

**Publisher**

Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC)

**Title of publication**

"Together, we aim to provide the best possible early childhood education and care and quality to the day of every child" The diverse management structures and leadership in early childhood education and care

**Authors**

Anna Siippainen, Tuomas Sarkkinen, Janniina Vlasov, Jukka Marjanen, Elina Fonsén, Suvi Heikkinen, Hanna Hjelt, Jarkko Lahtinen, Noora Lohi & Mikko Mäkelä

This evaluation examines the management structures and leadership in Finnish early childhood education and care (ECEC). The evaluation will be carried out in two phases between 2020 and 2023. This report covers the first phase of the evaluation. It focuses on the organisation structures of ECEC, the job description of heads of early education centres and the factors that promote and prevent the work.

The data for the evaluation was collected in two different surveys. The first survey was targeted at the office holders responsible for ECEC and the second at heads of early education centres and family daycare supervisors. Both surveys were carried out at the beginning of 2021 and were addressed to all municipalities and private service providers in mainland Finland. The response rate in the survey sent to the office holders in ECEC was 97 per cent and in the survey sent to heads of early education centres and family daycare supervisors approximately 54 per cent. The evaluation data was used to seek answers to the following questions: 1) What kind of management and decision-making systems are there in ECEC in Finland? 2) Who works as heads of early education centres and what are their job descriptions like? 3) What kind of leadership competence and development needs can be identified on the basis of this evaluation?

The office holders responsible for ECEC found the leadership and decision-making structures functional from the point of view of ECEC and the answers were similar in municipalities of different sizes. Well-functioning cooperation, agile decision-making in the municipality and clear job-descriptions in the organisation, among other things, were mentioned as strengths of one's own organisation. The same aspects, in other words, a lack of sense of community and cooperation, the vulnerability of small organisations, and unclear job descriptions and decision-making structures were also mentioned as areas requiring development.

In the survey targeted at heads of municipal and private early education centres and family daycare supervisors, the different areas of leadership had been divided into subareas, which were leadership in pedagogy, human resources, finances, services and digitalisation, cooperation with stakeholders, and communications. The respondents mainly evaluated the statements related to their own job descriptions positively and the majority was satisfied with their job description. On the other hand, approximately one quarter of the heads of early education centres found their job description too burdensome and the number of subordinate staff too large. Heads of early education centres and family daycare supervisors used the largest proportion of their working time on leading the personnel and pedagogy. In the answers to open-ended questions, they mentioned matters such as the meaningfulness of their work and leading the pedagogy and personnel as factors inspiring their work. Heads of early education centres mentioned busyness and the fragmented and unpredictable nature of the work as factors complicating their work. Although their job descriptions varied, most of them would have wanted more support in their work, regardless of the job description.

In the survey directed to heads of early education centres and family daycare supervisors, the respondents' evaluations of their own work were affected by the number of their subordinate staff, their own work experience, and whether the respondent was employed by a municipal or private employer. However, the management model or the language in which statutory ECEC was provided in the centres led by the respondent did not produce differences between the respondents. The evaluations of heads of small entities were often more positive than those of heads of medium-sized and large entities. The heads of large entities in turn reported more challenges related to leadership, but found the structures related to deputy leadership to be more functioning. Heads with little work experience estimated their own competence to be lower and hoped to get more support in their leadership than others. Heads of early education centres with less work experience reported their own leadership competence to be lower, whereas heads with a large number of subordinate staff reported more challenges related to the scope of their leadership as a whole than other heads.

The leadership and management structures as well as job descriptions in ECEC should be both nationally and locally examined. It should be considered how all heads with their varying job descriptions will get enough support in their leadership. Diverse leadership training could be an answer to this. Functioning and permanent structures for supporting new heads and engaging them to the world of work should also be considered both nationally and locally. One way to do this could be to develop and target different forms of mentoring, collegial support and work coaching especially at heads who have recently started their work. The changed qualification requirements for heads of early education centres also contribute to who will be working as heads in Finland after 2030. It should already be considered how to enable as many of those working as heads of early education centres or those willing of it to complete a Master of Arts (Education) degree before the end of the transition period.

FINEEC presents the following recommendations for the development of leadership in ECEC:

**Finland has a variety of leadership and decision-making systems in ECEC. As a rule, the office holders responsible for ECEC, the heads of early education centres and family daycare supervisors were satisfied with the leadership and decision-making structures in their municipality, regardless of the size of the municipality:**

- The number of children participating in ECEC in the municipal organisation did not result in differences between groups. The respondents hoped that the leadership and decision-making structures in leadership would be clarified especially in relation to making decisions and to the job descriptions in municipalities of all sizes. In the light of the results, the functioning of the organisation is not linked to the size of the organisation. It is therefore important to broadly consider what kind of factors a functioning organisation consists of and what kind of structures support heads and directors in their work.
- The survey sent to the office holders in ECEC examined who in the municipality is responsible for the specific statutory tasks in ECEC. The specific tasks selected to the survey were related to the issues such as staff recruitment for ECEC or pre-primary education. In large municipalities, many tasks have been centralised, while in smaller municipalities, the head of an early education centre or the officeholder responsible for ECEC in the municipality was responsible for them in addition to their other management work. In general, there is a need to discuss what kind of work can be included in the leadership.
- Most municipalities have an officeholder specifically responsible for ECEC. It is important to make sure, that those preparing, presenting or making the decisions related to ECEC have a strong substance competence. When the health and social services reform currently under way has been implemented, municipalities will be left with fewer obligations. The reform may offer an opportunity to strengthen and clarify the position of ECEC alongside basic education in the municipal government organisations.

**The respondents of the survey sent to heads of early education centres and family daycare supervisors represented the leadership at the national level diversely and, for example, the employing municipality, the year of graduation and work experience were evenly distributed. The majority of those who responded to the questionnaire sent to heads of early education centres were satisfied with their job description, but some also found it burdensome and the number of their subordinate staff too large. The largest proportion of the monthly working hours of heads were consumed by personnel and pedagogical leadership:**

- The evaluations of the heads of small entities were often more positive concerning their job description than the evaluations of the heads of medium-sized or large entities. Concerning some of the issues, the evaluations of the heads decreased as the number of subordinates increased. The management entities must be manageable and enable the implementation of leadership to be of high quality. Additionally, strengthening the structures of deputy leadership could be one way to support the heads and clarify their job descriptions.
- According to the respondents, one of the key changes in their work was digitalisation. Digitalisation was seen to have brought with it many practices that facilitate work, but the large number of systems, some of which were half-complete and overlapping, were also found burdensome. The introduction of different electronic systems and ensuring the competence of heads to use them should take place in a coordinated and well-planned manner. This way it is possible to ensure that they systems will really facilitate and clarify

the work tasks of the heads. It should also be discussed what kind of tasks will be assigned to the heads along with the introduction of digital systems.

- Busyness and the fragmented and unpredictable nature of the work were brought up as factors complicating the work. These were seen to have resulted from a shortage of staff, because of which heads use a large proportion of their working time to find substitutes. Based on the evaluation, the shortage of qualified staff is also visible in the job descriptions of the heads. On the one hand, the importance of pedagogy and personnel leadership is emphasised when the constantly changing and untrained staff requires support. On the other hand, the arrangements for substitutes and recruitments take time, which in turn may make long-term development work more difficult. There is awareness of the shortage of qualified ECEC staff both at the national and at the local level. However, from the point of view of the daily leadership work, local solutions are needed quickly.

**The majority of those who responded to the survey sent to heads of early education centres were at least partly of the view that they had enough leadership competence. They considered leadership in pedagogy, personnel and services the strengths in their competence. Based on the evaluation results, however, three groups can be identified that should be taken into consideration when developing the education and training:**

- The answers given by heads with the least work experience differed from those given by the other heads and they estimated their leadership competence to be lower than the others. Functioning and permanent structures for supporting new heads and engaging them to the world of work should be considered both nationally and locally. One way to do this could be to develop different forms of mentoring and collegial support and to develop and target work coaching specially to heads who have recently started their work.
- The transitional provision recorded in the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care proposes that as from 2030, heads of early education centres must have a master's degree in education in addition to the qualification of teacher or social pedagogue in ECEC (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, section 31). Of those heads, who responded to the survey, 12.2 percent had a Master of Arts (Education) degree. The preparation for training in line with the transitional provisions and especially for the provision of resources for participation in the training should be started early enough both in municipal and private organisations. Most likely universities will need additional resources to be able to expand their Master level education provision. At the national level, training should be planned broadly so that it will meet the needs of both those supplementing and those acquiring their degree.
- The competence basis provided by the training of heads of early education centres has not become established and it is fragmented. The daily work of head of early education centres consists of different subareas and requires a wide variety of competences. Today, heads of early education centres need comprehensive leadership competence and consequently, comprehensive training for leadership in ECEC, which will comprehensively combine the different areas of leadership. In addition, training should support and strengthen the formation of leadership identity.

**Keywords:** early childhood education and care (ECEC), Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, management structure, leading, leadership, head of early education centre, family daycare supervisor, director of ECEC