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To cite this article: Elina Fonsén & Tuulikki Ukkonen-Mikkola (2019) Early childhood education teachers' professional development towards pedagogical leadership, Educational Research, 61:2, 181-196, DOI: [10.1080/00131881.2019.1600377](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2019.1600377)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2019.1600377>



Published online: 15 Apr 2019.



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# Early childhood education teachers' professional development towards pedagogical leadership

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** In recent years, early childhood education (ECE) has faced many reforms that have led to new requirements for pedagogy. Due to this evolution, there is, in turn, an increasing need to enhance the professional competence of ECE teachers through further training.

**Purpose:** This article examines ECE teachers' interpretations of the changes in their pedagogical thinking during a further training course for ECE teachers in Finland. The aim of this qualitative research was to investigate the professional development that can be related to the further training. The context of the study was an 18-month long ECE teachers' further training course called 'Pedagogy of Early Childhood Education during Changing Practices'.

**Sample:** The study involved 32 ECE teachers participating in the further training course. The data consisted of the written responses of the further training participants in respect of their interpretation of pedagogy.

**Design and methods:** The research was carried out using a participatory action approach. The written data were collected from the teacher participants. Thematic analysis was firstly conducted inductively from the data. In the second phase, content analysis was applied using abductive reasoning. The theory-based content analysis was conducted using pedagogical leadership aspects of the theory of human capital.

**Results:** The features of professional development that were identified were explored through the lens of pedagogical leadership and grouped into four dimensions: increased knowledge, awareness of the quality of previously implemented pedagogy, developmental skills, and ability to make the case for ECE pedagogy.

**Conclusions:** The research identified connections and relationships between the further training and professional development in pedagogical leadership. The significance of and demand for a participatory action research approach to further training for ECE teachers are discussed.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 7 September 2018

Accepted 21 March 2019

## KEYWORDS

Early childhood education; ECE teacher; further training; professional development; pedagogical leadership; action research

## Introduction

Teachers of early childhood education (ECE) have to address many cultural, educational and social challenges (Urban 2008). When the nature of society, families and childhood changes, so too does the work of ECE teachers. In many places, including, for example, in

Australia and in many European countries, several pedagogical and regulatory reforms have been implemented to develop ECE practices (Miller and Cable 2008; Miller, Dalli, and Urban 2012). Due to these many professional demands and reforms, initial and continuing professional development plays an essential role in increasing teachers' levels of competence (Ukkonen-Mikkola and Fonsén 2018).

The recent changes in Finnish ECE concern both pedagogical and administrative practices. Specifically, in 2015, the Finnish Act on Early Childhood Education and Care was updated (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 36/1973). Further, the National Core Curriculum on Early Childhood Education and Care was replaced in 2016. Following the responsibility for education moving from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2013, an increased emphasis on education has been observed. The current legal and guiding documents support this tendency (Fonsén and Vlasov 2017).

The notion that the professional development of ECE teachers has a positive influence on child outcomes has been widely documented (Jensen and Rasmussen 2016). Whilst Ackerman (2004) highlights the importance of teachers' ongoing professional development that is both context- and experience-specific, and managed by experts, Duhn, Fler, and Harrison (2016) emphasises that the support of highly skilled facilitators is essential for successful development efforts. In addition, previous studies indicate that teachers appreciate the opportunity to develop themselves professionally. The development activities and projects of teachers' own work communities are widely held to be supportive and empowering of professionalism (Cherrington and Thornton 2013; Cotton 2013; Ukkonen-Mikkola and Fonsén 2018).

Despite the perceived benefits of, and need for, ECE teachers' professional development and further training, there is no systematic or obligatory further teacher training offered in Finland. However, in 2015, the Finnish National Agency for Education began to fund further training for ECE teachers. This article examines the professional development received by ECE teachers during one such further training course at a Finnish university which received such funding and arranged further training for an 18-month period. In particular, the development of the teachers' pedagogical thinking is investigated (Ackerman 2004; Hirschi 2012; Karila and Nummenmaa 2001; Ryan and Cooper 2004; Stephen 2010). Essentially, the challenges concerning teachers' professional development include developing functional pedagogical structures and collaborative practices in ECE centres. For example, a major goal is to have more pedagogical discussions and to improve dialogue skills. The shared understanding of interpretations regarding pedagogy among professionals has also been found to be a significant development challenge (Ukkonen-Mikkola and Fonsén 2018). Furthermore, assessment skills are another development target for ECE professionalism (Banerjee and Luckner 2012). Gordon, Peeters, and Vandekerckhove (2017) pointed out that the development of powerful and motivated leadership, pedagogical support for teams, self-reflection tools, a clear decision-making process and understanding of clear roles and responsibilities are essential factors for delivering contemporary children's and family services, including ECE.

## Background

### *The pedagogical professionalism of ECE teachers*

ECE teachers have to fulfil several requirements for their profession and teachers' professional competence doubtless affects how ECE pedagogy is implemented in practice (Saracho and Spodek 2003). It is, therefore, important to consider more generally what is involved in the notion of professional competence. Hoppo, Määttä, and Uusiautti note that 'Competence consists of the mastery of substance and experience gathered through working' (2012, 499). Karila and Nummenmaa (2001) suggest that teachers' essential competencies include cooperation and interaction skills, pedagogical and contextual knowledge and reflective practices. Further, Lehrer (2013) observes that reflection is a significant factor in developing such professionalism. Ryan and Cooper (2004) comment that teachers' self-conception and enthusiasm play an important role in valuable teaching, whilst Stephen (2010, 17) asserts that the professional pedagogical practices in ECE range 'from the didactic interactions more typically associated with teaching, through modelling, prompting exploration, questioning, scaffolding specific skill acquisition and nurturing a child's disposition to learn'.

Due to the growing demands for professionalism, teachers also need the skills of leadership. Heikka, Halttunen, and Waniganyage (2016) argue that this leadership must be constant and embedded in several aspects of the teachers' work. Thus, teachers take on roles as the leaders and coordinators of curriculum work and supporters of professional development of their colleagues. They are also facilitators in creating pedagogical improvements within the group of children that they teach and also the ECE centre level. According to Kocolowski (2010), distributed leadership implies leadership responsibilities and duties that are shared among team members. In ECE centres, teachers are the key members of distributed pedagogical leadership. However, Keski-Rauska et al. (2016) argue that the concept of distributed leadership is not yet clear and that the concept requires further clarification for teachers – and, above all, *with* teachers.

### *Distributed pedagogical leadership as a part of professionalism*

McDowall Clark and Murray (2012) conceptualise leadership in ECE as a diffused phenomenon; it contains a relational interdependence between stakeholders. This idea implies that the community reflects, learns, inquires and cares together (Sergiovanni 1998). Distributed pedagogical leadership is not only the overall managers' responsibility. It can also be considered to be an important professional skill of the ECE teachers (Fonsén 2014; Heikka 2014), as teachers are the leaders of the pedagogy at the level of the child group. In addition, Finnish ECE teachers are the pedagogical leaders of a multi-professional working team in ECE centres. Therefore, the teachers themselves need to have certain leadership skills. However, previously, the basic training has not included leadership studies (Fonsén 2014; Heikka, Halttunen, and Waniganyage 2016). In the current study, pedagogical leadership is approached through the aspect of shared leadership (Harris 2004; Heikka 2014), which implies that all those in the community should have the human capital that is needed for leadership so that the responsibility

for the quality and development of the pedagogy is divided among all members of the working community (Fonsén 2013; Hujala and Fonsén 2011).

At times when challenges are created by increasingly limited financial resources, we contend that it is especially important to pay attention to and invest in the support and development of human capital to ensure pedagogical quality, particularly as the quality of pedagogy depends more deeply on a teacher's pedagogical competence than it does on physical resources alone.

There is evidence to suggest that critical reflection is a determining factor for pedagogical quality. For example, research findings from Sheridan (2001) indicate that, when assessed by the ECERS (Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale) indicator of pedagogical quality, the educators with poor results commonly attributed this to external resources, whereas educators with good results perceived their own pedagogical activity and methods as targets for further development.

Pedagogical leadership requires certain human capital aspects, as set out by Fonsén (2014) and as based on the ideas of Sergiovanni (1998). These aspects can also be considered to be a key dimension of teachers' professionalism. The relevant aspects of human capital are constructed from several sources: knowledge about the desired state of the curriculum and pedagogy; awareness of the quality of the pedagogy being applied garnered through critical reflection; skills and the means to lead the pedagogy towards the desired state; and the ability to argue and validate both practical decisions and choices pedagogically.

### *ECE teachers' education and professional development*

The quality of teachers' basic education needs to be high, in order to ensure pedagogical quality in ECE. It is evident that initial teacher education and early experiences as a teacher play a significant role in teacher identity and the formation of professionalism (Edwards 2015). In Finland, ECE teachers study to bachelor's degree level (180 credit points) or master's degree level (300 credit points) at a university, or to bachelor's degree level at universities of applied sciences (formerly polytechnics). The bachelor's degree training consists of courses in theory and practice periods. This training consists of professional studies on early childhood and preschool education, basic and intermediate studies in education, and elective studies. The research-based training examines the approaches to childhood, pedagogy, sociology, psychology and the arts. The methods used for teacher training are lectures, seminars and small group student exercises. Practice periods at kindergartens are an essential part of the training (Ukkonen-Mikkola and Turtiainen 2016).

The quality of initial teacher education in Finland is regarded as high standard. As highly educated professionals, teachers have considerable autonomy in Finland (Fonsén and Vlasov 2017); this creates high expectations about the teachers' pedagogical competence. However, professional development is a continuous process that carries on during the teachers' work career. Meta-analyses in the United States (Fukkink and Lont 2007) and Europe (Jensen and Rasmussen 2016) indicate that ECE teachers' further training promotes pedagogical quality. Mackay (2017) observes that professional development supports an individual's confidence and self-efficacy. Practitioners see professional learning as the building of professional competence, confidence and individual

growth. In addition, professional development can create optimism and may help empower practitioners to fulfil their capacity to contribute to society. The benefits of continuous professional learning enhance reliance and support the motivation to gain further professional knowledge.

It is helpful to conceptualise continuing professional development after teacher education and early experiences by viewing them through the lens of Hirschi's (2012) framework of continuing professional development. This framework can be identified across four constructs of career resources: human capital, and social, psychological, and career identity resources. Within this conceptualisation, human capital resources can be defined as the ability (cognitive skills, education, training and experience), in a relationship, to meet the expectations of a profession (Fugate, Kinicki, and Ashforth 2004). According to Hirschi (2012), career resources are personal but require an environment that is favourable to positive personal professional development. Sergiovanni's (1998) interpretation is that human capital consists of a variety of professional attributes and it has tangible significance for pedagogical leadership and the quality of education. Using Sergiovanni's description, human capital expansion can be seen as the key mediating variable that stands between pedagogical leadership and a school's performance. It enhances teachers' professional capital and improves students' learning, through the emergence of social, academic and intellectual capital, in a reciprocal process between teachers and students.

Also noteworthy are earlier studies indicating that ECE teachers are motivated to participate in professional development projects (Cherrington and Thornton 2013; Cotton 2013; Ukkonen-Mikkola and Fonsén 2018). Further, an intervention study of preschool teachers' professional development by Jensen, Jensen, and Rasmussen (2015) used a training programme that provides new knowledge as the basis for reflection about practices. Jensen and Rasmussen (2016) indicated that an intervention basis for the professional development of preschool teachers led to improvements in pedagogical practices and the socio-emotional skills of the children. Brown and Englehardt (2016) also argued that professional development is meaningful and effective when it promotes practices that concern the political, critical and intellectual complexities of ECE settings and their communities at the local level. Such research draws attention to the importance of undertaking research into the changes in ECE teachers' pedagogical thinking and their professional development as they experience further training.

### *ECE teachers' further training in Finland*

As mentioned in the introduction above, although ECE teachers are not obliged to undertake further training in Finland, there are opportunities to take part in such further education. For example, the Regional State Administrative Agency (AVI) and several private training companies offer chargeable professional development courses for teachers. Participation depends on the teacher's motivation and the employer's appreciation of further training and there are major regional differences in opportunities to participate in further training (Repo et al. 2018). When the Finnish National Agency for Education funded a widely available professional development programme for the entire education system in 2015, it included ECE teachers for the first time. The aim of the programme was to promote the functioning of the education system and the quality of education and also to support the implementation of education policy reforms. Participation in this further training was free of charge.

## Research questions

The purpose of the study was to investigate how ECE teachers describe the changes in their pedagogical thinking when they receive further training. Our research focused on the professional development and strengthening of pedagogical competence that was achieved. The research questions are:

- (1) What changes do the ECE teachers describe in their pedagogical thinking after the further training?
- (2) What professional development can be identified from the ECE teachers' descriptions?

## Method

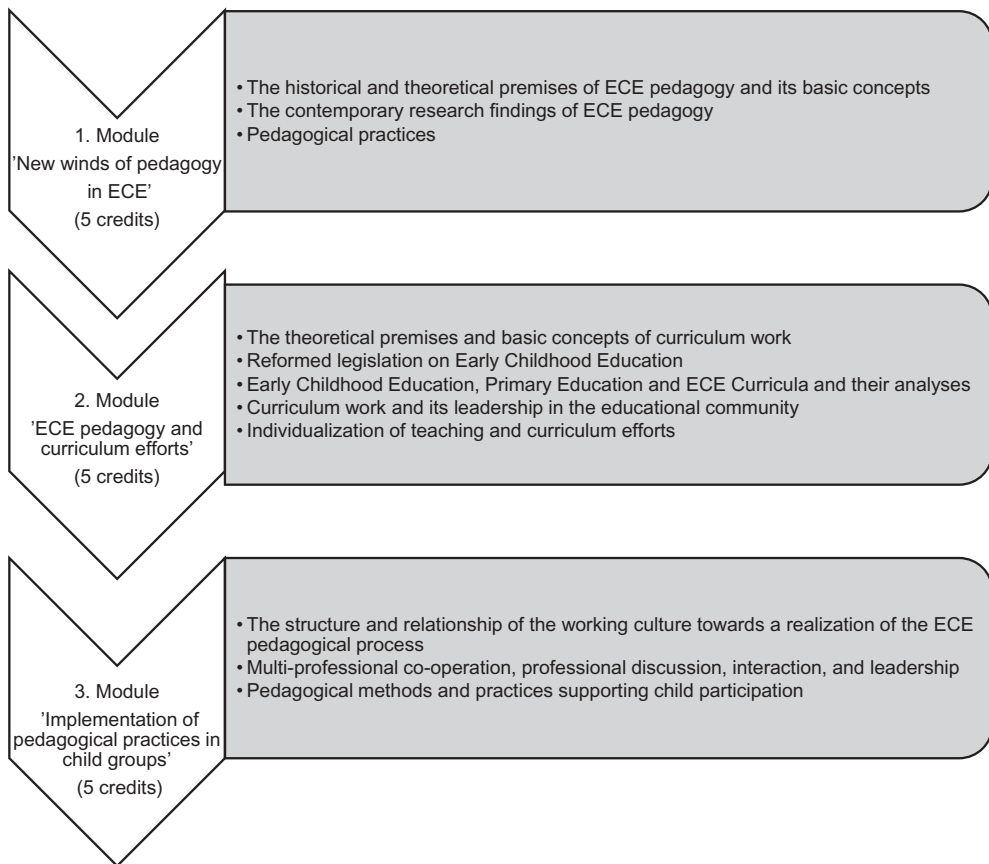
### *The further training course as a research context*

The context of the study was an ECE teachers' further training course at a university in Finland, as conducted for 18 months. The title of the course was 'Pedagogy of Early Childhood Education during Changing Practices'. The participants were 32 teachers whose average age was 35 years. The vast majority of the course participants was female. Their average work experience was 11 years. To be eligible to attend the training course, teachers had to be working as kindergarten teachers. The training was voluntary and free of charge for all participants. The funding for the training came from the Finnish National Agency for Education, a national development agency, which is subordinate to the Ministry of Education and Culture.

The aim of this further training course was to enhance the awareness of pedagogy and curriculum work. The purpose of the course was to develop the ability to analyse, reflect on and renew the pedagogical culture of the participants' work communities. The training was divided into three modules (see [Figure 1](#)). It totalled 15 credit points and consisted of 5 days of classroom teaching (6 h per day) once a month and involved developing tasks in the participants' own workplaces between the classroom teaching days.

The first module, called 'New winds of pedagogy in ECE', contained the theoretical basis of ECE pedagogy and current research findings. By recording relevant events in a journal, the participants reflected on their pedagogical practices and analysed them using Layder's (1993) research map. In the second module, ('ECE pedagogy and curriculum efforts'), the teachers focused on curriculum work and its implementation. In addition, they examined and discussed distributed pedagogical leadership. The third, and final, module ('Implementation of pedagogical practices in child groups') was built on developing child group-level practices that support children's participation, multi-professional work and improving working culture.

The methods used for the further training were lectures, reading groups, poster seminars, reflective tasks in day-care centres (e.g. to make the current organisational culture visible), and planning, implementing, evaluating and reporting development projects in the teachers' own ECE centres. Moreover, for further training, e-learning platforms were used for peer discussions, information and return of tasks. Finally, the development project reports were published on the university's website.



**Figure 1.** The structure of the ECE further training course: 'Pedagogy of Early Childhood Education during Changing Practices'.

Source: Authors' original figure created for this publication.

### **Ethical considerations**

The research was conducted in full consideration of responsible and ethical requirements (Finnish advisory board on research integrity 2012). The purpose of the research was explained to all participants and their anonymity was guaranteed. In addition, no ECE centre is identified in the reporting. Permission to use participants' completed questionnaires for research purposes was obtained from all who took part. Furthermore, the ECE teachers were told that submitting their writing as research data was voluntary.

### **Conducting the research**

The methodological approach of this research involves certain characteristics of action research. These include features such as a circle of reflection, interventions by the researcher, informants' participatory role and development of educational practices (Carr and Kemmis 2004). The researchers intervened by providing knowledge about new educational research findings, using lectures and active learning methods. The



participants' own evaluation of their educational practices and the development project that they carried out were crucial elements of the training. Kemmis (2008) emphasises the importance of the participants' own actions. The knowledge of the practitioners is as significant as scholarly knowledge. Kemmis (2010, 25) indicated that 'educational praxis can only be changed from within, by those whose work – whose individual and collective praxis – is education'. The researchers examined the participants' pedagogical reflections and supported their professional development dialogically, through common discussions during the further training.

In the further training course, the aim of the first phase was to investigate the participants' interpretations of their pedagogical thinking via the circle of action research. The purpose of the second phase, after intervention and the 18-month further training period, was to investigate the change in interpretations that occurred during the further training. According to Carr and Kemmis (2004), an action research spiral forms the dialectic of retrospective analysis and prospective action that continues. The ECE teachers recorded their thoughts about their pedagogical work at the beginning of the project in a journal, and they evaluated and analysed their experiences according to Layder's (1993) research map. They then drew up their own pedagogical development plans according to Kotter's (1996) eight-step model. The changes in their pedagogical thinking were the focus of the research through this process. By way of the changes that occurred in their pedagogical thinking, the teachers described their professional development. It was essential to examine the change that has occurred, while investigating the effectiveness of the intervention using action research. However, equally as important as the occurrence of change and the mapping of its causes was an examination of its immutability (Kuula 2006).

### *Data collection*

The data collection was carried out at the end of the further training. The participants were asked individually to write down their interpretation of ECE pedagogy and how they perceived that their interpretation had changed during the further training. The participants had 1 h to write; they did not have any word limits or other requirements. The data consisted of 32 responses which varied in length from half a page to one and a half pages. In this paper, we focus on the teachers' perceptions of the changes concerning the interpretation of ECE pedagogy during the further training course and the professional development levels that they attained.

### *Data analysis*

Thematic analysis was first conducted inductively from the data and certain themes were identified. In the second phase, content analysis was applied using abductive reasoning (Krippendorff 1981, 1989; Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2003). In the first phase, both researchers analysed the transcribed written responses and categorised themes. During the analytical process, the researchers also discussed and reflected on the analysis and research findings to ensure consistency. After that, the theory-based content analysis was conducted using the theory of human capital of pedagogical leadership dimensions (Fonsén 2014 adapted from Sergiovanni 1998). The dimensions were entitled: increased knowledge, awareness of the quality of previously implemented pedagogy, developmental skills and ability to argue for ECE pedagogy.

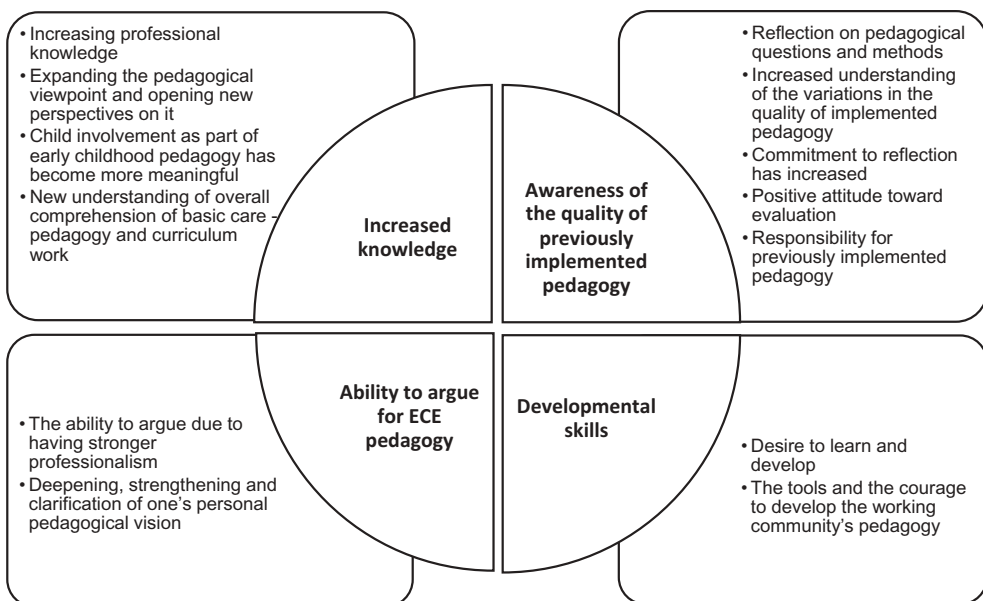
## Results and discussion

The main themes were investigated using the description of the ECE teachers' interpretations of the changes in their pedagogical thinking. The themes were categorised to reflect the four dimensions of human capital that appear in pedagogical leadership. The four dimensions are presented in Figure 2.

In the sections below, the thematic findings from the analysis are presented and discussed in relation to the four dimensions. Translated and anonymised quotations from the written responses are included where it was considered necessary. The findings are discussed in the context of the literature.

### Dimension 1: increased knowledge

The teachers indicated that they felt that their pedagogical perspective had expanded. They perceived that they had gained new professional knowledge, perspectives and ideas about pedagogy. Increasing professional knowledge, children's involvement and overall pedagogical expertise relate to the knowledge dimension in Fonsén's (2014) definition of human capital of pedagogical leadership. In Fonsén's (2014) investigation, the dimensions of knowledge proved to be a crucial aspect of pedagogical leadership competence for centre directors as well as ECE teachers. Not only was the basic knowledge of ECE pedagogy important, but also the desire to acquire new professional knowledge. These themes resonate with the characteristics of human capital resources as expressed by Hirschi (2012).



**Figure 2.** Professional development shown through the dimensions of human capital of pedagogical leadership.

Source: Authors' original figure created for this publication.

Many of the teachers mentioned their belief that their increased knowledge had enhanced their empowerment, that the belief in their ability to make pedagogical choices had increased and that the sense of trust in their own pedagogical abilities had emerged, as this quotation from a participant indicates:

My view on the ECE pedagogy has been clarified and strengthened. The idea of how my choices, actions and speech can influence the actual pedagogy has intensified. My ideas about pedagogical processes are deepening and the belief in the effects of my actions has been strengthened. The idea of the significance of interaction in pedagogical processes is greater than ever.

Participation of children is strongly emphasised in the guiding documents in Finnish ECE. Nevertheless, Kangas (2016) argues that structural and institutional issues may restrict the implementation of participatory pedagogy. Our study indicates that children's involvement in early childhood pedagogy became more meaningful while the teachers participated in their further training. The teachers' values and attitudes were further shaped towards the children's participation and the participatory pedagogy of ECE. This approach can be seen in the following quotation from another of the participants:

The further training has opened my eyes to the role of children in day care. They are not just objects that are in that care; instead, they are experts in their own lives and that must be respected!

It is evident from the analysis that participants felt that their understanding of the curriculum as a comprehensive guide to ECE pedagogy had been enhanced. In addition, the role of the National Core Curriculum on ECEC (Heikka, Halttunen, and Waniganyage 2016) appeared clarified as the basis of pedagogical direction and the tool of pedagogical leadership for the teachers' own efforts. An awareness of that pedagogical aim being embedded in the basic care situations emerged.

### *Dimension 2: awareness of the quality of previously implemented pedagogy*

According to the data analysis, it appeared that a broader awareness of new pedagogical research and the aims of the core curriculum on ECE was able to enhance the teachers' understanding of the variation in the quality of the ECE pedagogy being implemented. The teachers gained 'the spectacles of critical reflection' towards daily practices in their ECE centres. Their awareness of the pedagogy that had been implemented and requirements to reflect critically also increased during the further training. Teachers identified how they had gained courage and new abilities to lead the pedagogy in the desired direction, due to an increased understanding of the variations in the quality of implemented pedagogy. As Lehrer (2013) states, critical reflection is an essential part of professionalism. In line with this viewpoint, most of the participants were able to describe their increased awareness and certainty about their own pedagogical thinking. One participant noted: 'My pedagogical thinking has become more intense or perhaps I have become more aware and confident about the paths of my thoughts as verified by my own pedagogical competence'. The ECE teachers' growing responsibility for pedagogy and their desire to improve pedagogical quality suggested the advantages of having distributed pedagogical leadership (Fonsén 2014; Parrila and Fonsén 2016; Heikka, Halttunen, and Waniganyage 2016).

### ***Dimension 3: developmental skills***

The ECE teachers made it clear that they felt that their ability to reflect and their courage to develop pedagogical practices in their work place was strengthened as a consequence of the training. As Hirschi (2012) argues, human capital resources, such as cognitive ability and new skills for the profession, can be increased in such circumstances. This was realised by the growing ability for critical reflection and the skills to use a range of methods, including weekly diaries, to assess pedagogical practices (see Ukkonen-Mikkola and Fonsén 2018). In addition, ECE teachers commented on how they had achieved a level of proficiency in enhancing pedagogical development work in their ECE settings using other tools, such as Kotter's (1996) eight-step strategic model of change implementation. They also learned to lead evaluation and development work with the developmental instruments provided in the further training, as the following comment indicates:

I learned many ideas for the development of work and attitude. The training has provided tools for work and its development and information on how pedagogical development can be supported and evaluated. I also learned a lot about new pedagogical thinking concerning children's participation and I have become familiar with creating a new direction.

One important aspect that participants mentioned was the skill to recognise the power of operational culture, by retrospective analysis in dialogue with prospective development – as Carr and Kemmis (2004) characterise the process. Specifically, the development projects in the further training relied on analyses of the participants' own pedagogical practices using Layder's (1993) research map (Ukkonen-Mikkola and Fonsén 2018). The significant skill the participants gained was having the ability to identify and develop an operational culture, as can be seen in the following comment from one of the participants: 'I also paid attention to the development of operational culture more broadly and understood the importance of pedagogy as a basis of everything'.

### ***Dimension 4: ability to argue for ECE pedagogy***

The teachers' psychological and identity resources, as defined by Hirschi (2012) could be seen to be further developed on account of the teachers' increased awareness of the ability to argue. The ECE teachers indicated that during their training they became more confident in their own pedagogical thinking and professional identity. The result of this was that their ability to make the case for the importance of ECE became stronger. In particular, the teachers stated that they learned to justify the pedagogical solutions they offered in their daily practices. They observed that they were getting stronger in their 'teacher leadership'. These statements chime with McDowall Clark and Murray's (2012) description of the power of diffusing leadership in community. As one participant commented, 'The training has given me assurance that pedagogy should be visible and that my own pedagogic skills as an ECE teacher do not have to be hidden in ECE'. It is widely held that the undervaluation of ECE is a universal phenomenon (Ebbeck and Waniganayake 2004). The ability to argue with pedagogical premises at the societal level is, we believe, essential for the entire ECE field to promote its appreciation further still. As Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2004, 164) assert, teachers can be like community leaders in this regard, in that they can 'promote and

exert pressure on governments to acknowledge the significance of early childhood, not only to safeguard children but also to ensure the future well-being of all humanity’.

One ECE teacher who participated explained that the process of empowerment in professional development increased the ability to advocate for the quality of ECE and pedagogy, as the following quotation explains:

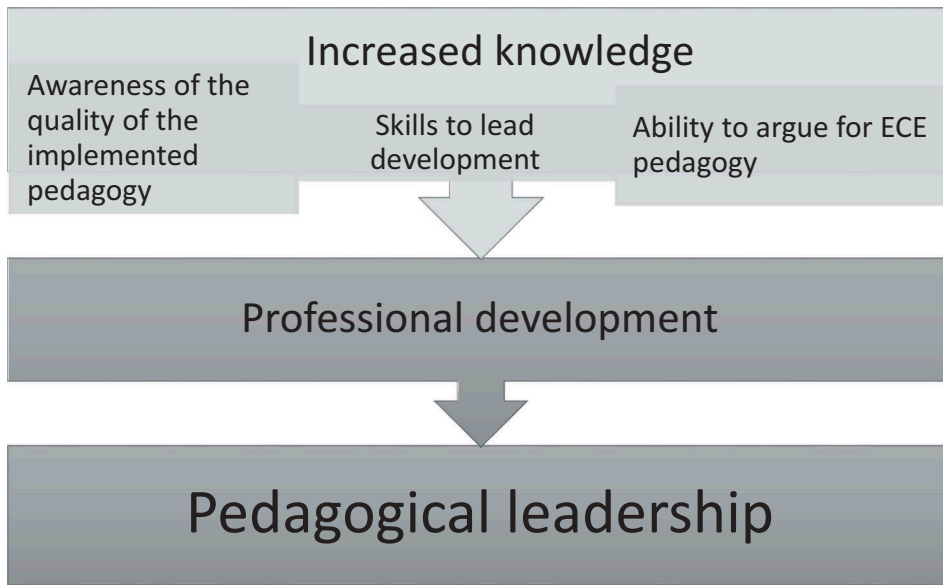
I have gained plenty of confidence and tools for the development of early childhood pedagogy. I feel my professionalism has strengthened and my self-confidence has increased as an advocate for the quality of ECE and pedagogy.

## Conclusion

The aim of this research was to investigate qualitatively the professional development that can be recognised during the ECE teachers’ further training. The increasing human capital that teachers in this study felt that they gained during the further training indicated their professional development. The increased level of pedagogical competence that the teachers reported reaching suggests how they became empowered as developers of pedagogical practices and how they enhanced their ability to engage in distributed pedagogical leadership in the future (Fonsén and Vlasov 2017). The professional development may be better understood through the four dimensions of the human capital of pedagogical leadership: increased knowledge, awareness of the quality of previously implemented pedagogy, developmental skills, and also the ability to advocate for ECE pedagogy (Fonsén 2014).

The education in the basic programme for ECE teachers provides the knowledge teachers need for their work; however, the further training provides new knowledge about recent educational research. The data analysis suggested important evidence of critical reflection for the pedagogical practices that were implemented, a basis for development work and for promoting for the quality of pedagogy. These aspects of human capital support professional development, in line with Hirschi (2012), who argues that critical career resources including human capital are needed for professional and career development. The current challenge for the professionalism of the ECE teachers is to achieve distributed pedagogical leadership in Finland (Heikka, Halttunen, and Waniganyage 2016). As the National Core Curriculum on ECEC (Heikka, Halttunen, and Waniganyage 2016) has established a requirement for teachers’ pedagogical leadership, they need the leadership skills to lead the pedagogical work of multi-professional teams in ECE centres. Figure 3 shows the potential for an empowering process for ECE teachers towards strong professionalism and pedagogical leadership during their further training.

The findings from the current study draw attention to the significance of further training for ECE teachers. Even though these teachers’ initial education on the quality of ECE pedagogy was crucial, further training can support the promotion of pedagogical quality in particular, as meta-analyses from both the United States (Fukkink and Lont 2007) and Europe (Jensen and Rasmussen 2016) have indicated. Earlier studies have also suggested that the professional development of ECE teachers has a positive impact on children’s learning (Jensen and Rasmussen 2016; Maxwell, Field, and Clifford 2006). Consequently, a teacher’s participation in distributed pedagogical leadership could be seen as a ‘power transfer’. By pedagogical leadership, human capital can be transferred for the well-being, development and learning of children in ECE (Fonsén 2014; Sergiovanni 1998).



**Figure 3.** The process of professional development and the progress of pedagogical leadership.

*Source: Authors' original figure created for this publication.*

Our analysis lends support to the case for continuous, regular and compulsory further training for teachers in ECE (see also Jensen and Rasmussen 2016; Cherrington and Thornton 2013). Such further training should contain contemporary research knowledge and ways to relate this new knowledge to the pedagogy being implemented. We argue that this pedagogical development work is essential for individuals and working communities. Moreover, the participatory action research approach and practice-based reflection is significant here: the action research model can empower teachers for pedagogical leadership, and the dimensions of human capital can also increase. This approach provides tools to develop and a knowledge basis that gives the power to accomplish pedagogical improvements. However, the opportunity to participate in long-term further training is not currently realised for all ECE teachers in Finland. As a result, it is an ongoing challenge for teachers' pedagogical competence and the equal quality of ECE pedagogy in general. We suggest that the initial training of ECE teachers should include more studies of pedagogical leadership; indeed, some Finnish universities have already noticed this need and implemented more courses.

There are, of course, some limitations to the validity of this study, as the data were collected during further training at the university. The relationships between informants and researchers can decrease the validity and objectivity of the study (see Atkins and Wallace 2012). In addition, the researchers' commitment to organising the training can affect the validity: it is possible that participants wanted to give positive feedback to educators. Furthermore, because the data were gathered during a further training course, the participants may have been more prone to suggesting ideas about development and feel more motivated than might be the case in ECE teachers' usual working environment. In a future research proposal that would aim to provide a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of further training, it would be interesting to contribute greater insight by investigating how further training affects the learning outcomes and the well-being of the children in Finnish ECE.<sup>1</sup>

## Note

1. The new Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018) came into force on 1 September 2018. This research process was carried out before the new legislation was introduced.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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