



CHAPTER
10

Developing leadership training: Early Childhood Education leaders' views

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ABSTRACT

In Finland, the requisite qualification for childcare centre leaders is an Early Childhood bachelor degree and 'adequate management skills'. However, there is variation in how these skills are defined, and it often depends on the individual employers' definition of what constitutes 'adequate management skills'. In Finland, as in many other countries, leaders in early childhood education (ECE) do not receive any systematic pre- or in-service training for leadership. This chapter explores the views of ECE leaders who attended an in-service leadership training program on how best to arrange such training and to identify appropriate content and design. The data were collected from participants in two focus group interviews at the end of the in-service training program. The main finding identifies their need for leadership training at different stages of their ECE work career and additional opportunities for in-service training.

Key words: leadership training, in-service training, early childhood leadership

ABSTRAKTI

Suomessa päiväkodin johtajan muodollinen pätevyys on kasvatustieteen kandidaatin tutkinto ja riittävä johtamistaito. Se, miten riittävä johtamistaito määritellään, vaihtelee ja on lopulta riippuvainen työnantajasta. Suomessa, kuten ei monessa muussakaan maassa, varhaiskasvatuksen johtajilla ei ole systemaattista valmistavaa tai täydennyskoulutusta johtajuuteen. Tämä artikkeli tarkastelee varhaiskasvatuksen johtajuuden täydennyskoulutukseen osallistuneiden näkemyksiä siitä, miten tämänkaltaisen koulutus tulisi järjestää ja millainen sen sisällön ja muodon tulisi olla. Aineisto kerättiin kahdessa focus group -ryhmähaastattelussa

koulutuksen päätyttyä. Päätuloksena voidaan todeta johtajuuskoulutuksen tarpeellisuus varhaiskasvatusuran eri vaiheissa ja täydennyskoulutusmahdollisuuksien lisätarve.

Asiasanat: johtajuuskoulutus, täydennyskoulutus, varhaiskasvatusjohtajuus

ABSTRAKT

I Finland er de nødvendige kvalifikasjoner for barnehagestyrere en bachelorgrad og "tilstrekkelige lederferdigheter." Men det er variasjon i hvordan disse ferdighetene er definert, og ofte avhenger det av den enkelte arbeidsgivers definisjon av hva som utgjør "tilstrekkelige lederferdigheter." I Finland, som i mange andre land, får ikke ledere i barnehagene noen systematisk opplæring eller etterutdanning i ledelse. Denne artikkelen utforsker synspunktene til barnehageledere som deltok i et ledertreningsprogram om hvordan man best kan organisere en slik opplæring og å finne passende innhold og design. Dataene ble samlet inn fra deltakerne i to fokusgruppeintervjuer på slutten av etterutdanningsprogrammet. Hovedfunnet identifiserer deltakernes behov for ledertrening på ulike stadier av deres arbeidskarriere i barnehagen, og flere muligheter for etterutdanning.



INTRODUCTION

The need to develop and increase leadership preparation is both a global and local issue. Bush (2012) states that in many countries, the expanded roles of school leaders and the increasing complexity of school contexts heighten the need for effective preparation. Locally as well as in the ECE context, the issue is similar: in Finland, the roles of ECE leaders have expanded, and the contexts where they work have become varied.

There has been considerable discussion throughout the past years in Finland regarding the professional qualifications of childcare centre leaders. The rationale behind this discussion is that the work of ECE leaders has faced several changes and that the demands of the work are very different compared to the past. For example, today, most of Finland's ECE leaders lead several services, the number of staff they have to manage has increased, and they have more decision-making power. However, the training of these leaders has not been central to this discussion.

The development of in-service training has been the responsibility of a few training providers. There are a few private companies that arrange training, and some universities also offer in-service courses for ECE leaders. However, there is no national training program for ECE leaders. According to Finnish legislation, the qualification of childcare centre leaders is the same as that of kindergarten teachers – a bachelor degree in ECE. In addition to this

formal education requirement, the law states that childcare centre leaders must possess “adequate management skills.” What is meant by the expression “adequate management skills” remains unclear, and frees local authorities, who select leaders at the municipal level, to define the necessary skills as well as the level of sufficiency. In Finland, kindergarten training at the bachelor degree level is offered by seven universities. Although there is variation among the curricula of these training programs, the goal of the curricula is mainly to educate kindergarten teachers. However, there is a lack of leadership studies, and the acquisition of “adequate management skills” happens as part of everyday work, on the job, in the workplace, and through in-service training.

This chapter focuses on the experiences of the participants of one in-service leadership program in 2012–2013. The aim of the study was twofold: to obtain feedback on in-service training programs for the provider and to gain a greater understanding of what kind of leadership training is needed in the context of early childhood education.

THE NEED FOR LEADERSHIP TRAINING IN ECE

Information on ECE leadership training in Finland is very limited. According to Nivala (1999), 81% of the leaders who participated in his study had received some leadership training. However, a report by The Association of Kindergarten Teachers in 2004 indicates that 15% of childcare centre leaders had received no leadership training. Half of those who reported having had some training mentioned that the training was short and lasted only a couple of days. Nevertheless, 80% of the participants of the same study said that they needed more training in leadership issues. Nivala (1999) also suggests that there is a need for in-service training throughout ECE practitioners’ work careers.

It seems that the dearth in ECE leadership training is not restricted to Finland. According to Aubrey, Godfrey and Harris (2013), ECE leaders tacitly develop leadership knowledge, often without formal training or even wise role models. Further, Muijs, Aubrey, Harris and Briggs (2004) assert that while the need for training is understood, current training programs continue to be small scale and localised. Waniganayake (2014) points to similar challenges in the Australian context; there is no mandatory preparation for ECE leaders, and in-service courses are sparse and inadequate. One study, which was completed in an early childhood context, recommended that the content of a leadership training program for leaders at the beginning of their career

should focus on planning, directors' work, and other issues that were not included in kindergarten training (Hsue, 2013).

This picture suggests that in-service training in Finland appears to be fairly good. However, the data do not offer information about the quality and content of training. In practice, the situation may be similar to that identified by Rodd (1997), that most of the leadership training offered to early childhood professionals is short and of a general nature. Nevertheless, based on a literature review, even short (less than 30 hours) training programs have positive outcomes and serve some training purposes well (Lauera, Christopherb, Firpo-Triplettb & Buchtingb, 2014).

There are many commonalities in terms of the expectations and needs of leadership development. Gentry, Eckert, Munusamy, Stawiski and Jacob (2014) conducted a seven-country investigation of the expectations and needs of participants attending leadership development programs. Their findings provide evidence of the universality and similarities in the needs, challenges, and expectations of training program participants. The most prevalent challenges highlighted by the managers from the different contexts were how to develop managerial skills, how to inspire and develop others, and how to lead a team, guide change, and manage internal stakeholders and politics. In addition, other necessary competencies relating to success in an organisation were leading employees, change management, and resourcefulness. Although the researchers did not find significant cultural differences, they suggested that cultural contexts should not be ignored.

Due to the paucity in research on ECE leadership training, not much is known about the outcomes of these training programs. Nevertheless, previous studies indicate that the outcomes are positive although direct and focused outcomes are sometimes difficult to define. These outcomes are related to both the level of confidence as a leader and to leadership practices. Jorde Bloom and Sheerer (1992) found positive outcomes regarding participants' level of perceived competence, the quality of classroom teaching practices, and the quality of work life for staff. Ang (2012, p. 302) asserts that leadership development programs have "a strong impact on children's centre leaders, their practice and preparations of leadership." There were similar findings from research on a training program for school principals. Bush, Briggs, and Middlewood (2006, p. 197) note that the training program "produced gains in heads' knowledge, understanding and confidence, leading to significant changes in leadership practice and behaviour." In their study, Orphanos and Orr (2014) found that positive outcomes spread to staff: an innovative

leadership preparation influenced teacher collaboration and job satisfaction. Moreover, research on pre-service training has identified some advantages of leadership training. According to Mistry and Sood (2012), newly graduated early years practitioners whose pre-service training included leadership preparation were better prepared for leadership roles than those whose studies did not include this kind of training.

The content of a leadership training program may also have divergent impacts. Orr (2011) has an interesting finding: the quality of internship, if included in a training program, influenced the likelihood of the participants becoming leaders, and the content and quality of the program were related to what was learnt about leadership. In addition, Day (2001) makes a distinction between leader development and leadership development. The former focuses more on developing human capital whereas the latter focuses on social capital. Day also states that these approaches are incomplete by themselves and that both are needed. Notwithstanding, training programs developers should be aware of aims and desired outcomes and develop their program content accordingly.

However, it is important to note that good, beneficial training has some criteria. Orphanos and Orr (2014) emphasise the need to invest in quality because “leadership practices are influenced by the nature and quality of leadership preparation” (p. 697). Orr (2011) sums up features of effective leadership preparation programs. She argues that it is important to consider how leadership is framed in the program and how learning is enacted. In other words, for the program to be of high quality, it should be coherently organised and offer active, experimental, and reflective learning opportunities. In a study in which data were collected from participants who attended the same training program, the key sources of leadership practices came from theory, practice, leadership knowledge, and networking (Kakon Montua, Halttunen & Kanervio, 2014). Accordingly, a good training program includes a mix of theory, practice, and interaction.

RESEARCH METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

The context of the study

This in-service training program for early childhood education practitioners was the first of its kind arranged by the provider, the Institute of Educational Leadership (hereafter the Institute), University of Jyväskylä. Previously, the Institute offered in-service training programs for school principals and teachers only. In planning the training, some local leaders occupying different

leadership positions (for example, a childcare centre director and an ECE director from the municipality level) were interviewed for the purpose of capturing ideas about what content should be included. The issues and requests for content were very similar to those, for example, in the Principal Preparation Program (PPP) offered by the Institute since 1996. The content of the in-service training was based on ideas generated from interviews with local ECE directors as well as experiences and feedback from the other training programs offered by the Institute, for example, PPPs.

The training included ten contact days over a five-month period and located at the campus. The ten days were divided into five two-day sessions. Each two-day session had its own theme: Development as Leader, Variation between People, Leading Change, Community, Values and Ethics, and Pedagogical Leadership. The training was targeted at ECE professionals interested in leadership or acting as leaders, and the participants were not required to have any previous leadership experience. A total of 16 participants came from different parts of Finland, from variously sized municipalities, from different leadership positions, and with different amounts of leadership experience. Most of them were in charge of an ECE at the municipality level (for example, director of ECE services) or were childcare centre leaders. There was wide variation in the length of their leadership careers. Some had been in different leadership positions more than 20 years while others only had a couple of years' experience.

In addition to the face to face contact sessions, the training included homework, which was undertaken both before and after each session. Prior to each session, the participants were provided with some readings or other material in order to prepare them for the session. After the session, those who wanted to broaden their understanding had access to readings that offered an opportunity to develop a deeper insight into the topic of the preceding contact session. The goal of the homework assignments was to relate the theories, literature, and content of each session to the participant's daily work. The majority of participants – 14 out of 16 – engaged with the broader homework assignments, which were completed after the contact session.

The trainers were either staff members of the Institute or experts from the ECE field. The learning modes emphasised interactive learning methods and involved group work, discussion, and lectures. The use of social media in an in-service program was also explored to examine its impact on the program. The lecturer was present during all the contact sessions and wrote a blog text after each two-day session, which summed up key issues from the lectures and

discussions. Participants contributed to the blog discussion on a voluntary basis.

All participants were invited to take part in this research study. Participation was voluntary, with 11 out of 16 participants accepting the invitation. However, only nine of them finally participated in the hour-long focus group interview. The participants were divided into two groups: five in the first group and four in the second. The interviews took place on the last contact day of the training.

At the beginning of the interview, the model of a focus-group interview session and the interviewer's role in it were explained. A sheet of paper with 10 questions was distributed, and each question was written on a separate piece of paper. The ten-question papers were on the table so that everyone could easily read them. Participants were free to answer the questions in any order, which questions they wanted to discuss, and the length of time they wanted to spend on each question. Apart from responding to questions regarding clarification, the interviewer had no further input in the discussion.

The 10 interview questions covered:

1. How would you develop leadership training in early childhood education?
2. What are the best ways of getting training?
3. What is a suitable and sufficient qualification of a childcare centre director?
4. What kind of leadership competencies are needed in early childhood education?
5. How would you develop this present training? What kind of training should the Institute offer?
6. How did this training enhance your own leadership?
7. What are the training needs of early childhood leaders? Do needs vary according to position?
8. At what state/s is training needed?
9. What kind of new perspectives did the training offer you?
10. Which leadership competencies were developed during the training?

Although only half of the 16 participants participated in this research, they were representative of the variation in the entire cohort: some had long careers as directors for over 20 years, and some had very short careers. The participants' leadership positions were also representative of the positions within the cohort and included a childcare centre leader and someone who held a leadership position at the municipality level.

FINDINGS

The key findings are presented and analysed below.

The ideal stages for training: before or during one's career as a leader

Overall, the participants thought that early childhood leaders needed leadership preparation during their university studies at the bachelor and master degree levels and that kindergarten teacher training had not developed sufficient leadership competencies. Although both stages – pre- and in-service, were seen as important in leadership training, the emphasis was on in-service training. However, leadership studies need to be included in earlier pre-service training. One interviewee said that every ECE practitioner should have some understanding of leadership, whether or not they become a leader. Some of the participants said that during their studies, they did not have the capacity to understand leadership-related knowledge.

When I graduated as a kindergarten teacher, I don't think I was able to use the leadership knowledge that I had. Now that I have been a leader for a while, I know the meaning of the issues we encountered in training. For me, this training came at a very good moment.

All the participants said that because they had practical experience as leaders, it was easier to apply the training to practice. Their careers both motivated and supported them to make the most of the training. Nevertheless, their views varied in relation to the best time and the usefulness of in-service leadership training.

Some of participants had 20–30 years experience in leadership positions, and for them, the training served as a checkpoint to reflect on their leadership practices or renew their motivation. Those who had short careers spanning one to two years said that they had developed confidence about how to exercise leadership and that the training broadened their understanding of it. For those with short careers, the training offered preparation, new knowledge, and determination to find their own leadership path.

The participants' main critique was that the training period was too short. Several of them were willing to commit to a training program lasting one to two years. Some mentioned the Principal Preparation Program offered by the Institute, which lasts around 18 months, as a good model for training early childhood leaders.

Because the training period was only six months and included several topics, the participants found it demanding to assimilate all the new information,

knowledge, and experiences. They said that a longer period between the contact sessions would have given them additional time to apply and integrate knowledge into practice and to discuss experiences with peers.

After these [five] sessions, there should have been a break to allow us to implement this into practice. [After the break] would come the time to discuss what you got from others and how you were able to apply it in practice. That way, we could avoid some of the mistakes, and we could learn from each other.

In-service training arrangements

In addition to the training programs organised at the national level, several of the interviewees thought that training could also be locally arranged. In Finland, symposia or training programs are quite often arranged in the metropolitan area, which, for those coming from different parts of the country, makes travel costly and time-consuming. Locally arranged training could enable more than one person from each municipality to participate in the programs and could also focus more precisely on the needs of a specific area.

Some of the participants came from the same municipality or from the same company. Those who were the only ones from their municipality felt that having a partner from the same employer would have helped to put the ideas from the training into practice. Having a colleague from the same work organisation provides an opportunity to continue the discussion and reflect on the topics.

One thing I envy and would like to do differently is to be able to take a colleague with me. In other words, where there have been two from the same municipality, you have been able to contribute these issues and foster greater understanding among the management in your municipality.

One aspect raised in the interviews was the content and target group of training programs. Several of the participants had experiences from several in-service training programs, but for many, this was the first one focusing specifically on leadership in ECE. Leadership training that includes professionals from different fields is also beneficial and necessary. However, a specific focus on ECE provides common ground for discussion.

The benefits of training

The participants mentioned the different kinds of benefits coming from the training program. Some spoke of a theme or specific content from a contact session that represented an important learning experience, and some said that

the training program had offered them a more holistic view of leadership. For example, the more novice leaders said that the training program had helped them broaden their understanding of leadership and that it had been an opportunity for professional growth.

I think that my understanding of leadership has broadened. Sometimes I feel that I do not understand what is meant by leadership – it is not easy because there are so many aspects in it that need to be taken into account and understood (...) For example, the perspective that a leader is a supporter of the work community and tries to give tools to staff for the future.

Peer support was an integral part of the training, especially for those participants who were at the beginning of their leadership careers. They enjoyed discussions with the more experienced leaders.

I would have liked to have even more peer support and time just to discuss and to listen to the others ... probably this is because I'm a new leader.

Nevertheless, peer support and discussion among the participants did not exclude the need for theoretical elements. All the participants said that there should be balance between theory and practical issues in any in-service training program. For some of them, for example, those with almost 30 years' experience as leaders and who had not recently undertaken study, an exposure to literature and theoretical perspectives brought to light new outlooks on leadership.

I have had a long career and have been a practitioner. I experienced it really good; I encountered theoretical views, and I was surprised that I became enthusiastic about gaining knowledge based on research.

DISCUSSION OF ISSUES RELATING TO DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP TRAINING

Walker, Bryant and Lee (2013; see also Orphanos & Orr, 2014) suggest that there are a number of key areas to consider in developing a leadership development program:

- ◆ leadership frameworks that inform a program,
- ◆ the wide access to participate in a program,
- ◆ global and local aspects, and
- ◆ the role of the practitioners.

The findings of this study support these notions. The ease of access to participate in the program for all those who are interested in leadership, regardless

of specific leadership experience, was seen in a very positive way. In part, the positive outcomes and experiences were related to the issue that the participants had different work careers and experiences. This fostered opportunities for the novice leaders to learn from the more experienced. Notwithstanding, Walker et al. (2013) note that sometimes, more selective programs need to be in place because the length of a leader's experience affects both the needs in relation to content and the design of training sessions.

In these findings, the global and local aspects are reflected in the desire to have training both at the national and local levels. This training program did not employ experienced practitioners, as suggested by Walker et al. (2013), but the modes of learning emphasised time for group work and discussion and allowed the participants, who were real practitioners, several opportunities to share their experiences.

Although not discussed in the interviews, the first concept in Walker et al. (2013), the leadership frameworks, should be discussed. When most of the trainers came from the same Institute, they had previously discussed and developed a common understanding of (educational) leadership. A common language and framework among trainers makes a training program more coherent. The importance of including both theories and practical issues in a preparation program or an in-service program has also been emphasised by other scholars (Orr, 2011; Kakon Montua et al., 2014) and was substantiated in the current findings.

In addition to these notions, the findings of this study suggest that the length of a development program should be considered. The participants of this study were willing to commit themselves to a longer training period. An even longer period could, for example, offer greater opportunities to apply the program's content into practice.

The requirements for in-service training are varied; consequently, what is offered should meet participants' needs and demands. The aim of this in-service program was to generate insights into a broader leadership framework as well as issues that more directly focus on questions relating to ECE leadership. The study's participants, whether they had short or long careers or held different leadership positions, identified similar themes as being most important, interesting, and beneficial for their leadership development, including strategy, change, pedagogical and value leadership. The findings affirm Rodd's (2001) suggestion that future leaders will need some key capacities that include critical thinking, goal setting, creative assimilation, and change management, all of which are relevant in different fields of work. The findings

on the most beneficial and interesting content encourage a focus not just on ECE leadership issues but also on the inclusion of theories and knowledge from other fields. Some of the participants gave positive feedback and were pleased because they were not treated “*as just early childhood education leaders but as leaders.*”

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

A childcare centre leader’s requirement of “adequate management skills” is not achieved during university training, thus demonstrating a need for in-service training for those who apply for or are in leadership positions. First, the requirement of “adequate management skills in leadership” needs to be defined in order to clarify the required training for the specific job and work expectations of an ECE leader. In Finland, one possibility could be to use the Principal Preparation Program model of the qualification training for school principals. It is also important to define the core competencies of the work of childcare centre directors as these can form the basis of the training. However, in-service training should not be limited to preparing someone to be qualified for certain leadership positions. There should be opportunities to access in-service training throughout the ECE work career.

Research offers good advice on how to arrange an efficient training program. Based on this research, the training should be sufficiently long, include both theory and practice, and the modes of learning should be interactive. Nevertheless, there is a sizeable gap in leadership training research. Showanasai, Lu and Hallinger (2012) argue that in the context of school leadership, there is a lack of empirical research focusing on learning processes and outcomes of preparation and on the efficacy of the programs. As Bush (2012) states, the delivery process of a program is important. Showanasai et al. (2012) also maintain that research should be conducted using a broader set of research designs, for example, longitudinal, quasi-experimental, and experimental study designs. In addition, there is a need to develop cross-cultural research. These gaps in the research are similar in the ECE context. In sum, as leadership training programs in the context of ECE increase, research, even on a small scale, should be included in the program design, and a variety of research designs should be broadened in undertaking these studies.



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