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Leadership Tasks in Early Childhood Education in Finland, Japan, and Singapore

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ABSTRACT

Leadership research in early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a relatively new undertaking. It combines leadership concepts from school research as well as from business. There are common aspects in the leadership profession, but the context and the mission define the content of leadership tasks and responsibilities. Data in this cross-cultural study were collected in Finland, Japan, and Singapore from 2012 to 2014. Questionnaires were used as the data collection method and content analysis as the method to explore how leadership tasks define leadership in the different countries. The project included 100 participants in each country. Analysis in this article focuses on leadership tasks in ECEC settings in Finland, Japan, and Singapore. The study revealed that the tasks of ECEC leaders in all three countries are similar—the two most important leadership tasks are pedagogical leadership and human resource management—though implementation of tasks varied based on cultural context. In practice, leaders in Finland spend most of their time in line with the two issues considered most important, leaders in Japan spend their time on service and human resource management, and leaders in Singapore spend their time on pedagogical leadership and service management.

This article contributes to the debate on leadership in early childhood education and care (ECEC). It has a twofold aim: (1) to make sense of the leadership in ECEC in the framework of recent international research and (2) to describe the forms it is taking in the everyday lives of ECEC leaders in Finland, Japan, and Singapore. Recent research is systematically analyzed to uncover the tasks of ECEC leaders. Cross-national study opens possibilities for reflective practices in one's own country in relation to others.

The theoretical framework for this study is based on contextuality, which is defined as how the context shapes the leadership discourse and leadership culture (Akselin, 2013; Hujala, 2002, 2004; Nivala, 1999). The contextual leadership approach provides the framework for leading practices in the ECEC environment at the micro- and macrolevels. This leadership approach also allows for examination of the interaction between the different levels (Hujala, 2004; Nivala, 1999) and perceives the ECEC mission and core tasks as a socially constructed, situational, and interpretive phenomenon. As such, the leadership tasks of the three countries studied are examined from the point of view of their own ECEC core tasks. According to Hujala (2013), leadership roles and responsibilities should be based on the core tasks of ECEC at every level.

This study was conducted between 2012 and 2014 in Finland, Japan, and Singapore. These countries were selected because their leadership in early childhood education (ECE) has been increasingly highlighted and the researchers have the same research interest and are able to work cooperatively.

Contexts of the study

Finland

In Finland, ECEC has two aims: to provide child care service for families and to provide ECE for children. *Educare* refers to the integration of education, teaching, and care (Hujala, 2010). The aim of educare is to promote children's positive self-image, develop expressive and interactive skills, enhance learning and develop thinking, and support children's overall well-being (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health [STM], 2004; STAKES, 2004). ECE has been regulated by the Ministry of Education and Culture since 2014. Before 2014, it fell under the guidance of the Ministry of Social Affairs.

In Finland, educare programs are organized by municipalities (92%) or private providers (8%). Approximately 62% of Finnish children ages 1 to 6 years participate in an educare program (National Institute for Health and Welfare [THL], 2011). Preprimary school is for 6-year-old children and is voluntary. The preprimary school is steered by Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education in Finland (Finnish National Board of Education, 2010).

Child care is offered as a universal public service for families. Every child has a right to have early education regardless of parental employment. Municipalities are obliged to organize child care for every child younger than age 7 years. Approximately 80% of children attend full-time child care. Child care services are mainly provided by municipal child care centers. Child care programs are either center-based, preprimary school, or family day care programs. The child care is regulated by legislation under the Act of Children's Day Care (36/1973) and Decree of Children's Day Care (239/1973), and steered by the National Curriculum Guidelines on ECEC (STAKES, 2004).

Qualification requirements for ECEC leaders are defined in the Act on Qualification Requirements for Social Welfare Professionals (272/2005). Center directors are required to be qualified ECEC teacher and to have adequate management skills. Administrative ECEC leaders are required to have a higher university degree, knowledge of the sector, and adequate management skills. In this legislative framework, municipalities can define directors' tasks.

In the past, Finnish child care center directors were usually working as a practicing kindergarten teacher as well as acting as a director. Centers were small, and working with children was emphasized. However, directors today do not usually work with children but instead are working as administrative leaders in one to five child care center units (LTOL, 2007).

Japan

Historically, Japan provides two types of facilities where children could spend their days. One option is the kindergarten, which is regulated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in accordance with the School Education Act, 1947. Kindergarten operations are guided by the "Course of Study for Kindergarten" (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2008). Usually, children spend 4 hours a day at kindergarten. Kindergarten programs are provided by the state (0.03%), municipalities (36.9%), and private providers (62.7%).

Day care centers are child welfare facilities established under the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare in accordance with the Child Welfare Act, and they operate based on the "Guidelines for Daycare Center" (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2008). Usually, children stay 8 hours a day in a day care center, which provides service for families who may need an all-day service. The need for day care service has increased, and waiting lists for services are common in urban areas. Day care center services are provided by municipalities (43.2%) and private providers (56.8%). The

government has also allowed the participation of joint-stock companies to run day care centers as a part of deregulation.

Twenty-five percent of Japanese children ages 0 to 5 years participate in kindergarten programs, 35.2% are in day care centers, 2.8% are in nonregistered day care centers, and 37.0% of children stay in their own homes (National Liaison Committee of Early Child Care and Education Organization, 2013). For children older than age 4, 53.7% are in kindergarten, 43.8% are in day care centers, 2.2% are in nonregistered day care, and 0.3% stay in their own homes. Over the years, the number of children participating in day care centers has increased.

The ECEC facilities provide *hoiku* (care and education) for children, as it is acknowledged that "early childhood is extremely important in cultivating a foundation for lifelong character building" (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2008, p. 4). The main idea of *hoiku* is that children develop through the rich environment around them and the focus is on "nurturing emotions, will, attitude, etc. as a foundation for children to embrace a zest for living" (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2008, p. 4).

In 2015, some ECEC facilities, known as *kodomo-en* (*kodomo* means child, *en* means facility) and including kindergartens and day care centers, came under regulation of the Cabinet office. The Cabinet office is tasked with providing a seamless continuum of programs for all children and the coordination of a governmental budget to support regional programs for families based on varying needs.

With regard to the education of leaders, many are graduates from 2-year universities and vocational schools. Compared to Finland and Singapore, it seems that in Japan practical abilities and experience developed culturally are valued more than acquisition of pedagogical philosophies. Especially in private centers, leaders usually learn leadership philosophies and management skills directly from former leaders of the centers. In comparison to the other countries, Japanese principals are more often engaged in the management and operation of facilities, rather than acting as teachers.

Singapore

In Singapore, the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) serves as the regulatory and developmental authority for the EC sector. It oversees all aspects of development for children younger than age 6, across child care and kindergarten. Child care centers mushroomed after passage of the Child Care Centers Act and The Child Care Center Regulations in 1988. With the Act and Regulations came child care subsidies for placing children in center-based care. This also coincided with increase of the female workforce participation, from 28.6% in 1970 to 51.1% in 1997 (Retas & Kwan, 2000). With the growing numbers of child care centers, the ECDA was formed in 2013 to be responsible for overseeing measures to raise quality standards of programs in child care centers as well as kindergartens. This includes regulation, quality assurance, and provision of EC development resources. The quality assurance system known as the Singapore Pre-school Accreditation Framework (SPARK) is well established; in 2014, 288 centers successfully participated in SPARK.

The ECDA is not only a regulatory body, in practice, but also provides the leadership for the EC sector. It facilitates the training and continuing professional development of EC professionals. It develops Professional Pathways for educators and has crafted new initiatives to develop and recognize EC professionals at each stage of their career. This includes a new leadership role, known as the ECDA Fellow. Fellows are EC professionals who have demonstrated high levels of leadership and professional expertise. They serve as role models, drive quality improvements in the sector, and develop a fraternity of Fellow professionals. The ECDA supports the Fellows as they take on sector-level roles and drive the EC community to a higher level of professional practice. These activities include leading professional learning communities, sharing best practices through work-shops, and mentoring other EC professionals. This role will be in addition to their leadership role within their own child care center or kindergarten. The first batch of ECDA Fellows received their awards on May 6, 2015.

Child care centers serve infants to children age 6 and operate from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.; the leader of the center is called a supervisor. The kindergartens run 3- to 4-hour programs for children ages 3 to 6; the leader of the kindergarten is called a principal. Supervisors and principals will have to first complete a Teaching Diploma, followed by a Leadership Diploma, to be eligible for the leadership role. To guide their practice in the EC curriculum, the leadership at the center has the Early Years Development Framework for children ages 0 to 3 years and the Curriculum Framework for Kindergartens for children age 3 to 6 years.

Literature review of ECEC leadership tasks in Finland, Japan, and Singapore

In Japan, leadership is considered relevant for improving the quality of ECEC programs. "Guidelines for Daycare Center" (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2008) stipulates the role of principals as one of organizing a system to cultivate a shared understanding and nurturing cooperative practices for facing day-to-day challenges. The Education Ministry has outlined the following desirable attributes of a center leader: (1) build cooperative organization and maintain respectful relationships among staff members, (2) be in charge of enhancing teachers' qualifications and quality, (3) be prepared for crisis management.

Several studies have been conducted about these three attributes. Ito (1999) interviewed principals of day care centers and found that the leader's ability to garner cooperation among the staff members was of utmost importance. Takahashi (2006) advocated for moving beyond cooperation within the center to collaboration with parents/families and regional stakeholders. He believed that a center leader, being responsible for children and working with their families, takes on a demanding social responsibility that requires collaboration. As such, a collaborative approach has been taken into consideration in Japan in recent years.

Another leadership theory is the performance-maintenance (PM) theory (Misumi & Peterson, 1985). It has been developed in Japan as an extensive interdisciplinary and intercultural approach to leadership (Misumi, 1995). The theory determines the type of leadership profile by understanding the interaction between the performance and maintenance functions. The performance leadership function (P) is oriented toward goal achievement or problem solving, and the maintenance leadership function (M) is oriented toward preserving group social stability. The theory claims that in Japan, performance and maintenance are essential for the leader.

Watanabe (2001) applied the PM theory for ECEC leadership and included an understanding of children, daily practices, and positive relationship with parents as the foundational cornerstones for implementation of policy and curriculum. Also, the leader should be a good model for staff members, one who is able to provide practical, on-the-job coaching and creates an environment where conversations can take place among the staff on a daily basis (Ueda, 2013). Ueda (2013) described such conversations as "building a learning community and team culture," which is also advocated by Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007). However, in the Confucianism tradition, Japanese leadership means that subordinates have to respect and obey leaders. Leaders, on their part, have paternalistic attitude—called *mendou* ("I will take care of you")—toward their staff (Dorfman et al., 1997).

In Singapore, Ang (2012b) studied 27 local leaders in Singapore. Leaders described their practice, including "the complex range and responsibilities which requires them to exercise leadership acumen and judgment on a daily basis" (p. 93). In an Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC) report from 2009, "Early Childhood Development: From Policy Ideas to Implementation to Results," leadership was highlighted as a key driver in achieving targeted outcomes for children. This raises a question about whether leaders should spend more time on advocacy and be the drivers of policy implementation and change for better outcomes for children.

In Finland, ECEC leadership research appears to be somewhat more established, compared to that in Japan and Singapore. According to the Finnish ECEC research, a director of a child care center or principal is responsible for the child care center's daily practice and works as an advocate of the staff (Riekko, Salonen, & Uusitalo, 2010). The director or principal will also disseminate research to the staff, take care of planning, coordinate the parent-teacher partnership, and communicate with other

stakeholders (Karila, 2001; Nivala, 1999). Administrative leaders implement and evaluate a munici-pality's ECEC strategy. Success in these efforts require clear position in the hierarchy and ECEC know-how (Akselin, 2013).

Pedagogical leadership is considered a focal responsibility in child care center directors' and principals' work (Heikka, 2014). According to Fonsén (2014), strong pedagogical leadership has to be based on vision, strategy, structure for pedagogical leadership, tools, staff's expertise and professionalism, clear core tasks, and articulated values. High-quality service is part of the pedagogical leadership. To obtain high-quality pedagogy, directors need to reflect on and influence pedagogical practices when necessary and instruct practitioners who work with children (Fonsén, 2014).

At the moment, the discourse about shared leadership is strong. Distributed leadership can be seen as a shared responsibility for organizations' core tasks, goals, and guidelines (Heikka, 2014; Hujala, 2013). According to Heikka (2014), pedagogical leadership is not distributed adequately from directors to teachers, or from municipal administration to centers. It also seems that staff is not always willing to commit to distributed leadership, or leading one's own work, and therefore reinforcing distributed leadership needs determined effort. In distributed leadership organization, sharing leadership through self-directed teams leads to independent decision making and strengthens team work (Fonsén, 2014; Halttunen, 2009). Shared leadership in EC environments could enhance the pedagogical practices and lead to a self-directed work culture and hence higher quality (Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011).

Fonsén's (2014) findings suggest that EC center directors' tasks and responsibilities are not clearly defined and work loads are not apportioned appropriately, which may lead to directors' burnout. Directors' numerous tasks and fragmented responsibilities shift their focus from the pedagogy to other things. According to Hujala and Eskelinen (2013), the fragmented nature of EC directors' work may hinder carrying out human resource management and pedagogical leadership, which are considered most important for succeeding in their core tasks.

Key concepts

Pedagogical leadership is improving and developing educational and teaching practices in educational organizations (Kyllönen, 2011). Pedagogical leadership consists of three elements: developing educational practices, taking care of human relations, and administrative management from the perspective of educational goals. In ECEC, pedagogical leadership means taking the lead regarding the core tasks: supporting the educational goals and accomplishing curriculum and its decision-making process (Hujala, 2013). Pedagogical leadership can be shaped by children's learning, professionalism of the EC staff, and society's values (Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011). A pedagogical leader is in charge of securing the children's education and care (Sergiovanni, 1998) and reflecting and disseminating research findings to staff (Kagan & Hallmark, 2001).

Service management is strongly culture bound, depending on the structure and function of ECEC. It can be defined as acknowledging customer orientation in leadership (Nivala, 1999). This means that the organization is aware of how customers perceive the quality of services as well as how to provide services that meet the customer needs (Grönroos, 1987). Service management in ECEC means providing a variety of child care services according to the needs of families, new technical service solutions, and common policy formations (Armistead & Kiely, 2003; Nivala, 2002).

Human resource management consists of managing and leading people. The EC managers' control over human resources management means, for example, supervision of the staff, examination of the procedures, and introduction of new practices. Management of human resources aims at finding a balance between the need for personnel and the amount and quality of personnel, as well as how the personnel work toward the goals of the organization; it can also be a more limited concept referring to daily routines dealing with personnel matters (Fullan, 2007; Vanhala, Laukkanen, & Koskinen, 1998). The challenges in human

resource management arise from the multiprofessional nature of ECEC work. The manager needs to understand the clients' and the employees' points of view (Ang, 2012a).

Financial management's role has been growing in ECEC. Demands for cost-effectiveness and business expertise have risen: the economy sets the boundaries for solutions and actions taken (Niiranen, Seppänen-Järvelä, Sinkkonen, & Vartiainen, 2010). Efficient EC leaders should have strong business expertise as well as good personal leadership skills. However, it seems that child care center directors do not have sufficient financial management skills, as child care center directors are trained as teachers, rather than specialists in administration and business (Nupponen, 2006; Ryan, Whitebook, Kipnis, & Sakai, 2011). In societies with a strong private ECEC service sector, financial management, such as budgeting and sharing resources, takes a considerable amount of an EC manager's working time. It is an important skill area because fiscal management decisions regulate program practices (Portin, Scheiner, DeArmond, & Grundlach, 2003).

Change management is a focal challenge for ECEC in today's changing world. Leading change requires change in an individual's thinking and skills set, as well as changes in organizational principles and practices. When implementing change, a leader needs to interact with stakeholders and take care of staff well-being. Feelings of insecurity, pressure, and resistance to change can decrease the organization's ability to perform effectively (Rodd, 2006). Key factors in change management from the organizational culture point of view are the vision created by the director, engagement of the members of the organization with its values, and director's ability to improve the organization (Lakomski, 1999; Rodd, 2006).

Network management is one of the newest and most important arenas for leaders. In network management, leaders act as advocates for children, families, and employees in various ECEC matters. This occurs by participating in discussions and influencing local level decision-making with different kinds of stakeholder groups (Kagan & Bowman, 1997; Kagan & Hallmark, 2001; Ryan et al., 2011). Network management emphasizes a shift away from highlighting the system, strategies, and statistics, toward highlighting people and human interaction in management. Pursuing advocacy and joining political discussion at the societal level would probably require more skills of ECEC leaders than they currently have (Nupponen, 2006; Rodd, 2006). However, facilitating collaboration is a pathway to development and high-quality ECE (Sergiovanni, 1995).

Daily management refers to "secretarial" tasks connected with leadership (Hujala & Eskelinen, 2013; Nivala, 1999). Daily managerial tasks are the mechanisms and routine tasks that have to be carried out on a daily basis. These include recruitment of substitute staff, matters to do with maintenance of the property, and making small purchases. Particular expert knowledge is not needed to perform these tasks, but they can be very time consuming. These tasks include, for example, financial and personnel management, knowledge management, immediate stakeholder collaboration, planning, pedagogy, services provided to families, allocation of resources, monitoring of daily activities, and personnel management (Ho, 2011; Kagan & Hallmark, 2001).

Conducting research

Cross-cultural leadership research

Culture is a concept that connects shared values, meaning, and interpretations of behaviors (Ilesanmi, 2009). Cross-cultural study tries to determine similarities, differences, and variations of certain phenomena that broaden understanding of the phenomena from one's own national perspective (Hujala, 1998). Cross-cultural research is supposed to identify a culture's emics and etics. Emics are cultural attributes that are unique to a culture and cannot be compared across cultures. *Etics* means things that are universal to all cultures and can be compared (Graen, Hui, Wakabashi, & Wan, cited in Dickson, Den Hartog, & Mitchelson, 2003, p. 732). Emic also can be seen as a "within cultures" approach, whereas *etic* refers to "across cultures." These concepts are symbiotic: both are needed to acquire the whole picture (Berry, 1999). In this study, researchers are trying to find similarities and differences in ECEC leadership practice, keeping in mind each culture's emics (inside aspect, not comparable) and etics (outside aspect, comparable).

Researchers from each country will handle the data and try to explain the ECEC leadership practice phenomenon from the emic aspect to find universal similarities across countries (etic aspect).

In cross-cultural leadership, studies do not provide a consistent definition of *leadership* or workable framework, thus comparing leadership may be challenging. Researchers do not have a theoretical basis for expecting and identifying cultural differences (Dickson et al., 2003), but leadership and management are culturally dependent, and people's thinking and actions are affected by the cultural environment (Hofstede, 1983). As such, when leadership concepts are taken over from abroad, they are usually adapted to local conditions. This affects its effectiveness, as leadership depends heavily on cultural beliefs and values (Hofstede, 1983).

According to Hofstede (1983, Hofstede & McCrae, 2004), four independent dimensions can describe cultures: (1) individualism-collectivism, (2) power distance, (3) uncertainty avoidance, and (4) masculinity-femininity. The first dimension, individualism versus collectivism, refers to the relationship between individuals in a society. It measures the degree to which individuals are integrated into the group. In a collective society, people are integrated, "forming strong cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty" (Hofstede, 1997, p. 51). Societies based on individualistic values let its individuals make decisions based on their own interests. In a collectivist society, individuals are supposed to make decisions based on their in-group's interests (Hofstede, 1983).

Power distance is "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (Hofstede, 1997, p. 28). In organizations with high power distance, leaders tend to be more authoritarian and less participative. On the other hand, when power distance is low, subordinates prefer more equal leadership (Dickson et al., 2003; Hofstede, 1983).

Uncertainty avoidance refers to society's dealing with the unpredictability of the future. In societies with weak uncertainty avoidance, people tend to feel secure and be tolerant of behavior and opinions, which differ from their own. In societies with strong uncertainty avoidance, anxiety level is high with more established structures and formal rules that make events clearly interpretable and predictable. This dimension measures the extent a culture programs its members to feel either comfortable or uncomfortable in unstructured situations. In a society with high uncertainty avoidance, planning and agreements are crucial, whereas in low uncertainty avoidance societies, there is more flexibility and innovation (Dickson et al., 2003). As such, the uncertainty avoidance dimension has an impact on the definition of leadership (Dickson et al., 2003).

The fourth dimension is masculinity versus femininity. The dominant values in a masculine society upholds values like assertiveness, performance, success, and competition, whereas feminine values include quality of life, maintaining warm personal relationships, service, caring, and solidarity (Hofstede, 1983; Hofstede & McCrae, 2004). In this study, researchers are illustrating the ECEC leadership practices in Finland, Japan, and Singapore through Hofstede's cultural dimensions.

Finland is a country where people can freely make decisions based on their own interests; hierarchies are relatively low and feminine values are prominent. However, uncertainty avoidance is high in Finland. As such, it has strict regulations and well-established institutions and risk taking is low. Japan is a country high on collectivism but is less collective than other Asian countries. Large power distance has its roots in the Confucian tradition, where the leader takes care of his subordinates and subordinates respect and obey their leader. Japan, as well as Finland, has strong uncertainty avoidance, which is manifested in regulations, established institutions, risk avoidance, high technologies, and expertise. However, Japan being high on masculine values, together with large power distance, strong uncertainty avoidance and low individualism will define the practice of leadership in its own unique way. As for Singapore, since Hofstede's study of 1968 to 1973, Chew and Putti (1995) and Chen (2000) have used Hofstede's dimensions (Hofstede, 1968) to measure the cultural profiles of their participants in their studies. The two dimensions that have demonstrated a clear trend of change are power distance and individualism. Power distance has been decreasing and individualism increasing (Chen, 2000). This implies that Singaporeans would be more open to

distributed leadership and are inclined to make decisions based on their own interests. However, uncertainty avoidance in Singapore is low, which leads to few formal rules, risk-taking, flexibility, and creativeness in people's life. Singapore is clearly neither masculine nor feminine.

Data collection

Making comparisons across cultures might be challenging because representative samples that would typify the whole population are difficult to acquire. Culture, norms, and practices differ among the research countries, which needs to be taken into consideration when interpreting results (see Rodd, 2013).

Inside each country, EC systems are quite consistent because of stable ECEC systems and regulations. Leadership contexts, however, differ from each other and the researchers have been discussing and clarifying leadership phenomena in their own countries. Through these discussions, the researchers have tried to perceive a common understanding of leadership in their own countries but also in the global sense (cf. Rodd, 2013). The researchers have used English in their reciprocal communication, but questionnaires have been translated into the mother tongues of the respondents. In any case, key concepts of this research is founded on a Western frame of reference and EC leadership field is dominated by Western theory (see, e.g., Harkness, Van der Vijver, & Mohler, 2003).

This research was conducted from 2012 to 2014. The data were collected from Finland in 2012 and 2013 and from Japan and Singapore in 2013 and 2014. Respondents were child care center directors in Finland (100), ECEC program principals (100) in Japan, and ECEC program principals and supervisors (altogether 100) in Singapore. In Finland, all centers were public and run by municipalities. In Japan, 72% of centers were public and 28% were private. In Singapore, 99.7% of centers were private and only 0.3% were public.

The data-gathering instrument was a semistructured questionnaire, which is founded on Finnish EC leadership research and key concepts (pedagogical leadership, service management, human resource management, financial management, change management, network management, and daily managerial tasks). The questionnaire contained open-ended and structured, closed-ended questions. Participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire where they assessed what kind of leadership tasks they did and what responsibilities they had during the day. The questionnaire was tested among researchers and translated and sent to Singapore and Japan after data collection in Finland. Each participant country was responsible for translating the data and analyzing it.

The questionnaire contained background information questions, one "percentage" question that was formulated based on research concerning EC leaders' work (see Hujala & Eskelinen, 2013), and five open-ended questions:

- As a leader, how do you divide your working time into different tasks? (percent of the working time %)
- Which are the most important tasks in your leadership work?
- Which leadership tasks do you not have enough time to complete?
- What in your leadership work is difficult or problematic and wears you down most?
- What skills and attributes have helped you to succeed as a leader?
- How have your superiors and the management structure supported you as a center leader?

Participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling. Participants who were interested in the study were invited to recruit other participants from their own networks. Principals who took part in the study were given information about the purpose of the study, its methodology, and the observance of confidentiality.

In the following text, the term *principal* is consistently used regardless of the national term used for child care leaders.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed quantitatively as well as qualitatively. The data were coded to produce quantitative data sets and analyzed alongside survey data. In this study, the data analysis tool was qualitative content analysis (see Mayring, 2000). Finnish and Singaporean data were analyzed by Finnish researchers, and Japanese data by Japanese researchers. To find common understanding of the categorizing, researchers discussed the process and tried to find solutions together when a response was unclear or otherwise difficult to categorize. Researchers were permitted to create categories that were best suited. Finally, data from different countries were checked and unified. Data were analyzed using data-driven and theoretical methodology.

Principals were asked to estimate the percentage of time spent in leadership tasks in their leadership position, and average percentages counted. The data from open-ended questions were categorized into classes based on data-driven analysis. Responses were coded based on the amount of occurrences: if at least 10 individual respondents mentioned certain phenomena, a new category was created. In each response, there could be none, one, or several mentions of different kind of leadership tasks.

Results

In Finland, Japan, and Singapore, 100 principals were asked to estimate their working time in terms of percentage of time spent each day in different leadership responsibilities. The categories were defined in the questionnaire, but principals were asked to describe what kind of tasks and responsibilities they have in each category. Table 2 presents the average percentages of time spent by principals in different leadership responsibilities in Finland, Japan, and Singapore.

The results show common trends in the principals' main responsibilities. It appears that the main tasks of principals in Finland, Japan, and Singapore consist of pedagogical leadership, service management, human resource management, and daily managerial tasks. However, emphasis between different tasks and responsibilities differs between countries. In this study researchers are illustrating the ECEC leadership practices in Finland, Japan, and Singapore through Hofstede's (1983) cultural dimensions (see Table 1).

In Finland, principals use most of their time in human resource management and pedagogical leadership. Often, these tasks are intertwined with each other. Also, these are the tasks that center

Table 1. Finland, Japan, and Singapore categorized in Hofstede's (1983) dimensions.

Country	Individual—Collective	Power distance	Uncertainty avoidance	Masculinity vs. femininity
Finland	High individualism	Small power distance	Strong uncertainty avoidance	Feminine
Japan	Low individualism	Large power distance	Strong uncertainty avoidance (> Finland)	Masculine
Singapore	Low individualism (< Japan)	Large power distance (> Japan)	Weak uncertainty avoidance	In between

Table 2. Principals' time used in different leadership responsibilities (%).

	Finland	Japan	Singapore
Pedagogical leadership	21	12	23
Service management	11	23	18
Human resource management	26	15	12
Financial management	8	13	9
Leading change	10	9	11
Network management	10	9	9
Daily managerial tasks	14	15	17
Other	0	5	1
TOTAL	100	100	100

staff expect principals to carry out (Fonsén, 2014). Daily managerial tasks is the third big group, consisting of secretarial tasks and everyday routines, such as recruiting substitute staff, property maintenance, and small purchases. Usually, these tasks are very time consuming and reminiscent of secretary work and do not require pedagogical expertise.

In Japan, service management is the most time-consuming part of the principals' work. Human resource management and daily managerial tasks come next. Along with the daily tasks, principals plan and open facilities according to the need of families in the region. These are usually child-support programs for families that need support for their child rearing but are not using day care or kindergarten services regularly. Meeting families that need help is one of the main tasks of the principals. Principals also organize a variety of day care or kindergarten services, such as extended day care or day care and education for children with special needs.

In Singapore, most of the principals' working time is spent on pedagogical leadership. Next is service management, and then the daily managerial tasks. It appears that SPARK has influenced the focus of the leaders' work. In the SPARK rating scale, there are three items relating to pedagogy: strategic leadership (including curriculum leadership), integrated curriculum, and principles for pedagogy (including assessment of children's learning). As for service management, the tasks include working with and engaging the families and community agencies like the National Library Board and the Health Promotion Board. Daily managerial tasks include answering telephone calls, responding to enquiries from government agencies and interested stakeholders, keeping good records and a proper filing system, keeping an inventory of materials, as well as maintaining the whole center, doing registration, collecting fees, and applying for subsidies.

In Table 3, the tasks that ECEC leaders find important are presented. The most important leadership tasks in Finland, Japan, and Singapore were found to be quite the same. Pedagogical leadership and human resource management were considered the most important tasks, though the percentage was considerably lower in Finland than in other countries. In Finland and Singapore, daily managerial tasks were considered a little more important than service management, whereas service management as well as security and safety issues were stressed in Japan. In Finland, security and safety issues had been seen as a part of daily management because security and safety planning and procedures are usually made at the administrative level in every municipality, and only updated annually and implemented at the child care center level.

In Japan, crisis management is considered an important duty for principals. In the past decade, awareness of risk management has increased. These risks include natural disasters, food allergies, accidents, violence, and health issues. Natural disaster risk is high in Japan, and each kindergarten and day care center conducts a disaster drill several times in annually. Principals take care of safety procedures themselves, such as locking up the facilities and carrying out safety checks as part of the total management system.

In Singapore, health, hygiene, and safety is one item on the SPARK scale and is the first item that the center needs to pass before it can undertake the rest of the other items. As such, safety and security may not be viewed as an important issue because safety features are so integrated into the running of the center that leaders in this survey did not bring it up as an issue to be concerned about.

It seems that in Finland the work of the center leader is a little more fragmented than in Japan and Singapore. Findings from recent studies also suggest that in Finland principals' work is divided

Table 3. What principals consider as important leadership tasks (%).

	Finland	Japan	Singapore
Pedagogical leadership	24	33	35
Service management	14	12	13
Human resource management	26	32	27
Financial management	7	1	1
Leading change	5	0	3
Network management	8	4	2
Daily managerial tasks	16	6	14
Security and safety	0	12	5
TOTAL	100	100	100

into a number of responsibilities (Fonsén, 2014; Hujala & Eskelinen, 2013). This may imply that leadership is not clearly defined in child care principals' position or the connection between leadership and the core tasks is not strong enough.

As shown in Table 2 and Table 3, principals from all three countries find pedagogical leadership and human resource management to be the two most important tasks for center leadership. However, in terms of the amount of time they spend on each task, only the Finnish principals spend most of their time on the two tasks they find the most important. The Japanese principals spent most of their time on service management, human resource management, and daily managerial tasks, whereas pedagogical leadership remains in the background. The principals in Singapore spent most of their time in pedagogical leadership, some time on service management and daily managerial tasks, and less time on human resource management.

In Table 4, the principals ranked the importance of their leadership tasks and made an assessment of the time needed to complete their leadership responsibilities. The table compares how the ranking is aligned to time management. Although pedagogical leadership and human resource management were assessed as the most important tasks, principals in all countries agreed that they do not have enough time to carry out the responsibilities connected to those tasks. Both of these tasks are crucial in ensuring and enhancing high-quality ECEC. In Finland and Singapore, principals would need more time to accomplish daily managerial tasks successfully. In Singapore, the demands on the leader for curriculum and pedagogy leadership are so high that leaders find that they need to spend most of the time playing that role. In Japan, principals would need more time for service management because even though the fundamental idea of Japanese ECEC is to provide ECEC programs for children, day care centers and especially principals are supposed to support parents in raising their children.

Principals were also asked "what is difficult or problematic" in their leadership role. Principals in Finland were burdened with daily managerial tasks, fragmented nature of work, and human resource management. Fragmented work causes constant pressure to rush through work and hinders principals from focusing on the core tasks. Human resource management is considered important but sometimes burdensome. In Finland, principals are pedagogical experts, many of them without proper leadership training; though human resource is believed to be important, it could be quite a daunting task for principals who may not have the skills to work with staff and build a team.

In Japan, the burdensome issues are problems of communication with superiors and staff, development of ECEC practice, and parent-teacher partnership. In Japan, dialogue and listening attentively to parents, staff, and colleagues are believed to be important for moving forward and improving the current situation. Because there are many time-consuming tasks in child care centers, it is difficult to find enough time for communication with staff members and to engage in capacity building. In addition, principals made particular comments about the increasing difficulty in communicating with parents.

Table 4. Principals' ranking of the importance of leadership tasks compare to time resources demanded for successful task completion (1 = *most important*, 8 = *least important*; [a, aa, aaa] = the more letters, the more time demanded for successful completion).

	Finland		Japan		Singapore	
	Task importance	More time needed	Task importance	More time needed	Task importance	More time needed
Pedagogical leadership	2.	[aaa]	1.	[aaa]	1.	[aaa]
Service management	4.		3.	[a]	4.	
Human resource management	1.	[aa]	2.	[aa]	2.	[aa]
Financial management	6.		6.		8.	
Leading change	7.		7.		6.	
Network management	5.		5.		7.	
Daily managerial tasks	3.	[a]	4.		3.	[a]
Security and safety	8.		3.		5.	

In Singapore, child care services struggle with staff shortages. Turnover rate is high; as soon as a new staff member is familiarized to the center's culture, she/he often leaves. The next challenge is to encourage the staff to pursue the SPARK Certification and Accreditation. Teachers were known to leave centers that were embarking on the SPARK certification to join centers that were not applying for SPARK. As more and more centers apply for SPARK, it is hoped that the improved quality of centers, together with professional pathways for educators, would reduce staff attrition. With SPARK Accreditation, hopefully, center quality and center leadership will be improved.

When principals assessed the skills and attributes that helped them to succeed as a leader, the principals in Finland thought that personal qualities, abilities, and skills are the most important attributes. Staff that supports and appreciates the leader was also seen important, as was training and competency. In Singapore, personal qualities, abilities, and skills were considered considerably more important than any other attribute for succeeding as a good leader. Supportive work with the community, training and competency, and dialogue with parents, staff, and colleagues were also mentioned.

In contrast, the Japanese principals did not mention personal qualities, abilities, and skills at all. Training and competency; dialogue with parents, staff, and colleagues; and previous work experience were seen as attributes that lead to success in a leaders' work. Japanese principals said that seeking harmony and balance among staff members is essential. Successful ECEC practice requires good teamwork; even if each staff member is qualified and has good skills, it is not enough. In addition, dialogue and being attentive to parents, staff, and colleagues is considered the path to success.

The study showed that principals got different kinds of support for their leadership work from their organizations (i.e., their superiors and the management structure). Finnish principals seemed to get the most support from other center principals, and their superiors. In Singapore, support from superiors was seen as the most important form of support; in Japan, information, guidelines, and strategies were considered the most important. In every country, training and professional development were mentioned as an existing form of support. Yet in Finland and Japan, many respondents said that they do not get enough support for their leadership work.

Discussion

The core tasks and aims of ECEC are quite the same in Finland, Japan, and Singapore: to provide young children's education and care in the best possible way. However, there are some distinctive and culture-bound features, which can be considered with Hofstede's (1983) cultural dimensions. All in all, tasks and aims are surprisingly similar, though they were implemented differently based on cultural context.

In all researched countries, ECEC is regulated and steered with curriculum. In Japan, the service system has been divided into child care and kindergarten, contrary to Finland, which has only one ECEC service, including preprimary education. In Japan and Finland, which have strong uncertainty avoidance traits, institutions are strong and ECEC is regulated strictly. In Singapore, child care and kindergarten are being regulated by one agency, the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA). By the end of 2015, a new Early Childhood Development Act will be introduced to raise the quality of care and education through a harmonized regulatory framework for kindergartens and child care centers.

In Japan, the significance of child care is to provide children with care and education so they can contribute to society in the future. Japanese leadership caters to the needs of families and society. In Finland, child care service is provided as a universal public service for families. Every child has a right to early education, regardless of parental employment. In Singapore, child care services are provided so that women can join the workforce.

It seems that there are differences in who is considered to be a customer of a principal. In Japan, the primary customers are parents and secondary customers are the staff. Principals meet parents regularly and try to serve them first. In the Japanese culture, leaders are also supposed to take care of their subordinates. In Finland, the primary customers of a principal are the staff and the parents are secondary customers. Human resource management is stressed in principals' daily work, whereas meetings with parents are

irregular at best. In Singapore, the majority of a principal's time is spent improving and developing educational and teaching practices, as well as taking care of human relations, namely, parents and staff.

When time management is examined, it seems that even though Finnish principals share their working time on several leadership tasks, they spent most of their time on the tasks they also consider the most important: human resource management, pedagogical leadership, and daily managerial tasks (Hujala & Eskelinen, 2013). However, there is some discrepancy in Japan and Singapore. Japanese principals could not focus on pedagogical leadership and human resource management as much as they wanted to because service and safety management take up most of their time and energy. Japanese principals take precautions to avoid risks, such as may occur during natural disasters, which quite often afflict Japan. Japanese principals also deal with the increasing need for child care services by opening facilities for the region, which explains why service management is a de facto priority for Japanese principals. In Singapore, service management takes more time than principals would like, because they rank human resource management more important than service management. Yet, in relation to time spent, more time is spent on service management than on human resource management.

Safety management did not arise as an issue in Finland, possibly because safety issues are taken care of on an institutional level. Safety issues and procedures are regulated in organizational level (i.e., municipality or private ECEC service provider). In Singapore, safety and security issues arise to the extent of the accreditation program requirements.

In every country, principals would like to spend more time on the tasks they consider the more important. In Singapore ECEC centers, principals and staff work toward attaining SPARK accreditation. It appears that the accreditation program has clarified the core tasks and responsibilities of the principals in relation to pedagogical leadership.

In Finland, principals do not have the tradition of instructing staff in pedagogical matters, because all staff members have training in the ECEC field (either teacher training or child care nurse training) and are expected to function independently (Fonsén, 2014). In addition, teachers in Finland are trusted and autonomous professionals. This might be a pitfall because the quality of pedagogy depends on an individual's professional skills rather than pedagogical leadership. The principals' responsibilities are vague, and instructing teachers directly is not the usual practice (Hujala, Fonsén, & Elo, 2012).

Closing

We hope that this research has thrown some light on the principals' core tasks and provided a basis for leaders to reflect on their roles and responsibilities in relation to the importance they hold. When core tasks and their importance are aligned, the leader will be able to craft the mission, clarify the core tasks, and paint a vision of child care in its relevant context (see Hujala, 2013). The mission and vision, as well as the core tasks, must be explicitly articulated in the ECEC strategy to develop quality service for children, which goes hand-in-hand with high-quality professionalism (Peterson, Veisson, Hujala, Sandberg, & Johansson, 2014) to strengthen the distributed leadership in ECEC (see Heikka, 2014). The key to genuine distributed pedagogical leadership is the involvement of teachers in the assessment and development of quality ECEC practices. This, in turn, will lead to genuine distributed pedagogical leadership, which is a pivotal phenomenon in leading an ECEC organization.

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