Dimensions of Leadership in the Childcare Context

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ABSTRACT The contextual leadership theory provides a frame to investigate the leadership phenomenon in a childcare context. According to the contextual leadership theory, leadership is perceived of as a socially constructed, situational and interpretive phenomenon. The purpose of the study was to investigate leadership in a Finnish childcare context based on the views of those people who are involved with it. The focus group method was used to gather data for the study. The results showed that the leadership context defines the leadership language and the culture. In most focus group discussions leadership was described as the position of a leader. Centre directors were seen to have multiple role positions. All in all, it seemed that the tasks and duties connected to leadership on all contextual levels were unclear.

Key words: leadership; early childhood education; focus group; contextual theory

INTRODUCTION
Traditionally the term ‘leadership’ in a Finnish childcare context has been connected to the childcare centre director’s work and the position of the director. Centre leadership has been managed mostly inside the centre. In the Finnish language, broader leadership is called ‘guidance’ or ‘supervision’. Guidance from outside the childcare centre has concentrated mostly on administrative business. The problem has been that these two areas, childcare centre leadership and administrative guidance, have not been seen to be connected to each other (Hujala & Lindberg, 1998).

The study is part of an international leadership project (Hujala & Puroila, 1998a) that has been implemented in Australia, the UK, Russia, the USA and Finland. The purpose of this study was to investigate leadership in a Finnish context and its societal connections.

In many early childhood leadership studies (Jorde Bloom, 1992; Rodd, 1998; Culkin, 2000) leadership was examined as a micro phenomenon. Researchers have investigated leaders themselves (Jorde Bloom & Sheerer, 1992; Hayden, 1998; Jorde Bloom, 2000; Morgan, 2000; VanderVen, 2000) or the immediate environments where the leaders work (Hujala & Puroila, 1998b). This study is interested in
leadership in a broader sense. It investigates leadership as perceived by those people who are involved in childcare. The challenge is to discover the nature and significance of leadership in the societal context as well as the roles and responsibilities attached to leadership.

Because the goal of this study was to investigate connections between leadership and society, the study uses the contextual leadership model as a theoretical orientation. The contextual leadership model (Nivala, 1998, 1999) provides a frame in which to view the leadership phenomenon in a cultural context. The model has its structure in the theory of contextual growth in early childhood education (Hujala, 1996, 1999). The contextual theory has its foundation in Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1989) ecological theory and in system thinking (Järvilleto, 1992).

The contextual leadership model in early childhood education defines the structural framework of the factors and actors related to leadership and leading. The model considers leadership as a cultural system. The core of the contextual leadership model is the mission and substance of early childhood education (ECE). In addition to the mission and the substance of ECE, the leadership system consists of the children, parents, childcare unit, local and state authorities and, finally, the whole society and its culture. Nivala (1999) defines the system on a micro level (the childcare centre director, families and the child care unit) as intra-culture. He calls other elements of the system inter-culture. On the macro level of the system, societal

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**Fig. 1. Contextual model of leadership (Nivala, 2001).**
values and institutional structures define leadership. The meso level consists of interaction and cooperation between the micro levels, while the exo level between micro and macro levels has an indirect effect on leadership. Based on this comprehensive orientation, Nivala (1999) sees leadership as interactions between the substance of ECE, the actors in the process and the structures of an organisational environment.

According to the contextual leadership model, leadership is perceived of as a socially constructed, situational and interpretive phenomenon (Nivala, 1999). Accordingly, the structuration theory of Giddens (1984), as well as Berger & Luckman’s (1995) ideas about socially constructed reality, will be incorporated into the model to explore the dialogue between actors and structures, e.g. the leader and the organisational culture of the centre. Leadership as an interpretive phenomenon means that it is not only the leaders’ own ideas concerning leadership but also the views of all those involved with childcare, including the families and stakeholders, that define leadership in childcare.

In Nivala’s (1999) study, leadership was examined from the point of view of the mission and substance of childcare, i.e. from the point of view of ‘early childhood education’. Alternatively, in many earlier studies leadership was examined from the leader’s point of view. In this study, leadership is examined from a leadership point of view, i.e. from the point of view of leadership as a phenomenon and as a reality. Nivala (2001) defines leadership reality as interaction between the process and the context. In this study, leadership is seen as a visionary strategy consisting of interactions between the process and context of leadership. Leadership will be investigated in the micro, meso and exo/macro context from the point of view of interaction between actors and the substance/mission of early childhood education.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STUDY

Problems of the Study

The purpose of the study was to investigate leadership in a Finnish childcare context, based on the views of those people who are involved with it. The following problems were defined.

1. What is the leadership context where people involved with childcare consider early childhood leadership?

2. What is the significance and nature of leadership and what are the leadership roles and responsibilities on the micro, macro/exo and meso levels of contextual leadership?

3. Are there any differences between participants in their views about leadership and leadership tasks?

Method

Methodological triangulation was used in the data collection as well as data analysis. The focus group method (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1998; Mäenpää et al., 2002) was
used to gather data for the study. The focus group method uses group discussions, where people sharing a common interest get together to discuss the topic of research interest. In this study, it gave a forum for participants broadly representing the early childhood field to discuss leadership freely and reflect on each other’s opinions. By allowing the participants to express their personal views, it is assumed that the method is able to ascertain a broad coverage of community perceptions as a whole. The focus group discussion method is a relatively researcher free method, compared, for example, with interviews or traditional surveys. It gives the floor to the group of participants. The researcher’s intervention in the process is minimal. The researcher gives the discussion topics, but the content of the discussions depends upon the emphasis existing in the group.

An Australian international leadership project team that also implemented a focus group study constructed the list of focus group questions (Waniganayake et al., 1999). The Australian focus group questionnaire was subsequently assessed and modified to be culturally valid in Finland. The idea behind the international leadership project was that all countries formulate their own questions according to their own ideas concerning important issues in their society and childcare (emic level) and then decide a set of questions to use in a national investigation (derived etic). Using these steps makes it possible to shift from the emic level to the etic level in cross-cultural research (Berry, 1989; Hujala, 1998). The pilot analysis of Australian and Finnish questions showed that there were quite different orientations in these two societies. The Australian questions emphasised the leaders’ personal issues and training, while Finnish researchers were more interested in early childhood substance and content issues connected to leadership.

In total, 11 questions were formulated for data collection. The discussion topics concerned the definition of leadership, the challenges, roles and responsibilities of leadership, as well as leadership tasks and training, and the quality of childcare connected to leadership.

There were three researchers involved in the data collection. They were responsible for running different focus group discussions. The basic roles played by the researchers included arranging and coordinating the processes of recruiting participants and facilitating the focus group discussion, as well as note taking and observing focus group discussions. The moderator explained the goals of the study and clarified the idea of the focus group method. At the beginning of the discussion the list of discussion topics to be used was given to each participant. The moderator gave the instructions as to how to manage the group, for example a time limit for discussion and a recommended time for each individual question. The moderator emphasised that each participant’s view was unique and important and that there were no right or wrong answers. During the discussion, she remained in the background and interfered with the discussion as little as possible, only to ensure that all questions were discussed or to remind the participants about the time limit for discussion. The length of each focus group discussion ranged from 1 to 2 hours.

In addition to the focus group method, a survey was used to collect data. In the survey questionnaire there were questions about the participants’ background and questions about leadership. The survey was sent by mail. The main idea of the short
survey was to determine the participants’ personal opinions about leadership and to serve as an orientation for the coming focus group discussion.

**The Participants**

The participants invited to the investigation were professional people and parents who were known by the research group. All the participants were contacted by phone and asked if they would be interested in participating. After that an invitation letter with a survey questionnaire was sent to everyone.

The types of focus groups used and the actual number of participants are shown in Table I. Participants in this study broadly represented the early childhood field. Childcare teachers, centre directors and stakeholders represented the whole country, but trainers, students and parents came from the city where the study was conducted.

Ten participants were invited to each group. Only parents had 100% attendance. The lowest attendance was by trainers and students. Overall, 83% of those invited took part in the discussions. This gives a very reliable basis for analysis of the data.

According to the background information on the participants concerning their age and experience in the early childhood field, it seemed that in all groups there were some experienced participants. Those with most experience were the trainers, centre directors and stakeholders. The students and parents had least experience in the early childhood field.

**Data Analysis**

All focus group discussions were held at the Early Childhood Research Centre in Oulu, Finland. Each focus group discussion was audio-taped. In addition to the sound recording, some notes on the discussions were made. The recorded discussions were transcribed.

Focus group analysis was based on the *contextual leadership theory* (Nivala, 1998, 1999, 2001). The research interest was to study the leadership context, where the significance and nature of leadership as well as leadership roles and responsibilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus group</th>
<th>Participants (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child care teachers</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre directors</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trainers</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholders</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
were discussed and evaluated in the focus groups. In the data analysis the application of narrative analysis (Smith, 2000) and discourse analysis (Jokinen et al., 1999) was used. The first step of the analysis was to assess the contents of leadership discourses according to the contextual leadership levels, the micro, macro/exo and meso levels. Table II describes the analysis procedure.

On all levels, the nature and significance as well as roles and responsibilities of leadership were analysed for all focus groups separately. After analysing the data, a summary of the research topics was made both horizontally and vertically. Finally, leadership was summarised in the whole context, which resulted in a profile of Finnish leadership.

RESULTS

The results relate to the context of Finnish early childhood leadership. They consider the significance and nature of leadership, as well as the roles and responsibilities involved in it. The results will be presented in the framework of contextual leadership theory.

The first research problem was to investigate the leadership context in which participants in the focus groups considered leadership. All focus group discourses were counted according to the contextual levels. Figure 2 shows the distribution of discourses in the focus groups as percentages in the frame of contextual leadership.

Students and trainers more often saw leadership to be a micro level issue than the other groups. Parents and stakeholders least often considered leadership to be on a micro level. Parents saw leadership as interaction more than other groups, whereas trainers least often considered leadership to be on a meso level. Stakeholders defined leadership most often on the macro level. All in all, it seems that people whose work is directly connected to childcare centres see leadership more narrowly, whereas those who look at leadership from outside the centre see leadership issues more
TABLE II. Leadership data analysis in a Finnish context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership context</th>
<th>Group 1, 2, …, 6</th>
<th>Sum (1, 2, …, 6) of leadership analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Macro/ exo level</strong></td>
<td>Analysis of nature and significance</td>
<td>Analysis of roles and responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meso level</strong></td>
<td>Analysis of nature and significance</td>
<td>Analysis of roles and responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Micro level</strong></td>
<td>Analysis of nature and significance</td>
<td>Analysis of roles and responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sum of leadership (macro/exo, meso and micro levels)</strong></td>
<td>Nature and significance of leadership</td>
<td>Roles and responsibilities of leadership</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

broadly. In addition, according to the findings from students and trainers, it seems that training in early childhood education is mainly focused on internal centre issues. Those issues that regulate or are somehow connected to the implementation of centre-based care are not so much focused on, especially by students.

**Contextual Leadership**

The nature and significance, as well as roles and responsibilities, of leadership will be reported in the frame of contextual leadership theory, beginning at the micro level and ending at the meso level. The meso level is seen as integrating the micro and macro levels into a unity. The differences between groups are dealt with both on the basis of focus group discourses and survey answers.

**Leadership on the Micro Level**

*Significance and nature.* The significance of leadership is seen to be formed through the context, i.e. through the basic mission of childcare and through the social situation. Leadership is mainly defined in three dimensions: (i) the development and evaluation of childcare; (ii) the development and well-being of the staff in a childcare unit; (iii) strengthening the significance and appreciation of childcare in a society.

The nature of leadership is characterised by the comprehensiveness of the task, which is seen to range from taking care of and educating children to financial administration and supporting human relations.

Childcare leadership has changed from directing educational work to administration, even though pedagogical leadership is essential in childcare leadership. (Stakeholders)

Power and responsibility were seen to be connected with leadership. Leadership skills were especially emphasised when the leader is forced to decide about difficult issues.
If everything goes smoothly and the working unit is good, leadership prevails within the whole unit, but if decisions have to be made, leadership is emphasised in a different way. (Parents)

Among trainers and students the views about leadership were polarised. They connected leadership either to the position of the leader or to the leadership of a working team. The trainers understood that

the working team makes the realisation of leadership possible, the team takes care of leadership and the team has the power.

But, at the same time, some uncertainty arose about the question of who has the final liability. The centre team was not seen to have any power position at all by some trainers. Instead, the power was seen to be on a macro level and

the leader of the team has the task to act as a negotiator between the team and the parents as a third party.

Whereas among students and trainers the team was seen to have the significance and properties of leadership, the other focus groups emphasised the special significance of a childcare director who was seen to take responsibility for childcare, both inside the centre and outside it. Stakeholders insisted on even more responsibility and exercising of power by childcare directors. They even doubted if ‘centre directors have enough courage to take responsibility’, because they think that directors ‘have neither training nor rational and purposeful action’.

The problems relating to power and responsibility were different for leadership in municipal and in private childcare. In private childcare the director has both the economic power and responsibility for the content of the work. The municipal directors felt that the board of social and health care had a leadership role in childcare, and so the hands of the directors were tied.

Keeping up to date and planning for the future were seen as important factors in leadership. In addition, the students especially emphasised the basic skills of caring and educating children as a quality factor of leadership. They thought that directors should be able to cope with all practical things, beginning with changing diapers.

If the director works only with employees and parents, but not with children, he/she will not have a realistic picture of the work in reality.

Roles and responsibilities. In this study, comprehensive responsibility is seen to be connected with leadership. It takes shape as responsibility for personnel and administration, as well as educational leadership, in childcare centres. In the focus group discourses, there was one issue about which all groups agreed totally. All agreed that the central duty of leadership is to supervise the education and care according to the basic mission of childcare. Another equally important factor in leadership was seen to be taking care of the well-being and human relations among the childcare personnel. In addition to supporting and motivating the staff and working unit, the
Leaders were seen to be responsible for decision making and advancing the mission of childcare. Central roles and responsibilities on the micro level for leadership are:

- to develop and supervise the care according to the goals of childcare;
- to support and motivate the personnel and child are unit;
- to be responsible for the unit and decision making in it;
- to clarify the basic mission of childcare.

**Leadership on the Macro Level**

In this study, leadership on the macro level was largely derived from the mission of childcare in society. The mission was defined as producing early childhood services for families. Participants saw that implementation of the mission is comprehensively shared by society through its values, municipalities and its administrative organisation and by the parents with their demands for services.

The Parliament legislates, in the municipalities councils and local governments make decisions. From there, leadership issues are transferred to the officials and executives. Parents as clients are excluded in this process.

On the macro level, the function of leadership is seen as creating frameworks and opportunities for implementation of the mission of childcare. This means creating frameworks concerning policy, regulations and resources.

**Nature and significance.** A very clear opinion was expressed in the focus groups that financial issues define leadership on the macro level. The representative of the trainers declared that ‘the financial manager dictates the reality of childcare more than Fröbel’. Focus groups agreed that the real source of power is not in the childcare centre. The macro level hierarchy in administration was clearly seen.

Although the power was seen to be at the top, everybody agreed that the responsibility for leadership lies at all levels in a society. The parents as taxpayers have the right and responsibility to influence childcare. In addition to direct action within the centres, parents were seen to influence childcare policy when they cast their vote at local elections. Although parents saw themselves as part of the childcare system and part of its leadership, it was agreed by other focus groups that parents are still quite restricted in leadership. In the larger municipalities especially, the voices of the parents are not heard on the macro level, even though the parents are active inside the centre. Executives and officials responsible for the services are seen to be on one side of the childcare system and the parents, as users of the services, are on the other. Parents seemed to be subordinates to the whole decision making culture of the municipality. Stakeholders considered this tradition to originate from the history of childcare as ‘a social service that is humbly received’. This subordinating attitude towards parents on the macro level was evident in the control of the information given to the parents. According to the childcare personnel, there are
orders and instructions from higher officials not to speak about problems to the parents or to talk openly about childcare policy. ‘There were free places but we weren’t allowed to tell of them’. The parents’ efforts to participate in leadership seemed to disturb the hierarchical leadership. The personnel had noticed that the demands and the complaints of the parents to the higher officials have caused the centre director, who is bound to the higher decisions, to be subject to blame.

Roles and responsibilities. Macro level leadership delimits the responsibilities that are connected with leadership on all levels. However, the responsibilities were experienced as unclear on all levels. Leadership on the macro level was seen to take shape as top-down administrative demands, instructions and orders. On the other hand, many directors saw that it is the directors’ own affair how the resources allocated by the upper level are used in each unit. The most important areas in macro level leadership were seen to be related to financial issues and controlling resources. Political decisions and legislation define the framework, the local council accepts the budget and the local board of social welfare has total responsibility for childcare and its quality. The childcare executives as officials transfer the board’s policy decisions to field workers, who were seen to be responsible for the realisation of board decisions in childcare. The parents asserted that ‘the executives acclimatised directors, employees and the families to existing realities’.

‘Leadership’ on the macro level did not seem to listen to the childcare directors. This is how the hierarchy on the macro level subordinates the work of the director. ‘The directors are in a difficult situation between the families, their own subordinates and their managers’. The responsibility for implementation of the practical activities on the operational level was seen to lie with the staff. The directors themselves felt that surrender to political resolutions reduces the credibility of the director.

In the morning, the director reads at the same time as his/her clients what was decided yesterday about the future of childcare centres for the week, month or year.

Stakeholders saw leadership as a broader phenomenon than the other groups. They emphasised the fact that the power and responsibility for all childcare leadership is in the municipality ‘as long as you obey the law’. In addition, they were quite sceptical about national leadership. They had a feeling that central administrative guidance is ‘lost’. The parents, too, were asking for more comprehensive responsibility for leadership on the macro level. They demanded more discussions about children and education as well as the values behind decision making.

Leadership on the Meso Level

Nature and significance. The focus groups had quite congruent understandings about the fact that leadership is an integrated whole reaching from the micro to
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macro level. To integrate leadership at the micro and macro levels into a unity demands a distinct definition of the functions and responsibilities of leadership as well as cooperation between levels. Meso level action means that implementation of childcare practice is in integration with decision making concerning resources and guidelines. Comprehensive leadership was not seen as a clear concept and this was conceived of as a problem in leadership practice. Power connected to decision making and responsibilities connected to leadership were recognised as lying in different places. The director is responsible for pedagogy, but the supply of resources is decided elsewhere. It was very clearly seen, however, that money is a facilitator of leadership.

The director of the childcare centre was seen to be half inside the working unit and half outside it. In this meso level situation the task of the leadership is to integrate the micro and macro levels. In the childcare director’s work it is important to understand the unity concerning education and resources.

The director must understand both the financial administration and pedagogy, because the director presents matters to the social welfare committee. (Stakeholders)

It was seen as the centre director’s task to integrate evaluation of the micro and macro levels in childcare. This means that the director must understand the basic functions of childcare in the society and at the same time, she/he must evaluate how well the basic functions are implemented in his/her centre. The fact that the director has an accountability for different directions requires

a steady theoretical expertise and practicality. The director carries the responsibility for his/her own work. The responsibility is not the fact that a child stays a year or two at the centre, but if something goes wrong, the whole society will later pay for this incident. (Parents)

Besides stakeholders, the other focus groups considered the centre director to be subordinate to the higher level management. The level above was seen to require certain duties from the directors. The decisions coming from above are informational and the directors can have hardly any influence on them. The dilemma is that the centre directors are expected to be subordinate to their superiors in the local administration and, at the same time, the members of staff in the centre expect active leadership from them. The staff expects that the director ‘will defend their own unit’ from the higher administration.

Differing from the other groups, the stakeholders strongly agreed that the centre directors have power and are able to influence the communal organisations, but they doubt the directors’ abilities and courage to lead and exert an influence on the macro level. The stakeholders’ opinion was that the leaders should have more clearly defined leadership. They should demand arguments for board decisions. According to the stakeholders, centre directors together have strength and they should use this
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unity more when they articulate their demands of the board. Stakeholders gave an example of how directors have successfully managed to reach their goals.

There may be a note on the wall in the centre giving the telephone number of a board member and information for parents about decisions on the agenda of the next board meeting. Please, call the board member! The childcare directors are terribly strong.

The directors themselves felt that their cooperative actions with the higher administration and decision makers are regulated by resources and the demands for effectiveness and accountability. The centre directors have a feeling that they are taken seriously by higher administration only if they use these ‘hard’ business concepts.

Childcare staff have to learn to discuss with higher administration by using the arguments that they expect.

The position of the parents in the totality of leadership was seen as marginal and controversial. On the one hand, parents are seen as part of the leadership. Inside the centre, parents influence day care a lot. Also, the staff encourage the parents to participate and influence the decision makers. On the other hand, the staff considered that parents should not be used as buffers in influencing the decision makers but that the task of the childcare centre director as an official is to contact higher officials. Then again, the staff suspected that the parents were not aware of who leads the childcare and they do not know to whom to complain.

Some countries have information centres for the parents about childcare so that if they are not happy they can consult them.

The parents saw themselves as part of the childcare system and part of the leadership. Parents emphasised being able to have discussions with the decision makers and having influence in society. They proposed, for example, that ‘a common forum for childcare directors to put issues forward to the higher administrative staff’ should be organised. Parents saw the directors as a contact person for them and they expressed a desire for parent meetings to evaluate childcare. They expected information from the directors both about internal issues within the childcare centre and about the decisions concerning childcare made by the board. In terms of leadership, cooperation in listening to the opinions of the parents and cooperation in general were regarded as central.

**Roles and responsibilities.** Leadership was seen to have a mediating task between resources and guidelines for practice and vice versa. The childcare centre director was seen as a mediator to the municipal organisations, which in turn communicate with the social welfare board. The director was seen as the conveyer of the decisions from the grassroots level up to the administration and, particularly, vice versa. ‘The director is a link between the working unit and the outer world’. The central issue is to keep childcare up to date and inform all participants. The childcare staff expect
that higher officials have the courage to address issues and that they believe their subordinates, the directors, who contact them.

Leadership was described as image building for childcare. The important task of the centre director is to defend ECE and childcare and also to defend children and families, as well as to protect the employees’ interests. Parents see the director as having the role of ‘a mouthpiece together with the parents and media’. Centre directors themselves see their task as to ‘keep the flag flying, advertise and represent childcare and bring it to public attention’.

Comparison of Focus Groups

In addition to focus group discussions, participants were asked to write a short narrative about leadership in ECE based on his/her personal opinions of leadership. The research questions concentrated on the significance of leadership from the writer’s own perspective. In the narratives the discourses that writers used were analysed. The following main categories shown in Table III were found from the narratives.

Leadership concentrated on supporting personnel and developing and enhancing the mission and practices of childcare. In addition, the directors’ activities in providing the best working conditions for the staff were seen as most important in leadership in the early childhood sector. Also, most leadership issues that were ranked as important were connected to the position of the centre director. The differences between the groups were interesting, showing that each focus group examines the leadership issues in terms of their own interests. Parents see the most important issue of leadership to be serving families and cooperation; teachers emphasise supporting and caring for the staff, as well as taking care of human relations; centre directors see the most important issues to be building visions and strategies, as well as taking care of harmony in the childcare centre; stakeholders emphasise developing the mission in childcare and its implementation. Trainers differed a lot from the other groups. They did not see decision making and administration as part of early childhood leadership at all. Also, leadership in the role of early childhood image building and acting as an advocate for children seemed to differentiate the groups from each other. In addition, students were the only group that emphasised being an expert in childcare practice in the centre as an important issue in leadership.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

All in all, the focus groups agreed widely about issues in Finnish childcare leadership. Although in principle leadership was seen as a broad phenomenon, beginning from legislation and reaching to services for families, in discussions about concrete issues and daily practices the leadership discussion focused mostly on the position and tasks of the centre director.

Although within the focus groups the participants’ opinions were quite similar, there were very different emphases by different groups concerning leadership.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Significant leadership tasks</th>
<th>Stake-holders (%)</th>
<th>Trainers (%)</th>
<th>Directors (%)</th>
<th>Teachers (%)</th>
<th>Students (%)</th>
<th>Parents (%)</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supporting and caring for the staff, being responsible for human relations</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhancing and developing mission and implementation of child care</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing visions and strategies, taking care of the unity</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision making, administration</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serving families, co-operating with administration, families etc.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enabling staff’s working, informing the staff about new research, team building</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocating for children and early education, image building</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acting in children’s every day life</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Teachers as well as students and trainers defined leadership as an issue mainly concentrating on the childcare centre. They emphasised supporting the working unit and human relationships there. Centre directors emphasised providing a vision and strategies for childcare. Parents see leadership as networking and as a challenge for cooperation among people involved in childcare. Stakeholders described the most comprehensive view of leadership. They considered leadership as an influencing factor in childcare policy and its implementation in childcare programmes.

There were some leadership discourses that arose directly or indirectly from the focus group discussions and that seemed to have special significance in considering and understanding Finnish early childhood leadership.

**Leadership Culture and Language**

The leadership context defines the leadership culture. The values and language of leadership differ from each other on the micro and macro levels. Leadership on the macro level focuses on policy issues and financing. The status of leadership on the macro level is defined by ‘hard’ business concepts. It speaks about leadership by using concepts such as effectiveness, accountability and economic policy. Micro level leadership speaks about education, pedagogy and supervision. The concepts of educational leadership are developed from the mission of childcare. Important concepts are caring, upbringing and educating. One can ask if the discussions on the micro and macro levels do not match each other. Does the contradiction between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ leadership arise from an unclear definition of the mission of childcare for different levels of leadership or is the status of children, their needs and ECE too low to be dealt with on a macro level and used as a language of decision making. Do people at the macro level of leadership feel that educational leadership is simply ‘talking rubbish’? Supervision of ECE on the macro level seems to be held down by financial leadership. Pedagogical issues of childcare do not define the leadership in higher administration, and little even in other leadership contexts. All in all, it seems that Finnish leadership is defined quite separately by economic policy and political guidelines in municipalities, on the one hand, and the by the internal affairs of a single childcare centre, on the other.

**Leadership is Defined as a Position**

In most focus group discussions, leadership was described as the position of a leader. Leadership was seen as business inside the centre, not so clearly as a phenomenon on a macro or meso level. On the other hand, leadership was quite invisible in the centre. When the director is responsible for administrative work and also for working as a teacher in a childrens group there is no image difference between the director and other teachers.

**Centre Directors’ Multiple Role Positions**

The centre director is a colleague for teachers and yet a person in charge of them at
the same time. This is one reason why the staff feel that the leadership is unclear. Secondly, the leader is at the same time subordinate to her manager or supervisor at the municipal level and a colleague for them in front of the parents. Directors are in an awkward position between families, their subordinates and their superiors. Does the multiplicity of roles show joint responsibility and teamwork in childcare leadership or does it mean that the structure of management is unclear? Also, multiple leadership means being at the same time the leader of the centre and a teacher working in a childrens group.

Inside the centre, the director is seen as the team leader. Although the team makes decisions together, the leader is responsible for these decisions. The director
as an early childhood expert and responsible for management can be in a situation where she/he is forced to rule against team decisions. It seemed that the dilemma between team leadership and leadership connected to the director remained unresolved. Although the team develops childcare within the centre and its own management style, the directors’ leadership is needed to support the team and, especially, to take care of the basic mission of childcare and its image in society.

**Multilevel Leadership**

Multilevel leadership is most obviously seen to be concrete in an early childhood leadership model where power and responsibilities connected to leadership are not in the same hands. Childcare centre directors have responsibility for the implementation of care by the centre, but decisions about resources are made elsewhere. Directors do not have much financial power. The directors’ power is restricted to mainly personnel and children. Responsibilities connected to joint leadership are seen to be vague at all levels, which explains why the leaders’ job descriptions are defined unclearly and contradictorily. Often directors do not know what their responsibilities are and what issues they have the right to decide. Problems concerning directors’ rights and responsibilities make leadership different in different municipalities. In big cities, childcare centre directors are unable to influence childcare policy, but in small municipalities the chances of having an influence are better.

Inside the centre, multilevel leadership does mean that directors have double responsibility. They are both administrative and educational leaders at the same time.

**Duty Areas of Leadership are Unclear**

The tasks and duties connected to leadership are unclear and not clear-cut. Although there are certain duties from higher administration to centre directors, they feel that their tasks are not explicit. It is up to the director what she/he prefers in the implementation of her/his leadership. The strongest contradiction in leadership is between the decisions made by higher administration and the demands connected to the implementation of everyday work in childcare. Although resources are controlled by higher administration, the parents demand quality care for their children from the centre director.

One can speculate on whether the unclear and disunited leadership reflects an unclear and disunited mission of childcare among leaders at different levels. The challenge for quality leadership is to clarify the different missions of childcare—social service and preschool as well as childhood education and care—and develop a balanced unity of leadership based on the unity of different missions.

**REFERENCES**


