



## TUTKIMUSSUUNNITELMA

### **Hanna Saarinen: Leading wellbeing in Finnish comprehensive schools - Guiding policies and evidence-based practices**

#### **Introduction**

Within the framework of this study, leadership is defined as a future-oriented activity targeted at achieving goals and objectives while aiming to identify changes in the operating environment (Leithwood 2004). Previous studies show that the role of leadership is important in promoting wellbeing in schools (Nielsen 2008, Elomaa 2023). However, this research area is scarce, even internationally (Dadaczynski 2022). The aim of the present study is to produce new information on leading wellbeing in comprehensive schools and contribute to this area of research. This research participates in the scientific discussion on the goals and practices of leading wellbeing.

The study consists of three sub-studies. In the first one, the aim is to investigate what kind of wellbeing goals are important for school communities. This sub-study examines school-level documents (e.g. school year plan) outlining goals for leading wellbeing. By analyzing different documents, the aim is to find out what kind of goals do the plans for wellbeing in schools emphasize. The second sub-study aims to answer the question of how principals lead wellbeing in schools. The third sub-study examines how principals transform data obtained from the different wellbeing related surveys and research to support leading wellbeing and evidence-based decision-making in schools. This study utilizes qualitative methods, discourse analysis in the first sub-study and the content analysis in the second and third sub-study. Sub-studies 2 and 3 are based on the stories written by the principals by using the method of empathy-based stories.

The findings of the study will provide novel insights for developing high-quality continuing education that supports the development of leading wellbeing in an educational context. Furthermore, this study can create information to help develop leadership towards a more sustainable and wellbeing entity.

#### **Starting points of the research project**

My study focuses on leading wellbeing in schools which is an under researched area (Dadaczynski 2022). Leading wellbeing refers to an action/activities where leaders (i.e. principals) create the wellbeing goals with the school community, monitor the progress, use wellbeing data, and update the goals accordingly (Leithwood 2001). At its best, the wellbeing goals are included in practical leadership actions, otherwise the leadership and realization of goals stay superficial (Sylväjärvi & Leinonen 2020).

The national curriculum and legislation guide the conceptualization of wellbeing related goals in school-level plans. This study covers leading wellbeing in schools and evidence-based decision-making. Leadership is defined in this study as a future-oriented activity aimed at achieving goals and objectives in a changing operational environment (Leithwood 2004). Evidence-based decision-making entails a leader's actions based on a body of facts or information (i.e. data) instead of beliefs (Archer 2013). Evidence-based decision-making sets the grounds for leading wellbeing in schools (Schildkamp 2019). Wellbeing knowledge helps leaders to get a picture of their school's situation (Lai 2013).

Previous research has noted a need for information about leading wellbeing (Fonsén 2022), leading wellbeing practices (Leinonen & Syväjärvi 2020) and how leadership adapts to evidence about wellbeing (Schildkamp 2019). This study produces new information on wellbeing policy discourses, their realization in leader's actions, and the evidence-based decision-making in leading well-being.

### **Scientific objectives and impact of research results**

My study contributes to leading wellbeing with the focus on guiding school level documents, principals' leadership practices and evidence-based decision making in comprehensive schools. The better school leaders are able to set goals for their work and pursue goals systematically, the better the community's wellbeing will be. It is important to identify the cornerstones of leading wellbeing in schools (Latham 2006).

The objective of the study is divided into three main research questions (RQs) and sub-studies.

*How are discourses of wellbeing structured in the policies that frame wellbeing in schools? (RQ1)*

*What kind of leadership practices and actions do principals use for leading the wellbeing in schools? (RQ2)*

*How do evidence about wellbeing inform principals' leading wellbeing in their schools? (RQ3)*

I focus on foundations of leading wellbeing in schools which is a little-researched area (Dadaczynski 2022). The basis for wellbeing goals at the school level is drawn from laws and acts. The goals are written in school year plans, student welfare plans and equality and non-discrimination plans setting the grounds for leading wellbeing (Andersson 2020). My study examines the content of the wellbeing objectives in the documents of schools (RQ1), focuses on how leading wellbeing is done in practice by examining written stories by principals (RQ2), and considers the use of data when leading wellbeing in the schools, thus, covers the theme of leaders' evidence-based decision-making (RQ3).

I aim at finding drivers affecting goal-oriented wellbeing leadership in school and to create a framework for leading wellbeing in school. The study can influence leadership at the local level and the results can be widely utilized in school communities. The information obtained from the study can be used to assess and develop the implementation of wellbeing goals and leadership in the school environment.

## **Research methods, research material used and its significance in the research project**

This study is composed of three sub-studies. The study includes two different datasets, the first of which will be used in the first sub-study and the second in sub-studies 2 and 3. First dataset is a selection of school-level documents collected from twenty different sized municipalities. The second dataset will be collected from principals with the empathy-based stories method (MEBS). Qualitative data-driven discourse analysis and content analysis will be used as the analysis methods.

### *Sub-study 1: The content and objectives of policy discourses related to leading wellbeing in schools (RQ1)*

The school year plans, student welfare plans and equality and non-discrimination plans are defining goals for the wellbeing work. The data for the sub-study are collected from schools (N≈100) in 20 municipalities around Finland. The data used are related to the wellbeing of schools located in both smaller and larger cities and rural areas around Finland. The goal is to examine discourses that form the basis for school wellbeing. As a method discourse analysis proceeds from the assumption that language or text does not reflect social reality, and its relationships neutrally, but the text is the producer and product of social reality (Fairclough, 2007). Through the analysis, the study aims to identify the most important goals and discourses for leading wellbeing in schools presented in the documents (Särkelä 2020).

### *Sub-study 2: Principals' wellbeing leading practices and actions (RQ2)*

Principals (N≈70) in both smaller and larger cities and rural areas around Finland will be studied using the empathy-based stories method (MEBS). MEBS guides the participants (principal) to think about the previously mentioned documents related to school wellbeing (Särkelä 2020). MEBS refers to a method of qualitative data collection in which participants read a short frame story and reflect its content by writing a short essay. The data provide information on the principal's leadership activities that guide wellbeing. The frames describe situations that professionals can relate to, either based on personal experiences or by imagining themselves in the events. Content analysis allows one to draw conclusions about the relationship of the research data to its factual and content context (Hsieh & Shannon 2005).

### *Sub-study 3: Evidence-based decision-making in leading wellbeing in schools (RQ3)*

The data of the third sub-study is collected using the MEBS (simultaneously with dataset 2). This sub-study uses principals' (N≈70) stories how evidence can inform decision-making when leading wellbeing in their schools. Content analysis is also used in this part of the study. The aim is to analyze principals' stories about the use of information as part of leading wellbeing. The stories provide information on the evidence-based decision-making in schools in a context of leading wellbeing.

## **Plan for the acquisition, use and storage of material**

The research data acquired for this study consist of collected textual material from the school level documents and from written stories by principals. I will make a preliminary data management plan (DMP) in DMPTuuli and I will continue working on DMP throughout

the study process. This is part of responsible conduct of research and helps to avoid losing or destroying the data. All the collected data belong to the University of Helsinki (UH) and the usage for scientific purposes requires an agreement.

Sub-study 1 textual data is collected from municipalities of different sizes. The sub-study 2 and 3 data is collected with MEBS from the principals. The data of sub-study 2 and 3 will be saved to the HU network to guarantee the information security. Further analysis will be done after saving data to the HU network.

This study does not collect personal data of participants meaning that individual respondents cannot be identified at any stage of the study.

This study follows good scientific practice and open access principles in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the University of Helsinki (HY 2023). I follow the instructions given by TENK on how to inform the participants of the research (e.g., data usage, participants' rights).

### **Timetable for research work**

The data for sub-study 1 will be collected at the beginning of the year 2024. Therefore, I can start working with the first article from May 2024 with the discourse analysis. During the autumn 2024 I will write theory, results and discussion so that the article is sent to peer-review in December 2024.

In the beginning of the year 2025 I will plan and conduct the data collection for the sub-studies 2 and 3. In June 2025 I am able to start with the sub-study 2 data analysis. After writing the theory, results and discussion the article will be sent to peer-review in December 2025. The planning and data analysis of sub-study 3 will start in January 2026 after I write the theory, results and discussion. This article will be sent on peer-review in November 2026.

After this I will write the synopsis of my article-based study and aim to deliver my doctoral study to pre-examination in the beginning of 2028. In my schedule I have taken into account the fact that the journal peer-review process takes time and effort. It is possible that articles have to be offered to different journals and they at least require the corrections of the content. This is a part of the scientific process that guarantees the scientific credibility and reliability that maintain the high scientific standard. During my scientific research process every article and my approach will be systematically introduced in the research seminars of the LeadEd research group.

### **Main literature**

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