Finnish early childhood education and care leaders' perceptions of pedagogical leadership and assessment of the implementation of the National Core Curriculum in times of change

Raisa Ahtiainen⬤, Elina Fonsén and Laura Kiuru

Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki, Finland

Abstract

Finnish early childhood education and care (ECEC) experienced system-wide changes in legislation, curriculum, and teachers' and centre leaders' qualification requirements between 2013 and 2018. Through these changes, the Finnish ECEC follows the global trends shifting the focus of ECEC from care towards education. The data are leaders' ($N = 41$) written responses to three open-ended questions in a survey completed in 2018. The analytical framework draws on the models of educational change and human capital of pedagogical leadership. The framework directs focus on leaders' understanding about and realisation of these new policies in their ECEC centres. Results indicate that leaders have the capacity to interpret and lead the curriculum process. However, to secure the coherence in and quality of ECEC, guidance that is more systematic and instruments (e.g. for development of pedagogy) that support the implementation of the curriculum and its assessment are needed.

Keywords

Early childhood education, early childhood education and care curriculum, educational change, Finland, pedagogical leadership

Corresponding author:
Raisa Ahtiainen, Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki, Siltavuorenpenger 3A1, Helsinki 00014, Finland.
Email: raisa.ahtiainen@helsinki.fi

Introduction

The growing understanding of the importance of learning and education in the early years of childhood has led to an increased need for the development of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services globally, and the field has undergone extensive change in the past decade (Gibson et al., 2020; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2019). Leadership in education for 21st century learning should aim at practices that set the direction for pedagogy and emphasise mutual understanding instead of focusing only on service management (OECD, 2013). As in all areas of education, the conceptualisation of leadership in the ECEC context is evolving, changing and being re-defined (Dinham, 2016). Simultaneously with these changes and new goals for policy development, the economic downturn has increased pressure to cut costs within the education sector in many countries (Borgna et al., 2019).

Big changes force professionals working in ECEC to rethink and reorganise their work. The purpose of this article is to discuss the changing Finnish ECEC landscape from centre leaders' perspective by using the lenses provided by the human capital of pedagogical leadership (Fonsén, 2014; Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019) and educational change (Ahtiainen, 2017; see also Fullan, 2015; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012). This investigation aims at identifying aspects related to these two theory-based models in ECEC leaders' descriptions about the leadership needed for realising the objectives of the National Core Curriculum for ECEC (Finnish National Agency for Education [FNAE], 2018) and the assessment of its implementation. To set the study to its context, we begin with an introduction of Finnish ECEC and the theoretical viewpoints employed in the data analysis.

The changes in Finnish ECEC context

In the decentralised education system of Finland, local educational authorities (i.e. municipalities) have strong decisional power concerning the arrangements of their services (Simola et al., 2017). Traditionally, the Finnish education has been based on public services, and the municipalities have been the main education providers. However, the private service sector has started to expand within the ECEC. In 1997, the private sector proportion of ECEC services was only 2.5% (Mäntyjärvi & Puroila, 2019); currently, 18.2% of children participate in ECEC organised by private service providers, and further, 54% of Finnish municipalities provide private services along with the public ones (Finnish Education Evaluation Centre [FINEEC], 2019).

Finnish ECEC went through many fundamental changes during the 2010s. These changes have affected all service providers in the field and ECEC is gradually moving closer to comprehensive schooling. First, in 2013, ECEC was moved from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to the Ministry of Education and Culture. This affected the basis of ECEC services fundamentally and began the conceptual move from care to education yet retaining the integrated approach of Finnish ECEC, in which care, education and teaching form the so-called 'educare' model with particular emphasis on pedagogy (Fonsén & Vlasov, 2017).

Second, the Finnish National Agency for Education (FNAE), which is responsible for the implementation of national education policies and works under the Ministry, updated the National Core Curriculum for ECEC in 2016, with further minor revisions in 2018 (FNAE, 2018). The curriculum lays the foundation for pedagogy and pedagogical conceptualisations guiding the work of ECEC professionals. It emphasises the need for distributed leadership, which in the Finnish ECEC context means that teachers along with the designated centre leader have leadership roles. ECEC teachers are defined as pedagogical team leaders responsible for the pedagogical activities and ECEC leaders are responsible for the overall operation of the centre (Act on ECEC [Act 540/2018], 2018; FNAE, 2018). The curriculum provides

national-level guidelines, which are the basis for local-level curricula. Municipal autonomy allows local service providers to adjust the national curriculum to the conditions and needs stemming from their local contexts. Whether ECEC service providers are public or private, they are required to formulate the local ECEC curricula and to follow it.

Thirdly, the Act 540/2018 systematised ECEC state-level norms. It states that every child has the right to ECEC, and municipalities are obliged to organise ECEC services or offer private services. Service providers are required to evaluate their curriculum work implementation or participate in an external evaluation process. The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) launched guidelines and recommendations for the evaluation of ECEC quality (Vlasov et al., 2018). The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre provides development-oriented quality management in contrast to inspection and supports the evaluation in ECEC centres. It is the leaders' duty to lead the evaluation process in their ECEC centres.

Finally, the overall changes in the ECEC field are reflected in the qualification requirements for ECEC teachers and centre leaders, which were updated in 2018 and will come into full effect after the transition period in 2030 (Act 540/2018). Every ECEC teacher must now have a 3-year bachelor's and a centre leader, a 5-year master's degree in an ECEC teacher programme consisting of studies in educational sciences, pedagogy and teaching practice. Currently, a variety of degrees, not all of which are based in educational sciences or pedagogy, are accepted.

Leadership in the pedagogical context of ECEC

The emphasis on pedagogical conceptualisations has increased in the ECEC discourse. We understand pedagogical leadership as a broad concept including the leader's various actions supporting the implementation of the aims of ECEC curriculum (cf. Lahtero & Kuusilehto-Awale, 2015) and approach leadership as a distributed phenomenon, in which leadership is a collective commitment and process for all participants (Heikka, 2014). The leaders of ECEC centres are key players. They need to be capable of leading the pedagogy and curriculum work, yet simultaneously, base their work on distribution of responsibilities. According to ECEC curriculum, the teachers are responsible for pedagogical leadership at the level of child groups and as leaders of their own teams (FNAE, 2018).

The human capital of pedagogical leadership

Due to the changes in Finnish ECEC, the organisation of roles, responsibilities and tasks have to be rethought. To begin with, professional roles need clarification because ECEC teachers' new role involves the practices of distributed pedagogical leadership. Further, attention should be given to leadership training for leaders, and the concept of distributed pedagogical leadership should be embedded within the entire ECEC system (Heikka, 2014).

According to Fonsén (2014), drawing from the work of Sergiovanni (1998), pedagogical leadership requires certain aspects of human capital. These aspects are constructed from knowledge concerning the goals set for the realisation of curriculum and good pedagogy: awareness through critical reflection of the quality of the pedagogy being applied; skills and the means to lead the pedagogy towards the desired state; and the ability to argue pedagogically and validate both practical decisions and choices. These aspects of human capital are part of the process of professional development of pedagogical leadership (Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019). They, together with perspectives stemming from the process of educational change, form a frame for analysing ECEC

leaders' understandings of the meaning and leadership of the recent curriculum reform in this study.

As pedagogical leaders, leaders need to have knowledge of the goals set for the realisation of the curriculum and the high quality of pedagogy. Leaders should also have completed studies in education as they form a foundation for professional knowledge required in leading pedagogical practice and provide tools for thinking critically about pedagogy and interpreting curriculum (Autio et al., 2017). Furthermore, leaders should seek information and read recent research to develop their pedagogical knowledge, skills and understanding. It is the leaders' responsibility to lead the overall development of pedagogical practices and coordinate implementation of the curriculum (Fonsén, 2014; see also Fonsén & Ukkola-Mikkola, 2019).

To lead pedagogical practices that are in line with the curriculum, it is crucial to follow-up on the work through critical reflection on the quality of the implemented pedagogy. This requires the capacity to search for and use various methods of programme evaluation. The evaluation must include reflection on pedagogical questions and methods, not just questionnaires providing information at the level of satisfaction perceived by the customers (i.e. families). Leaders are responsible for the quality of pedagogy in their centres and need to understand the variations in it (Fonsén, 2014; Fonsén & Ukkola-Mikkola., 2019).

Leaders' capacity for leading pedagogical practices to meet the aims of the curriculum is related to human resource management and indirect pedagogical leadership (Lahtero & Kuusilehto-Awale, 2015). The indirect pedagogical leadership consists of management skills, including the ability to lead the curriculum work, the capacity to explain and interpret the curriculum, the desire to learn and the tools and courage to develop the organisation's pedagogy. The leader must be able to guide staff to implement high-quality ECEC, leading

discussions to achieve a shared understanding, supporting critical reflection, guiding development work, assessing needs for and organising in-service training (Dinham, 2016; Fonsén & Ukkola-Mikkola, 2019).

The fourth aspect of the human capital of pedagogical leadership is the ability to argue pedagogically and validate both practical decisions and choices, which are part of ECEC leadership (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2004; Hayden, 1996; Jorde-Bloom, 1997). The leader must have the ability to argue using strong pedagogical knowledge and to deepen, strengthen and clarify the collaborative developed pedagogical vision for the staff. To do so, they must be able to justify their explanations pedagogically and base them on the curriculum, to explain why things should or should not be done in a particular way. A leader's task is to justify pedagogically to their local administration the needed resources (Fonsén, 2014; Fonsén & Ukkola-Mikkola, 2019).

Lenses for observing the process of educational change

The educational change process along with the human capital of pedagogical leadership forms the analysis framework in this study. The main components of the educational change process are built around the purpose, tools for achieving this purpose and practices related to these (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012). Whether the change is at the national or local level, it is crucial that all involved in the change are provided with enough information concerning the process so that they can focus on the new knowledge and capacities needed (Fullan, 2003).

The above-mentioned factors are central when examining how the Finnish ECEC leaders lead the curriculum work in the changed working environment. We have employed a framework developed by Ahtiainen (2017) depicting the main dimensions of educational change emerging from Fullan's (e.g. 2003,

2005) and Hargreaves's (e.g. 2003, Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012) central publications on educational change. The framework consists of four categories: entry, objective, dissemination and impact. These categories provide the framework for identifying the key aspects of a change process and observing whether they are present in a specific context at a particular time (Ahtiainen, 2017).

According to Ahtiainen (2017), entry includes the introduction of the agenda for change. In terms of Finnish ECEC, this is related to the renewed policies and justifications regarding the organisation of ECEC. Entry focuses on the purpose of the whole change process, which includes higher aims, such as the betterment of society and vision for the future (see also Fullan, 2003; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012). This can be seen in the increased emphasis on the education of children during their early years in the Finnish context. The aspects related to this category aim to justify the change; they are concerned with the moral purpose of ECEC and the idea of education as a responsibility shared between all educators involved in the work (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

While entry gives purpose for the change, the objective category directs the focus to the aims and defines what needs to be done to reach the aims of these new policies nationally and locally (Ahtiainen, 2017; Fullan, 2005, 2015). That is, people working to enact the change need to have a clear understanding of what they are expected to do and how. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) suggest that the new practices should be based on the existing ones. However, they do not mean simply building on the existing practices. Instead, the old practices need to be understood in terms of which practices are usable, which should be abandoned and which new practices will be applied (Ahtiainen, 2017). Therefore, the change requires time and space for questioning and creativity.

The category of dissemination includes plans, strategies or actions related to clarity making, professional commitment, interaction, and capacity building in terms of the change agenda (Ahtiainen, 2017; Fullan, 2005). This stage is concerned with the process of making the big picture accessible to all. The change and its purpose should be understandable and doable at all levels of the system (Fullan, 2003). Therefore, it is necessary for ECEC professionals to be provided with enough opportunities for professional learning, sharing of knowledge and reflection on the content of the change (Ahtiainen, 2017; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Furthermore, to support the process of clarity making and learning, it is necessary to formulate short- and long-term objectives through which the change agenda can be broken down into more comprehensible units.

In a system-wide change, there has to be a means for the government to follow-up on the educational change to evaluate its impact (Ahtiainen, 2017). The government is responsible for providing the necessary support at all levels in the system so that they meet the requirements of the change (Ahtiainen, 2017; Fullan, 2003, 2005). The requirements for evaluation of the process also apply to all other levels within the education system. It is crucial that local education administrators collect evidence concerning local strategies to enact the change in practices. Consequently, the evaluation of the change often reveals the quality of actions taken in terms of purpose and clarity of the change process (i.e. objective and dissemination; Ahtiainen, 2017).

Research questions

The aim of this study was to examine how the ECEC centre leaders describe their work with the two main changes, realisation of the new curriculum and its assessment. The first question focuses on educational change and the second on human capital of pedagogical leadership:

1. What kind of aspects of educational change are present in the ECEC centre leaders' descriptions of the realisation

and assessment of the provided ECEC services?

2. What kind of knowledge and skills are referred to in centre leaders' descriptions of leading the process of curriculum realisation and assessment (i.e. leading pedagogy)?

Conducting the research

The data are 41 ECEC leaders' written responses to three open-ended questions concerning the implementation of the National Core Curriculum (FNAE, 2018). For each open-ended question, the leaders were asked to describe the pedagogical practices in their own centres. These short writings were extracted from survey data consisting of responses for both open-ended and Likert-scale questions. The survey covered six focus areas: organisation, leading curriculum, well-being at work, equality, leadership competence and future leadership. The other areas of the survey have been reported elsewhere (Fonsén et al., forthcoming).

In this study, we have a small convenience sample of ECEC leaders (Robinson, 2014). All respondents were participants of a 1.5-year leadership-training programme targeted at leaders in educational field (e.g. ECEC leaders and school principals). We wanted to conduct the study before the ECEC leaders had started their studies. In 2018, before the first training day, we sent an electronic survey to all participating leaders ($N = 125$). Altogether, 102 leaders responded, with 41 of the respondents representing ECEC.

The majority of the leaders represented public ECEC centres, only one was from a private one. All participants were working as leaders, yet, their work experience as leaders varied. About half ($n = 19$) of respondents had 1–5 years, nine had 6–10 years and 13 had over 10 years of work experience as leaders.

Methodologically, the process of analysis followed the ideas of directed content analysis (Assauroudi et al., 2018; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), in which the researchers' knowledge on earlier research or existing theories guide the identification of contents of initial themes for coding. This kind of approach represents a deductive use of theory in terms of theory's position in the analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). The steps in the analysis are outlined next.

First, the data were read, the initial themes identified and the parts of the text representing the first impressions related to the themes were marked (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This formed the basis for naming and defining the themes by using conceptualisations drawn from models of educational change and human capital of pedagogical leadership (Assarroudi et al., 2018; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Additionally, one to two initial codes were named for each theme. Then the already marked data were coded by using this thematic framework. The framework was developed further in this process as some aspects could not be coded according to the initial codes in the framework and some new codes were needed (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Finally, the data were coded by using seven codes that were divided under three themes (Table 1). Coding was done with a qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti (https://atlasti.com/).

Next, we printed out coding outputs from for further examination. The outputs contained each code name and all quotations with full content that are linked to the code. The outputs enabled us to examine the systematicity of the coding and to ensure its consistency.

Ethical considerations

The University of Helsinki in Finland has regulations for research ethics to which all employees of the institution are committed. All participants were informed about this study in the acceptance letter for the training they participated in. They were provided with detailed information about the aim, data collection methods, data storage, data use and research

Table 1. Themes and codes used in the data analysis with the frequencies of used codes.

Theme	Code name	Total (*n*)
Clarity making and setting objectives	Clarity making	32
	Objectives and aims	18
	Competence	10
Working climate and structural solutions	Working climate	30
	Structures and sharing responsibilities	27
	Support for leadership	8
Assessment of the curriculum process	Assessment and impact	45

participants' rights (e.g. withdrawal) before the data collection took place. Participation was voluntary.

Findings

The ECEC leaders shared stories concerning educational change and leaders' positions and practices in it. Further, they shared their plans and worries concerning the change. The aspects emerging from the leaders' responses are examined under the three themes of the analysis framework (Table 1). Some citations from the responses have been included to capture their voice. The written responses have been referred to with a respondent number (e.g. Leader 23), and years of work experience as a leader (e.g. 1–5 years).

Clarity making and setting objectives

Due to many changes occurring within a rather short time frame (2013–2018), the leaders' responses concerning the realisation of the curriculum included many intertwining aspects about the need to understand the content and objectives of the curriculum and its meaning in terms of practices and existing competence. Moreover, to respond effectively to the evolving changes, the leaders understood that they also needed opportunities for professional learning:

> I should have a clear understanding of the content of all the documents; otherwise, it is not possible to base the practices on them. All we do and

discuss should be based on the curriculum, and these things should regularly be brought into discussion with the staff. (Leader 39, 1–5 years)

Nine leaders mentioned how the whole of the curriculum would need to be divided into smaller units to make the content more approachable. It is crucial for the leaders to use the curriculum language in relation to everyday practices and discussions with their ECEC colleagues to bridge the practice with the content of the curriculum.

Thirteen leaders described how the objectives introduced in the curriculum would be adjusted to the curriculum aims set at the local administration level and in ECEC centres. These responses indicated that the development work needed for reaching the objectives should stem from the work community, not to be externally imposed. Some leaders emphasised the need for ongoing professional discussion and shared object setting to create a stronger commitment to the process. The idea was not only to create shared understanding but also to provide space for challenging ideas: 'Planning the objectives together – the clarity of the objectives supported with examples of real practices… will help the staff to commit to the objectives and their realisation' (Leader 19, 6–10 years).

In general, the aspect related to the pace of change was present in the clarity making and objective setting processes. The leaders had noted that staff members feel unsure about their own abilities in terms of the curriculum, and there is a need for structured professional

learning opportunities supporting the curriculum process. The leaders often mentioned how crucial it is to proceed with small steps. This slow pace gives the staff time to learn and to discover what they need to learn to meet the new objectives. In some responses, the leaders mentioned the importance of grounding the work in existing knowledge. It is crucial to recognise the value of the work community's current capacity and to support staff in the process of realising their professional learning needs: '[The leader] knows how to put the staff's expertise and creativity to good use in the process of planning and putting new ideas into practice' (Leader 9, over 10 years).

Working climate and structural solutions

Twenty-six leaders talked about the working climate they aimed to create, support or emphasise in their centres. Not all of them had yet taken all the steps they felt were necessary, but there were at least strong intentions to proceed in a certain direction. In the process of leading the realisation of the curriculum, it was seen as essential to have a working climate that supports the work of every professional in the centre. In the responses, words such as 'ongoing discussion', 'negotiation' and 'sharing knowledge and ideas' were often repeated. All these described how the working climate supports the work needed to reach the aims set in the curriculum: 'The leader has managed to advance the realisation of curriculum by enabling professional discussion and giving the staff opportunity to focus on development work and to share ideas with each other' (Leader 1, 1–5 years). ECEC leaders described practices that provide opportunities for participation and interaction within the work community. They saw that it is crucial to value everyone's work and base the work on trust.

There were almost as many descriptions concerning structures and sharing of responsibilities as there were about working climate; however, these aspects were not often linked together or expressed within the same written response. In terms of practices describing the working climate, most leaders mentioned the development of organisational structures and distribution of responsibilities in order for these practices to occur. However, structures can also hinder the work, and therefore, they are not the solution per se. Leaders mentioned several structural factors, the largest of which were internal, related to their own centres.

At the ECEC centre level, leaders mentioned teams and groups with certain areas of responsibilities and who met regularly. The leaders emphasised the importance of a clear vision regarding the area of responsibility and shared knowledge about who is involved and the timing of events in terms of ECEC plans for children, parent meetings and assessments. The importance of clear job descriptions was mentioned in many of the responses. In some cases, it was clear that the leader created structures that enabled new ways of working and provided space for innovation stemming from work community. Twenty respondents described the distribution of leadership within their centres though not all referred to this exact concept. However, some leaders wrote how the shortage of qualified staff and constant staff turnover endangers the whole curriculum realisation process as it is impossible to develop and sustain common practices in their centres.

In addition to internal structures, some leaders mentioned external ones that support the curriculum and development work at their centres. There seem to be systematic local team structures that gather together staff from different centres within the municipality to share and discuss to disseminate information between separate units. To work successfully, eight leaders pointed out the importance of support for leadership between different leadership levels (e.g. municipality or groups formed of ECEC leaders from several centres) and that curriculum realisation must be supported and directed from above as well as at the local level:

'The realisation of the new curriculum is still in process, and we have succeeded every time when the leadership group has provided clear ideas to the centre leaders' (Leader 14, 6–10 years). Leader 5 (1–5 years) discussed the kinds of leadership from their own supervisor that supports the achievement of the goals set in the curriculum: 'My supervisor has to be interested in pedagogy, and how things are done at the different centres, and what is it that we can develop'.

Assessment of the curriculum process

ECEC leaders described assessment related to the implementation of the curriculum, both the local curriculum framing the work at the centre level and the use of an individual curriculum for each child. The description of assessment procedures implied that the leaders were familiar with the new policies regarding the curriculum, its implementation and assessment. The leaders discussed the assessment as a tool supporting and guiding the use of curricula in the centres. However, according to the leaders' descriptions, the current phase of change varies between local ECEC authorities and centres. The process between the aims of the curriculum and the assessment were clearly linked in theory yet this phase had not yet been reached in practice.

Twenty-two leaders referred to locally selected guidelines and structures for assessment and discussed how they set a shared goal and assessment criteria. They mentioned that some local authorities provide electronic forms to guide the process:

> [Our municipality] has an assessment procedure that is good and takes place regularly. All is based on the curriculum. The assessment takes place twice a year according to a certain, pre-determined schema. Furthermore, all teams do an informal assessment every week. (Leader 12, over 10 years)

Yet, some leaders expressed a need for more structured assessment measures, methods and guidelines as these are not available in some areas: 'We do not have clear structures for assessing curriculum realisation, however, we should have because then it would be easier to assess' (Leader 1, 1–5 years). They mentioned the importance of having locally shared ways of working with the curriculum that would increase coherence: 'The framework for assessment is still in progress, things are in a mess. The curriculum implementation is miscellaneous, the quality is not uniform, and it can start developing in various directions' (Leader 37, 1–5 years).

However, whether there is a local structure for assessment or not, 27 leaders described a similar assessment pace. A thorough local assessment takes place twice a year, and there are often various informal assessments that occur continuously to check the situation at each centre. Nineteen leaders viewed the assessment as a process involving the leaders and other staff members working in the centre. Four leaders provided a wider picture, discussing how they surveyed parents and in two cases, children as well. Consequently, we were able to infer that assessment is a multifaceted process that could involve multiple stakeholders.

Discussion

The recent educational changes in Finnish ECEC concerns the whole country and all service providers. It has affected the work in the field in many ways. The strengthened educational content of ECEC requires stronger pedagogical leadership. The demands for competent centre leaders have increased, necessitating a reconceptualisation of their duties and responsibilities (Fonsén & Ukkola-Mikkola, 2019; Vlasov et al., 2018).

Our results indicate that the Finnish ECEC leaders seem to understand the meaning of the National Core Curriculum of ECEC (FNAE 2018) as a means for guiding the pedagogy and practices. The leaders perceive the curriculum and the assessment being the key to increasing and ensuring the quality of ECEC

pedagogy in their centres. Of the frameworks of human capital of pedagogical leadership (Fonsén, 2014) and categories of educational change (Ahtiainen, 2017) addressed in this study, aspects specifically related to the knowledge concerning the goals set for the realisation of curriculum and the high quality of pedagogy and the skills and means to lead pedagogy were visible in the leaders' responses. Within the framework of educational change, the prerequisites for successfully leading the change (i.e. curriculum process) are knowledge and understanding of the ongoing reform and various expectations related to it (Ahtiainen, 2017). This is linked to the first aspect of human capital and pedagogical leadership (Fonsén, 2014; Fonsén & Ukkola-Mikkola., 2019), which emphasises knowledge concerning the goals set for the implementation of the curriculum and the high quality of pedagogy. That is, before they can support others, leaders need to know the aims of achieving the goals and the means to do so (Ahtiainen, 2017; Fullan, 2005; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

In the process of implementation of the new curriculum and the related means of assessment, Finnish leaders seem to be taking on the role of an enabler. The leaders described the process of clarity making; they break the curriculum-related aims down into smaller steps and short-term aims (Ahtiainen, 2017; Fullan, 2005). This refers to processing the curriculum and pedagogy related to it and adjusting it to their own contexts (Fullan, 2015). This demonstrates leaders' skills and abilities to lead the pedagogy towards the desired state, clarify the basic task and values of ECEC (which are part of the human capital promoting pedagogical leadership; Fonsén, 2014) and understand the purpose of the change (Ahtiainen, 2017).

Moreover, the role of enabler was demonstrated in the leaders' descriptions of the workplace routines and structures for negotiation and knowledge sharing. Shared discussions can create workplace professional learning for the whole work community, including the leaders themselves. These practices function as internal channels for disseminating information and learning (Ahtiainen, 2017; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Some of the structures provide these opportunities daily, while others have more specified times and places (e.g. weekly meetings). Through this role of enabler, leaders employ practices that resonate with indirect pedagogical leadership (Lahtero & Kuusilehto-Awale, 2015) and human resource leadership, of which interaction, support and leadership of capacity are key components.

However, to succeed in their work, leaders cannot only be enablers; they also need support from the organisational structures that empower them to develop and learn professionally. The leaders' responses implied that they are knowledgeable about the need for and purpose of evaluating the realisation of the curriculum at their own centres and at the municipal level (Ahtiainen, 2017; Fullan, 2005; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Hence, they seemed to possess the skills needed for critical reflection and evaluation of the pedagogy in use in their centres (Fonsén, 2014). This awareness reflects the work of the FINEEC regarding the evaluation of ECEC, which is spread throughout the country. To be precise, the work of the FINEEC began in 2018 with guidelines for leaders, and this organisation was intended to provide the support and tools necessary for evaluation. Yet, evaluation practices and their coherence were the main challenges pointed out by many of the leaders. This indicates that for some reason, leaders have been unable to have their voices heard to get the necessary support and resources. There may also be a lack of mutual understanding about the situation between the ECEC centres and local administrations (Fonsén & Ukkola-Mikkola, 2019; Heikka, 2014).

Conclusions

To summarise the results, leaders require strong educational knowledge to be able to interpret the curriculum and lead its realisation in the

changing work environment of ECEC, which also agrees with earlier findings (Fonsén, 2014; Fonsén & Ukkola-Mikkola, 2019). It is evident that the ability to develop and support distributed pedagogical leadership is crucial. Further, ECEC teachers need support from the leader in terms of developing their own pedagogical leadership roles. Therefore, work communities should develop in such a way that leaders can work behind the scenes and secure the quality of ECEC at the centre level while teachers lead pedagogy of their child groups at the frontline of the centres. To do so, arenas for pedagogical discussion should be organised and provided through different organisational structures.

In Figure 1, the two theoretical frameworks of the study are combined based on the results. Leaders need to have the human capital of pedagogical leadership (Fonsén, 2014), and

they need to understand the process of educational change (Ahtiainen, 2017) to successfully implement the curriculum. That is, to lead the change. The elements of these frameworks give a definition for required leadership competence and can be utilised in the development of ECEC leadership training and instruments (e.g. for assessment methods and development of pedagogy) that support leaders' work.

Pervious research indicates that the basis for high-quality ECEC services are leaders with strong leadership skills and knowledge about pedagogy along with qualified teachers (Fonsén & Soukainen, 2020). However, challenges with finding qualified staff and staff turnover in some regions may impede the prospects of this field. Therefore, it is crucial that all political emphasis that has already been put on the improvement of this field through administrative and normative
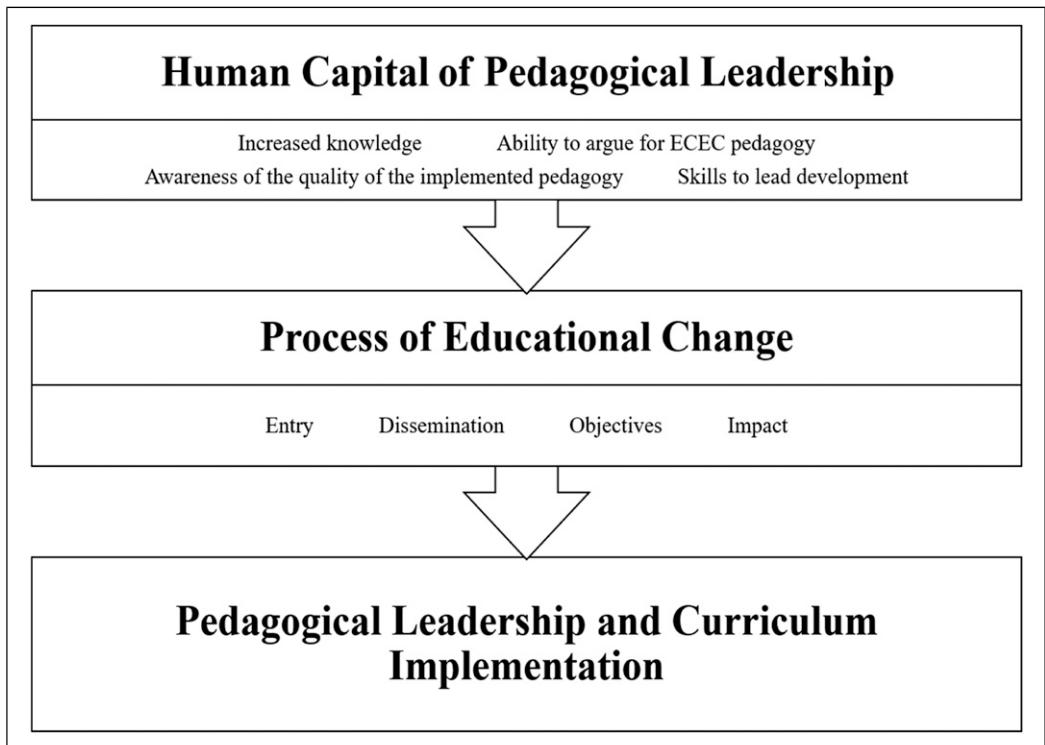

Figure 1. Leadership competence model for leading pedagogy and curriculum implementation.

changes will result in the increase of attractiveness of this profession in the near future. This includes pedagogy as well as new qualification requirements aimed at strengthening the status of ECEC in Finland. From the perspective of ECEC globally, the increasing understanding of the importance of ECEC and the formulation of policies that support the development of the field in terms of both financial and human resources may have a high impact on overall wellbeing of people in the future (OECD, 2013, 2019).

Limitations

The data used in this study were collected from leaders participating in a training programme. The respondents represented a group of 41 professional learning-oriented leaders, which may have affected the way they answered. Despite the limitations in terms of generalisability, this study provides important insights to ECEC and the experiences of leaders working in it, and points the direction for future research.

Declaration of conflicting interests

Funding

ORCID iD

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

References

Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018 (2018). Varhaiskasvatuslaki. https://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/2018/en20180540.pdf.

Ahtiainen, R (2017). *Shades of change in Fullan's and Hargreaves's models: Theoretical change perspectives regarding Finnish special education reform*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Helsinki, Finland]. (978-951-51-3549-0). http://urn.fi/URN.

Assarroudi, A., Heshmati Nabavi, F., Armat, M. R., Ebadi, A., & Vaismoradi, M. (2018). Directed qualitative content analysis: The description and elaboration of its underpinning methods and data analysis process. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, 23(1), 42-55. doi:10.1177/1744987117741667

Autio, T., Hakala, L., & Kujala, T. (Eds.). (2017). *Opetussuunnitelmatutkimus. Keskustelunavauksia suomalaiseen kouluun ja opettajankoulutukseen*. Tampere University Press. http://urn.fi/URN.

Borgna, C., Solga, H., & Protsch, P. (2019). Overeducation, labour market dynamics, and economic downturn in Europe. *European Sociological Review*, 35(1), 116-132. doi:10.1093/esr/jcy046

Dinham, S. (2016). *Leading learning and teaching*. ACER Press.

Ebbeck, M., & Waniganayake, M. (2004). *Early childhood professionals: Leading today and tomorrow*. Elsevier.

Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (2019). *Tilastoraportti 2019 varhaiskasvatuksen järjestämisestä*. Finnish Education Evaluation Centre. https://karvi.fi/app/uploads/2019/09/Karvi_vaka_tilastoraportti_2019-1.pdf

Finnish National Agency for Education (2018). *Varhaiskasvatussuunnitelman Perusteet (Määräykset ja ohjeet 2018:3)*. Finnish National Agency for Education. https://www.oph.fi/sites/default/files/documents/varhaiskasvatussuunnitelman_perusteet_2018.pdf

Fonsén, E. (2014). *Pedagoginen johtajuus varhaiskasvatuksessa* [Doctoral dissertation, Tampere University, Finland]. https://trepo.tuni.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/95050/978-951-44-9397-3.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

Fonsén, E., Ahtiainen, R., Lahtero, T., Hotulainen, R., & Kallioniemi, A. (in press) Kasvatus- ja opetusalan johtajien näkemyksiä omasta johtamisosaamisestaan ja sen kehittämistarpeista.

Fonsén, E., & Soukainen, U. (2020). Sustainable Pedagogical Leadership in Finnish Early Childhood Education (ECE): An evaluation by ECE professionals. *Early Childhood Education*

Journal, *48*(2), 213-222. doi:10.1007/s10643-019-00984-y

Fonsén, E., & Ukkonen-Mikkola, T. (2019). Early childhood education teachers' professional development towards pedagogical leadership. *Educational Research*, *61*(2), 181-196. doi:10.1080/00131881.2019.1600377

Fonsén, E., & Vlasov, J. (2017). Leading pedagogical quality in the context of Finnish child care. In C. Ringsmose, & G. Kragh-Müller (Eds.), *The Nordic social pedagogical approach to early years* (pp. 253-265). Springer-Verlag.

Fullan, M. (2003). *Change forces with a vengeance*. Routledge Falmer.

Fullan, M. (2005). *Leadership and sustainability: System thinkers in action*. Corwin.

Fullan, M. (2015). *The new meaning of educational change* (5th ed.). Routledge.

Gibson, M., McFadden, A., Williams, K. E., Zollo, L., Winter, A., & Lunn, J. (2020). Imbalances between workforce policy and employment for early childhood graduate teachers: Complexities and considerations. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, *45*(1), 82-94. doi:10.1177/1836939119885308

Hargreaves, A. (2003). *Teaching in the knowledge society: Education in the age of insecurity.* Teachers College Press.

Hargreaves, A., & Fink, D. (2006). *Sustainable leadership*. Jossey-Bass.

Hargreaves, A., & Shirley, D. (2012). *The global fourth way: The quest for educational excellence*. Corwin.

Hayden, J. (1996). *Management of early childhood services: An Australian perspective*. Social Science Press.

Heikka, J. (2014). *Distributed pedagogical leadership in early childhood education*. [Doctoral dissertation, Tampere University, Finland]. https://trepo.tuni.fi/handle/10024/95016.

Hsieh, H.-F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, *15*(9), 1277-1288. doi:10.1177/1049732305276687

Jorde-Bloom, P. (1997). Administrative leadership: Commentary. In S. L. Kagan, & T. B. Bowman (Eds.), *Leadership in early care and education* (pp. 34-37). NAEYC.

Lahtero, T. J., & Kuusilehto-Awale, L. (2015). Possibility to engage in pedagogical leadership as experienced by Finnish newly appointed principals. *American Journal of Educational Research*, *3*(3), 318-329. doi:10.12691/education-3-3-11

Mäntyjärvi, M., & Puroila, A.-M. (2019). Has something changed? Leaders', practitioners' and parents' interpretations after renewed early childhood education and care legislation in Finnish private centres. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, *20*(1), 7-22. doi:10.1177/1463949119828158

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2013). *Leadership for 21st century learning: Educational research and innovation*. doi:10.1787/9789264205406-en

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2019). *Education at a glance 2019: OECD indicators*. doi:10.1787/f8dF7880d-en

Potter, W. J., & Levine-Donnerstein, D. (1999). Rethinking validity and reliability in content analysis. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, *27*(3), 258-284. doi:10.1080/00909889909365539

Robinson, O. C. (2014). Sampling in interview-based qualitative research: A theoretical and practical guide. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *11*(1), 25-41. doi:10.1080/14780887.2013.801543

Sergiovanni, T. J. (1998). Leadership as pedagogy, capital development and school effectiveness. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, *1*(1), 37-46. doi:10.1080/1360312980010104

Simola, H., Kauko, J., Varjo, J., Kalalahti, M., & Sahlstrom, F. (2017). *Dynamics in education politics: Understanding and explaining the Finnish case*. Routledge.

Vlasov, J., Salminen, J., Repo, L., Karila, K., Kinnunen, S., Mattila, V., Nukarinen, T., Parrila, S., & Sulonen, H. (2018). *Varhaiskasvatuksen laadun arvioinnin perusteet ja suositukset*. Kansallinen koulutuksen arviointikeskus.