

## TEACHER LEADERSHIP IN THE CONTEXT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: CONCEPTS, CHARACTERISTICS AND ENACTMENT

Sanni Kahila<sup>1</sup>, Johanna Heikka<sup>2</sup>, Nina Sajaniemi<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Doctoral Candidate, School of Applied Educational Science and Teacher Education, University of Eastern Finland, 80100 Joensuu, Finland

<sup>2</sup>Senior Lecturer, School of Applied Educational Science and Teacher Education, University of Eastern Finland, 80100 Joensuu, Finland

<sup>3</sup>Professor, School of Applied Educational Science and Teacher Education, University of Eastern Finland, 80100 Joensuu, Finland

sanni.k.kahila@uef.fi<sup>1</sup>, johanna.heikka@uef.fi<sup>2</sup>, nina.sajaniemi@uef.fi<sup>3</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Recent studies have indicated that early childhood education (ECE) teachers' responsibilities have expanded to include leadership functions. In school contexts the phenomenon is called teacher leadership and the same concept has recently been adopted in ECE research literature. Additionally, there are other concepts and perspectives connected to leadership performed by ECE teachers. This literature review aimed to explore the conceptualization, characteristics, and enactment of leadership performed by ECE teachers. Leadership that ECE teachers perform in their work is characterized as a multidimensional and contextual phenomenon, and as intentional influencing, which is based on collaboration and distribution. The focus is on pedagogical leadership, although teacher leadership is a broader concept, which can also include administrative tasks. The findings of the review suggest investigating teacher leadership more within the distributed leadership perspective by focusing on ECE teachers' essential role in enhancing other actors' participation in leadership. The literature review reflects the need to clarify the conceptualization of ECE teacher leadership for developing teacher leadership research, especially in an ECE context.

**Keywords:** early childhood education, leadership, teacher leadership, distributed pedagogical leadership

### INTRODUCTION

Leadership in early childhood education (ECE) has become a globally popular research area (Fenech, 2013; Heikka, Halttunen, & Waniganayake, 2016; Sims, Waniganayake, & Hadley, 2018). Leadership is considered to play a key role in quality improvement (Sims, Forrest, Semann, & Slattery, 2015), and therefore to promote children's overall development and well-being (Douglass, 2018). In ECE, leadership often means supporting ECE organizations to achieve the goals and core tasks of ECE (Hujala, Waniganayake, & Rodd, 2013). Pedagogical leadership is considered as the core responsibility of ECE leadership (Fonsén, 2014; Heikka, 2014). In ECE, pedagogical leadership includes taking care of children's learning, but also promoting professional development and influencing educational values and beliefs in the community (Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011).

Several studies since the 2000s have indicated that pedagogical leadership in ECE is implemented as a common process, as distributed leadership (e.g. Heikka, 2014; Heikka &



Waniganayake, 2011; Kangas, Venninen, & Ojala, 2016). This means that leadership tasks are divided between several individuals, including stakeholders from different organizational levels (Hujala et al., 2013), and everyone works towards common goals (Heikka, 2014). Consequently, ECE teachers are also invited into leadership (Heikka et al., 2016). When discussing pedagogical leadership from a distributed leadership perspective, ECE teachers as pedagogical experts are seen as essential persons for ensuring that the pedagogy is connected with individual children's interests and needs (Bøe & Hognestad, 2017). In many countries around the world, for example in Australia, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Finland and Norway, the significance of teachers' professionalism for quality has been recognized, and the need for strengthening teacher's role in pedagogical quality development has been emphasized (see Bøe & Hognestad, 2017; Foong, Veloo, Dhamotharan, & Loh, 2018; Heikka, Halttunen, & Waniganayake, 2018; Li, 2015; Sims et al., 2018). Therefore, ECE teachers' responsibilities have expanded to include leadership functions (Heikka et al., 2016; Li, 2015).

In the few studies, researchers have approached ECE teachers' leadership work through the concept of teacher leadership (e.g Cheung, Keung, Kwan, & Cheung, 2018; Halttunen, Waniganayake, & Heikka, 2019; Heikka et al., 2016, 2018; Ho & Tikly, 2012; Wang & Ho, 2018). The teacher leadership concept has emerged in school contexts and has its roots in the USA, where since the late 1980s, as part of school reform, the significance of teachers' professionalism for school improvement was emphasized and teachers' responsibilities were expanded (Little, 2003). Silva, Gimbert and Nolan (2000) discussed three waves of teacher leadership, describing how teacher leadership, its meaning and its responsibilities have developed in school contexts. In the first wave, teachers were recognized as members who can contribute to school effectiveness, and their role was extended to administrative and managerial tasks including formal roles, such as head/master teacher. In the second wave, teachers' instructional expertise was highlighted. Therefore, teacher leadership became more complex, including curriculum leading, professional development of the staff, mentoring and decision-making. In the third wave, teachers came to be considered as central persons in the 're-culturing' of schools, which means that teachers are responsible for improving organizational culture and structures towards a supportive environment for collaboration and learning in the community (Silva et al., 2000).

In school-based literature, the concept of teacher leadership is defined in various ways (Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004), and it is firmly connected with the term 'teacher leader', referring to teachers who perform leadership (Murphy, 2005). Harris (2003) defines teacher leadership as the leadership tasks and responsibilities that teachers perform in their work. Teacher leadership is considered as contributing to school improvement by enriching the teaching practice, thus impacting student learning and also professional development in the community (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). Teacher leaders influence others to change and enhance their participation in educational improvement (Murphy, 2005). Teacher leadership also extends beyond the classroom (Danielson, 2006), comprising both formal and informal roles (Muijs & Harris, 2006). Teacher leaders, for example, function in professional learning communities, where they work and lead both as members and contributors (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2015; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). Harris (2003) suggested that teacher leadership is one form of distributed leadership, in which teachers are also involved. York-Barr and Duke (2004) summarized that in teacher leadership, the idea is emphasized that teachers work in a central and important position within the schools and they take on different, continually expanding leadership functions.





In this review, the meaning of teacher leadership is explored in the ECE context, in which the phenomenon of teacher leadership is also became topical (Heikka et al., 2016; Li, 2015). In addition to the teacher leadership concept, there is a diverse range of other concepts used when discussing leadership performed by ECE teachers. This notion of different perspectives and concepts served as a promoter for this literature review, in which the aim to explore the meaning of ECE teacher leadership will be achieved by addressing the following questions: How is the teacher leadership concept used and explored in the literature? Through which perspectives other than teacher leadership, has the leadership that ECE teachers perform in their work been examined? What characterizes teacher leadership in ECE contexts? What kinds of leadership enactment does the ECE teachers' work include?

## METHODS

The purpose of this literature review was to provide an overview of teacher leadership in the ECE context (Onwuegbuzie & Frels, 2016). The literature reviewed was selected via a two-step literature search, both conducted in FINNA and Google Scholar, first in June 2018 and then updated in December 2019. The criteria for inclusion was that an article was published in a peer-reviewed journal in the 2000s, was written in English, included information on leadership performed by ECE teachers, and was focused on the ECE context. Both conceptual and empirical articles were included. At the first step, the purpose was to find articles that addressed the teacher leadership concept. The search terms were identified based on concepts that are generally used for ECE in the literature. The search was conducted using the search terms 'teacher leadership + early childhood education', 'teacher leadership + kindergarten', 'teacher leadership + preschool'. A total of 17 articles, four theoretical and 13 empirical research articles, included the term teacher leadership and focused on the ECE context. The purpose of the second search was to find articles, in which ECE teachers' involvement in leadership has been approached through other leadership perspectives. The search was conducted with the terms 'early childhood education teacher + leadership', 'kindergarten teacher + leadership' and 'preschool teacher + leadership'. Via this search, 17 articles, four theoretical and 13 empirical, were included in the review. Therefore, a total of 34 articles were selected for this literature review.

The articles were analysed through a qualitative content analysis by each of the four research questions (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). One researcher analysed the data and other experts were consulted regularly at different stages of the analysis to ensure the quality. The analysis of the first research question began by reading all the articles and finding articles that included the teacher leadership concept. These 13 articles were analysed from the perspective of how the concept of teacher leadership is used. As a result, two groups of articles were formed: articles focused on teacher leadership and articles in which the teacher leadership concept was mentioned.

The second question was to explore whether there are other concepts or perspectives for leadership performed by ECE teachers. The analysis then focused on those 17 articles in which the teacher leadership concept was not used, but also on those articles found via the first research question, in which the concept was only mentioned. These perspectives were coded and categorized according to how they depicted leadership. As a result, four main categories were formed. Firstly, leadership performed by ECE teachers, with or without a formally appointed leadership role, was discussed with the general concept of leadership.





Secondly, discussion focused on perspectives used to depict leadership as a common process involving ECE teachers. The third category included perspectives depicting ECE teachers' specific positions as leaders. The fourth category considered leadership perspectives, which inform the aims of leadership.

The analysis of the third research question used all 34 articles. The focus was on characteristics of leadership performed by ECE teachers. At first, texts about characterizing leadership were coded for each article separately. The codes were categorized based on similarities and differences in two steps. First, the codes in the articles including the teacher leadership concept and in other articles were categorized separately. In a second step, categories were combined by analysing and comparing how categories of articles without the teacher leadership concept support categories of teacher leadership articles. As a result, we identified four main themes that described the characteristics of leadership performed by ECE teachers as emphasized in the literature: leadership as influencing others towards desired goals, leadership based on collaboration and distributed leadership, leadership as a multidimensional phenomenon, and leadership as a contextual phenomenon.

For the fourth research question, the content analysis was conducted from the perspective of the leadership enactment of ECE teachers by using the same procedure as the third question. Again, all 34 articles were used in this analysis. Texts about tasks and responsibilities of ECE teachers were coded, and the codes categorized according to similarities and differences. The categories of the articles with and without the teacher leadership concept were compared, analysed and further categorized. As a result, four categories of the main leadership enactment of ECE teachers were formed: leading curriculum and pedagogy, leading change and development, leading team and working culture, and enhancing other's engagement in leadership.

## **OVERVIEW OF THE ECE RESEARCH LITERATURE WITH THE CONCEPT OF TEACHER LEADERSHIP**

The first research question focused on how the concept of teacher leadership is used and explored in the early childhood research literature. The articles can be divided into two groups according to the central role of teacher leadership in the research: articles focusing on teacher leadership (Cheung et al., 2018; Crawford, Roberts, & Hickmann, 2010; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2005; Halttunen et al., 2019; Heikka et al., 2016, 2018; Heikka, Pitkaniemi, Kettukangas, & Hyttinen, 2019; Ho & Tikly, 2012; Li, 2015; Wang & Ho, 2018) and articles mentioning teacher leadership (Caudle, Moran, & Hobbs, 2014; Colmer, Waniganayake, & Field, 2014; Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019; Grarock & Morrissey, 2013; Heikka & Suhonen, 2019).

The earliest empirical research article on teacher leadership was authored by Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2005), who investigated how early childhood educators define themselves as teacher leaders and perceive their leadership roles. In their article, teacher leaders were considered as working actively for change and advocating children's growth and development. Later empirical studies were only published in the late 2010s. Crawford, Roberts and Hickman (2010) from the USA examined the nature of teacher leadership and how early childhood teachers developed as teacher leaders while participating in the Master Teacher Program planned in collaboration with university and school.





Teacher leadership has also been investigated in the context of early childhood education in Finland. By observing the work of ECE teachers and childcare nurses, Heikka et al. (2016) identified teacher leadership enactment in ECE. Secondly, they interviewed ECE teachers, childcare nurses and ECE centre directors with the purpose of exploring their perceptions on teacher leadership and the support teacher leadership needs (Heikka et al., 2018). Halttunen et al. (2019) identified through discursive analysis teacher leadership repertoires during weekly team meetings. In the study of Heikka et al. (2019), the ECE teachers' commitment to pedagogical leadership on staff teams was investigated.

Research on teacher leadership, both empirical and theoretical, has also been conducted in Hong Kong. Li (2015) explored by questionnaire how teacher leadership is practiced in ECE settings in Hong Kong and how cultural and institutional context shapes teacher leadership practice. Teacher leadership was perceived as purpose-driven work, which includes decision-making and moving things forward (Li, 2015). In their quantitative study, Cheung et al. (2018) identified leadership practices in Hong Kong pre-primary schools, and their study revealed that teacher leadership has an effective impact on children's development and learning. Ho and Tikly (2012) and Wang and Ho (2018) also discussed teacher leadership from a cultural perspective and examined what teacher leadership theories conducted primarily in Western countries could mean in a Chinese context. These two articles include theoretical discussion on teacher leadership in Chinese ECE settings.

In the second group of articles, the concept of teacher leadership was only mentioned. One part of these articles mentioned the concept in the theoretical background, but generally the concept was replaced with other concepts (Caudle et al., 2014; Colmer et al., 2014; Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019). There were also articles, in which the concept of teacher leadership was presented as part of a discussion about the idea that teacher leadership in ECE is needed (Grarock & Morrissey, 2013; Heikka & Suhonen, 2019; Ho, 2010, 2011). For example, Grarock and Morrissey (2013) focused on educational leadership and the abilities needed to act as an educational leader, and they highlighted the fact that there is a need for effective support for teacher leadership in the ECE field. Ho (2010), in turn, dealt with possibilities and challenges relating to teacher participation in pedagogical decision-making. Instead of using the term teacher leadership, she discussed curriculum leadership. However, Ho (2010) suggested that developing the culture of teacher leadership is important for improving educational quality. In their study, Heikka and Suhonen (2019) identified functions of distributed pedagogical leadership in ECE and the interdependence between the leadership enacted by centre directors and teachers. They concluded that, in the ECE centre, teacher leadership works as a mediator of pedagogical leadership.

## **OTHER PERSPECTIVES THROUGH WHICH LEADERSHIP PERFORMED BY ECE TEACHERS HAS BEEN APPROACHED**

The second research question was designed to examine the other leadership perspectives, besides teacher leadership, through which the leadership performed by ECE teachers has been examined, and then to explore whether there are other concepts for the phenomenon of teacher leadership. These perspectives were divided into four categories according to how they depicted leadership. Firstly, there were articles in which the general concept of leadership was used for the leadership ECE teachers perform. For example, Davis (2014) explored the development of early childhood teachers' leadership. Niron, Suyata and



Suardiman (2017) used the term teacher's leadership when they investigated the influence of kindergarten teachers' leadership on children's learning. Several researchers discussed leadership performed by ECE teachers with some formally appointed leadership positions, such as graduate leader (Davis, 2014), teacher leader (Caudle et al., 2014), educational leader (Garrock & Morrissey, 2013) and room leader (Colmer et al., 2014).

The concepts and perspectives of the second category illustrate the leadership in ECE as a common process, involving also ECE teachers. In several studies, leadership performed by ECE teachers is investigated within the framework of *distributed leadership* (Colmer et al., 2014; Heikka, 2014; Heikka & Hujala, 2013). In the ECE field, distributed leadership means that stakeholders from different levels are involved in leadership, considering also ECE teachers who share their pedagogical expertise for common leadership work (Heikka, 2014). Distributed leadership is also discussed in articles that include the concept of teacher leadership (Heikka et al., 2016, 2018, 2019; Ho & Tikly, 2012). For example, Heikka et al. (2018) discussed the close connection between teacher leadership and distributed leadership, and they proposed that these concepts are closely intertwined. Douglass (2018) studied early educators' leadership through the lens of *relational leadership*. As in distributed leadership, in relational leadership, the expertise of each individual is recognized (Gittell & Douglass, 2012). Douglass (2018) wrote that in relational leadership, the view of leadership is highly relational and exercised at multiple levels, often by both formal and informal leaders, which highlights the need for teachers' engagement in leadership.

The third category includes perspectives, which depict the ECE teachers' specific position as leaders of their colleagues. The Norwegian researchers Hognestad and Bøe (2014) explored the leadership of formal teacher leaders under the concept of *hybrid leadership*, which is based on the work of Gron (2011), who recognized that both solo and distributed leadership can be exercised at the same time. According to Hognestad and Bøe (2014), the leadership work both as leader and as colleague reflects the complexity and hybridization of the leadership in ECE. Similarly, the Swedish authors Rönnerman, Edwards-Groves and Grootenboer (2015) wrote about *middle leadership*. They considered teachers who improve their colleagues' professional skills by teaching and leading them from within the staff.

The concepts and perspectives of the fourth group illustrate the instructional and developmental aims of leadership, in which ECE teachers are also involved. As mentioned previously, Ho (2010) discussed *curriculum leadership* in which teachers participate in pedagogical decision-making and curriculum change. Researchers, especially from Australia, have explored leadership in ECE under the concept of *educational leadership*, and how it also involves ECE teachers in leadership (Colmer et al., 2014; Garrock & Morrissey, 2013; Sims et al., 2018; Waniganayake, 2014). Several researchers have emphasized the connection between teacher leadership and *pedagogical leadership*, which is considered as the ECE teacher's core responsibility (Bøe & Hognestad, 2017; Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019; Heikka, 2014; Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011). As pedagogically qualified professionals, ECE teachers have an essential role in ensuring that the pedagogy is based on children's needs and interests (Heikka, 2014). Pedagogical leadership has also been considered from a distributed perspective (Bøe & Hognestad, 2017; Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019; Heikka & Suhonen, 2019), in which pedagogical leadership is seen as a common and collaborative task (Bøe & Hognestad, 2017), which is based on the interdependence between all stakeholders' enactments for pedagogical purposes (Heikka, 2014).



As presented in this section, there are articles dealing with leadership performed by ECE teachers without the concept of teacher leadership. In these articles, leadership performed by ECE teachers is discussed from the perspective of broader leadership theories, but other concepts for teacher leadership were not found. Common to these perspectives discussed above is that the ECE teacher can be involved in leadership. As teacher leadership in the ECE research literature is considered as the leadership that ECE teachers perform in their work (Heikka et al., 2016, 2018; Li, 2015; Wang & Ho, 2018), the articles that did not include the concept of teacher leadership are also used in this literature review as a source of information on characteristics of teacher leadership and ECE teachers' leadership enactment.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF TEACHER LEADERSHIP IN ECE

The third research question focused on exploring how leadership performed by ECE teachers is characterized in the literature. Four themes are emphasized when characterizing ECE teachers' leadership both in the articles focusing on teacher leadership and in the articles that approach the leadership work of ECE teachers through some other perspective.

Firstly, common in the literature is the view of teacher leadership *as intentional work toward pedagogical goals* (Cheung et al., 2018; Crawford et al., 2010; Halttunen et al., 2019; Heikka et al., 2016, 2018; Ho & Tikly, 2012; Li, 2015; Wang & Ho, 2018). This means that ECE teachers work purposefully to contribute and influence others towards desired goals (Caudle et al., 2014; Crawford et al., 2010; Li, 2015). Ensuring and improving pedagogical quality, especially, are considered as purposes of teacher leadership (Heikka et al., 2016, 2018; Li, 2015). ECE teachers' participation in leadership is justified precisely by the fact that teachers have pedagogical expertise and essential knowledge and skills for ensuring pedagogical quality (Bøe & Hognestad, 2017; Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019; Heikka & Suhonen, 2019; Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011). In addition, because ECE teachers work with the children, they are aware of the interests, knowledge, skills, and needs of the children, which provide important information for pedagogical decision-making and for improving pedagogical quality (Crawford et al., 2010; Heikka, 2014; Ho, 2010).

The second theme emphasized depicts the view that teacher leadership is *based on collaboration and distribution* (Halttunen et al., 2019; Heikka et al., 2016, 2018; Heikka & Suhonen, 2019; Ho & Tikly, 2012; Li, 2015). The essence of collaboration is described with different concepts, such as cooperation, sharing, participation, interaction, and collegiality. The collaboration includes cooperation with several actors working to further children's learning and development (Heikka et al., 2018). They work together by sharing information and thoughts, distributing responsibilities, collaborating for solving problems and developing their practices (Grarock & Morrissey, 2013; Heikka et al., 2016). The term professional learning community (PLC), which means community members' mutual learning through interaction, also supports the meaning of collaboration between community members (Ho & Lee, 2016; Li, 2015; Rönnerman et al., 2015). The importance of collaboration also arises from the perspective of challenges related to the isolation between teachers, which interferes with the collaboration and common learning between teachers and therefore challenges the implementation of teacher leadership (Crawford et al., 2010; Li, 2015).

Collaboration as an essential element of teacher leadership is also reflected in the stance that teacher leadership is based on the idea that leadership is distributed and performed



as a common process (Heikka et al., 2019; Heikka & Suhonen, 2019; Ho & Tikly, 2012). Leadership in ECE is distributed between multiple people, who bring their own expertise into leadership (Colmer et al., 2014; Douglass, 2018; Heikka et al., 2016, 2018). Leadership is not reserved just for those with a formal position (Douglass, 2018). Involving members with informal status in this way is considered a challenge to the traditional form of leadership (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2005; Douglass, 2018; Ho & Tikly, 2012), and moves from hierarchical leadership to peer controlled, decentralized leadership (Ho, 2010; Ho & Tikly, 2012; Hognestad & Boe, 2014).

According to the literature, teacher leadership in ECE can be *seen as a multidimensional phenomenon*, with its multiple combinations of leadership responsibilities, tasks, dimensions and styles for ECE teachers to take on. Heikka et al. (2016, 2018), for example, identified, how teacher leadership extends to many organizational levels. ECE teachers perform leadership both at the team and the centre levels. Additionally, ECE teachers' leadership extends to the municipal and national levels, while the professionals in ECE centres assess, plan, align pedagogy and set goals by taking into account both municipal and national goals (Bøe & Hognestad, 2017; Heikka et al., 2018). Furthermore, ECE teachers work in a multi-professional community (Bøe & Hognestad, 2017; Campbell-Evans, Stamopoulos, & Maloney, 2014; Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019), including stakeholders with different qualifications and backgrounds, such as parents, childcare nurses, directors, and special teachers.

ECE teachers' diverse leadership roles also reflect the multidimensionality in ECE. Firstly, ECE teachers' leadership includes both formal and informal roles (Bøe & Hognestad, 2017; Colmer et al., 2014; Grarock & Morrissey, 2013; Heikka et al., 2018; Wang & Ho, 2018), which seems to differ between countries. For example, in Norway (Bøe & Hognestad, 2017), Sweden (Rönnerman et al., 2015) and Australia (Grarock & Morrissey, 2013), there are ECE teachers with formally appointed leadership roles, but in Finland, for example, the leadership role of ECE teachers is legitimated in policy documents, but teachers still work as informal leaders without a formally appointed position (Vlasov et al., 2018). In addition, leadership performed by ECE teachers combines both solo and distributed leadership styles, including both individual and shared functions (Hognestad & Boe, 2014). Studies have also identified, how ECE teacher concurrently works as a community member and colleague, but also as the leader of the community (Halttunen et al., 2019; Rönnerman et al., 2015). ECE teachers balance between hierarchical and heterarchical, solo and shared roles (Bøe & Hognestad, 2017; Halttunen et al., 2019).

*The contextuality of teacher leadership* is the fourth theme highlighted in the literature (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2005; Heikka et al., 2016, 2018, 2019; Ho & Tikly, 2012; Li, 2015; Wang & Ho, 2018). The contextuality was reflected by cultural, political, environmental, personal and more situational conditions, which are seen to impact leadership in ECE. Researchers, from Asia especially, highlight cultural diversity, arguing that teacher leadership studies of Western culture and their results are not relevant in Asian culture (Ho & Tikly, 2012; Li, 2015). Connection to broader cultural issues, local regulations, and curricula of centres also impact leadership (Bøe & Hognestad, 2017; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2005; Heikka & Hujala, 2013; Li, 2015). At the local level, ECE centres are also diverse. They can be, for example, municipal or private, small or large centres. It can also impact leadership, whether the teacher works in a preschool or in a group for younger children, and whether the teacher works as an only adult or together with other staff in the group (Heikka et al., 2018).







Therefore, teacher leadership is also highly variable and context-specific.

The view of teacher leadership as a cultural and contextual phenomenon is also supported by the literature through discussions about concerns relating to teacher leadership. Researchers, especially from Asia (Ho, 2010; Ho & Tikly, 2012; Li, 2015), have highlighted that ECE teachers should have better opportunities to engage in meaningful discussion concerning broad issues and to make themselves heard on the ECE centre level. On the other hand, there are also studies showing that it is common for ECE teachers to be reluctant to take on leadership (e.g. Crawford et al., 2010; Garrock & Morrissey, 2013; Ho, 2010; Li, 2015; Waniganayake, 2014). It has been suggested that the reasons for reluctance and lack of motivation stem from unsatisfying working conditions, overloading responsibility and inadequate compensation (Li, 2015; Waniganayake, 2014). In addition, lack of opportunities for professional development (Crawford et al., 2010; Douglass, 2018; Heikka et al., 2018) and unconfident leadership skills (Heikka et al., 2019; Waniganayake, 2014) might diminish leadership aspirations. It is also debated in the literature, whether formalization of the teacher's leadership role boosts teacher leadership, or interferes with the work atmosphere in teams (Bøe & Hognestad, 2017). Some researchers (e.g. Davis, 2014; Garrock & Morrissey, 2013) have reported on the increased confidence of teachers with a formal title to take on leadership roles.

Teacher leadership consists of diverse ways to lead (Halttunen et al., 2019; Heikka & Suhonen, 2019). The kind of leading required depends on the circumstance and situation (Hognestad & Boe, 2014; Li, 2015). Bøe and Hognestad (2017) highlighted that situations can also be unexpected. Working in ECE includes hectic and fast-changing, unforeseen events, which means that ECE teachers must manage the suddenness of emerging situations arising during the day. By using their practical knowledge, teachers assess spontaneous situations and make decisions about how to guide situations in a purposeful way (Bøe & Hognestad, 2017). These more situational conditions and previously mentioned environmental, personal and broader cultural conditions reflect the contextuality of teacher leadership in ECE.

## ECE TEACHERS' LEADERSHIP ENACTMENT

In the literature, teacher leadership is connected to activities, not to a job title (Li, 2015; Wang & Ho, 2018). The fourth research question focused on leadership enactment of ECE teachers, and four main activities were identified in this review. Firstly, leadership enacted by ECE teachers was firmly connected to *leading curriculum and pedagogy* (Crawford et al., 2010; Halttunen et al., 2019; Ho, 2010; Ho & Lee, 2016; Li, 2015; Rönnerman et al., 2015), which includes assessment, planning and ensuring the connection between practice and pedagogical goals (Heikka et al., 2018). As pedagogically qualified professionals, ECE teachers work as pedagogical experts who bring their expertise to pedagogical decision-making both at the centre and team levels (Crawford et al., 2010; Heikka & Suhonen, 2019). Also, ECE teachers assist children's families to support children's learning and development (Campbell-Evans et al., 2014).

ECE teachers ensure that decisions are based on pedagogical knowledge, guidelines set in law and in the national curriculum framework (Heikka et al., 2018), and are in the interests and needs of the children (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2005; Ho, 2010). They direct





colleagues towards a desired pedagogy and ensure the connection between practice and the agreed goals (Bøe & Hognestad, 2017; Caudle et al., 2014; Li, 2015). ECE teachers help team members to realize the connection between the broad goals of the whole centre and pedagogical practices with individual groups and children (Halttunen et al., 2019; Heikka et al., 2016). ECE teachers' decision-making appears to be stronger on the team level than on the centre level (Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019; Heikka & Suhonen, 2019; Li, 2015), and it is argued that teachers should have better and more democratic opportunities to engage in meaningful discussion and to make themselves heard on the ECE centre level (Ho, 2010; Ho & Tikly, 2012).

The second main leadership task of ECE teachers includes *leading change and development* (Crawford et al., 2010; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2005; Ho & Lee, 2016; Ho & Tikly, 2012; Li, 2015; Wang & Ho, 2018). ECE teachers, as leading change and development, move things forward and improve quality, pedagogy and organization (Caudle et al., 2014; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2005; Davis, 2014; Grarock & Morrissey, 2013; Li, 2015). They promote children's learning and development (Cheung et al., 2018; Niron, Suyata, & Suardiman, 2017), but also professional development (Caudle et al., 2014; Colmer et al., 2014; Heikka et al., 2016, 2018; Wang & Ho, 2018). This means that teachers enrich, promote and increase team members' and students' knowledge and understanding about educational and pedagogical issues (Colmer et al., 2014; Heikka & Suhonen, 2019; Ryan & Hornbeck, 2004).

Hognestad and Bøe (2014) investigated how formal teacher leaders promote their staff members' knowledge development, and they found that teachers provide professional guidance, act as role models, put word into practice and support desired teaching practices. The study by Heikka et al. (2018) revealed that ECE teachers provide professional guidance for team members, share knowledge and experiences about children's learning and development and bring contemporary topics into discussion. In their study, childcare nurses perceived it as important that, even without pedagogical education, they can obtain important knowledge about ECE from ECE teachers (Heikka et al., 2018). On the centre level, ECE teachers promote professional development by participating in professional learning communities (Colmer et al., 2014; Ho & Lee, 2016; Rönnerman et al., 2015). Through promoting other peoples' professionalism, ECE teachers improve pedagogical work and therefore children's learning and development (Hognestad & Boe, 2014; Li, 2015). Consciously, ECE teachers also aim to develop themselves as teachers and leaders (Caudle et al., 2014; Crawford et al., 2010; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2005; Rönnerman et al., 2015).

*Leading team and working culture* was identified as the third main leadership task. This includes organizing working, practices, structures, and environment. Studies by Heikka et al. (2016, 2018) revealed that ECE teachers may have some administrative tasks, for example organizing staff resources and work shifts, especially when directors have several centres to lead. However, leading team and working culture was primarily reflected as aiming to promote pedagogical goal achievement, while ECE teachers assess the ECE centre as a learning environment, question shared values and understanding about pedagogy (Grarock & Morrissey, 2013; Heikka & Suhonen, 2019), and lead others towards desired practices (Bøe & Hognestad, 2017; Caudle et al., 2014; Ho & Tikly, 2012; Li, 2015). ECE teachers promote successful communication and collaboration between stakeholders and parents (Bøe & Hognestad, 2017; Campbell-Evans et al., 2014; Rönnerman et al., 2015). They coordinate the collection and distribution of information between the centre and families (Heikka et al.,





2016). They inform team members, distribute and clarify responsibilities and tasks between them, and assign children and team members to daily activities (Halttunen et al., 2019; Heikka et al., 2016; 2018; Li, 2015). This requires recognizing each staff member's personal ways of working and interaction (Bøe & Hognestad, 2017).

In addition to ECE teachers' key role to bring planned guidelines and agreed goals from centre level to team level and to ensure that applied practices are in line with the goals, ECE teachers also *engage others in leadership*, which is the fourth main leadership task identified in the review. ECE teachers' responsibility is to advocate the growth and development of children (Cheung et al., 2018; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2005; Heikka et al., 2018) and to lead with the purpose to promote best practices in their teams and centres (Crawford et al., 2010). Even though ECE teachers have a certain amount of leadership in their teams, the emphasis is on making decisions collaboratively by listening to and recognizing team members', parents' and children's ideas, interests and needs (Halttunen et al., 2019; Heikka et al., 2018; Ho, 2010). Because ECE teachers work near children and their parents, and they have knowledge about the practices in their teams, they have much important information for leadership on the centre level (Crawford et al., 2010; Heikka, 2014). ECE teachers are key persons to bring this information from the team level to the centre level (Crawford et al., 2010; Heikka et al., 2018) and, in this way, to ensure that children, parents and team members are heard in decision-making (Heikka et al., 2018; Ho, 2010). In ECE, teachers collaborate with diverse professionals from outside the centre, for example, health and welfare professionals who work for the children and their families (Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011). ECE teachers' responsibility is also to make their observations and knowledge available for pedagogical leadership and in this way to enhance their engagement in pedagogical leadership in ECE.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this review, literature concerning leadership performed by ECE teachers was analysed with the purpose of exploring the conceptualization, characteristics, and enactment of teacher leadership in ECE. Although research on teacher leadership in ECE has become topical in recent years, and interest in exploring it has increased (Heikka et al., 2018), this review indicates that the concept of teacher leadership is rarely used in ECE research literature. According to our results, there is literature concerning ECE teachers' participation in leadership without the teacher leadership concept, but in this review, no other concepts for the phenomenon of teacher leadership were found.

According to this review, teacher leadership is discussed as intentional work for common desired goals. Teacher leadership seems to be a multidimensional and contextual phenomenon, which is based on collaboration and distributed leadership. ECE teachers' leadership enactment, in turn, includes leading pedagogy, change and development, and team and working culture, and engages others in leadership. These enactments focus primarily on pedagogy and curriculum, but ECE teachers also have some administrative tasks to lead.

In school-based literature, similar observations have been made about teacher leadership as a highly complex phenomenon, with many diverse dimensions, roles, tasks and forms to accomplish leadership (Harris, 2003; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). The main functions in both contexts appear to be the same: teachers participate in improving





organizations and decision-making; organize practice and resources so that goals can be achieved; involve the community in pedagogical leadership; and promote the professional development of other actors (see Fairman & Mackenzie, 2015; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

In both contexts, teachers are seen as persons who are involved in leadership and teacher leadership is seen as based on distributed leadership, practiced as a common task (Harris, 2003; Heikka et al., 2018). In ECE, this means collaboration and interdependence between members who are involved in leadership, commonly between ECE leaders, directors and teachers. Collegiality and collaboration are also supported by the view that ECE teachers also take into account and participate with others in leadership, including children and multi-professional team members. On the other hand, as Bøe and Hognestad (2017) discussed, in some situations, leadership requires more individual leadership work, stepping forward and balancing between solo and shared leadership. However, as Heikka's (2014) study indicates, the interdependence between members involved in leadership is key to ensuring that ECE teachers are not soloing but working in line with common goals.

According to this review, there is a firm connection between teacher leadership and pedagogical leadership. Firstly, the phenomenon of teacher leadership has emerged in the ECE context through pedagogical leadership and especially the distributed pedagogical leadership frameworks: as leadership in ECE has come to be seen as distributed, the role of ECE teachers, and specifically their pedagogical expertise, has been emphasized and seen to be necessary and beneficial for pedagogical leadership (Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019). Pedagogically qualified ECE teachers have the expertise to make decisions from the pedagogical perspective, and therefore it is considered important to support and increase teachers' involvement in pedagogical leadership. The pedagogical expertise is also valued in the school context, and therefore it is considered necessary to involve teachers in organizational improvement (Harris, 2003).

Pedagogical leadership in ECE has been investigated mainly from the perspective of ECE directors' work. As this review indicates, teacher leadership comprises mainly functions that are traditionally considered as pedagogical leadership. According to Heikka and Waniganayake (2011), pedagogical leadership considers leading both children's learning and professional learning in the community. This includes ensuring that there is a connection between pedagogical goals, practice and children's interests and needs and creating an environment and community that promotes learning and development. These activities also appeared in this review as key leadership tasks of ECE teachers, through diverse ways to perform leadership, when ECE teachers intentionally influence others towards pedagogical goals. Therefore, pedagogical leadership is reflected as the core of teacher leadership in ECE, as well as in ECE in general (Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011). From the perspective of distributed pedagogical leadership, teacher leadership includes the teacher's part of pedagogical leadership (see Heikka, 2014), but also some administrative tasks, for example resource management. Consequently, more research is needed on how ECE teachers enact pedagogical leadership.

The results of this review show that ECE teachers' role in pedagogical leadership varies depending on the organizational level and with whom the ECE teacher is collaborating. On the centre level, ECE teachers are involved in pedagogical decision-making and development work. On the team level, ECE teachers have more of a leading role, when they lead curriculum and pedagogy and promote both children's learning and staff members'





professional development. In addition, the ECE teacher plays a significant role in enhancing the participation of the parents, children, team members and other collaborators in pedagogical leadership, by bringing their needs, attitudes and observations to pedagogical decision-making. The research on teacher leadership in ECE has been mainly focused on how ECE teachers perform leadership on the team and centre levels (Bøe and Hognestad, 2017; Heikka et al., 2016; Li, 2015). There has been less exploration focused on how ECE teachers involve children, parents, and team members in pedagogical leadership, although according to this review, this responsibility precisely highlights ECE teachers' unique and necessary role in ensuring that the needs and interests of all the community members on the team level serve as the basis for pedagogical leadership. Consequently, more research is needed on how ECE teachers enhance others' participation in pedagogical leadership and what the best practices are for implementing this area of teacher leadership.

The literature reviewed emphasizes the importance of teacher leadership for ECE, its improvement and the implementation of pedagogical leadership. However, as the results of this review show, it is important to recognize that cultural, political and structural factors have a significant impact on the implementation of teacher leadership. Therefore, more research is needed on ECE teacher leadership in different ECE contexts, such as different centres, cultures, and countries. More research is also needed on the circumstances of ECE that affect teacher leadership, its implementation, and its development. This kind of research increases understanding of how teachers in different settings can be supported in teacher leadership, and how to strengthen the benefits of teacher leadership in quality development.

Around the world, strengthening ECE teachers' professional skills is seen as important for quality development (see Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019; Foong et al., 2018; Waniganayake, 2014). For this work, this literature review provides beneficial information, highlighting how a central part of the ECE teachers' work today teacher leadership is. This information can also be benefitted when training both future and existing ECE teachers. It is important that ECE teachers receive training in leadership so that they can better respond to increased leadership duties (Fonsén & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019; Heikka et al., 2019; Ho & Lee, 2016).

This literature review provided a theoretical perspective on teacher leadership in ECE, and in particular, its meaning in the context of ECE. What made this aim challenging was that in the literature, ECE teachers' involvement in leadership is discussed within different concepts and perspectives, even without using the concept of teacher leadership at all. Consequently, this literature review, in addition to its overview of characteristics and enactment of ECE teacher leadership, reflects the need for clarifying the conceptualization of ECE teacher leadership for developing teacher leadership research, especially in the ECE context.

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