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## Will the Leadership Last? Sustainable Leadership in Early Childhood Education

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OMEP Hrvatska  
2018

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Soukainen , U & Fonsén , E 2018 , Will the Leadership Last? Sustainable Leadership in  
p̃y Early Childhood Education . in E Rogulj , A Jevti & A Jur evi - Lozan  
Childhood Relationships: The Foundation for a Sustainable Future : Proceedings,  
International Scientific and Professional Conference OMEP 2017 . OMEP Hrvatska , pp.  
312-329 , 69th OMEP World Assembly and International Conference , Opatija , Croatia ,  
19/06/2017 . < <http://omep.hr/assets/zbornik.pdf> >

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/321627>

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unspecified  
acceptedVersion

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# WILL THE LEADERSHIP LAST? SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

Ulla Soukainen and Elina Fonsen

## **Abstract**

*This article discusses the construction of sustainable leadership for early childhood education by means of various discourses. The context of the study is the Sustainable Leadership Development Project, which was conducted in two Finnish municipalities in 2015-2016. The aim of the project was to strengthen early childhood education leadership in the context of ever-changing conditions. The data were collected from discussions between the focus group of the management teams of the early childhood education units, and senior civil servants of the municipal early childhood education scheme who were involved in the project. The material was analyzed with discourse analysis, with the aim of defining the principles of sustainable leadership in early childhood education. The research results show that to build sustainable leadership we need a common understanding of the key factors influencing leadership structure, such as shared values and visions, the importance of strategy, communication, development work and pedagogical leadership structure*

**Key words:** development project; discourse analysis; early childhood education; focus group; sustainable leadership

## Introduction

In recent years, Finnish early childhood education has come under a series of reforms. In early 2013, the administration of early childhood education was transferred to the Ministry of Education and Culture from the Ministry of Health and Social services. In 2014, the guidance of the content of early childhood education was transferred from the National Institute for Health and Welfare to the Finnish National Agency for Education. The first phase of the new Early Childhood Act came into force on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August 2015; the Finnish National Agency for Education having earlier published the core curriculum for pre-primary education (2014). On the basis of the core curriculum, the municipalities had to draw up local curricula and plans, which were introduced on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August 2016. The new National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education and Care was published in October 2016. The local plans have been effective since the 1<sup>st</sup> of August 2017. Now the national curriculum guidelines for ECEC is the norm and is based on the law; this, therefore, has required a change in old practices. In substance, the nature of early childhood education has changed in three areas: the administrative sector of the change, the new legislation and guidance documents, the pedagogy of the content-control system. (Fonsén & Vlasov 2016).

Various studies suggest that early childhood education should lay the foundation for lifelong learning (Karila 2016). However, the recent political decision-making has not supported this in the legislation as regards the realization of the work of early childhood education. In October 2015, the Finnish Government presented Parliament with a bill (HE 80/2015), according to which the right to early childhood education is limited to 20 hours a week. In addition to capping Early Childhood Education through this Law, the Government also approved an increased in the ratio of children per adult in ECEC. Before the change, the ratio was seven children per one adult in groups of over three-year-old children. Under the current regulations, the ratio increased by one child, that is, one adult can take care of eight children. In February 2016, LocalFinland (Kuntaliitto) investigated the stand taken by municipalities on this limiting of the subjective right to day-care and the introduction of the changed ratio of children. The result was that 86 % of the Finnish mainland municipalities answered the survey and 16 % of those responding disclosed that they were not intending to limit the right to early childhood education. In many municipalities, the decision making was still in progress in February. At the time of the survey, about 12 % of the respondents had decided to increase the ratio. (Lahtinen & Selkee 2016.)

In 2014, the Trade Union for Education in Finland published a study entitled *The work-load of the day-care centre directors has become unreasonable* (Vesalainen, Cleve & Ilves 2014). The purpose of their study was to examine the situation of day-care center managers and how it has changed since previous studies (Lastentarhanopettajaliitto 2004, OAJ & Lastentarhanopettajaliitto 2007). In the light of above mentioned surveys, it seems that attention has been paid in early childhood education to leadership, as

directors are increasingly exempt from working with children. On the other hand, however, the number of staff, children and offices under a director's responsibility has increased. Day-care center directors are also broadly responsible for the management of the various early childhood services. The proportion of the day-care center directors working with children has fallen in the past ten years from 65 percent to 25 percent. The shift in focus away from regular education work has changed the skill requirements of directors. Organizational structures have also changed compared to the past. According to the survey, only 32 percent of the responding directors had only one day-care center to operate. The number of distributed organizations has increased. (Halttunen 2009, Soukainen 2015).

The above-mentioned changes, as well as the law, the curricula, and the management of the organizations, lead to conflict in management work and the following questions arise: Does the leader try to lead the service or the teaching? Does the administrative work leave time to support staff in pedagogical matters? Early childhood education directors face many challenges in their work. The Sustainable Leadership project sought to find solutions to the above-mentioned leadership challenges in early childhood education. The project was implemented in two different municipalities in the period 2015-2016. This article describes the focus group discussions between the departmental and municipal level management teams in the project, and then how the discourse analysis describes the way in which sustainable leadership can be built in early childhood education.

### **Leadership in The Finnish Early Childhood Education**

Until recently, very few doctoral studies have been conducted on early childhood leadership in Finland (Halttunen 2009, Nivala 1999). Only in the last few years have scientific studies on leadership in early childhood obtained results that show there is a need for different type of leadership (Akselin 2013, Fonsén 2014, Heikka 2014, Soukainen 2015). In addition to these dissertations, the Kindergarten Teachers' Union in Finland (LTOL) together with the Trade Union of Education (OAJ) published studies in leadership in 2004, 2007 and 2014. Karila (2001) listed the tasks of the directors of daycare centers and graded them into five categories: work organization management, the service organization's management, management of care, education, and teaching, acting as an expert in early childhood education and day-care, as well as knowledge management. The categories of the management of care, education and teaching can be thought of as pedagogical management-related, since these categories include the following themes: the basic task of the high-quality care, upbringing and education for children, support for upbringing at home, supporting and managing the development of staff awareness and constructing an operational culture, in particular of a pedagogical culture.

Recent research has provided new perspectives on early childhood leadership since Karila's listing. Akselin's (2013) research examines the formation of strategic leadership in early childhood education.

According to Akselin's study, the directors of early childhood education considered that the aim of strategic leadership was public relations, the purpose of which was to maintain appreciation or gain added value. In municipal organizations, its purpose was to secure resources. Heikka (2014), in turn, called for a description of the responsibilities, tools, and processes across different levels of the municipal organization. This can be described as a shared pedagogical leadership strategy. Heikka also expresses her opinion on investing in basic and continuing training for directors, as well as checking the qualification criteria. According to Fonsén's (2014) study, the weak definition of work descriptions, too many responsibilities, and job fragmentation affect the endurance of directors, as well as the good implementation of pedagogical leadership. The study of leadership in distributed organizations of early childhood education (Soukainen 2015) draws attention to the significance of the structures, and strongly emphasizes the importance of the structures as a means of managing large entities.

In the spring of 2014, in the first phase of the reform of the Early Childhood Education Act there was also discussion on changing the qualification requirement for the directors of daycare centers. The suggestion was that a higher university degree should replace of the current requirement of a qualification as a kindergarten teacher and sufficient experience of management (Opettaja 2014, L272/2005 10 § e mom). The proposal did not, however, lead to a change of the requirements, even though the leadership of daycare centers was seen as important as the leadership of schools. Early childhood education is currently undergoing a transformation as regards the new law, as well as the renewed curricula. There is a similar trend as there was in the basic education in the 1980's, when it became required that the principal of a school should complete a degree in school administration. The justification then for this requirement was as follows: the educational objectives had to be defined in detail, the change in the decision-making system, the changes in the control system and the constant acceleration of social change. (Lahtero 2011, 23.) In addition to these changes, made almost 40 years ago, are the recent challenges posed by the new curricula, and, for example, the increase in technology and multi-literacy; all of which necessitate new pedagogical skills for leaders and staff of early childhood education today. The diversity of different cultures also required changes in cooperation with parents, as consequence more and different interpersonal skills than before are needed.

### **Sustainable Leadership**

Sustainable leadership can be seen as a response to the ever-changing claims mentioned previously. In examining sustainability, the aspects of economic, human, and social sustainability need to be looked at in addition to the ecological perspective. The systematic nature of the changes requires the integration of different perspectives of sustainability. (Kasvio & Rääkkönen 2010.) Hargreaves (2006) considered that the most important basis for a sustainable leadership is that there is time for leadership. Without sufficient

time resources leadership has no opportunity to be sustainable. Leaders need time to increase resources for themselves and their staff as regards innovativeness and long-term development. The final reports of the Advisory Board on Early Childhood Education indicate that the management of resources is currently inadequate, and this has resulted in an increased responsibility of the staff for the quality and development of early childhood education. (Social and Health Ministry 2007:5, 2007:6, 2007:7.)

The leadership structure of early childhood education needs clarification. In addition to development work, Hargreaves and Fink (2006) also require the active exclusion of old dysfunctional habits. The reform of the curricula, as well as the new Early Childhood Education Act, have provided a juncture at which to challenge old practices in the light of the new goals. In organizational cultures, the "in-house rules" are often thought of as self-evident truths without questioning the arguments for the action (see for example Harisalo 2008, Schein 1989). Hargreaves and Fink (2006) also argue that there can be tasks that could be performed more efficiently by another professional group instead of teachers and directors. The change in the structures of early childhood organizations has led to the need to look at the responsibilities and job descriptions of the director and other employees.

Halttunen (2009) describes that the fragmentation of the leaders' job description and the expansion of responsibilities started in the 1990s. The expansion of leadership responsibility for several separate daycare units and different services has distanced the leaders from the everyday work as well as pedagogical support and the focus of work has become more administrative. Directors have less and less time to conduct the core task - early childhood pedagogy. According to Parrila and Fonsén (2016) the leaders' job description and the clarification of responsibilities are an important target for developing early childhood leadership. It is also essential to define what is the role of the kindergarten teacher as a part of the structure of shared leadership. Parrila (2011) emphasizes that clear leadership structures and operating models also support employees' well-being and the development of know-how.

Recent Finnish early childhood education studies (e.g. Fonsén 2014, Heikka 2014, Soukainen 2015) show that a clear leadership structure and distribution of responsibility support the success of leadership. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) define sustainable leadership as a shared leadership with shared goals and work values. The common understanding of the organization's basic task and the sharing of a common vision and strategy will thus become a key method for sustainable leadership. Unregulated distribution of leadership by delegating tasks to staff will only lead to failure. It is therefore important that structures for shared leadership are specifically defined together with the staff. Sustainable leadership can be considered to be built through the confidence of the staff and professionalism. Kocolowski (2010) describes that in the background to shared leadership there are shared common values and an organization culture. Sharing leadership, at its best, produces the engagement of employees and makes them responsible actors. It functions by empowering staff to take full advantage of their skills (see Rodd

2006, Woods 2004). Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) consider that the success of a Finnish school is the result of a guiding - not controlling - leadership where the trust in teachers is strong.

As Hargreaves and Fink (2006) emphasize, the sustainable director takes care of his or her own the development as well as the staff's resources. Sustainable directors do not consume human resources by overwhelming their staff or themselves with too high demands. Instead, these directors try to produce more human capital. Continuous innovation and change are a threat which will burn out/exhaust the staff if they do not feel that the development work is important from their own standpoint. Kasvio and Rääkkönen (2010) consider that one dimension of sustainable working life is human sustainability. Productivity and efficiency requirements in the short term can consume human resources in such a way that the requirements finally turn against their purpose. In the case of the educational organization, the human capital also reaches a "user level" - the children - and thus benefits society as a whole. Sergiovanni (1998) has used the terms human capital and leadership capital. By increasing the leaders' human capital towards good leadership, it also produces the growth of capital for the teachers' knowledge. This has the effect of adding value to the human capital that students are receiving. Fonsén (2014) has also applied these concepts of human capital as the elements of pedagogical leadership in early childhood education. The leader's human, social, and academic capital can be described as knowledge, awareness, skill, and ability. The knowledge capital is knowledge of the substance, i.e. good pedagogical knowledge, and knowledge of the guiding documents (acts, curriculum etc.). Awareness is the knowledge of the implemented pedagogy and the ability to look at it critically. It involves knowledge of the state of pedagogy that has been implemented, which requires different forms of discussion and assessment tools. Skill is leadership know-how, the ability to guide staff to implement high-quality pedagogy and the ability to lead development work. It is strongly associated with the discussion about the values and the early childhood curriculum. The element of ability is the ability to argue and pedagogically validate the pedagogical choices and practical decisions.

Hargreaves (2007) describes that sustainable leadership is based on continuity. Continuous changes in leadership structures consume human capital. In addition, continuous changes weaken long-term development work. Sustainable leadership strongly supports sustainable learning. Paying attention to the people who need special support and targeting resources to support them is crucial. Resources should also be allocated regionally in a sustainable and socially just way to prevent regional inequality. Good practices and know-how should be shared in networks and not just used to promote the quality of a personal unit. Stakeholders are important to the sustainable director as well as politicians who speak on behalf of the sector. In addition, Kasvio and Rääkkönen (2010) highlight the social dimension of sustainable working life. They place a focus on prevention of social inequalities, educational equality, and a fair distribution of employment opportunities in society. Kero and Perko (2016) summarize sustainable

leadership the following way: "Sustainable leadership is a continuous development and development along the way. It is an attitude that determines the direction and vision - the will to make things more sustainably."

### **Sustainable Leadership in Early Childhood Education - Development Project as a Research Context**

The Sustainable Leadership in Early Childhood Education project started in the spring of 2015 with a project design meeting to which potential participants were invited. A project plan was presented by Ediva Ltd., with specifications being made by the participants as regards timetables, processes, and costs. Two cities participated in the project, one of which is among the six largest municipalities in Finland and one which has a population of less than 50,000. In the larger municipality, there were five day-care units which piloted the project. The participants were the directors, deputy directors and special education teachers of early childhood education from each unit. In addition, six people were involved from the administration, with a total of 21 participants in this municipality. From the other municipality, four day-care units were piloted, with a total of 16 participants.

The aim of the project was to strengthen and clarify the leadership of early childhood education organizations response to the challenges posed by the current administrative changes and economic pressures. Clarifying the management structure between the director, the deputy director and the special education teacher of early childhood education was one of the key goals during the project.

The day-care centers which were selected for this project were already interested in development work. The model of the project was the so-called "spearhead" method. The key principle was to target development activities in the centers with the greatest capacity to develop, and then to expand the development work to the other day care centers in the municipalities. In addition, seminars widely targeting the whole staff of early childhood education in these municipalities were organized during the project. The focus group discussions were only conducted in the larger city in this project.

### **Research Task and Research Questions**

The purpose of this research was to investigate and provide information about sustainable leadership in early childhood education. The focus group discussions concerning the results of the Leadership Evaluation Survey analyzed those factors which, in the participants' opinion, influence the building of sustainable leadership. The Leadership Evaluation Survey was created for the project. The research questions guiding this study were: What kind of discourses can be identified in the focus-group discussions?

What were the differences between the discussions of the focus groups?



## **Focus Group Discussions and Discourse Analysis**

The philosophical basis behind the discourse analysis can be considered to be a socio-constructivist theory of the social construction of reality (see Berger & Luckman 1966). The function of language is thus seen as a key - not only in portraying reality but as a constructor of reality (Jokinen, Juhila & Suoninen 1993). Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) describe the starting point for discourse analysis by stating that information is never reachable from outside linguistic discourses, so the discourse itself is the object of analysis in the production of scientific knowledge. Epistemologically, knowledge that is accessible to a researcher is thus context-oriented and relative, subject-dependent (Taylor 2001). According to Alvesson and Kärreman (2000a), the linguistic turn in the post-modern era has given rise to a special interest in discourses in organizational research. Knowledge is not a direct mirror for the image of reality, but linguistic expressions reflect reality from different perspectives. As Suoninen (1993) emphasizes, the same phenomenon can have different interpretations, whereby reality is spoken differently through the interpretation given to it. Discourses are shared systems of meanings from the different groups of actors. Jokinen, Juhila and Suoninen (1993) argue, that meaning making systems are complex in nature. Meaning making systems differ from each other and appear in coexistence. They can also be referred to as a repertoire, but in this article, we use the term of the meaning system. Alvesson and Kärreman (2000b) describe the different dimensions of discourse analysis as micro- and macro discourse. In discourse analysis, local meanings which emerge from the interpretations of society can be differentiated, and even global macro-level meanings can be differentiated from the microstructural contexts of the actors.

In this study, the focus group interviews were used as the method of gathering material. The participants of the larger municipality discussed the results of the Leadership Evaluation Survey. Due to the informants knowing the context of the units, it can be assumed that they had a common shared social construction of the units' reality. Due to the fact that they all worked in the same organization, they had developed a mutual understanding of the language and conceptual categories (Lahtero 2011, 52). Marková, Linell, Grossen and Orvig (2007) call focus group discussions a locally defined function based on historically and culturally shared social knowledge. Dialogue produces a jointly allocated reality which is shared by those in the discussion. There are matters shared in history, not necessarily present at the current moment of discussion, but that define a common understanding of the general state of affairs.

According to Jokinen and Juhila (1993), power relations between discourses can be viewed by analyzing the mutual hierarchy of discourses. In exploring the diversity of discourse, the power analysis can also be extended into various parallel discourses and to look at what factors appear prevalent in the discourse. In research ethics, it should also be noted that the researcher is one of the links in the expression of the meanings. Jokinen and Juhila (1993) emphasize that in a dialogue with the data the researcher brings his or her own meanings of interpretation and the significance of the material is based on the choices made.

In this study, discourse analysis is used to examine the various discussions concerning the results of the Leadership Evaluation Survey. The purpose of the research is to identify the various meanings that the subjects rely on when they discuss the evaluation results of their work units. The participants were asked to describe the strengths and development targets of the units based on leadership measurements. In analyzing the focus-group discussions, the focus was placed on what factors are described in the background of the measurement result, and what kind of discourses the participants rely on in analyzing these factors.

### **Methods - Implementation of the Study**

At the beginning of the project, all the participants in both municipalities were subjected to an electronic survey aimed at measuring the current state of realization of the different areas of leadership. In addition to those individuals involved in the project, the staff members of their units were also requested to respond to the survey. However, for some units, responses were received only from the participants in the project (total 113 responses). The survey had 30 variables classified under four headings. The headings were: organization leadership, leadership structure, leadership in knowledge and wellbeing at work, and leading yourself. The evaluation was carried out on a scale from 1 to 5, where a value of 1 described a low-quality level and 5 a high level of quality.

In the larger city, focus group discussions were organized based on the results of the Leadership Evaluation Survey; hence, there were four focus-groups. The discussions were based on the survey result per unit, which were then compared to the results of the entire material. Prior to participation the participants were requested to sign a written consent form/ to give written confirmation as regards their participation. Participants were asked to discuss the ideas that emerged from the measurement results on the survey. Discussions were recorded and transcribed. The time reserved for discussion was 40 minutes (the length ranged from 22 to 38 minutes). This article surveys the results of the transcribed material. The quantitative results of leadership assessment are reported separately (N.N. & N.N. coming). The process of the project is depicted in Figure 1. Each workshop included only the participants of one municipality. Both municipalities took part in the seminars.

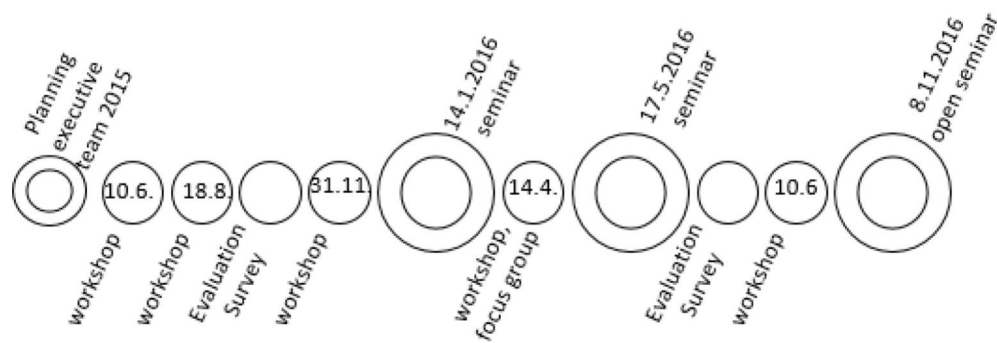


Figure 1. The process of the project in the larger city.

The data contained a set of certain themes, in which the construction of leadership was given different meanings and themes. These themes were: vision and strategy, values, communication, organizational structure (e.g. roles, meeting practices, management structures, roles in management structures) and development. The specific aim of the analysis was to discover those discourses that give leadership meanings from different perspectives, and based on these perspectives to find development targets for guiding the leadership of early childhood education towards the principles of sustainable leadership. In this article, the management teams of the units represent "the field", and the director of early childhood education and the service chiefs represent the management team, or "leaders".

## Results

*The discussion about strategy and vision - to attach the work to the goals.* The management team had a very robust discussion on the importance of vision and strategy. The management team argued that they regularly reported on strategy. However, the evaluation result provided by "the field's" representatives was weaker than management team's evaluation result for strategy. The interpretation provided by the participants ("field") in the debate, relied on a strong common vision at the day care center level. Based on the discussions, it was felt that basic tasks need to be clarified in the day care centers from time to time. The curriculum was described as a good guide and provided a basis for the whole activity. The debate concerning the implementation of the curriculum was described in the expression "it may also improve the atmosphere". The national curriculum gained a central role: "The Curriculum of Early Childhood Education is a practical guide to pedagogy." On the other hand, child-specific early childhood education plans were seen as needing further improvement. The discussion showed that nurses were not necessarily aware of the contents of the child's individual educational plans, and they may not even have read them since the plans were described as being the responsibility of the kindergarten teacher. Mutual

understanding about children's educational plans was seen to be important in order to jointly design the child group's activity from the perspective of development.

*The discussion on communication - tensions between the actors.* Challenges related to communication emerged in many different discussions, as well as being related to many different issues, and tensions were described between various levels of operators. Directors send out messages, but these messages may not always reach the staff. This is due to the immense amount of information and the fact that a lot of information comes by email and is not always very important. On the other hand, it was also described that knowledge does reach "the field" - but there is still room for improvement. This discussion by "the field" raised an image of inadequate dialogue and that the staff in "the field" feel their voice was not given enough attention. The management team, on the other hand, described a systematic and regular communication strategy and the reasons for the changes, however, the personnel had given a low rating to those issues in the survey. According to the leaders, the ability to respond to information from the personnel varies. At the unit level, "the field" saw that it was challenging for the whole staff to participate in the day-care center's common meetings. Thus, information was often disseminated by reading, and the need for discussion on the matter was ignored. This could cause misunderstandings: "You adopt the things that are written differently. When you read the paper, you may not adopt it as it was intended. Responsibility is, of course, lies with both the issuer as well as a recipient." Or: "Information flow or communication is always raised whenever you talk. There's always something to say about it. It's to be developed in every organization."

In addition, the role of the special teacher as an "information dealer" arose in the debate. In one group, the participants questioned the role of the special teacher as a spokesman, targeting the question directly to the teacher present. However, the discussion went on to another theme before the teacher answered the question. The special teacher saw that it is very important that the knowledge of the special needs of children become known to the director. This was solved by the implementation, in the autumn, of the needs of the children being discussed together with the director. The special teacher felt that special teachers should be more involved in the pedagogical discussions and, hence, strengthen them. In the discussion of the leaders, it was thought that the role of the special teacher should be especially strengthened based on his or her knowledge of the pedagogy in the units. Thus, special teachers could act as part of the leadership structure by bringing up-to-date information to directors. It was also hoped that the position of special teacher would become part of the regional leadership team. The challenge was felt to be that in large units the "visibility" of the special teacher was weak.

*The discussion of development – various perspectives.* There were many different interpretations of the development. The opinions of the leaders and "the field" were different, and, in addition, the discussion of "the field" group was even contradictory. On the one hand, the personnel of the day-care centers related

that the development work of the whole organization was led from top down. On the other hand, they also related that development based on their own initiatives was possible, and this was also recognized as a strength. Discussion concerning the curriculum work was considered to be at the core of the development discussion. However, the participants doubted that at the unit level all the guidelines were known to the whole staff, and this could also cause conflict. One part of the discussion concerning well-being is a good example: "In our day-care center well-being is being developed regularly...but well-being received the lowest points...on the other hand, it's a broad concept. There are some programs and everything... The required conversations will take place, but they may not apply to all the staff. So not everyone is involved in any welfare discussion..."

In connection with the development, the level of values and supporting know-how also were discussed, which was concretized in the development work. Drawing up a training plan based on competence mapping was seen as serving its purpose. Having concrete development tasks and open reflections were seen as important. The discussions showed that the management team supported pedagogical development work. The flow of information and communication were mentioned as perpetual tasks for development.

*The discussion of values – support for individual's empowerment.* In the discussions, the significance of common values was considered an important guiding principle. The shared value discussions in the units contributed the need for commitment to the values. Trust became an important value in supporting the work climate, and depicted as a productive empowering position for the individual. Individuals have to feel free to discuss difficult matters, take risks, and share different opinions. This was important for learning and hence development as one of the participants described: "...also dare to fail...because it is based on trust...dare to ask stupid questions and learn from it..." In the focus group discussions, the participants talked about values in general, but they did not explicitly reveal what the defined values in that organization were.

*The discussion of organizational structure - unsettled practices.* The management team's discussion about the structure of pedagogical leadership showed it as being meaningful and desirable. On the one hand, "the field" described the leaders as using their power when the structure was given from the "top"; this discussion also showed that space for the uniqueness of the units was required. On the other hand, however, it was felt that the idea of pedagogical leadership was unclear. In the description of the leaders, "the field" appeared as diverse. In "the field", the ability to receive information was described as varied. The leaders considered that pedagogical discussion had varying levels in "the field". Thus, the leaders tried to find a common structure for pedagogical leadership. The leaders argued that pilot studies can first be used to create a coherent structure and thus produce a consistent practice throughout the organization. The participants questioned the level of engagement in "the field" and wanted to deliberately increase

commitment to the common guidelines. It was considered that it would be a good idea to discover what the current situation was as regards: the structures used for pedagogical discussions in different regions, the kind of meetings being held, and the individuals involved. This data could be collected in a table from which the overall situation could be easily understood. The table should also include the frequency of the meetings, the themes, and the director's role. The director of the day-care center should play a supporting role in these meetings as a pedagogical leader, but this is not necessarily the case at the present.

The significance of pedagogical leadership was also sought by discussing the role of pedagogical leadership at the level of various professional groups. This basic task was seen to be the responsibility of everyone. The director's job description was evident from the point of view of responsibilities and obligations. The assignments of deputy director and special teacher varied in different units. In some units, the special teacher visited regularly according to the "schedule", while in others he/she was consulted on a case-by-case basis. The staff also contacted the special teacher – because the lack of management structure – in the case of issues that should really be discussed with their supervisor. In addition to the ambiguities of their assignments / responsibilities, the co-operation between the director and the deputy director was also considered a challenge. There have been no commonly agreed practices. Therefore, it was considered that the creation of practices would increase the flow of information, and delegating tasks would be one of the tools used to share the leader's workload.

Time management became a key topic. It was embodied in the implementation of the annual cycle, the time reserved in the calendar and the day-care unit for common meeting times. Managing a distributed organization was seen as very difficult in the discussions. The directors had considered different practices to enable staff to attend meetings: "It was found that both day-care centers had to reserve an hour. Meetings are organized in terms of both day-care centers. Every second week you meet the whole personnel. And then there are meetings for the whole staff..." For these focus-group discussions, different meanings could be seen in relation to the concept of pedagogical leadership structures, common lines, and fluency of information flow.

### **The Ethics and Reliability of the Research**

The research was carried out in accordance with the research ethics of the Research Ethics Advisory Board (2012-2014). Permission for the data collected in the project was requested from the participants and they were informed about the study. In the case of the larger municipality, a different /a separate researcher made the analysis of the data because the initial researcher was a participant in the focus-group discussion of the leaders. The identity of the people/individuals involved in the study has been removed from the data.

In the analysis of the data, a challenging task for the researchers was to ignore their own assumptions in order to identify the emerging meaning systems genuinely and equally in the various participants' groups. According to Taylor (2001), research participants in discourse analysis should be considered as producers of information instead of being research objects. The researcher must not use power, as all the voices should be allowed to rise equally among different discourses. In this study, the analysis was based on the texts and the meaning systems were reviewed from the verbal material. As a consequence, the interaction-related additional information was not processed. (See e.g. Jokinen, Juhila & Suoninen, 2016).

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

The changes that have already been made, and those that are still being realized in early childhood education, challenge both directors and staff. The Early Childhood Education Act (1973/36) defined ten goals, which must be implemented regardless of how a municipality has limited subjective day-care rights or how a family has decided to use the early childhood education services. This challenged the municipalities implementing the local early childhood education curriculums in August 2017. The changes - or we may say reforms - are a kind of turning point that can be responded to by implementing sustainable leadership.

Based on the results of this research, it can be seen that finding a common view between the leaders and "the field" is a challenge. As the debate concerning the development and the management structure showed, the different interpretations can be a challenge to leadership. However, shared leadership is a construction of sustainable leadership. As Hargreaves and Fink (2006) emphasize, shared leadership in sustainable leadership is the sharing of goals and values. A common vision and strategy are the tangible agreements necessary and they also build a sustainable leadership. In the discussion between the leaders and "the field", there were various different meanings given to the terms power, actor, and responsibility. In the focus-group discussion of "the field", the search for a common structure was perceived as a risk which might limit its own operational capacity; this was also identified in the discussion of the lead. However, the management team thought that the common management structure can also strengthen the regions' unique structures. According to Kocolowski (2010), sharing a common set of values and operating culture is crucial when organizations are building a meaningful reality. There were also differences in the discourse concerning the information flow. The reasons and responsibility for the lack of information flow was seen being outside of one's own group. According to the opinion of the leaders, there was sufficient or perhaps too much communication and information, but according to the opinion of "the field" there was not enough information, and the communication was poorly timed. "The field" also considered that the information was given about unfinished matters and often had to be corrected later.

Hargreaves and Fink (2006) emphasize creating the structures together with the staff. In this study, the goals of the structures and the development projects seemed to relate to different meanings. Kasvio and Rääkkönen (2010) define a sustainable working life consisting of four dimensions: the ecological, human, social, and economic dimensions. *The ecological dimension* can be seen in the aforementioned discourses as a wish for clarity as regards the structures and the common understanding of the vision. The main goal of the ecological dimension is the rational organization of the work so that its performance does not consume excessively the limited resources. Clear job descriptions and jointly agreed processes also increase ecological endurance. *The human dimension* appears very strongly in the discourses of the Sustainability Leadership Project. Human sustainability can be viewed by pondering the meaningfulness of work, the development of competence and the sense of satisfaction gained from work. Discussions about the atmosphere and discussions that emerged from team spirit reveal the meaningful content of the work. The importance of a common value and the implementation of an early childhood education curriculum created an opportunity for open reflection and development. *The social dimension* can be viewed, for example, with fair treatment in the workplace. A clear definition of work will help to achieve social sustainability. The equitable distribution of knowledge through the role of the special teacher is also a part of socially sustainable leadership. *The economic dimension* requires the need to ensure competitiveness and the level of productivity that employees have the opportunity to acquire. A clear vision and a strategy to achieve a common goal will also enable competitiveness in the future. Although families will increasingly have different possibilities to choose their early childhood education service, it can be seen that, based on customer satisfaction surveys, families are presently happy with early childhood education; however, it is important to continually assess and develop models, the content, and leadership of early childhood education. Currently, the participation rates in Finland are below the average in OECD countries. The aim is to raise the number of children participating in early childhood education to 95 % by 2020 in Finland (Pakanen 2016). In which case, we need resolute leadership and adequate organizational and leadership structures.

In the light of the above-mentioned discourses and the conclusions drawn from them, it can be assumed that the seven principles of sustainable leadership of Hargreaves (2007) are also found in the leadership of early childhood education. In this study, they emerged as factors of common values, vision and strategy, communication, the development of work, and the structure of pedagogical leadership. Hargreaves's principles of community involvement, constructive co-operation and social justice are realized through common values, vision, and strategy. In this study, from the point of view of communication, Hargreaves's shared leadership and trust are related, as well as partnership. The development of work includes sustainable learning, resource development, renewal, and innovation. Hargreaves's continuity, shared leadership and trust appear in this study as structures of pedagogical



leadership. Instead of various discourses, we need to create a common understanding of sustainable leadership in early childhood education. Finally, the question in the title of the article can be answered: leadership will last, and through sustainable leadership it can lead to a sustainable working life and sustainable early childhood education.

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