

Distributed Pedagogical Leadership and Quality in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

High-quality early childhood education (ECE) is widely regarded as an essential right, with leadership playing a vital role in its delivery. Effective pedagogical leadership significantly enriches children's learning, development, and overall well-being by nurturing collaborative settings and promoting shared decision-making processes. Limited research exists on particular leadership approaches, such as distributed pedagogical leadership (DPL), that contribute to quality improvement, despite the commonly recognized significance of distributed leadership in enhancing ECE quality. Thus, our study aimed to explore the connection between DPL and ECE quality in Finland. A sample of 453 staff members from 35 ECE centers in six municipalities around Finland responded to online surveys in 2019. The participants rated the DPL and ECE quality in their ECE centres. The results of multivariate regression analysis showed that distributed pedagogical leadership responsibilities and power relations were related to structural quality, such as the physical environment and human resources, whereas shared vision, distributed power

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relations, and distributed enactment of pedagogical development contributed to effect and process quality, such as child well-being and pedagogical activities. Distributed responsibilities were also related to intangible resources, and distributed enactment of pedagogical development was related to collaborative ECE planning. The findings imply that municipalities should prioritise investing in the establishment of a shared vision and strategy and the distributed enactment of pedagogical development as part of implementing DPL. Furthermore, because power and authority distribution are essential for pedagogical quality and child well-being, it is crucial to explore approaches to empower and include staff in decision-making.

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Introduction

High-quality early childhood education (ECE) is a child's right. It is suggested in the literature that effective leadership has a positive impact on the ECE quality, which in turn promotes children's learning, development, and well-being (Douglass, 2019). Leadership and quality in ECE are globally recognised as critical components in providing young learners with a sound educational foundation (Barnett, 2003; Bøe & Hognestad, 2015; Epstein, 2018; Ishimine, Pianta & Hamre, 2009; Karlsson, 2024; Modise, 2019; NAEYC, 2021; Okiri, 2024; Sheridan, 2001; Tayler & Bennett, 2010; Yang & Lim, 2023; Yoshikawa et al., 2018).

Leadership for quality requires a participatory and systematic approach, for example, through joint negotiation of visions and the implementation of coherent strategies (Heikka et al., 2021). Shared responsibility for achieving goals is key. Quality management as a whole is built when everyone commits to their tasks. National and organiser-level guidance, plus the ECE centre director's and ECE teachers' responsibilities and duties, promote the achievement of a common goal in this context (Heikka & Suhonen, 2019). Additionally, Yang and Lim (2023) argue that autonomy encompasses both freedom and a sense of ownership and accountability in teaching. Teachers who are actively involved in decision-making are more inclined to critically reflect on their practices, contribute to reforms, and foster continuous improvement. This approach positions distributed pedagogical leadership (DPL) as a means for professional development that also enhances educational standards.

Finnish ECE leadership research has embraced the concept of pedagogical leadership. This concept focuses on guiding and leading the core purpose of early childhood pedagogy within ECE organizations (see, for example, Fonsén & Lahtero, 2024). Essentially, it involves ensuring that the educational practices and philosophies are effectively implemented and maintained. In Finland's multi-level municipal organization, pedagogical leadership is not the responsibility of a single individual. Instead, it is distributed among multiple stakeholders. This means that various people, such as municipal ECE leaders, ECE centre directors, and teachers, share the responsibility of leading and supporting pedagogical practices. The idea of DPL has

been developed to describe how this shared leadership works at a system level. It emphasizes the interdependent (Spillane, 2006) actions of different stakeholders in enacting pedagogical leadership. This approach is distinct from mere delegation, where leadership tasks are simply assigned to others. Instead, distributed leadership involves a collaborative and interconnected effort to lead and support pedagogical practices (Spillane, 2006). For example, while delegation might involve an ECE centre director assigning specific tasks to teachers, distributed leadership would involve the centre director and teachers working separately, but interdependently (Heikka, 2014) to develop and implement pedagogical goals. DPL emphasises the importance of group effort alongside individual strength. Research indicates that distributed leadership fosters better teamwork and consistent teaching methods (Bøe & Hognestad, 2015; Okiri, 2024).

DPL supports quality management by building a shared vision and systemic strategy to achieve goals. Shared and clear responsibilities secure the prerequisites for leadership at the macro level and strengthen quality work in children's groups. DPL in the centres includes pedagogy development, in which ECE centre directors and teachers have separate but collaborative responsibilities and tasks from the perspective of goals (Heikka, 2014; Heikka et al., 2021; Spillane, 2006). However, the development of effective leadership may be half-finished due to limited guidance or limited theoretical knowledge.

It has been suggested that distributed leadership approaches relate to the realization of quality in ECE (Douglass, 2019; Heikka et al., 2021). This study seeks to

clarify which aspects of DPL relate to structural and process quality in Finnish early childhood education. The findings of this research can foster advancements in theoretical developments in ECE leadership. That is, the results of this study could assist in renewing the concepts that describe the main functions in this area and explain their effective implementation in ECE settings and the municipal functions. This research will provide knowledge of innovative approaches to enhance quality provisioning of ECE, and theorizes the rationale for the proposed system-wide multi-faceted leading of ECE through DPL. By extending the focus from centre directors to teachers in leadership for quality, this research also provides new knowledge by indicating how leadership can be enacted as distributed practice (Spillane, 2006), where teachers are expected to lead pedagogy in their teams. This approach to ECE leadership has received growing attention around the world (Bøe & Hognestad, 2024; Yang & Lim, 2023; Okiri & Hercz, 2024). This study can help shed light on the meanings of the new approaches by complementing existing empirical and theoretical research with the use of evidence collected from municipalities in Finland.

The Study Context

The present study was conducted in Finland. According to Urban (2023), a common value base of holistic, play-based learning can be identified in ECE in the Nordic countries. The Nordic model also entails governance through decentralisation and local democracy. In Finland, Sweden, and Norway, this is reflected as strong local autonomy, where local structures and practices play a key role in ECE.



Local autonomy enables flexible procedures for municipalities and citizens, including children, to influence matters concerning themselves (Kiili, 2011). Great strides have been made over the past decade in the quality steering of Finnish early childhood education. The governance of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Finland was moved from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2013. The Act on Early Childhood Education and Care was enacted in 2015 and revised in 2018 to set the goals for ECEC and to regulate the quality of ECE. According to Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018, §3), the aim is to 'provide all children with equal opportunities for early childhood education and care, to promote non-discrimination and gender equality, and to provide them with the ability to understand and respect the general cultural tradition and their linguistic, cultural, religious and philosophical background'. ECE is steered by the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (EDUFI, 2022). Pre-primary education for 6-year-old children is legislated in the Basic Education Act (Act 680/1998) and steered by the Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education (EDUFI, 2014). Additionally, every municipality uses the national curricula framework to draw its own specific guidelines and local curricula.

The quality evaluation of the ECE system is a statutory task (Act 540/2018). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Report highlights Finnish centres' observing, with local authorities determining evaluation processes (OECD, 2015, p. 85). Evaluation is crucial for ECE quality, and municipalities

have a continuous obligation to assess it (Vlasov et al., 2019). The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) focuses on development-oriented quality management and encourages evaluation within the ECEC centres (Ahtiainen et al., 2021). Municipalities should observe educational transformation and evaluate its effects on systemic change, whereas the government should support practical development. Evaluation extends to all educational system levels (Ahtiainen, 2017).

Finnish ECE centres are usually owned, organised, and managed by municipalities (Ahtiainen et al., 2021). ECE centres in Finland educate children aged from 1 to 6 years. One centre can contain 1-10 or more groups of children. In the groups of children under three years, the adult/child ratio is 1/4. In groups with full-time children over three years, the adult/child ratio is 1/7 (The Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 540/2018). Pre-primary education is one year of preschool for 6-year-old children before comprehensive school (Basic Education Act, 680/1998).

The ECE centre directors are usually responsible for the functioning of a cluster of ECE centres and ECE services. The staff in a Finnish ECE centre work in multiprofessional teams in the child groups, and the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018) requires that two of every three educators among the multiprofessional staff must have bachelor's degrees by the year 2030, and at least half of those bachelor's degrees must be in education. Currently, a staff team usually comprises a university-qualified ECE teacher together with two ECE child carers



or one child carer and a teacher with a Bachelor of Social Services degree. Child carers typically have a vocational qualification in social welfare or in health care. The qualification requirements for ECE centre directors will also increase in 2030, and according to the law, ECE centres must have a director who is responsible for the quality of the centre they manage. The staff's pedagogy and competence will be emphasized more than before, and directors will be required to have a master's degree in education from 2030 onwards.

Distributed Pedagogical Leadership

The development of the concept of distributed pedagogical leadership (DPL) in educational research has received growing attention during the past decade (Bøe & Hognestad, 2015; Okiri & Hercz, 2024). However, the concept is still evolving. Researchers have not yet reached a consensus on the concept. One reason for this lack of agreement is the limited research available in this area. Another reason is the absence of a unified understanding of the basic concept of pedagogical leadership within educational research. The variability of perspectives makes it challenging to establish a common framework. As a result, for the contextual appropriateness, the understanding of the concept in this study is anchored mainly with Finnish and Nordic research (Heikka, 2014; Bøe & Hognestad, 2015, 2024). This body of research is complemented and elaborated on by the available international research in the area.

DPL combines the concepts of distributed leadership and pedagogical leadership (Heikka, 2014). Distributed

leadership's core element is that leadership is enacted separately but interdependently between leaders (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001; Spillane, 2006). Heikka (2014) has identified five prerequisites for interdependence in early childhood education (ECE) leadership, which we next describe in more detail, because the research instrument used in this study is based on these prerequisites.

Enhancing shared consciousness of visions and strategies is essential for creating interdependence between leadership enactments (Bøe & Hognestad, 2024; Okiri & Hercz, 2023; Yang & Lim, 2020). According to Sims et al. (2015), a shared understanding of the ECE organisation's purpose by all staff members is crucial for distributed leadership. The participants' capacity to make informed decisions on pedagogy is enhanced when formal and informal leaders participate in the negotiation of goals and values. This brings additional, relevant information from the staff's perspectives to form the basis of decisions (Heikka, 2014; Heikka et al., 2021).

Distributing responsibilities for pedagogical leadership involves, firstly, the provision of sufficient resources for pedagogical leadership in the ECE centres (see, for example, Yang & Lim, 2020). Shared responsibility also means teachers' participation in pedagogical leadership (Grice, 2019). This means, in practice, that teachers take various leadership actions (Bøe & Hognestad, 2015) and especially responsibility for pedagogical planning, assessment, and development in their child groups (EDUFI 2022; Heikka et al., 2022). Teachers' leadership

responsibilities also entail leading and organising daily pedagogical activities, leading parental and multiprofessional collaboration, and enhancing staff team members' professional learning (Colmer, Waniganayake, & Field, 2015; Harris, 2008; Heikka et al., 2016, 2022; Hognestad & Bøe, 2014, 2015). Fulfilling these responsibilities often requires empowerment and professional development for the teachers (Grice, 2019; Yang & Lim, 2020).

ECE teachers in Norway assume leadership roles to ensure high-quality educational experiences are provided. Research has shown that, while teacher leadership is good, more explicit direction is needed. This emphasizes the need for further support and the development of competencies for teacher leaders to improve their efficacy in giving instructional guidance in the classroom (Hognestad & Bøe, 2025). Also in Finland, and for example in Sweden and Singapore, the implementation of DPL has become more difficult due to the teacher shortage (see, for example, Yang & Lim, 2020). This further emphasizes the need for professional development and training.

Distributing and clarifying power relationships is crucial for the functioning of DPL. This includes ensuring participation in decision-making (Heikka et al., 2013) and trust (Grice, 2019). Bøe and Hognestad (2015) indicated how teachers' leadership is embedded in interaction and enacted by positional capacity. It also means a shared authority between directors and teachers in ECE centres. Fonsén et al. (2021), for example, have found that teachers' leadership cannot function if power is not boldly and visibly given to teachers. Grice (2019) revealed that

hierarchical leadership hindered teachers' work for pedagogical change. The authority is shared if the teachers can act independently but interdependently as pedagogical developers in staff teams (Heikka, 2014). Denee and Thornton (2021) stated that in distributed leadership, trust and opportunities for teachers to participate in leadership are important. Heikka et al. (2020) stated that the role of teachers is not yet clear in Finnish ECE communities. The leadership responsibilities of the teachers should be clarified in relation to power distribution. Similarly, in Singapore, Yang and Lim (2020) reported insufficient inclusion of teachers in curriculum decision-making, which hindered the implementation of DPL.

Distributing the enactment of pedagogical development within centers is the core element of DPL. This means sharing goal-oriented and planned leadership functions between centre directors and teachers so that both have separate but interdependent tasks and responsibilities in pedagogical development. Pedagogical development includes, for example, pedagogical reflection among staff (Colmer, Waniganayake, & Field, 2015; Heikka et al., 2022). Shared pedagogical reflection in staff teams led by the teachers is important for enhancing the staff's professional learning (Heikka & Suhonen, 2019). In DPL, teachers can enable, structure, and empower staff for collective learning and development (Grise, 2019). However, teachers have varying dispositions to lead the team to critical reflection and to involve team members in discussion (Grise, 2019; Heikka et al., 2021, 2022; Waniganayake et al., 2018). The Competence Development Model by Sheridan (2001)



highlights how crucial reflective practice is for improving teaching effectiveness. DPL promotes ongoing learning for educators by weaving reflection into daily leadership and collaboration.

Implementation of distributed leadership should be goal-oriented, evaluated, and developed regularly (Heikka et al., 2013). Therefore, developing a strategy for distributed pedagogical leadership is essential. This means creating structures, tools, and practices for interdependent participation and enactment of leadership by all leaders. This can mean, for example, making leadership procedures and responsibilities explicit for all professionals. A forum, tools, and procedures for negotiating shared organisational visions and strategies are essential. The study by Heikka and Suhonen (2019) revealed that the strategies for distributed pedagogical leadership made by the centre directors within their centres were crucial for pedagogical development. The directors formulated a leadership plan together with teachers to enact distributed pedagogical leadership separately but interdependently within the centres.

Quality of Early Childhood Education

Early childhood education (ECE) can fulfill its potential only if it meets high-quality standards (Ahtiainen, Fonsén, and Kiuru, 2021; Hujala, Fonsén & Elo, 2012; Karlsson, 2024; Mäntyjärvi & Puroila, 2019; Von Suchodoletz, Larsen, Uka & Nadyukova, 2022). Nevertheless, the definition of (high) quality remains a subject of debate.

The notion of quality is both value-bound and subject to change (Puroila & Kinnunen, 2017). Different research

methodologies reflect varying paradigms that shape beliefs regarding quality in the associated discourses (Fenech, 2011). Puroila and Kinnunen (2017) found in their review that many quality studies are rooted in positivist, post-positivist, or constructivist paradigms. Research using positivist methods has been dominant, influencing our understanding of quality by minimising the importance of, for example, the perspectives of children and guardians in assessments. Conceptualisations of quality can also illustrate views whereby quality is assessed based on universal criteria related to structure and processes, which are often framed through the lens of experts (Fenech, 2011).

Puroila and Kinnunen (2017) identified four distinct approaches to conceptualising quality. The first approach defines quality criteria in terms of children's learning outcomes, while the second adopts a more comprehensive perspective on children's learning and development as a process focused on evaluating and enhancing practices. The third approach highlights the importance of incorporating various viewpoints, including those of guardians and children, in quality assessments, and the fourth approach stresses the qualities that emerge from material-discursive practices.

The understanding of quality can differ across countries and cultures, with some nations grounding it in specific curricula (Fonsén, Lahtinen, Sillman & Reunamo, 2022) while others focus on children's learning outcomes (Furu & Heilala, 2021). At the heart of Finnish quality structuring lies the ECE environment and the way the established

goals and content for ECE are implemented in practice (Vlasov et al., 2019). The quality of Finnish ECE remains relatively high, characterised by all aspects of children's experiences and environments that are believed to support their holistic development and well-being (Furu & Heilala, 2021).

Various elements in the field of ECE influence the quality of education delivered, including educators' qualifications and the curriculum utilised. Studies reveal that teachers with higher education and extensive training tend to provide superior and excellent ECE experiences. The adopted curriculum also plays a significant role in determining educational quality, with curricula that are developmentally suitable and culturally responsive yielding more favourable results. The nature of interpersonal relationships between educators and children, characterised by warmth and sensitivity, is vital for optimal child development. Additionally, parental involvement stands out as a key element affecting educational quality. Research indicates that active participation of parents or family members in their children's education fosters positive outcomes (Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019; Mäntyjärvi & Puroila, 2019; Ahtiainen et al., 2021).

A study comparing ECE across various nations reveals significant differences in curriculum standards, teacher qualifications, and learning outcomes. While Scandinavian nations emphasise overall growth and learning through play, North American and Asian regions prioritise academic readiness and standardised testing. Conversely, European education systems focus on cultural growth

while fostering both intellectual and social development. Thus, these variations in ECE reflect views on quality that are shaped by the unique cultural, historical, and economic contexts of each area, highlighting the need to understand local situations in quality evaluation. Nevertheless, in the Nordic countries, for example, quality evaluation tools based on different paradigms are used in parallel, and therefore Urban (2022) suggests discussion in Nordic countries about the appropriateness of decontextualized measures. For example, exploration of standardised instruments, such as ECERS, can be seen in Nordic countries (Sheridan, 2007), besides tools that are situated in their specific contexts.

Examining curriculum standards, Nordic countries maintain a child-focused strategy that emphasises the child's social, emotional, and cognitive development through play-based education. Finland's curriculum centers on personalised development plans (Niu et al., 2024), while Sweden advocates for democratic values and children's welfare (Gu, 2006). In contrast, ECE in North America is more formal, emphasising academic readiness and standardised results, especially in the U.S., which focuses on literacy and numeracy (Hernandez, 2024). Canada, while also concentrating on academic readiness, integrates play-based learning, particularly in Quebec, to enhance social and cognitive growth (Alvarado & Galigao, 2024). Asian nations such as China, Japan, and South Korea prioritise structured, academically driven ECE, stressing moral, intellectual, and physical growth to ready children for formal education (Li, 2024; Niu et al., 2024; Woo et al., 2023). In contrast, European nations employ diverse

strategies, often balancing academic and social development. The UK underscores essential skills in literacy, numeracy, and social growth (Huang, 2024), while Germany and France emphasise socialisation and comprehensive development through play-based learning and cultural enrichment (Sylva et al., 2016).

ECE teachers in the Nordic countries are very skilled, typically having a bachelor's or master's degree, with Finland mandating a bachelor's for teachers (Niu et al., 2024). Norway and Denmark also stress the importance of professional training and freedom in developing curricula (Urban, 2023). In contrast, North America shows a lot of differences; in the U.S., basic qualifications can be just a high school diploma or an associate's degree (Hernandez, 2024), while Canada mostly requires a diploma or degree in early childhood education (Alvarado & Galigao, 2024). ECE teachers' qualifications differ across Asia, where academic degrees are highly regarded. In China, teachers must have a college degree in early childhood education, with increasing attention on professional growth (Niu et al., 2024). Japan and South Korea also need highly trained teachers, focusing on teaching methods and classroom experience (Woo et al., 2023). In Europe, many countries require a degree in early childhood education, with the UK needing specialised training in areas such as special needs education (Huang, 2024). Likewise, educators in Germany and France are well-trained, emphasising teaching techniques and cultural development (Sylva et al., 2016).

Concerning learning outcomes, the Nordic countries focus on comprehensive development in ECE, prioritising social, emotional, and cognitive growth. Finland focuses on

personalised learning outcomes and the well-being of children (Niu et al., 2024), while Sweden's system highlights democratic values and critical thinking (Gu, 2006). In contrast, North America's method, especially in the U.S., leans more towards academic performance, stressing literacy and numeracy, with a focus on readiness for school (Hernandez, 2024). Canada, while also appreciating academic skills, emphasises social and emotional growth, particularly in Quebec (Alvarado & Galigao, 2024). ECE in Asia emphasises literacy, numeracy, and science skills, with China focusing on moral, intellectual, and physical growth in a structured environment (Niu et al., 2024). Japan and South Korea prioritise academic achievement, especially in reading, writing, and math (Woo et al., 2023). In Europe, results vary, but there is a strong focus on comprehensive development. The UK takes a balanced approach, combining academic and social growth, while Germany and France concentrate more on social skills, cultural enrichment, critical thinking, and collaboration skills (Sylva et al., 2016).

Several countries have established frameworks and regulations concerning quality (Heikka et al., 2021; Urban, 2022). Quality aspects are usually categorised into process and structural factors. Domains can also be classified into three or more overarching categories that may include structural, intermediate, process, and effect factors (Fonsén et al., 2022; Heikka et al., 2021). In Finland, quality is perceived through postmodern and transmodern perspectives as subjective and co-constructed, grounded in local values and goals (Alila, 2013). Hence, in this study,

quality is assessed using the Finnish quality evaluation model with the four quality dimensions outlined here (Hujala-Huttunen, 1995; Hujala et al., 1999; Hujala & Fonsén, 2010a; Authors, 2021). Firstly, the structural domain encompasses the physical setting, including teacher-child ratios, group sizes, and other physical tangible facilities (Furu & Heilala, 2021). In the context of Finland, Hujala and Fonsén (2010a,b) and Heikka et al. (2021) outlined intermediate quality factors, such as informational communication regarding policies and practices, an inspiring learning environment, professionalism, collaboration, and leadership. According to Hujala et al. (2012), educators' experience in the workforce aligns with quality and fosters excellent interactions between children and their teachers.

Thirdly, the process domain pertains to the quality interactions that occur between teachers and children during the implementation of a quality curriculum. Heikka et al.'s (2022) findings affirm that this is a pivotal aspect of the pedagogical dimension in ECE. Furthermore, it encompasses pedagogy, effective teaching strategies, social-emotional support, and children's engagement in daily interactions with educators and peers (Hujala et al., 2012). Finally, the effect factor pertains to children's learning and holistic development, as well as their positive experiences in ECE and the satisfaction of customers (Heikka et al., 2021; Hujala & Fonsén, 2010a,b).

The Connections Between Leadership and Quality

The connection between leadership and quality in early childhood education (ECE) is profoundly intertwined and

complex. Leadership is a crucial factor in establishing and sustaining high-quality ECE settings (Barnett, 2003; Douglass, 2019; Modise, 2019; Blose & Muteweri, 2021; Hansen & Ringsmose, 2023), yet its impact on quality is dependent upon multiple elements, including leadership style, responsibilities, and the specific context.

Research indicates that leaders play a vital role in cultivating positive environments, promoting lifelong learning, and ensuring the achievement of goals. For example, Togher and Fenech (2020) highlight the necessity for leaders to possess robust qualifications and leadership abilities to facilitate quality improvement. Pianta and Hamre (2009) likewise emphasise the critical role of leadership in facilitating teacher development and improving child outcomes. Leaders also significantly influence parent and community involvement, as noted by Epstein (2018), which is particularly shaped by cultural contexts, such as those found in Qatar (Ihmeideh et al., 2020).

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) underscores that leaders are essential for upholding quality through effective assessment and enhancement strategies (NAEYC, 2021). Leadership also encompasses advocacy at the policy level, in addition to internal practices, as observed by Yoshikawa et al. (2018). Competent leaders secure funding, resources, and community support to maintain high standards in ECE.

Distributed pedagogical leadership (DPL) particularly provides a framework for harmonising quality initiatives across all levels of an ECE organisation (Atjonen, 2015;

Vannebo & Gotvassli, 2018; Vlasov et al., 2019). Leaders who encourage collaboration, engage in reflective practices, and facilitate professional development contribute to embedding a continuous enhancement culture. For instance, leaders in Australia promote quality by supporting the development of educators and aligning the organisation's objectives (Zhou & Fenech, 2022). Furthermore, research conducted by Heikka et al. (2021) indicates that distributed leadership fosters teacher dedication and teamwork, thereby enhancing both pedagogy and learning outcomes.

Douglass (2019) encapsulates contemporary studies, suggesting that effective leadership significantly enhances children's learning, development, and overall well-being, especially when it involves collaboration in driving change and making decisions with staff, fostering teamwork in learning, and enhancing improvement within environments, while also encouraging teacher leadership. Although a connection between distributed approaches in leadership and ECE quality has been suggested in ECE literature, there is no research evidence on the topic. It is important to understand how different leadership strategies contribute to quality, particularly how DPL is connected to quality. Therefore, using quantitative research methods, we aimed to answer the following research question in the present study: What is the relationship between different areas of distributed pedagogical leadership (DPL) (e.g., shared vision, distributed responsibilities, and distribution of power) and different areas of quality (e.g., available resources, child well-being, and collaboration) in Finnish ECE?

Methodology

Participants

The participants of this cross-sectional survey study were 453 staff members (94.5% female, 2.0% male, 3.5% other/no response) from 35 ECE centres in six municipalities in Eastern and Southern Finland. A convenience sampling was used for selecting the participating municipalities of different sizes from different parts of Finland. A link to respond to the survey was sent to all personnel in six municipalities. The selected municipalities and their early childhood education and care services represented a typical organizational and administrative structure in Finland. The number of children under school age in the municipalities varied between one hundred and two thousand. The participation rate was approximately 77%. A majority of the participants (74.8%) had more than six years of work experience, whereas 9.5% had 4 to 6 years, 10.6% had 1 to 3 years, and 5.1% had less than one year of work experience.

Data Collection

Two electronic questionnaires were distributed to all participants in 2019 by municipality ECE leaders. The first questionnaire concerned questions on DPL in the participants' ECE unit; the second questionnaire included questions on ECE quality. Of the 453 participants, 310

(68.4%) evaluated both leadership and quality, whereas 49 (10.8%) responded only to the leadership questionnaire and 94 (20.8%) only to the quality questionnaire. A missing value analysis showed that the data were not missing completely at random: Participants with less than a year of work experience were underrepresented (39.1%) among those who participated in both questionnaires and overrepresented (30.4%) among those who evaluated leadership only. Additionally, those who participated in both questionnaires gave higher evaluations on all leadership variables than those participants who gave ratings only to leadership but not to quality (p values < .001; Cohen's $d = 0.52$ – 0.73).

Data Collection Instruments

Distributed Pedagogical Leadership

The distributed pedagogical leadership (DPL) scale included 28 items grouped into five sections representing the five DPL areas developed in the study by the Authors (2014) (for previous use of the same scale, see the Authors). The questionnaire was suitable for this study because it was developed with Finnish organizational and leadership structures in mind. The participants were presented with a general instruction to respond based on their own experience in their early childhood education (ECE) centre, even though they might not belong to the personnel group that a specific item concerned. All items were responded to on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree). Mean scores for the five subscales were calculated: *shared consciousness of visions and strategies* (5 items, e.g., "There is a clear vision guiding the pedagogy

and its development"; Cronbach $\alpha = .89$), *distributed responsibilities for pedagogical leadership* (6 items, e.g., "Teachers' participation in pedagogical leadership is supported"; $\alpha = .87$), *distributed and clarified power relations* (5 items, e.g., "I have enough opportunities to be involved in decision making regarding ECE in my municipality"; $\alpha = .83$), *distributed enactment of pedagogical development* (4 items, e.g., "Teacher guides the team of educators in developing the operational culture"; $\alpha = .82$), and *Developing strategy for distributed pedagogical leadership* (5 items, e.g., "The responsibilities and tasks for leadership have been clarified and I am aware of them"; $\alpha = .90$). Three items were omitted because of poor internal consistency (i.e., a poor inter-item correlation with the rest of the respective scale and a resulting decrease in the scale reliability coefficient).

ECE Quality

The scale for ECE quality comprised 66 items responded to on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree). The quality evaluation instrument is based on the quality evaluation model of ECE, developed in earlier studies by Hujala-Huttunen (1995), Hujala et al. (1999), Hujala and Fonsén (2010a), and the Authors (2021). The original instrument was updated according to the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood and Care in Finland (EDUFI, 2019) and the FINEEC guidelines and recommendations for evaluating the quality of ECE (Vlasov et al., 2019). The updated scale has been previously used in a study conducted by the Authors (2021). The quality evaluation instrument was used in this study

because it is based on the policy documents that steer ECE quality in Finland.

An explanatory factor analysis was performed to establish the factor structure among the items; accordingly, five factors were created: *physical and human resources* (6 items, e.g., “The outdoor area is safe for children”; $\alpha = .77$), *intangible resources and respectful climate* (19 items, e.g., “The staff is professionally skilled and committed to education and care”; $\alpha = .95$), *effectiveness and child well-being* (4 items, e.g., “Children enjoy coming to ECE centre/preschool”; $\alpha = .87$), *pedagogical activities and educational content* (16 items, e.g., “Staff and children together carry on a wide range of activities based on play”; $\alpha = .93$), and *collaborative ECE plan* (6 items, e.g., “Parents and staff have together written children’s ECE/preschool plan”; $\alpha = .89$). Fifteen items were omitted because of poor internal consistency. Mean scores for the five quality factors were calculated across the respective items.

Control Variables

The participants’ age in years and level of education were used as control variables in the analyses. The distribution of education in the sample was as follows: upper secondary education with vocational or general qualification (e.g., child carer) – 213 participants (47.0%), upper secondary education with further vocational qualification (e.g., teaching assistant) – 20 (4.4.%), post-secondary education (e.g., social educator) – 60 (13.2%), bachelor’s degree (e.g., Bachelor of Education or Social Services) – 127 (28.0%), and master’s degree (e.g., Master of Education or Social Services) – 24 participants (5.3%).

Nine participants (2.0%) did not report on their level of education.

Analytical Strategy

A multivariate regression model was analysed to answer the research questions. All five quality variables in the model were regressed on all five leadership variables. The control variables were included alongside the leadership variables. The analyses were conducted in *Mplus* 8.8 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2022). The models were estimated with full-information maximum likelihood with standard errors that are robust to non-normality (MLR). Intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC) and design effects were calculated because the data were hierarchical (i.e., individual participants clustered in the ECE centres). Relatively high ICCs (.11 to .36) and design effects (2.22 to 4.65) were obtained for all variables, indicating that a significant amount of variance in the Distributed Pedagogical Leadership (DPL) and Early Childhood Education (ECE) quality evaluations could be attributed to differences between the ECE centres. Consequently, the COMPLEX command in *Mplus* was used to take the group-level differences into account.

Research Ethics

The responses to the online questionnaires were collected anonymously. In other words, the respondents' identities were not known to the researchers at any point in the research process. Consent to participate in the study was collected from the participants after they were informed about the study and their rights. The principles of research integrity (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK, 2023) were followed at each stage of the study's

implementation. Links to the electronic surveys were distributed to the research participants by municipality ECE leaders. Help from the local government officers was used to contact the participants and distribute the survey invitation among the ECE staff, although the participants were assured that their survey responses would stay anonymous and not be shared with their employers or anyone outside the research group.

Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations of the study variables. All leadership variables had moderate or strong positive relationships with all quality variables. Strong correlations ($r = .55-.76$) were also detected between the leadership variables, which may signal possible multicollinearity issues when the variables are simultaneously included as predictors in a regression model. The variance inflator factor (VIF) values for these variables ranged from 1.94 to 3.28. VIF values exceeding 10 are generally considered a sign of multicollinearity¹. Nevertheless, the shared variance was accounted for in the final model by allowing correlations between the leadership variables.

¹ As even lower VIF values have been suggested to indicate possible multicollinearity (see Cohen et al., 2002), we repeated the results in a revised model without the predictor “distributed responsibilities for pedagogical leadership,” which had the highest VIF value. Eliminating this predictor from the model increased the predictive power of distributed enactment of pedagogical development on the quality of physical and human resources ($\beta = .9, p = .001$) and on the quality intangible resources and respectful climate ($\beta = .28, p = .01$). Concerning the other predictors, the results remained fairly similar (i.e., within the same level of statistical significance) to the full model, suggesting that the role of the other predictors was unaffected by the eliminated predictor.

Table 1

The Descriptive Statistics and Zero-Order Correlations of the Study Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	N	Min-Max	M (SD)
Distributed leadership														
1. Shared consciousness of vision and strategy												357	1.00–5.00	3.81 (0.75)
2. Distributed responsibilities for pedagogical leadership	.76***											358	1.33–5.00	3.81 (0.74)
3. Distributed and clarified power relations	.61***	.64***										359	1.20–5.00	3.44 (0.75)
4. Distributed enactment of pedagogical development	.70***	.72***	.55***									356	1.00–5.00	3.95 (0.70)
5. Strategy development for distributed pedagogical leadership	.76***	.76***	.65***	.69***								353	1.00–5.00	3.53 (0.82)



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Quality of pedagogy												
6.	Physical and human resources	.57***	.60***	.59***	.55***	.54***						404 1.50–5.00 3.77 (0.64)
7.	Intangible resources and a respectful climate	.50***	.52***	.36***	.50***	.45***	.46***					404 2.56–5.00 4.51 (0.47)
8.	Pedagogical activities and educational content	.53***	.47***	.48***	.52***	.46***	.49***	.77***				404 2.50–5.00 4.20 (0.54)
9.	Effectiveness and child well-being	.40***	.34***	.33***	.34***	.33***	.46***	.66***	.64***			403 2.75–5.00 4.48 (0.49)
10.	Collaborative ECE plan	.42***	.48***	.39***	.47***	.40***	.35***	.50***	.50***	.33***		399 1.00–5.00 4.55 (0.57)
Control variables												
11.	Level of education	-.08	-.14**	.02	-.08	-.14*	.04	-.04	-.02	.01	-.06	444 1–5
12.	Age	.20***	.14**	.06	.11*	.16**	.16**	.10*	.15**	.12*	.07	- .15** 453 21–66 45.88 (11.01)

Note: ^a Spearman's rho coefficient used for the ordinal scale (1 = upper secondary education with vocational or general qualification; 2 = upper secondary education with further vocational qualification; 3 = post-secondary education; 4 = bachelor's degree; 5 = master's degree). * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Figure 1 presents the results of the regression model. The model was saturated (with zero degrees of freedom) because all possible means, variances, and covariances were estimated, and no fit statistics are thus provided. The results of the model showed that, after controlling for the effects of other leadership variables and the background variables, shared consciousness of visions and strategies was positively related to the quality of intangible resources and respectful climate ($\beta = .18, p = .02$), effectiveness and child well-being ($\beta = .27, p = .004$), and pedagogical activities and educational content ($\beta = .24, p = .003$). This indicates that the more positive the participants assessed shared consciousness of visions and strategies in their ECE center, the higher they rated the quality of intangible resources, effectiveness, and child well-being, and pedagogical activities and educational content. Similarly, distributed responsibilities for pedagogical leadership were positively related to the quality of physical and human resources ($\beta = .24, p = .004$), intangible resources and respectful climate ($\beta = .29, p < .001$), and collaborative ECE plan ($\beta = .20, p = .049$). Moreover, positive distributed and clarified power relations were related to high quality of physical and human resources ($\beta = .29, p < .001$), effectiveness and child well-being ($\beta = .15, p = .03$), and pedagogical activities and educational content ($\beta = .22, p = .001$), whereas high distributed enactment of pedagogical development was related to high quality of physical and human resources ($\beta = .13, p = .049$), pedagogical activities and educational content ($\beta = .28, p = .003$), and collaborative ECE plan ($\beta = .24, p = .01$). Strategy development for distributed pedagogical leadership was not related to any of the quality outcomes, nor were the control variables age and educational level. The highest amount of explained variance was found in the quality of physical and human resources, where 44% of the variance could be explained by the five leadership factors, followed by pedagogical activities and educational

Figure 1 is a path diagram illustrating the research model. The model consists of five predictors (left column) and five outcomes (right column). The predictors are: Shared consciousness of vision and strategy, Distributed responsibilities for pedagogical leadership, Distributed and clarified power relations, Distributed enactment of pedagogical development, and Strategy development for distributed pedagogical leadership. The outcomes are: Physical and human resources ($R^2 = .44^{***}$), Intangible resources and respectful climate ($R^2 = .31^{***}$), Effectiveness and child wellbeing ($R^2 = .17^{***}$), Pedagogical activities and educational content ($R^2 = .33^{***}$), and Collaborative ECE plan ($R^2 = .25^{***}$). The diagram shows standardized path coefficients (beta weights) for each relationship. Significant paths are marked with asterisks (*, **, ***). The predictors are grouped by a dashed line, indicating they are measured at the same time point. The outcomes are also grouped by a dashed line, indicating they are measured at the same time point.

Predictor	Physical and human resources	Intangible resources and respectful climate	Effectiveness and child wellbeing	Pedagogical activities and educational content	Collaborative ECE plan
Shared consciousness of vision and strategy	.24**	.13*	.15*	.22**	.20*
Distributed responsibilities for pedagogical leadership	.29***	.18*	.27**	.24**	.24**
Distributed and clarified power relations	.13*	.29***	.15*	.22**	.24**
Distributed enactment of pedagogical development	.13*	.29***	.15*	.22**	.24**
Strategy development for distributed pedagogical leadership	.13*	.29***	.15*	.22**	.24**

Figure 1. Results of the Multivariate Regression Model for Predicting the Five Areas of Quality from the Five Areas of Distributed Leadership, Controlling for the Respondents' Age and Education Level (Standardized Estimates)

Discussion

The findings showed that the staff members' perceptions of distributed pedagogical leadership (DPL) in their Early Childhood Education (ECE) centre significantly related to their perceptions of quality. However, different areas of leadership were related to different quality factors, suggesting that the way leadership is distributed regarding specific practices in the ECE work communities can have complex reflections on the quality of their everyday operations.

Firstly, the results revealed that if the respondents felt that there was a clear and mutually agreed vision leading the pedagogical work in their ECE centre and in their municipality, it was perceived to reflect on a high-quality implementation of pedagogy, the well-being of children and staff, and an appreciative climate and communication in their workplace. The OECD (2020) promotes transparency among stakeholders in ECE to ensure quality effectiveness. Sims et al. (2015) also emphasize that the core of distributed leadership is the creation of the shared meaning of the ECE work in the organization. Fonsén et al. (2020), in line with this finding, discovered that a shared vision helps to improve ECE quality. Active involvement of all participants in an ECE setting promotes vision and goals (Zhou & Fenech, 2022) and assists in making informed decisions on pedagogy by all participants (Heikka, 2021). Thus, when all stakeholders understand the ECE's clear goals, it becomes easier for them to commit to the necessary demands for high-quality outcomes.

Secondly, the results showed that when staff members felt that the more the responsibilities are distributed not only to the head of the centre but also among all staff members, the safer and more functional the facilities are, the more competent and supportive the staff members are, and the better the communication and collaboration within the staff and with families. Fabry, Barblett, and Knaus (2022) also conclude

that teachers' ability to act as pedagogical leaders for quality improvement demands continued teacher learning.

Similarly, perceptions of distributed and clarified power relations were positively related to quality evaluations regarding child well-being, pedagogy, and human resources. In other words, the basic tasks of education and care seem to benefit from the staff members' empowerment and experience of power being fairly distributed in their workplace. ECE teachers in Finland are defined as pedagogical team leaders responsible for pedagogical actions in their own child groups (Ahtiainen et al, 2021). This understanding demonstrates that authority is not centred just on ECE leaders, but that teachers are also involved and believe they have a voice and can participate in decision-making. Teachers will have a voice in mutual decision-making that can enhance their ability to carry out their essential tasks more effectively when power and authority are vested in them. Therefore, our results suggest that valuing teacher autonomy and expertise helps to improve the quality of education in ECE. Zhou & Fenech (2022) also found that when the centre staff value educational leaders and their work, it enables the quality of education.

The distributed enactment of pedagogical development was found, in turn, to have a positive relationship with the quality of pedagogical activities, educational content, a collaborative ECE plan, and physical and human resources. Distributed pedagogical development can promote pedagogical quality by enhancing mutual reflection on the daily practices in the staff teams (Heikka et al., 2022). The reflection is led by the teacher and focuses on development areas and how the team works together to reach goals aligned with local and national policies. The reflections can then be utilized in the curriculum planning. Leeson, Campbell-Barr, and Ho (2012) emphasise the meaning of context sensitivity when leading quality improvement. They also call more

attention to the interrelationships between policy, leadership, and quality in ECE research. Distributed pedagogical development can be a flexible strategy enabling the consideration of the local needs and characteristics of each child group, as well as families' views in the development of quality.

It has been found that to be functioning, distributed leadership has to be well planned, goal-oriented, managed, and developed continuously (Heikka et al., 2013). However, strategy development for DPL was found in this study to have no unique contribution to the quality perceptions over and above the effects of the other leadership factors. It is possible that because strategy development functions on a higher level – laying the strategic grounds for leadership and pedagogical practices – its effect on the quality outcomes may be transmitted through the other leadership variables. This is something that should be further explored in future studies.

Limitations

Some limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of the study. Firstly, the questionnaires included a long list of items on a number of different concepts, and it may have been difficult for the participants to interpret all of them. The measures' validity should be further developed in future studies. A mixed method approach with qualitative analysis could also increase our understanding of the results by clarifying what the concepts mean to different individuals; for example, what does 'good quality' mean to them. Secondly, our sample was not fully representative, for example, in terms of the participants' work experience, creating possible bias in the results. The findings should be replicated in more heterogeneous samples. Thirdly, although we did take into account that the participants were clustered

into several ECE centres, our analyses focused on the between-person level, that is, on the perceptions of individual participants. Larger samples that allow proper multilevel analyses would be needed in order to examine whether the leadership and quality perceptions vary both within and between the ECE units.

The questionnaires developed for the study are particularly well suited for the evaluation of Finnish early childhood education and care, as they are based on the value base of Finnish early childhood education and care as well as social policies and structures. The results describe the manifestations and relationships of the studied phenomena in the selected Finnish municipalities. Because quality is understood as a context-specific phenomenon, when carried out elsewhere, the study should use local quality indicators. In addition, the sampling did not include the biggest cities in Finland, and in that respect, the study participants do not represent all municipalities in Finland.

Conclusion

This study contributes to understanding relations between distributed pedagogical leadership (DPL) and quality in Finnish early childhood education (ECE). The results showed that the effectiveness of DPL positively relates to the quality of ECE in the six Finnish municipalities. We would particularly like to highlight two critical observations from the perspective of quality in the implementation of distributed leadership. Firstly, the study's results suggest that municipalities should prioritise investing in the development of a shared vision and strategy as part of the implementation of DPL, as it's also shown in international studies on distributed leadership (Sims et al., 2015; Okiri & Hercz, 2023; Bøe & Hognestad, 2024). Contemplating building a shared vision and strategy requires functional structures for sharing

information and shared decision-making in the organisation (Heikka et al., 2013). Therefore, municipalities should focus particularly on how to build interdependence within an ECE organisation to support interaction between different levels and, notably, how to involve the staff in joint negotiations on visions and strategies.

Municipal local policies and structures in Nordic countries create a central operational environment conducive to leadership and quality (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2022). A recent Finnish study found that municipal structures play an important role in the implementation of pedagogical leadership (Heikka et al., 2024). Earlier research has shown that building interdependence may not always work in practice in a multilevel municipal organisation, and leaders in the municipality do not communicate sufficiently with each other. The views of the personnel in building the vision and strategy may be limited in this case, jeopardising both awareness and commitment to goals and common approaches (Heikka, 2014). The problems of vertical co-operation in quality management have also been highlighted in recent Nordic studies (Urban, 2022, 2023). This has now been emphasised in the Finnish municipalities, and things have improved. Based on our results, staff members' perceptions of visions and strategies were relatively positive, and it was one of the DPL factors relating most strongly to quality. Reflecting on the Finnish system and leadership for quality within a larger framework, we can observe that the context of Finnish ECE leadership is relatively complex, and it poses challenges in the implementation of DPL. It seems that Finnish municipalities have now adopted distributed leadership in a more formal way, which could be reflected in the ECE quality.

Secondly, due to the findings demonstrating that power and authority distribution are vital for pedagogical quality and child well-being, it is critical to explore ways to empower and involve staff in decision-

making. According to Denee and Thornton (2021) and Grice (2019), this necessitates a shift in the traditional concept of leadership, in which the leader has the power, and the staff executes the decisions. As such, a new understanding of leadership as distributed strengthens and increases teachers' commitment, empowerment, and motivation. That is why it is important to pay attention to the critical component of DPL, because when responsibilities are shared, power is also shared (Heikka, 2014). Fonsén (2021), for example, has found that teacher leadership cannot function if power is not boldly and visibly given to teachers. Yang and Lim (2020) reported that the development of DPL was hindered in Singapore because teachers were excluded from the curriculum decision-making. This negatively contributed to improving quality.

ECE teachers are responsible for pedagogical planning, assessment, and development in the Finnish policy (EDUFI, 2022). However, teachers in Finland may feel insecure about their role in the staff teams (Heikka et al., 2021). This is a challenge for ECE communities, local municipality leaders, and policymakers. Finnish National ECE policy may better support teachers' positions in this regard, compared, for example, to Norway and Australia. It should be stated more clearly in Finnish policy documents what the teachers' roles and responsibilities are regarding pedagogical leadership and quality improvement. It is also important to pay more attention to teacher professional development at different stages of education and career, as studies in Australia (Grice, 2019), Singapore (Yang & Lim, 2020), and Norway (Hognestad & Bøe, 2025) have shown that it is essential to support teachers' leadership skills and pedagogical expertise for the implementation of DPL. In addition, cultivating a culture of teacher leadership in ECE centres so that the whole community supports teachers' identities as pedagogical leaders and values teachers'

pedagogical expertise and decisions about pedagogy is also essential (Yang & Lim, 2020).

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