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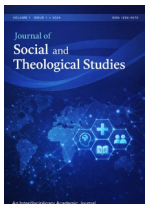

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATION LEADERS IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEMS OF FINLAND, SOUTH KOREA AND UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract. *The article presents a comparative analysis of the systems for preparing and developing the professional competence of preschool education leaders in Finland, the Republic of Korea and Uzbekistan. Using Bereday's four-stage comparative method and documentary analysis of legislation, government decrees, international reports and peer-reviewed studies, the study compares entry qualifications, pre-service leadership training, in-service professional development, its frequency and providers, and the conceptual basis of leadership. In Finland, from 2030 the director of a day-care centre must hold the qualification of an early childhood education teacher or social pedagogue, at least a Master of Education degree and sufficient leadership skills, while providers are legally obliged to ensure, monitor and evaluate staff continuing training. In Korea, heads of kindergartens and child care centres must obtain a state qualification certificate, and child care centre principals take legally prescribed off-the-job continuing education, including pre-service training of 80 hours. In Uzbekistan, since 2025 preschool directors complete off-the-job management courses of at least 144 hours once every five years, and only holders of a management certificate are appointed from a reserve of candidates; the target is 4,000 certified directors by 2030. The study concludes that Uzbekistan has built a centralised certification-based model and recommends strengthening it with pedagogical leadership content, peer mentoring and evaluation of training effectiveness.*

Keywords: preschool education, educational leadership, professional development, pedagogical leadership, continuing education, Finland, Republic of Korea, Uzbekistan, comparative education.

INTRODUCTION

The quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) depends to a large extent on the people who lead preschool organisations. International research shows that leaders shape working conditions, pedagogical practice, staff professional learning and relations with families, and therefore act as a key lever of quality [3; 13]. The Global

Education Monitoring Report 2024/5, devoted entirely to leadership in education, draws attention to the fact that preschool leadership remains a weakly regulated area in many countries: requirements for the qualifications and preparation of preschool leaders vary widely, and leaders spend a substantial share of their time on administration rather than on pedagogical work [21].

Different education systems answer the question of how to prepare and support preschool leaders in different ways. Finland is widely recognised for the academic level of its ECEC workforce and for the concept of pedagogical leadership developed in Finnish research [5; 8]. The Republic of Korea has built a strongly regulated system of state qualification certificates and legally prescribed continuing education and is currently integrating kindergartens and child care centres under the Ministry of Education [11; 14]. Uzbekistan, where the 2019 Concept for the development of the preschool education system identified a shortage of management staff and their low qualifications as one of the main problems [19], has introduced since 2024 a new system of continuous professional development and management certification for preschool directors [16; 18].

Despite the growing attention to this topic, comparative studies that juxtapose the Finnish, Korean and Uzbek approaches to the professional development of preschool leaders are scarce, and the new Uzbek regulations adopted in 2024 have not yet been analysed against international experience. The **aim of the study** is to compare the systems of preparation and professional development of preschool education leaders in Finland, the Republic of Korea and Uzbekistan and to identify elements of foreign experience that can be used to improve the Uzbek system.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study is a qualitative comparative documentary analysis. Its methodological basis is the four-stage model of comparative education, which includes description, interpretation, juxtaposition and comparison, as presented by M. Bray, B. Adamson and M. Mason [2]. The units of comparison were national systems, and the object of comparison was the professional development of heads of preschool organisations (directors of day-care centres in Finland, heads of kindergartens and child care centres in Korea, and directors of preschool education organisations in Uzbekistan).

Three groups of sources were analysed. The first group comprised primary legal documents: the Finnish Act on Early Childhood Education and Care No. 540/2018 [4]; the Child Care Act and the Early Childhood Education Act of the Republic of Korea in the official English translation of the Korea Legislation Research Institute [14; 15]; the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan “On Preschool Education and Upbringing” No. O‘RQ-595 [17], Presidential Resolutions PQ-4312 and PQ-231 [18; 19] and Cabinet of Ministers Resolution No. 867 [16]. The second group included international reports of the OECD and UNESCO [3; 13; 21]. The third group consisted of peer-reviewed studies on preschool leadership in Finland, Korea and Uzbekistan [1; 5; 6; 8; 9; 10; 11; 12; 20] and news publications reporting on the implementation of the new rules [7; 23]. Five criteria of comparison were used: (1) governance and legal framework; (2) entry qualification requirements; (3) pre-service leadership preparation; (4) in-service professional development, its form, volume and frequency; (5) the conceptual focus of leadership development. Quantitative context indicators (pre-primary enrolment and pupil–teacher ratios) were taken from the World Development Indicators database of the World Bank [22], and the figures were produced in Python (Matplotlib). No empirical data were collected by the author; the results are based on the analysis of the documents, statistics and studies cited.

RESULTS

Finland: academic entry requirements and decentralised professional learning

In Finland, the requirements for the director of a day-care centre are set by the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care. Under Section 31, which enters into force on 1 January 2030, the person responsible for the operation of a day-care centre must have the qualification of an early childhood education teacher or social pedagogue, at least a Master of Education degree and sufficient leadership skills; a transitional provision applies an equivalent requirement until that date [4]. Thus, leadership of a preschool organisation in Finland is grounded in a university-level education in educational sciences and in prior professional qualification as an ECEC practitioner.

The law does not prescribe a fixed number of training hours for leaders. Instead, Section 39 obliges the organiser and the provider of ECEC to ensure that staff participate sufficiently in continuing training that maintains and develops their professional

competence and to monitor and evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of such training [4]. Professional development is therefore decentralised: municipalities and private providers plan it according to local needs, while universities and research groups contribute through research-based programmes and development projects.

The conceptual core of leadership development in Finland is pedagogical leadership. E. Fonsén and U. Soukainen, in a development project on sustainable leadership in two Finnish municipalities, surveyed 110 ECEC professionals (experts, directors, teachers and nurses) on six themes of leadership quality; statistically significant differences between professional groups were found only in the theme of pedagogical leadership, and higher professional status and qualifications were associated with a more critical and demanding attitude to the quality of pedagogical leadership [5]. E. Fonsén, R. Ahtiainen and K.-M. Heikkinen examined how Finnish ECEC leaders themselves conceptualise and understand pedagogical leadership [6]. J. Heikka, M. Waniganayake and E. Hujala developed the idea of distributed leadership, in which leadership responsibilities are shared between directors and teachers [8], while shadowing studies of centre directors documented how pedagogical leadership is enacted in everyday practice [9]. P. Kupila analysed peer mentoring as a means of support for ECEC leaders [12], and E. Hujala, J. Vlasov and K. Alila proposed an integrative leadership framework that links leadership with the quality of ECEC [10].

Republic of Korea: state certification and legally prescribed continuing education

Korea has traditionally had a dual ECEC system consisting of kindergartens, governed by the Early Childhood Education Act, and child care centres, governed by the Child Care Act. Under Article 22 of the Early Childhood Education Act, the head and deputy head of a kindergarten must meet the qualification standards set out in the Appendix to the Act and obtain a certificate of qualification examined and granted by the Minister of Education; the Act also provides for a master teacher certificate awarded on the basis of training to teachers with at least 15 years of experience [15]. Under Article 21 of the Child Care Act, principals of child care centres must be persons qualified as prescribed by Presidential Decree who have acquired a certificate of qualification issued by the Minister of Education [14].

Continuing education of child care centre principals is regulated directly by law. Article 23 of the Child Care Act states that the Minister of Education provides continuing education to improve the quality of principals in the form of off-the-job training, divided into preliminary (pre-service) on-the-job education and on-the-job education. The law specifies mandatory content: prevention of sexual violence and child abuse, prevention of missing children, prevention of infectious diseases and drug misuse, health and hygiene, disaster safety, traffic safety and improving the human nature of principals, including education on protecting the rights of infants and young children [14]. According to regional reports on the organisation of this training, pre-service job training for directors requires 80 hours of completion [7].

An important recent development is the integration of ECEC. Amendments to the Child Care Act adopted on 26 December 2023 transferred the powers concerning child care centres, including the issuance of qualification certificates and continuing education of principals, to the Minister of Education [14]. J.-U. Ko's survey of 2,246 respondents from kindergartens, child care centres and academia examined social demands regarding this integration policy, including the qualifications of teachers [11], and J.-Y. Uhm identified teacher qualification and training systems as one of the core structural issues of integration [20]. In terms of leadership practice, the UNESCO GEM Report, drawing on the OECD TALIS Starting Strong Survey 2018, notes that pedagogical leadership took up more than a quarter of preschool leaders' time in Korea [13; 21].

Uzbekistan: a new centralised system of management certification

In Uzbekistan, the legal basis of preschool leadership is the Law "On Preschool Education and Upbringing" of 16 December 2019. Article 10 of the Law assigns to the authorised ministry the powers to set qualification requirements for the staff of state preschool organisations, to ensure the training, retraining and professional development of personnel, and to conduct the attestation of managerial and pedagogical staff [17]. The Concept for the development of the preschool education system until 2030, approved in 2019, identified the shortage of management staff in the preschool system and their low qualifications as a problem to be solved; at that time only 37.7% of children aged 3–7 attended preschool organisations [19]. M. Akmalova highlights the

improvement of personnel management and management techniques as a precondition for raising the quality of preschool education [1].

A comprehensive reform of professional development started in 2024. Presidential Resolution PQ-231 of 21 June 2024 created a vertical system of continuous professional development (ministry – training institution – educational organisation), established the Preschool Education Institute responsible for retraining and upgrading the qualifications of preschool directors and specialists, set the target of enrolling 20% of preschool staff in upgrade courses annually, provided for an electronic platform for continuous professional education and planned a management certificate for preschool directors and candidates, with the target of 4,000 certified preschool directors by 2030 [18]. Cabinet of Ministers Resolution No. 867 of 20 December 2024 specified that directors are trained off the job once every five years in management courses, that the volume of training for managerial staff is at least 144 hours, that training ends with a final attestation consisting of a final test and the assessment of a qualification work, which may be retaken once within two months, and that those who complete the course receive a management certificate [16].

The new rules also changed the procedure for appointing directors. From 1 January 2025, candidates for the post of director of a state preschool organisation are trained in management courses and receive an electronic management certificate; vacancies are filled only from a reserve of certified candidates formed by regional education departments, and from 1 September 2025 certified directors receive a monthly supplement of 30% of their salary for the validity period of the certificate [23]. Consequently, management certification in Uzbekistan has become simultaneously a condition of appointment, a tool of professional development and an instrument of material incentives.

Comparative overview

The three systems operate in different quantitative contexts (Figure 1). According to the World Bank, the gross pre-primary enrolment ratio in 2020 was 88.4% in Finland and 91.8% in the Republic of Korea, whereas in Uzbekistan it was 25.2% in 2015 and rose to 44.0% by 2021 [22]. The number of children enrolled in pre-primary education in Uzbekistan increased from 620,769 in 2015 to 874,385 in 2019, or by 40.9% [22]. Such rapid expansion of the network of preschool organisations requires a correspondingly

rapid preparation of new directors, which explains the emphasis of the Uzbek reforms on a uniform, large-scale and mandatory system of management training.

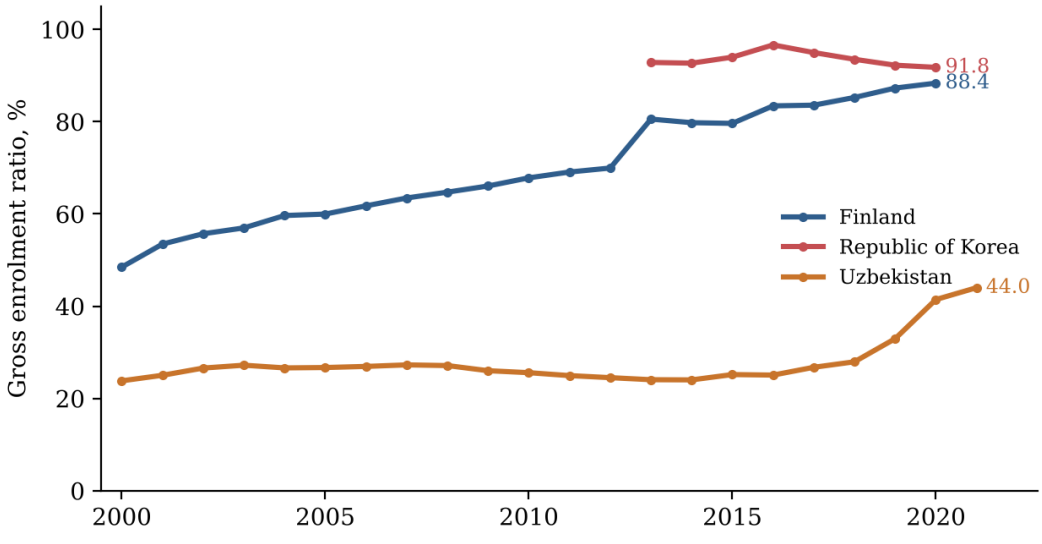

Figure 1. Gross enrolment ratio in pre-primary education in Finland, the Republic of Korea and Uzbekistan, 2000–2021, % (based on data from [22])

By contrast, the pupil–teacher ratio in pre-primary education is comparable across the three countries: 11.1 children per teacher in Finland (2017), 13.0 in Korea (2017) and 11.6 in Uzbekistan (2018) (Figure 2) [22]. The differences between the systems therefore lie less in staffing ratios than in the way leadership is prepared, regulated and supported.

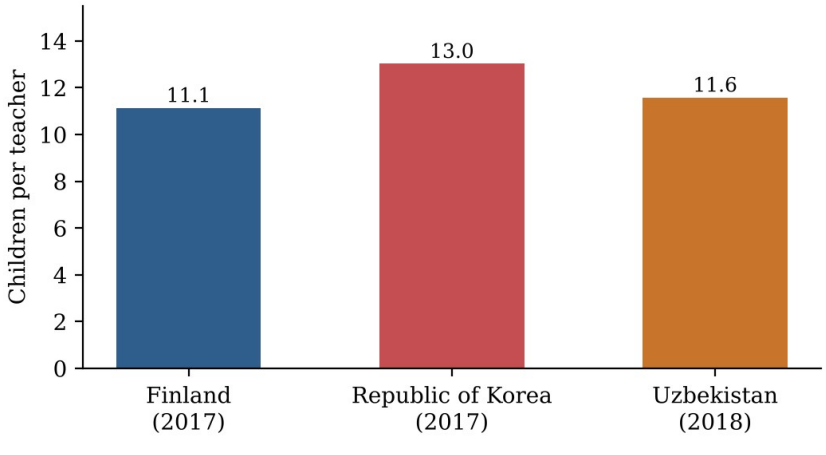

Figure 2. Pupil–teacher ratio in pre-primary education, latest available year (based on data from [22])

Figure 3 summarises the statutory requirements for formal leadership training. Finland does not prescribe a number of training hours but sets the highest entry requirement (at least a Master of Education degree and sufficient leadership skills) and obliges providers to ensure and evaluate continuing training [4]. Korea combines a state qualification certificate with legally prescribed off-the-job continuing education, including 80 hours of pre-service training for child care centre principals [7; 14]. Uzbekistan requires a management course of at least 144 hours once every five years, completed with a final attestation and a management certificate [16].

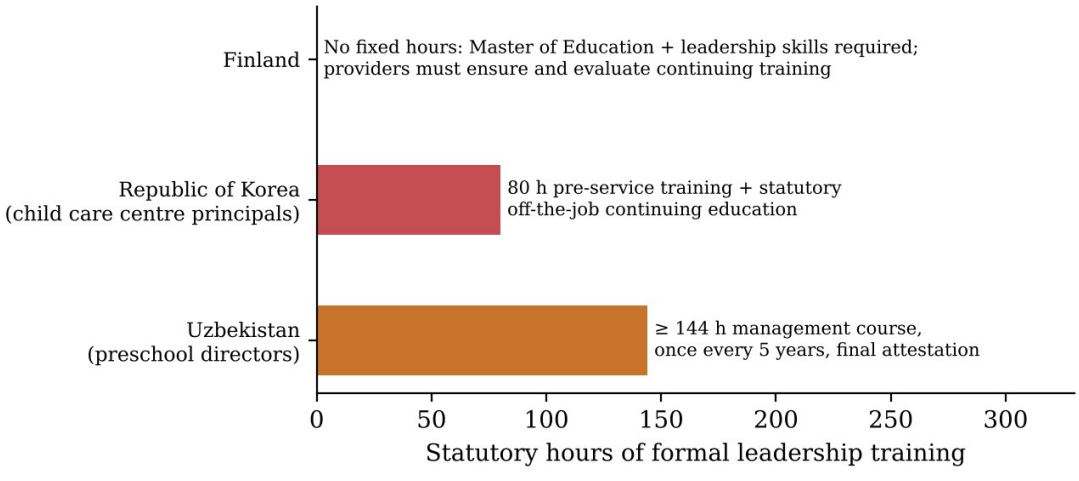

Figure 3. Statutory requirements for formal training of preschool education leaders (compiled by the author on the basis of [4; 7; 14; 16])

The sequence of Uzbek reforms shown in Figure 4 demonstrates that the current system was formed within a short period: from the identification of the shortage of qualified management staff in the 2019 Concept to the introduction of mandatory management certification of director candidates in January 2025 and the target of 4,000 certified directors by 2030 [16; 17; 18; 19; 23].

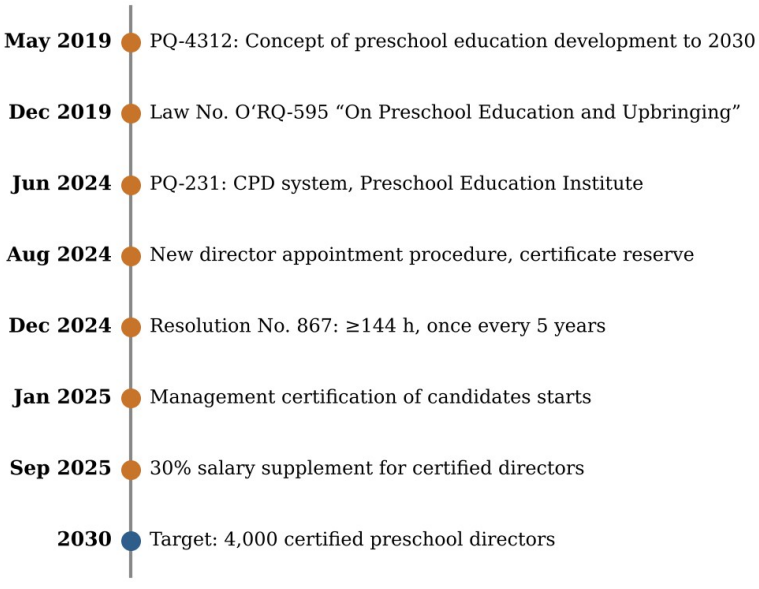

Figure 4. Main stages of the reform of preschool leaders' professional development in Uzbekistan, 2019–2030 (compiled by the author on the basis of [16; 17; 18; 19; 23])

DISCUSSION

The comparison reveals three distinct logics of leadership development. The Finnish model may be described as academic and professional: the right to lead is grounded in high-level university education, while further development is entrusted to providers and supported by a strong research community that has produced the concepts of pedagogical and distributed leadership [4; 5; 8]. The Korean model is regulatory: it relies on state certification and legally prescribed continuing education whose content is defined in the law itself and emphasises child protection, safety and health [14; 15]. The Uzbek model, formed in 2024–2025, is centralised and certification-based: it combines a uniform management course, a five-year cycle of retraining, a reserve of certified candidates and financial incentives [16; 18; 23].

Each model has strengths and risks. The Finnish approach provides leaders with a solid pedagogical foundation, and Finnish research shows that highly qualified professionals set demanding expectations for the quality of pedagogical leadership [5]; at the same time, internationally, preschool leaders spend a considerable share of their time on administration rather than pedagogy [21]. The Korean approach guarantees that all principals receive training in essential areas such as child protection and safety, but the integration of two subsystems has made the harmonisation of qualification and

training requirements one of its central policy challenges [20]. The Uzbek approach has rapidly created a nationwide system with clear rules and incentives, yet its effectiveness will depend on the content of the management courses and on whether they develop pedagogical, and not only administrative, leadership. A. Douglass's review of research for the OECD concludes that leadership plays a central role in improving and sustaining process quality in ECEC and that support is needed in leadership recruitment, preparation, professional development, credentialing and compensation [3].

On this basis, several elements of foreign experience appear relevant for Uzbekistan. First, following the Finnish experience, the content of management courses for preschool directors could be enriched with modules on pedagogical and distributed leadership, curriculum leadership and the organisation of staff professional learning [5; 8]. Second, the five-year interval between off-the-job courses could be complemented by continuous forms of support between courses, such as peer mentoring groups of directors [12], which would also correspond to the encouragement of peer exchange and self-directed learning in Resolution PQ-231 [18]. Third, the Finnish legal requirement to monitor and evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of continuing training [4] could serve as a model for evaluating the impact of the new certification system on the quality of preschool organisations. Fourth, the Korean practice of including mandatory content on child protection, safety and the rights of the child in leaders' training [14] deserves attention in the design of Uzbek course programmes. Finally, in the longer term, the development of master's-level programmes in preschool education leadership would make it possible to combine the Uzbek certification model with an academic foundation similar to the Finnish one.

The study has limitations. It is based on the analysis of legal documents and published research, and the Korean appendix to the Early Childhood Education Act containing detailed qualification standards for kindergarten heads was not available in the English translation examined. The new Uzbek system has been in force only since 2025, so evidence of its outcomes is not yet available. Future research should include empirical studies of preschool directors' professional needs and evaluations of the effectiveness of management courses.

CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis has shown that Finland, the Republic of Korea and Uzbekistan represent three different models of professional development of preschool education leaders. Finland relies on high academic entry requirements, including at least a Master of Education degree, a statutory obligation of providers to ensure and evaluate continuing training, and a research-based concept of pedagogical and distributed leadership. Korea relies on state qualification certificates and legally prescribed off-the-job continuing education with mandatory content, and is currently harmonising its requirements within the integration of kindergartens and child care centres under the Ministry of Education. Uzbekistan has, within a short period, created a centralised system in which directors complete management courses of at least 144 hours once every five years, are appointed from a reserve of certified candidates and receive financial incentives, with the goal of certifying 4,000 preschool directors by 2030.

The Uzbek reform has thus solved the institutional task of creating a uniform and mandatory system of leadership training. The next stage of its development should focus on the content and effectiveness of this training: integrating pedagogical leadership into management courses, supporting directors through peer mentoring and professional networks between courses, regularly evaluating the impact of training on the quality of preschool education, and developing academic programmes in preschool leadership. Combining the strengths of the Finnish academic model, the Korean regulatory model and the Uzbek certification model can help to form a balanced system of preparing preschool leaders capable of ensuring high-quality early childhood education.

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