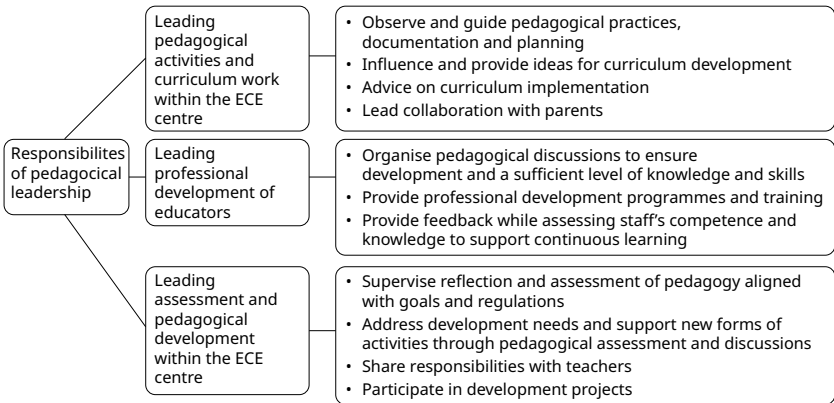
Figure 8.1: Responsibilities of pedagogical leadership.

coded with open codes; then the similarities and differences between the codes were analysed.

The researchers jointly analysed data, discussing the classification and reviewing the analyses, in order to reach consensus and strengthen the transparency and trustworthiness of the study. The following categories were formed: the structures of pedagogical leadership, the guidance of pedagogical activities, and the leadership of competence, as well as the forms of realisation of these categories. Based on this comparison, the sub-categories and main categories were formed for both research questions (Kyngäs, 2020), and theory was utilised in naming these categories. For the first question, three main categories were formed (see Figure 8.1); for the second, the main categories were leadership organisation in the municipality and the ECE centre and leadership approaches used by the centre directors.

The Implementation of Pedagogical Leadership Responsibilities by the Centre Directors

Shadowing reflected three main areas of responsibility for pedagogical leadership of the centre directors: leading pedagogical activities and curriculum work within the centre, leading professional development of educators, and leading pedagogical assessment and development (Figure 8.1).

Leading Pedagogical Activities and Curriculum Work Within the ECE Centre

Leadership of pedagogical activities was reflected in shadowing through various centre directors' practices. The directors provided the educators with guidance on pedagogical activities during daily encounters and meetings and led planning and assessment in the child groups. Guiding pedagogical activities was realised as observing educators and activities of child groups, giving advice, and leading practices documented in the groups' early childhood education plan. When leading pedagogical activities, the directors justified the principles and solutions for the educators and provided advice for the activities. The directors' leadership approaches were positive, encouraging, and supportive; however, some directors were occasionally quite straightforward and expressed confidence in their own views while questioning

how they would support the educators' professional competence and learning.

In one episode, the director went to storage and fetched big foam rubber shapes, which the teachers had put aside. However, the director wanted them for children to use. She speculated that her actions might cause discussion, but stated:

> This is the kind of matter in which you need leadership from time to time … that you will do as you see and then discuss the matter with teachers and explain your pedagogical justification for this action. If we don't agree on pedagogical principles, someone has to make the decision, and in my opinion, that is leadership. (Director 2, episode 8)

Later, the director explained the rationale for her actions to teachers. They did not express disagreement but explained why they decided to put the materials aside, and the director stated her pedagogical justification for bringing them back.

The example of foam rubber shapes is rather complex. The director oversaw the teachers' plans, but on the other hand, she justified her own decision and actions based on pedagogy. However, the director failed to scrutinise the pedagogical premises of the educators; thus, a shared learning opportunity and potential to develop pedagogy were lost.

The centre directors' pedagogical leadership consisted of leading curriculum work within the centre and child groups. Curriculum work included leading the planning of small-group activities and long-term pedagogical goals within the child groups, and implementation of ECE plans, as well as learning environments. Additionally, all the directors enhanced pedagogical documentation in the groups. The following example from shadowing revealed how the director instructed teachers in pedagogical documentation:

> The director ensures that teachers understand that it is important to make documentation of [problematic] issues parents have expressed, so 'they will know what has been done to improve the situation'. Teachers should document and describe for parents those things that have been done during the day and what has been important for the child. (Director 2, episode 12)

This example shows the director enhancing cooperation with parents, which is important in Finnish ECE (Finnish National Agency

for Education [EDUFI], 2022). During shadowing, Director 2 told the researcher that the cooperation is a joint commitment to promoting the growth, development, and learning of children. According to the director, there were diverse forms of cooperation: for example, informing parents, managing children's ECE participation hours, supporting educators in ECE planning, and ECE discussions with parents. However, only some practices were observable during shadowing. Children's daily events and experiences were shared with parents, and the directors stated that messages that encourage and positively describe the child's development and learning are important for parents.

Leading Professional Development

Pedagogical discussions with educators were of key importance in leading professional development. Director 2 told the observer that the municipality holds pedagogical discussions at least twice a year with all personnel. She continued: 'The matters of one's own professional development and pedagogical reflections are raised in discussion' (Director 2, episode 8). Next, one observed pedagogical discussion is illustrated.

> The director asked the teacher for a pedagogical discussion. The teacher raised two matters that she would like to focus on in her professional development. The first concerns implementing the national ECE curriculum, particularly pedagogical documentation, and the other is a training she would like to undertake. The teacher explains her current professional situation and competencies. The director encourages her and enquires whether she would need more support or training for her development. The director asks frequent questions of the teacher, which promotes her pedagogical reflection. The director also shares her own pedagogical premises as she explains the practices of the municipality and issues of curriculum. The director gives the teacher advice and guidance for professional development on pedagogy, as well as positive feedback and affirmation. (Director 2, episode 8)

As noted, the director and the teacher discussed the teacher's professional competencies and her need for further support or training. The director emphasised the importance of pedagogy and the crystallising of one's own pedagogical principles. The director supported the teacher and gave her positive feedback while assessing her competen-

cies and ensuring that she had sufficient knowledge about the centre's and municipality's structures, practices, and pedagogical principles. In individual discussions, the director sometimes noted issues that were important to discuss with other teachers also—regarding planning practices, for example. Thus, the director simultaneously supervised and promoted the professional development of an individual teacher along with the wider community of teachers.

Although the data presented opportunities for discussions for directors and teachers to exchange ideas and narrate pedagogical practices and principles, as well as to plan pedagogical development, leadership approaches and structures were not always successful. In one situation, Director 3 (episode 6) wanted to discuss the centre's window decorations, but no pedagogical justifications were given; thus, the pedagogical potential in the discussion was lost. Another situation entailed unprofessional leadership:

> The teachers have complained to the director about the unprofessional behaviour of a teacher, which they disapproved of. The director starts to ponder with the teachers and another director about the cause of this kind of behaviour and how to best proceed with the situation. (Director 3, episode 6)

As illustrated, the two directors and the teachers discussed how to react to that teacher's unprofessional behaviour, which might compromise trust between employees and directors.

Leading Assessment and Pedagogical Development within the ECE Centre

While shadowing, some of the centre directors' pedagogical assessment and development practices were observed. The directors supervised so that assessments of practices were carried out systematically and so that educators knew what to assess and how. These issues were narrated in the pedagogical discussions and meetings between the centre directors and the educators. Structures for the assessment and development of pedagogy included observation of pedagogical practices in the child groups and pedagogical discussions with the staff teams by the centre directors. It was also noted that the directors actively raised issues for development and shared responsibilities with the teachers to

promote them, and in addition they supervised and supported educators' reflection.

The directors ensured that assessments followed the guidelines of the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018) and the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (EDUFI, 2022). Director 2 (episode 13) said that 'all the observations we do … [are needed] for the basis of assessment, and this will become legally binding for all to conduct [observations] and to assess'. Additionally, the directors and teachers jointly assessed and developed pedagogical activities and sought solutions to factors that hindered them. Directors highlighted the general importance of assessment and gave teachers affirmation on conducting them. For example, Director 3 (episode 5) praised the teachers' development of documenting through pictures: 'As a means of assessment, this is a good way to look at whether some area [of children's learning] has been given less [attention] and now should be paid more attention. That is good! When do you plan to initiate that [practice]?' These examples describe the collaboration between directors and teachers regarding the assessment practices of centres. Pedagogical development was also present in daily encounters between the directors and the educators; for example, during the coffee break, Director 1 and educators discussed how to promote language development for children under three.

The ECE centres' episodes of pedagogical development suggest that it is dual in nature. Firstly, in most episodes, the director and teachers discussed pedagogical development and practices, as previously explained. Secondly, there were several mentions of the centres' development through new projects. Further, some projects seemed to occur at the municipality level, and these focused on developing the municipality's ECE practices. In other projects, developmental processes took place in the centre—for example, by initiating new collaborations, improving the learning environment, or enhancing technology use. In these projects, the directors' role was central in both the municipality and the centre, although some responsibilities were also distributed to teachers.

Leadership Approaches and Structures Framing the Implementation of Pedagogical Leadership

Distributed pedagogical leadership, which included sharing leadership responsibilities between the centre directors and the teachers (see Heikka, 2014), was a common strategy among the centre directors. The teachers' role as pedagogical leaders in their teams was emphasised. According to the directors, leadership structures and tools enabled the functions of distributed pedagogical leadership within the ECE centres. For example, weekly teachers' meetings addressed issues in the child groups, supporting teacher leadership. Pedagogical leadership plans and team agreements also worked as leadership tools for the directors and teachers in distributed pedagogical leadership. These tools were considered important in guiding the distribution of responsibilities and tasks of the educators and assisting in the pedagogical assessment in child groups. In the team agreements, the members wrote their pedagogical overview and responsibilities. Director 2 (episode 12) placed significance on the team agreements: 'These team agreements are for you, but these are done because everyone must understand and think through their own role [in the group].' Furthermore, Director 3 (episode 3) states: 'This [team agreement] is an assessment. I will go every autumn to observe the team, and I will go to assess this team's activity for the second time.' The directors also reminded teachers to document joint decisions on team agreement; they justified its importance in terms of activity transparency, cooperation with parents, and child-related factors.

The findings indicated that the organisation of centre directors' own work and leadership approaches significantly affected the implementation of pedagogical leadership. Their leadership approaches differed in how they facilitated educators' pedagogical discussion and thinking. All the directors visited child groups regularly; however, while one director facilitated many shared pedagogical discussions with the educators, the encounters of the other two directors with educators remained rather shallow and did not strive to promote pedagogical thinking. For example, one director used plenty of time to organise the centre's learning environments and worked in child groups as a peer with educators when needed. However, from the perspective of pedagogical leadership, these situations where the director is working side-by-side with the educators can be identified as 'lost moments' in

pedagogical leadership. The following excerpt illustrates a lost opportunity for pedagogical leadership in a meeting situation:

> The centre director set the planning of the family event as the main goal of the meeting. She asked questions, listened, enhanced discussion, and documented carefully the opinions of the educators on how to promote participation of parents in the event. However, she spent a total of 20 minutes in the meeting to discuss practical details of the event. (Director 1, episode 18)

According to the excerpt, Director 1 struggled to regulate her leadership style; she used plenty of time to negotiate non-pedagogical practical matters with the educators that she could have decided for herself. She also could have prepared better before the meeting to dedicate more time to pedagogical discussion.

The findings indicated that the municipality's ECE strategy, organisation of ECE leadership, and support significantly framed the functioning and enactment of pedagogical leadership by the ECE centre directors. According to Director 2, centralising basic managerial tasks, such as recruiting substitutes in the municipality, has released time for pedagogical leadership. However, municipal structures and local policies also negatively affected the directors' pedagogical leadership. For example, the directors could not always lead discussions in weekly staff meetings because of municipality alignments. For example, one municipality's allocation of human resources was organised such that it significantly affected the weekly discussions with teachers, where time was spent calculating how many staff memberswere needed in each centre for the following week instead of on pedagogical discussion.

Discussion and Conclusions

Results suggest that key responsibilities of pedagogical leadership are leading daily pedagogical activities and curriculum work as well as pedagogical and professional development within the centre. This small case study supports the finding that leading pedagogy can be manifested as pedagogical discussions between the directors and teachers (Waniganayake et al., 2017). The directors led and supervised pedagogical activities and offered guidance and affirmation (O'Sullivan, 2009). Shared pedagogical assessment was also of particular interest

to promote informed decisions on development proceedings. Furthermore, directors aimed to follow the obligations of the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (EDUFI, 2022) and the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018) and to maintain the high quality of ECE (e.g. Sylva et al., 2010).

The results show many positive manifestations of pedagogical leadership, including positive and supportive leadership styles; supporting and appreciating teachers in their pedagogical work; promoting joint planning, assessment, and professional development; and discussing pedagogical principles and responsibilities. However, these manifestations need further consideration. The findings indicated that the directors' pedagogical and leadership skills framed their capabilities as pedagogical leaders, as the study by Muijs et al. (2004) found. For some directors, this foundation helped their pedagogical leadership in many ways—for example, when they fluently explained and justified pedagogical issues to teachers—but others struggled a bit. This became apparent in the spontaneous 'lost moments of pedagogical leadership': some directors failed to deepen educators' pedagogical thinking and enhance professional learning through joint discussion and reflection. Similarly, directors' overbearing guidance could hinder teachers' learning. The findings also revealed some unprofessional and indecisive leadership, which could be overcome by clarifying the directors' roles and responsibilities and by providing support and training in leadership skills (Heikka, 2014). The findings suggest that the directors' knowledge of pedagogical leadership, pedagogy (Muijs et al., 2004), and leadership approaches and skills (O'Sullivan, 2009) are essential in leading the pedagogical and professional development of educators in ECE, and in practice, they shape the enactment of pedagogical leadership alongside the organisational structure.

As in the study by O'Sullivan (2009), pedagogical leadership in ECE centres and the leadership approaches of the centre directors were framed and shaped by the structures of the municipality; thus, pedagogical leadership manifested itself contextually, reflecting the directors' competence in pedagogical leadership, features of the municipality, and the national ECE guidelines. The practical implications of the findings also imply that these structures and their influence on the enactment of leadership should be considered when researching pedagogical leadership, alongside directors' own competence in pedagogical leadership. This calls for further, larger-scale research with different

methods than those chosen in the present study. Moreover, because of this influence of structures, pedagogical leadership requires a commitment from the municipality leaders and decision makers in ECE.

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