Article

Views from the Inside: Roles of Deputy Directors in Early Childhood Education in Finland

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Abstract: This study explored the perceptions of deputy directors about their leadership in Early Childhood Education (ECE) centres in Finland. Our aim was to look beyond task distribution and understand how deputy directors enacted leadership with their colleagues. Six deputy directors employed in one municipality in Finland participated in this study. Interviewed individually, the participants discussed how they themselves perceived being in a leadership position and what their leadership looked like in practice. The emphasis they placed on the various relationships highlight the importance of paying attention to the relational dynamics amongst staff within a centre, taking into account both formal and informal authority. Given the increasing global interest in understanding leadership enactment within ECE centres, and its connection with quality service provision, knowledge of the positional leadership roles of deputy directors is of importance to the ECE sector. This is one of the first studies dedicated to exploring the work of ECE deputy directors.

Keywords: early childhood; leadership; deputy directors; pedagogical leadership

1. Introduction

Deputy leadership in ECE is a form of distributing leadership by involving several actors in leadership roles. There are several formal and informal leadership positions in ECE both in Finland and in other countries, e.g., [1]. In addition to deputy directors [2], research shows the variety of positions and titles in ECE leadership: educational leaders [3], middle leaders [4], teacher leaders [5] and ECE teachers as team leaders [6]. Deputy directors, although having a formal leadership role, seem to be the "forgotten leaders" in the same way that Cranston, Tromans and Reugebrink [7] (p. 225) ingeniously described deputy principals in schools. However, the research gap about the middle leadership role is deep in ECE, with no published research focusing exclusively on deputy directors.

In Finland, during recent years, several municipalities have reorganized leadership structures within ECE centres [8]. In this country, the position of a deputy director is understood as a broad concept. There are no national regulations and instead there are local variations based on the municipality on matters such as how deputy directors are appointed, if they are paid extra allowances, what positional terms are used, and how their roles and responsibilities are defined to satisfy the needs of their centres.

Typically, a deputy director is appointed to assist the director of an ECE centre. In other words, they are the second-in-charge or 2IC at the centre. In Finland, deputy directors are also usually identified and selected by the centre director. The specific tasks or roles and responsibilities of the deputy director, however, have not yet been fully documented and analysed by researchers. An earlier paper involving the authors of this study examined the combined roles of both centre directors and their deputies in Australia, Finland and Norway [2]. The present study goes deeper into deputy leadership within Finland only, with the guiding research question being: How do the deputy directors themselves describe

their work and role as a deputy? The analysis of their perceptions enabled us to present 'insider perspectives' on the leadership enactment of ECE deputy directors in Finland.

2. Theoretical Framing and Literature Review

The theoretical underpinnings of this research are aligned with distributed leadership [9,10] and teacher leadership [11]. The discussion is based on examining both formal or informal leadership roles impacting the interactions between deputy directors and their colleagues within their centres. There have been several attempts to define and compare distributed leadership with similar concepts and to question its use as a concept [12]. Distributed leadership has been defined in many ways [1] with similar assumptions being made, such as leadership is not the task of a single person acting alone and includes both formal and informal responsibilities. Robinson [13] (p. 242) defines it by using two main concepts: "distributed leadership as task distribution and the second, distributed leadership as a distributed influence process". A simple way to define distributed leadership is to recognise multiple individuals leading and managing an organisation. A more holistic way is to recognise the interactions between the individuals working in an organisation as well their dealings with external stakeholders. A critical question remains: what kind of power or resources do individuals require to enact leadership as a co-leader? [2].

In conducting school-based research, Spillane [14] (p. 144) defined distributed leadership as a practice "viewed as a product of the interactions of school directors, followers and their situation". According to Spillane [15], the situations, tools, artefacts, routines and language are important aspects constituting and producing distributed leadership: Tools are, for example, communicational devices which may support staff to share leadership. Routines in ECE settings may include meeting chair responsibilities and artefacts of an organisation including the centre philosophy statement. These aspects may be taken for granted but they may form interactive patterns that hinder or support taking part in leadership activities. Some of these matters, relevant to Finland are reflected in the research by Halttunen et al., [2] and Heikka, Halttunen and Waniganayake [6].

Research and theorizing about distributed leadership also show some key elements of it involving co-operation, interdependency and conjoint activity [9,10]. Harris [9] (p. 175) notes how teachers are important creators of their leadership: "where teachers are working together to solve particular sets of pedagogical problems, they will occupy a leadership 'space' within the school and will be engaging in leadership practice". Research also indicates that the director or chief executive officer of any organisation is seen as the crucial source for enabling others to demonstrate leadership. Likewise, it is expected that ECE centre directors support and encourage professional growth of their colleagues and steer the community towards sharing leadership and negotiating the meaning of distributed leadership [8,16–18].

When investigating distributed leadership within ECE centres, Heikka, Waniganayake and Hujala [19] emphasised the uniqueness of the sector. This uniqueness arises through the diversity of governance, ownership, size and staffing arrangements of ECE organisations which are highly regulated by the State unlike any other educational organisations. This is in part historical and, more importantly, connected with the age group of the children—from birth to five or six years—attending ECE centres. One important perspective on distributed leadership is to consider it in relation to pedagogical leadership because the role of leading pedagogy within ECE centres critically impacts program quality and children's development and learning outcomes [16,19,20]. When implementing and assessing the National Core Curriculum that is the core of pedagogy, centre directors set the aims, create the working climate and support staff, but the actual implementation and assessment is done through distributing leadership [16].

Findings of ECE leadership studies highlight the willingness of various staff to enact leadership together with the centre directors, but there were challenges if the leadership work being performed did not have a formal status [8,21]. These studies therefore affirm the importance of having positional authority aligned with a job title such as a centre director

or a deputy director as being a necessary condition that supports the implementation of distributed leadership within ECE centres. The extent to which ECE teachers hold formal leadership responsibilities, however, is not well researched nor is the nature of power sharing amongst those occupying various leadership roles within ECE centres well understood.

Additionally, most studies anchored on teacher leadership have been conducted in school contexts [11], and there are only a few studies focusing on ECE teacher leaders [5,6]. One commonality in the research done both within schools and ECE contexts is that although there are variable practices carried out by teachers, those with a formal teacher leader position also emphasized their informal leadership activities. In Norway, Bøe and Hognestad [5], for instance, realised how teacher leaders balanced solo and shared leadership practices within the hierarchical structures and elements of ECE leadership. They concluded by describing the teacher leadership model as a hybrid situated as a middle layer within ECE centres. The research by Heikka et al. [6] based in ECE centres in Finland also focused on leadership work carried out by ECE teachers working in small teams that included nurses. These teacher leaders did not have a role as a deputy director. In this case, teacher leadership was explained from the perspective of being the pedagogical leader of their playroom team where the ECE teacher usually worked with two childcare nurses.

3. Contextualizing ECE Leadership within Finland

One reason why deputy leadership in Finland is important relates to the fact that most ECE centre directors today are responsible for leading a cluster of centres offering a variety of services within a municipality. On average, a cluster of centres comprises of two units (an ECE centre, family day care unit or an open day care unit). For instance, in a large-scale study by Vesalainen, Cleve and Ilves [22], only 32% of the directors reported leading only one ECE centre or another type of service such as a family day care. This pattern was confirmed more recently by Eskelinen and Hjelt [23], who also found that less than half of the centre directors reported leading only one ECE centre. These management arrangements across diverse centres and locations have increased the need for distributing leadership, and the position of a deputy director is one way of supporting ECE centre directors with their increasing workload that takes them away from their own centre.

Previous studies, e.g., [24], have indicated some general tasks of centre directors: leading pedagogy, service quality, ECE knowledge, human resources management and other daily operational tasks. The new National Core Curriculum for ECE in Finland [25] emphasises both the role of the centre director and the ECE teachers of their centres. According to a previous study [20], the aim of pedagogical leadership is to achieve the teaching and learning goals of an ECE centre. Most often, a deputy director works simultaneously as a deputy and as an ECE teacher leading her own team. There is, however, no published research evidence on how ECE deputies are involved in leading the pedagogy of their centres.

Nevertheless, in Finland, as in other countries, pedagogical leadership is now every ECE teacher's role [26], but at the same time, the importance of the centre director's leadership is being emphasised [17,27]. Moreover, Aubrey, Godfrey and Harris [28] (p. 19) note that ECE centres in the UK are "regarded as 'hierarchical at the strategic level and collaborative at the operational level". The same was evident in Halttunen's [8] research that found ECE centre directors in Finland had legislative responsibilities, but the centre director and other staff performed the day-to-day operational work collaboratively.

4. Materials and Methods

In Finland, municipalities arrange ECE leadership structures in various ways. The data for this present study were collected from one municipality and involved participants employed in public ECE centres. This municipality was chosen because it had a structure of deputy directors in each of its centres. In this municipality, centre directors led a cluster of centres or a few had only one large centre. Typically, a cluster head office was located

at the main ECE centre where the director had her office. Additionally, the director had 2–3 remote units comprising a mix of ECE centres, family day care homes and open day care services.

At the time of data collection in this study, all participants held an ECE university degree, and were employed as ECE teachers. All participants were women, and in the case of two participants, their centre director was a male. Gender was not a variable that influenced data analysis, and to secure each participant's anonymity, only female gender is used when referring to the centre directors. All except one director, worked in a cluster of centres. The number of staff in a cluster or an ECE work unit varied from 20 to 35. Information about each participant's experiences of working as a deputy director and their working community is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants and their work experiences as a deputy director.

Deputy Director (Pseudonyms)	Experience as a Deputy Director in the Current Place and/or in Another Leadership Position	Type of Work Community
Iiris	20 years; Substituting as the ECE centre director for 1 year	Cluster of two centres
Veera	9 months; Substituting as the ECE centre director for about 5 months	One large ECE centre
Ilse	6 years	Cluster of two ECE centres, Family day care and Open day care services
Eila	4.5 years	Cluster of four ECE centres, Family day care and Open day care services
Aino	6 years	Cluster of two ECE centres and Family day care
Ulla	1.5 years Deputy director in another town for 3 years	Cluster of two ECE centres and Family day care

As reflected in Table 1, a total of six face-to-face interviews were completed. The participants were chosen using random sampling. At the time of the data collection, the municipality was divided into six ECE districts, and the aim was to invite one deputy from each district to participate in the research. After obtaining the names and contact information of all the deputies ($n = 33$) from the municipal ECE office, each participant was allocated a code number, placed on individual papers, folded and put into a box. One number from each ECE district was picked out of the box giving each deputy an equal chance of being selected for the interview. If those who were picked first were not able to join the research because she/he did not have time or declined the invitation without a reason, a new number was picked.

The interview structure was kept open to enable interviewees to talk freely about their work as a deputy director. Three main themes were covered with broad interview questions: being a deputy director, professional relationships and development of the deputy leadership at the municipality level. All the interviews started with an opening: 'Please, tell me about you being a deputy director'. In this way, the interviews reflected a narrative or storytelling approach. All the interviews were conducted at the workplace of the interviewee, although, to secure their anonymity, the option of conducting the interview in another place was also offered. The interviews were audio-recorded, and each lasted between 40 to 55 min and were transcribed verbatim. The participants were also asked to complete a daily diary during five working days documenting situations where they demonstrated leadership. Three participants returned the diary and were included in the analysis.

The aim of the study was to understand how deputy directors perceived themselves as being in a leadership position and what their leadership looked like in practice. The interview recordings were listened to, and the transcripts were read several times to let the data guide the direction of the analysis. When writing about thematic analysis Grbich [29] asks researchers to set questions about the data. Writing about text-driven analysis, Krippendorff [30] also emphasised keeping an open mind in reading the text when

doing research. Using these ideas, the first phase in the analysis was to code (i) situations where deputy directors described having leadership or what they included as belonging to their work and position as a deputy; (ii) the descriptions of the relationship between the deputy and the centre director; and (iii) the descriptions of the relationships between the deputy and the other centre staff. There was no attempt to find associations between participants' experience or type of working community in the data analysis. This is a limitation of this kind of small-scale study.

When analysing the transcripts, the work of a deputy director was separated from the position of an ECE teacher to emphasise this specific position and not confuse it with the role and responsibilities of an ECE teacher. During the interviews, the researcher regularly reminded the interviewee to focus on their work as a deputy director. The nature of work expected of a deputy director was categorised in terms of the roles or functions they performed. Not all six participants performed all of these roles.

5. Results

The data analysis in Phase 1 led to the identification of seven roles which described the leadership work of the deputy directors as outlined in Table 2. This table also shows how the jobs performed by these six deputy directors related to specific relationships.

Table 2. Key roles of deputy directors and their connectivity.

Key Roles of Deputy Directors	Frequency ($n = 6$)	Relationships with Whom?
Substitute: Replacing the director when s/he was absent	6	Centre Director
Administrator: Doing specific tasks connected with centre administration	6	Colleagues, children and families
Informant: Keeping themselves informed about developments within the municipality	6	Colleagues
Client servicing: Responding to child and family needs	6	Children and families
Partner: Sharing current and future plans with the centre director	5	Centre Director
Intermediary: Connecting the director to the daily life of the centre	5	Centre Director
Decision maker: Making decisions as the deputy director	1	Colleagues

Essentially, the key roles of the deputy directors were associated with interactions involving children and adults who are the primary stakeholders in an ECE centre. The framing of this analysis was influenced by conceptualisations of ECE leadership typologies in previous research by those such as Ebbeck and Waniganayake [31] and Rodd [32,33]. Each role reflected a particular aspect or quality about the nature of the relationships between the deputy director and the centre director and other colleagues, as well as their relationships with clients who were the children and their families at each centre. Overall, individual participants emphasised different aspects or qualities when describing their work as a deputy director as explained next.

Each participant had an experience of **being a substitute** for the director. Interviews indicated that the deputy substituted for the director when she was absent for a short or long period. Although being a deputy director involved daily operational work, the deputy was more visible when the centre director was absent. Substituting for the centre director during holiday seasons was a pattern clearly identified in the daily diaries and interviews. Describing her work as a deputy, Ulla said that " . . . *you are the one who knows what to do or you know who can solve it like when we need a substitute, when the director is away* . . . "

Collecting various data such as child enrolment numbers and checking staff' shift records were the most frequently mentioned **administrative task** mentioned by all six participants. Most of the issues the three deputies had documented in their diaries related to administrative tasks such as keeping and checking different records. Other administrative tasks identified included organizing staff resources such as "*making plans for the work shifts for the coming week*" (Veera) or "*organising relief staff*" (Ilse).

Each participant articulated the importance of **the information** they received from the municipal ECE office in performing the role of a deputy. They emphasised that being aware and informed about different kinds of issues, compared to the work of an EC teacher or other colleagues, meant that the deputies were trusted to know "*how things should be taken care of and from where to find information*" (Eila). All the deputies also recognised the need to be up to date not only about issues related to the centre but also about those related to what occurred across the municipality.

Being a substitute also underlined that the deputy was **serving clients** by being the contact person for the parents. Participants emphasised that families should always receive a good service. One deputy, Veera, said, "*they [parents] know who I am and if there is something they want to know and if they can't reach the director, they know they can also ask me*". Depending on the issue, parents continued to maintain contact with the deputy even when the director was present at the centre.

The concept of a partnership with the centre director was identified by five participants based on the planning they did together. Being a partner with the director was also recognised as the most satisfying aspect of their work. Frequent contact and meetings characterised their partnership. This also meant that they could share things that could not be shared with other staff, and they could truly support each other. The cooperative nature of their relationship enabled the future development of the centre. Being a partner also served as the best way of enacting pedagogical leadership. Most often, involvement in pedagogical leadership at the centre level was indirect and collaborative. For example, Iiris had several administrative tasks, but she emphasized the support she could give the director more:

> "*[We have] together considered the well-being of the staff, what kind of the services the families need and what is the core in the work done in this new centre of ours. I see it very important to share ideas and think about pedagogy*".

While the centre directors led a cluster of centres and services, they were not present in each unit daily. Although the directors had their office in the same centre where their deputy worked, the duties of the director took her often away from her office unit. Those participants (Ilse and Ulla) who raised the issue of **being an intermediary** explained that deputies were the ones who knew about the daily issues at the centre where they worked, and they transferred this information to the director. A deputy was therefore the connective link between the staff and the director or, as Ilse described it, "*an anchor to the everyday life*".

The role of decision maker was rare. Ilse wrote in her diary that when substituting as the director she asked the director to confirm the decisions she had made. Only Veera's work was characterised by having permission to make independent decisions. Based on the division of labour between her and the director, Veera felt the power of being able to make decisions but also "*not to use the power and responsibility in a wrong way*". Part of her work was to balance staff' work hours, and she made, for example, decisions about allocating shifts at her centre. One reason that explains why Veera did not see it as being always easy to work simultaneously as a deputy and as an ECE teacher was that, after making decisions, she still needed enough strength to work with those for whom the decisions she had made were not pleasant ones.

The data analysis in Phase I identified the practical roles performed by ECE deputy directors. In Phase 2, a deeper content analysis indicated participants' feelings reflecting three overarching themes about the characteristics of deputy directors as noted in Table 3. These themes were also associated with their relationship dynamics within their centres but not necessarily connected with a specific role as indicated in Table 2.

Table 3. Characteristics of ECE deputy directors.

Characteristics of Deputy Leadership	Relationships with Whom?
Silent: Staying quiet and considering how to express oneself to others	Colleagues
Reliable: Being responsible for the whole centre	Colleagues
Restrictive: Deputy leadership was restricted by someone else	Centre Director and colleagues

The three themes identified in Table 3 reflected a broader conceptualisation of how the participants enacted their jobs as deputy directors. These characteristics were indicative of their behaviours, attitudes and beliefs about their work as described next.

Four participants (Eila, Iiris, Veera and Ilse) indicated that they intentionally remained silent or seemingly inactive at certain times by not offering any advice or opinions about matters concerning the centre and the staff. The role of a deputy as being both an employee and as a leader was described as being between "*a rock and a hard place*" (Iiris). Likewise, participants explained how deputies had to consider what they could say in different situations as reflected in the following example:

> "*There are several that kind of situations when I can't join the discussion of my colleagues with very strong opinions. I have to be very careful and responsible about what I say. I think the other staff members have more freedom to say and also say quite sharp views but I need to be more diplomatic and really need to think that I have this role . . . "* (Veera)

At least three participants (Aino, Eila and Veera) believed that being perceived as a reliable person who felt responsible for the whole centre was an important consideration of enacting deputy leadership. Unlike the centre directors whose work did not always take place at the centres, deputies were more often present at the centres.

There were three participants (Aino, Ilse and Iiris) who noted limitations about their role as a deputy. Sometimes, these restrictions were self-defined, and at other times, participants felt controlled by others such as the centre director. The grounds for 'restriction' related to the resources the deputies had when enacting their roles and on what was considered the most important role they performed. A notion in Ilse's diary is a good example of how, when working simultaneously as an ECE teacher and a deputy director, participants had to juggle their role, especially when the centre director was away on holidays: She was not only responsible for the centre, but she also worked with her own child group. Most participants also noted that they had limited time resources for the work as a deputy, and they struggled with their work hours being an ECE teacher with children, which was their main duty. For this reason, two participants (Ulla and Ilse) quite strongly self-restricted their duties, which did not belong to their role as a deputy.

One participant in particular, Aino, noted that it was the director who restricted her work by not giving space and possibilities to enact her work as a deputy. Aino felt very strongly that her director "*wanted to run the show*" alone. Despite her restricted role, Aino believed her colleagues trusted her:

> "*They [colleagues] may come and talk about issues concerning families or something that has happened in the child group or with an individual child. Just this morning one of my colleagues came to discuss with me what should be done in one case*".

6. Discussion

This was a small-scale study focusing only on one municipality in Finland. This is a limitation because the practices of how to enact deputy leadership vary across the municipalities in Finland. Including observational data could have also strengthened our analysis and understanding of the work of these deputies. Nevertheless, apart from two participants, the majority had been enacting the deputy leadership role for more than four years (see Table 1) and had established structures for these roles within their organisational

units. Data analysis raised questions about the importance of supporting centre directors in pedagogical leadership, staff wellbeing and developing the cluster of centres. There is a need for future research on how deputy directors can support the centre director in the core areas of leadership, including pedagogy development and leading these processes by themselves.

As indicated, deputy directors in Finland performed several leadership roles and responsibilities and they could support the centre director in a variety of ways. The findings showed commonalities between the six participants as well as an emphasis placed on the particular leadership roles they performed as a deputy. The seven roles identified in the interviews and diaries were mainly related to daily operational matters and administrative work and illustrate the multifunctional nature of their work. Nevertheless, this research shows that, in school contexts as well as in ECE contexts, deputies have a key role in leading a centre, which warrants further research.

Based on the analysis of previous research on educational leadership, Waniganayake et al., [1] (p. 7) have identified "three enduring relational constructs" that are foundational when enacting leadership. These components suggest that leadership is aligned with developing an organizational vision, professional learning and development, as well as connectedness or collaborative relationships. The findings of this study also highlight the importance of communication and teamwork based on the 'connectedness' between the deputy directors and their colleagues, including the centre director. These aspects reflect both direct and indirect interactions across the organisational unit involving all staff, as well as the children and families attached to the ECE centre where the deputy was employed.

The work of the deputies was inextricably linked with their relationship to others as reflected in the findings presented. The closeness they had with their colleagues was significant in the same way as Rönnerman's et al., [4] note about the close connection middle leaders have to and within classrooms. Closeness came naturally as the centre director was often taken away from her centres while the deputy was present daily. Most of the participants of this study had a strong, satisfying relationship with the centre director and other colleagues cf. [34,35]. Participants also reported that the most satisfying aspect of their work was being a partner with the centre director. Frequent co-operation with the centre director, enough time resources and the director's acknowledgement of distributed leadership ensures a supportive, successful and satisfying role as a deputy director. It can be concluded that it was not enough to be one of the multiple individuals leading a centre as the emphasis was on co-operation, interdependency and conjoint activity [9,10].

However, the possibilities of being involved in developing an organisational vision, as well as staff' professional learning and development, varied among the six participants. Based on the data, pedagogical leadership was not directly embedded in their role as a deputy but was incorporated in their work as an ECE teacher. Nevertheless, participants had indirect influence on pedagogical issues through cooperation with the director. In this study, as in a previous one by Halttunen et al., [2], limited time resources and different understandings of the work of a deputy director were obstacles for cooperating on strategic aspects of leadership. There were variable arrangements made for the deputy to reserve time for this role. In reality, however, quite often the deputies in this study asserted that they had to prioritise the work as an ECE teacher over the work of a deputy. Structural support, including adequate child-free time, may engage deputies more formally in leading the pedagogy and development of their centres.

In the Finnish context, the centre director together with the ECE teachers have the main role in leading pedagogy [6]. The deputies in this study did not have a formal pedagogical leadership role but had influence across their centre on pedagogical and developmental issues in informal ways, providing pedagogical advice when their colleagues came to ask for support. Although the findings indicated the challenges of enacting distributed pedagogical leadership, the deputies wanted to have more possibilities to focus on pedagogical leadership and development of the centres in co-operation with the centre director. It can be concluded that for the deputies, it was not enough to have authority over administrative

tasks, and they also wanted to have a more influential role reflective of their status as a deputy leader cf. [13].

This study affirms that there is good evidence to indicate that ECE teachers are capable of enacting leadership as deputy directors. Given the support and reliance of their colleagues, it is also obvious that ECE teachers enacting the role of deputy directors require support from centre directors, teachers, other colleagues as well as the municipality to achieve better conditions and formal recognition for this work. Hard and Jònsdòttir [36] assert that the support and recognition of leadership responsibilities is highly important in the field of ECE as this impacted equity and resistance towards colleagues abusing positional power within centres.

7. Conclusions

Overall, the findings of this study demonstrated that multiple roles, lack of clarity of the role and responsibilities of deputies, limited time resources and the absence of authority to make decisions can hinder leadership enactment by deputy directors in ECE. For the participants of this study, the most critical concerns were embedded in the relationships with their colleagues and how they themselves understood their leadership roles and responsibilities. This reinforces the call for new research on better understanding of the power of leadership and the relationship dynamics within ECE centres. Additional research is also needed to appraise what kind of power is allocated to these middle leadership positions in ECE to sanction those who act as deputies. With more research, deputy directors in ECE will not be 'forgotten leaders' but will be accurately acknowledged for their important leadership work in supporting the centre directors and other colleagues.

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