

# Superior's Pedagogical Support in Distributed Organisation of Early Childhood Education

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## Abstract

The focus of this research is on the distributed organisation of early childhood education: or in other words long-distance management, given that there are managers who have many day-care centres or several types of day care to lead. My focus is comparing the staff who are physically in the same unit as their superior, to those who work in units without a superior's constant presence.

The data were collected from a questionnaire that was constructed to include the question: "What kind of pedagogical support do you need from your superior?" The results highlight several categories, such as cooperation and interaction, pedagogical guidance, development and resources. Questions using a 16-point Likert scale measured pedagogical support. The data indicated that staff who worked without a superior's constant presence felt that they received more support than those physically working in the same unit as their superior.

## Tiivistelmä

Tämä artikkeli keskittyy tutkimaan pedagogisen tuen kokemuksia varhaiskasvatuksen hajautetussa organisaatiossa. Varhaiskasvatuksen hajautetulla organisaatiolla viitataan tässä yhteydessä organisaatorakenteeseen, jossa yhdellä esimiehellä on johdettavanaan monta päiväkotia tai päivähoitomuotoa.

Aineisto kerättiin kyselylomakkeella, jossa esitettiin avoin kysymys: "Minkälaista pedagogista tukea kaipaat esimieheltäsi?" Vastaukset ryhmiteltiin seuraaviin luokkiin: yhteistyö ja vuorovaikutus, pedagoginen ohjaus, kehittäminen sekä resurssit. Lisäksi lomakkeessa oli 16-osainen Likert-asteikkoinen summamuuttuja, joka kuvasi pedagogiseen tukeen liittyviä väittämiä. Tutkimuksessa havaittiin erillisyyksikössä

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työskennelleen henkilöstön kokeneen saavansa enemmän pedagogista tukea kuin henkilöstön, joka työskenteli esimiehen kanssa samassa paikassa.

## Introduction

By visiting and observing the meetings of day-care centres' superiors or headteachers the main problem of their work is evident. It seems that most of their days are occupied with increasing amounts of paperwork – both related to administration and management – even though they would prefer to engage in leadership activities with their staff. Leaders should have time for guiding people in a manner that produces the desired results. How can leaders organise their day to manage and complete everything? How can, and how do, leaders prioritise their tasks? Soukainen and Keskinen (2010) have explored the way that superiors believe they can influence their work and found that a majority did not actually realize that this would even be possible: they blamed this on a lack of time, and said that they would need secretaries to help with their work. However, this problem was less acute if computers are used effectively, and teams are utilized to manage the day-care centre. It is often argued that trained and professional early childhood staff help their superiors – but there is also another point of view, that is, that the superior should take care of the staff. Motivated and engaged staff are a major resource, which no employer can give up without there being consequences (Manka, 2007).

Although superiors have their problems, subordinates also experience certain difficulties when working in early childhood services. The support of a superior is thus very important. If there is a time pressure in the work, there is too much to do, there is a lack of control, or a feeling of being unrewarded, then conflicts appear – sooner or later the employee will be stressed (Manka, 2007).

I became involved in this problematic world through my position as a headteacher of a day-care centre. I was the leader of a large day-care centre comprising four teams and 12 employee who worked in family day care – there were 25 subordinates in all. One of the teams worked in a different building. During my time there, I began to consider what difference physically working in the same building as one's superior might make, as

opposed to working in a different building, in which the superior has no office. And what about the women who worked from their own homes?

Vartiainen (2004) defines distributed organisation through four elements: place, time, diversity and the way of interaction. Hujala and Puroila (1998) and Nivala (2002) had opened up the theoretical discussion about the early-childhood leadership phenomenon in relation to context and culture. The context model is based upon Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological theory where leadership is displayed in a certain context – my context was a distributed organisation. For the purposes of this research, I transferred the term from the industrial field or sector of enterprises to the context of early-childhood education (Vartiainen, Kokko, & Hakonen, 2004; Léman, 2005; Léman, 2007; Halttunen, 2009).

These kinds of distributed organisations became increasingly common during the 1990s (Halttunen, 2009). One reason for this was the saving and reorganisation of work: when one manager retired, her or his work was re-organised and rationalized. Another main reason was the tendency to reduce hierarchical structures.

Thus, a number of key questions have been raised. What does it mean to work in a distributed organisation in a pedagogical context? What happens to the interaction between the superiors and the staff in a distributed organisation? Can I find the solution to these questions from LMX (leader-member exchange) theory (Scandura & Lankau, 1996; Illies, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007; Northouse, 2007)?

Therefore, this article focuses on identifying what kind of pedagogical support staff need, and whether there are any differences in how the staff experience that support depending on the context of their workplace.

## Distributed organisation in early childhood education

Increasingly, organisations are trying to reduce costs, get closer to their customers and engage the best talent, wherever that may be. This kind of distribution and mobility of work will strongly influence its management. Working in multiple locations, with different working hours and without a traditional team nearby challenges both superiors and subordinates (Vartiainen et al., 2004). Distributed organisation can easily lead to a situation where superiors control and oversee their employees' work, without

developing any trust. It is difficult to establish and maintain trust when face-to-face contact is reduced (Sims, 2010). Also, employees can feel that they are not getting any support from their superiors. According to Fisher and Fisher (2001), people will provide a special effort when they feel trusted and supported. Yet the possibilities for informal discussion are decreased in a distributed organisation, and thus it is harder to feel a part of the “unit”.

In an early-childhood context, distributed organisation means that one manager is a superior for many day-care centres or that one manager has different services – for example, a day-care centre and family day care – under his or her control (Léman, 2007; Halttunen, 2009; Keskinen & Soukainen, 2010; Soukainen & Keskinen, 2010). We can compare this with the “traditional organisation” where there was one manager per day-care centre or one supervisor for family day care. In early childhood education, distributed organisation can also mean that the local area commune is divided into areas which include different kinds of services. There can then be so-called Service Area Managers who are the superiors of managers who have their own units; and these units can cover almost anything. Especially in these kinds of organisations, organisational citizenship behaviour has a significant role, and the role of a functioning structure in obtaining a good interaction between a superior and subordinates cannot be stressed enough.

From a client’s point of view, distributed organisation is very useful. When the child is very young he or she is taken care of in a family day-care. The parents transact their business with a manager, with whom they later collaborate when the child goes to a day-care centre. The clients thus deal with the same person, no matter what the reason. Moreover, the possibilities to use the internet are growing; applications for day care can be filled out electronically, or the day-care fees can even be calculated with an online fee calculator. It is easy to find information from website, no matter where you live or to where you are planning to move. Indeed, municipal day care follows the same rules and laws throughout the country, as organisational differences do not influence the law.

Therefore, from the client’s point of view things are straightforward: but what about from the superior’s viewpoint? The Trade Union of Education in Finland has conducted two surveys, in 2004 and in 2007. Their results show that the superiors of day-care centres do not work with children as often as they used to. The reason for this change is said to be providing the superiors with more time for leadership – but at the same time the units

have grown in size. One superior may even have 30 subordinates. According to the survey from 2007, almost 60% of superiors had, alongside day-care centres, also family day care, playground activities or other kinds of services to lead. This high percentage means that distributed organisation in early childhood education is rather common.

Working in a distributed organisation is also challenging for the staff, as they are unable to find support when they need it, because their manager is not present all of the time. It is difficult to build trust by leading from afar and without knowing what the staff are doing, and how. If work management is lacking a superior's support could be helpful, and feelings of well-being or of stress are correlated to social support (Karasek & Theorell, 1990).

Here I am talking about distributed organisation in early childhood education: but does this have anything to do with distributed leadership? Lately, there has been much research into distributed leadership which can result, for example, in a school in which there is a head teacher who deals with resources and a pedagogical leader who takes care of pedagogical guidance and development.

## Leader-member exchange theory (LMX) and organisational citizenship behaviour

As mentioned above, organisational citizenship behaviour plays a large role in distributed organisation. Besides organisational citizenship and leadership skills, the relationship between a superior and their subordinates is important. The leader-member exchange (LMX) theory's main principle is that leaders develop different types of exchange relationships with their followers (Illies et al., 2007). Also, the role that trust plays is one determinant of intraorganisational cooperation (Kramer, 1999). LMX has significant influences on task performance, satisfaction, turnover and organisational commitment (Gerstner & Day, 1997; Zhang, 2012). Relationships between superiors and subordinates are characterised by, for example, physical or mental effort and emotional support (Durarajen, 2010).

Zhang (2012) suggest that through a strong relationship with a hierarchical leader, a team member may be privileged to resources or information about the team. They also assume that LMX is positively related to a team member's emergence as an informal leader as perceived by peers.

Subordinates in high-LMX relationships are delegated with additional tasks and can act as agents for the leader. This high LMX provides resources that also enable the individual to claim leadership. Thus in LMX theory, there is an assumption that the trust between superiors and staff is strong, and that this trust is a basic element for good interaction and cooperation. If there is not enough trust in a superior–subordinate relationship, the staff will not be able to receive all the support they need.

If we think that leadership is formed in a process where superiors and staff do their jobs (Juuti & Rovio, 2010), LMX theory and the interactions between superiors and subordinates is very meaningful. Therefore, in a distributed organisation in particular, LMX theory is important. How does a superior arrange face-to-face meetings, set goals collaboratively, and make them concrete? The list of such questions is never ending. LMX-theory explains the actions and behaviours of a superior: but what is required from the subordinates? In organisational psychology there is the term “organisational citizenship behaviour” (OCB), as mentioned at the beginning of this section. According to Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine and Bachrach (2000) almost 30 potentially different forms of citizenship behaviour have been identified. Moreover, the number of publications on this field grew considerably from 1983 to 1999, from only a few to nearly 200, and today the research in this field is still growing. Podsakoff and others organised these conceptual definitions under seven common themes or dimensions. These dimensions were: helping behaviour, sportsmanship, organisational loyalty, organisational compliance, individual initiative, civic virtue, and self development.

## Trust

Managers play a central role in determining the overall level of trust. They also design reward and control systems. (Kramer & Tyler, 1996.) Related to this idea of trust in distributed organisations, Vartiainen, Hakonen, Koivisto, Mannonen, Nieminen, Ruohomäki and Viertola (2007, 14) argue that: “Management typically has to rely more upon results than upon the supervision and direct control of behaviour typical of traditional organisations. Motivation of employees and social bonding, two of the major benefits of face-to-face communication, has to be at least partly

accomplished in other ways.” The issue seems to be in relying on each other – not about control.

LMX theory tries to explain the interaction between leaders and followers. Trust is seen as part of the human interaction between two persons (Laine, 2008); in circumstances where a subordinate works for a long time without seeing or talking to a superior – as it may be in distributed organisations – this trust must have previously been developed. Fisher and Fisher (2001) offer tips for developing this trust, and from their point of view it is very important for a superior to communicate through face-to-face interaction. That is why in an early-childhood context it is also important to organise meetings or workshops where subordinates who usually do not see each other can, at least sometimes, do things together. By doing things together, they can picture the kind of organisation that they are working within. This is very important, especially in family-day care situations where staff are working alone in their own homes. Trust is increased among subordinates when they know, and care, about each other – and not only about the job they do.

Fisher and Fisher's (2001) tips for developing trust are as follows: 1) communicate openly and frequently; 2) to get trust, give trust; 3) be honest; 4) establish strong business ethics; 5) do what you say you will do, and make your actions visible; 6) make sure that your interactions with the team are consistent and predictable; 7) from the outset, set the tone for future interaction; 8) be accessible and responsive; 9) maintain confidences; 10) watch your language; and 11) create social time for the team.

## Pedagogical leadership

Pedagogical leadership can be defined in many different ways. In a limited sense, it can mean a person who is a manager of a pedagogical organisation such as a school. More widely, it can mean a complicated system that is built to maintain subordinates' constant development and support adults as learners (Rodd, 2006). Pedagogical leadership is a term that also includes pedagogical support and guidance. Both individuals and teams require a superior's guidance to progress (Parrila, 2009). One method to increase efficiency in subordinates' pedagogical awareness and professional

development is mentoring. As with mentoring, coaching is another collaborative process that helps teams to achieve goals and objectives.

Fisher and Eheart (1991) conducted a survey in the early 1990s about factors related to the quality of caregiving practices in family day care. They noticed that training and support (in that study: child nutrition programs, professional associations, book loans, toy loans, county referral services and public libraries) are factors that can be manipulated to improve the quality of care. This support is not pedagogical support, requiring a superior's guidance. Fisher and Eheart's study was comprehensive and the caregiver's training was included in the model. The idea of a superior helping to progress a subordinate professionally is based in socio-constructivism, meaning that previous knowledge, skills and experience influence current learning (Parrila, 2009).

Therefore, pedagogical leadership is one part of a superior's task. Yet, some researchers think that the term 'pedagogical leadership' is unclear as a concept (Karila, 2001). Their (1994) reports that a superior as a pedagogical leader helps subordinates to act better more effectively. She also names competence areas where a manager should develop his or her own, but also his or her subordinates, competencies. These areas are cognitive skills, affective skills and social skills. Reviewing these different researches and theses presents an idea that there are almost as many definitions for the term pedagogical leadership as there are writers. Thus, for the purposes of my research, I define pedagogical leadership very widely, as do Nivala (2002b) and Fonsen (2008), who think that the basic task of day care is early childhood education. Therefore, pedagogical leadership is the development of this as its core substance.

## Method

This research took place in Southern Finland during 2006. I interviewed 10 superiors who were leading distributed organisations. I constructed a questionnaire, which was presented to the superiors that I interviewed and their subordinates (87% answered, n=223). In the questionnaire there was this open-ended question: "What kind of support do you need from your superior?" and also 16-point Likert scale questions concerning

pedagogical support. From Table 1 can be seen the titles and workplaces of the participants.

I coded the open-ended questions with data-based content analysis. I made a scale variable from the Likert-scale questions and used a Mann-Whitney test to compare two groups: those who physically work in the same place as their superior and those who physically work in a different place to their superior.

**Table 1. The titles and workplaces of the participants, superiors not included**

Physically the same workplace as your superior?			N	Percent
yes		child minder	3	3.8
		nursemaid	36	45.6
		teacher	22	27.8
		other	17	21.5
		total	78	98.7
		missing	1	1.3
	Total		79	100.0
no		child minder	48	50.0
		nursemaid	15	15.6
		teacher	14	14.6
		other	17	17.7
		total	95	99.0
		missing	2	1.0
	Total	96	100.0	

other = assistant, cleaner or cook

The results were studied from two perspectives depending on the research question and strategy for data collection. The first research question was “What kind of pedagogical support do the subordinates need?”, for which the data were collected with an open-ended question. The second question was “Is there any differences in subordinates’ experiences by getting support depending on the workplace?”, for which the data were collected by the 16-point Likert-scale questions.

## Results

### *The subordinates need the superior's presence*

Almost 63% of the 223 participants answered the open-ended question about their pedagogical support. Most responses described an existing problem, and how they needed their superior's support to solve that problem. Some of the responses included words like "trust", "frank", "feedback" and "instruction". Some of the respondents expressed a wish for education and courses.

I coded the answers into the following categories:

- cooperation/interaction
- pedagogical guidance
- development
- resources

The category of cooperation and interaction contains responses like meetings with personnel, togetherness, common values and the superior's presence.

"That the superior answers the phone if I ring." (A 816)

The category of pedagogical guidance contained references to feedback discussions, development discussions between superiors and subordinates, discussions about pedagogical issues and there generally being time for discussion.

"Discussing about difficult matters and how superior should take responsibility for them." (A 801)

The category of development contains references to education, the changing of proceedings, courses, knowledge and supervision.

"Possibilities to participate proper schooling. Now courses last for two to three hours and it's impossible to take part in those lessons because there is not enough personnel to take care of the children during that time." (A 717)

The size of the group of children, materials and human resources are included in the category resources.

"More material and *toys*." (A 1002)

From these varied answers, we can see that subordinates need different kinds of pedagogical support. Some would like to have support which is cognitive – like guidance – some require material support, for example toys.

*The feeling of getting pedagogical support differs depending on where you work*

By analysing the 16-point Likert-scale questions, I compared the two groups of subordinates who physically work in the same place as their superiors, and those who work from afar. I constructed a scale variable named “Superior’s pedagogical support”.

I carried out a statistical, non parametric Mann-Whitney test and compared the two groups. Those who either worked all the time or sometimes in a physically different place to their superior thought that they received more support (mean 3.94) than those who physically worked in the same unit as their superior (mean 3.71), Mann-Whitney,  $Z = -2.311$ ;  $p = 0.021$  ( $<0.05$ ).

Some main items were highlighted with this scale of variance. Relating to pedagogical guidance, 21.6% of those who physically worked in the same place as their superior thought that they received a lot or quite a lot of pedagogical guidance. On the other hand, 42.7% of those who worked apart from their superior thought that they received a lot or quite a lot of pedagogical guidance. The percentages were 40.5% and 28.2%, respectively, if we view the answers for the options of little guidance and no guidance at all. This means that over 40% of those who physically worked in the same place as their superiors thought that they got little pedagogical guidance, or no guidance at all. Table 3 shows that there is a statistically significant difference between the two groups ( $p \leq 0,05$ ).

**Table 2. Scale variable: Superior's pedagogical support**

Scale variable	Items	Number of items	Cronbach's Alpha	Correlation	Mean	Std. Deviation
Superior's pedagogical support	Commendation and recognition from superior. Pedagogical guidance. Sufficiency of guidance. Development discussion. Usefulness of development discussions. Positive feedback from superior. Superior informs me of matters concerning me. Superior informs me of matters concerning early-childhood education (work). Superior knows what I'm doing (my tasks). Superior encourages me. Superior trusts me. Superior knows the problems of my work. Superior supports subordinates. Superior's fair management. Superior is flexible. Superior's advice transferred into practise.	16	.917	0.347–0.794	3.79	0.70

**Table 3. Pedagogical support crosstabulation**

			Pedagogical support			Total
			little or not at all	not little, not much	a lot or quite a lot support	
Physically	the same	Count	35	34	25	94
		Expected Count	29.0	30.3	34.7	94.0
	different; including those who sometimes work in the same place	Count	32	36	55	123
		Expected Count	38.0	39.7	45.3	123.0
Total	Count	67	70	80	217	
	Expected Count	67.0	70.0	80.0	217.0	

$$\chi^2 = 7,7; df=2; p=0,02$$

The other interesting proposition relates to the feelings of trust, as 2.6% of those who physically worked in the same place as their superior felt that their superior did not trust them at all, or only a little. Only 1% of those who worked from afar thought that their superior did not trust them at all. Regarding the feeling of being trusted, 70.9% of those who physically worked in the same place, and 86.4 of those who worked afar, thought that their superior trusted them a lot or quite a lot. From Table 4 it can be seen that there is also a statistically significant difference between the two groups when it comes to trust.

**Table 4. Trust crosstabulation**

		Pedagogical support			Total	
		little or not at all	not little, not much	a lot or quite a lot support		
Physically	the same	Count	2	23	69	94
		Expected Count	1.3	16.5	76.2	94.0
	different; including those who sometimes work in the same place	Count	1	15	107	123
		Expected Count	1.7	21.5	99.8	123.0
	Total	Count	3	38	176	217
		Expected Count	3.0	38.0	176.0	217.0

$\chi^2=6,46; df=2; p=0,04$

## Discussion

Though my sample is somewhat limited, the answers to the open-ended question are similar to those commonly found in the books of organisational psychology and management literature. Also, the high correlation between the items in the scale variable tells us from which parts the pedagogical support constructed. Based on the documentation, it seems that the superiors do things differently when they lead from afar. Though there is less face-to-face interaction, the structure seems to be more explicit in a context where the superior’s presence is not felt on a daily basis. Those who physically work in the same building as their superior can arrange things in passing in the corridor, or during coffee breaks. Leading and managing from afar requires regular meetings, and the articulation of the vision, mission, core values, big picture goals and revenue projections. The superior must provide coaching and operating support besides ensuring that the subordinates have the resources they need.

When it comes to the feeling of trust, the participants in this survey have been lucky. They felt that their superiors trusted them and were are

not under any “negative control”. Furthermore, they understand what is expected of them, and how they will be evaluated; they have power and responsibility. “Teams with trust converge more easily, organise their work more quickly, and manage themselves better” (Lipnack & Stamps, 2000, 69). This is the main issue – the superiors should focus on building trust with their subordinates. Group dynamics develop differently in distributed groups than in groups where people work in the same place (Vartiainen et al., 2004). I also collected additional data from interviews with superiors which are not included in this article. Many superiors said they did not attribute much significance to their subordinates’ awareness of working in a distributed organisation. However, I think they should – if not for the subordinates’ sake then at least for themselves. Leading a distributed organisation needs different kinds of tools than a traditional organisation, where there is one superior leading one kindergarten.

According to my results, it seems that the superiors had been successful with their units which are in a different physical location to themselves. They should thus use the same structure with the units that are in the same location as their offices. This could be done firstly by making their location visible, and by keeping a clear schedule for their meetings, so everybody can see that the superior works in many different places. Weekly meetings are important for all units. Organising one’s own timetable, prioritizing tasks and being available when needed are challenges for every leader or superior. An open atmosphere where everybody – both superiors and subordinates – gives feedback frequently and constructively helps people to make their work better, and increase their feeling of belonging.

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