Distributing leadership in a day care setting

Leena Halttunen

University of Jyväskylä, Finland e-mail: leena.halttunen@jyu.fi

ABSTRACT: The latest leadership theories require leadership to be distributed, but there is little evidence of how the distribution is made in practice, particularly in the context of early childhood education. This article describes leadership in two day care organizations in which the organizational structure was different than the traditional one. One organization comprised four day care units and the other had five units. According to the findings, leadership was implemented in the spirit of distributed leadership. The staff and the day care centre director in co-operation took responsibility for their organization. The relationship between the director and the staff was interactive and there was readiness to share the tasks and duties of the director.

Keywords: early childhood education, leadership, distributed leadership, distributed organization

TIIVISTELMÄ: Viimeaikaiset johtajuusteoriat korostavat jaettua johtajuutta, mutta on vähän näyttöä siitä, miten johtajuus käytännössä jaetaan etenkin varhaiskasvatuksen kontekstissa. Tämä artikkeli tarkastelee johtajuutta kahdessa päivähoito-organisaatiossa, joiden organisaatiorakenne oli perinteisestä poikkeava. Toisessa organisaatiossa oli neljä ja toisessa viisi yksikköä. Tulosten mukaan johtajuus toteutui jaetun johtajuuden hengessä. Henkilöstö ja päiväkodin johtaja ottivat yhteistyössä vastuuta organisaatiostaan. Johtajan ja henkilöstön välinen suhde oli vuorovaikutteinen ja organisaatiossa oli valmiutta jakaa johtajan tehtäviä ja velvollisuuksia.

Asiasanat: varhaiskasvatus, johtajuus, jaettu johtajuus, hajautettu organisaatio

Introduction

In Finland, day care centre directors[1] have traditionally led only one centre, in which they have had the central leadership role (Hujala, 2004). The first major change in leadership arrangements took place at the end of the 1980s when directors simultaneously started to lead family day care and day care centres. Later, during the 1990s, the smaller day care units were merged with larger ones. This shift was the beginning of multiunit organizations, in other words, distributed organizations, in day care (cf. Vartiainen, Kokko, & Hakonen, 2004). The findings of a study from 2007 show that the percentage of directors who simultaneously led day care centres and family day care was already 72% (Alila & Parrila, 2007). Whereas earlier most directors led one day care centre and had duties with the children, today most of them focus wholly on leadership and run several units.

I was interested in understanding how these changes relating to leadership and organizational structure arrangements affect the work of both day care centre directors and staff members. The aim of the study was to describe day care work and leadership in this new kind of organizational structure. At first, this change of merging units may look like it has visible effects only on the work of the day care centre director and on her/his leadership practices. According to Leavitt (1965), organizations comprise four interacting variables: task, structure, people, and technology. Changes in any one of these variables result changes in the others. When organizational changes of this kind occur (i.e., units are merged), the effects may be more far-reaching than anticipated. My guiding principle was that this new model of a distributed organization needed to be investigated from both the perspective of the director and that of the personnel. I assumed that the new organizational structure may also have effects on the work of the employees also in regard of leadership activities.

The original study was conducted without adherence to a specific organizational or leadership theory, although my understanding about leadership was related to the view that the personnel as well as the director were seen as co-constructing leadership and they were able to take on leadership responsibilities (cf. Shamir, 2007). This article seeks to describe the manner in which leadership was executed, i.e. in a spirit of distributing leadership. Consequently, the literature review focuses exclusively on distributed leadership.

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[1] I use the professional title 'day care centre director' [later director] because that is the most common title used in Finland for a person in this kind of a leadership position.

Distributed leadership

One aspect in the review on leadership is the consideration of whether one person is in charge (solo leadership) or whether leadership is distributed among members of a group. Distributed leadership sounds like a new phenomenon, but Woods et al. (2004) suggest that the practice already existed in some older cultures. Similarly, studies in the school context have shown that, for example, elementary schools are often led by a group of people rather than by a single principal (Camburn, Rowan, & Taylor, 2003). One explanation for the increase in the interest in distributed leadership has to do with the fact that the current organizational environment is too complicated for one leader or for one team to handle independently (O'Connor & Day, 2007).

There are synonymous concepts and definitions used for distributed leadership. Spillane (2005) says that shared leadership, team leadership, and democratic leadership are not synonymous with distributed leadership. Harris et al. (2007, p. 338) consider distributed leadership as a concept that covers "all forms of shared leadership activity" and which describes different ways of shared or collaborative leadership practices. Offermann and Scuderi (2007) have an opposite view and for them, shared leadership is a major concept, which covers co-leadership, distributed leadership and collective leadership. However, Harris and Spillane (2008, p. 32) warn to use distributed leadership "as a 'catch up' term to describe any form of devolved, shared or dispersed leadership practice" although they are advocates of distributed leadership themselves. As Heikka, Waniganayake and Hujala (2012) write, there is not a clear consensus about the connection between the concepts of distributed and shared leadership, and many authors use the concepts alternately. Also, Tian, Collin and Risku (2015) in their meta-analysis of distributed leadership from 2002 to 2013 noted that there had been attempts to conceptualize distributed leadership during these years by comparing distributed leadership with similar concepts. In addition, they identified attempts to define distributed leadership by modelling it and by questioning the very concept.

I use the concept of distributed leadership in this article because it enables one to assume that, in addition to manifestations of formal leadership, there are also manifestations of informal leadership in organizations. The other members may have formal (e.g. assistant leaders) or informal roles. Nevertheless, the role of the formal leaders is seen significant, because there are certain tasks that cannot be distributed and the formal leader is in charge to support the distribution of leadership. Distributed leadership can be seen in the light of distribution of tasks as well as in the light of

distributed influence process, and it may exist both in the vertical and the horizontal dimensions and relationships of the organization.

Nevertheless, the definition of distributed leadership is still vague and the current research shows the different forms it can take. In their literature review, Woods et al. (2004) identified three characteristics of distributed leadership: leadership is an emergent property of a group or a network, the boundaries of leadership are open, and the expertise is distributed among many. There are some key characteristics related to distributed leadership. For Spillane (2005, p. 144) leadership practice is "viewed as a product of the interactions of school leaders, followers and their situation" emphasizing interaction and situations (cf. also Spillane et al., 2004). In line with Woods et al., Spillane (2005) includes multiple persons into leadership, and their leadership roles may be formal or informal. In a similar way, Harris (2004) addresses the significance of formal and informal roles, conjoint activity and interdependency. Without these attributes, distributed leadership may be just misguided delegation (Harris, 2004). In addition, Harris et al. (2007) link concepts such as empowerment, democracy, and autonomy to distributed leadership. Robinson (2008, 242) in her definition uses two main concepts: "distributed leadership as task distribution and as distributed influence process". For Robinson distributed leadership is not to make a school more democratic for the teachers, but a way of improving teaching and learning.

Authors have also tried to capture the different forms of distributed leadership. MacBeath (2005) provides a taxonomy of distributed leadership and offers a model that includes six ways of thinking about it. The taxonomy can also be seen as a development process of distributed leadership from a stage where leadership distribution is only done through formals roles to a stage where distributed leadership is part of the culture.

Distributed leadership has its own challenges and it is not an absolute solution for good leadership either. Spillane (2005) sees distributed leadership as a conceptual or diagnostic tool for thinking and not as a blueprint for effective leadership. Harris and Spillane (2004, 33) write that it is not "necessarily good or bad thing: it depends." Torrance (2013) identified five generally held assumptions concerning distributed leadership: not everyone is able to lead or even wants to lead; distributed leadership does not occur naturally; the leadership role of the staff is not easily legitimated; and distributed leadership is not without problems. In previous studies, teachers have not identified or named themselves as leaders (Ho, 2011). According to Mistry and Sood (2012), staff in early childhood education was afraid to manage other staff members. Nevertheless, based on their study newly graduated practitioners whose pre-service training included leadership preparation were better prepared for leadership roles than those whose studies did not include this kind of training. Another challenge is that

leaders may not be prepared to give power to the employees and to be able to accept not being able to control everything (Harris, 2004; Harris, 2013; MacBeath, 2005).

Despite whichever concepts and understanding are in favour, the role of the formal leader is considered to be important (e.g., Harris, 2008; 2013; Shamir, 2007; Torrance, 2013). In the context of early childhood education, the role of the director of a day care centre has been central (Hujala, 2004). Shamir (2007, p. xviii) takes a philosophical view by saying that "leadership can never be fully shared and cannot be substituted for. There is no leadership without leaders and followers, because without leaders and followers a leadership relationship does not exist." Others maintain that one of the main tasks of the formal leader is to involve followers into leadership practices (Harris, 2004; 2013; John, 2008; Mangin, 2007). According to Gronn (2000), we should retain leadership but disengage it from headship. In sum, there is a need for formal leaders, but it is significant to consider what the main tasks of the leaders are.

Most of the authors who write about distributed leadership in the educational field come from school context. Heikka, Waniganayake and Hujala have done pioneering work and conceptualized distributed leadership within Early Childhood Education [ECEC]. Their message is that we should remember the unique characteristics of ECEC when implementing or researching distributed leadership. The focus of the implementation of leadership distribution should be "in ways which support pedagogical functions and processes" (Heikka et al., 2012, p. 36). For research, the authors set two questions: who are the stakeholders in ECEC who are responsible for distributed leadership and what are the outcomes of distributed leadership.

In the Finnish early childhood context, there are only a few pioneer publications on the practices of distributed leadership. Heikka and Hujala (2013) discuss distributed leadership between different actors at the municipality level (leaders of ECE services, centre directors and teachers). The most developed form of leadership distribution can be found at the micro level between the centre director and leading teacher. Centre directors and teachers feel that they are left out, for example, from the decision-making, which takes place at the municipality level. However, also the distribution of leadership between the centre director and leading teacher appears undeveloped. There is willingness on both sides to develop partnership, but time resources and in some cases lack of trust hinder the distribution of leadership. In another study, Heikka (2013) describes the meaning of the formal leadership position: the ECEC teachers in Finland confront challenges to act as pedagogical leaders, if they do not have a formal appointment as assistant directors. Heikka and Hujala (2013) also give suggestions how to improve the distribution of leadership between different stakeholders at the municipality level. These suggestions may be useful at the day care centre level as well. Their conclusion is that there should be improvement in the possibilities of how

different stakeholders can be involved in sharing leadership activities. There is a need for practical tools, reforms of leadership practices, and discussions between different stakeholders.

The aim of the study and the research questions

The aim of the present study was to describe day care work and leadership in a distributed organization. The study explored day care work and leadership in a new organizational structure, a distributed organization (Halttunen, 2009). In such an organization, day care units are situated physically apart and may offer different kinds of day care services (day care centre, family day care, and open day care). This article is based on a larger research and was confined to the following research questions:

> *How do directors and employees describe their work in a distributed organization?*
>
> *What are employees' expectations of leadership?*
>
> *How is leadership executed?*

Concerning the first research question, the findings are mainly presented from the perspective of the employees.

Methodology

I utilized an ethnographic approach and, employing Stake's (2005) definition, designed an instrumental case study. The cases were not chosen because they were the only ones of interest, but there were other organizations that could have served as cases, as well. The criterion for the cases was that they comprise of two or more day care units. According to Stake (2005), an instrumental case study may redraw a generalization. Cases in this study were typical enough to draw a generalization in the Finnish context. As mentioned above, in many Finnish municipalities, day care units and leadership are arranged using the form of a distributed organization. Nevertheless, in qualitative research, the readers usually draw the ultimate generalization – a thick description of the report should allow the readers to transfer the findings into their own reality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The basic assumption behind the research was to see the world as socially constructed (cf. Berger & Luckmann, 1994). This assumption affected both the number of the cases

and who were invited to be the informants. The rationale for choosing two organizations was to ensure the possibility to contact all the members of these chosen organizations and in this way guarantee the possibility to hear as many voices as possible. The rationale for not inviting only day care centre directors and those having a semi-formal leadership position (e.g., assistant directors) was based on my understanding of leadership as socially constructed, especially in the interaction between a leader and followers (cf. Shamir, 2007). I agree that the amount of the organizations is at the same time a limitation but I preferred to be able to collect broad data from these two organizations.

The two case organizations were from different municipalities. One organization comprised four day-care units and the other consisted of five units (see Table 1). The number of employees in these organizations consisted of two day-care centre directors and 48 staff members. In both of the organizations the director had named one assistant director. In Organization A, each of the units had also one person in charge working at the site of the unit. The directors had their offices in one of the units, which was called an office unit and the others were called remote units. Although there were many similarities in these organizations (e.g., the number of the personnel and the form of day care services), there were also some differences. First, Organization A was located so that the distance between the units was less than 1 kilometre. For Organization B, the distance between units was from 1 to 3 kilometres. Second, the directors had different ways of meeting the personnel. The director of Organization A held all the meetings or annual celebrations for the whole staff, but the director of Organization B held the staff meetings and annual celebrations separately in each unit.

To ensure the credibility of the findings, I used method triangulation (Patton, 2002): the empirical data consist of observations, group and individual interviews and a qualitative questionnaire, each of them focusing on all the research questions. The data collection started with the observation, and the observation data were taken from the researcher's field notes. Observation (60 hours) was done in each unit during the daily activities and especially in staff meetings. The semi-structured interview had four themes following the research questions: being an employee or a director in a distributed organization, the meaning of employees' own unit, relationships and collaboration among the units, and leadership (expectation and execution of leadership).

TABLE 1　Case organizations

ORGANIZATION A	STAFF	CHILDREN	0RGANIZATION B	STAFF	CHILDREN
Day care centre & Director's office	16	74	Day care centre & Director's office	6	42
Day care centre	4	15	Day care centre	6	42
Family day care group	3	12	Family day care group	4	12
Open day care	3	60*	Open day care	1	7
			Family day care (working at home)	5	20
Total	26	101	Total	22	116

* total amount of children in the clubs

The interviews began with the staff's group interviews. The groups were formed on the basis of natural work teams. In other words, either all members of a small day care centre formed an interview group or a group consisted of three to four staff members who worked in the same team. Almost all the staff members took part in the group interviews. In addition to the group interviews, there were nine individual interviews. The rationale behind asking particular individuals to be interviewed had to do with their role (e.g. an assistant director) and the balance of having individuals from different units and services. In addition, everyone was offered an opportunity for an individual interview, but no one wanted to use that option. The two directors were interviewed three times individually and once together. Their individual interviews were at the beginning, at around half way, and at the end of the data collection process. The qualitative questionnaire was for the staff only and 29 (62%) persons returned it. The rate of the responses was quite low but responses included answers from each unit. To improve the credibility of the findings I have added a few direct citations from the interviews and from the observation diary to the chapter Findings.

The interviews were the primary data and the data from the observation and questionnaire were used to support and enrich it. The data were analysed using data-cantered, inductive content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The unit of analysis was a meaningful utterance, ranging from a couple of words up to a couple of sentences. The analysis process started with classifying the interview data into three themes (leadership, being an employee, and day-care work) and at this stage the form of the original expressions was saved. Each utterance included the code of the interviewee and the code of the theme it belonged to. The further data analysis of each theme was

implemented by forming lower and higher order categories driven directly from the classified data text (cf. Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). According to the idea of inductive content analysis, the original utterances were reduced and a conceptual hierarchy was formed following three phases. First, an overview was made of the data text, second, the utterances from different sources were reduced and combined, and third, the subcategories and main categories were formed. Naturally, the research questions provided a significant guidance for the analytical process. This article focuses on the analysis of the data themes *leadership* and *being an employee.*

Findings

The staff emphasized working independently

The key phrase the staff members used to describe their work in a distributed organization was "*working independently*". Working independently emphasized the work of the staff as a team as well as the self-regulation of each individual staff member: individuals and teams were responsible for their unit, team, and for themselves. Working independently did not, however, mean decrease in the importance of collaboration between the staff and the director.

This ***collaborative attitude*** towards work was evident in the day-to-day activities of all staff members: responsibility was distributed to designated employees (e.g., the assistant director) as well as allocated through spontaneous collective responsibility. It was evident both in the interviews and during the observation that the employees in many cases first had tried to sort things out by themselves before contacting the director. But what was important was to inform the centre director about the decisions or actions the staff had done independently.

The quote below is an example of a ***collective responsibility***:

> *During a staff meeting the representative from a remote unit asked for help to arrange their team meetings. It seemed to be very easy to make the arrangement for the next meeting but immediately after the arrangement had been made, some of the staff members started to quietly discuss how they could make a permanent arrangement. The director as a chair of the meeting was not involved in this part of the discussion.* (Observation diary, Organization A)

Especially those staff members who worked in the remote units emphasized the common responsibility they had as individuals and as a team.

> *So it began with the idea that we are a team or two teams and then we have the cleaning lady and the person in the kitchen. We have to make the best of the situation and the director will visit us every now and then.* (A staff member of a remote unit, Organization B)

Working independently was seen as a challenge and as a possibility. When working independently was seen as a challenge, it was related to the challenges of teamwork in one unit or in smaller teams. Each member of the staff had to *take more responsibilities* for the common good and for the common tasks. When it was seen as a possibility, it was related to *professional development* and to *positive self-regulation* over the work.

However, it was not always easy to learn how to take new responsibilities. To be able to take new responsibilities was also seen as5a *learning process*.

> *Of course at the beginning I was a bit worried about what kind of responsibility I need to take. But now I feel that I kind of had to grow – and quite quickly I have been able to handle issues, which are related to other issues than just how to run the work with the children.* (A staff member, Organization B)

Actually, the work of the directors leading now several units had not faced many changes. The content of their work was quite the same as when leading one day-care centre. They both said that in a distributed organization, the major change was to *lead different kind of day care services* instead of, for example, only day care centre(s). The needs for leadership varied in each service. The other new challenge was how to *be in contact especially with the remote units* and how to disperse their leadership also to these units. In connection to the independent work of the staff, they both said that they had to learn that they *did not need to be aware of all the things* taking place in the units and to trust on their staff.

The role of an assistant director is important and accepted

Although responsibilities were widely shared, in both of the organizations there were some practical arrangements done to nominate one of the employees into a formal position as an assistant director. In Organization A, there was also a position for a person in charge in each unit. However, none of the directors held systematic meetings with the assistants.

The assistant directors or the other members of the staff did not mention that they were forced to handle some concrete work tasks or responsibilities of the director. The role of the assistant directors included, however, some *concrete administrative tasks*, but

they were, for example, **not responsible of the pedagogical leadership** of their unit. More or less their role was to support and co-work with the director.

The answers of the staff confirmed that **these assistant directors were needed** in the units. In addition, their leadership and responsibility were seen mostly in a positive way. Also the assistant directors did not see their tasks and role too demanding and they were **willing to take this duty**. It is noteworthy that the leadership of these assistants was expected to be supported by the whole community. The support was provided in two ways. Firstly, the work community tried to arrange time for the assistant director to take care of her/his tasks. Secondly, the work community together took care of some of the tasks, like participating in the communication with the director.

> *Noora [an assistant director] felt that she can't leave her child group and get familiar with a new computer program. The director said that he understood it but it would be nice if they could share some work concerning the program because he was now so busy. The other employees who heard this conversation immediately started to plan how Noora could occasionally do office work for a couple of hours.* (Observation diary, Organization B)

It was important to **clarify their roles and responsibilities**. In a case, where the role of the assistant director was not defined at the vey beginning, the situation was confusing both for her and for the other staff members. The assistants did not identify themselves as leaders but positioned themselves as equal members among the staff. However, their role was unique and in some cases they felt being somehow between the staff and the director, which made them to consider their role towards their colleagues. One of the assistant directors said that in some situations she felt more representing the employer and she needed to consider how to express herself among the other staff members.

The importance of the day care centre director remains

It can be concluded that the new organizational structure required sharing responsibilities between the director and the staff. Nevertheless, it did not mean that the importance of the centre director had decreased. The main expectation towards the leadership was to have a director who could be present and thus more involved in the daily activities of her/his units. The strongest critique concerning this new leadership and organizational structure was the decrease especially in **spontaneous meetings and discussions** with the director.

> *We missed during the previous director and we still miss something more informal, something that the staff can have at the centre where the office is. They can have a cup of coffee together, and the director hears what they [staff] are talking about and can comment those issued discussed.* (A staff member, Organization B)

In addition to the need of spontaneous discussions, the **director** was in many cases the one who **had the main responsibility**: sometimes because she/he had the legal right and legitimate responsibility to make the decisions, and sometimes she/he was seen having more authority than the employees. The official decisions related to the staff and the children as well as taking care of the wellbeing of the employees were tasks set to the director. Nevertheless, many of the decisions and their actual makers depended on the circumstances of the situation. For example, if there was a need for a short-term substitute, the staff tried to make the arrangements by themselves but in a case of a long-term need the director was more responsible for the arrangements.

When the responsibilities to run the day care organization and the units were shared between the director and the staff, it also meant that the division of labour between them had to be clear and well defined. For the staff members, it was very clear in which duties the director had the official and legal responsibility to make the decision. However, in some cases, there were slightly different views about who was to make the final decision.

> *I discussed with Noora about the work shifts and about the director's wish to affect those. Noora said that the team had wanted to hold on the work shifts they had and do as they wanted the shifts to be.* (Observation diary, Organization B)

There were some contradictions how the director could affect the activities and pedagogy of a child group. On one hand, there were expectations that the director would instruct and supervise the child group activities, on the other hand, the staff saw that they were the experts to know the needs of their own child group best. Also, employees in different age groups, for example, expected and understood leadership differently. Based on the data, the employees in the present study had witnessed several trends in leadership. The expectations towards the director and how she/he should carry out the leadership in addition to the individuals, varied also among different teams and units.

Discussion and conclusion

In this research leadership and day-care work were studied in the context of a new organizational structure where a single day care centre director led simultaneously several units. It was evident that the work of the director, but also that of the staff, had met changes. The findings show that in the case organizations, leadership was carried out distributing the leadership activities and responsibility over the whole staff and the staff accepted to take the responsibility.

According to the findings, leadership in the centres can be interpreted as distributed based on the way the members of the staff described their attitudes towards the work and the relationship between the director and the staff. There is no one model or definition of distributed leadership, which makes it difficult to identify an activity of leadership as manifestation of distributed leadership (Tian et al., 2015). In this research, the key terms like interaction, involvement of multiple persons in leadership practices and conjoint activity addressed by Spillane (2004) and Harris (2004) were present. However, I can't argue that the distribution of leadership was fully developed. I could recognize the "lowest" form of distributed leadership, in other words, delegation of concrete tasks, but I could also find distributed leadership being deeply embedded in the culture (cf. MacBeath, 2005).

Employees emphasized their independent work. On the other hand, working independently meant working without an everyday face to face contact with and support of the director and on the other hand, it meant greater responsibility for a team or for a unit in a close interaction with the centre director. Working independently did not, however, mean that the staff and the director worked without interaction. For the centre directors, new leadership arrangements meant finding new tools and ways to lead different kind of services and units.

Basically, working independently was mostly seen in a positive way. Working independently was described as enhancing professional development and job satisfaction (cf. also Boyd & Schneider 1997; Pestoff, 2000). Working independently stresses the importance of good relationships among the employees, because the staff needs to rely more on each other. Other studies have also found collaborative relationships to be one of the three key elements in the descriptions of early childhood professionalism (Dalli, 2008).

One way to implement distributed leadership is to nominate some staff members to leadership positions (Spillane, 2005; cf. MacBeath, 2005). This was also the case in my data while there were nominated assistant directors and persons in charge in the remote units. However, seeing oneself as a leader was difficult for those in a leadership position. These nominated staff members did not describe their work with terms related to leadership although their leadership position was recognized by their colleagues (cf. Heikka, 2013; Ho, 2011). Further, the distribution of leadership was not only restricted to those having a formal position. In different situations, for example when arranging substitutes, also those in informal roles adopted leadership roles. This confirms the earlier research findings (cf. Harris, 2004; Spillane, 2004) according to which people both in formal and informal leadership positions may possess a leadership status, and different situations may product leadership roles and activities.

Although the employees had taken greater responsibility over their work, the importance of the centre director remained significant. The director had some duties based on her/his legal position. The director was also needed to support the work and well-being of the staff. It is noteworthy that authors of distributed leadership have not at any point underestimated the importance of the formal leader either (e.g. Harris, 2013; Shamir, 2007; Spillane, 2006).

The key element to guarantee the distribution of leadership to flourish is trust (e.g. Harris, 2013; Heikka & Hujala, 2013; MacBeath, 2005). On one hand, the director needs to trust on the staff's ability to work independently. On the other hand, the employees, for example, have to use the freedom given showing responsibility. Literature talks more about the leaders' role in giving space to employees' leadership (e.g. Harris, 2008), however, employees who accept leadership activities to be part of their work are needed as well. As McDowall Clark and Murray (2012, p. 33) note, "If leadership, like learning, can be seen as central to early years practice, it becomes part of everyone's purpose and way of working." There is also evidence that leadership training supports ECEC professionals to take leadership roles (Mistry & Sood, 2012).

The findings raise several questions to be discussed, when leadership is being distributed, regardless the organization structure. These questions are, for example, why we should distribute leadership, how the distribution of leadership should be made visible, and how to improve the distribution of leadership. These questions cover both leadership practices and our understanding of leadership.

First, improving the distribution of leadership is important because better distribution benefits both leaders and staff members in practical situations. In addition to the practical benefits, discussions and the use of the distribution of leadership may also clarify the roles and duties of the leaders and the staff. John (2008) addresses that seeing leadership as something which can be shared may make the self-expectations of leaders more realistic but also may make staff members respected and valued.

Second, there should be an open discussion about how leadership is distributed, for example, in regard to which tasks or responsibilities are distributed and to whom. Open discussion may especially improve leadership identity of those having a teacher or an assistant leader position (Heikka, 2013; Ho, 2011). Roles, resources and the division of labour should be clear in implementing distributed leadership.

Third, the level of distribution needs consideration. Heikka et al. (2012, p. 34) note that "Distributed leadership is, however, not just sharing of tasks in an organization, but is also used to explain deeper levels of interaction between members working through shared goals." To improve the distribution of leadership, the directors could, for

example, form boards with their assistants and in conjunction with them lead the organization. This kind of collaboration could also be an answer for the call of "deeper levels of interaction" (Heikka et al., 2012) or for "distributed leadership as influence process"(Robinson, 2008).

Although the existing research on distributed leadership is considerable broad, studies should be addressed to new areas. According to Tian and his colleagues (2015), the focus of the research during previous years has been on three areas: examining the favorable conditions for distributed leadership, evaluating its effects and understanding its potential risks. They suggest that distributed leadership should be understood and studied from two perspectives: distributed leadership as a resource from the organizational perspective and as an agency from the individual perspective.

A significant topic for research is addressed by Robinson (2008) suggesting researchers to focus on discriminating those leadership tasks, which deal with the mission of the organization, because they are especially the ones, which should be distributed. Also in the present study, the distribution of the leadership was mainly focused on managerial and administrative issues and not on how to improve teaching and learning. According to Heikka et al. (2012), leadership distribution in ECEC should support the pedagogical functions and processes. I agree with Heikka's and her colleagues' notion, which also gives direction for the future research: 'How is the distribution of leadership supporting pedagogical functions and processes, and what are the outcomes when leadership is distributed?' The present research confirms the readiness and willingness of the directors to invite and include employees to their leadership practices and also employees' ability to be involved. Hence, the discussion and research about the core targets of distributed leadership in the context of ECEC should continue both at the macro and micro levels.

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