



CHAPTER  
6

## Early childhood landscape in Finland and reflective comments on Australia and Norway

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### EARLY CHILDHOOD LANDSCAPE IN FINLAND

In Finland, ECEC has two aims: to provide a service for families and early childhood education for children. The early childhood education concept is 'EDUCARE', meaning the integration of education, teaching and care (Hujala, 2010). The aim of EDUCARE is to promote children's positive self-image, develop expressive and interactive skills, enhance learning and develop thinking as well as support children's overall wellbeing (STM, 2004; Stakes, 2004). Early childhood education is regulated by the Ministry of Education and Culture since 2014. Before this it was under the Ministry of Social Affairs.

In Finland, EDUCARE programs are organised by municipalities (92%) or private providers (8%). Approximately 62% of Finnish children aged 1–6 years participate in EDUCARE programs (THL, 2011). Preschool is for six years old children and it is voluntary. Pre-school for six years old children is steered by the *Core Curriculum for Pre-school Education* (Finnish National Board of Education, 2010).

ECEC is offered as a universal public service for families. Every child has the right to have early education regardless of parental employment. Municipalities are obliged to organise ECEC for every child under seven years. Approximately 80% of children attend full time childcare. ECEC services are mainly provided by municipal ECEC centres. Educare is provided through either ECEC centres, preschool or family day care programs. It is regulated by legislation under the *Act of Children's Day Care (36/1973)*, *Decree*

of *Children's Day Care (239/1973)* and steered by the *National Curriculum Guidelines on ECEC* (Stakes, 2004).

Qualification requirements for ECE leaders are defined in the *Act on Qualifications Requirements for Social Welfare Professionals (272/2005)*. Centre directors are required to be qualified EC teachers and to have adequate management skills. Administrative ECE leaders are required to have a master's degree, knowledge of the sector, and adequate management skills. In this legislative framework municipalities can also define EC directors' tasks.

In the past, Finnish ECEC centre directors were usually working as a practicing kindergarten teachers as well as acting as a director. Centres were small and working with children was emphasised. However, today directors do not usually work with children directly but are working as administrative leaders across one to five ECEC centre units (LTOL, 2007).

ECE leadership research is now somewhat well established in Finland. This research has focused on pedagogical leadership, distributed leadership and leaders' everyday work. Finnish ECE leadership research is analysed in a detailed manner in the article of Eskelinen and Hujala (2015) in this book. Main trends of Finnish ECE leadership research are briefly summarised here.

According to Finnish ECEC research, a director or a principal of a ECEC centre is responsible for daily practice but works as an advocate of the staff (Riekkö, Salonen & Uusitalo, 2010). They will also disseminate research to staff, take care of planning, coordinate parent–teacher partnerships, and communicates with other stakeholders (Nivala, 1999; Karila, 2001). Administrative leaders implement and evaluate the municipality's ECE strategy. Success in this requires clear position in the hierarchy and ECE know-how (Akselin, 2013). It seems that centre directors' tasks and responsibilities are not well defined and work loadings are not apportioned appropriately, which may lead to directors' burnout. The numerous tasks and fragmented responsibilities expected of directors, results in shifting the focus from the pedagogy to other things. The splintered nature of the directors' work may hinder carrying out staff management and pedagogical leadership which are considered the most important tasks for succeeding in their core tasks (Fonsén, 2014; Hujala & Eskelinen, 2013).

Pedagogical leadership is seen as a focal responsibility in centre directors' work. Successful pedagogical leadership has to be based on vision, strategy, structure for pedagogical leadership, tools, staff' expertise and professionalism, clear core tasks, and articulated values. In order to obtain high-quality

pedagogy, directors need to reflect and change pedagogical practices when necessary and instruct practitioners who work directly with children (Heikka 2014; Fonsén, 2014).

Currently, in Finland, the discourse of distributed leadership can be seen as a shared responsibility for the organisations' core tasks, goals and guidelines. Pedagogical leadership is not shared adequately from directors to teachers or from administration to centres. It also seems that staff are not always willing to commit to distributed leadership or leading one's own work. Thus reinforcing distributed leadership needs direct and intentional actions. (Fonsén, 2014; Hujala, 2013; Heikka, 2014). Within a distributed organisation, sharing leadership to self-directed teams leads to independent decision-making and can strengthen team work. Shared leadership in EC environments could also enhance the pedagogical practices and lead to self-directed work culture and hence higher quality (Halttunen, 2009; Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011).

## REFLECTIONS ON AUSTRALIA

The articles from Australia point out the significance of leadership for professional development and learning of ECE staff and this way could assist in facing the challenges laid for ECE sector in Finland in terms of arranging ECE services and establishing structures which maintain high quality care and education.

**Colmer's** article assists in understanding the relationship between leadership and professional development and learning during changes in ECE. **Wong** sees mentoring as one of the leadership development and quality improvement strategies to enhance the professional growth of practitioners, both as individuals and collectively as a profession. In Finland, we could learn how to utilise the capacity which peer mentoring offers in contributing to an overall improvement of pedagogical practice. **Marsh and Waniganayake** explored ways in establishing connections between early childhood and school education. In making connections, they claimed that learning and leadership cannot be contained within educational structures. Findings about the benefits of establishing a shared language for learning and leadership are applicable in Finland.

National level planning, administration and steering of educational policies and services under the Ministry of Education and Culture in Finland has created a platform for establishing a coherent learning pathway for children. However, more effort still needs to be made for developing a shared understanding for ECE as a significant part of the educational continuum.

## REFLECTIONS ON NORWAY

The model of Norwegian stakeholders in ECCs presented by **Flormælen and Moen** is very similar in Finland: the work of EEC directors does not focus only on leading their centre and a big part of the work takes place in different external networks. The difference compared to Norway is that most of Finnish centres are publicly owned and the expectations come from the state and from the municipality level.

In Finland there is no clear position of a formal teacher leader as described by **Hognestad and Boe**. Leading knowledge development occurs at centres at the team level. However, there is a lot of discussion going on now on how to strengthen the role and position of kindergarten teachers in leading knowledge development and pedagogy of their teams.

There are also good signs in Finland on how local centres have started to share pedagogical leadership and have, for example, joint meetings for kindergarten teachers where ideas and knowledge are shared. We share the same situation with Norway, with increasing numbers of experienced employees will retire in the near future. With them we will lose a lot of valuable knowledge if we do not take care of their tacit knowledge as discussed by **Vannebo and Gotvassli** as being typical in the context of early childhood education.

**Skjæveland** addresses the important issue of leadership and government guidance of ECEC in Norway. There is increasing demand to foster learning in ECEC but the efficiency of the government's support appears to be insufficient. The new Government in Finland has decided to limit the subjective legal right for early childhood education and also to increase the group size in ECEC. Consequently, a good question to ask is: what will they do with the old ECE law?

**Granrusten** considers Norwegian ECEC directors have a large degree of freedom to choose how to implement the goals which are set by the government through policy documents. In Finland, the situation is quite similar concerning the freedom to implement the leadership. New law of ECE is in the process of being changed and it will be seen if or how it will determine leadership.



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