SHARED LEADERSHIP IN PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION: THE PARENTS' PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. Shared leadership has been a topic of discussion and debate among scientists and practitioners. The article analyses the perspective of parents on shared leadership in the pre-school educational institution. The article consists of three parts: first, the concept of shared leadership and its features are revealed, the second part of the article presents the methodology of empirical research, and in the third part of the paper main results of the research are discussed. Shared leadership in the article is understood as a process based on collective responsibility, cooperation, and democratic values, in which all members of the community are involved in decision-making, activity planning, and sharing responsibility. A study of shared leadership characteristics in one nursery school revealed that, from the parents' point of view, leadership is shared in this educational institution because it is based on cooperation, trust, and the involvement of parents in the life of the educational institution. Parents are informed, listened to, invited to participate in activities, offer ideas, and contribute to decision-making. The support and openness of teachers create the conditions for active, equal partnership.

Keywords: leadership, shared leadership, features of shared leadership

INTRODUCTION

In the modern concept of educational organisation management and organisational culture, the phenomenon of shared leadership is receiving increasing attention. Global transformations and accelerating social, economic, and technological changes are driving the need for educational institutions to operate not in a hierarchical manner, but in systems based on the principles of cooperation, empowerment, and trust. A study by Mayer et al. (2023) revealed that even in remote working conditions, aspects of shared leadership, such as joint decision-making, mutual assistance, and distribution of responsibility, significantly increased team members' job satisfaction and productivity. Thus, nowadays, it has become obvious that complex challenges of the modern world cannot be effectively addressed by the competencies of a single leader, and this fact reveals the importance of shared leadership, which requires collective responsibility, professional partnership, and the involvement of the experiences of different members of the organisation. This concept of leadership strengthens community involvement, increases the organisation's resilience to change, encourages innovation, and improves the quality of education.

The relevance of shared leadership in pre-school education institutions is even more evident due to the specific nature of these institutions. Early childhood education is a particularly sensitive stage of child development, where cooperation between teachers, parents, and administrators has a direct impact on children's well-being and educational achievements. Daily processes in these institutions are highly dynamic, with a constant need to respond to the individual needs of children, a changing social environment, and increasing parental expectations. Therefore, effective shared leadership becomes a prerequisite for ensuring the smooth organisation of the educational process and improving the quality of the institution's activities.

Scientific research (Sousa and Rocha, 2019) shows that shared leadership practices have a positive impact on the activities of educational institutions. Research by Harris (2008, 2011) and Leithwood (2008) reveals that strengthening shared leadership improves the quality of education and student achievement. Gronn (2002) and Spillane (2006) emphasise that such leadership creates conditions for teachers' professional development and collaborative learning. Harris & DeFlaminis (2016) establish a link between shared leadership and organisational innovation. In addition, research by Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), and Leithwood (2008) shows that shared leadership models increase the resilience of educational institutions to change and ensure the sustainability of the organisation. Dambrauskienė and Liukinevičienė (2018) studied the expression of shared leadership in the education sector, paying particular attention to the processes of cooperation between teachers and school leaders in order to improve school performance and achievements. Damkuvienė et al. (2019) analysed how shared leadership can contribute to organisational change and increased operational efficiency. Research conducted by Malinauskienė (2021) revealed how shared leadership improves school management and organisational culture.

Thus, different scientific researches show that shared leadership practices have a positive impact on improving the quality of education, the professional development of teachers, organisational innovation, a culture of community and partnership, and the resilience of educational institutions to change. Therefore, research on shared leadership is particularly relevant when analysing contemporary educational management and organisational change.

It is important to emphasise that leadership processes in pre-school education institutions involve not only teachers and administrators, but also *parents as active partners in education*. Parents, with their unique knowledge of

their children, can significantly contribute to the quality of education, participate in solving everyday pedagogical issues, and consequently strengthen the institution's culture. Such partnerships create a more open, democratic, and child-oriented educational environment. Therefore, research on shared leadership between parents and educators is of particular scientific and practical value, as it reveals the mechanisms, obstacles, and opportunities for cooperation and contributes to the development of more effective management models for preschool institutions. In addition, it is worth noting that there is a lack of such research conducted in Lithuanian preschool institutions.

In this context, the following problem question is formulated, which this article seeks to answer: *What is the expression of shared leadership between parents and teachers in a Lithuanian preschool education institution*?

The purpose of this article is to reveal the expression of shared leadership between parents and teachers in a Lithuanian preschool educational institution.

The aim implied the following structure of the article: first, the concept of shared leadership is revealed, and in the second part of the article, the results of the research are analysed.

The following methods were used in this article: scientific literature analysis and a questionnaire.

CONCEPTUALISATION OF THE CONCEPT OF SHARED LEADERSHIP

In scientific literature (Dambrauskienė and Liukinevičienė, 2018; Dukynaitė, 2015; Harris, 2010; Malinauskienė, 2021; Northouse, 2016; Tian, 2016; Valuckienė et al., 2016, Zhu et al., 2021), shared leadership is often defined as a model of organizational management in which responsibility and decision-making powers are distributed among the team. Researchers argue that shared leadership promotes close cooperation, as each member of the group contributes their knowledge and skills, helps others become leaders, and creates an environment in which everyone continuously learns and improves together. They also emphasize that this form of leadership involves sharing responsibility and decision-making among all members of the institution's community. Malinauskienė (2021) notes that shared leadership is a form of collective leadership in which each member of the organization takes responsibility for the overall success of the organization.

An analysis of scientific literature revealed that the concept of shared leadership emerged as an alternative to traditional hierarchical management structures. Its theoretical foundations are linked to the sociocultural perspective of organizations, which emphasizes that leadership is not the function of a single person, but a collective process arising from mutual interactions, joint activities, and contextual situations. The theory of shared leadership is based on the assumption that members of an organization have different competencies that can be used equally to solve problems, initiate change, and improve the organization's performance. Zhu et al. (2021) argue that shared leadership can manifest itself both through the distribution of functions or responsibilities among team members and through the collaborative performance of specific leadership activities. According to the authors, leadership can be shared in various ways: team members can lead simultaneously (otherwise referred to in scientific literature as co-leadership), in turn (on a rotational basis), or by distributing different but complementary functions among themselves, taking into account individual abilities and competencies. In addition, the authors note that shared leadership is not necessarily spontaneous – it can also be consciously organized and purposefully developed, depending on the nature and needs of the organization. In the authors' opinion, this approach allows for a broader understanding of shared leadership as a flexible, dynamic, and context-adaptive phenomenon that can be applied in various organizations, including educational institutions.

According to Harris (2011), shared leadership in an educational context can manifest itself in three ways: within an educational institution, outside it, and between educational institutions. Valuckienė et al. (2015) emphasise that shared leadership *within an educational institution* manifests itself in the reorganization of functions and responsibilities, the promotion of teamwork focused on professional development, the creation of new learning groups, the distribution of responsibilities, and the promotion of student leadership. According to the authors, shared leadership *between schools* emerges through cooperation and collaboration. In this way, schools can join forces to solve problems, learn, and gain valuable professional experience. This process highlights the main features of shared leadership, such as cooperation and strengthening positive relationships, collegiality, trust, developing leadership responsibility, and maintaining strong connections. Analyzing shared leadership *outside of school*, the authors note that it manifests itself in cooperation with the local community and organizations in creating and implementing joint projects. In addition, the authors emphasize that in many schools, all three models of shared leadership can be combined.

Summarising the analysis of scientific literature, it can be noted that the following main features of this form of leadership help to reveal the concept of shared leadership:

- distribution and sharing of responsibility,
- effective cooperation, when members make decisions and solve problems together, because leadership emerges through active interaction among community members, rather than through a formal structure.
- trust and empowerment (or power sharing), which ensures an effective and efficient work process and which means that all members of the community are encouraged to act independently, offer ideas, and take initiative.
- democracy and support for democratic processes within the 88ecognize88on (as Haines (2015) emphasizes, shared leadership requires cooperation, freedom, respect for individual uniqueness, diversity of views, personal responsibility, and active initiative)

- and universal participation, i.e., the involvement of all community members in decision-making and organizational activity planning.

To summarize the characteristics of shared leadership, it can be said that shared leadership in an educational organization is based not on a formal structure or hierarchy, but on the interaction, trust, and active partnership of community members, allowing all members to participate equally in decision-making and the improvement of the educational process. Such leadership is characterized by the following aspects: communication based on cooperation, activities based on cooperation, and flexibility in the role of leadership.

Having described the concept of shared leadership and its features, the article further analyses research results.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study aims to examine the expression of shared leadership between parents and teachers at the nursery-kindergarten from the parents' perspective.

An analysis of scientific literature allowed us to identify three characteristics of shared leadership, which led to the refinement of the research objective into three tasks, which consequently led to three research criteria:

1. To determine whether communication in the nursery is based on cooperation
   (1st research criterion is *cooperation-based communication*)
2. To determine whether the activities of community members are based on cooperation
   (2nd research criterion is *cooperation-based activities*)
3. To determine whether the role of leadership is flexible.
   (3rd research criterion is the *flexibility of the leadership role*)

Each criterion was detailed with indicators reflecting the expression of shared leadership between parents and educators.

First, to answer the question whether communication in the nursery is based on cooperation it is important to determine if communication is regular, consistent, and open, are parents empowered to express their opinions and suggest ideas; *second*, to answer the question whether the activities of community members are based on cooperation, we have to reveal following indicators: sharing responsibility for joint activities, assuming responsibility for joint activities, mutual trust among community members, creation of an environment conducive to joint activities in the educational institution; *third*, to answer the question whether the role of leadership is flexible, following indicators have been set: any community member can take on the leadership role and parents are empowered to take initiative.

The quantitative research strategy was chosen, and a written survey was carried out using a questionnaire that was compiled based on the criteria and indicators outlined above. A five-point Likert scale was used to evaluate the statements, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The questionnaire consisted of two parts: sociodemographic questions and 45 Likert scale statements.

The general sample of the study consisted of 189 families with at least one child attending nursery school at the time. Each family was given one questionnaire, which was completed by one of the parents. This procedure was chosen to avoid duplication of data and to ensure equal representation of all families. The questionnaires were completed by 180 parents, which constitute 95% of the total population; therefore, it is considered sufficient to obtain reliable results, and the data obtained is considered representative.

RESEARCH RESULTS

4. Results of the study on criterion 1 – cooperation-based communication.

In order to assess the expression of cooperation-based communication, respondents were asked to give their opinion on two aspects: whether communication is regular, consistent, and open, and whether parents have the opportunity to express their opinions and suggest ideas.

The results of the study revealed that most of the parents who participated in the study appreciate the regularity, consistency, and openness of communication with teachers. Most respondents (94%) indicated that they regularly receive the necessary information. 91% of respondents noted that there is ongoing dialogue between them and teachers about their child's education, and that they receive information on time. The majority of respondents (90%) also indicated that they always receive information about their child's education, decisions, and plans. 89% of respondents stated that they themselves provide teachers with information about their child and that the information they receive is clear and understandable.

These data show that the educational institution has two-way, consistent, and timely communication based on trust and the principle of mutual exchange of information, and that timely, mutual, and trust-based communication prevails in this educational institution.

The processed questionnaire data revealed that most of the parents who participated in the study feel empowered to express their opinions and suggest ideas related to the activities of the educational institution: 86% of the participants indicated that they can express their opinions and offer ideas when communicating with teachers, and freely express their opinions about the activities of the educational institution; 85% of the participants noted that their opinions about their child's education are listened to and respected.

These results show that most parents experience open communication with teachers and are invited to actively participate in dialogue, and their opinions are considered important in the educational process.

2. Results of the study on criterion 2 – cooperation-based activities.

In order to assess whether the activities of the educational institution are based on cooperation, respondents were asked to give their opinion on the principles of sharing responsibility, their own assumption of responsibility, trust in teachers, and the environment's favorability for joint activities.

Although the survey data revealed that most of the survey participants are actively involved in the life of the educational community, i.e. most respondents say that they feel responsible for participating in decisions related to their children's education (92%), feel responsible for the life of the group in which their child is educated, together with the teachers (87%), and also take responsibility for the implementation of the ideas proposed (84%) and for their contribution to the overall success of the educational process (83%), they are clear about what they are responsible for in the activities of the educational institution (82%), however, about 30% of the parents who participated in the survey do not feel that they are involved as equal partners, that activities are distributed according to their willingness and ability to contribute.

Respondents were also asked to assess whether the educational institution provides real opportunities to work together with teachers. Close, trust-based relationships form the basis for constructive cooperation, so the study also assessed how the educational institution creates an environment conducive to this. The results obtained suggest that cooperation between parents and teachers is not only theoretically possible, but that practical conditions for parental involvement are also being created: according to the majority of respondents, educational institution organizes joint activities in which they can participate (91%), institution creates real opportunities to work together, get involved, and cooperate (91%), respondents feel involved in the life of the educational institution as active members of the community (82%).

The results of the study show that the expression of cooperation-based activities in the nursery school that participated in the study is clear and strong. The respondents who participated in the study noted that teachers share responsibility, involve them in planning activities, and provide opportunities to contribute according to their wishes and abilities. In addition, most of the parents who participated in the study noted that they themselves take responsibility for the overall success of the educational process, the implementation of proposals, and participation in decisions related to their children. The survey data suggests that most parents trust teachers, feel valued and invited to cooperate, and consider the educational institution environment conducive to joint activities and involvement.

5. Results of the study on criterion 3 – flexibility of the leadership role

When examining the flexibility of the leadership role, we assessed how parents perceive opportunities to actively engage in organizing initiatives, coordinating activities, or making decisions. Respondents were asked to assess how often they notice that different community members can take on leadership roles and whether this opportunity is given not only to teachers but also to parents.

After processing the data, it became clear that most respondents positively assessed the opportunity to actively engage in initiating activities and sharing leadership in the community. According to the survey participants, their activity in the educational institution is supported and encouraged (77% of respondents), the institution supports the leadership of various members (teachers and parents), regardless of their duties (74%), different community members take on leadership roles in different situations (70%), not only teachers but also they themselves have the opportunity to lead activities or initiatives (69%), they can take responsibility for organizing or coordinating activities (67%). However, about 40% of respondents do not believe that teachers 90ecognize that parents can also take leadership roles in certain situations.

In assessing whether parents are empowered to take the initiative, their responses to statements about making suggestions, being invited to participate in decision-making, events, and involvement in initiating change were analyzed. As can be seen from the survey results, most of the parents who participated in the survey believe that they are encouraged to take the initiative and are involved in various activities organized by the educational institution: respondents say that they are invited to participate in the institution's events, projects, or meetings (86 percent), are encouraged to submit proposals, ideas, or initiatives regarding the activities of the educational institution, the educational process, or events (79 percent), their initiatives are implemented in the activities of the group or institution (71%), and teachers support their involvement in planning new activities (67%). However, about 40% of parents do not say that they are invited to participate in decision-making at the educational institution, that their initiatives are discussed in the community, or that teachers support their involvement in initiating change.

In summary, it can be said that, according to parents, the principle of flexible leadership role sharing is applied in the educational institution. However, to further strengthen it, it is advisable to clarify the role of parents in the community and to provide more active feedback on the consideration and implementation of their initiatives.

Limitations of the study and directions for future research. The main limitation of the study can be considered that it is based only on parents' perceptions, which may be influenced by subjective interpretation. In addition, as the study was conducted in a single Lithuanian preschool institution, the generalizability of the findings to other educational contexts (other preschools, pre-primary schools, etc.) is limited. The use of a quantitative questionnaire also limits a deeper understanding of the reasons for parents' experiences and perceptions. Future studies could include several preschools and/or pre-primary institutions to compare data from different institutions and increase the generalizability of the research. Teachers and educators could also be interviewed. Including teachers' perspectives and using qualitative methods (e.g. interviews or focus groups) could help to better understand common shared leadership practices and factors influencing their expression.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Summarising the analysis of scientific literature, it can be stated that the concept of shared leadership is based on joint action, collective responsibility, and the involvement of all community members in decision-making processes. Shared leadership does not arise from formal duties or hierarchical positions, but from constant interaction, cooperation, and contextual factors. It is worth noting that shared leadership can manifest itself both within an institution and outside of it – through collaboration with other organisations and the community, promoting problem-solving and sharing of experiences.

2. The scientific literature analysed allowed us to identify five characteristics of shared leadership: cooperation, shared responsibility, empowerment, flexibility and mutual trust. These characteristics allow leadership functions to be distributed among all members of the community, thus encouraging their activity, initiative, and professional development. Three essential aspects stand out among these characteristics: cooperation-based communication, cooperation-based activities, and flexibility in the leadership role, which best reveal the expression of shared leadership.

3. A study of shared leadership characteristics in one nursery school revealed that, from the parents' point of view, leadership is shared in this educational institution because it is based on cooperation, trust, and the involvement of parents in the life of the educational institution. Parents are informed, listened to, invited to participate in activities, offer ideas, and contribute to decision-making. The support and openness of teachers create the conditions for active, equal partnership. However, some parents lack clearer feedback on the implementation of their initiatives, so it can be said that, in the parents' opinion, shared leadership is strong in this nursery-kindergarten, but still has potential for further development.

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