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

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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.

1. Background

1.1. Purpose and structure of the report

At the European level, leadership has been recognised as a crucial condition for ensuring quality of ECEC provision since the enactment of the **Council Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems (2019)**. In this Recommendation[5], *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*. In particular, statement 4 of the proposal for a **European Quality Framework for ECEC (2014)** includes professional leadership among those supportive working conditions which can contribute to reducing the detrimental staff turnover in ECEC[6]. The later document **"Monitoring the quality of early childhood education and care – Complementing the 2014 ECEC quality framework proposal with indicators"** further emphasises the importance of *investing in ECEC leaders' training and qualification to increase their capacity in sustaining quality development processes in ECEC settings*. As better trained leaders are more able to manage ECEC services effectively – and lead teams to develop high-quality educational practices with a focus on children and families – such training should entail a solid pedagogical leadership component, rather than being limited to administrative and organisational leadership components[7].

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 tend 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[8] agreed to explore the topic of ECEC leadership, with a focus on supporting the exchange of inspiring practices and policy initiatives among EU countries. The following questions lead the group's discussions between January 2024 and the summer of 2025.

[5] For a more detailed account refer to Annex 8.1.

[6] For a more detailed account refer to Annex 8.1.

[7] For a more detailed account refer to Annex 8.1.

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

1. Leadership in ECEC: models and practices across Europe

- What are the main **functions and tasks** associated to centre leaderships?
- What are the main **structures of leadership** in place (*i.e. hierarchical/distributed, support structure, role of providers, local authorities,…*)?

2. How to train, recruit and motivate leaders in ECEC?

- What are the **competence requirements/professional profiles** for ECEC centre leaders?
- What are **initial and in-service training** programmes provided?
- Which **career pathways** are currently available *(i.e. from being a practitioner to become a leader)*?

3. From centre leaders to ECEC system leadership

- How can **network leadership** support **integrated work across sectors** *(horizontally)?*
- as well as **across different levels of education** *(vertically), i.e.* 0-3/3-6 in split systems, ECEC/primary schools in integrated systems?

The output of WG discussions will be articulated in three independent but interrelated thematic reports:

- the first report "*Leadership in ECEC: models and practices across Europe"* will explore 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;
- the second report *"How to train, recruit and motivate leaders in ECEC"* will delve into competence requirements associated to leadership profiles, as well as in existing training programmes and career pathways supporting their professionalisation;
- the third report *"Leadership development and sustained capacity building of ECEC systems"* will focus 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.

The present report **"Leadership in ECEC: models and practices across Europe"** is structured in six parts:

- the first section considers the purpose and structure of the report and outlines existing definitions of leadership in ECEC;
- the second section presents the findings of existing research exploring the benefits of investing in leadership for children, families and professionals; also pointing at the relevance of investing in leadership for achieving ambitious policy goals such as increasing the quality and equity of education systems;
- the third section provides an overview of functions and tasks associated to ECEC centre leadership by drawing on existing literature, WG discussion and an internal mapping exercise, in order to gain a better understanding of the factors contributing to – or rather hindering – effective leadership in ECEC settings;
- the fourth section, based on research, analyses different models for understanding and enacting leadership in ECEC, to gather insights on how to translate a vision of collaborative and transformative leadership into practice;

- the fifth section explores existing structures and support available for ECEC leaders in EU Member States by drawing on the practice examples shared by working group members;
- the sixth section discusses implications for developing policy initiatives that are supportive of collaborative and transformative leadership in ECEC.

The report presents the results of the discussions during the first six months of the 2024-25 work cycle of the working group and draws on the following sources:

- research literature and policy reports informing WG meeting discussions,
- WG discussion on challenges and good practices highlighting current issues within and across European countries,
- presentations by experts to deepen the understanding of current issues related to leadership development in the ECEC field,
- internal exercise of mapping ECEC leadership tasks,
- examples of practice shared by WG members in relation to existing structures and support available for ECEC leaders across Europe.

1.2. Definitions of 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.

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:

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- 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.

Despite the attempts made to define leadership from a policy-making perspective, a prevailing and commonly accepted definition of ECEC leadership is currently lacking in research as well as in the field of practice.

Rodd (2013) states that leadership is an 'enigma' – a concept that is not clearly defined and confidently grasped within and across the ECEC sector – as a commonly accepted and prevailing definition of leadership in ECEC is lacking in research as well as in practice. Along this line, existing research points out that **leadership is not easily understood because it is essentially a holistic, multidimensional, multi-layered and complex phenomenon deeply embedded in the context in which it is enacted** (Hujala, Waniganayake and Rodd, 2013).

Despite this lack of clarity on definitions, a shared consensus is clearly emerging from international research: the issue of leadership – to be fully grasped in its complexity – should be explored within a systemic perspective. Such systemic understanding of leadership emerges from the idea that individuals influence people and institutions in their ecology as much as they are influenced by them – this has significant implications for the development of children (Toh et al. 2014). From an ecological systems theory point of view (Urban, 2012), children's development occurs through the interrelations between the various levels of the environment they live in and their interactions with others who form part of their environment. Such systemic understanding of children's development has important implication also for the way ECEC leadership is understood within a child-centred perspective.

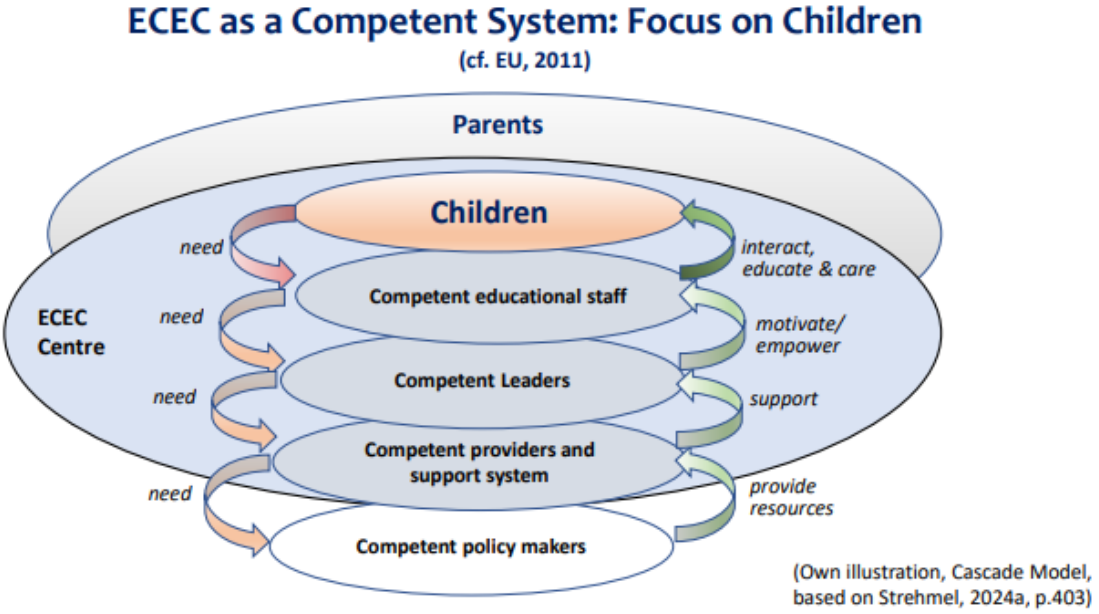


Figure 1: Petra Strehmel's presentation "Strengthening leadership for quality development: what needs to be considered?" held during the PLA in Berlin (22-24 May 2024).

In this perspective, 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:

> "More specifically, the leaders act as a mediating layer to manage the interpretation of macro policies, benchmark them against the multilevel contexts they lead, make a careful selection of innovations that they want to develop, translate them into micro implementations, consolidate the insights that arise from the processes and restrategize for innovation diffusion to other contexts." (Movahedazarhouligh, Banerjee, Luckner, 2023; pp. 1046-1047)

2. 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). In the sections below, the findings of international studies on ECEC leadership will be examined with a special focus on how leadership can act as an important driver sustaining an organisational culture 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.

2.1. Leadership and ECEC quality[9]

The relation between leadership, ECEC quality and child development has been illustrated by Strehmel (2016), by drawing on existing studies as see below.

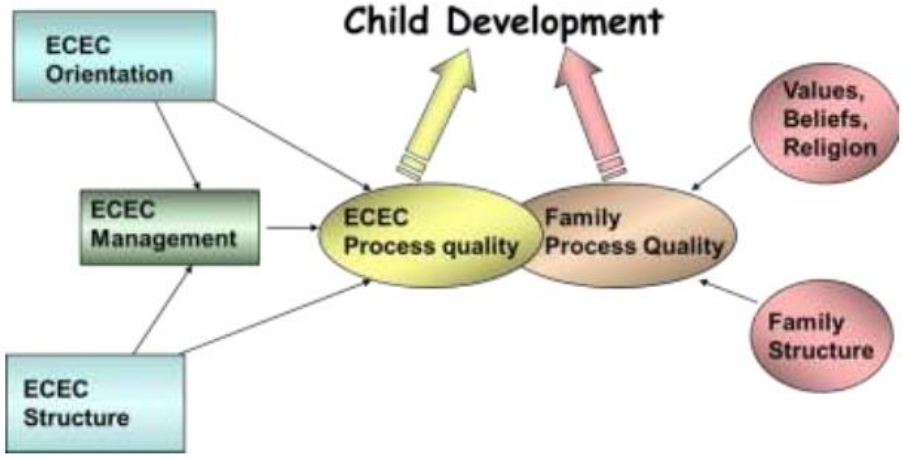


Figure 2: Leadership impact on child development (Strehmel, 2016)

The findings of several studies show that **ECEC leadership influences children's development indirectly, by contributing to improve process quality in ECEC settings.** The literature review conducted as part of the TALIS Starting Strong study (Douglass, 2019) highlights that leaders can create organisational conditions that support process quality, and thereby promote children's learning and wellbeing, by:

- sustaining staff professional development and learning,
- leading transformative processes by engaging staff in decision-making,
- providing time and space for team reflection, enabling staff to collaborate and plan for improvement,
- establishing a positive work climate, collegial relationships and providing a range of support for teacher leadership.

[9] A more comprehensive overview of existing models exploring the relation between leadership and ECEC quality is presented in Annex 8.2. Such overview served as a basis for introducing the current debate on ECEC leadership within the Working Group.

The findings from the literature review conducted within the ExCELS study in the U.S. (Kirby, Douglass and Malone, 2023) provide further insights into how leadership might influence children's outcomes. Due to the paucity of research exploring the relationship between centre leadership, pedagogical quality and children's outcomes in the ECEC field, most of the findings analysed within the literature review derived by empirical research is conducted in primary school contexts[10]. The results derived from such literature highlight that **building a positive organisational climate and relational trust with staff can lead to positive outcomes for children**, such as:

  - relational coordination is a critical element for supporting the improvement of pedagogical practice, ultimately resulting in improved outcomes for children,

- principals' leadership, as defined by teachers' perceptions of principals' pedagogical leadership and principal-teacher trust, is associated with higher quality of ECEC and better outcomes for children through the learning climate,
  - leadership association with children's achievement comes through the leaders' influence on teacher motivation and work environment,
  - variation in children's outcomes from leadership practice stems, in part, from the level of teachers' trust in the school leader.

Most importantly, *the findings of such studies show that involving teaching staff as leaders is crucial to improve quality of pedagogical practice and children's outcomes.* Therefore, **distributing leadership functions and tasks within teachers' teams – through either formal or informal roles – may be particularly important for fostering pedagogical innovation and quality improvement at the centre level**. As stated by the authors of the literature review, "participation in leadership among teaching staff can help ***create a culture of continuous learning that has been associated with quality improvemen***t" (Kirby, Douglass and Malone, 2023)[11].

In this perspective, **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, a sense of belonging, caring relationships and safe environment for ECEC staff, necessary for skills improvement and staff well-being as highlighted by the findings of research reviewed in the OECD TALIS Starting Strong study (Brinia, Poullou & Panagiotopoulou, 2020; Ehrlich et al., 2019; Heikka, Halttunen and Waniganayake, 2018; Ratner et al., 2018;)[12]. Ensuring a respectful, trusting and collaborative working environment for staff, in turn, 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.

Furthermore, ECEC leadership can play a significant role in staff engagement in professional development initiatives (Jensen and Iannone, 2018; Keung et al., 2020; Page & Waniginayake, 2019) as well as on the **building of professional learning communities sustaining transformative processes** at the centre or local level (Sharmahd et al., 2017, Omdal & Roland, 2020). However, the influence of leadership on the wider social environment of their ECEC centres (local communities) has been considered only by recent studies, investigating the **role played by leadership in ECEC centres as places which**

[10] Acknowledging the contextual nature of leadership and how leadership is embedded in institutional cultures and educational policies, the findings from the literature review conducted within the EXCel study are reported by using the original terminology.

[11] https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/ExCELS_LitReview_Brief.pdf

https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/measuring-leadership-early-care-and-education-excels-measure

[12] https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2021/06/starting-strong-vi_0a304435.html

are open and inclusive to all children, families and staff, aiming for a democratic and inclusive society (Nordahl, Sunnevag & Hansen, 2023).

2.2. Leadership and reform trends in the ECEC sector

The growing awareness that investing in high-quality ECEC can yield significant benefits across various dimensions of the society, from education to social equity (Council Recommendation on early childhood education and care: the Barcelona target, 2022; Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee, 2021), led policy makers to accelerate reform processes aimed to increase both quantity and quality of ECEC provision in their countries. Against this background, the work of leaders has become more complex and demanding in recent years (OECD, 2020)[13].

The cross-national analysis carried out within the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) study (2016)[14] highlighted major shifts in ECEC systems across the world, to which professionals responsible for the governance, management and leadership of early childhood services currently have to respond. Four of these major ECEC system shifts and their consequences for ECEC leaders are explored below (Pascal, Bertram et al., 2019).

System shift 1: the ECEC sector is undergoing a period of rapid development as there is growing consensus that public policy should strive toward universal access to high quality services for all children

Most of the participating countries in the IEA study, as well as many European countries (Eurydice, 2019)[15], have recently implemented or planned significant structural changes in their ECEC policies to align with this vision. However, the transition to a more comprehensive and equitable ECEC system is not without challenges. The ECEC sector is characterised by complexity, with *diverse providers, funding mechanisms, and regulatory frameworks* that differ significantly from those in primary and secondary education. Such fragmentation characterising the governance of the ECEC sector increase the complexity of policy reform implementation processes.

In this landscape, *ECEC leaders are increasingly required to view themselves as integral parts of a broader and interconnected system of services for children and families.* This system encompasses various settings, including home-based, centre-based, private paid-for settings, voluntary organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), charitable organisations, and programmes under the oversight of different government departments such as Education, Health, and Social Services/Welfare. *ECEC* ***leaders are tasked with managing these change processes by engaging in greater partnership working and collaborative action at the local or regional level.*** This approach recognises that effective ECEC systems require coordination and cooperation among various stakeholders to ensure that all children have access to high-quality early education and care.

System shift 2: Multiplicity of policy aims for ECEC is increasingly common, leading to wide-ranging and sometimes competing /clashing expectations

The IEA study (2016) highlighted a wide array of policy aims for ECEC, including:

- promoting children's development and learning,
- supporting parental employment and training,

[13] www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/building-a-high-quality-early-childhood-education-and-care-workforce_b90bba3d-en

[14] https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/978 978-3-319 -3984739847-1.pdf

[15] https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/publications/key-data-early-childhood-education-and-care-europe-2019-edition

- early intervention (with specific reference to language support or special educational needs),
- tackling socio-economic inequalities by reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion.

The fact that ECEC policies are used to address a spectrum of social, educational and economic demands implies that different, and sometimes competing or conflicting expectations, are placed upon leaders. In this context, ECEC leaders might face conflicting and sometimes excessive demands for the service they are expected to deliver. This situation can create several challenges such as, for example:

- Leaders may need to balance multiple goals and prioritise objectives (from enhancing children's development and learning to fostering social inclusion, supporting working parents, and promoting economic growth), which may not always align seamlessly.
- In a context of limited financial and human resources (i.e. staff shortages), this might put pressure on leaders to prioritise one objective over another or to find innovative strategies to address simultaneously multiple demands.
- Striving for increasing the quality and accessibility of ECEC provision can also be a challenging task for ECEC leaders if the responsibility for system governance is decentralised at the level of providers and/or if centre leaders are not adequately supported by coherent local/regional policy guidelines.
- Leaders may face difficulties in implementing monitoring and evaluation processes in a meaningful way, especially if they have to coordinate internal and external evaluation simultaneously.
- various stakeholders such as parents, staff, policymakers, and the wider community may have varying expectations of what ECEC services should achieve, further complicating the coordination of internal and external decision-making processes for leaders.

System shift 3: the structural split between care and education which persists in many countries undermines the coherence of pedagogical approaches and practice both within the ECEC sector, and between ECEC and primary schooling

In most countries (Eurydice, 2019) ECEC is split into two separate phases according to children's age: childcare is more commonly provided for younger children under the Ministry of Welfare, while early education is more commonly provided for older children under the Ministry of Education. As the dis-continuity of pedagogical approaches and practice adopted in childcare and preschool services might undermine a smooth educational trajectory for children – producing negative consequences on their learning and wellbeing – ECEC leaders in split systems play an important bridging role in supporting children and families during transitions. This proves to be a major challenge for ECEC leaders, particularly if ECEC services are provided across the public and the private profit and not-for-profit sector (InTrans project, 2022)[16].

System shift 4: Expectations of the role, level of professionalism and qualifications of the ECEC workforce are raising in a context where staff shortage is increasing

Research demonstrates that enriched, stimulating environments and high-quality pedagogy are fostered by better qualified practitioners, who are better equipped to sustain children's

[16] www.issa.nl/content/save-date-series-webinars-challenging-split-system-early-childhood-care-and-education

learning, development and well-being through warm and responsive interactions (OECD, 2020)[17].

As described in the previous session, centre leaders can also play an important role in sustaining the pedagogical quality of ECEC settings by supporting staff professional development, coordinating teamwork, and engaging them in decision-making processes thus increasing their agency and sense of self-efficacy to improve practice. However the significant diversity in terms of qualifications, roles, and status among staff working in ECEC – as well as current challenges related to staff shortages (see policy brief *"Staff shortages in ECEC"*) – pose additional demands on centre leaders such as, for example:

- co-constructing a shared pedagogical vision by engaging all staff working in the setting, which might include practitioners with diverse qualifications and professional background or assistants who might not hold any qualifications;
- striving for implementing such vision and pursuing high quality pedagogy in contexts characterised by high turnover of staff – which is often associated with low pay and low social recognition negatively affecting staff motivation;
- dealing with internal tensions which might arise in situations where qualified leaders with less work experience are coordinating senior staff with more professional experience in the field;
- fostering practitioners' continuing professional development (CPD) in contexts where CPD might be only an optional requirement for ECEC staff and might not be readily available and/or accessible.

[17] www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/building-a-high-quality-early-childhood-education-and-care-workforce_b90bba3d-en

3. Leadership in ECEC: functions and tasks

The first part of section 3 provides an overview of functions associated with ECEC leadership by drawing on existing literature, to gain a better understanding of the factors contributing to effective leadership and to high quality ECEC provision for children and families. The **findings derived from international research exploring leadership functions were discussed by the Working Group, which endorsed five dimensions associated to ECEC leadership: 1) *pedagogical leadership*, 2) *administrative leadership*, 3) *engagement with families, parents and legal guardians*, 4) *engagement with communities,* 5) *advocacy leadership.***

The second part of this section presents the results of an internal exercise mapping of ECEC leadership tasks and responsibilities associated to such functions. The ambition of such mapping is to provide a comprehensive overview of leadership tasks and responsibilities which ECEC leaders may be involved in – at different levels – when ensuring the coordination of high-quality provision.

Finally, the third part of this section examines the factors contributing to – or rather hindering – effective leadership, drawing on:

- a review of the literature which explores the link between centre-based leadership, ECEC process quality and children's outcomes; and
- the results of WG group discussions, exploring issues and challenges that decision-makers experience in their countries to ensure effective leadership in the ECEC sector.

3.1. Functions associated to ECEC leadership

Several models describing leadership functions can be found in international research. Some of these models approach ECEC leadership functions by focusing on individual responsibilities and tasks to be performed by leaders. **Others identify different dimensions associated to ECEC leadership within a systemic framework where such 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,...). While a detailed overview of such models is presented in Annex 8.2, in this section the five functions of leadership commonly found in ECEC settings and contexts will be illustrated by drawing on recent research reviews (Movahedazarhouligh, Banerjee, Luckner, 2023) and on the analytical framework elaborated for the TALIS Starting Strong survey (OECD, 2020)[18].

Pedagogical leadership

Pedagogical leadership is the leadership function needed to support a high quality and inclusive educational environment, promoting children's rights and nurturing children's wellbeing, socialisation, learning and development. This function includes creating trusting and collaborative relationships with – and among – staff, supporting staff professional development, promoting participatory curriculum design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and structuring the work environment to support all these

[18] OECD (2020), *Building a High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce: Further Results from the Starting Strong Survey 2018*, TALIS, OECD Publishing, Paris, *https://doi.org/10.1787/b90bba3d-en*.

aspects simultaneously with a view on ongoing improvement of practices[19]. Pedagogical leadership also entails bridging research, policy and practice. Pedagogical leaders might use theoretical knowledge to observe staff practices with children and provide effective feedback to staff based on these observations, to stimulate critical reflection on everyday practices within the team, or to foster practitioner enquiry projects as part of staff professional development (McNair et al., 2023; Marsh & Deacon, 2024). Pedagogical leaders might also contribute to sensitise researchers about questions and issues that are relevant for improving the work with children and families within ECEC settings, thus promoting professional learning and capacity building amongst both parties (Forssten Seiser, 2019).

Administrative leadership

Administrative leadership is usually presented through two approaches: one of a manager and one of a leader (Movahedazarhouligh, Banerjee, Luckner, 2023). According to the first approach, administrative functions mostly refer to the efficient and effective management of operations including human resources and finance such as budgeting, hiring staff and scheduling their work. The second approach entails a broader understanding of administrative functions, which goes beyond the daily managerial tasks of running an ECEC centre by connecting them to a shared vision and orientation. In this sense, administrative leadership functions include strategic planning, promoting organisational change, reporting activities, ensuring accountability and fostering quality improvement through monitoring and evaluation processes, and may also include collaborating with community partners and systems (OECD, 2020). 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 (OECD, 2020). Engaging with families also entails taking into account diverse families' cultures and perspectives in educational decision-making processes, thus making ECEC practice more responsive. It might also entail the creation of a welcoming climate supporting parents' participation, creating opportunities for networking among families, thus sustaining their parental role in both formal and informal ways and nurturing social inclusion (Višnjić Jevtić, 2023).

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. Community leadership functions can be enacted by "those individuals who reach out to the community and communicate the importance of ECEC for the well-being of children and families" (Movahedazarhouligh, Banerjee and Luckner, 2023; p. 1048). This entails establishing cross-agency collaborations and community partnerships to outreach children and families who are underrepresented in ECEC services (especially the most vulnerable one) and to provide them a better support in accessing educational, welfare and health services through an integrated approach (OECD, 2020). 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.

[19] Definition adapted from: OECD (2020), *Building a High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce: Further Results from the Starting Strong Survey 2018*, TALIS, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/b90bba3d-en

Contribution to policy-making

Bringing about change for children, families and the society can also be considered a function associated to ECEC leadership in a broadest sense. ECEC leadership entails thinking and acting beyond individual settings to improve the quality of the field as a whole, thus advocating for a more just and equitable society (Abel, Talan & Masterson, 2016). In this perspective, leaders engage in advocacy as part of their daily work, for example by promoting equality and inclusion in their practices, by seeking better conditions, resources, environments to support children and staff and through engagement with their communities. According to Movahedazarhouligh, Banerjee and Luckner (2023) it is important that leaders have knowledge about legislative processes and reach out to community organisations in order to create a pedagogical vision of their setting with long-term planning and forward-thinking. .,

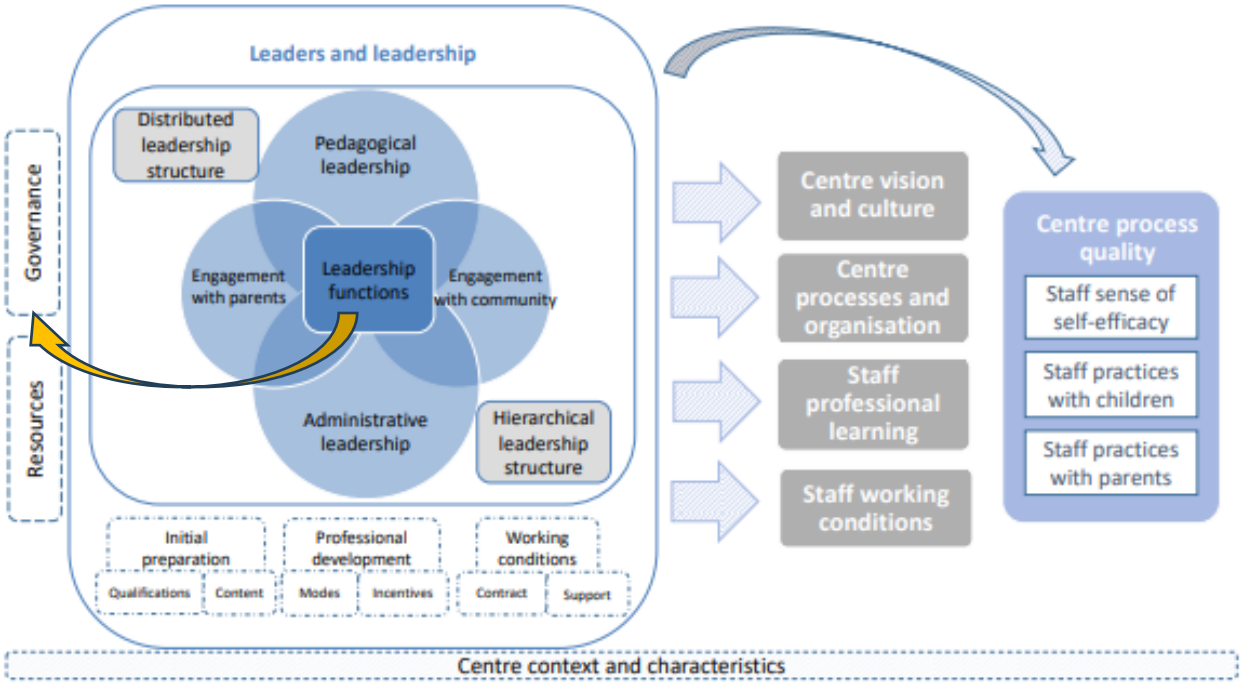


Figure 3: Framework for the analysis of early childhood education and care centre leadership elaborated in the TALIS Starting Strong (p. 169) and integrated by the ECEC working group in October 2023 (revision added in yellow).

3.2 Mapping of leadership tasks and responsibilities

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 WG agreed on a mapping exercise providing an overview of leadership tasks and responsibilities which ECEC leaders may be involved in – at different levels – when ensuring the coordination of high-quality provision.**

The goal of such mapping exercise was to draw an exhaustive list of all responsibilities and tasks which are associated to ECEC leadership, based on the holistic and multidimensional framework which has been endorsed by the Working Group. For this purpose, the five broad leadership functions outlined in the previous section are untangled by a list of more concrete responsibilities and tasks to be performed at the leadership level. This can be the leader at

service level, but some responsibilities can be distributed to other members of the staff, or other persons responsible for ECEC settings at providers level or at the level of local authorities.

The WG recognises that the actual list of tasks and responsibilities varies depending on the structure/governance of the national ECEC system, the regulations in place, the type and size of the ECEC setting, the age of children being in the ECEC centre, and many other variables. Some responsibilities and tasks are repeated under the different headings, as they might serve different purposes, they might require different competences, and might be undertaken by different people depending on the purpose.

Based on the results of the mapping exercise (illustrated below), **a reflection tool** will be piloted in 4 countries - Slovenia, Ireland, Luxembourg, Finland – and two cities – Ghent, in the Flemish Community of Belgium, and Milan in Italy. This 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. 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.

PEDAGOGICAL LEADERSHIP

Pedagogical leadership is the leadership function needed to support a high quality and inclusive educational environment, promoting children's rights and nurturing children's wellbeing, socialization, learning and development. This function includes creating trusting relationships with and among staff, supporting staff professional development, promoting participatory curriculum design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and structuring the work environment to support all aspects simultaneously with a view on ongoing improvement of practices[1].

Pedagogical leadership at service level

- Build a shared pedagogical vision with the staff for provision of ECEC, that is child-centred, value-based with specific reference to the principle of non-discrimination and non-prejudice towards children, staff and parents, strength-based and informed by research evidence
- Create an own pedagogical curriculum / educational concept, with clear links to national curriculum or guidelines, in collaboration with the staff, and lead implementation of the curriculum
- Internal and external representation of the institution; give visibility to the pedagogical work carried out in the ECEC setting, both internally (documentation of practices for families) and externally (raising awareness within local communities)
- Set short- and long-term priorities regarding the pedagogical vision and curriculum, and translate this into concrete action plans (strategic planning)
- Lead inclusive practice (pedagogy, culture) in the ECEC setting and arrange for a warm welcome of all children in the ECEC setting.
- Organize the environment (including the use of space and facilities): facilitate the use of indoor or outdoor space for learning, caring, and playing, choosing materials, tools, …
- Monitor characteristics and trends in the catchment area and care for adaptation of the service to local needs
- Lead to quality improvement: organize self-evaluation & participate in external evaluation + making changes in centre structures / practices based on internal and external monitoring & evaluation results
- Establish plans for evaluation and monitoring of children's development, wellbeing, and learning
- Regularly evaluate the local pedagogical curriculum / educational concept
- Ensure documentation of the connection between the learning environment and the children's well-being, learning, development, and formation
- Involve the ECEC centre in innovation / innovative practices
- Incorporate scientific findings on educational quality into pedagogical work
- Approve children for admission
- Ensure participation of parents/communication with parents

- Ensure collaboration with the community
- Ensure collaboration with local/regional/national authorities
- Ensure collaboration with other organizations working with children and families
- Ensure transparency of the organization of the centre towards parents, stakeholders, local/national/regional authorities, …
- (Part-time) work with children (on a regular basis, or replacing staff in leave)

Pedagogical leadership with specific reference to staff support

- Strengthen interpersonal relations, work towards a warm organization, building trust, … among all staff members (e.g. core practitioners, assistants, logistic staff, …)
- Support staff professional development and self-learning
- Define a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and in-service plan for the whole team, including assistants and leaders themselves
- Mentor new staff (through an induction process)
- Support quality learning experiences for students / trainees / apprentices / interns on professional practice placements in the setting.
- Observe and document staff practices and staff-child interactions
- Provide feedback to staff based on observations and performance / evaluation meetings and/or making changes based on these observations and documentation
- Create and facilitate a feedback culture among staff and a culture of evaluation / self-evaluation
- Facilitate that the staff share new knowledge, facilitate that new knowledge (e.g., from CPD) is being rooted in the everyday practice
- Organize documentation and team reflection/collaborate with staff to improve how children learn and play together
- Take actions to ensure that staff feel responsible for children's development, well-being, and learning
- Take actions to ensure that staff take responsibility for improving their skills in working with children and working with families
- Take actions to support co-operation among staff to develop new approaches to ECEC practices
- Examine the needs of staff and take actions according to those needs so that staff feel supported and have a high job involvement, job satisfaction and organisational commitment
- Establish the professional direction, which includes: 1) communication/translation on how the overall quality framework manifests itself in the specific ECEC, 2) inclusion of the staff in the discussions of the implementation of the quality framework to create a common understanding and ownership of the ECEC practice.
- Convey new knowledge/research to the ECEC staff
- Assess what projects and initiatives would help strengthen the staff's competences
- Show professional engagement
- Review staff's written work documentation
- Make sure child safeguarding policies are in place and implemented by all staff (including CSP training for increasing staff awareness)

ADMINISTRATIVE LEADERSHIP (MANAGEMENT)

Administrative leadership refers to the management of operations including human resources and finance; strategic functions connected to planning, reporting, organisational change and accountability (OECD, 2020).

Administrative leadership in relation to staff

- Define and promote job positions
- Recruit staff (interviews, salary negotiations, checking of police records, medical checks, contractual and financial arrangements)
- Assume overall responsibility to integrate new staff in the team
- Assume overall responsibility to provide mentorship
- Supervise trainees / interns /cooperate with training institutions
- Replace staff on leave (foreseen or not foreseen)

- Organise weekly/monthly/yearly planning of staff evaluation (not only from an administrative point of view but regarding performance)
- Develop / support diversity in the team
- Management of leaves (short/long term; planned/unplanned)
- Establish staff schedules
- Organize team meetings
- Organize staff training (apprentices / induction periods / CPD), from an administrative and financial point of view
- Organize support of staff according to the needs
- Conflict management
- Payment of salaries
- Performance evaluation (from an administrative point of view – e.g., respect of working schedules)
- Report data related to staff (to ministry, local authorities, ECEC owner…)
- Prepare service certificates
- Dismiss or suspend staff

Administrative leadership in relation to children and families

- Inform families about the ECEC setting (registration rules, deadlines, current events, projects, activities, fees, staff changes, etc.)
- Manage children's registration, waiting lists, departures, approve the enrolment of children
- Record (and report) daily children's attendance
- Manage specific administrative tasks to accommodate children's specific situations (e.g., children with disabilities, undocumented or homeless children)
- Organize management of transitions (daily, e.g., from kindergarten to afterschool care, or over the years, e.g., from kindergarten to primary school)
- Organize children's groups / classes

Administrative and financial management

- Secure and manage financial resources (fees paid by parents, local, regional, national, European funds)
- Secure daily administrative and financial management (insurance, paying bills, contracts…)
- Report on (financial) management, number of children, staff, etc.
- Manage ECEC setting's material and structure (ordering toys, keeping track of furniture, organizing repairs – indoor and outdoor)
- Organize and support (ECEC/school) board (appointments, meetings, etc.), or other parents' representations
- Know all (new) national/regional/local regulations, implement them, inform/train staff to implement them; check/guarantee/report on implementation of these regulations (e.g., regulations on adult-child ratios, supervision of children, etc)
- Cooperate with ECEC provider
- Increase centre's visibility in local community through public relations

Administrative leadership in relation to health and security

- Provide a secure and sustainable environment
- Follow development of all national/local health and security regulations, implement them, inform/train staff to implement them; check/guarantee/report on implementation of these regulations
- Organize food, provide healthy food
- Organize cleaning of the setting (staff, material, energy, etc.)
- Manage / follow medical file of each child (e.g., checking compliance with vaccination regulations, organize and follow-up medical check-ups, etc.)

- Legally responsible to ensure child protection (e.g., contact social services in case of suspicion of child abuse at home)
- Legally responsible for preventing accidents / giving first aid to children and staff or ensure that staff is trained in giving first aid to children
- Occupational health management for staff

ENGAGEMENT WITH PARENTS, LEGAL GUARDIANS AND FAMILIES

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 (OECD, 2020). The tasks connected to such function might include:

- Create a welcoming culture that values different family structures and backgrounds
- Support staff in developing "familiarization" activities to build trust with families (i.e., open door policy, open days, visits to the setting, facilitating the welcoming and settling in of newly enrolled children)
- Communicate with families, both formally (e.g., arranging and attending collective/individual parent's meetings) and informally (e.g., one-to-one conversations on children's development, not planned)
- Organise extra activities / discussions to understand and accommodate special needs
- Ensure that parents are informed of what is happening in the centre, by making sure that pedagogical documentation is available on display and regularly shared with families through different means (e.g., wall panels, display of children's artefacts, children's individual portfolio, etc.); organize activities with families to support their engagement and sense of belonging in the everyday life of the centre
- Facilitate the involvement of parents in decision-making processes (e.g., establishing practices that seek feedback from parents about their children's experience and involve parents in decisions related to their children and the setting), organize cooperation with the parents' council
- Organize activities for parents to understand the transition to the next step (e.g., information sessions, meetings with parents, etc.)
- Plan, implement and reflect on the partnership with parents, build a reciprocal trustful relationship
- Support parent-teacher meetings
- Examine and analyse barriers with all ECEC staff to improve the accessibility for all parents, legal guardians, and families
- Organize outreach activities to address parents whose children are not (yet) attending ECEC.

ENGAGEMENT WITH 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. Establishing community cross-agency collaborations and partnerships is an important - and often challenging - dimension connected to leadership role in supporting children and their families (OECD, 2020). The tasks connected to such function might include:

- Communicate and network with staff and/or leaders from other ECEC centres in the neighbourhood
- Communicate with compulsory school institutions (i.e., facilitating children's transition to primary school)
- Consult with child development / early childhood intervention specialists and services
- Co-operate with child welfare, preventive family support or social services
- Collaborate with health-related services
- Collaborate with cultural and sport organizations in the local community (e.g., libraries, cultural associations, museum, etc.)

- Cooperate with authorities
- Set up activities in the neighbourhood to improve the community-feeling
- Collaborate with child protection systems / stakeholders
- Contribute to the wide spreading of a "culture of childhood" in the local community (e.g., advocating for children's rights, giving voice to and raise visibility of children's experiences in urban development/municipal planning processes)

CONTRIBUTION TO POLICY-MAKING

ECEC leaders can play a significant role in sustaining the development of high-quality ECEC provision for all children, therefore an important function of leadership is connected to the active engagement of leaders in policy-making processes within local/regional/national contexts. As policies influence the lives of children and families, it is important that ECEC leaders are aware of their role as "agents of change", supporting policy decision-making processes in a way that is responsive of the diverse needs – and aspirations – of children and families in local communities. The tasks connected to such function might include:

- Understand legislative/regulatory processes in the ECEC sector and the role of leaders as active agents in such processes
- Participate in action-research projects coordinated by universities, research institutions, NGOs
- Contribute to the wide spreading of a "culture of childhood" in the local community (e.g., advocating for children's rights, giving voice to and raise visibility of children's experiences in urban development/municipal planning processes)
- Engage with local administrators/policy decision-makers to actively contribute to shaping the implementation of early childhood policy at local level
- Engage with local administrators and ECEC services to examine, analyse and make agreements on the accessibility of ECEC services
- Engage in policy consultation initiatives at local, national, European levels.

3.3 Effective leadership practices

Research reveals that **successful ECEC leadership is often linked to the pedagogical functions of leadership**. For example, Strehmel (2016) states that ECEC leaders should elaborate a shared pedagogical framework jointly with settings' staff, adapt systematic procedures for documenting educational practices and evaluate the outcomes, provide opportunities for joint work, and offer ongoing pedagogical guidance to all staff.

Furthermore, **leadership activities should be based on values such as democracy and respect for diversity, understanding of professional development as a continuous learning process that encompasses personal and professional growth and to conceive early education institutions as a forum for civil engagement that fosters social cohesion** (Peeters, 2023).

Next, **the role of effective ECEC leaders includes the promotion of a positive organisational climate, staff wellbeing, and professional development**. Taken together these can lead to better staff motivation and improvements in the quality of provision. As mentioned in the TALIS Starting Strong VI report (OECD, 2021)[20] leaders' ability to **communicate** and maintain **good relationships** with their staff and the community, providing **frequent feedback** and **recognising accomplishments**, are key factors for effective leadership (Daniëls, Hondeghem & Dochy, 2019). Leaders should take into consideration **staff needs and expectations,** providing them with opportunities for skill

[20] OECD (2021). *Starting Strong VI: Supporting Meaningful Interactions in Early Childhood Education and Care*. OECD Publishing: Paris. https://doi.org/10.1787/f47a06ae-en

development, while creating adequate work conditions through the establishment of a respectful, trusting and safe environment (Bove et al., 2018; Page & Eadie, 2019). When leaders **nurture trust** and **foster a collective understanding** towards excellence and improvement, the relationships among staff are stronger, and staff is more willing to work together, with direct links to higher levels of process quality (Ehrlich et al., 2019). Similarly, Douglas (2019) mentions that successful leaders have greater knowledge and skills to develop **staff leadership**, a **positive workplace climate**, and an **organisational culture of learning and improvement** that supports curriculum development, implementation and pedagogy. Effective leaders may also establish alignment and coherence in the centre's educational programme across curriculum design, implementation and evaluation. Together, these can result in high levels of process quality. In addition, when staff leadership is supported, staff can positively impact process quality, and can also contribute to a positive organisational climate that supports positive staff-child interactions.

Fostering a **positive workplace climate,** establishing a **culture of continuous improvement**, ensuring **educational programme coherence,** involving **families and community in decision-making** and **efficient management of resources** are resulting as the **main factors associated with ECEC process quality** also from the review of empirical research conducted within the ExCELS study[21]. In the policy brief "*Understanding and Measuring Leadership in Center-based Early Care and Education to Inform Policy and Practice*" the authors suggest that leadership practices supporting positive outcomes[22] in ECEC settings fall into five categories, as reported in the box below.

1. **Instructional quality practices** that promote, facilitate, and enable high quality teaching and classroom quality.
    - *Examples include: using observation and feedback to help teaching staff improve, using data for improvement, ensuring dedicated time for collaborative instructional planning and support.*
2. **Relational coordination practices among centre-based staff** to create and sustain a culture of respect, collaboration, and continuous learning.
    - *Examples include: building and sustaining relationships with and between staff, fostering positive workplace climate, collaboration across staff and among peers, establishing structures that support respectful collaboration and communication.*
3. **Relational coordination practices with families and the community** to promote engagement and partnerships.
    - *Examples include: setting policies to promote family partnerships, conducting activities to engage with families, engaging with the community and the field.*
4. **Strategic practices** that establish and implement a shared strategic vision.
    - *Examples include: establishing and following a vision, conducting strategic planning, engaging in self-reflection and learning.*

[21] https://www.mathematica.org/publications/early-care-and-education-leadership-study-excels-data-users-guide

[22] The review of empirical research carried out within the study considers positive outcomes in ECEC settings with specific refence to classroom quality, children's socio-emotional development and language skills.

5. **Operational practices** that establish and manage consistent, efficient organizational structures, operations, and performance management.
    - *Examples include: compliance with regulations and requirements, ensuring smooth operations, and fiscal management.*

Source: Kirby, Douglass and Malone, 2023 (direct quotation from the report - p. 4)

3.4 Current issues and challenges

Leaders often report that finding the time to adequately engage in their pedagogical and administrative functions simultaneously is difficult, due to multiple other demands they are facing in their everyday work. An increased administrative workload has often been reported by school leaders as well, showing that the challenges associated with recent accountability trends in education are not confined only to ECEC, but also apply to the school sector. Similar challenges were also mentioned during the WG discussions, where the fact that leaders may have **too many responsibilities to balance** repeatedly emerged as a pressing issue. Besides **being accountable** for complying with regulations and ECEC quality requirements, there is an expectation for them to become **visionary leaders** as well.

Results from the TALIS Starting Strong Survey (OECD, 2020)[23] reveal that in general ECEC leaders spend **most time on administrative tasks**, **followed by pedagogical tasks**. The tasks that ECEC leaders spend the **least time on are interactions with children and parents**. The workload of administrative tasks is also mentioned in research from Finland (Soukainen, 2019; Hujala & Eskelinen, 2013), reporting that centre leaders admit they have no time for pedagogical leadership. This shows a contradiction between pedagogical leadership and daily management – instead of developing pedagogy, ECEC leaders' daily working hours are mainly spent on maintaining structures and fulfilling administrative tasks. More specifically, it seems that approximately two-thirds of a principal's time was spent on "managing things", whereas only one-third was spent on leading teams (Hujala & Eskelinen, 2013).

A cross-national study on ECEC leaders in Finland, Japan and Singapore found that leaders across these three countries considered pedagogical leadership and human resources management as the two most important tasks (Hujala et al., 2016). Yet leaders in all three countries agreed that finding the time to adequately engage in these core tasks was difficult due to **competing other demands**, although the nature of these varied somewhat across the three countries.

Along the same lines, Strehmel (2016) stressed that ECEC leaders often have insufficient time to dedicate to quality improvement and organisational development tasks, suggesting that managing organisational change is an important function of ECEC leadership, yet one that requires both time and **specific kinds of leadership skills**, which are sometimes lacking.

The challenges experienced by leaders might also be connected to the **dual nature** of their work (Hujala & Eskelinen, 2013), referring to the relational dimensions of their role connected to **mentoring and supporting staff** on one side, **while ensuring compliance with policy and regulatory standards** on the other.

[23] OECD (2020). *Building a High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce: Further Results from the Starting Strong Survey 2018*. OECD Publishing: Paris. https://doi.org/10.1787/b90bba3d-en

In summary, daily operational management of ECEC institutions, balancing administrative and pedagogical leadership functions and prioritising tasks due to time-constraints are challenges experienced by many ECEC leaders.

Other challenges that ECEC leaders face include dealing with staff members' different educational backgrounds, reluctance to pursue self-direction, avoidance of collective responsibility and conflict between professionals. Hujala & Eskelinen (2013) report that – in order to meet the **needs of multi-professional teams** – ECEC centre directors in Finland play a crucial role in mentoring staff, especially when dealing with pedagogy or curriculum development work. Staff also expected pedagogical feedback from the leader when evaluating the quality of their work.

The study conducted by Ang (2012) on ECEC leadership in England found that establishing positive family and community partnerships was perceived by centre leaders as a key domain of their practices. At the same time, leaders reported that **establishing inter-agency collaborations and community partnerships were the most challenging dimension of their role in supporting children and their families**.

Finally, the study from Heikka (2013) – investigating ECEC municipal leaders, centre directors and ECEC perceived leadership enactment across 6 Finnish municipalities – found that participants perceived an **imbalance between the holistic aims of pedagogical improvement and the role-based enactment of pedagogical leadership**. In a context where municipal leaders are responsible for arranging ECEC programmes within the municipality (ensuring that centres meet the requirements of the national ECEC laws and local policies), centre directors are responsible for the management of multiple settings within a specific municipality and teachers are responsible for pedagogical work with children in their centre, **leadership involves multiple personnel, consisting of those with either formal leadership positions and/or informal leadership responsibilities**. While all stakeholders perceived the enactment of pedagogical leadership as being connected with the position of centre directors, the latter were perceived as having a workload comprising primarily administrative duties. The role of municipal ECEC leaders was also seen as important in ensuring the prerequisites for quality pedagogy, as they set the vision for the development of ECEC provision in the municipality, develop frameworks and guidelines for centre-based practice and allocate the necessary resources to achieve these goals in ECEC centres. However, participants' perceptions reflected **disjointed leadership enactment across these different roles**: difficulties in information sharing and alignment were repeatedly reported by the stakeholders, especially in relation to quality development work. ECEC teachers do not necessarily perceive the developmental projects as jointly decided means for pedagogical improvement and, at the same time, **centre directors felt that there were no means to participate in the decision-making processes about them with the municipal ECEC leaders**. As centre directors and teachers asked for a greater engagement in decision-making-processes with municipal leaders about the vision, pedagogical guidelines and quality improvement initiatives, the findings of this study call for a **greater attention to be paid to the enactment of the policy advocacy function of leadership**.

In this regard, the study conducted by Kagan and Kauerz (2012) identified the following main **factors hindering effective and efficient leadership development and sustainability** in the US:

- the dearth of leadership research focusing specifically on the ECEC field
- the lack of operationalised conceptualisation of ECEC leadership, due to the fluid and ever evolving definition of leadership in this specific field
- the variations in state and federal requirements for leaders that result in the fields' lack of understanding of effective and efficient leadership development strategies.

With specific reference to the US context, later research from Goffin (2013) argues that **leadership is needed within the field to transform ECEC efforts into coherent, competent, and accountable professions**. This is perceived as a daunting challenge, especially considering that **low compensation** continues to undermining efforts to **prepare, support and retain quality leaders** in the field of ECEC – the low wages and status of the ECEC workforce often force professionals to leave the field or search for a second job (Douglass and Austin 2017). As argued by Movahedazarhouligh et al. (2023) – although there have been several calls for ECEC leadership development in the US over the past 20 years – all the factors mentioned above "impact the field's capacity to build, nurture, and preserve leadership capital, improve the field's working knowledge and maintain an ethic through which leaders bring about improved outcomes for children and families" (p. 1049).

4. Developing ECEC leadership: from existing models to a shared vision

As illustrated in previous sections, the current political pressures for reform and improvement of ECEC provision brought the issue of leadership into the spotlight. In the last decade several studies have been conducted in order to gain a better understanding about what ECEC leadership looks like across diverse settings and contexts, and how different types and structures of leadership can positively impact quality and equity of ECEC systems (Hujala, Waniganayake and Rodd, 2013; Strehmel, Heikka, Hujala, Rodd, and Waniganayake, 2019; Hansen and Ringsmose, 2023; Modise, Fonsén, Heikka, Phatudi, Bøe and Phala, 2023). The first part of this section analyses different models for understanding and enacting leadership in ECEC, drawing on research and policy reports. The second part of the section outlines the vision of ECEC leadership endorsed by the WG, with specific reference to collaborative and transformative leadership; practice examples provide insights on how to translate such a vision into practice.

4.1 ECEC leadership models: an overview of international research

Traditionally, leadership has been conceptualised in the context of a hierarchical power structure. It was perceived as one positional and formal leader - usually a qualified preschool teacher - with ultimate authority and power over the staff who worked in the service and those who used the service. Traditional conceptualizations of leadership have left a legacy within ECEC that 'leaders' are programme directors or those professionals who occupy roles at the highest levels of formal authority within the setting. **Such hierarchical understanding of leadership also had an impact on the way career tracks were conceived within a pathway of linear progression increasingly distancing leaders from direct work with children and families** (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003).

A systematic literature review conducted by Nicholson et al. (2018) found that traditional hierarchical understandings of leadership are still quite common.

Many of the examined studies positioned leadership as residing within an individual and corresponding to specific roles assigned to the person at the highest levels of authority within the ECEC setting. For example, the study by Fleming and Love (2003) proposed a training and mentoring model for leadership in childcare organizations by drawing on business environments. Embedded in a context of highly marketized ECEC provision (U.S.), the model developed by the authors envisages the role of programme director as change agent responsible for driving reform. Within such a leadership model, the programme director is compared to a company CEO, whose quality is believed to improve in early care organisations by aligning closely with corporate practices.

In traditional views of leadership, it is often implicitly suggested that certain individuals have special innate characteristics which make them leaders, and that such qualities (e.g. extraversion, vision, strong communication skills, intelligence, self-confidence) differentiate them from "non-leaders" (Northouse, 2015).

Studies drawing from traditional approaches often include a substantive listing of specific skills that require competency for individuals performing leadership in ECEC services (Boardman,2003; Aubrey, 2011). Such skills-based approach to leader-centred leadership has also implications on the conceptualisation of career development, within stage theories that describe stable hierarchical progressions envisioning a predictable journey from teacher/practitioner (lowest) to director/centre leader (highest) roles. In this perspective, professional identities of teachers/practitioners and leaders are clearly defined as

separated, recalling another feature of hierarchical leadership models which is stability and fixity of professional roles. For example, the study by Argyropoulou (2013) investigating early childhood lead teachers' perspective in Greek kindergarten makes the claim that "effective headteachers cannot perform dual duties, teach and lead, at the same time" (p. 676).

Whereas traditional hierarchical understandings of leadership are still quite common in the field of practice, the systematic literature review conducted by Nicholson et al (2018) also found that in the last decade there has been a shift towards more distributed and relational understandings of leadership.

Contemporary understandings of leadership move beyond traditional power hierarchies and assumptions of leadership's association with specific professional roles and levels of authority, **to describe leadership as a socially constructed, politically embedded, culturally informed and dynamic process.** In more recent studies, leadership is understood as a concept that is constantly negotiated in situated contexts, blurring the traditional boundaries between leaders and followers. Within such studies personal traits, skills or leadership styles that characterise individuals independent of context are not assumed. Rather, they are defined in relation to the political and socio-cultural contexts - as well as in relation to the specific pedagogical and operational culture of the settings - within which leadership is enacted.

Contemporary understandings are centred on the idea that leadership in ECEC services is a **core responsibility that all early childhood practitioners need to understand and develop**: "*it can be formal or informal, it is distributed to staff at all levels and it is essential in all contexts*" (Hujala, Waniganayake and Rodd, 2013, p. 29). Within such understanding, a leadership career does not reflect a linear pathway but rather **flexible professional development trajectories which might comprise experiential learning, mentoring, and achievement of professional qualifications as three intertwined processes**. Waniganayake (2013, p. 73) describe each of these processes as follows:

- *experiential learning*: learning by observing, reflecting and demonstrating leadership skills and strategies in diverse contexts;
- *mentoring*: working with a mentor to support, guide and nurture leadership potential;
- *achieving qualification*: completion of university-based degree focusing on early childhood leadership.

The three main leadership types reflecting contemporary understanding of leadership in ECEC are described below, based on recent systematic literature reviews (Douglass, 2019; Nicholson et al., 2018).

Distributed leadership

Distributed leadership occurs when l**eadership functions, tasks and responsibilities are shared among multiple people. According to this model, leadership is not defined by one's job title but rather by the actions of those enacting leadership to influence a change or improvement**.

Pedagogical and administrative functions may be distributed in many ways among the administrative and pedagogical staff in ECEC settings (Heikka and Hujala, 2013; Kangas, Venninen and Ojala, 2015), as well as across settings and at higher levels of the ECEC system (i.e. provider level, local authority,…). Pedagogical leaders may be engaged in supervision and induction of newly recruited staff, be responsible for staff professional development activities, supporting educational teams in curriculum implementation and quality improvement of their daily practice, leading family engagement and outreaching efforts, and/or be involved in organisational change. Thus, they may also take on organisational tasks supporting the administrative leader. At the same time, organisational conditions and administrative leadership can have an important influence in facilitating (or hindering) pedagogical leadership and the extent to which it is distributed among staff.

This type of leadership requires a collaborative approach to continuous professional development (CPD) within ECEC institutions which are envisaged as learning organisations (Hansen and Ringsmose, 2023). In distributed leadership models, CPD is often described as a professional learning community (PLC) whereby ECEC practitioners are seen as actors of change in improving pedagogical practices through ongoing collective reflection. It is also acknowledged that closer the cooperation of research, training, policy, and practice is, the more impactful CPD is on achieving sustainable change (Peeters, 2023).

Contextual leadership

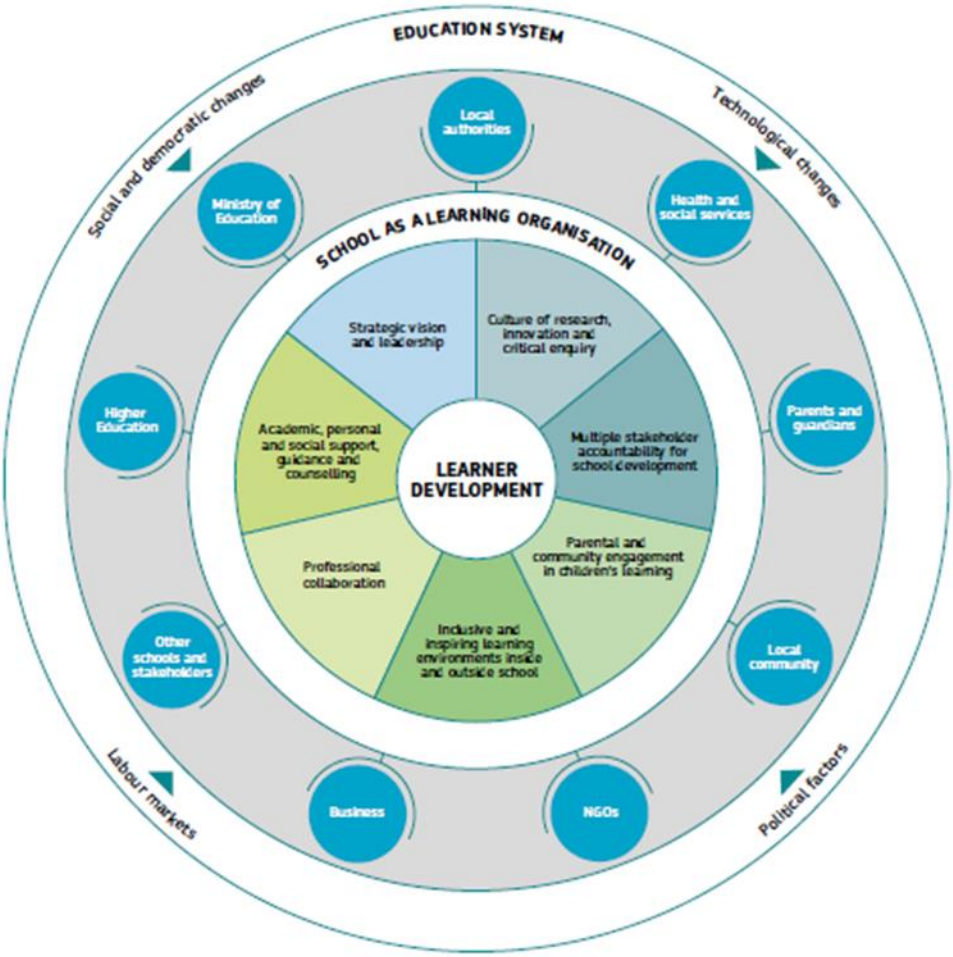
In contemporary studies, leadership has been increasingly explored within an ecological and systemic perspective (Osborn, Hunt and Jauch 2002). According to this perspective, **the effectiveness of leadership is dependent upon the contextual conditions within which it is performed.** This implies that **increased attention needs to be paid to the dimension of policy and governance of ECEC systems at macro-level**, to supplement the micro- dimension (operational culture of the setting) and meso-dimensions (referring to the interaction between the setting and the local community, considering also the interaction with ECEC providers, counselling and support infrastructures, local authorities).

By examining leadership as a broader systemic whole, these studies consider leadership as a dynamic product of ECEC historical developments, thus reflecting the societal values and purposes of ECEC. In this perspective, contextual leadership is considered as a micro-level phenomenon in ECEC settings, as well as a broader macro-level issue reaching up to legislation and back. At the macro- level, societal values and institutional structures define the framework within which leadership is performed (i.e. mission of ECEC, governance and funding of ECEC provision) while at meso- and micro- level, interactions among professionals, children, families and local communities' stakeholders shape the way pedagogical and administrative functions of leaderships are performed according to a shared and negotiated vision of ECEC. As the interactions and co-operation between the different actors at different levels of leadership are particularly meaningful for the success of leadership, these aspects should be simultaneously considered when looking at the implementation of leadership practice and defining the direction of developing ECEC policies and guidelines (Hujala, Vlasov & Alila, 2023).

A **distributed and contextual understanding of leadership** is clearly underpinning the policy guide "SUPPORTING TEACHER AND SCHOOL LEADER CAREERS" (2020) elaborated by the WG SCHOOL under the ET2020 framework:

"Fundamental to continuous development in European education is to understand and support schools as learning organisations. These encourage and enable teachers and school leaders to improve both their pedagogical and their organisational practices concurrently through local collaborative research, networking and continued professional development. Developing the capacity and role of teachers and school leaders is essential for schools to provide a clear strategic vision and leadership that guides and fully supports teaching and learning, and which enables effective communication with other practitioners and stakeholders" (pp. 7-8).

Figure 1: Schools as learning organisations: recognising the diverse roles and action that exist in and around schools to support learner development



Source: European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Supporting teacher and school leader careers – A policy guide – Report, Publications Office, 2020, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/972132

Democratic and inclusive leadership

In most recent studies, the issue of leadership has been investigated within a social justice perspective. Starting from the assumption that engaging in leadership is inherently political, **exercising leadership involves influencing oneself and others towards change (Northouse, 2015) through the negotiation of power relationships**.

These studies understand leadership as an ***'ethical entrepreneurship'*** which should be grounded in a "belief in social justice, making a difference and taking some action that contributes in a strategic way to the wellbeing of children, families, community and colleagues" (Fasoli et al., 2007, p. 244). Hence, the purpose of leadership is reframed towards **developing shared knowledge and practices that can be used in the best interests of children, families and local communities**[24]. In this sense, democratic leadership entails:

[24] Within such a framework, diversity and social justice become foundational principles for re-conceptualising leadership in ECEC. As stated by Fasoli et al. (2007): "We would like to offer alternative discourses of early childhood educational leadership. These alternatives see that leaders work with people to create spaces for leadership that lead to the creation of

- creating space for discussion where the diverse experiences and voices of children and families are *made visible*,
- listening to their voices and taking their experiences *seriously into account in decision-making processes*,
- leading the development of *responsive practices where their concerns are acted upon*, thus working to improve unjust conditions for children and families that currently exist in educational systems and society.

In this strand of studies, **leadership has been redefined to be more inclusive of a wide variety of stakeholders**, such as ECEC **professionals**, **staff working** in services or organisations related to **child and family welfare**, **special education professionals**, **parents, children and the community**. According to Woodrow and Bush (2008), understanding early childhood professionals as both community activists and pedagogical leaders can enhance their sense of agency and collective responsibility in enacting transformational change. Whitebook et al. (2012) suggest that staff in community services and organizations - such as staff operating in childcare resource and referral programmes - should also be included in definitions of leadership as they directly support children and their families and are involved in shaping policy. Other authors have expanded leadership to include early childhood special education curriculum specialists and early interventionists, parents and children (Aubrey et al., 2013).

A distributed, contextual, democratic and inclusive understanding of leadership is also defined in the **NESET Report "Transforming European ECEC services and primary schools into professional learning communities: drivers, barriers and ways forward" (2017)**. The report stresses that, in today's complex and multi-diverse societies, quality and equity of educational opportunities for all children cannot be achieved through standardized solutions. Therefore, the *role of leaders is crucial in achieving such ambitious policy goals by tailoring ECEC settings to the needs of local communities and sustaining educational teams in developing responsive practices in dialogue with children and families*. The study consists of four case studies:

- the Belgian (Flanders) case study focuses on childcare services and pre- and primary school, and it points to the importance of investing in democratic leadership, shared values and reflection on practice
- the Croatian case study focuses on pre- and primary schools involved in the Step by Step program, and it illustrates the importance of organizing meaningful team meetings, through which staff motivation can grow thanks to the active involvement of all participants
- the Italian (Pistoia) case study focuses on ECEC services (0-3 and 3-6 years old) and on the crucial role played by pedagogical coordinators in supporting collegial reflection, joint planning, and peer-learning activities at city level - thus connecting pedagogical leadership and local policies development to foster innovation in the ECEC sector
- the Slovenian case study also focuses on ECEC services (0-6 years old) and it illustrates the importance of de-privatising the practice (through shared observations, co-reflection, and exchange), the complex role of leaders, who need training and support, the focus on

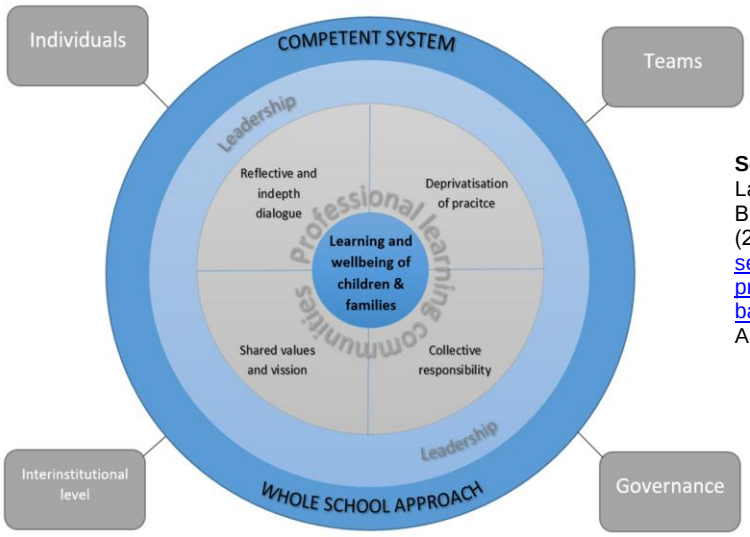
communities where knowledge and inequitable positioning is critiqued and reconstructed. Within this leadership image, a leader can: be inclusive; learns alongside others; doesn't always have the answers and solutions; listens to and with others; and places ethics at the core of their work" (p. 144).

connecting research with practice, and the need for official financial investment in PLCs to make them sustainable over time.

The **policy recommendations** elaborated by drawing on the cross-national analysis of case study findings emphasise the **importance of investing in 'leadership' as a powerful factor in transforming an ECEC centre's or school's culture.** In this sense, ECEC and school leadership plays a crucial role in:

- *fostering a shared vision and set of values* based on children's rights and respect for diversity through democratic and communitarian decision-making processes, in which the voices of families, professionals, children, and local communities are listened to
- *ensuring vertical and horizontal collaboration to take place among the different services for children and families, schools and organizations that are within the same territory* (ECEC services and schools, and other services in the neighbourhood),
- *sustaining the ongoing improvement of pedagogical practice* and the professional development of staff by combining top-down approaches (i.e., *orienting staff decision-making processes, fostering pedagogical innovation, providing CPD opportunities*) and bottom-up approaches (i.e., *fostering teams' reflectivity on their practice, encouraging collective sharing of responsibilities, creating space for children and families to engage in decision-making processes*) to drive change.

A systemic approach to leadership development is also stressed in the policy recommendations, advocating for a competent system of governance where leaders are adequately trained to fulfil their complex role and supported by a strong network that enables them to learn from one another



Source: Sharmahd, N., Peeters, J., Van Laere, K., Vonta, T., De Kimpe, C., Brajković, S., Contini, L. and Giovannini, D. (2017). 'Transforming European ECEC services and Primary schools into professional learning communities: drivers, barriers and ways forward', NESET II Analytical Report.

The Supporting Inclusive School Leadership (SISL) project carried out by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE) highlighted that the crucial influence that school leadership has on inclusive practice. With the ambition of achieve the vision that 'all learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers' (EASNIE, 2015, p. 1), the SISL project builds on the work by EASNIE[25] and wider European and international agencies to investigate how inclusive school-level leadership practices could be developed and promoted through national and local-level policy frameworks and support mechanisms. By considering inclusive leadership as a way to address

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inequalities, building communities and fostering full participation, the project focuses on valued outcomes for all learners, including those from most vulnerable backgrounds. As results of the project, **the *policy messages*** outlined below **can support national/local-level policy-makers/decision-makers to develop the school leader role to foster inclusive education for all learners in different policy contexts.**

- School leadership can be performed by one leader or, *to be effective, by a collaborative leadership team or distributed among several key actors* within or linked to a school
- Inclusive school leadership is *specifically dedicated to addressing inequity to build community and the full participation of all learners*.
- *Every school leader should aim to be an inclusive school leader and practise school leadership that promotes inclusion*, even if school leadership takes place in different school contexts that are developing inclusive cultures and practices in varying ways.
- *Supportive policy measures for inclusive school leadership exist within a regulatory framework that universally defines inclusive education* and determines which resources are available, which decisions can be made and what leaders are held responsible for.
- It is essential that *policies support the development and implementation of effective and inclusive school leadership* that can enhance equity, equality and well-being in education. To achieve this, it is necessary to identify the gaps between the standards *school leaders are held accountable for and the supportive policy measures available to them*.
- The *vision of a policy framework to support inclusive school leadership* is that existing and developing policy supports school leadership *to build a culture and implement practice* in which all learners are provided with meaningful, high-quality education, high expectations for their achievement, well-being and a sense of belonging within an equitable school environment.
- Through a *guided reflection* and a *structured dialogue* on the existence and efficiency of policy measures aimed at supporting school leadership, *policy-makers can gain an insight into areas that need to be addressed. Being aware of the gaps between policy and practice can help to find a balance between what school leaders are held accountable for with the resources they have access to and their autonomy for decision-making within their schools.*

4.2 Moving toward a collaborative and transformative leadership: insights into practice

Despite the consensus that exists in research and policy debates, successful examples on how distributed, contextual, democratic and inclusive leadership could be achieved in practice are still rather limited. Several studies, in fact, describe how the impact of **policy reforms on leadership practice have been hampered** by the ***lack of a common understanding of leadership*** and by ***entrenched pedagogical and organisational cultures***, which have an impact on the way leadership is performed daily within ECEC settings.

Hierarchical and distributive structures of leadership often co-exist in practice, especially in those contexts where ECEC services are provided under different authorities (i.e., state authorities for 3-6, regional/local authorities for 0-3) and/or run by diverse providers. As the mission and vision for leadership is strongly embedded in institutional cultures and pedagogical traditions, ECEC leadership functions might be understood and performed in different ways within settings which fall under direct management of municipalities, settings run by private not-for-profit or for-profit organisations, settings operating within state-maintained institutions (sometime comprising primary schools as well) or within family daycare settings. The challenges connected to the creation of a shared understanding of leadership across 0-3 and 3-6 institutions in a context of multilayered governance and

fragmented ECEC provision have been explored by Lazzari et al. (2022)[26] in relation to the implementation of the reform on the integrated 0-6 system in Italy.

Finally, the studies conducted by Ho and colleagues (Ho & Tikly, 2012; Ho, 2012) analyze the tensions emerging in the process of translating policy shifts toward the promotion of distributed teacher leadership in Asian countries which traditionally relied upon hierarchical leadership models. Such research highlights the gaps existing between ambitious policy and systems reform goals – including shifting early childhood leadership away from traditional models for improving preschool quality – and the realities of policy implementation, where principals are resisting such reforms by maintaining centralised traditional hierarchical cultures at their school sites.

Being cognizant of the above-mentioned challenges, promising initiatives where distributed, contextual, democratic and inclusive understandings of leadership were successfully translated into practices have been presented and scrutinised during WG meetings. Such examples of practices are illustrated in the following sub-sections. In the final subsection, the **vision of ECEC leadership endorsed by the WG** – resulting from the discussion of research findings and practice examples – will be outlined with specific reference to **collaborative and transformative leadership**.

4.2.1. Fostering democratic and inclusive leadership in contexts of socio-cultural diversity: the Elmer crèches in Brussels

Elmer is one of the most inclusive ECEC services in Brussels, attended by children aged 3 months to 3.5 years[27].

In the vision developed by the centres, the three functions of ECEC - economical, pedagogical and social - are combined. As the centres are situated in the most socio-culturally diverse and multilingual neighbourhood of Brussels, innovation is part of Elmer's DNA. Brussels has 19 municipalities, and the levels of child poverty differs across these. Elmer is present in the neighbourhoods with the highest levels of child poverty. It is a neighbourhood service in childcare, a centre for inclusive education and an initiator of family centre. Elmer's mission is at the heart of its functioning – it aims to increase the well-being, social opportunities and participation of families and children by organising neighbourhood services that offer Dutch-speaking, accessible, quality childcare in Brussels. The operation around training and employment of staff from disadvantaged groups is an integral part of this. Respect for diversity and individuality and the belief in the growth opportunities of each individual are important values in this respect.

Elmer has four services in the region of Brussels Capital: Elmer Noord – Schaarbeek (68 places + family centre); Elmer Zuid – Anderlecht (58 places); Elmer West – Molenbeek (34 places) ; Elmer in de Stad – Brussels (30 places).

Elmer organises neighbourhood services in social childcare with the possibility to use the service urgently, part and full-time, and also for short stays*. Aiming to create a social mix of families living in the neighbourhood, its target groups include working parents, parents who follow a training or who suddenly found work, parents with social / medical issues, parents applying for jobs as well as parents in crisis situations*. In 2022, Elmer reached:

- 409 children and their parents;

[26] https://www.issa.nl/content/intrans-project-achievements-enable-smooth-and-inclusive-early-years-transitions

[27]The Elmer nursery in Brussels aims to promote well-being, diversity, social opportunities, and participation of families. Through their neighbourhood-centred services Elmer provides accessible and high-quality childcare, while promoting training and employment among disadvantaged groups. An overview of Elmer's ethos, vision and practice is provided in the video, subtitled in 29 languages: https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=gGi_ba7vVEI
The democratic and inclusive leadership model developed by the Elmer crèches in Brussels was presented during the 13th WG Meeting (28-29 November 2023).

- 24 children with special needs;
- 30.8% single parents;
- 35% parents with low qualification;
- 37.2% of parents following training;
- More than 50% with a low income;
- 59.4% vulnerable families.

Based on the birthplace of the mother, children originate from 58 countries, most from Africa, then Belgium, Asia and the Middle East, the rest of Europe, and America. Children with special needs are welcomed on a case-by-case basis. Whereas the centres do not have extra resources for working with children with special educational needs and disabilities, the staff is committed to work in partnership with parents to explore how to best support the development of these children. Last year, Elmer worked with 24 children with special needs, and it is continuously checked how long they shall stay at the institution depending on their development. *An inclusion coach is available onsite to support the staff in developing appropriate practice for promoting the development of children with special needs*; in addition *professionals from other organisations go onsite to work directly with children with special needs* (i.e. physiotherapy, speech therapist,...).

In line with the *Flemish pedagogical framework for babies and toddlers*[28], Elmer must work on both the *high wellbeing as well as the high involvement of the child. Co-education with the parents (between families and the centre) – the first educators – are at the core of Elmer's pedagogical policy*, which focuses on enabling the wellbeing of each child, offering them rich opportunities to develop, and enabling connectivity.

Elmer enables social participation for parents and opportunities to meet for young parents, such as via the Parents' café. It is also an active partner in the neighbourhood. The Elmer team has 103 co-workers of 27 different origins and a plurality of languages.

The *leadership culture developed by Elmer creches is strongly based on values*, providing a framework for the work of ECEC staff at team level:

- *strong belief that every staff member needs safety and well-being;*
- *strong belief that every staff member is constantly developing;*
- *strong belief that every staff member is unique, and that this diversity is precious;*
- *strong belief that every staff member is equal, and that reciprocity is important;*
- *strong belief that every staff member has talent and potential, and can take responsibility.*

The organisation chart includes the director, pedagogical coaches, teachers, administrative staff, cleaning and cooking team, as well as other support staff (back office, HR, etc.). The people closest to the child are the most important (bottom-up structure), the parents and children are at the centre.

Elmer has a vision of ***coaching leadership***, *which is an interactive process to provide direction and inspire the flow that directions follow, advancing the learning capacity of the individuals so they can reach and harness their self-management abilities*. For coaching leadership, there has to be:

- *Dialogue in a safe learning environment*;

[28] https://www.opgroeien.be/sites/default/files/intern/the-pedagogical-framework-in-flanders-def.pdf

- *A challenge defined along with a coaching question to ensure goal orientation and ownership;*
- *Taking responsibility / accountability for results;*
- *Consideration for varied learning styles*.

Elmer has an open view on dynamically making changes based on changing circumstances, being a learning organisation, therefore, its organisation chart has been in motion over the past 26 years. There are growth opportunities and internal mobility through the creation of flexible training routes. In each Elmer crèche, there is a pedagogical team with responsibility to oversee the work within the centre. Competences are clearly defined, and recruitment is followed up. *Elmer has monthly coordination meetings, providing space for reflection to increase involvement, including through joint decision making, and taking responsibility together. Weekly discussions among staff are held while children sleep (between 1-3 pm) to reflect on pedagogical planning, children's progresses, ongoing projects, etc.* The persons in training have meetings alone with the pedagogical coaches to follow their assignments and supervise how activities are being done: they work 4 days per week and follow training outside Elmer. Sometimes those trained on the job by Elmer centres, can be recruited if vacancies are available; otherwise Elmers helps them applying for jobs.

The inflow model (recruitment) of Elmer is based on training long-term unemployed persons without qualification into qualified day-care workers:

- 18 childcare workers in training;
- SOCECO contracts from the employment service;
- 1 day/week school + internship at work;
- duration of the formation +/- 2 years;
- more than 80 persons (all women) graduated, some continued to with Bachelor's degree.

Peer-learning exchanges within international and EU-funded programmes – such as Erasmus+ – are very important for fostering the ongoing development of high quality practice at Elmer: currently the staff is involved in the following projects: "enhancing quality in ECEC through parent participation" (EQuaP), "Building educational bridges in the city", "Playing and Narrate".

4.2.2. Distributing leadership responsibilities within and across ECEC centres: the joint leadership model developed in Hämeenlinna city in Finland[29]

The effectiveness of a new joint leadership model developed and implemented in the Finnish city of Hämeenlinna was examined by a research case study conducted by the University of Tampere, in partnership with the Regional State Administrative Agency of West/Central Finland and Early Childhood Education Department of Hattula Municipality[30]. Hämeenlinna's executive administration and local officers began restructuring the ECEC leadership model in early 2014. The aim was to strengthen directors' leadership positions and skills in pedagogical leadership, as well as to improve ECEC finances, human

[29] The joint leadership model reported in this section only refer to the city of Hämeenlinna and it is not representative of Finnish municipalities. In fact, in Finland each municipality can decide the organisation of leadership in ECEC.

[30] Keski-Rauska, M. L., Fonsén, E., Aronen, K., & Riekkola, A. (2016). Research on a joint leadership model for early childhood education in Finland. *Journal of Early Childhood Education Research*, 5(2), 310-328: https://journal.fi/jecer/article/view/114063/67262

resources, and client processes. This arrangement was unique within the Finnish municipal ECEC system.

At the time of the study, qualification requirements for ECEC leaders were defined by the Act on Qualification Requirements for Social Welfare Professionals (272/2005), stipulating that centre directors must be qualified ECEC teachers with adequate management and leadership skills[31]. Currently, centre directors typically do not work directly with children; instead, they act as administrative leaders across one or more ECEC centre units. The increasing number of units and employees has resulted in unclear definitions of directors' tasks and responsibilities. A broad array of administrative tasks related to human resources and economic issues has shifted directors' focus away from pedagogy. To provide high-quality pedagogy, directors need to reflect on and develop pedagogical practices with ECEC practitioners who work directly with children.

In 2014, Hämeenlinna had 32 municipal ECEC units, including ECEC centres and preschools, led by 19 directors. After the municipal reorganization, these units were still led by 19 directors, but they began working in pairs. In these pairs, one director focused on finance and human resources, overseeing ECEC staff officially and administratively, while the other concentrated on client processes and pedagogy, managing the work processes. The key element of the new ECEC leadership model in Hämeenlinna was the concept of joint leadership (Fonsén, Akselin & Aronen, 2015). This concept is based on the principles of distributed leadership both horizontally and vertically. Horizontally, joint leadership involved the two directors working together as a pair. Vertically, leadership entailed interactions between all staff members and the two directors. The joint leadership model was also implemented using a distributed organizational model, where one director might lead at least two physically separate ECEC units.

The case study examined the phenomenon of joint leadership vertically. The research questions focused on how ECEC teachers and directors assessed the quality of the joint leadership model in Hämeenlinna and the main differences in these assessments between ECEC directors and teachers. An evaluation tool assessing leadership quality (Fonsén & Mäntyjärvi, 2019) was used and administered via an online survey to teachers and directors of ECEC centers in Hämeenlinna (233 respondents in total - 214 teachers and 19 directors - out of 486 staff members). The survey also included questions about the developmental needs of the joint leadership model.

Results indicated that d*irectors evaluated the joint leadership model more positively than teachers. Positive feedback highlighted the importance of investing more in pedagogical leadership, noting that the new model had strengthened structures for strategic planning, which respondents found functional in their work.* Critical and challenging aspects of joint leadership included: time resources and changes in directors' positions. Sufficient time for implementing changes and daily interactions was deemed essential. *When implementing a distributed leadership model, it is crucial to enhance teachers' awareness of directors' availability and to support staff independence and confidence in their abilities.*

The study revealed that directors rated their support for workplace well-being higher than teachers did. Teachers reported that directors were too occupied with various units, making them less engaged with teachers' work as well as with children and parents. Given that teachers' expectations of directors' leadership might be traditional (not aligning with the joint leadership model's functional premise), *there should be organizational discussions about*

[31] Since 2018, the new regulations are in the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care. for a special education teacher in early childhood education). In Section 31 - Head of early education centre – is stated that "The qualification criteria for the role of head responsible for the activities of centre-based early education consist of the qualification required of teacher in early childhood education and care or of a social pedagogue in early childhood education and care referred to in sections 26 and 27 and at least a Master's degree in Education, as well as sufficient leadership skills." The regulations under *Section 31* will enter into force on 1 January 2030. The masters degree is expected from 1 January 2030.

the content, tasks, and expectations of leadership to avoid tensions. An open discussion about expectations for both directors is necessary.

In conclusion, the results from the case study suggested that the concept of joint leadership needs clarification for teachers – and with teachers – to enable a better understanding – and sharing – of pedagogical leadership responsibilities. *Joint leadership appears to be built through deepening interactions between teachers and directors. At this stage of the joint leadership model's development, horizontal leadership distribution seems more advanced than vertical distribution between directors and teachers*. While directors perceived strengths in joint leadership related to exchange, mutual feedback, and peer support before decision-making, the study indicated that more time is needed to understand and develop the joint leadership model in discussions with teachers.

4.2.3. Developing collaborative leadership between ECEC centre's directors and municipal providers in Norway

In Norway, the *Framework Plan for Kindergartens* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017)[32] states that centre's directors are responsible for the day-to-day management of pedagogical, personnel, and administrative matters at ECEC settings' level. It also emphasizes that effective pedagogical and administrative leadership requires strong cooperation with the ECEC provider, who is ultimately responsible for ensuring the centre operates in compliance with relevant laws and regulations. In the Norwegian context ECEC centres are either municipally or privately owned (just over half being privately owned). In the past, municipality providers were not very involved in the pedagogical management of ECEC centres; while today, many directors experience a high level of owner involvement in both pedagogical and administrative matters. In this context, the effectiveness of cooperation between centre directors and municipal providers was investigated by a study conducted by Oslo Metropolitan University[33]. Formally, the owners of municipal ECEC centres are the elected municipal council politicians. However, in practice, especially in larger municipalities, directors have little contact with these politicians. Instead, directors typically interact with a superior at the middle management level within the municipal leadership hierarchy, referred to as the person representing the ECEC provider in the study.

There is considerable variation between Norwegian municipalities regarding the leadership structure at the administrative level, specifically who the immediate superiors of ECEC centre directors are and whether these superiors have personnel, administrative, and pedagogical responsibilities. Most superiors involved in the study had both personnel responsibility for the directors of ECEC centres and pedagogical and administrative responsibility for the ECEC centres within the municipality (or city district in larger municipalities). In this context, the research focused on exploring: a) the expectations, possibilities, and challenges that ECEC directors perceive in their cooperation with their immediate superiors at the municipal level; and b) how this cooperation affects the autonomy and freedom of action of centre directors' leadership roles.

As leaders of their entities, directors occupy a top hierarchical position. Simultaneously, they are at the bottom of a broader leadership hierarchy, with state governance at the top, the owner in the middle, and the director at the bottom. Directors are part of a governance chain that extends from the national level to individual ECEC centres. Given the sector's ongoing development, analysing ECEC centres as part of a larger organization is necessary, considering how responsibility and decision-making power are divided and

[32] See first paragraph of section 7 in the Kindergarten Act: https://www.udir.no/contentassets/7c4387bb50314f33b828789ed767329e/framework-plan-for-kindergartens--rammeplan-engelsk-pdf.pdf

[33] Larsen, A. K. (2023) Leadership in Norwegian Municipal Early Childhood Education Care Centres. In: M. Modise, E. Fonsén, J. Heikka, N. Phatudi, M. Bøe, & T. Phala (Eds.), *Global Perspectives on Leadership in Early Childhood Education* (pp. 67–83). Helsinki University Press. https://doi.org/10.33134/HUP-20-5.

delegated across different system levels impacts leadership enactment, directors' autonomy, and freedom of action.

ECEC centres' directors – who were interviewed through a survey – showed clear expectation about their roles. *They focused on personnel responsibility, ensuring that staff have opportunities for professional development, participate in decisions, and work collaboratively as a team. This reflects contemporary understandings of leadership as interactions and processes prioritise personnel development and collective goals over individual ones*. They also emphasized the *pedagogical aspects of their roles, highlighting the importance of promoting the ECEC centre's mandate and children's welfare.* Directors seemed more concerned with pedagogical leadership than administrative management.

Directors expect their superiors to be available for discussions on pedagogical issues. They believe their superiors should focus on supporting their pedagogical work while allowing them autonomy in decision-making processes at the centre level. *Directors welcome distributed leadership, viewing it as a cooperative effort. However, many pointed out that their superiors have limited time. It is crucial for those above the directors in the leadership hierarchy to be approachable and available, which also builds trust*. Interviewees noted that they have professional autonomy, that their superiors trust them, and that they possess legitimacy and professional authority.

At the same time, directors noted that *increasing demands on ECEC centres from various sources raise pressure and expectations, necessitating municipal superiors who can assist with pedagogical leadership.* Such *multilayered leadership structures* prompt new questions about leadership processes. As the Norwegian ECEC sector has developed more complex leadership structures recently, an increased variations in leadership and management forms in the coming years seems likely. Therefore, it seems necessary to further explore how leadership responsibilities can be divided between the owner and the director – as well as between the director and the pedagogical leader within practitioners' teams – not only in municipal ECEC centres but also in private ECEC one.

4.2.4 The vision shared by the group: developing a culture of high quality ECEC for children and families through collaborative and transformative leadership

As discussed in previous sections, **certain consensus exist – across the fields of research, policy and practice – on the need to overcome traditional notions of leadership** associated with hierarchical institutional structures and individual skills and dispositions, **to move toward a distributed, contextual, democratic and inclusive understanding of leadership.** The vision developed by the working group is informed by international research – which was reviewed in this report and discussed during WG meetings – but it also draws on experts' contributions, exchange of good practice and insights from site visits which were taking place during peer-learning activities.

Within the vision developed by the 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 sense, 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.

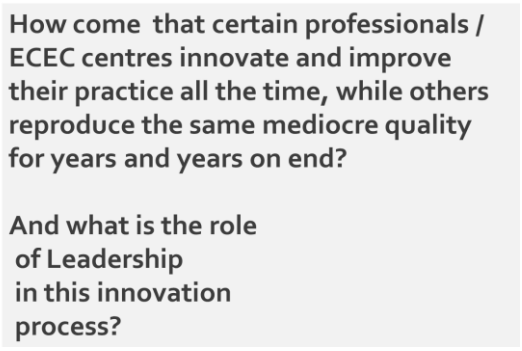
For this reason, the vision of leadership endorsed by the working group emphasise the collaborative and transformative dimensions connected to decision-making processes contributing to shape ECEC practice and policy, thus possibly influencing change at system level. The main features of **collaborative and transformative leadership** – as articulated in WG discussions leading to this publication – are described below[34].

- **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.

"The common shared vision is inspiring for the yearly evaluation and planning, it helps to find a solution in case of problematic situations and it helps to decide which projects and actions have to be taken."

(leader of ECEC centre Ghent)

- **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** is a crucial element of leadership connected to ECEC quality improvement. 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 perspective, 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.

- *'Motivation comes from being into a growing process that supports the team in researching together with colleagues'.*
- *'Knowing that our job is important, that we are important for families, this gives us motivation. We know that we have a big responsibility'.*
- *'When your voice is not listened to, then you feel de-motivated. Here we feel that we have a voice'.*

(practitioners working in municipal ECEC centres in Pistoia)

- **Building participatory alliances to influence policy in the best interest of children and families**. Within a systemic

[34] The quotes are taken from the slides presented by Dr. Jan Peeters in the keynote speech he gave during the WG meeting held on 22-23 January 2024. More specifically, the quoted excerpts draw on the NESET report on Professional Learning Communities, which was co-authored by the keynote speaker: Sharmahd, N., Peeters, J., Van Laere, K., Vonta, T., De Kimpe, C., Brajković, S., Contini, L. and Giovannini, D. (2017). *Transforming European ECEC services and Primary schools into professional learning communities: drivers, barriers and ways forward*. NESET II Analytical Report No 2/2017.

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.

> *"The leaders were methodologically strong and also had special **diplomatic talent** to be able to involve people. There were individuals who really were committed to bring about changes in the educational system. "*
>
> *(ECEC project manager in Slovakia)*

5. ECEC leadership in Europe: existing structures and support available for leaders

In this section, the opportunities and challenges connected to the implementation of a vision of collaborative and transformative leadership will be explored by drawing on country cases and example of practices shared by working group members during meetings and peer-learning activities[35]. On these occasions, working group members explored how leadership can be strengthened in this context by raising awareness about the different roles leaders need to fulfil and the importance of sharing responsibilities – at centre, provider and governance level – to ensure, support and promote quality development and retain staff in the field of ECEC. Country cases and practice examples focused on existing policy initiatives to sustain ECEC leadership, by exploring opportunities for further innovation and improvement of leadership at all system levels:

- the setting where ECEC is provided for the children
- the support structures for leaders at the level of the setting such as counselling and professional development;
- the approaches to quality development through internal and external evaluation, and monitoring[36];
- the policies setting the legal and financial framework for ECEC.

It is essential to note that ECEC centres do not operate in a vacuum, as they are embedded in the society / cultural context at large, influenced by the political system (including unions, policymakers, financial backers, public administration, and welfare offices), local infrastructures (such as social services, schools), the families and children. Centres are supported by a diverse system of welfare associations, professional consulting, higher education and research institutions, as well as professional and further education organisations.

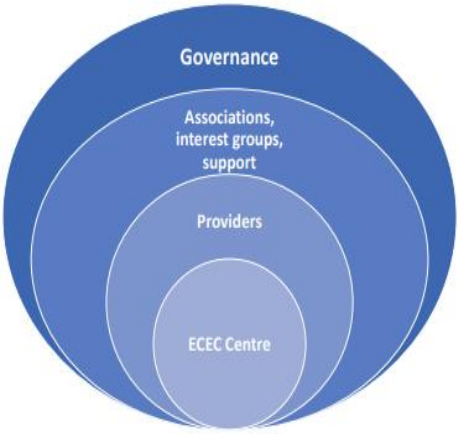
5.1. From vision to implementation: challenges and ways forward to develop collaborative and transformative leadership in complex ECEC ecosystems

[35] In particular, this section will draw on the results of the peer-learning activity (PLA) "*Strengthening leadership for quality development and staff retention*" jointly organised by the European Commission and the Ministry for Education of Lower Saxony, that took place between 22 and 24 May 2024 in Berlin, Germany. The event hosted 50 participants from 18 countries and 4 international organisations. The PLA offered an opportunity to WG members and guests from Germany to meet face-to-face and discuss the ongoing reforms on how to strengthen leadership for quality development and staff retention in ECEC at all system levels. The event included a mix of presentations, time for discussion, reflection, and for sharing knowledge and experiences, while also offering an opportunity to all participants to visit an ECEC centre in the area of Berlin. For more detailed information, the public minutes of the PLA are available on the European Commission website reporting regularly updates on the activities carried out by the ECEC Working Group: https://wikis.ec.europa.eu/display/EAC/ECEC+Documents.

[36] The work on ECEC leadership carried out by the WG within the current mandate (2024-25) follows up on previous work from the group on monitoring and evaluating quality in ECEC (2022-23 mandate), which results have been published in four interdependent reports:

- *Purposes, Values and Principles* (2022)
- *Improving the governance of monitoring and evaluation of quality in ECEC* (2023)
- *Involving children, parents, staff and stakeholders in monitoring and evaluation of quality in ECEC* (2023)
- *Making ECEC more inclusive through monitoring and evaluation of quality* (2023)

Implementing the vision of collaborative and transformative leadership shared by the group requires building capacity at all levels of the ECEC system. *While the competencies of the leaders and staff are certainly crucial to sustain a culture of high-quality pedagogy at ECEC centre level* – by involving children, families and local communities – *framework conditions at ECEC policy level and a well-coordinated support infrastructure* – with specific reference to leaders and staff training (pre & in-service), working conditions and material resources available to providers – *are equally important.* As conceptualised by Stremhel[37] drawing on the CoRe study[38], ECEC leadership can be defined in terms of ***"community of responsibilities"*** where the various stakeholders operating at different levels of the ECEC system contribute to develop a culture of high quality ECEC where children's well-being and development stands at the centre (see figures below).



Levels of the ECEC system
(cf. EU 2011)

SYSTEM LEVELS	Primay task	Organisational units	Actors
Individual	pedagogical work	pedagogical units	children, parents, educators
Institutional	leadership and management	ECEC centres, provider organisations	pedagogical teams, directors and providers
Inter-institutional	leadership, management, support and lobbying	Provider organisations, associations and consulting enterprises	Leaders, providers, professional experts, lobbyists
Governance	decision making on structures and resources in ECEC	interest groups, political administration, parliaments	lobbyists, political experts, policy makers

→ „Community of responsibility"

Figure 4: Slides presented by Prof. Petra Strehmel as part of the keynote speech she gave during the PLA in Berlin (22-24 May 2024).

In this perspective, leadership development for high quality ECEC cannot be seen as a sole responsibility of the staff working with children and families in early childhood centres on a daily basis, but rather unfolds in the combined efforts of all institutions and actors who are responsible to ensure that high quality educational opportunities are available to all children and that children and families are thriving in society. Leadership development can therefore be seen as the result of a collaboration of ECEC, society and policy-making institutions interacting within a well-coordinated infrastructure as illustrated below.

[37] "Strengthening leadership for quality development and staff retention at all levels of the ECEC system: What needs to be considered?" keynote presentation by Prof. Petra Strehmel (Department of Social Work, HAW Hamburg).

[38] European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (2011) *Competence requirements in early childhood education and care – Final report*. EU Publications Office: **https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/38368**

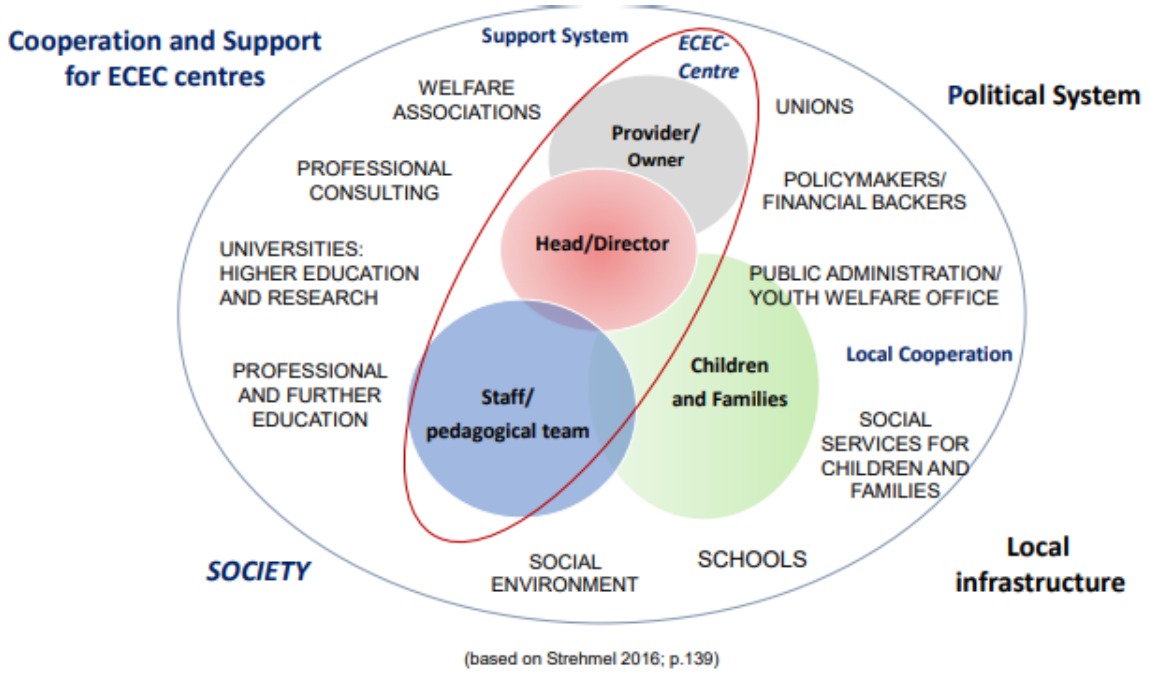


Figure 5: Slide presented by Prof. Petra Strehmel as part of the keynote speech she gave during the PLA in Berlin (22-24 May 2024).

In such context, implementing the group's vision of collaborative and transformative leadership at operational level entails:

- establishing *collaborative practices and participatory alliances* both towards the *inside of the settings* (i.e. team building, continuing professional development and career planning, engagement of families in decision-making processes) and toward the *outside of the settings* (i.e. inter-professional exchange with the pre/primary education sector, child and family welfare organisations within local communities, dialogue and consultation with administrators and policy decision-makers at local level)

- developing *coordinated communication and exchange among institutions operating at different levels of the ECEC system* (i.e., level of individual setting, of service provider, of local/regional governance, of national policies)

- *awareness of the political, economic, cultural and social context* within which leadership functions and tasks are embedded (i.e. national/regional/local policies, funding mechanisms, mission/vision/regulations orienting the operational culture of the setting/provider, characteristic of population in the local community) for *strategic planning*, *allocation of resources, and policy advocacy.*

5.2. 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.

During a peer learning activity (PLA) in May 2024[39], participants were encouraged to reflect on leaders' needs and on the role of different actors at different levels of the system (i.e., ECEC providers, counselling services, independent/governmental agencies responsible for ECEC quality monitoring development, trade unions, local authorities...) to support leadership in ECEC. The main findings emerging from the overall discussion have been clustered below.

Overall, discussions have shown that ECEC leaders' support needs include:

- formal acknowledgement of their role at 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 in Lithuania
- 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 of counsellors/educational advisers/peer coordination)
- mutual support among staff and leaders within ECEC settings
- parents' councils established at centre level
- funded projects supporting experimentation

[39] ECEC Documents - EACGroups - EC Public Wiki (europa.eu)

- counselling agencies
- quality development initiatives.

The interplay between the different actors varies across countries and local policy cultures. In certain contexts, the national level might be instrumental in improving leaders' working conditions, reforming education/qualification systems, and providing them with ongoing support through target initiatives (i.e. improving ECEC quality monitoring and evaluation processes, increasing the inclusiveness of ECEC settings…). However, a strong need for a coherent governance structure in which all actors work together in a systematic way emerged from the 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.

5.3. Examples of support strategies across Europe

The purpose of country examples illustrated in this section is to **explore different ways in which leadership responsibilities could be shared across the levels of the ECEC system**, by considering the **different configurations characterising the governance of ECEC provision within countries and across Europe**. In this perspective, the challenges and opportunities connected to the creation of a shared vision of collaborative and transformative leadership in complex ECEC ecosystems are analysed by considering:

- *contexts where the governance of ECEC is decentralised at regional/state level* (i.e., Berlin land) *within a system granting a certain degree of autonomy to ECEC providers* (mostly publicly subsidised), while at the same time aiming at a consistent pedagogical quality, by supporting leaders through a coherent framework of public policies and sets of tools for evaluating and improving practices at centre level
- *contexts where ECEC is mostly provided within the private sector* (e.g. Ireland), *with providers (private for profit and not-for-profit) having a high degree of autonomy and a limited support infrastructure in place.* In such contexts, linking public subsidies to career pathways connected to specialised training and diversified leadership roles could be a strategy to increase leaders' capacity while at the same time ensuring shared leadership responsibilities within ECEC settings
- *contexts where ECEC is provided within a split system*, *with 3-6 provision being primarily provided within the state education system based on a school clusters model* (i.e. Portugal) encompassing kindergartens, primary and lower secondary school. Whereas ECEC leadership positions are not formalised in such contexts, due to centralised leadership in the hand of the head teacher in charge of whole school cluster, various solutions could be adopted for creating a shared vision of leadership, e.g., developing a collaborative leadership structure at cluster level, the establishment of cross-functional teams, or facilitating cross-organisational communication and cross-sectoral collaboration at municipal level
- *contexts where ECEC is provided, regulated and funded within a unified system publicly regulated and funded with decentralised responsibilities to local authorities* (i.e. Norway and Finland) and *where a shared vision of distributed ECEC leadership at centre level is explicitly set out in ECEC policy frameworks.* In such context, investing in the professionalisation of qualified teachers undertaking

leadership roles, and on a supportive ECEC quality development infrastructure, is considered strategic to the effective implementation of distributed leadership

- *contexts where ECEC is provided within a unified – and mostly publicly funded system - regulated at national level but with decentralised responsibilities devolved to local authorities in terms of funding and at school level in terms of curriculum implementation* (i.e. Lithuania). In such contexts, leadership at school level is distributed among the head of the ECEC centre and two deputy heads, the ECEC Council/Board, the head of the methodological group – while at the same time is supported at national level by the ECEC Leaders' Association and the National Agency for Education (providing mentoring programmes and other support measures) and local level by municipal educational departments providing support with legal procedures and ongoing quality development processes.

A systemic, participatory and multi-layered approach to quality development as support to strengthen ECEC centre leadership: the case of Berlin land

The Berlin Early Years Institute for Quality Development (BeKi) is one of the nine institutes within the International Academy Berlin (INA Berlin gGmbH) and it plays a crucial role in monitoring, supporting, and conducting ongoing self-evaluation of quality in Berlin's ECEC centres. The institute focuses on developing practical materials for centres' leaders, involving them in innovative projects, providing quality requirements and criteria, and offering in-service training regarding their roles and functions – with specific reference to their roles and functions within the Berlin land ECEC quality development system.

The Berlin Early Years Programme called '*Bridging Diversity*'[40], was developed through a participatory process involving practitioners, academic researchers, providers, policymakers and approved by the Regional Ministry of Education and umbrella organizations of ECEC providers in 2020. 'Bridging Diversity' (BD) is based on a holistic understanding of the German concept of Bildung, which is akin to education but encompasses an active, sensory, social, and enjoyable process that builds on the interests of the child. The programme aims to strengthen various competencies in children. The *Berlin Policy Framework on Quality* (2006) provides the strategy for implementing 'Bridging Diversity' according to a combination of external and internal (self-evaluation) processes[41]. A permanent working group (WG) steers its implementation. Quality development is carried out in an interconnected system involving various providers whose roles are defined within this framework. The steps for quality development include:

- each ECEC centre prepares an in-house educational concept paper based on the BD curriculum
- this document is evaluated both internally and externally, ensuring it aligns with BD principles
- ongoing support and updates for staff and leaders are provided through counselling
- evaluation reports are presented to the ECEC department of Berlin Land (funder) and shared with ECEC centres to demonstrate the utilization of the data they provided
- self-evaluations remain internal to the team and are not published, fostering a reflective and improvement-oriented culture within the centres.

[40] https://www.isbn.de/buch/9783937785462/bridging-diversity-an-early-childhood-curriculum

[41] https://beki-qualitaet.de/media/pages/materialien-und-forschungsberichte-uebersicht/materialien-und-forschungsberichte/3f43d2fec5-1627461718/1_introduction.pdf

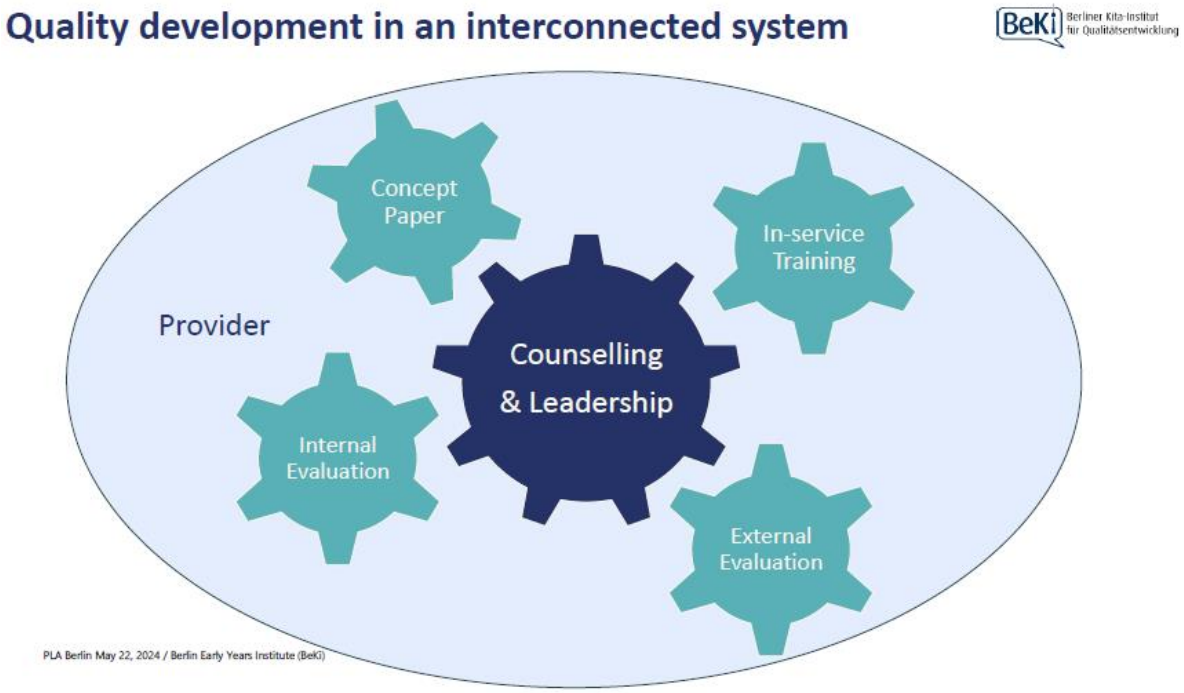


Figure 6: Slide presented by Dr. Henriette Heimgaertner (BeKi's M.A. co-founder and former Head) as part of the keynote speech she gave during the PLA in Berlin (22-24 May 2024).

The introduction of 'Bridging Diversity' and the implementation strategy through *Berlin Policy Framework on Quality* illustrate Berlin's commitment to high-quality ECEC. By integrating research, policy, and practice, and emphasizing participatory processes and holistic education, leaders' competence to support ECEC staff and teams toward the development of high-quality practices are enhanced.

Policy for leadership development in ECEC: the case of Ireland

The country example provides insights into the structure and challenges of the Irish Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system, which is characterised by:

- private sector dominance: approximately 99% of ECEC providers in Ireland are private and operate with a high degree of autonomy
- public funding: despite the private nature of the sector, more than 69% of income received by ECEC services is public funding
- average staff and support structure: on average, ECEC settings have nine staff members and leaders have limited support structures and in many cases manage multiple tasks individually
- size of the settings: most centres cater for 21-40 children, followed by those with 41-60 children, and then those with up to 20 children
- profit orientation: about 75% of settings are for-profit organizations. The remaining 25% are community, non-profit services.
- chains: only 7% of settings are part of larger chains (6 or more settings).

The Irish workforce plan *'Nurturing Skills'*[42] is a comprehensive strategy designed to enhance the quality and professional development of the ECEC workforce by focusing on five key pillars, one of which is *establishing a career framework.*

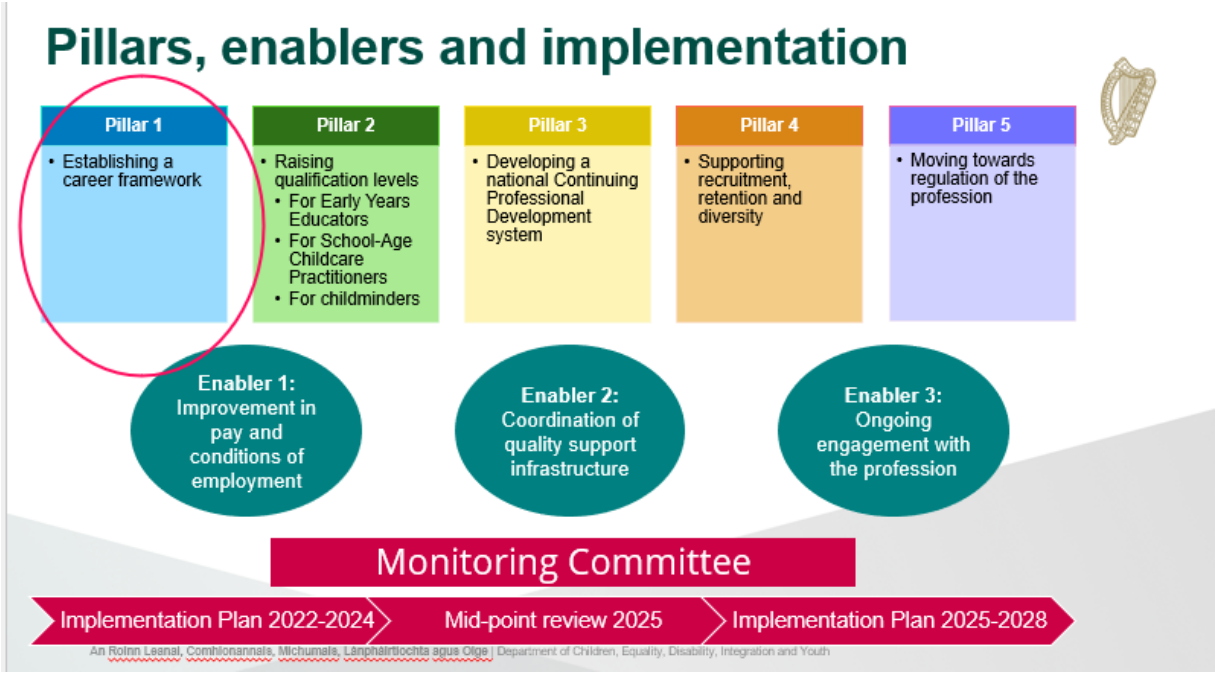


Figure 7: Slide presented by Toby Wolfe (representing Ireland's Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth) as part of the country example he shared with the Working Group during the PLA in Berlin (22-24 May 2024).

Within the Career Framework pillar, the plan outlines three grades of responsibility with corresponding role profiles and minimum rates of pay:

- Early Years Educators (Assistants), who support lead educators in practice with children
- Lead Educators (Teachers), who lead practice with groups of children
- Managers (Heads of Centre), who are in charge of the day-to-day running of the setting.

These roles are now linked to different minimum pay rates, supported by funding for qualifications. Although services are private and set their own recruitment policies, providers are required to work within legally required minimum pay structures for the sector which recognize and reward higher responsibility and qualifications, aiding the transition to a graduate-led workforce.

'Nurturing Skills' also commits to developing *distributed leadership responsibilities* within ECEC settings by supporting the introduction of key roles such as:

- Inclusion Coordinator: to focus on ensuring inclusive practices within the setting
- Family and Community Partnership Coordinator: to strengthen ties and collaboration between the setting, families, and the community

[42] www.gov.ie/en/publication/97056-nurturing-skills-the-workforce-plan-for-early-learning-and-care-elc-and-school-age-childcare-sac-2022-2028/

- Pedagogical Lead: to provide guidance and oversight on educational practices and curriculum implementation
- Student Placement and Induction Lead: to manage student placements and oversee the induction of new staff.

Moreover, the 'Nurturing Skills' strategy for the first time commits to the introduction of minimum qualification requirements for managers, to be implemented by 2028. It also commits to the development of training programs in management skills.

The insights provided by the country example highlight Ireland's efforts to professionalize the ECEC workforce, emphasizing career progression, distributed leadership, and enhanced qualification standards. The 'Nurturing Skills' plan aims to create a more structured and supported ECEC system that can better meet the needs of children, families, and educators.

Challenges related to creating a shared vision of leadership in a complex ecosystem: the case of Portugal

The Portuguese ECEC ecosystem is based on a school clusters model for public provision. This means that public ECEC centres are mostly included into 849 school clusters nation-wide – which are groups of school centres ranging from kindergartens (between age 3-5 years), primary schools, lower secondary schools, and upper secondary schools. Therefore, there is no ECEC leadership in Portugal, but cluster leadership, and ECEC educators/teachers within the clusters have the same qualifications, salary, etc. as other teachers. All centres are linked to one centre leader – a Head Teacher – who is in charge of all the schools/kindergartens in the cluster, which can include around 1200-1300 students/children. Any teacher can apply to become the Head Teacher when meeting certain minimum criteria related to number of years of experience and training/qualifications.

The Ministry of Education and the municipalities are managing the school clusters (public provision). The Ministry oversees 1) the curriculum framework and syllabus, 2) the National Competences Framework, 3) the management of teaching staff (career, progression, placement), and 4) the regulation of teachers' CPD.

On the other hand, there has been a movement of municipalisation over the past years. As a result, local authorities have become in charge of 1) managing/maintaining the schools' infrastructure (but not owning the schools), and 2) managing non-teaching staff as well as children's and students' enrolment. One municipality can be accountable for several school clusters.

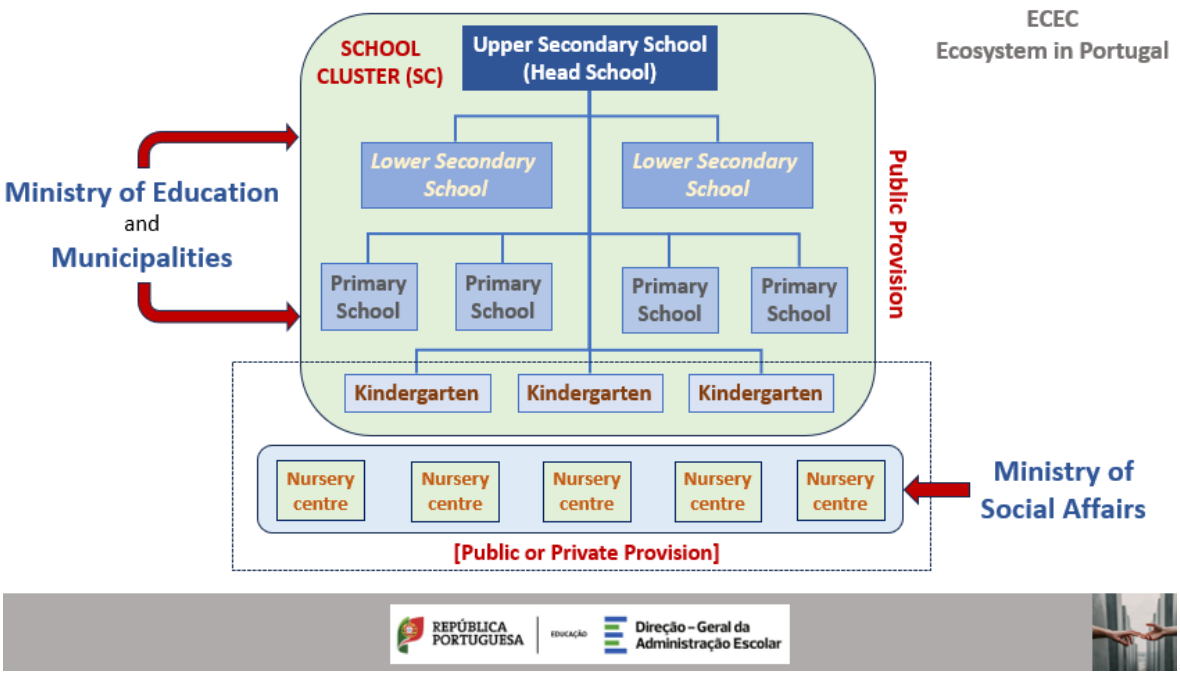


Figure 8: Slide presented by Fernando Alexandre (representing the Directorate-General for School Administration of Portugal's Ministry of Education) as part of the country example he shared with the Working Group during the PLA in Berlin (22-24 May 2024).

The management model of these school clusters consists of a General Council, the Principal/Head Teacher and the Pedagogical Council. Nursery centres (between age 1-3 years) are all private, managed by the Ministry of Social Affairs. In addition, some kindergartens are also private and owned by social organisations, managed by the Ministry of Social Affairs as well.

The challenges in developing a coherent leadership development system in Portuguese school clusters include:

- divergent priorities and philosophies, consisting of differences in mission and focus across school clusters.
- communication barriers: lack of dialogue between different school levels within clusters
- cultural differences and power dynamics: variations in values and pedagogical approaches are often hindering cooperation among teachers across different school levels
- resistance to change introduced by new reform and engrained practice
- complex and multi-layered governance structures, which may not always support seamless implementation of policy and regulatory frameworks
- lack of systematic professional development opportunities tailored to the specific needs of teachers, and of ECEC teachers in particular.

To address these challenges, several strategies are proposed to foster a more collaborative and effective leadership structure:

- developing collaborative leadership by encouraging joint decision-making and shared responsibilities among teachers

- facilitating a more reciprocal communication and dialogue among teachers working across different education levels
- establish cross-functional teams which values diversity of professional backgrounds, expertise and skills
- encourage understanding and respect for cultural differences by creating an educational environment that values diversity and inclusion
- develop platforms for stakeholders to work together and distribute leadership roles and responsibilities to various stakeholders
- cultivate an environment of ongoing professional development
- celebrate diversity and inclusion, by recognising and valuing the diverse backgrounds and contributions of all members of the school community.

ECEC leadership and quality in national strategies: the case of Norway

Recent policy developments in Norway display a multifaceted approach to enhance the quality and equity of ECEC provision. By focusing on strengthening leadership, staff competencies and systematic quality development, the strategies undertaken within recent reforms of the ECEC sector aim to create an inclusive and effective ECEC system that supports the well-being and development of all children.

At the national level, 1) the Ministry of Education and Research is responsible for the ECEC sector; 2) the Directorate of Education and Training is an agency with a key role in providing guidance for policy implementation; whereas 3) the County Governors implement the national policies at the local level and support the 356 local municipalities. Municipalities in Norway are of diverse sizes, capacities, and cultural representation (Sami indigenous population), with a crucial responsibility as local authorities for kindergartens, also conducting inspections of the quality of settings. Half of the kindergartens are public – owned and run by the municipalities – and the other half is private-owned.

National/local authorities have a key role in ensuring the quality of ECEC provision at system level, while the legal responsibility for ensuring and developing high quality ECEC lies with the kindergarten providers.

Figure 9: Slide presented by Tove Mogstad Slinde (Senior Policy Analyst at Norway's Ministry of Education and Research) as part of the country example she shared with the Working Group during the PLA in Berlin (22-24 May 2024).

At centre level, the head teacher is given day-to-day responsibility for pedagogical practices, staff and administration, and in particular:

- shall ensure that pedagogical practices comply with the *Kindergarten Act*[43] and the *Framework Plan*[44] and that staff have a common understanding of their duties as described in these documents
- shall enable staff to put their expertise into practice
- ensure good pedagogical and administrative management by co-operating with the kindergarten provider (i.e. municipal officer), the pedagogical leaders and other kindergarten staff
- shall lead and follow up on the planning, documentation, evaluation and development of kindergarten content and working methods and ensure that the entire staff are involved
- shall ensure that the kindergarten adopts procedures for co-operating with relevant institutions such as schools, health centres, the educational psychology service and the child protection service

Head teachers might be supported by an Assistant Head Teacher – and Pedagogical Leaders[45] – leading pedagogical work within the team and in the child group within a distributed leadership framework. In particular, the pedagogical leader shall contribute to strengthening staff's analytical competences required to develop ECEC quality practice at centre level by:

- implementing and overseeing the kindergarten's pedagogical practices using sound professional judgement
- offering guidance and ensuring that the *Kindergarten Act* and the *Framework Plan* are observed in the kindergarten's pedagogical practices
- overseeing the process of planning, implementing, documenting, assessing and developing the work taking place amongst the group of children or in the areas he/she is tasked with supervising.

In Norway, ECEC leadership is perceived as instrumental for quality provision and the topic has been lifted in ongoing national policies and strategies such as:

- the *'National Strategy for ECEC towards 2030 – Kindergartens for a New Era*'[46]
- the '*National Strategy for Raising Staff Competences 2023-2025 – Competences for the Future Kindergarten*'[47].

In the context of such strategies, the Government is currently investing in strengthening leadership in kindergartens through a stronger professional fellowship. The aim is that head teachers have (formal) competence on leadership. The Government will also work to have more kindergarten teachers in kindergarten with a Masters degree.

Leadership competence and competence on a Masters level will contribute to strengthening the analytical competence required to lead, assess and develop the kindergartens quality and practice. For this purpose, it is also important to develop reciprocal partnerships between kindergarten and higher education institutions.

[43] https://lovdata.no/dokument/NLE/lov/2005-06-17-64

[44] https://www.udir.no/contentassets/7c4387bb50314f33b828789ed767329e/framework-plan-for-kindergartens--rammeplan-engelsk-pdf.pdf

[45] Both Assistant Head Teacher and Pedagogical Leaders must meet the minimum requirement of being trained kindergarten teachers with a Bachelor's degree.

[46] https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/barnehagen-for-en-ny-tid/id2959402/

[47] https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/kompetanse-for-fremtidens-barnehage/id2933368/

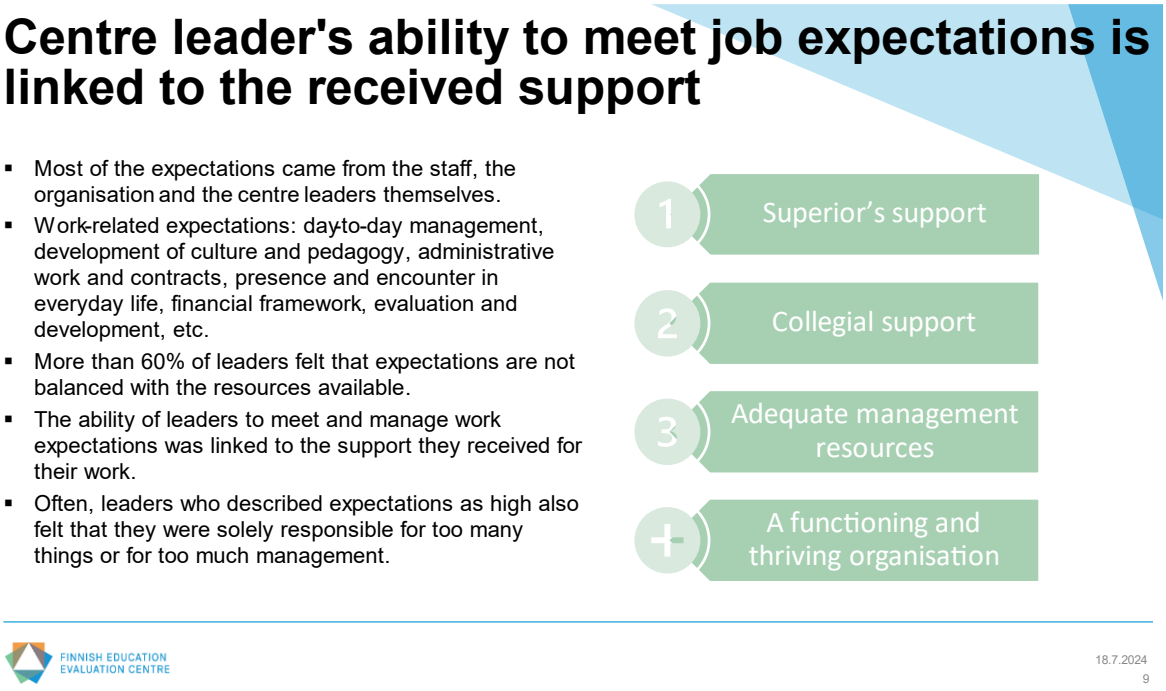
Leading, evaluating and developing high quality ECEC: the case of Finland

In Finland, ECEC leadership has recently gained an increased attention in national policies, quality development and evaluation strategies.

There are 293 municipalities which are responsible for organising ECEC (including private provision in their area), comprising education, care and upbringing. There are both municipal and private centres, with an approximate 15% of private provision rate. Finnish ECEC staff work in multiprofessional teams, including:

- the leader of the ECEC centre
- ECEC teachers
- ECEC social pedagogues
- ECEC child carers
- family day-care childminders
- pre-primary teachers
- ECEC CENTRE leaders currently need to hold minimum a Bachelor's degree (ISCED 6), and they will be required to have a Master's degree from 2030 on. The current group structure consists of one teacher and two child carers, but from 2030 onwards a group will have to include one social pedagogue and a child carer besides the teacher.

The results of the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre's national ECEC leadership evaluation show that most ECEC centre leaders participating in the study (survey in September 2022, group interviews in January 2023) were typically women between ages 50-63 years, most of them having either 2-5 years or over 20 years of ECEC leadership experience. Centre leaders had an average of 24 direct employees, with 59% of them having one deputy leader, 17% having several deputies, and the remaining leaders not having any deputy leader. 36% of leaders led one, 31% led two, and 33 % led three or more ECEC centres. In addition, 34 % of the leaders also worked in a child group on a permanent or occasional basis. This shows that there is no shared perspective in Finland of what distributed leadership means. Leaders with more than 34 employees and two or more centres experienced on average a lower sense of job control than others. Whereas leaders with fewer than 24 employees and one deputy leader experienced a higher sense of job control on average – these leaders mostly come from rural/densely populated municipalities and the private sector. It has also been shown that having sufficient time allocated to deputy management tasks plays a significant role in leaders' sense of job control. The day-to-day management takes up most of the leaders' time, with little to no time left for pedagogical leadership. Thus, centre leader's ability to meet job expectations is linked to the support they received for their work. Often, leaders who described expectations as high also felt that they were solely responsible for too many things or for too much management. Furthermore, over 60% of them felt that expectations were not balanced with the resources available.



The national ECEC leadership evaluation also provides development recommendations for the sector.

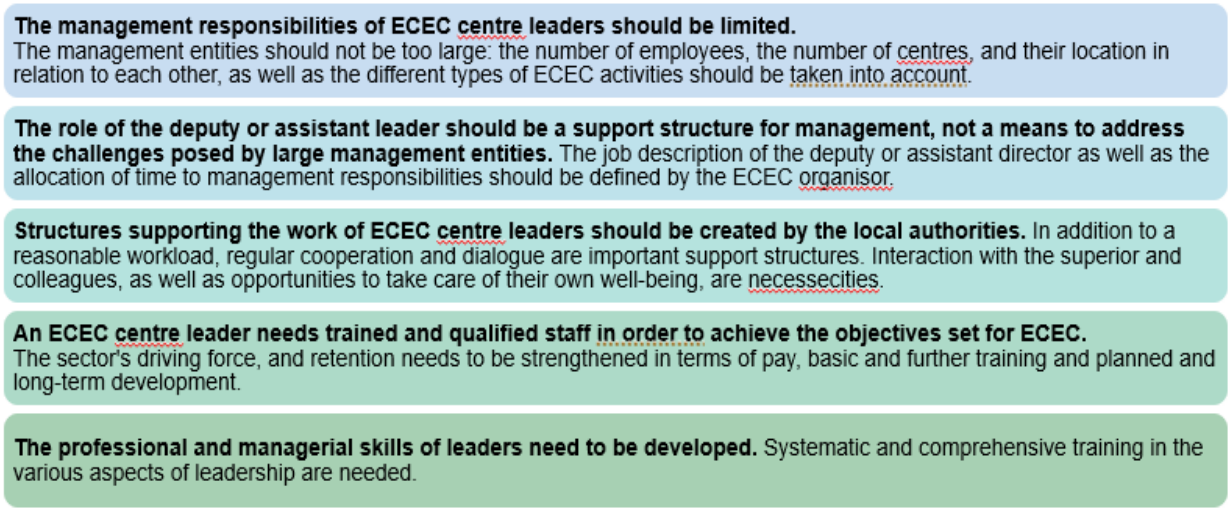


Figure 10-11: Slides presented by Janniina Vlasov (Counsellor at the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre) as part of the country example she shared with the Working Group during the PLA in Berlin (22-24 May 2024).

In order to support pedagogical leadership and development, Finland created a national digital system (Valssi)[48] in August 2023, which is a free of charge and voluntary support service for quality management and leadership, open to all ECEC users.

[48] https://www.karvi.fi/en/evaluations/early-childhood-education-and-care/valssi-national-quality-evaluation-system-ecec

The contribution of ECEC centre heads' performance assessment to improve the quality of education: the case of Lithuania

Lithuania has a unitary integrated ECEC system for children between ages 0-6 years, and 70% of the kindergartens are public. As set out by the relevant regulations, the tasks of performance evaluation of heads and deputy heads of educational institutions include:

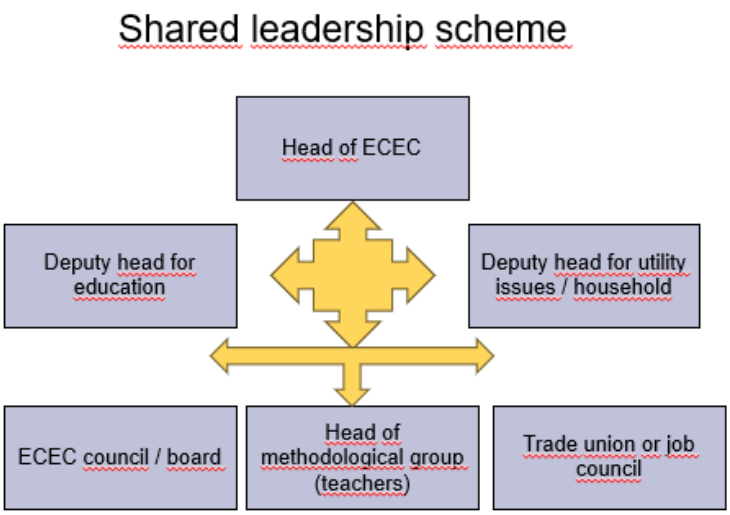
- setting clear and focused performance measurement objectives, outcomes and indicators
- assessing (changes in) performance and identify opportunities for improvement
- assessing the ability to perform the functions set out in the job description.

Accordingly, the municipality – or any other ECEC provider – determines the annual tasks for the head of the ECEC centre. The leader shall prepare and make publicly available the annual report according to the given tasks and submit it to the ECEC Board (Council). The Board assesses the report and within 10 days it may give proposals to it, whereas within 15 days the Board concludes with the assessment and gives the report to the municipality/provider of the institution. Within 15 days of the report's submission the municipality/provider adopts the decision on the leader's performance evaluation, and the head of the ECEC centre may be invited to present the report. The assessment is connected to financial incentives depending on the leader's performance. For instance, if the performance is below the expectations, there may be plans ranging between 2-6 months to make improvements, otherwise the leader can be dismissed.

In addition, an important area within Lithuania's self-assessment methodology is the culture of the learning organisation. This is measured by four indicators, namely:

- school activity management
- continuing professional development
- leadership for learning
- ECEC/school self-governance.

Lithuania has a shared leadership scheme, in which there is the Head of the ECEC centre and two Deputy heads – one for education and another for utility issues/household. There is also the ECEC board which is consisting of the head of the methodological group – in which teachers engage with each other on a regular basis – and a trade union/job council in institutions with more than 20 staff. As a result, the leader is not alone in carrying out his/her tasks.



Figures 12-13: Slides presented by Sandra Valavičiūtė (representing the Lithuanian Ministry of Education, Science and Sport) as part of the country example she shared with the Working Group during the PLA in Berlin (22-24 May 2024).

REGULATIONS ON PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL OF HEADS OF STATE AND MUNICIPAL EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS (EXCEPT HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS), THEIR DEPUTY HEADS OF EDUCATION AND HEADS OF DEPARTMENTS ORGANIZING EDUCATION ŠMSM

Tasks of performance evaluation of heads of educational institutions, deputy heads of educational institutions, heads of departments organizing educational activities:

1) **set clear** and focused performance **measurement objectives, outcomes and indicators**;
2) **to assess changes** in performance, performance and identify **opportunities for improvement**;
3) **to assess** the ability to perform the **functions set out in the job description.**

Principles of performance evaluation:

1. contextuality - the evaluation of performance takes into account the national education policy, the objectives set by the owner of the institution and the cultural and social environment of the institution, which is linked to the performance results;	**2. optimality** – assessing activities and clear annual performance targets that are consistent with the aims and objectives of the educational institution, using adequate resources;	**3. systematic** – the evaluation is carried out on an annual basis, in a consistent manner, taking into account all evaluations of performance and the institution;	**4. objectivity and transparency** – the evaluation is based on clear indicators; the conclusions of the evaluation by the head of educational establishment are made public together with the Report.

At the national level there are further institutions to support leaders, such as the ECEC Leaders' Association and the National Agency for Education, which provide mentoring programmes and various other support initiatives. In addition, the municipal educational departments provide support with legal procedures, and they also inspect teachers, centres, groups, and activities, as well as discuss points for improvement.

After assessing the situation of educational leadership and effective leadership in Lithuania – with the advice from the European Commission's Structural Reforms Support Programme's educational leadership experts from Ireland and the Netherlands – the following guidelines have been identified for strengthening leadership and management in educational institutions:

- strengthening training for leaders of educational institutions by introducing specialized master's studies in education (in the fields of leadership, public administration and/or management)
- enhancing the selection and recruitment of ECEC leaders by supporting educational cooperation between heads of educational institutions and their deputies, and by organizing internships and other forms of experiential cooperation
- improve assistance to leaders by encouraging municipalities – and heads of educational institutions) to introduce middle management figures with pedagogical and organizational skills
- ensuring career continuity opportunities by updating the methodology for assessing the competencies of managers of educational institutions, paying more attention not to the assessment of potential theoretical management and leadership competencies, but to the ability to apply them in practical activities
- increase public awareness in relation to ECEC leadership role(s).

6. 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 the analysis of the literature review and on the insights deriving from country examples.

- 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 and 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 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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8. Annexes

Annex 8.1: ECEC leadership in European policy documents

COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems (2019/C 189/02):

https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605(01)

In accordance with national and European legislation, available resources and national circumstances, and in close cooperation with all relevant stakeholders Member States are recommended to:

"***3. Support the professionalisation of early childhood education and care staff, including leaders***. *Depending on the existing level of professional qualification and working conditions, successful efforts can include*:

(a) raising the status of the early childhood education and care profession by creating high professional standards, offering attractive professional status and career prospects to early childhood education and care educators, striving to reach a better gender balance and creating professionalisation pathways for staff with low or no qualification as well as specific pathways to qualify assistants;

(b) improving initial education and continuous professional development to take full account of children's wellbeing, learning and developmental needs, relevant societal developments, gender equality and a full understanding of the rights of the child;

(c) providing time for staff for the purpose of professional activities such as reflection, planning, engaging with parents and collaborating with other professionals and colleagues;

(d) aiming at equipping staff with the competences to respond to the individual needs of children from different backgrounds and with special educational needs, including disabilities, preparing staff to manage diverse groups." [C 189/08]

THE EU QUALITY FRAMEWORK FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

"STAFF is the most significant factor for children's well-being, learning and developmental outcomes. Therefore staff working conditions and professional development are seen as essential components of quality.

Quality statements:

3. Well-qualified staff with initial and continuing training that enable them to fulfil their professional role.

Effective early childhood education and care systems consider raising the professional status of staff, which is widely acknowledged as one of the key factors of quality, by raising qualification levels, offering attractive professional status and flexible career prospects and alternative pathways for assistants. This can be supported by aiming for a pedagogical staff that is composed of highly qualified professionals holding a full professional qualification specialised in early childhood education, in addition to assistant staff. State-of-the-art initial education programmes are designed together with practitioners and provide a good balance between theory and practice. It is also an asset if education programmes prepare staff for working collectively and for enhancing reflective competences. Such programmes can benefit from training staff to work with linguistically and culturally diverse groups, from

minority, migrant and low-income families. Staff that are equipped to follow the developmental needs, interests and potential of young children and able to detect potential development and learning problems can more actively support child development and learning. Regular, tailormade and continued professional development opportunities benefit all staff members, including assistants and auxiliary staff. Regarding the necessary elements of child development and psychology, competences for staff should, in line with the different structures of training in the Member States, include knowledge on child protection systems, and more generally on the rights of the child.

4. Supportive working conditions including professional leadership which creates opportunities for observation, reflection, planning, teamwork and cooperation with parents.

Early childhood education and care systems that aim at improved working conditions, including more adequate wage levels, can make employment in early childhood education and care a more attractive option for better-qualified staff, looking for proper careers. Adult-child ratios and group sizes are most adequate if designed in an appropriate manner for the age and composition of the group of children, as younger children require more attention and care. Professional learning communities, where they exist within and across settings, have shown a positive impact through assigning time and space for staff collegial practices and joint work. Offering mentoring and supervision to newly recruited staff during their induction can help them to quickly fulfil their professional roles." [C 189/08]

European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, **Monitoring the quality of early childhood education and care – Complementing the 2014 ECEC quality framework proposal with indicators – Recommendations from ECEC experts**, Publications Office, 2018:

https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/825252b4-3ec6-11e8-b5fe-01aa75ed71a1

"***Statement 3: Well-qualified staff whose initial and continuing training enables them to fulfil their professional role***

Recognising the professionalism of the ECEC workforce is important in improving the quality of provision. Professional development has a huge impact on the quality of staff pedagogy and children's outcomes. Developing high quality education and training programmes for all staff working in an ECEC context (e.g. preschool teachers, assistants, educators, family day carers etc.) helps to create a shared agenda and understanding of quality.

The experts agreed that four indicators can be used to evaluate the extent to which this statement has been met." (p.17)

"Indicator 7** - The percentage of **ECEC leaders** working in an ECEC setting **who have completed leadership training or have a recognised, relevant leadership qualification.

This indicator is directly related to the quality of provision as better trained leaders are more able to organise and manage ECEC services. The focus is on pedagogic leadership in an ECEC setting, rather than financial or organisational leadership. The indicator contains two options which reflect different practice in Member States i.e. some countries do not require or expect ECEC leaders to complete a recognised leadership qualification.

There is a broad range of leadership training and qualifications available qualifications may be accredited or approved; training may be formal, informal or non-formal; and leadership training may not lead to a professional qualification. There are questions about whether the

outcomes of training are assessed. Even though there is a wide range of opportunities for developing leadership skills in ECEC, the research emphasises the importance of leadership in ECEC settings as contributing to high quality[49].

Each system in each Member State will have their own understanding of 'a relevant' leadership qualification. There could be further work at a European level to gain greater clarity on this aspect of the indicator. Member States are encouraged to set their own target for this indicator – this is likely to be based on increasing (by an agreed amount each year or over a longer period) the percentage of leaders who have received training or have a relevant qualification. There is limited opportunity to consider a European target because the policies associated with ECEC leadership differ across Europe.

To support this indicator, where there is a system based on qualifications, it is worth considering:

- What is the European Qualification Framework level of the ECEC leadership qualification(s)?
- How long would it normally take to complete an ECEC leadership qualification?
- Is there one, or many, qualifications which could be taken by ECEC leaders?
- How are ECEC leaders supported (both professionally and financially) to complete a qualification?
- Are there different arrangements for staff working with children under three years of age and children aged over three?

To support this indicator, where there is a system based on training, it is worth considering:

- How is an ECEC leader supported during the training?
- What is the normal amount of time/week which is allocated to leadership training?
- Is training mainly 'on-the-job' or 'off-the-job'?
- Does the training include assessment of the leaders' skills and competences?
- Are there different arrangements for staff working with children under three years of age and children aged over three?" (pp. 19-20)

"Statement 4: Supportive working conditions including professional leadership which creates opportunities for observation, reflection, planning, teamwork and cooperation with parents

Good working conditions benefit staff, contribute to their retention and reduce levels of staff turnover. Working conditions can be affected by policies which focus on the structural quality of ECEC provision. These include arrangements on the size of a group; children to adult ratios; working hours; and wage levels. These policies can help to make employment in an ECEC context a more attractive option." (p.22)

[49] Hujala, E. and Eskelinen M. (2016) 'Researching leadership in Early Childhood Education. Leadership Tasks in Early Childhood Education' , in *Researching Leadership in Early Childhood Education*, Tampere: Tampere University Press, 213-34, http://ilrfec.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/art_12Hujala-Eskelinen.pdf

Annex 8.2: models describing ECEC leaders' functions and tasks

Strehmel (2016) mentions that ECEC leaders have to manage tasks in 10 different domains :

- organisational development and service quality;
- concept and concept development;
- quality management;
- human resource management;
- financial management;
- commitment to families and participation;
- networking and cooperation in the community;
- development of demands and planning new supplies;
- public relations;
- organising buildings and equipment.

Nupponen (2005, in Hujala & Eskelinen, 2013) analysed international leadership research in ECEC, and based on that meta-analysis she has listed leaders' roles and responsibilities. These responsibilities consisted of:

- to create a professional environment in child care centres;
- to build and maintain strong interpersonal relationships;
- to provide leadership and management that shapes the organisation;
- to influence and provide quality of ECEC;
- to ensure that outcomes are related to the quality of care and education;
- to guide staff and monitor centre activities.

According to Rodd (2006, in Hujala & Eskelinen, 2013) the main responsibilities of ECEC leaders were coordinating "time, talent and task". Jorde Bloom (2000, in Hujala & Eskelinen, 2013) approached ECEC leaders' responsibilities and tasks from the point of view of their personal competence and professional self-awareness, legal and fiscal management, human relations, educational programming, and facilities, marketing and public relations and advocacy.

Scrivens (2003,in Hujala & Eskelinen, 2013) characterised the crucial tasks in ECEC leaders' daily work focusing on:

- people: staff and parents;
- centre management: program development, curriculum planning and implementation, children and monitoring child/adult ratios;
- program guidelines and practices: human resource management, financial management, safety and wellbeing, curriculum dissemination, inclusive practices;
- property maintenance.

Hujala and Eskelinen (2013) mentions that the work of ECEC leaders is characterised by a splintered nature, and refer to key concepts, which can be related to ECEC leaders' responsibilities:

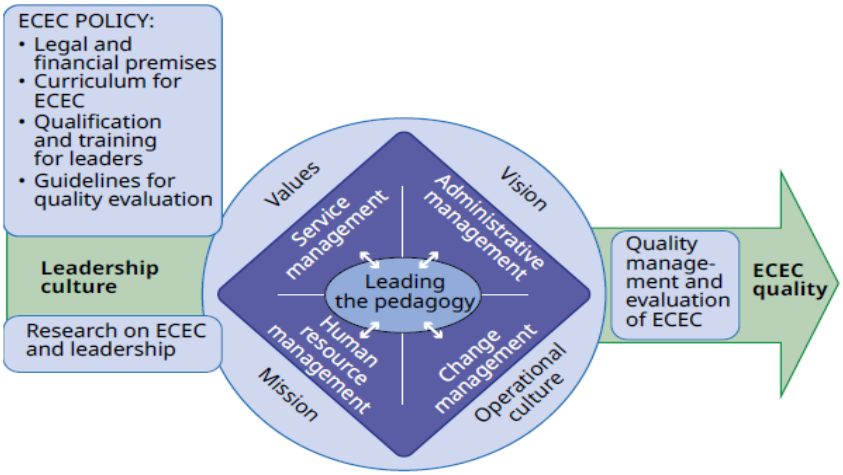
- **pedagogical leadership**, which is linked to developing educational and teaching practices. It's about supporting educational goals, accomplishing curriculum and decision-making.
- **human resource management**, which consists of managing and leading people.

Leaders need to find a balance between the need for staff and the amount and quality of the ECEC-staff and making sure that the staff works towards the goals of the ECEC service.

- **leading change**. This refers to creating a vision, taking care of the engagement of the staff towards the service values, and the ability to improve the ECEC service.
- **service management,** referring to taking into account the needs of the families.
- **financial management**, referring to budgeting, funding and sharing resources;
- **daily management**, which refers to 'keeping the wheels turning' in daily practice.
- **network management**, This is linked to facilitating collaboration. Kagan and Hallmark (2001) mention the term community leadership, stressing the role of ECEC leaders in being responsive to the community and acting as advocates of various ECEC matters.

By drawing on the study by Pennanen's (2006), Hujala, Vlasov & Alila (2023) argue that the performing of such leadership tasks seem to involve both a *reactive* and a *proactive* component:

"Administrative leadership is more reactive, while other leadership functions are more proactive. Administrative leadership takes care of tasks that are needed while managing everyday situations in the ECEC centre, which might include financial management and management of public relations, as well as cooperation with stakeholders. It provides the foundation for other ECEC management functions - which are more proactive - such as leadership for pedagogy, human resource management, service management, and change management." (Hujala, Vlasov & Alila, 2023, pp. 292-293)



At the centre of the integrative model, is the leadership function "**leading the pedagogy**". This "leading the pedagogy" includes all actions in creating good working conditions for personnel, the utilisation and development of professional competence and training, and pedagogical activities, all aiming to promote the well-being and the development of every child. Next, there are:

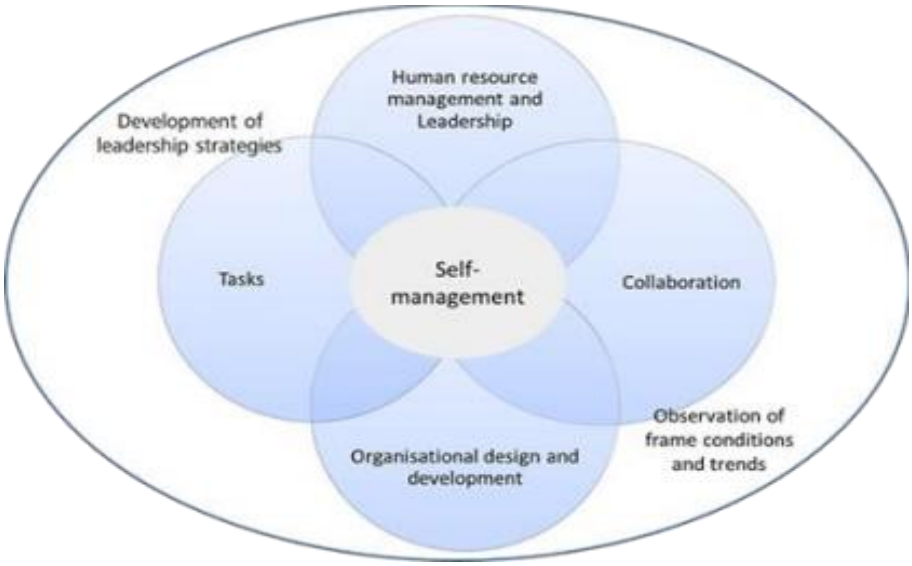
- **administrative management** - this is about coordinating ECEC legislation, quality policy, and curriculum guidelines, and transforming them into pedagogical practice.
- **human resource management** - this focuses on taking care that the personnel are strongly committed to reaching the objectives set for the ECEC service and to developing pedagogical practices.

- **change management,** as change is a constant reality in ECEC;
- **service management,** taking into account parental participation, and starting from the best interests of the child and the rights of children to high quality ECEC.

The integrative leadership framework also stresses the role of ECEC leaders in **quality evaluation and management**, referring to well functioning quality management systems with self-evaluation processes.

A different model is provided by Strehmel (2016). She defines the following functions:

- **tasks**, this implies the building, steering and coordination of educational work to fulfil curriculum requirements including planning pedagogical activities, organising internal communication, creating pedagogical spaces and coordinating time schedules. Other important activities of this field are conceptual and quality development.
- **human resource management and leadership:** on the one hand, it is an important goal to reach and strengthen pedagogical quality and provide excellent learning opportunities for the children. On the other hand, it is the responsibility of leaders to care for the professional development of the staff as well as to ensure job satisfaction, work ability and health of every person working in the institution.
- **collaboration**. ECEC leaders are in the centre of different groups of stakeholders inside and outside the institution. They are both team leaders and they also have to coordinate the collaboration with different institutions in the system of ECEC.
- **organisational design and development**: ECEC institutions have to develop and change according to quality development, changing curricula and rules and new challenges and for example consider new target groups such as refugee children. Quality development should be a permanent process of reflection, learning and adapting to new knowledge emerging from empirical studies for instance.This was also mentioned in the report of the WG on how to recruit, train and motivate well-qualified staff (2021): supporting staff to think critically about their practice is part of the ECEC leader's responsibilities.
- **observing frame conditions and trends.** Leaders have to take into account structures and processes in the social, societal and politicalaser78is. environment of early childhood education and care. Educational leaders also must know about the living conditions of their target groups, changes in the social environment of their institution as well as about new curricula, rules and laws – and they have to think about the meaning of these changes for the development of their institution. They should also know financial backers and other stakeholders to discuss changes and obtain relevant resources for their institution. This function is also mentioned by Hansen & Ringmose (2023): the ECEC leader as a gatekeeper, translating policies and initiatives into the organization.
- **strategic management:** ECEC leaders have to develop visions concerning the development of their institution and discuss them with their team and other stakeholders. They should initiate developmental processes, plan carefully and carry through changes by discussing and reflecting on the ideas with all the people involved.
- **self-management.** In the centre of Strehmel's model is self-management, referring to the large amount of autonomy leaders have in their work, also in caring for their own professional development and health.



The above mentioned models reveal a multitude of tasks and functions for ECEC leaders. Douglas (2019) clusters the different leadership tasks to 2 broad leadership functions in ECEC - administrative and pedagogical functions – with specific reference to:

- **administrative functions** referring to the management of operations including human resources and finance (e.g., hiring staff and managing budget); strategic functions such as planning, goal setting and quality improvement; and may also include collaborating with community partners and systems (Moen and Granrusten, 2013; Strehmel, 2016; Starting Strong VI)
- **pedagogical functions** referring to tasks related to supporting teaching and learning. More concretely it's about supporting staff professional development and learning, creating trusting relationships with and among staff, facilitating peer learning, promoting the implementation of curriculum and assessment, and structuring the work environment to support all of these (Cheung et al., 2018; Eskelinen and Hujala, 201; Whalen et al., 2016). It can also involve establishing positive family and community partnerships. For example, Ang (2012) found that cross-disciplinary collaboration was a key domain of leadership practice in her study of ECEC leaders in England. Leaders reported that establishing community cross-agency collaborations and partnerships were an important and often challenging dimension of their role in supporting children and their families. In the Starting Strong VI report this aspect of leadership includes observation of staff practices with children, providing effective feedback to staff based on these observations, establishing a collaborative culture among staff, as well as building positive relationships with families and community organisations. These practices are important for supporting process quality and for enabling staff to continue developing their skills and knowledge as part of their regular work duties.

In the framework developed by the OECD-TALIS Starting Strong report (OECD, 2021; p. 169), the model of Douglas is enriched by introducing 2 additional functions: **engagement with parents and engagement with the community**. Within such model, leadership functions also entails establishing positive family and community partnerships. Establishing community cross-agency collaborations and partnerships are perceived by leaders as important – albeit often challenging – dimensions of their role in supporting children and their families.

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