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

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# Perspectives on Leadership in Early Childhood Education and Care Centers Through Community of Practice

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Kirsi-Marja Heikkinen<sup>1</sup> , Raisa Ahtiainen<sup>1</sup> ,  
 and Elina Fonsén<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article investigates early childhood education and care (ECEC) leadership through the concept of community of practice (COP). The focus is on ECEC leaders' perceptions regarding their leadership during the educational changes taking place in the context of Finnish ECEC. The purpose is to increase understanding of how leaders see themselves in relation to the ECEC multi professional working community and practices of distributed leadership. The data are five focus group interviews of ECEC leaders analyzed with directed content analysis within the theoretical frame of domain, practice, and community forming the core of COP in Lave and Wenger. The results show how all three COP components comprise several dimensions in ECEC leaders' perceptions of their leadership. For example, the component of the leadership domain consists of ECEC values, ECEC legislation, and ECEC curriculum. The results indicate that a formal leadership role is essential in leading the community and its vision. Moreover, building flexible leadership structures and supporting multi professional cooperation in the community augment leadership as a community's joint enterprise.

## Keywords

community of practice, pedagogical leadership, distributive leadership

## Introduction

Turani and Bloem (2019) argue that ECEC leadership is changing globally. The value and understanding of the impact of ECEC for future citizens has risen and nations have been expanding their ECEC systems. As a consequence, organizations in the ECEC field have expanded, expectations of the quality of pedagogy have risen and the work of leaders has become more complex and demanding. Recently, Finnish early childhood education and care (ECEC) has gone through a large-scale reform (Fonsén, 2019). At the core of the reform have been the renewal of the National Core Curriculum on Early Childhood Education and Care (Finnish National Agency for Education [FNAE], 2018) and the launch of the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018). These central policy documents guide Finnish ECEC and form the normative framework within which ECEC leaders, teachers, and nurses work (Ahtiainen et al., 2021). In Finland, ECEC leaders lead between one and three separate centers with an average of 20 to 30 employees (FNAE, 2018). ECEC working communities are multi professional combining the knowledge and skills of teachers, nurses, and group assistants. These professional groups differ regarding their education and

responsibilities. ECEC teachers have a 3-year bachelor's degree with a strong emphasis on either pedagogy and educational sciences from university (in educational sciences) or on social sciences from a university of applied sciences. Nurses and group assistants working closely in child groups with the teachers have their background in vocational education. Usually there is a teacher and two ECEC nurses in a child group and an assistant if needed (FNAE, 2018).

When examining studies of the ECEC leadership, in Finland, the multi professional working environment with unclear job descriptions (Heikka, 2014), the vague definitions of the pedagogical responsibilities (Fonsén, 2014), and lack of commitment and motivation (Ahtiainen et al., 2021; Heikkinen, 2019) have been the primary challenges in the field. In this situation, ECEC leaders are not able to distribute leadership at a higher pedagogical level as it is

<sup>1</sup>University of Helsinki, Finland

\*Elina Fonsén is also affiliated to University of Jyväskylä, Finland

### Corresponding Author:

Kirsi-Marja Heikkinen, Department of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki, P.O. Box 9, Helsinki 00014, Finland.  
 Email: [kirsi-marja.heikkinen@helsinki.fi](mailto:kirsi-marja.heikkinen@helsinki.fi)



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defined more as sharing daily routines with employees. This also hinders the opportunity for leaders to benefit from the versatile competence of different professionals in the community (Heikka, 2014). However, large-scale changes in the ECEC normative framework have influenced this situation as the main target of the reform has been the clarification of roles and responsibilities within ECEC centers. The earlier working culture of “everyone does everything” despite their education has changed. Today, ECEC leaders and teachers have the main responsibility for pedagogy. Further, in the child groups, it is assumed that teachers will share this responsibility with ECEC nurses and assistants. This is a fundamental change in the Finnish ECEC working culture affecting all of its members—leaders, teachers, nurses, and assistants alike (Fonsén et al., 2021). Leaders find it to be important to keep this change positive to be able to lead meaningful roles and responsibilities in ECEC (Fonsén et al., 2021; Heikkinen, 2019). To reach cooperation and working motivation, leading open dialogue in the multi-professional community is needed. ECEC leaders point out that in the future they need to lead a community as a whole, not just ECEC teachers, even though they carry the main responsibilities with the leaders (Fonsén, 2019; Heikkinen, 2019).

In the field of education, community of practice (COP) is often linked to the change process of a new curriculum through and leaders' ability to lead pedagogical change in collaboration with teachers (Edwards, 2012; Fernandez et al., 2008). In addition, community of practice is perceived as having the ability to change educational leadership practices and the ways leaders work inside a formal organization as it promotes more flexible structures and encourages employee-leader cooperation (Cherrington, 2011; Moretti & Alessandrini, 2015). In this article, early childhood education and care leadership is reflected in the framework of community of practice for two main purposes. Firstly, the aim is to understand leaders' experiences of distributive leadership and how they position themselves in relation to the surrounding ECEC working community by searching the features of community of practice from these experiences. Secondly, in this paper we discuss how community of practice could be applied to develop leadership practices in ECEC multi-professional reality toward leadership as a joint enterprise and to transfer the power from a single leader to a larger community (Wenger, 1998; Wenger & Lave, 1991). According to earlier research, the role of the formal leader seems still to be significant in the community (Printy, 2008). Therefore, this article focuses on ECEC leaders: their perceptions of themselves as leaders and their vision of their power over larger communities. Distribution of power can create the commitment and motivation of the different types of professional to the shared pedagogical work as they complement and support each other with their own competencies (Clarkin-Phillips, 2011; Heikka, 2014; Martela & Ryan, 2016; Wenger, 1998).

### *Aspects to the Community of Practice and Early Childhood Education and Care Leadership*

The community of practice theory was originally founded by Wenger and Lave (1991). It is a widely used social theory suggesting that learning happens in a reciprocal process because of community participation. The theory states that communities exist because of a shared practice and domain, including the community's identity and unitary values and these two shapes each other in community cooperation. Practice is not only plain doing, as it is tightly linked to the community social context, which determines the actions that community members take. Strong cooperation is crucial for communities' identity and unitary values as this promotes participation (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002). Nevertheless, participation is not a constant phenomenon; rather it is a situational and subjective matter, an interactive concept, in which non-participation and full participation overlap and are linked together (Wenger, 1998). As a theoretical construction, community of practice has been described as a living organism which is never fully completed (Wenger 1998). It gathers people together to share information and create mutual ideation. When building new ideas, former experiences and new information both develop the community's practice in new inspiring ways (Wenger, 1998). Similarly, Gibbs (2020) argues, reflection on building a culture of trust, the use of professional knowledge and language, and the collective development of vision and philosophy cultivate the leadership in the ECEC. Community of practice is also believed to be a way to re-invent and refresh traditional teamwork. It is a way to expand the traditional view of the master and apprentice position into a more complex and dynamic set of interactions in which all the community members are equally important in the development of practices (Wenger, 2000). This helps the organization to take more collective responsibility for the knowledge as it also creates direct links between learning and the performance in the community (Wenger, 2000). In business and education, the community of practice has been used for over 20 years to promote organizational change and create innovation (Hong, 2014; Kerno, 2008). Nevertheless, it is not a straightforward concept but is constructed with a few unanswered questions when comparing the original idea and later adaptation to the formal organization. Li et al. (2009) have explored the evolution of the concept that started as Lave and Wenger's (1991) idea of self-empowerment, participation and social learning, and over the years transformed into a managerial tool for promoting competitiveness (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Also, the definition of the concept varies from an informal self-selected group or network to a community in which the members automatically belong because of their employment relationship. These contradictions between personal growth, organizational needs as well as the vague definitions of the concept are causing disturbances that complicate the measurement of its effectiveness.

In traditional organizations like early childhood education and care, community of practice is a complex structure as it was originally described as being a non-hierarchical system of social learning (Kerno, 2008). Positive outcomes should not be taken as givens as the realization of a community of practice depends on the context in which it is applied; COP has an ability to cause positive changes but the actual means of doing this form the key question (Kerno, 2008). A community of practice has to be led intentionally and to be connected to the organizational community, strategy, and leadership to achieve the official objectives. Formal authority and power do not vanish through having the will to stretch leadership, and too much hierarchy and interference paralyzes a community. Organizations have to understand the need for different forms of communities, and they have to be created in a way that suits the unique organizational profile and official goals (Agrawal & Joshi, 2011; Hong, 2014; Kerno, 2008; Li et al., 2009). The commitment of the members seems to be linked to its success, but also to its failures. The key seems to be creating trust and confidence through open communication that creates connectedness among the members (Agrawal & Joshi, 2011).

### *Pedagogical Leadership in ECEC*

Pedagogical leadership has a unique moral and ethical dimension in which the shared values, hope of life, and positive atmosphere create an essential mindset (Fonsén, 2014). Successful leadership is connected to its pedagogical practice, and pedagogical leadership is therefore seen as the most important responsibility of the educational leader (Fonsén, 2014; Nivala, 2002). When examining communities of practice and leadership in early childhood, they both have similar features in their structures. Nivala (2002) has formed a Contextual Leadership Model, in which leadership is also seen as a socially constructed phenomenon that happens in larger social settings. Leadership cannot be separated from its basic mission as it is an ability to lead communities' shared visions and mutual pedagogical perceptions in accordance with the curriculum. The contextual model is a cultural phenomenon that considers the customer, leader, and the working community that are dependent on each other. It emphasizes the sharing of leadership (Nivala, 2002).

Pedagogical leadership is the concept of leading the curriculum and implementing its content to the educational organization (Fonsén, 2014). Heikka and Waniganayake (2011) also emphasized the demand for the larger transformative capability of those responsible for pedagogical leadership to build ECEC as a profession and increase the awareness of its leadership in wider society. To work as a pedagogical leader, formal leaders need enough time and opportunities to prioritize the pedagogical leadership as well as the ability to share the leadership with the community (Akselin, 2013). Consequently, this leads to a need for reorganization of time resources and practices, such as reducing the number of managerial tasks and creating new organizational structures (Soukainen, 2019). Within the community, mutual

discussion, strong pedagogical competence of ECEC teachers and nurses and most of all, the commitment of the whole community is in the central role (Clarkin-Phillips, 2011). Formal leadership from its part promotes the community's social learning, professional empowerment and commitment to the shared core mission (Aubrey & Harris, 2013; Douglass, 2017; Heikka et al., 2013).

### *Distributive Leadership in the ECEC Organization*

It has been claimed that ECEC leadership perceptions and structures are rigid and traditional. Leadership has largely been based on a single leader with role-limited responsibilities but without a broader vision of the subject (Rodd, 2013). Distributed leadership has been the term used when referring to the sharing of pedagogical responsibilities as well as everyday tasks with the surrounding pedagogical community. The original concept refers to democratic leadership that is defined as giving autonomy to the teachers (Harris & Chapman, 2002) or sharing responsibilities and tasks as in interaction between leaders (Spillane, 2005). Distributive leadership can be seen as a complex interaction between the people who work for a common goal where the focus is not on tasks and roles, but on sophisticated interaction and relationships within the community. It can also be defined as a way to share pedagogical responsibilities when mutual understanding and commitment to the shared vision create its foundation (Hujala, 2013). Commitment is the key factor that affects the quantity and quality of distribution as it is required from all the parties in the community (Heikka, 2014). Distribution is also a leader's ability to extend the boundaries between the formal leader and community and it requires flexible, resilient, and coordinated structures that advance professional competence and more refined ways of distribution (Fonsén & Mäntyjärvi, 2019).

In the future more developed structures of the distributive leadership are needed to achieve a larger scale of leadership improvement (Heikka et al., 2021). It calls primarily for a spirit of sharing, continuous dialogue and nurturing community relationships. To make these happen, communities need functional leadership structures that support growth and allow joy of all the community members' success (Lee, 2008). Leaders who concentrate on developing relationships and who respect collaboration, succeed in creating commitment in the community. These factors are critical in community formation and influential factors that determine participation, productivity, and distributing leadership (Thornton & Wansbrough, 2012; Zvalo-Martyn, 2018).

### **Research Questions**

Our purpose with this paper is to discuss ECEC leaders' perceptions of leadership through the concept of community of practice and further, to examine how it is applied to the ECEC leadership context. The research questions were:

- (1) What community of practice features can be found in the ECEC leaders' experiences?
- (2) What promotes leadership as a joint enterprise in ECEC?

## Methods

### Study Context and Data

The data are five focus group interviews with ECEC leaders in 2019. At the time of the data collection, the leaders were attending a 1.5-year in-service training program concerning leadership in educational contexts at the University of Helsinki. The training was targeted at a diverse group of educational leaders working in ECEC, basic education, upper secondary, and liberal adult education. The leaders were a convenience sample of Finnish ECEC leaders (Robinson, 2014). The data collection took place in the middle of the training period and all ECEC leaders participating in the in-service training were sent information about the study and an invitation to participate ( $N=42$ ). Fifteen leaders showed interest in being interviewed and five focus groups were formed. The focus group interviews were guided by a schema consisting of five main themes: education of leaders, future direction of educational leadership, leading curriculum, pedagogical leadership, and leading change. The goal was to share new ideas and experiences and discuss the aspects of successful leadership. All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed for further analysis. The ethical considerations related to being a participant in an interview study were explained to the leaders and all interviewees were aware of their rights as interview participants, and the later use of data. The interviews were done by researchers and research assistants not involved in teaching the ECEC leaders.

### Data Analysis

To examine Finnish ECEC leadership in the framework of the community of practice, we chose an analysis method that follows the ideas of directed content analysis discussed by Assarroudi et al. (2018) and Hsieh and Shannon (2005). The theory has a central guiding role in the process and as a deductive method (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999), directed content analysis provides a good basis for widening the theoretical understanding of the theme in question (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In this study, the main categories of the analysis frame were formulated according to three components that are in the core of Lave and Wenger (1991) understanding of the community of practice (COP): domain, practice, and community. Due to the context-bound nature of education and leadership within it (e.g., Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017) the subcategories named as dimensions were drawn from the data. This process was guided by the earlier research about the ECEC leadership in the Finnish context. The connection

between these two category-levels is enlightened in the description of the analysis below.

The analysis process can be divided into four main steps, of which the first was an immersion in the data. After that data were read through the lens of the three COP components (i.e., domain, practice, and community) to find parts of the interviews that thematically belonged under each of them. Hence, during this second step, the data were roughly re-organized into three bigger thematic units. Third, the data under COP components were examined more closely to identify several dimensions that described more specifically each component in the context of Finnish ECEC. The dimensions were pattern-like elements or often repeated expressions of the leaders in relation to the multi-professional working communities or distribution of leadership. Consequently, these dimensions formed subcategories for the three main categories formed of COP components and this step finalized the analysis frame as follows:

Domain: values, core curriculum, legislations, and leadership competence; Practice: leadership structures and practices, distributive leadership as a theoretical concept, and leader role; Community: Teacher-leader community, multi-professional community, and roles/responsibilities/job descriptions. Fourth, the dimensions were used in the final round of analysis of the data during which a reply of a leader or a short dialogue between leaders was coded as an analysis unit. The purpose was to avoid missing the original idea expressed by the leaders.

## Results

Our findings from ECEC leaders' focus group discussions are presented here through the COP theory and its three components which were used as a lens in ECEC leader interview data analysis. Leaders' voices were included by adding quotations to enlighten the emergence of each component in the data. The leaders are referred to by using their individual number (e.g., L3) in a certain focus group (e.g., FG2).

### ECEC Leadership Domain

The domain of ECEC leadership is composed of the dimensions of values, legislations, curriculum, and leadership competence (Wenger, 1998). Leaders' discussions revealed that the ECEC values and curriculum were inseparable from early childhood and education leadership. Description of one leader of the matter was:

*We lead with the same values as our employees do with the children. It is highly important that leaders have the same values. . . because if we don't, I feel, we start to drift away from the core of our leadership; the well-being of the children (FG2, L2).*

Successful leadership was based on ECEC values, mastery of core curriculum, and legislation. The common suggestion

was that competent leadership demands the “pedagogical spirit” that was created with mastery of core curriculum and commitment to the ECEC values as: “*pedagogical documents and values are the backbone for leadership and boundaries that create clear procedures and guidelines for the whole field*” (FG1, L3).

Leaders did not see “traditional business-type” leadership as being possible because of the unique ethical foundation of the field. Regulations and core values were described as obligatory demands determining all decisions. As one leader noted:

*I feel that mastery of curriculum, legislation and values of ECEC is very important to our leadership. I can't even imagine that we had leaders with just leadership education. My ECEC teacher competence is relevant when I lead this ECEC centre. In this profession you have to have a pedagogical heart (FG1, L1).*

Even though leaders saw values and many concepts as ideal and automatic by their nature, they pointed out that these are also highly subjective, meaning different things to the different community members. The only way to create shared understanding was the constant pedagogical dialogue of the values and core curriculum.

### **Distributive Leadership as the Shared Practice of Leader and the Community**

The component of practice included four dimensions, distributive leadership as a theoretical concept, leadership structures and practices, and leader role. Distributed leadership was the practice the working community was constantly developing with ECEC leaders. As a practice it was a way to execute the ECEC curriculum and joint vision together with the work community, and one of the leaders reflected the theme as follows: “*shared vision is essentially important to be able to know where we are going and to create commitment and shared understanding of the community*” (FG4, L1).

Among the ECEC leaders, distributed leadership was still described as a novel, theoretical construct that needed further discussion of its practical implementation. Leaders felt that in general, ECEC field perceptions of distributed leadership were too diverse. More concordant understanding of the concept would diminish the confusion between practical delegation and a more ideological level of interactive sharing. The leaders pointed out how the most productive way to develop distributed leadership was to work as a multi-professional community that allows all its members to participate in leadership:

*We have to talk about our responsibilities and pedagogical praxis all over again, even if we have the same workers in our centre. People are in different situations as workers and this current curriculum. . . I feel that the practice of sharing the work and leadership develops gradually through a multi-professional dialogue (FG1, L1).*

Possession of a formal leader’s role in distributive leadership function as a promoter having the responsibility over the whole process. Leaders saw themselves as “positive generators” who should see opportunities and who were responsible for creating a plausible vision that reflected the pedagogy. It was believed that this would promote positive change and common understanding of the shared work. Leaders’ ability to coach and support communities’ reflective skills was seen as essential in creating distributive leadership. Even though leaders were inspirers in the beginning, they believed that distributive leadership was based on cooperation that created commitment in the working community:

*It is important to let the employees create ideas and make experiments. As a leader you must create opportunities of participation for employees. . . . even if these do not always work out perfectly. These are valuable learning experiences, and we can always create another way to carry it out. As a leader I have to understand this process and encourage my community to evaluate the structures and processes to develop them (FG2, L2).*

Leaders also pointed out that the requirements of the leadership were challenging considering large administrative workload, many ECEC centers to run, lack of leadership competence of the teachers and shortage of functional structures of distributive leadership. These issues needed to be solved before the true sharing of leadership was even close to becoming possible:

*I have these new ECEC teachers coming from the university. . . I always presume that they already have an understanding of their role as teachers. . . and their role as a pedagogical leader in the community. Quite often this comes as a surprise to these novel teachers. . . .and some of them experience it as unpleasant or even embarrassing. . . It's like 'I like this work with kids, but I don't want to be a team leader. And then there are teachers that have already had a long career and are used to the "everybody's doing everything" custom (FG1, L1).*

### **ECEC Leadership and the Component of Community**

The third component community included three dimensions: multi-professional community, roles responsibilities and job descriptions, and teacher-leader community. Leaders had controversial perceptions of the community because the multi-professional working community was seen both as a current challenge and as a future opportunity. Lack of shared pedagogical views, too little time to have conversations, and unclear responsibilities of the ECEC teachers and nurses caused confusion and conflict in the communities: “*all this requires a dialogue in the community. In our field it is so hard to arrange the time together because of the intensive work in the child groups. And this is a matter of joint discussion, to open up the key concepts, values and pedagogical practices*” (FG5, L3).

Leaders argued that the latest reform of ECEC legislation and the core curriculum was “unfinished.” They said how the reform affected a profound change in the teachers’ role and restricted certain pedagogical responsibilities only to the teachers. Leaders claimed that ECEC nurses had been left aside without supportive education. The updated job description of the teacher’s role affected the nurse’s responsibilities in the team. Leaders were worried that the promising reform was turning upside down and causing a lack of motivation, weak work commitment, and large contradictions in the multi-professional community as one leader put it out:

*This reform is interesting. . . for example this ECEC nurse’s role. All the time we talk about ECEC teachers’ responsibilities and roles and how it changes due to the new Act. We cannot forget the nurse’s role, if the teacher’s role changes, so does the nurse’s role! This is the situation that challenges my leadership at the moment. . . What is a nurse’s role and how do I lead them? (FG1, L1).*

Leaders felt that they were members of the working communities they were leading and wanted to prioritize attendance in their everyday life. Being present was valued because of the common pedagogical interest but later when analyzing leader discussions further that seemed to be an attitude of a theory. In practice, the lack of pedagogical competence of the staff pushed the leaders into child-groups to support the workers in action and in pedagogical meetings, mirroring the good pedagogical work and discussion:

*L1: . . .and now we get to the point of competent employees. . . do we have qualified teachers?*

*L3: yeah, that’s right*

*L1: In my situation, I only have a few professional teachers. . . many substitute teachers. . . and in those teams in which I have the competence, I do not have to follow them as much but in those teams where the substitutes work, I have to be present a lot more.*

*L3: This emphasizes your role as a leader. . . on a concrete level. . .*

*L1: yes, pretty much so (FG1, L1, L3).*

However, leaders’ experiences about more informal leader-teacher communities told an empowering story about working as a community. These were created to develop the pedagogical leadership structures and praxis and these experiences implied feelings of participation, commitment, and professional leadership. Leaders believed that sharing the pedagogical work with teachers made it easier to lead vision and change in the whole community. In these communities’ formal leader role was described as being pivotal but leaders were seen as being more like coaches who promoted cooperation and shared pedagogical competence. Directors believed that this working style supported distributive leadership teachers’ autonomy and comprehensive work motivation:

**Table 1.** The Basic Components and Dimensions of COP in ECEC Leadership.

| Component                      | Dimensions  |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Domain                         | Values  |
| “Expertise of ECEC documents”  | Legislation<br>Curriculum   |
| Practice                       | Leadership practices and structures   |
| “Distributive leadership”      | Distributive leadership as a theoretical concept<br>Leader role               |
| Community                      | Teacher-leader community  |
| “Multi-professional community” | Multi-professional community<br>Roles, responsibilities, and job descriptions |

*L1: . . .we have cooperated with a larger group lately with leaders and teachers. . . Leaders coach the teachers together and at the same time we have a dialogue about the pedagogics with teachers. . . It is empowering when we are gathered together. . .*

*L2: It’s more effective to work as a leader-teacher community, not just in your own ECEC center.*

*L1: That is true. . . It’s great to have a network where you can develop the work together and find new functional practices (FG5, L1, L2) (Table 1).*

## Discussion

This study employed ECEC leaders’ perceptions of leadership through COP, the concept of community of practice. Our first research question was what structures of COP can be found in the early childhood and education leadership context?

The theory of COP suggests that the component of the leadership domain (Wenger, 1998) is the core and the community foundation that gathers people together. Fonsén (2014, 2019) has stated earlier that ECEC leadership is a mastery of values, legislation, and core curriculum and the ability to lead these in ECEC multi-professional reality. Also, in these results, ECEC leaders assessed values, legislation, core curriculum, and leadership competence as dimensions of ECEC leadership domain. However, lack of ECEC community’s shared values and unawareness of the demands of the core curriculum were the main challenges. When leading a number of unqualified employees, leaders were pushed to leave their role and guide teachers and nurses in child groups to ensure the work along the domain.

Consequently, leaders saw distributed leadership as a component of leadership practice that had dimensions of functional practices and structures, leader role, and distributional leadership as a theoretical concept. Leaders defined distributed leadership as a concept of sharing the understanding of values, roles, and pedagogical responsibilities that created boundaries and structures for ECEC work. The Finnish ECEC core curriculum, which has been an obligation since 2016,

states that leaders and teachers are responsible for the pedagogy in ECEC centers. The leader-teacher structure creates the foundation of the multi-professional communities distributed leadership that includes the cooperation in the child groups between teachers and nurses. Unfortunately, this basic structure between leaders and teachers was not actualizing well enough to be able to distribute leadership further in the multi-professional community and this led to an essential problem in sharing power and responsibilities between all the actors; leaders, teachers, and nurses (Fonsén et al., 2021). To release the full potential of distributed leadership in the future, leaders emphasized the significance of qualified teachers that carry their role and responsibilities without hesitation. Further, more consensus of distributed leadership as a concept and practical structures was needed, which resonates with earlier findings by Heikka (2014).

The components of leadership are community included leader role, teacher-leader cooperation, and multi-professional community. Leaders considered their role as being an important part of the multi-professional community especially when leading change and keeping up the community's positive atmosphere, which Douglass (2017), Lee (2008), and Printy (2008) have emphasized in their research of COP. Also, the presence and guidance of a leader was creating positive change in the community by ensuring mutual learning, supporting positive relationships, and transforming curriculum theory into praxis. Nevertheless, this component was also a conflicting matter when it came to leading different professionals of a center. Renewed job descriptions for teachers and nurses combined with the limited time and structures to discuss and plan the work together were the main obstacles when trying to work as a community along the joint values and vision. Leaders' views seemed to reflect Kerno (2008) ideas how an efficient community is a matter of functional structures and methods based on both formal and informal multi-professional communities that developed pedagogical work together.

The second research question was what promotes leadership as a joint enterprise? This question combines the basic components of COP: the domain, the practice, and the community and their connection in between. As a whole, the expertise of the domain was the cornerstone of ECEC leadership as a joint enterprise which resonates with earlier research by Fonsén and Keski-Rauska (2018). The finding in this study was how the reform of the ECEC core curriculum and legislation had impacted the leadership, professional working roles and responsibilities in the ECEC community. Even though the leaders' attitudes about the pedagogical reform was positive, its execution was questioned from the "leadership as a joint enterprise" point of view. Leaders pointed out that the good aims introduced by the reform were in danger for two main reasons: the reform concentrated only on leaders and teachers, and the undefined pedagogical responsibilities of teachers and nurses. This caused a paradoxical situation in the centers as leaders tried to build strong

pedagogical communities and lead positive cooperation between teachers and nurses along the renewed policy meanwhile the hardships mentioned above led to inner contradictions in the centers. Community of practice theory respects diversity and is built for developing the shared practice (Wenger & Lave, 1991). When reflecting earlier ECEC leadership studies with the viewpoints emerging from this study, domain competence and ability to participate equally in the development of the practice are important steps in working as a joint enterprise. Moreover, the definition of shared domain is the key factor in defining practices, and articulation of domain is crucial in how discursive power manifests itself in early childhood education institutions (Fonsén et al., 2021). Due to the various professionals working together in centers, and the history of administrative and organizational changes in Finnish ECEC, the power and responsibility inherently linked together in leadership are currently in a process of transformation, and therefore require clarification. From the COP theory point of view, leadership as a joint enterprise in the ECEC community is a question of the domain competence which allows the development of the shared practice (Wenger, 1998).

Culture change in the ECEC organization is a rocky road that takes time to walk along. Consequently, to strengthen the faith in the positive impacts of the ECEC reform, research of that matter is needed. For the future, an important matter at the Finnish ECEC level is the multi-professional community, its occupational roles, and pedagogical responsibilities. Also, finding deeper reasons and solutions for the hardship illustrated above is more than relevant. From the international point of view, the impacts of positive interaction, flexible structures, and building multi-professional communities are building blocks to research in the ECEC leadership context.

### *Limitations*

Interview studies rarely provide results that can be generalized, nor do they aim to do so. Another limitation comes from the study design, due to the focus group interviews with the participants from the in-service training program. The participants represent a development orientation, and it may unify their attitude about leadership. However, during times of reform, as is the case in this study, in-depth information gained through interviews with people working closely with the issues the reform touched upon can provide valuable information about the multifaceted nature of the reform (Schildkamp et al., 2014). Reforms in ECEC are taking place globally, and this study is an examination of leaders' interpretations of the current state of leadership in the field of Finnish ECEC and provides a contextual view of the leadership in the light of the concept community of practice. To provide a holistic picture, authors of future studies should examine functional and leaderful ECEC communities (Cooper, 2014), and the structures, roles, and responsibilities supporting the positive growth of the multi-professional distributive leadership.

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## ORCID iDs

Kirsi-Marja Heikkinen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3262-4227>  
Raisa Ahtiainen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1925-6578>

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