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Editorial: Extended education – leadership in practice

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Editorial on the Research Topic
Extended education – leadership in practice

In many parts of the world, various forms of extended education are emerging to respond to parents' care needs before and after the school day as well as to enhance learning and provide children with meaningful leisure time. Extended education encompasses after-school programs, school-age educare, all-day schools, and outside-of-school-hours care. The extended education sector is under increasing pressure to deliver quality services for children youth and families. It is essential to ensure that the leadership is in place to ensure effectiveness of services working in tune with all stakeholders in a synergistic way.

Despite this growing field, research is still limited. The previous discourse on Extended Education (Bae, 2018; Schuepbach, 2018a,b) discusses the diversity within these educational offers and activities while highlighting the existence of shared values and structural similarities that help establish a common understanding of what Extended Education entails. This implies that while these programs may vary significantly across different contexts and countries, there are fundamental principles or characteristics that are widely recognized and agreed upon.

Leadership plays a crucial role in shaping the nature and relevance of extended educational activities as it is depicted as operating at the nexus of various stakeholders, including families, schools, and the broader community. It emphasizes that effective leadership in this context involves understanding and responding to the diverse needs of children, parents, and other members of the community. Essentially, leaders in Extended Education must navigate the complexities of multiple stakeholders and their varying needs to ensure that educational activities are well-designed and successfully implemented. There is limited research-based knowledge regarding how leadership is enacted within extended education. Nevertheless, considering the specific nature of its mandate, it may be assumed that leadership is exercised in ways that differ from those found in traditional classroom instruction. It is therefore essential to develop a broader research base in this area, illuminated through diverse contexts and perspectives.

In this Research Topic we were fortunate to be able to accept 10 articles for this Research Topic on expanding the knowledge base on leadership in extended education which provide a comprehensive examination of leadership, quality, and practice in extended education settings across several European countries and Australia. A recurring concern across the studies is the lack of standardized definitions and frameworks for quality in extended education to support leaders.

Key themes and findings

The research reveals significant challenges in leadership within extended education contexts. Swedish principals managing school-age educare demonstrate what researchers describe as "nebulous leadership"—a reactive, adaptable style that seeks collective support rather than taking full responsibility (see Holmberg and Kane; Manni et al.). This leadership approach emerges from complex power relations and institutional constraints that limit principals' ability to lead proactively.

In contrast, German research on all-day schooling emphasizes the importance of collaborative development over shared leadership responsibility as the primary driver of organizational quality (see Kielblock). Swiss studies further highlight how after-school program leaders must flexibly adapt their leadership styles based on municipal contexts and organizational demands, requiring both collaborative and distributed approaches depending on circumstances (see Jutzi et al.).

Several studies emphasize the critical importance of including children as leaders in extended education programs (see Milton et al.; Näpfli and Schweinberger). Swiss research demonstrates that children can articulate clear preferences about participation opportunities, self-determination, and feedback mechanisms. When children experience meaningful participation, they develop greater agency and engagement.

Australian research on co-production approaches shows that structured yet flexible processes can effectively amplify children's leadership roles and decision-making participation (see Milton et al.).

Staff working in extended education settings navigate complex professional tensions. Pedagogues face competing demands between serving individual needs vs. large groups, and between providing experiential spaces while building close relationships (see Scholian et al.; Lager). Their work often lacks visibility and coherent professional frameworks, leading to varied approaches based on individual backgrounds and qualifications.

Despite national differences in policies and structures, the research identifies common intentions and processes across European extended education systems (see Ferrari et al.; Krepper et al.; Kielblock). Five main categories emerge: factors influencing extended education, institutional structures, pedagogical requirements, content areas, and outcomes. This suggests potential for shared learning and development of transnational frameworks on extended education and its learning for children.

Educational implications and future directions

The research collectively points to several critical needs in extended education: Firstly, Context-specific leadership training that addresses the unique challenges of extended education environments, moving beyond traditional school leadership models is needed.

Secondly, according to the research published in this Research Topic, quality frameworks and policy coordination seem to be a shared concern. The development of comprehensive quality definitions that balance educational, social, and economic considerations while maintaining focus on children's developmental needs to help guide the responsibilities of leaders in extended education. This alignment extends to the policies underpinning the practices.

Thirdly, participatory practices for children must be enhanced in the field of extended education. This means the systematic integration of children's voices in program design and evaluation, valuing their knowledge as leaders. Consequently, staff working within extended education need to apply a form of leadership that makes children's voices visible and ensures they are acknowledged and valued.

This Research Topic emphasizes diverse research perspectives and collects submissions in a highly relevant field to improve educational outcomes for students, staff and communities, and promote equitable and inclusive policies and practices grounded in educational research and theory, using quantitative, qualitative and/or mixed methodologies.

This multidisciplinary section is at the forefront of disseminating and communicating cutting-edge scientific knowledge and impactful discoveries in the field of educational leadership to researchers, industry, policymakers, and the public worldwide.

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Conflict of interest

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