European Education Area Strategic Framework

Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

Leadership in ECEC: an overview of models and practices in Europe - SUMMARY

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Leadership in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC):

an overview of models and practices in Europe

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Executive Summary

At the European level, leadership has been recognised as a crucial condition for ensuring quality of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) provision since the enactment of the Council Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems (2019)[1]. In this Recommendation, supporting the professionalisation of ECEC staff and leaders is seen as a successful strategy to improve ECEC quality as:

- it contributes to developing a shared sense of purpose orienting the education and care practice at the team level,
- it enhances professional activities such as collective reflection, planning, engaging with parents and collaborating with colleagues, thus contributing to making pedagogical practices more responsive to the diverse needs of children, families and communities within which such services are placed.

In this sense, ECEC leadership has been acknowledged as an important element in shaping organisational conditions and operational strategies that are supportive of the continuing professional development of the workforce with potential benefits on staff motivation and retention.

Although there is a growing policy interest in gaining a better understanding of what ECEC leadership looks like across diverse settings and contexts – and how it can positively impact quality – research on ECEC leadership tends to be rather limited compared to other levels of education and more exchange on existing initiatives is needed.

For this reason, in November 2023, the European Education Area Working Group on ECEC[2] agreed to explore the topic of ECEC leadership - with a focus on supporting the exchange of inspiring practices and policy initiatives among EU countries - over the work cycle 2024-2025. This report is the first output derived from the work of the group, which will be articulated in three independent but interrelated thematic reports:

- "*Leadership in ECEC: models and practices across Europe"*, exploring how ECEC leadership is understood in research and enacted in practice, with specific reference to the functions and tasks associated to centre leadership and to the existing structures of leadership in place;
- "*How to train, recruit and motivate leaders in ECEC*", delving into competence requirements associated to leadership profiles, as well as in existing training programmes and career pathways supporting their professionalisation;
- "*Leadership development and sustained capacity building of ECEC systems*" focusing on how to develop a leadership culture whereby centre leaders are embedded in a well-coordinated infrastructure supporting an ongoing collaboration among ECEC providers, counselling and guidance services, and local/regional governance (i.e. municipal directors) as well as systematic inter-agency cooperation across the education, social and health sectors.

Defining leadership in ECEC

Although the issue of ECEC leadership gained increased visibility in international research and policy debates over the recent years, a clear definition of what ECEC leadership is and what it entails is not readily available.

[1] EUR-Lex - 32019H0605(01) - EN - EUR-Lex

[2] https://wikis.ec.europa.eu/display/EAC/ECEC

The definition of leadership adopted by the Working Group in a previous report *"How to recruit, train and motivate well qualified ECEC staff"* (2021) investigating the professionalisation in the ECEC sector draws on the definition of centre-based ECEC leaders elaborated by Eurydice (2019) and complements it with a more comprehensive focus on professional leadership. Such definition was further revised by the Working Group in 2024, as follows:

Leader (head of centre-based ECEC setting): the person who is ultimately responsible for the administrative, managerial and pedagogical leadership at the ECEC centre. As part of the leadership role, centre heads may be responsible for:

- the monitoring of children well-being, learning and development,
- the guidance and supervision of other staff, as well as their engagement in decision-making processes,
- contact with parents and guardians,
- the planning, preparation and/or carrying out of the pedagogical work in the centre.

Centre leaders may also spend part of their time working with children. In some situations, the leadership role is distributed between a number of staff who may have job titles such as assistant head, senior teacher, deputy leader etc.

Professional leadership: in an ECEC context this requires skills, behaviours and competences related to supporting children's care and education, pedagogy, engagement with parents, the local community, staff management and organisation. As with other leadership roles in the education sector, ECEC leaders need to establish a culture and purpose which ensures high quality provision is available to all children, and staff and parents are involved and supported.

Why is it important to invest in leadership?

Research suggests that leadership plays a central role in improving and sustaining the quality of provision in ECEC settings and in creating a stimulating environment for staff, children and their families (OECD, 2021). Leadership can act as an important driver sustaining an organisational culture of ECEC settings committed to improve outcomes for children and families, promoting the ongoing quality development of pedagogical practice, and fostering innovation and inclusion especially in services attended by children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Leaders in ECEC centres can play an important role in creating opportunities for improving working conditions and supporting professional development initiatives. Leaders can help to build a respectful, trusting, collaborative, safe environment for ECEC staff, a sense of belonging, caring relationships, which are necessary for skills improvement and staff well-being. Such an environment creates the conditions for children to feel protected, nurtured and supported to thrive – thus providing a safe and stimulating educational environment where children's well-being and learning is sustained by warm and responsive interactions with adults. ECEC leadership can also play a significant role in staff engagement in professional development initiatives as well as on the building of professional learning communities sustaining democratic and inclusive processes at the centre or local level.

Leadership in ECEC: functions and tasks

Unless ECEC environments are led by competent leaders who are supporting staff and teams in developing high quality practice, the positive effects of ECEC on children's development are less likely to be sustained. Leaders serve as a bridging layer to interpret macro policies, align them with the various contexts they oversee, choose pedagogical innovations, convert them into practical and sustainable applications, and scale them up over time for the benefit of children and families living in the community. Understanding ECEC leadership within a systemic framework (where leadership functions could be distributed among different professional roles (centre's head, practitioners acting as

pedagogical leaders, administrative staff responsible for management of financial and human resources,…) and across different levels of the ECEC system (centre level, provider level, local authority, etc.)), the Working group identified five functions associated with ECEC leadership.

Pedagogical leadership
Pedagogical leadership is essential for fostering a high-quality and inclusive educational environment that promotes children's rights and nurtures their well-being, socialisation, learning, and development. This role involves building trusting and collaborative relationships with staff, supporting their professional growth, and encouraging participatory curriculum design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Pedagogical leaders structure the work environment to facilitate these elements while continuously sustaining staff professional reflection to improve their practices. Leaders also play a vital role in connecting research, policy, and practice: they can help raise awareness among researchers about relevant questions and issues that can enhance the work with children and families in ECEC settings, ultimately fostering professional learning and capacity building for both groups.

Administrative leadership
Administrative functions do not only refer to the daily managerial tasks of running an ECEC centre; rather, they entail strategic allocation and long-term planning of human and material resources to transform the shared pedagogical vision of the setting into reality. Therefore, administrative leadership functions include strategic planning, promoting organisational change, reporting activities, ensuring accountability and fostering quality improvement through monitoring and evaluation processes. Administrative leadership might also entail securing financial and human resources necessary to ensure high quality ECEC by liaising with the relevant public authorities.

Engagement with families, parents and legal guardians
Centre leaders have an important role to play in shaping expectations for the centre's engagement with parents or guardians, so that they are involved in the learning and development of their children. Engaging with families requires acknowledging the diverse cultures and perspectives of families in educational decision-making, enhancing ECEC practices to be more responsive, and fostering a welcoming environment that encourages parental participation and informal networking to promote social inclusion.

Engagement with the communities
Establishing effective links with the community and partnerships with other child- and family-oriented services is another key function of leadership in ECEC settings, which cuts across leaders' administrative and pedagogical functions. This entails establishing cross-agency collaborations and community partnerships to outreach children and families who are underrepresented in ECEC services (especially the most vulnerable ones) and to provide them a better support in accessing educational, welfare and health services through an integrated approach. In the framework of children's welfare, it is also important to ensure a continuous cooperation with social protection services, local authorities and civil society.

Contribution to policy-making
Bringing about change for children, families, and society is a fundamental aspect of ECEC leadership in the broadest sense. ECEC leadership involves thinking and acting beyond individual settings to enhance the overall quality of the field, thereby advocating for a more just and equitable society. In this context, leaders incorporate advocacy into their everyday responsibilities, such as promoting equality and inclusion in their practices, striving for improved conditions, resources, and environments to support both children and staff, and engaging with their communities. To achieve this, it is essential for leaders to be knowledgeable about legislative processes and to connect with community organizations to develop a pedagogical vision for their setting that emphasizes long-term planning and forward-thinking.

Whereas a certain consensus exists over the five functions of ECEC leadership described in the previous section, tasks and responsibilities associated to such functions strongly differ across countries, contexts and settings. In order to shed light on the wide and extensive range of leadership tasks and responsibilities that are most commonly found in ECEC settings in Europe, the working group agreed on a mapping of leadership tasks and responsibilities which ECEC leaders may be involved in – at different levels – when ensuring the coordination of high-quality provision.

As result of such mapping, the working group is developing a reflection tool to organise the governance of ECEC leadership. The tool is intended to support discussions involving national, regional or local decision-makers, ECEC leaders and / or other stakeholders in reviewing policies and practices associated to ECEC leadership development in their own context[3].

Effective leadership: current issues and challenges

Research highlights that effective ECEC leadership is closely tied to pedagogical functions: creating a shared pedagogical framework with staff, implementing systematic documentation of educational practices, and providing ongoing pedagogical support for ECEC professionals. Leadership should be grounded in values like democracy and respect for diversity, viewing ECEC institutions as platforms for civil engagement and social cohesion.

Effective ECEC leaders foster a positive organizational climate, promote staff well-being and professional development, which in turn enhances staff motivation and the quality of education: addressing staff needs and expectations, and creating a respectful, safe work environment are crucial for building trust and collaboration among staff, leading to higher process quality. The main factors influencing ECEC process quality include: fostering a positive workplace climate, promoting continuous improvement of practices at team level, involving families and communities in decision-making, and efficient resource management.

However, ECEC leaders often struggle to balance their pedagogical and administrative responsibilities due to increasing demands and administrative workloads: the results from TALIS Starting Strong Survey (OECD, 2020) indicates that ECEC leaders primarily spend their time on administrative tasks, with minimal time dedicated to interactions with children and parents, leading to a conflict between their roles in pedagogy and daily management. Additional challenges include managing diverse staff qualifications, fostering self-direction, and addressing conflicts within multi-professional teams. Finally, although ECEC leaders recognize that building collaborative relationships with families and effective community partnerships is essential to their role, they frequently find that establishing inter-agency collaborations poses significant challenges in their efforts to support children and families.

The above-mentioned challenges call for:

- rethinking ECEC leadership according to a distributed, democratic and inclusive perspective
- developing a support infrastructure that can help ECEC centre leaders in dealing with increasingly complex demands without losing sight of the pedagogical core of their work.

Developing a culture of high quality ECEC for children and families through collaborative and transformative leadership

A certain consensus exist – across the fields of research, policy and practice – on the need to overcome traditional notions of leadership associated with hierarchical institutional

[3] The reflection tool, along with the results derived from its piloting in a sample of EU Member States, will be published in a separate report.

structures and individual skills and dispositions in order to move toward a distributed, contextual, democratic and inclusive understanding of leadership.

Within the vision developed by the working group, leadership can be viewed as the result of an evolving process – transforming the pedagogical and organizational culture of ECEC centres over time in relation to all actors involved (professionals, children, families and local communities) and to the policy context – rather than being defined solely by structural features of ECEC systems. In this perspective, developing leadership for quality ECEC has more to do with the process of engaging all actors in decision-making processes and collective practice rather than with the straightforward implementation of leadership models from theory (or policies) to practices. While ECEC leadership is certainly influenced by macro-level elements – such as policy frameworks, governance arrangements and providers' infrastructure – it is also acknowledged that ECEC leadership development cannot be enacted solely through top-down mechanisms. Being deeply embedded in the vision, mission and relational practice of an ECEC centre, leadership can only be developed from within institution – in dialogue with children, families and local communities – in order to be effective for improving quality. As the needs, potentialities and aspirations of children and families are constantly evolving – and so are societal dynamics in the communities where they are living – leadership for high quality ECEC can only be effective if all the actors involved in educational processes are given agency and voice in decision-making, thus contributing to shape ECEC centres' pedagogical culture and practice in a responsive way.

For this reason, the vision of leadership endorsed by the working group emphasises the collaborative and transformative dimensions connected to decision-making processes contributing to shape ECEC practice and policy, thus possibly influencing change at system level. The main features of collaborative and transformative leadership defined by the WG are:

- *Sense of purpose:* the leader and the ECEC team work on a common culture that is underpinned by a shared vision, of ethical values towards children, parents, colleagues, and the local community.
- *Sharing collective responsibilities:* distributing leadership responsibilities encourage ECEC staff to work collectively to achieve common goals and practitioners experience a feeling of trust and ownership of the innovation process. This, in turn, motivates them to improve their practice, increase their sense of self-efficacy and improve well-being in the workplace.
- *Sustaining a culture of professional learning and development at team level*: ECEC staff should avail of diversified opportunities that are tailored to their needs for professional growth (i.e. in-service training, coaching on the job, mentoring, supervision and inter-vision, professional learning communities) and are followed-up by leaders to maximise their impact on practice.
- *Fostering democratic decision-making processes in which the voices of professionals, children and families are heard and acted upon*. Time and space should be created to enable all the actors involved in the educational process to have a voice. This might also entail adopting specific tools – such as pedagogical documentation – that allow professionals and families to look at children's experiences in ECEC settings from different perspectives, thus learning from each other and enhancing parent-staff collaboration. Pedagogical documentation can raise children's agency in educational processes by giving visibility to their initiatives and valuing diversity: collective reflection on pedagogical documentation allows practitioners to revise and improve their practice responsively.
- *Building participatory alliances to influence policy in the best interest of children and families*. Within a systemic perspective, achieving better outcomes for all children and families in society can ultimately be achieved only if ECEC leadership is acted beyond individual settings, to improve the quality of the field as a whole, thus striving for a more just and equitable society. Establishing partnerships with schools, welfare

and health services in the community, communicating the benefits of ECEC for children and families to local decision-makers by documenting achievements, engaging in policy advocacy and consultation processes can successfully support capacity building at all levels of the ECEC system by strengthening the coordination of policy development and implementation processes.

What support do leaders need?

As argued in previous sections, leaders need support to accomplish their functions and tasks within multilayered and increasingly complex ECEC systems. It is therefore necessary to map the kind of support needed by leaders at the setting level and where they may be able to get it from. Overall, the working group discussions have shown that ECEC leaders need:

- formal acknowledgement of their role at (national / local) policy level
- trust and recognition by ECEC staff members (including moral support)
- legal advice and administrative support
- pedagogical and methodological support, including support to develop an inclusive setting for a diversity of children and families
- support with mental wellbeing, time management and managing resources effectively, with specific reference to staff shortages and safeguarding quality
- opportunity to connect and exchanging good practices in peer-learning networks and coordination networks at local/regional level
- adequate training, CPD and coaching to acquire confidence and constantly updating knowledge, working methods and skills
- support with identifying an adequate direction for developing a vision/mission for the centre, setting priorities, establishing working processes.

Examples of support available for leaders to answer these needs include:

- school of leadership established in Slovenia to support ECEC/school leaders' ongoing professional development
- regional centres for inclusion and IT specialist support services available to leaders
- initial training and mentoring initiatives, onboarding strategies supporting newly recruited leaders' induction
- local authorities' advisory services available to support leaders in managing effectively financial and human resources – although it was noted that enhancing the capacity of local authorities to better support leaders is also important
- providers' specialised support system including documentation and resource centres supporting research and innovation, counselling and advisory services and/or coaching opportunities for leaders and ECEC teams
- social partners, trade unions, labour organisations, employers, interest groups, associations supporting leaders in advocating for resources
- peer-learning networks established by providers or local authorities (such as counsellors/educational advisers/peer coordination)
- mutual support among staff and leaders within ECEC settings
- parents' councils established at centre level
- funded projects supporting experimentation

- counselling agencies
- quality development initiatives.

The interplay between the different actors varies across countries and local policy cultures: however, a strong need for a coherent governance structure in which all actors work together in a systematic way emerged throughout the working group discussion.

There is also a need for well-designed and aligned legal, policy and pedagogical frameworks. A balance needs to be sought, in each specific context, between accountability and autonomy of ECEC leaders: on one hand, a certain degree of autonomy regarding resource allocation and planning is crucial to allow leaders to tailor ECEC provision to the needs of local communities, but on the other hand, they cannot be made accountable for choices regarding structural quality, for example, that should be made at a higher level of the ECEC system.

Policy levers to develop collaborative and transformative leadership in ECEC systems

Policy levers for developing collaborative and transformative leadership in ECEC systems were identified by drawing on research, working group discussion and on the insights deriving from country examples[4].

- Defining ECEC leadership within a coherent conceptual framework - at policy, provider and centre level – to be used as reference while developing the content of the training and formal education of leaders
- Within such framework, clearly articulating leadership functions and tasks to be performed by the actors at different system levels – centre leaders, providers, local authorities – and their respective responsibilities (*the mapping tool developed by the WG could be used as a reflection instrument by policymakers for this purpose)*
- Distributing responsibilities through diversification of roles within the settings including on-site vertical posts (i.e. assistant heads, pedagogical head, middle-management head) and/or horizontal posts (i.e. inclusion leader, family and community partnership leader, pedagogical leader, induction leader), and through the creation of centre-based steering groups
- Establishing collaborative practices and participatory alliances at centre level through team building, continuing professional development and career planning, and engagement of children and families in educational decision-making processes
- Establishing collaborative practices and participatory alliances by reaching out to other services in the community (i.e. inter-professional exchange with the pre/primary education sector, child and family welfare organisations) and establishing an ongoing dialogue and consultation with administrators and policy decision-makers at local level
- Fostering an inclusive organizational environment and educational culture that values diversities in professional backgrounds, expertise and skills – as well as

[4] In the report, specific case studies are presented from Germany (a systemic, participatory and multi-layered approach to quality development as support to strengthen ECEC centre leadership: the case of Berlin land), Finland (leading, evaluating and developing high quality ECEC), Norway (ECEC leadership and quality in national strategies), Portugal (Challenges related to creating a shared vision of leadership in a complex ecosystem), Ireland (policy for leadership development in ECEC), Lithuania (the contribution of ECEC centre heads' performance assessment to improve the quality of education t) and Belgium (fostering democratic and inclusive leadership in contexts of socio-cultural diversity: the Elmer crèches in Brussels. These case studies illustrate the diverse approaches to ECEC leadership across Europe, highlighting both successful practices and ongoing challenges.

diverse contributions and perspectives of children and families in educational decision-making processes

- Integrating early childhood intervention (ECI) strategies within leadership frameworks, ensuring that ECEC leaders are equipped to support early identification, intervention, and collaboration with specialists to address developmental needs, and fostering an environment that is responsive to the diverse needs of all children.
- Strengthening a multi-level leadership support structures starting from the analysis of ECEC organizational cultures and existing resources in each context
- Establishing pedagogical counselling services with a specific focus on training and coaching ECEC leaders within existing infrastructure
- Enhancing the role of ECEC providers and/or local authorities in supporting centre leaders through pedagogical supervision and legal advice
- Establishing peer-learning networks (coordination platform at city/regional level) and ensure participation of ECEC leaders in policy consultation processes.

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