

# Leadership in Early Childhood Education – Theoretical and Empirical Approaches

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## **Commentary**

### **Introduction**

Leadership in early education is crucial for enhancing pedagogical quality. Task profiles and role models for leaders as well as requirements for the leaders' qualifications and resources needed differ from country to country. Thus we need a systematic approach including theoretical frameworks and research to raise our knowledge and understanding about leaders' activities in different systems of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Such an approach can enable us to consider competencies, stresses, dilemmas and ways of coping under different conditions in different countries in a more organised way. This will also enable researchers to compare working systems and describe good and best practices of leadership correlated with the developmental processes and educational outcomes for children as well as the professional development and well-being of ECEC staff.

Research on leadership in ECEC can enhance our knowledge of activities, problems and strategies that are necessary to qualify professionals as leaders. This knowledge can also provide a basis for argumentation to policymakers about the necessity for infrastructure and resources to support the work of leaders. In this commentary I will

- 1. propose theoretical models to describe the role of leadership and management processes necessary for producing pedagogical quality as discussed in Europe,*
- 2. present some empirical findings on activity patterns of early education leaders.*

These approaches can support the development of a common framework for research on leadership in ECEC.

## **The meaning of leadership and management in early childhood education and care**

### **The competent system of early education**

The European *Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care* study (CORE) points out the central issues of a “competent system” in ECEC at different levels: the individual, institutional, inter-institutional and governance levels (Urban, Vandebroek, Lazzari, Peeters, & van Laere, 2011). As a result of a literature review, a survey of professional requirements in 27 European countries, as well as commentaries of experts in 15 countries and case studies the required knowledge, practices and values were described (Urban et al., 2011, p. 13). Central leadership competencies are portrayed at the institutional level: following the results leaders need pedagogical knowledge with a focus on early childhood and diversity, knowledge of situated learning and communities of practice as well as knowledge of learning organisations and reflective approaches and knowledge of school leadership including collaborative management styles and distributed leadership (Urban et al., 2011, pp. 39–40).

According to the CORE guidelines (Urban et al., 2011), leaders and managers in ECEC institutions have to be able to elaborate a shared pedagogical framework, adapt systematic procedures for documenting educational practices and evaluate the outcomes, provide opportunities for joint work and offer ongoing pedagogical guidance to all staff. Further, leadership and management 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 (Urban et al., 2011). Thus this study is a valuable compendium of internationally shared knowledge and orientation on good practice in ECEC at different levels of the system of ECEC in Europe. Additionally, we also need approaches which are connected to scientific paradigms and theoretical frameworks going deeper into the practice of leadership.

### **Leadership to reach pedagogical quality**

Figure 1 shows a model which describes the meaning of leadership and management in promoting the quality of pedagogical processes (Strehmel & Ulber, 2014, adapted from Viernickel, 2006).

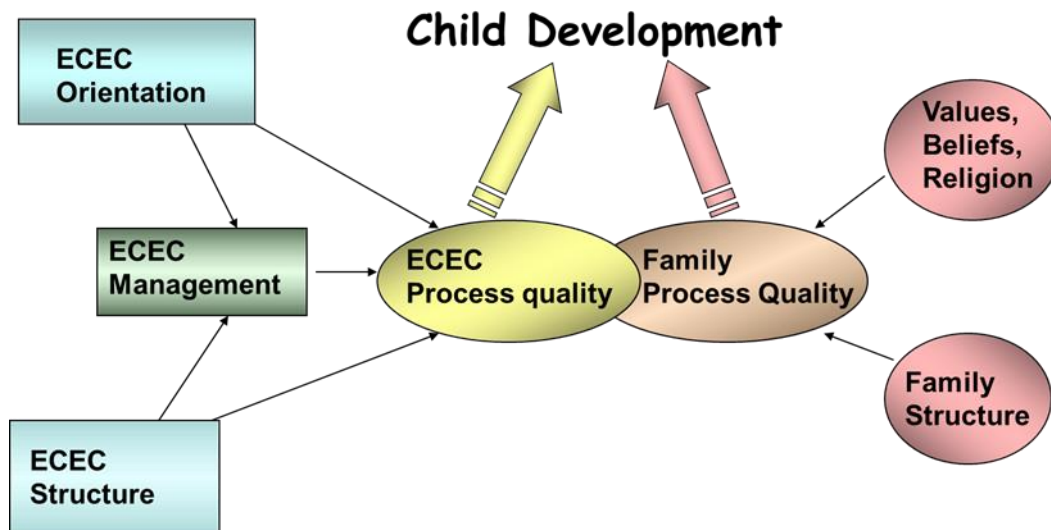


FIGURE 1 The role of Leadership and Management to provide educational quality (adapted from Viernickel, 2006)

Processes in the ECEC institutions are influenced by characteristics of children's families including family structures and culture. Research has shown that educational processes in the families have a stronger impact on children's developmental processes than any institution (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2010). This underlines the importance of cooperating with parents and families and strengthening their educational competencies. In Germany, ECEC leaders for example, work together with parents' associations and organise regular parents' meetings not only to inform about organisational issues but also to talk about educational questions. The leaders encourage and support their teams to discuss the development and needs of every child with the particular parents (Roth, 2014).

The quality of ECEC processes, i.e. interactions between educational professionals and children (parents, colleagues, etc.) in early childhood education and care is directly influenced by orientation quality and structure quality. Orientation quality is described by the pedagogues as educational goals, values and attitudes towards children and parents that shape their interactions with children and parents. On the one hand, these goals and values directly influence pedagogical quality. On the other hand, it is the task of the leaders to 'translate' educational goals and values into pedagogical concepts which are created and reflected by the team, parents and other stakeholders involved in the educational processes.

The British *Effective Leadership in the Early Years Sector* (ELEYS) study (see Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006; Siraj-Blatchford & Hallett, 2014) found that successful ECEC leaders of institutions with excellent educational results for the children developed visions for their organisation and focused on 'leading learning', i.e., common learning processes with all people involved in the educational processes (Siraj-Blatchford & Hallett, 2014). They developed a shared vision for the learning processes for children, parents and professionals and empowered the team to cooperate with parents and reflect on their own working and learning processes.

Structural quality is defined by equipment and resources of the institutions: staff-child ratio, group sizes, the qualification of the pedagogues, rooms, materials, etc. On the one hand, these resources can influence the quality of pedagogical processes directly. For example, child-adult ratios directly influence the quality of interactions between children and adults. On the other hand, leaders and the management can channel resources and place them to reach the best frame conditions for the pedagogical processes. Different empirical studies show that the smaller the groups, the more favourable the child-adult relationships and the better the qualification of the nursery school/preschool teachers, the higher is the quality of educational processes and the more positive are children's developmental outcomes (Sylva et al. 2010). Higher qualifications of preschool leaders are correlated with better pedagogical quality including language reasoning, activities and program structures (Taggart, Sylva, Siraj-Blatchford, Melhuish, Sammons, & Walker-Hall, 2000). Thus the quality of leadership and management is defined by the strategies of 'translation' and channelling of pedagogical orientations as well as structural resources to influence the quality of the educational processes (Strehmel & Ulber, 2014). Good quality management and leadership are conducted by careful communication, coordination and service for the organisation, team and other persons involved.

## **Leadership and management tasks in early childhood education and care**

### **Dimensions of leadership**

A previous empirical study in Germany identified 10 dimensions of management for early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions (Fthenakis, Hanssen, Oberhuemer & Schreyer, 2009). This study shows that leaders of nursery schools or preschools have to manage tasks in

- 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.

These tasks are shared by the organisation management and leaders of ECEC institutions. In Germany, what is considered as the priority for the leaders in this list of tasks vary according to the very heterogeneous conditions for ECEC institutions. They, for example, depend on the different curricula in the 16 states of Germany, different management types of ECEC organisations (public or private, small institutions to large enterprises), the financing systems in the states and communities and the division of work within the organisation management (Strehmel, 2016b).

### **A framework for leadership tasks and activities**

Strehmel and Ulber (2014) adapted a model of leadership in non-profit organisations developed by Austrian scientists Simsa and Patak (2008) on early childhood organisations to preschools and nursery schools. In this model seven dimensions of leadership are described (see Figure 2) as follows:

1. Primary tasks of the institutions: educational leadership as well as economic management and administration
2. Human resource management and leadership
3. Collaboration (in the team, with parents, in the community, etc.)
4. Organisational design and development
5. Self-management
6. Observation of frame conditions and trends in ECEC (governance, markets, etc.)
7. Strategic Management.



FIGURE 2 Dimensions of leadership by Simsa & Patack (2008)

Strehmel and Ulber (2014) integrated the two approaches by Fthenakis, Hanssen, Oberhuemer and Schreyer (2009) and Simsa and Patack (2008) in describing the tasks of ECEC leaders in Germany. This model reflects a theoretical framework that aims to investigate the activity profiles of leaders and their time use in carrying out their tasks. It can be also used as a general framework for the purposes of systematisation of theoretical work and empirical results. According to this model, leadership tasks can be described by referring to the theoretical and empirical knowledge of different disciplines and including practical tools and instruments to describe, plan or work out concrete activities of ECEC leaders. Knowledge and tools can be adapted from other disciplines, for example, pedagogical leadership from educational science, human resource management or team work from the psychology of work and organisation, etc.

### **Tasks**

Educational leadership implies the building, steering and coordination of educational work to fulfill 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.

Theoretical knowledge and tools are described in a number of textbooks for educational leadership relevant to ECEC settings (see for example, Aubrey, 2011; Rodd, 2013; Siraj-Blatchford & Hallett, 2014).

Administration and financial management can deduce knowledge and tools from microeconomics and social management. The leadership tasks in this field depend on the frame conditions of the particular organisation and this can influence the definition of the leadership roles, the division of labour with the organisation management, administrative requirements and support provided by administrative staff.

### ***Human resource management and leadership***

Peccei, Voorde and Veldhoven (2013; see also Guest, 2014) proposed a model of human resource management that can easily be transferred into the field of early childhood education and care (Figure 3, see Strehmel, 2016a). The goals of human resource management are twofold: 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. Beside the tasks of educational leadership and personnel management, leaders are responsible for work conditions, quality development and networking. By these practices they want to promote motivation, learning and participation of the pedagogical staff as prerequisite for good pedagogical quality as well as for professional development, well-being and health.

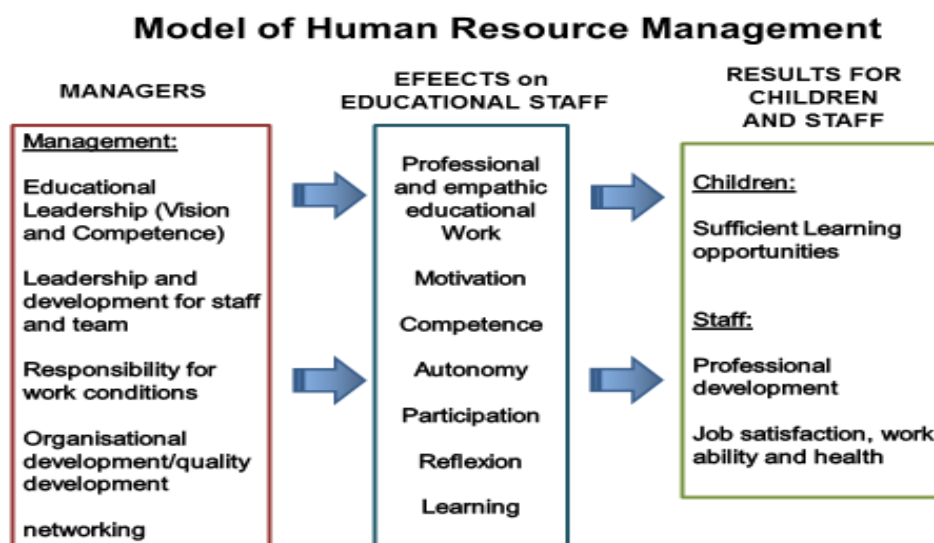


FIGURE 3 Human Resource Management in ECEC organisations

The psychology of work and organisation provide deep theoretical and empirical knowledge as well as tools and instruments for different fields of human resource management such as recruiting staff, personnel leadership, team building and professional development (Strehmel & Ulber, in press).

### ***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.

ECEC leaders have to know about team processes and group dynamics, conflicts and methods of conflict solving and have to guarantee participation in decisions concerning the pedagogical work and work conditions of the staff. Viernickel, Nentwig-Gesemann, Nicolai, Schwarz and Zenker (2013) showed in a qualitative study with leaders and staff in ECEC institutions that attitudes and leadership strategies can influence the ways of coping of teams with dilemmas in everyday life. If the demands of curricula on the one hand, and the possibilities for the translation into action on the other hand, are in conflict and team members experience dilemma due to the lack of time and resources, reactions of teams can be described in three ways:

- Teams striving for translation in spite of missing resources. These teams focus on the curricula but sometimes neglect the needs of children and parents.
- Teams who dissociate themselves from the task to fulfill the curriculum. These teams are under pressure from expectations of parents, but often have no alternative pedagogical ideas and thus have a dilemma with the orientation.
- Teams working on the basis of core values and educational goals (“Wertekern”) and following their own reflected ideas which can be extended and inspired by the proposals in the curriculum.

The leaders’ attitudes and team leading strategies can strongly influence pedagogical orientations and the self-confidence of teams in their pedagogical work and thus pedagogical quality. Leaders are at the same time the central contact point for external institutions (Figure 4). Their network consists of

- institutions for additional learning opportunities for the children and families (for example, institutions for leisure, sport and culture: playgrounds, swimming pools, libraries, etc.)
- institutions to support children and families (for example, counselling agencies and experts for special needs of children such as doctors and therapists, etc.)
- support systems for the professionals (for example, professional and further education, professional consulting, universities, professional associations which organise conferences and meetings for reflection and learning, etc.)



- societal and political stakeholders (for example, trade unions, financial backers, foundations and policy makers, see Strehmel, 2016b).

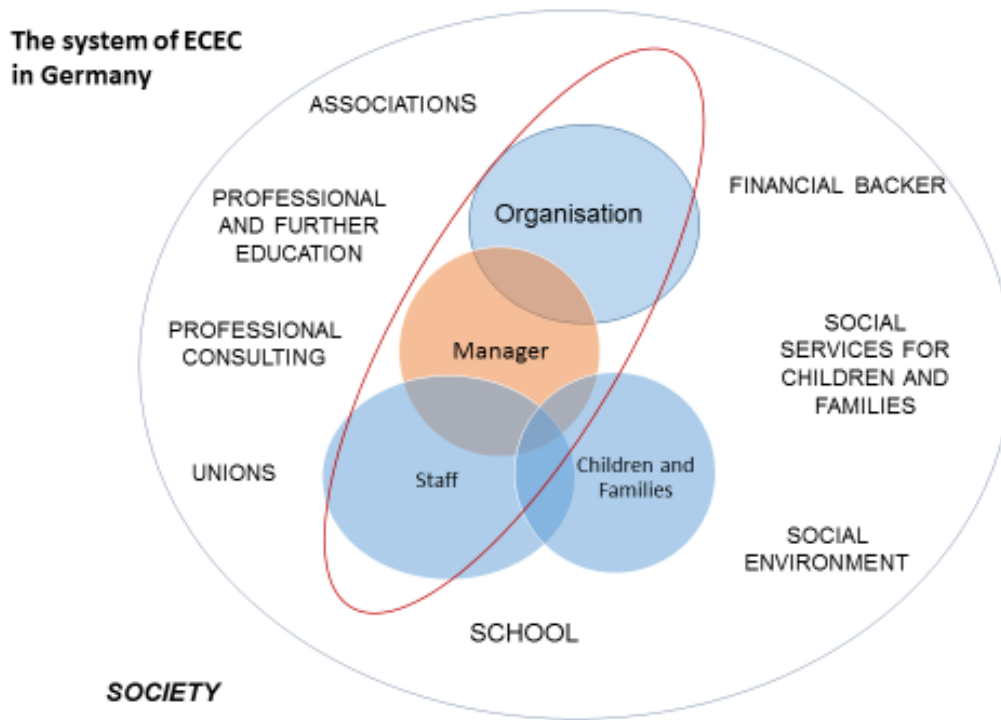


FIGURE 4 The system of ECEC in Germany (see Strehmel & Ulber, 2014, translation PS)

### ***Organisational 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. For these reasons, ECEC leaders need knowledge and competencies to manage change processes (such as, project management and tools) to run their institution as a learning organisation.

### ***Observing frame conditions and trends***

In addition to deep and convincing professional competencies leaders need 'field competencies', i.e., they have to know about structures and processes in the social, societal and political 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.

### ***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***

Leaders often have a large amount of autonomy to organise their work which means that they are alone responsible for their own working structures and time schedules. However, self-management is more than that, it also means to care for one's own professional development and health.

## **Empirical findings on every day activities of ECEC leaders in Germany**

Strehmel, Durda, Buntins and Ulber (2015) conducted a pilot study on time budgets in ECEC institutions. With a standardized questionnaire they studied the time use of educational leaders employed by a large nationwide provider operating ECEC institutions (n = 117) in Germany. The amount of time taken to complete different tasks was estimated weekly over a period of three months. The results of this study showed that the average time leaders needed for educational leadership (conceptual work and organisation of pedagogical processes, etc.) was only 4 hours per week, for management and administration they needed 16.2 hours, for leadership and human resource management 7.6 hours and for self-management 3.5 hours. The amount of time for organisational development was very low.

In a recent study, Münchow and Strehmel (2016) also investigated the time use by 141 ECEC leaders in Berlin as well as their subjective appraisal on the lack of time for leadership tasks. This study was conducted using a standardised online questionnaire. The Berlin leaders needed an average amount of 9 hours per week for administrators tasks as well as for team building and leadership. Other important areas of work where human resource management and pedagogical leadership. They used on average 6–8

hours per week to those tasks. These leaders also reported lack of time for quality management, organisational development, networking and self-management.

Thus in Germany, ECEC leaders in different contexts described as their most important and time-consuming everyday activities human resource management, pedagogical leadership, teamwork and administration. The amount of time for administration varied between the studies and this finding might reflect different patterns in the division of labour between organisational management and institution leaders, but also different financial systems in the German states that require different times for administration. The results also differ in the use of time for self-management. Organisational development, quality development and networking were often neglected due to the lack of time and the insufficient equipment accessible by those in leadership positions.

## Conclusions

This commentary presented theoretical approaches and some empirical findings on the task profiles and areas of activities of ECEC leaders. A theoretical framework for research and development of leadership in ECEC settings can be developed based on the dimensions of a competent system as proposed by the European CORE study as well as on the model of leadership and management dimensions by Simsa and Patak (2008, adapted to ECEC by Strehmel & Ulber, 2014). Taken together, these models can structure ECEC leadership research and help to systematise and compare international results.

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