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Leadership as a profession in early childhood education and care

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ABSTRACT

Background: Early childhood education and care (ECEC) centres have historically been overlooked and undervalued globally. However, recent economic investments and numerous changes have significantly impacted the role of ECEC centre leaders and their requirements. Moreover, recent research on educational leadership highlights its importance for both child development and employee well-being, as well as for maintaining pedagogical quality. Despite this recognition, ECEC centre leaders still lack systematic leadership education and adequate working structures.

Purpose: This study aimed to review research evidence to understand how Finnish ECEC centre leaders position themselves within the realm of leadership as a profession. Specifically, the focus was on identifying the key components of leader competence.

Method: We conducted a narrative structural analysis, following the framework developed by using data from 20 short writings by ECEC centre leaders. Four types of narrative were constructed to capture the essence of ECEC centre leaders' competence. Subsequently, these narrative types were analysed using levels of narrative positioning to gain insights into how these different narratives relate to leadership as a profession.

Findings: Through this two-step narrative analysis, we identified four types of narratives among ECEC centre leaders: professional leader, contextual leader, teacher leader, and leader persona. The findings underscore the importance of pedagogical understanding and competence as central themes in the narratives of ECEC centre leaders. However, a comprehensive understanding of general leadership competence as a learnable practice was not consistently evident across the narrative types.

Conclusion: The reflection on these findings suggests that ECEC leadership as a profession is still an emerging phenomenon. Moving forward, there is a need for systematic leadership education and the development of functional leadership structures to clarify the concept of leadership as a shared practice and to ensure its effective implementation in ECEC centres.

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Introduction

Effective leadership in educational settings is vision-focused, not purely administrative. It incorporates the facilitation of professional growth (Sergiovanni 2015), the enhancement of teaching and learning quality, whilst promoting equity and inclusivity (Fonsén 2014; Fonsén, Pesonen, and Valkonen 2021) and a good understanding of pedagogy, curriculum development, assessment practices, and educational policy (Heikkinen, Ahtiainen, and Fonsén 2022).

The research presented in this paper focuses on leadership in early childhood education and care (ECEC), the initial stage of the Finnish educational system (FNAE 2022). In Finland, ECEC is delivered through ECEC centres, which arrange education and care for children aged 0–7. Policymakers in Finland recognise the importance of educational leadership in fostering young children’s learning and well-being, and an increasing number of studies suggest that leadership competence in ECEC plays a crucial role in promoting high-quality pedagogy and can enhance the sector’s ability to attract and retain employees effectively (Cumming, Wong, and Logan 2021; Douglass 2019; Ruohola et al. 2021; Sirvio et al. 2023). Good leadership of ECEC centres is believed to be central to achieving these objectives and can also have a positive impact on the wellbeing of centre employees and children (Ruohola et al. 2021; Siippainen et al. 2021).

However, despite the recognised value of ECEC leadership, ECEC centre leaders are currently lacking systematic leadership education. Previous research has acknowledged a need for more systematic ECEC leadership education in Finland to support more effective leadership of ECEC centres (Ahtiainen, Fonsén, and Kiuru 2021; Fonsén et al. 2022, Gibbs 2020; Heikonen et al. 2023). Achievement of this goal requires favourable conditions (Cortázar 2015; OECD 2022). However, opportunities for training are currently reliant on personal motivation or the willingness of ECEC organisations to support in-service training. Additionally, a number of other factors are jeopardising Finnish ECEC centre leaders’ professional development and the emergence of sustainable leadership. These include growing ECEC centre sizes, a number of responsibilities (both administrative tasks and personnel management but also leading the pedagogical quality of the centre), and a lack of developing leadership system and structures (Fonsén, Keski-Rauska, Aronen and Riekkola 2016; Fonsén et al. 2022; Gibbs 2021).

Through an analysis of ECEC centre leader writings, this study contributes to the debate about leadership as a profession in ECEC by examining how ECEC centre leaders in Finland perceive leadership as a profession, and how leadership is constructed (Bamberg 1997). Additionally, the study aims to identify future needs and directions for the profession’s development.

Background

Leadership as a profession in early childhood education and care

For quite some time, leadership in ECEC centres in Finland has been both undervalued and overlooked (Douglass 2017). However, interest in this topic has grown in recent decades, with research indicating that effective leadership in ECEC centres is a crucial factor in providing high-quality education and care for young children during their

formative years (Fonsén 2014; Fonsén, Pesonen, and Valkonen 2021; OECD 2020). Effective leadership in ECEC centres is characterised by pedagogical leadership, which is a shared practice, involving all members of the working community (Fonsén et al. 2023). It necessitates strong pedagogical competence, as ECEC centre leaders are tasked with responsibilities such as developing and implementing curricula, managing staff and their pedagogical growth, ensuring compliance with regulations and standards, maintaining a safe and nurturing environment for children, and communicating with families (Hujala et al. 2021).

ECEC centre leadership is considered, in this article, as a triangular relationship between policy, research and the profession. It blends educational theory, practice and the human side of leadership development (Damiani, Rolling, and Wiczorek 2017). The profession is neither purely theoretical nor practical. Rather, knowledge and practice are filtered through a person's professional and personal history (Clandinin 1985, 1987). Research highlights a link between a leader's qualifications, the quality of the work environment, especially in administrative leadership, and pedagogical leadership of the ECEC centre (Dennis and O'Connor 2013; Fenech 2013; Ruohola et al. 2021; Sylva et al. 2004). ECEC leadership is a multi-professional process taking place in multi-professional working communities, where people influence each other and, in collaboration, facilitate individual and collective efforts to achieve set goals (Olivier, Hipp, and Huffman 2010; Wenger 1998). Functional leadership is a praxis, a shared duty of a community calling for adequate structures and shared practices to promote learning and wellbeing in the community (Köykkä, Vähäsantanen, and Lemmetty 2023; Palaiologou and Male 2019). This current, democratic, understanding of ECEC leadership marks a departure from earlier conceptualisations of leadership as authoritarian and position-based (Louise and Jónsdóttir 2013; Lund 2021). From a shared praxis perspective, the formal position of ECEC centre leader is not to rule but to secure adequate pedagogical resources and possibilities and to support emerging, positive interactions promoting communal learning and sharing good practices (Fonsén 2014; Uhl-Bien and Arena 2017; Wenger 1998). This requires awareness of authority and equality, as the goal of leadership is to create a trusting and autonomous working community without seeing this as a risk to the leadership position (Dimmock 2012; Gibbs 2021; Louise and Jónsdóttir 2013). This means creating confidence in others but also developing trust in one's professional abilities (Gibbs 2021; Hjelt and Karila 2021; Louise and Jónsdóttir 2013).

Finnish context of early childhood education and care

At the national level, Finnish ECEC is governed by the Ministry of Education and Culture. At the local level, municipalities have autonomy in organising ECEC, provided they adhere to the guidelines outlined by the Finnish National Agency for Education (FNAE). In Finland, ECEC centre leaders are considered as a part of organisational middle management, holding formal authority within their centres (Siippainen et al. 2021). In this study, middle managers are the individual ECEC centre leaders who occupy a formal leadership position bridging organisational administration and the ECEC centre working community (Heikkinen, Ahtiainen, and Fonsén 2022).

ECEC centre leaders usually have responsibility for 1–4 separate centres and approximately 120–250 children across these. On average, leaders have responsibility for 30–40 employees across their centres, who work in multi-professional working teams (Siippainen et al. 2021). Leaders who run several centres spread their working hours between these according to centre sizes and needs. ECEC centres have a deputy leader system and usually it is one of the ECEC teachers that holds this part-time responsibility. However, in the biggest municipalities and the largest centres, there is an administrative deputy-leader system (Siippainen et al. 2021). In practice, ECEC centre leadership is typically a shared duty, combining the pedagogical knowledge of centre leaders and teachers and also the practical skills of nursery nurses. Teachers play a significant role as they share pedagogical responsibility with leaders, while nursery nurses collaborate at team level (FNAE 2022; OECD 2022). Contextual factors such as centre size, location and leadership structures are significant factors affecting leadership and the operational culture, pedagogy and its quality, and also the administrative tasks of the centre (FNAE 2022; Fonsén 2014; Hujala et al. 2021; Ministry of Education and Culture 2018).

Contextual and policy change in relation to ECEC in Finland has created controversial expectations and conflicting goals for ECEC centre leaders (Kupila, Fonsén, and Liinamaa 2023). In 2013, ECEC was moved from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to the Ministry of Education and Culture, which strengthened the position of ECEC within the Finnish educational system. This was followed by the ECEC curriculum reform, which defined leadership of curricular content as the leader's core duty. The new ECEC Act 540/2018 (Ministry of Education and Culture 2018) led to changes in ECEC centre leaders' qualification requirements. Currently, ECEC centre leadership is a continuation of ECEC teaching, with both positions having the same educational qualification – a Bachelor of Arts in Education. (BA Eds). The ECEC centre-leader qualification does not yet include systematic leadership education, as the qualification is gained through practical experience and in-service training based on personal motivation or organisational will (Siippainen et al. 2021). However, after 2030, ECEC centre leaders will need to hold a master's degree in education and have adequate leader competence.

Over recent years, ECEC centre leaders have met several requirements calling for multifaceted competence and more systematic qualification (Siippainen et al. 2021). This context forms the backdrop for the study reported here. The study aims to contribute to the development of ECEC centre leadership by examining how ECEC centre leaders position themselves for leadership (Bamberg 1997), and by identifying the future needs, and the direction of development of the profession.

Conceptual background

To create a comprehensive picture of ECEC centre leaders' perceptions of leadership as a profession we drew on Positioning Theory (Davies and Harré 1990). Positioning Theory considers traditional roles as static and fixed, but 'positions' as flexible, dynamic, contextual and relational. However, the positioning process is not neutral – positions and positionings are influenced by perceptions of moral order and power dynamics, rights, and duties, and points that can be made from a certain position or in relation to another position (Andreouli 2010, Davies and Harré, 1990; Harré and Moghaddam 2003).

Role is one form of positioning. Individuals position themselves to certain roles, which guides the ways in which they act and respond. In the research of leaders this is important, as narrowing the focus only on the leader role may leave out factors related to collaborative leadership practices and their development in the ECEC community (Zinsser et al. 2016). Positioning can also enable us to find and locate temporal differences and positionings in relation to the past and present and also the future (Davies and Harré 1990; Harré and Van Langenhove 1991, 1999; McVee 2011).

Bamberg (1997) identifies positioning occurring on three levels. The first involves characters positioning themselves in relation to other leaders. In our study context, this level allows us to observe the foundation of leadership and examine how ECEC centre leaders position themselves within leadership roles, as well as how leadership is established, acquired, and managed. The second pertains to a character's position relative to others. This level enables us to examine how ECEC centre leaders are situated within multi-professional working communities and their roles within these relationships. The third focuses on how characters position themselves in relation to themselves. Here, we can explore how ECEC centre leaders perceive themselves as leaders, their primary responsibilities, and their tasks from a professional perspective (Bamberg 1997).

Purpose

Against this backdrop, our research objective was to study Finnish ECEC centre leaders' narratives to create a picture of the building blocks of leadership as a profession, and to identify the needs of the profession to support its emergence in the future. Our research question was: What narratives of ECEC centre leaders can be found in the context of leadership as a profession?

Method

Ethical considerations

Our research group followed the Ethical principles of research in the humanities and social and behavioural sciences issued by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity at the University of Helsinki (FNBRI 2023). If a study meets any of the following items specified by the FNBRI, a statement of the ethics of the research design is requested by the University: 1) participants under the age of 15; 2) exposure of participants to exceptionally strong stimuli; 3) research involving a risk to cause mental harm, or involving a threat to the safety of participants, or to researchers or their family members or others closest to them. Our research did not include any of these items. Therefore, a statement of ethics was not required. Our study followed a process of informed consent. All participants were informed about the research related to the training before agreeing to take part, and their participation was voluntary. They were made aware that an analysis of their leader writings would be part of the study. All participants had a right to withdraw their writings at any point in the research. Consequently, three writings were withdrawn from our study data. When receiving leader writings, we followed the scientific principles of confidentiality and anonymity. The data was stored in a safe group space at the University of Helsinki, to

which only the researchers involved in the data collection had access. This ensured the ethical handling of the writings. Before the analysis process, data were anonymised with all recognisable features, such as names, places and working organisations deleted from the content. Researchers applied identification numbers to participants in order to organise and analyse the data reliably and confidentially.

Data collection

In 2022, ECEC centre leaders were asked to complete pre-assignments, in the form of short writings, as part of an 18-month in-service training for educational leaders at the University of Helsinki. The training was targeted at ECEC centre leaders, and principals working in comprehensive and upper secondary education. The research team received 27 writings from ECEC centre leaders, and included 20 of these for analysis, consisting of 40 pages in total. Five participants denied the use of their writings as research data, and two did not work as ECEC centre leaders at the point of data collection. The writings were in electronic format and were written in the Finnish language. In their writings, leaders were instructed to use their own words to answer two statements concerning ECEC centre leadership as a profession. Statement 1: *The best foundation to ECEC leadership is ECEC teachers' qualification.* Statement 2: *ECEC leadership is an autonomous profession.*

Data analysis

Our analysis followed a two-step process, combining Labov and Waletzky's (1967) structural analysis with Bamberg's (1997) narrative positioning framework.

Labov and Waletzky's (1967) method enabled us to analyse and compare narratives using a five-step system of categorisation: 1) Abstract (A); 2) Orientation (O); 3) Complicating action (CO); 4) Result (R); 5) Coda (C) – the latter focused on evaluation and considerations for the future (Labov and Waletzky 1967; Patterson 2013).

Bamberg's (1997) narrative positioning framework enabled us to analyse and compare narratives by applying a three-level process: The first considers characters' positioning in relation to one another within events, enabling observation of the foundation of leadership and examination of how ECEC centre leaders position themselves within leadership roles. The second examines a character's position in relation to others included in the narrative, providing insight into how ECEC centre leaders are situated within multi-professional working communities. The third explores how characters position themselves in relation to themselves, shedding light on how ECEC centre leaders perceive themselves as leaders and their responsibilities from a professional perspective.

Our analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti, a software package supporting qualitative data analysis. We began by reading all 20 leader writings and making detailed notes. Next, through content analysis, we sorted writings in three temporal leadership groups: past persona, present teacher, and future leader (Krippendorff 2018). We then applied Labov and Waletzky's structural analysis to all individual writings within these temporal groups to identify the five categories (abstract, orientation, complicating action, result, and coda). Finally, we used content analysis to compare differences and similarities (Krippendorff 2018). Based on the content analysis, we identified four different narrative types: (1) professional

narrative with future temporality; (2) contextual narrative with future temporality; (3) pedagogical narrative with present temporality; (4) personal narrative with past temporality. We then formulated questions for these narrative types based on Bamberg's positioning levels to determine how each positioned itself to ECEC centre leadership as a profession. These questions addressed:

- (A) The narrative's positioning relative to leadership in general, including how leader position is acquired, managed, and whether agency or control is evident through competence or personality.
- (B) The narrative's positioning relative to the working community and how this positioning to other people is argued.
- (C) The narrative's positioning relative to leader work, including how it narrates about leading and how it aims to be perceived as a leader.

After reflecting on the four narratives using these positioning questions, we were able to determine the final narrative types and their positioning relative to leadership as a profession.

Findings

In this section, we discuss the four types of narratives (Table 1) that emerged through the analysis, discussing the differences but also the similarities in how ECEC centre leaders positioned themselves to leadership as a profession. We have added some quotations from our data which were translated by the authors from Finnish to English post-analysis. The narrative types were named based on the core of the leadership they represented as: professional leader; contextual leader; teacher leader; and leader persona.

The professional leader

First, we introduce the 'professional leader' whose narrative's abstract (A) and orientation (O) is attached to a recent arrival in the ECEC field. The professional leader has had an earlier career

Table 1. Summary of type narratives and their basic dimensions.

Type narrative	N	Level A: position to leadership	Level B: position to multi-professional working communities	Level C: position of themselves to leader work
Professional leader	3	Education on leadership, contextual understanding not compulsory	Facilitator	Professional, positioning on leadership expertise
Contextual leader	4	Education on leadership, contextual knowledge from the field	Servant	Professional, positioning on leadership expertise in educational context
Teacher leader	6	Teacher education, pedagogical competence and practical knowledge. Deputy leader role.	Pedagogical guide	Positioning on teacher role, expertise in pedagogy, based on teacher role
Leader persona	7	Teacher career, suitable character	Leadership is a solitary task	Positioning on leader persona and traits supporting leadership

in another field, and before becoming an ECEC centre leader, they have worked just briefly as an ECEC teacher and have very quickly moved to an administrative leader position. The professional leader is primarily a leader and orientates to leadership as a profession through systematic leadership education and knowledge. They have a powerful desire to conduct leadership work. As one 'professional leader' stated:

Of course, you benefit from it [a teacher career] somehow. But an administrative leader needs general leadership education to know how to lead. Moreover, you need practical experience, mentoring and systematic in-service training.

The professional leader is temporally oriented to the future, and for them leadership as a profession is about leading the operational culture, vision and strategy in the ECEC centre. They emphasise the value of discussion and creating meaningful work that strengthens the centre's operational culture. They regard leadership of pedagogy and developing pedagogical practice as a leader's core duty. However, this is focused on supporting professional development and sharing knowledge within the working community, rather than directly leading the curriculum. Consequently, the professional leader is a facilitator, who supports the participation of a multi-professional learning community. This quotation, taken from one professional leader's writing, exemplifies this:

The best competence to pedagogy is in ECE teachers and nurses. It is their responsibility to understand what the guiding documents [i.e., curriculum, legislation] require from their work and the way these requirements can be implemented and met on a daily basis.

For the professional leader, complicating actions (CA) are positioned to the working community and its knowhow. They see themselves as a core part of the multi-professional community, which is viewed as the best resource and support for a leader. Leadership is regarded as a shared duty, which is not based on a role or position. The best leadership structures occur in working pairs or small groups, where everyone can input their expertise. The primary problems for the professional leader are archaic, static leadership structures; fragmented work with many different tasks; and working alone. When these problems occur, the result is that ECEC centre leadership as a profession becomes fragmented, requiring the application of too many skills and competencies, which detract from a focus on ECEC centre leaders' core duties. Moreover, leadership education and structures are felt to be insufficient, compromising serious leadership as a profession, as indicated by the following quotation:

Leadership is a demanding task. Usually, ECEC centre leaders work first as deputy leaders and then as administrative leader substitutes before their tenures. With this path it is not easy to change your position from a teacher to a leader. You need leadership education and adequate structures. Otherwise, you cannot understand what leadership is about. Sometimes part of the field problems is because of lack of leadership competence.

In coda (C), the professional leader is a visionary for a different future and calls for systematic education. They perceive education to be important, not only for themselves as leaders, but also for all employees. In their view, there is no competent leader without competent employees. When the learning community has high competency, leaders' personal pedagogical knowledge is not the focus. At the core is the competence of the whole community. In conclusion, for the professional leader, ECEC leadership is

a profession, clearly separated from the ECEC teacher position by the position and by leadership education.

The contextual leader

Second, we introduce the ‘contextual leader’. The abstract (A) and orientation (O) of the contextual leader is attached to a long ECEC centre career, as a leader. Their narrative includes a deep reflection of the ECEC centre leader’s professional path and professional requirements. Work as an ECEC centre leader has taught the contextual leader that leadership as a profession requires leadership competence, which cannot be acquired solely by teachers’ education supplemented by practical experience as a deputy leader. As this ‘contextual leader’ noted:

To understand the context and the core of ECEC you need to have some experience in the field. I don’t think you have to be an ECEC teacher. When being a leader the most important thing is to gain leadership competence and continuous in-service training . . . There are lots of expectations for educational leadership. And, well, it’s not enough these days that you collect your competence from your working experience.

The contextual leader is temporally oriented to the future, and their primary aim is to support the basic mission of the field: the wellbeing of the children. Leadership as a profession is positioned to the combination of leadership education and contextual knowledge, which are seen as equally important. Leadership as a profession requires deep understanding of leadership, but also substantive ECEC pedagogical understanding on an operational level. In other words, the ECEC centre leader needs to know curricula goals, but is focused on leading, not implementing these. This is illustrated through the following writing extract:

Competent leadership is contextual and relational. What is working in some centres might just flop in other contexts. Aims, goals and contexts define what is quality and what is not. All ECEC centres are unique and you need to know how to lead exactly this centre and these people.

In terms of complicating actions (CA) for contextual leaders, pedagogical competence among the workforce is a supportive factor. However, personnel shortages and low levels of staff competence can complicate a sense of shared duty, with the contextual leader feeling unable to share pedagogical leadership to the extent required. In this scenario, unclear job descriptions and the concept of shared leadership being controversial complicate life in the centre and create confusion. Instead of leading together it becomes more a case of leading alone and guiding employees on a very practical level:

As a pedagogical leader my duty is to guide teachers along the guiding documents to the right direction. At the same time, I have to give time to learning communities to make innovations and experiments to develop our shared work for better.

As a result (R), the contextual leader aims to serve and enable the quality of work in ECEC centres. Their understanding of leadership as a profession has grown during the leader path and during the tenure, and they have realised that the ECEC centre leadership position and the ECEC teacher position constitute separate duties although the substance

is similar. Leadership as a profession is about leading goals, pedagogical quality and working commitment, and also supporting wellbeing and working motivation in the community. Good leaders recognise the capacity and competence of the work community and know how to benefit from this. As one contextual leader explained: 'Investing in ECEC leadership supports pedagogical quality and increases the wellbeing of children, families and employees. This is also a key to holding the force of the field'.

In terms of coda (C), the contextual leader emphasises systematic leadership education as being about the moment. Growing leadership competence is based on personal motivation and will, or that of the organisation. Eventually, this approach may become a threat to sustainable ECEC leadership and pedagogical work in general.

The teacher leader

Third, we introduce the 'teacher leader'. The abstract (A) and orientation (O) refer to a narrative type who has an extensive career as an ECEC teacher. The teacher leader has been an administrative leader for around 5–10 years and before that has worked a considerable amount of time as an ECEC teacher and deputy leader. The teacher leader is temporally oriented to the present. Their vision is focused on the current academic year and the needs of current children and employees. Teacher leaders are positioned to leadership as a profession through ECEC pedagogical core duty, children's wellbeing and pedagogy. Leadership as a profession is based on ECEC teacher education, pedagogical theory and practical experience. Their prior experience as deputy leaders provides the knowledge base for their leadership. As one teacher leader commented: 'A competent teacher is best qualified to lead the ECEC centre. She knows the guiding documents and understands what "educare", combining education and care, means. Only a teacher can know what is needed in quality pedagogics'.

When examining complicating actions (CA), the teacher leader's main expertise is in leading pedagogy and the core curriculum on a team level. A background in ECEC teacher education creates credibility and respect in the eyes of employees and helps create a plausible professional role. As this teacher leader said:

I have to be able to argue for my decisions and this is not possible without teachers' competence. Also, employees need lots of help and support, especially with children with special needs. To [provide] quality leadership I need to know the children, the resources they need, so that my work supports children's wellbeing.

The teacher leader thinks that the best leader knows what happens within child groups during the day. Teacher leaders show how to guide working teams through practical issues and should not be isolated to an 'administrative ivory tower'. Rather, they should operate within the working community, aware of what happens in the reality of ECEC work. When positioning to the working community, the teacher leader is a pedagogical guide. A complicating factor in this leadership type can be a vague positioning between leaders and teachers, as illustrated through this writing extract:

Sometimes I think that my teaching career is disturbing my leadership. Sometimes I take too strong a role of a teacher when it comes to the child cases and this feels contradictory.

I should give space to teachers to carry their responsibilities and make their decisions. Still, the teacher role comes easily in certain situations.

As a result (R), in this narrative, leadership is focused on leading pedagogical practice within the centre, one year at a time. Leadership is about guiding and acting, with teacher leaders thinking that their own pedagogical view guides centre operations. Leadership tends to be defined as a very demanding task because, ultimately, there are too many employees, ECEC centres and fragmented tasks for the leader to be able to be present in child groups, or to lead pedagogy on a practical level.

In teacher leaders' narrative, the coda (C) clauses are short, and they do not necessarily present an alternative future. Clauses are often in the form of questions about leader-teacher positionings. For example, one teacher leader queried: 'Is the difference between me and teachers that I have my administrative tasks?' However, when discussing leadership in practice or leaders' future professionalisation, this distinction becomes almost invisible, although teacher leaders are aware of the paradox. It seems that the core problem for teacher leaders is a sharing of the pedagogical leader role and its implementation, which complicates the path to clearer ECEC centre leadership as a profession.

The leader persona

The fourth leader narrative type is 'leader persona'. The abstract (A) and orientation (O) of a leader persona is attached to working in a small- or medium-sized centre as a full-time administrative leader, or part-time leader in a child group. The leader persona has an experience of both private and municipal ECECs and has made a lengthy career as an ECEC teacher. They are temporarily oriented to the past and their narrative is a reflection of the time when every small centre had their own leader present in everyday life. For example: 'It was luxurious in past times when you had time for real pedagogical leadership'.

Leader persona leadership is positioned to personal traits and inherent competencies, such as bravery and an ability to carry responsibility for others. These individuals wish to be leaders and to inspire and motivate people to work for the ECEC centre. A previous formal leader role, and tenure in the organisation, is usually the foundation to leadership. The leader persona thinks they have both a right, and a responsibility, to lead, with the concept of a right to formally command being the difference between leader and employee in this context. In the leader persona's narrative, there is an absence of systematic leadership education as a dimension in leadership as a profession. Personal talent, practical experience, personal will and the ability to organise everyday life are at the core of leadership as a profession for these individuals. Their strongest motivation to stay in the field is the ECEC basic mission and the wellbeing of the child. This extract from a leader persona's writing summarises the position:

Well of course a leader is kind of part of the working community, but I mean leader is not equal with working community. Leader has the formal right to lead and the leader only has to have the support of [their] own supervisor. It is nice if you are liked but that is not the main goal of leadership".

When positioning to the working community, the leader persona can be viewed as a 'lonely hero', or as a role model for employees who need a lot of support and supervision. The leader persona often reports having a dearth of competent personnel, or challenging relationships between staff, which can constrain effective leadership. The leader persona views the leader's primary duty in this scenario as treating everyone equally. For example, 'The most important thing is to stay neutral and avoid getting involved with communities' 'social drama'. This is sometimes difficult given that these leaders have often shifted to a leader position following a career as a teacher in the same centre.

When examining the complicating actions (CA) of a leader persona, few supportive factors are identified, and the leadership role can be beset by problems and exhaustion. In the result (R) category, leadership work presents as fragmented, demanding and impossible to succeed in. Leaders report loneliness and that there is no one to share the workload with. As this leader persona explained, 'I feel like an imposter. I feel I don't have enough competence. Parents and employees think I am highly professional, but I feel that my success is accidental'. What is notable in the leader persona narrative, is that the coda (C) clause is missing. The leader persona does not present a longer-term vision as they tend to be working to fight one day at a time. They present no alternative future, or solution to improve ECEC leadership in the future. A coherent perception of leadership as a profession is missing, and current building blocks are based on separate administrative responsibilities.

Discussion

The aim of our study was to examine the kind of narratives of ECEC centre leaders that are found in leadership as a profession. In this discussion, we reflect on our results through positioning theory and Bamberg's (1997) three positioning levels. The four emerging narratives of leadership as a profession, which we have described above, had considerable variation. However, there were also similarities, especially between 'professional leader' and 'contextual leader' and between 'teacher leader' and 'leader persona' positionings.

An examination of Bamberg's (1997) positioning level one (position to leadership) revealed ECEC centre leadership as a deeply culturally and contextually defined concept, which had its foundation in ECEC pedagogy (Ahtiainen, Fonsén, and Kiuru 2021; Heikkinen, Ahtiainen, and Fonsén 2022). For all four narratives, contextual and cultural matters were especially meaningful when explaining ECEC centre leadership as a profession to people outside of the ECEC centre context. In terms of differences on the first positioning level, professional leaders and contextual leaders viewed ECEC centre leadership as a profession, positioned to leadership education and context. The main difference between these two leadership types was that professional leaders underlined their understanding of the specific ECEC context, whereas contextual leaders focused on deeper contextual knowledge. For the teacher leader and leader persona, ECEC centre leadership as a professional role was not a clear concept – rather, centre leadership was strongly positioned to the ECEC teacher role, pedagogical competence and practical knowledge gained through a deputy-leader position. It was surprising in the data how many leaders positioned competent leadership to certain innate personal traits.

Systematic leadership education was not at the core of teacher leader and leader persona narratives – rather, the emphasis was on practical ‘learning by doing’.

In Bamberg’s (1997) second-level positioning (position to others), both professional and contextual leaders viewed leadership as a discrete practice (Palaiologou and Male 2019). Both focused on leading the operational culture and vision of the ECEC centre, while pedagogical leadership was defined in terms of leading, growing and sharing the competence of learning communities (Fonsén 2014; Wenger 1998). Leaders positioned themselves to their working communities as facilitators, with a core duty to make quality pedagogy and children’s wellbeing possible. These leaders were aware of the field difficulties when hiring competent teachers and nurses. They were contextual in their positioning, adjusting their leadership to the needs of their working communities (Gibbs 2021). They appreciated that a lack of competence was one dimension of the whole ECEC problematic. Both professional and contextual leaders saw the development of leadership, and leadership structures, as an important element of supporting the field and its future (Heikonen et al. 2022; Siippainen et al. 2021). In contrast, in teacher leader and leader persona narratives, leadership was seen as being about leading the curriculum and pedagogical processes. Teacher leaders, especially, positioned themselves to their working communities as pedagogical guides, helping to solve team-level pedagogical problems. Interestingly, the leader personas had no existing relation to their multi-professional learning communities as leaders. For these individuals, ECEC centre leadership was a solitary task, fighting against the work overload of their employees. These two leader types positioned themselves as outsiders to their multi-professional learning communities. They were primarily superiors holding the formal power and expertise of the ECEC centre (Lund 2021). Their former administrative positions and teachers’ knowledge gave them credibility, but also power, to lead very closely on how ECEC pedagogics should be implemented at the child group level.

The biggest difference was found in teacher leader and leader persona narratives related to Bamberg’s (1997) positioning level three. Working as a leader was deeply connected to the ECEC mission and to child wellbeing, but these narratives lacked the coda, the alternative end of the vantage point for the future (Gibbs 2021). Both were anchored either to the difficulties of the present, or to the past. Professional leaders and contextual leaders also narrated their work as challenging, but they believed that investing in both education, and structures, was essential as a means of making work more manageable. These leaders had a strong motivation to develop ECEC centre leadership as a contextual profession and they had a strong vision of the structures needed in the future (Lund 2021). When defining ECEC centre leadership as a profession in the light of our data, there is a notable emphasis on teachers’ education and practical field competence. This can lead to confusion around the expectations of the leader role and its core duty (Kupila, Fonsén, and Liinamaa 2023).

Limitations

The aim of this narrative study was not to provide generalisable results. Our aim was to uncover a small number of specific experiences through structural analysis and to identify potential alternatives to current approaches to leadership practice. We attempted to give a voice through unique narratives. The participants in our study were all taking part in an

in-service training programme for educational leaders at the University of Helsinki. Therefore, they arguably had a 'reform orientation', which may have affected their attitudes to leadership as a profession.

Conclusions

ECEC leadership is a challenging, morally and ethically sensitive field, where leaders need to have personal engagement and understanding of pedagogical practice to be able to build leadership in a multi-professional community (Aubrey, Godfrey, and Harris 2013). Our research has shown that some clarification is needed around ECEC leadership as a contextualised profession. Hierarchical, role-based leadership is still at the core of ECEC centre leadership (Lund 2021) and this is a potential risk when developing sustainable leadership practice (Palaologou and Male 2019). Also, there has been recognition of the intensification, increasing challenges, and multiple complexities of leader work (Kangas et al. 2022; Sirvio et al. 2023).

Our study has found that leadership varies and that consequently, to achieve quality leadership, ECEC centre leaders need to achieve a more coherent understanding of their profession (Kupila, Fonsén, and Liinamaa 2023). This suggests that there may need to be a more systematic approach to ECEC leadership education. This could start from ECEC teachers' education and continue through to the beginning of the ECEC centre leader career. Moreover, continuous in-service training during the tenures may also be beneficial (Heikonen et al. 2023; Siippainen et al. 2021). Currently, a lack of education for professional leadership may be linked to exhaustion and a lack of vision for the future, which poses risks for staff turnover and wellbeing (Sirvio et al. 2023). Studies by Fenech (2012) and Heikka et al. (2021) show competent leadership correlating with ECEC teachers' working commitment and motivation. Besides leadership education, it is also important to ensure that there is a clarity of professional roles. This might include plausible organisational-level clarification between the roles of ECEC centre leaders and ECEC teachers, to help overcome the current confusion about roles, which is contributing to the problem of building ECEC leadership as a profession. This would potentially also increase the legitimacy of ECEC teachers as pedagogical leaders (Steinnes and Haug 2013). ECEC leadership is one of the key dimensions to ECEC quality and the wellbeing of children. This research study suggests that a refreshed focus on its development, including a focus on recognised barriers prohibiting its growth and success, could be timely.

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