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Early childhood leadership through the lens of distributed leadership

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ABSTRACT: This study aims to investigate distribution of responsibilities for leadership in early childhood education (ECE) context. It focuses on the enactments of leadership by investigating how ECE stakeholders, e.g. teachers, ECE centre directors and administrative ECE leaders in municipalities perceive the leadership responsibilities. Using focus groups, the data was collected in seven municipalities in Finland. The study was based on contextual and distributed view of leadership. Quality improvement and pedagogical leadership was seen as primary responsibilities in ECE leadership by all studied groups. The study indicated different practices of distribution of responsibilities for leadership. However, it indicated that developed forms of leadership distribution were rarely used. In developing ECE leadership, focusing on interdependencies of leadership enactments between teachers, centre directors and municipal ECE leaders and building structures for interaction between stakeholders, increase the quality of distributed leadership.

RÉSUMÉ: L'étude présentée porte sur la répartition des responsabilités au niveau de la direction dans le contexte de l'éducation de la petite enfance. Centrée sur la représentation de la direction, elle cherche à préciser la manière dont les parties prenantes de l'éducation de la petite enfance, par exemple, les enseignants, les responsables des institutions préscolaires et les responsables administratifs municipaux perçoivent ces responsabilités. Les données collectées à l'aide d'entretiens collectifs proviennent de sept municipalités finlandaises. L'étude repose sur une vision contextuelle et distribuée de la direction. L'amélioration de la qualité et la direction pédagogique ont été considérées par tous les groupes comme des premières responsabilités. Cette étude indique différentes pratiques de répartition des responsabilités dans la direction. Toutefois, elle montre que les formes avancées de répartition sont rarement utilisées. Développer la direction dans l'éducation de la petite enfance, se centrer sur les interdépendances des représentations de la direction chez les enseignants, les responsables des institutions préscolaires et les responsables municipaux de l'éducation de la petite enfance et penser des dispositifs pour l'interaction entre les parties prenantes améliore la qualité d'une direction distribuée.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Im Rahmen dieser Forschungsarbeit wird die Verteilung von Führungsverantwortung im Kontext der frühkindlichen Erziehung untersucht. Dabei steht im besonderen Interesse, wie die an der frühkindlichen Erziehung beteiligten Akteure, u.a. pädagogische Fachkräfte, Kita-Leitungen und kommunale Trägerverantwortliche, Führungsverantwortung wahrnehmen. Die Daten wurden durch Focus-Gruppendiskussionen in sieben Kommunen in

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Finnland erhoben. Die Untersuchung basiert auf einem Verständnis von kontextualisierter und geteilter Führung. In allen Gruppen wurde Führungsverantwortung im Kontext frühkindlicher Erziehung in erster Linie als Instrument der Qualitätsverbesserung und der pädagogischen Führung gesehen. Im Rahmen der Untersuchung wurden verschiedene Praktiken geteilter Führungsverantwortung nachgewiesen. Entwickeltere Formen geteilter Führung waren jedoch selten anzutreffen. Eine Entwicklung von Führungskompetenzen, die wechselsseitige Abhängigkeiten (interdependence) zwischen pädagogischen Fachkräften, Leitungen und kommunalen Verantwortungsträgern berücksichtigt, sowie eine strukturelle Weiterentwicklung der Kommunikation zwischen diesen Personalgruppen würde die Qualität der geteilten Führung verbessern.

RESUMEN: En el presente estudio se investiga el reparto de responsabilidades directivas en el ámbito de la educación infantil pre-escolar. Se trata de establecer cómo la gestión de dirección es concebida y realizada en cuanto a las diferentes responsabilidades por todos los implicados en la educación infantil pre-escolar de los municipios, tales como maestros de pre-escolar, directores de centros pre-escolares y de guarderías. El corpus fue recabado en siete municipios a través de debates en grupos de tipo Focus group. El estudio se basa en un planteamiento contextual y de reparto de responsabilidades en la dirección. Todos los grupos analizados consideraron como responsabilidad principal en la dirección de la educación infantil pre-escolar la mejora de la calidad y la dirección pedagógica. El estudio constató que existen prácticas diferentes en el reparto de responsabilidades. Sin embargo, son escasas las prácticas en el reparto implementado de responsabilidades directivas. El fomento de la interdependencia de responsabilidades entre maestros de pre-escolar, directores de los centros (guarderías) y gestores municipales de educación infantil pre-escolar, así como la creación y desarrollo de estructuras que impulsen la interrelación entre los profesionales implicados incrementarían la calidad de la responsabilidad compartida.

Keywords: early childhood education; leadership; distributed leadership; leadership responsibilities; focus group

Introduction

This article is based on a study conducted in Finland, involving seven municipalities providing early childhood services. In Finland, municipalities have an obligation to plan and implement community services, including Early Childhood Education (ECE) services. ECE staff are municipal employees. The purpose of this study was to explore the distribution of early childhood leadership responsibilities within the context of municipalities. This research focused on studying how people involved in leading early childhood policy and programmes within local communities allocated leadership responsibilities. This article presents findings on distributed leadership based on the perspectives of municipal ECE leaders, ECE centre directors and ECE teachers.

The theoretical underpinnings of this research were connected with the contextual theory of early childhood leadership (Nivala 1999) and informed by distributed leadership approaches of scholars such as Spillane, Halverson and Diamond (2004) and Harris (2009). Data was collected by focus group method and analysed by qualitative content analysis. Looking through the lens of distributed leadership in analysing the data brings a new perspective in studying early childhood leadership. Understanding the interdependences between stakeholders, the study provides information which can enhance organisational efficiency within ECE contexts in municipalities in

Finland. It allows for the restructuration of ECE leadership work by bringing coherency and enhancing the capacity for change and quality improvement.

Distributed leadership in ECE context

In clarifying the responsibilities of early childhood leaders, previous leadership studies have investigated leadership mainly as a micro phenomenon and these researchers have investigated the functions and characteristics of the leaders themselves (Hayden 1996; Jorde-Bloom 1992, 1995; Morgan 2000; Rodd 1996, 1997, 2006; VanderVen 2000).

The analysis of leadership responsibilities is usually combined with roles and positions of leaders. Rodd (2006, 54), for example, defined roles and responsibilities under the 'key skills for effective leaders.' Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2003, 32) refer to roles and responsibilities as 'expected behaviours of a particular job or position.' When leadership responsibilities are analysed separately from the leaders' roles, leadership responsibilities are usually approached through concepts of leadership, management and administration. Although these concepts are sometimes understood as conflicting, most scholars (Andrews 2009; Murray 2009) consider them different aspects of a leader's work. Andrews (2009) states that in early childhood leadership these aspects are connected, as management of changes requires pedagogical leadership to be effective. According to Waniganayake (2000), distributed leadership provides a possibility to achieve organisational cohesion by integrating the operational dimensions of administration, management and leadership under a single conceptual framework. This study focuses on studying leadership responsibilities as enacted within the lived contexts of ECE in Finnish municipalities.

There is an increasing awareness of the importance of taking into account the meaning and connection between societal contexts and leadership as reflected in early childhood leadership research being conducted by Finnish researchers such as Hujala (2002, 2004); Nivala (1999); Karila (2004); and Puroila (2004). Discussions about distributed leadership began appearing in early childhood literature only recently (Aubrey 2007; Ebbeck and Waniganayake 2003; Fasoli, Scrivens, and Woodrow 2007; Halttunen 2009; Hujala, Heikka, and Fonsén 2009; Muijs et al. 2004; Rodd 2006; Scrivens 2006). Perspectives on studying leadership beyond a single leader was introduced decades ago by Gibb (1954), who was the first one to address leadership as a distributed phenomenon.

In this study, distributed leadership is based on the work of school leadership scholars, Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2004); Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2001); Harris (2009); as well as Harris and Spillane (2008). The core element of distributed leadership is firstly multiple persons involved in leadership; secondly, it focuses on leadership enactment rather than leadership roles; thirdly, interdependence of the leadership enactments by multiple persons, fourthly the importance of proceeding development of distributed leadership and finally, the significance of leadership is connected to educational work.

The theoretical underpinnings of the study emphasise leadership practice which involves multiple persons with formal or informal leadership positions (Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond 2004); Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2001). In their literature review on distributed leadership Heikka, Waniganayake, and Hujala (2013) suggest that the successful achievement of distributed leadership is determined by the interactive influences of multiple members in an organisation. Basing on leadership thinking explained within distributed cognition (see Hutchins 1995a, 1995b), Spillane,

Halverson, and Diamond (2004, 11) state that leadership is best understood as a practice 'distributed over leaders, followers, and the school's situation or contexts.' Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2004, 9) discuss distributed leadership practice as being 'stretched over' the whole school, social and community contexts. In these contexts, leadership involves multiple personnel, consisting of those who hold either formal leadership positions and/or informal leadership responsibilities. Furthermore, Spillane, Camburn, and Pareja (2007, 3) found that persons taking on leadership responsibilities changes according to situational factors. Responsibilities will be distributed by interactional influences depending on the task at hand and according to an individual's expertise (Heikka, Waniganayake and Hujala 2013).

Interdependence between people and their enactments of leadership is a core element of implementing distributed leadership. Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2001, 25) refer to leaders who work towards a shared goal through 'separate, but interdependent work.' Likewise, Harris (2009) connects two properties, 'interdependence' and 'emergence,' with distributed leadership. Hutchins (1995a, 20) also emphasises the meaning of '*interaction* of the people with each other and with physical structure in the environment.' Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2004), focus on interdependencies between leadership practices by analysing the enactment of leadership tasks. Interdependence of leadership practice exists when the implementation of leadership tasks involves interactions between multiple persons.

MacBeath (2005) describes distributed leadership as a developing process that requires the efforts of leaders to make it work. He expands this discussion by looking at the roles of those in formal leadership positions involved in developing distributed leadership through different developmental phases. At the early stages of development, the significance of planning and active monitoring of leadership is emphasised. The relevance of distributed leadership is gained through change implementation and the development of educational work. Distributed leadership is created by enhancing one's capacity to cope with changes (Woods and Gronn 2009). According to Camburn and Han (2009), investigating the connections between distributed leadership and leadership responsibilities could benefit development and change of instruction.

When applying distributed leadership perspectives to early childhood education, it is essential to remember the unique characteristics of this sector. The organisational contexts including the structure and governance requirements, incorporate a variety of programmes and the personnel. As such**,** the unit of analysis may vary, including leaders on vertical as well as horizontal dimensions of the organisation, and the leadership tasks at hand or the particular focus of the study (Heikka, Waniganayake, and Hujala 2013). The purpose of ECE is twofold. Firstly, entitlement for services as a part of government policy on supporting parents to participate in paid work. Secondly, ECE programmes underpin children's rights under the Finnish Child Care Act (Laki lasten päivähoidosta 19.1.1973/36), by supporting children's overall development. From the point of view of a child customer, high quality pedagogy is emphasised when studying responsibilities of ECE leadership.

Based on Bronfenner's ecological theory, Nivala (1999, 2001) has developed a contextual leadership theory, which provides a framework for examining leadership within contexts unique to ECE. Contextual leadership theory is based on the core purposes of ECE and addresses interactive influences of micro- and macro-systems (Hujala 2004; Nivala 2001). Distributed cognition supplements contextual perspectives by enabling

a deeper level of investigation of the interdependencies between stakeholders with responsibilities for implementing ECE within Finnish municipalities.

Research task

The aim of this research was to study leadership in ECE. In particular, this study investigated how leadership was enacted in ECE settings in Finland by exploring the perceptions of leaders, centre directors and teachers. The principle research question that was addressed in this study was: *How do the administrative ECE leaders in municipalities, directors and teachers in ECE centres perceive leadership responsibilities?*

In Finland, ECE leadership is interwoven and distributed in municipal structures involving a variety of stakeholders. Traditional approaches focusing on the leader's role are insufficient for studying leadership in municipal multilevel organisations. These contextual factors influenced the selection of a distributed perspective in this research. In this study leadership is understood as a contextual phenomenon influenced by micro and macro interactions in local communities and as a part of the wider society.

In this study, public ECE services formulate the context of leadership. Therefore, the responsibilities for leadership were investigated in relation to the core purposes of ECE services in Finland. These responsibilities were connected with educational work with children and thus exist in the actions of a wider set of stakeholders. The perceptions investigated represented a collectively formulated picture of lived working situations and leadership enactment in local municipal communities.

Research methods

The data was collected through focus groups methods, commonly used by educational researchers (Hydén and Bülow 2003). That is, these focus groups consisted of a small group of participants meeting to discuss a specific topic under the guidance of a moderator, who was an outsider to the research discussion (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2005; Wibeck, Dahlgren, and Öberg 2007). The participants expressed opinions, forming points of view, and discussing their perceptions about the phenomenon and its various dimensions (Wibeck, Dahlgren, and Öberg 2007).

In this study, focus groups were chosen as a research method because of the possibilities of combing the knowledge of distributing leadership responsibilities from various stakeholders' perspectives. The task of the study and the research context set certain limits and requirements for data collection methods, especially as stakeholders were dispersed throughout the municipalities. The aim was to gain a locally constructed picture of how leadership is enacted within Finnish municipalities. Group discussion generated local views on day to day leadership practise, with an identification of priorities of each stakeholder group. By analysing the different perspectives of stakeholders, it was possible to investigate interdependencies between stakeholders in the way leadership was enacted in Finnish ECE contexts.

The three key stakeholder groups responsible for early childhood services were employed as either ECE leaders, centre directors or teachers. These stakeholders influence policy and practice of early childhood leadership within local communities. ECE leaders are mainly responsible for arranging ECE programmes within the municipality ensuring that childcare centres meet the requirements of the national ECE laws and local policies. ECE centre directors are responsible for ECE services within specific municipality area which usually include ECE centres, family day care units and part

time ECE services for families taking care of their children at home. One director is often responsible for multiple centres and ECE programmes. Teachers work with children in different age groups.

The data reported on this article was collected as a part of a larger research study. In this research data was collected in 14 municipalities in different parts of Finland. Research partners from municipalities selected the participants in the focus group discussions and coordinated their participation. The goal was to assemble a maximum of 10 people in each stakeholder category of leaders, directors and teachers. Two main themes were formulated for the discussion: Core purpose of ECE and leadership of ECE. This type of focus group discussions were conducted in all 14 municipalities, but for this article, data from seven of these municipalities were analysed. The number of municipalities included in the study was shown to be enough for providing answers to the research questions. Overall a total of 21 focus groups were conducted across the seven municipalities. Together, there were 46 ECE leaders, 61 centre directors and 57 teachers in these focus groups, making a total of 164 participants.

The data analysis method was qualitative content analysis (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009). In qualitative content analysis, theoretical concepts and conclusions are generated through the process of interpretation and inference of participants' original expressions (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009, 111). Each focus group was analysed separately in order to form categories which described responsibilities for leadership discussed within each stakeholder category. Qualitative content analysis began with identifying sub-categories for leadership responsibilities of each focus group. Categories were identified by reading the transcribed data and selecting for expressions which manifest leadership responsibilities. In the second phase of analysis the main categories of each stakeholder group were formulated by combining sub-categories of the focus groups. Final conceptualisations were generated through parallel investigation and comparison of the main categories of stakeholder groups. The responsibilities for leadership as expressed by the stakeholders were compared with each other in order to find out similarities and differences between them. The comparison process led to the identification of conclusions about ECE leadership enactment in Finnish municipalities.

By examining the perceptions of leadership between these stakeholders, the study discusses the enactment of early childhood leadership from a contextual and distributed perspective. This analysis reflects the interdependencies and distribution of responsibilities for leadership between ECE stakeholders in Finish municipalities.

Key findings

Focus group discussions reflected participants' perceptions about the experiences and expectations of leadership. Discussions of leadership responsibilities were concerned with quality improvement, pedagogical leadership, daily management, human resources management, external relations and advocating for ECE within the municipality. Leadership responsibilities could be divided into primary and secondary responsibilities. Primary responsibilities were considered to be the most essential and the secondary ones enabled the enactment of these responsibilities. Two primary responsibilities for quality improvement and pedagogical leadership were emphasised quite similarly by all stakeholder groups. Primary responsibilities usually reflected the values and expectations of stakeholders. Responsibilities were layered and discussions

included controversies and inconsistencies. However, primary responsibilities did not necessarily realise as priorities in leaders' work.

Quality and pedagogy as primary leadership responsibilities

Responsibilities for quality improvement and pedagogical leadership were the two most emphasised topics during the focus group discussions. These leadership responsibilities were connected with each other when the discussion tended to focus on pedagogical aspects of ECE. Additionally, responsibilities of quality were discussed in relation to management and administration.

ECE leaders and centre directors considered themselves responsible for the provision of a variety of early education programmes. There was a shared commitment among stakeholders to take responsibility for achieving quality programmes. ECE leaders found that in terms of quality, their responsibility was to define goals and directions for ECE, create structures for co-operation, ensure security within centres, and together with municipal committees, provide sufficient resources for ECE. ECE leaders were expected to ensure accessibility and to support the implementation of pedagogical leadership.

Beyond the main responsibilities, there was more variety in how secondary leadership responsibilities such as daily management, human resources management, external relations and advocating for ECE within the municipality, were emphasised between stakeholder groups. ECE leaders emphasised strongly the development of external relationships outside ECE sector. The teachers and centre directors expressed that a big part of the centre directors' time went into an increasing amount of daily management work. Centre directors were busy taking care of access and placement of children in ECE programmes, finding substitute teachers, managing financial resources, centre buildings and security and, at the same time, dealing with the challenges related to pedagogical leadership responsibilities at their centres. These examples illustrate clearly the connection between primary and secondary leadership responsibilities performed by centre directors.

The enactment of responsibilities for leadership

The study identified different practices of leadership distribution. The developed forms of leadership distribution manifested usually within centres between centre director and leading teacher as well as among ECE leaders within municipalities. However, disconnected enactment of leadership responsibilities was most common way of practising ECE leadership between stakeholders within municipalities. Overall, all stakeholders expected more interaction between stakeholders working in different roles as leaders, directors and teachers etc. ECE leaders highlighted the importance of co-operation in constructing the vision and sharing professional knowledge with ECE staff. They also considered the importance of engaging staff in planning and providing them with opportunities to influence their work. ECE leaders viewed the centre directors as responsible for the realisation of quality standards within centres.

Disconnected enactment of leadership responsibilities manifested mainly between stakeholders in development of ECE. Centre directors and teachers felt that they were ignored in decision-making concerning developmental changes and improvements within the municipalities. Centre directors wanted better distribution of leadership with ECE leaders, especially concerning municipal level decision-making,

development, changes and long distance planning. They also wanted more interaction with Municipal committees. Centre directors and teachers highlighted the importance of interaction between stakeholders in securing continuity of development of quality provision. They wanted to participate in shared discussion about values and ECE issues prior to making decisions in municipal committees. They also continuously drew attention to the tools for knowledge sharing necessary between different stakeholder groups. Much criticism arose among centre directors and teachers due to the increasing amount of organisational changes and because development was experienced as too fragmented and disconnected from the realities of every day practice and evaluation of ECE.

The study identified some forms of leadership distribution between centre directors and teachers, however these forms seemed to be yet undeveloped. Centre directors highlighted the importance of sharing and developing partnerships with teachers. They emphasised their own role in creating leadership where knowledge was shared. Teachers expected centre directors to be responsible for curriculum implementation, development and co-operation with families and expected centre directors to dedicate more time to teacher support. On the other hand, teachers expressed their interest in sharing leadership responsibilities. They expressed their interest in taking responsibility for acquainting new teachers with the pedagogical approaches of the centre. They conceived that leaders' trust, valuation and their own space to be essential. However, teachers and centre directors reported difficulties in leadership distribution. According to centre directors, shared information processing, planning and discussion needed more time than was currently available. In some cases, centre directors did not trust the teachers' leadership abilities because of their lack of appropriate qualifications. Teachers discussed performing leadership tasks 'delegated' by a leader, but pointed out that the final responsibility still remains with the centre director.

Developed forms of leadership distribution were rare within the municipalities included in this article. Distributed leadership was developed when leadership was distributed in centres between the centre director and the leading teacher when they discussed the broader frameworks and strategies for curriculum implementation together. The responsibility for the implementation of the curriculum processes within a centre was distributed to leading teachers. However, centre directors thought that leadership responsibilities should be redefined and the director and the leading teacher should clarify the distribution of responsibilities together. In addition, some municipalities had established centre director teams to organise different forms of services and to guide families across districts. Leader teams functioned as a forum for interaction between the directors to reflect on how to create learning communities for teachers, have discussions about values and make guidelines together. In some municipalities, however, the teams were poorly organised or the focus of the discussion in the leaders' meetings was on other areas of managing services. Centre directors however, were hoping to reassert the focus on responsibilities related to education.

It was viewed that interaction among ECE leaders in these municipalities was efficient. They viewed that a director or a leader was not a single person, but a team of leaders in the sector. All stakeholders repeatedly mentioned the importance of interaction between ECE leaders and people in primary schools and welfare sector services in creating education and welfare services within municipalities. Interaction with schools, in particular, was considered essential for negotiating common goals and visions and for creating structures that ensure educational continuity for children.

Discussion

The focus of this study was to explore how leadership was enacted in every day work within ECE settings. The emphasis was on understanding how leadership practice was distributed rather than on how leadership roles were performed: 'it is the nature and quality of leadership practice that matters' (Harris and Spillane 2008, 33). The findings show that participants perceived the *interdependence* between people and their enactments of leadership as a core element of implementing distributed leadership. The anticipation of interdependence between stakeholders was manifested by emphasising the meaning of participation of all stakeholders in decision-making about development proceedings, shared understanding of the core purpose of ECE and awareness of the importance of sharing responsibilities for quality improvement.

Developed forms of distributed leadership were rare

The findings indicated that interdependent forms of leadership enactment were rare. The form of leadership distribution is relevant as only some forms of distribution contribute to organisational improvement (Leithwood et al. 2007). Efficient patterns of leadership distribution include interdependence between stakeholders as opposite to the forms where multiple persons are working as leaders without relevant interaction between them. As such, Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2001, 25) refer to leaders who work towards a shared goal through 'separate, but interdependent work.' According to Spillane, Halverson and Diamond (2004), interdependence emerges when enactment of leadership tasks involves interplay between multiple persons.

In the discussions, leadership enactment was pictured in hierarchical ways. Although there was a lot of co-operation between stakeholders, the responsibilities were not shared and there was not enough interaction between stakeholders to achieve quality improvement in efficient ways. In addition, the majority of leadership responsibilities were loaded onto the centre director's position and centre directors were considered responsible for quality improvement within centres. However, the participants explained that centre directors and teachers did not have any opportunities to participate in decisions about quality standards and proceedings within municipalities. There is a disconnection between the views of the people working directly with the children and the decisions made about ECE at the municipal level. In addition, decisions, made by the ECE leaders, often seem to have been done without appropriate evaluation tools. Likewise, in Halttunen's (2009) study, it was found that centre directors were not necessarily aware of how quality standards were achieved in centres. Similarly, in Harris's (2009) view of distributed leadership it is not just about the sharing of tasks in an organisation, but is also used to explain deeper levels of interaction between members working through shared goals. In early childhood organisations, greater level of interdependence between stakeholders could function as a basis of efficient decision-making.

According to Gronn (2002, 446–447), in 'spontaneous collaboration,' persons with varying expertise or from different organisational levels, combine their expertise to complete a specific task. In 'intuitive working relations,' persons share their roles in trustful relationships while, in 'institutionalised practices,' structures that enable distributed leadership are well-established. In ECE, institutionalised structures for co-operation seemed to be common for ECE leaders' level, and in some municipalities at the centre directors' level, but such systems rarely exist between different

stakeholders whereas, intuitive working relations were reported between centre directors and between teachers. However, inefficient forms of leadership could be understood in this study as being hierarchically disconnected relationships which were reported to exist between all stakeholders.

Development of interdependence

Gronn (2002, 671) emphasises the importance of coordinating leadership processes. For development of interdependence of leadership enactments, it is reliant on building appropriate structures which can enable coordination of interactions between stakeholders aimed at increasing the capacity for change and quality improvement.

According to Leithwood et al. (2007, 47) effective forms of distributed leadership 'reflect unconstrained forms of distribution, especially in the performance of complex leadership tasks.' It means that distributed leadership aims to develop the expertise of those involved and emphasises the potentials to build the 'organisation's collective cognitions on the achievement of complex tasks and organisational goals' (46). In this study, this 'collective cognition' between stakeholders about the developmental challenges seems to be missing. This was because the quality improvements had not been addressed as a system-wide issue within each municipality. It seems that the connection between stakeholders was based on mutual lack of awareness of what the developmental challenges in quality improvement were. Contextual changes identified in this study included the requirements to develop pedagogical work by implementing the national ECE curriculum (STAKES 2003), which increased the participants' emphasis on the implementation of distribution of leadership. Several studies conducted in Finnish early childhood organisations (Halttunen 2009; Hujala 2004; Hujala and Puroila 1998; Nivala and Hujala 2002) have shown that the context of leadership defines leadership discourse and influences the priorities of leading services as well as defining the social and cultural practices of leadership.

In addition, given that centre directors were unable to focus on quality issues because of the increasing amount of managerial duties and difficulties in sharing these responsibilities with teachers, it seems that the responsibilities for quality improvement need to be addressed more carefully within municipalities. Diverse administrative and professional responsibilities of various stakeholders seem to result in a lack of shared understanding of how to improve quality. This means, there is a need to develop tools that can identify the weaknesses and ascertain two way exertion of influence between stakeholders to gain a shared knowledge base of the challenges and strategies to enhance quality of ECE programmes.

Harris (2009, 7) sees that leadership which is built up with interactional influences between stakeholders could work as an 'organisational resource' for improvement. This study has clearly indicated that teachers and centre directors were reacting at decisions given from above than being agents of development. Furthermore, the teachers' and centre directors' control over the micro level decisions within centres was insufficient in achieving sustainable quality improvement. These findings suggest that decision-making about quality improvement requires mutual interaction between micro- and macro-level perspectives within municipalities.

The main concerns about leadership as identified by participants in this study were the responsibility for initiating and developing distributed leadership within the municipalities. According to MacBeath (2005), distributed leadership is a gradually developing process and needs input from leaders to develop. Centre directors were

expected to be responsible for constructing co-operation between themselves, teachers and municipal ECE leaders. However, at the same time, ECE leaders were considered to be responsible for constructing resources and structure for leadership within the municipality. These mutual expectations resulted in no one actually building interactional relationships between stakeholders as one was waiting for the other to make the effort to lead.

Conclusion

In Finnish municipalities, the ideas about distributed leadership are evolving, and there is limited understanding of this concept in practise. Development of distributed leadership should be focused on building practices which enable the interdependent enactment of leadership responsibilities between stakeholders within a municipality system. This study of ECE leadership has shown that the pedagogical work of leaders, directors and teachers is critical in quality service delivery. However, better enactment of distributing leadership responsibilities could contribute to sustained quality improvement and enhance the capacity to deal with changing and competing leadership responsibilities. The development of interdependence requires, firstly, quality assurance systems and tools to share information and decision-making between stakeholders and secondly, reforms of leadership practices from hierarchical forms of leading to building interaction between stakeholders and enhancing teachers' participation in leadership and decision-making. Finally, questions about distributing leadership responsibilities require discussion between stakeholders. This final challenge is connected with the administration of coordinated leadership processes.

Leaders have to establish structures for active interaction and negotiation of responsibilities between the various stakeholders and to promote learning to develop leadership skills of teachers. The challenge of the leaders is to nourish competency for learning in centres, which brings capacity for sharing leadership responsibilities and sustained quality improvements within centres. The efficiency of leadership is based on coordinated structures and tools for information sharing processes which are flexible, depending on the tasks at hand. Knowledge can grow based on these processes supporting capacities to change.

This study clearly shows that there is a need for a better way of implementing leadership by sharing and extending the boundaries of leadership. Multiple perceptions could be heard in the leadership discussions within the seven municipalities included in this study. Along with the traditional leadership role perceptions, the leadership discussions reflected expectations of shared leadership practices to foster change and development. Awareness of the need to develop distributed leadership reflects the need to focus on practices inhibiting leadership change. Such a change may mean that we must stop thinking about leadership as one person's work. This may mean the reduction of managerial work and more time and resources being allocated to valuing pedagogical leadership by supporting both directors and teachers within ECE centers.

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