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Raisa Ahtiainen
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Early Childhood Education Leadership in Times of Crisis

International Studies During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

Elina Fonsén, Raisa Ahtiainen, Kirsi-Marja Heikkinen, Lauri Heikonen, Petra Strehmel & Emanuel Tamir

Times of crisis further underlines the meaning of leadership as the common thread of an educational organisation. Leaders in early childhood education (ECE) have been forced to face tremendous challenges and changes within a very short timeframe. A global pandemic of this scale is something that no one has witnessed before. The Executive Committee, World Organisation for Early Childhood Education OMEP has formulated a position paper for ECE to remind the importance of continuing high quality ECE in spite of the pandemic (OMEP 2020). The position paper points out that "the global crisis has tested the political, health, and economic systems of many countries" and how all that may jeopardise the children's right to education and the quality of education. Therefore, the question of leadership in ECE is crucial to ensure educational rights.

Our book strives to meet the research cap of ECE leadership during the crisis. The book discusses the phenomenon of leadership and captures leaders' experiences during the pandemic in the context of ECE. Timely collected evidence-based information is aimed at guiding future policy-making and educational development, inspiring academic research, giving new insights to university courses, and supporting leaders and practitioners in ECE centres. The added value of this volume is in cracking mechanisms of dealing with a systemic crisis and change. Moreover, the book adds to the understanding of the ability of the ECE centres' to recover from the crisis, and introduces potential promotive factors of resilience in the future.

The purpose of this book is to provide understanding of leadership strategies, leading ECE practice, and a number of ways to cope with unstable and rapidly changing states of affairs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The crisis situation makes visible the (un)sustainability of practices in leadership. This book brings together researchers from different corners of the world, and enables the identification of ways of crisis leadership and management in ECE centres in many national contexts. The research reported here contributes to the knowledge about leadership, necessary skills and competencies of leaders but also the need of resources (e.g. for digitalisation). Moreover, the book draws a picture of a variety of conditions where leaders have mastered the crisis.

The book is composed of peer-reviewed original research articles approaching the theme of COVID-19 pandemic from various perspectives

providing a forum within which we can learn, share our lessons learned, and develop new insights regarding leadership in ECE for the future. The book process started in 2021 with a call for papers that was sent to a worldwide research network, the international leadership research forum (ILRF-EC). ILRF-EC has been established in Finland, and it currently has members in all continents. This edited book is the 4th publication of the ILRF-EC network (https://ilrfec.org/) and in Series International Leadership Research Forum Early Education (ILRFEC) Research monograph #4.

The book is divided into two sections of which the first "Leadership practices during the COVID-19-pandemic" considers administrative, leadership and pedagogical practices and solutions concerning ECE in times of the pandemic. That section is composed of papers of researchers from Finland, Norway, Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Israel, the USA (Florida) and Australia. Exceptional circumstances brought up pedagogical leadership challenges but also new opportunities, and changes needed to be implemented in both daily pedagogical leadership and ECE pedagogy. Some of the studies indicate that professional development, social support and distributed leadership may be developed even in times of crisis. In this section researchers also discuss challenges such as time returning to ECE centres on a daily basis and communicating health messages from the government. Studies indicate that leaders, teachers, parents and even the government had to try different alternatives to deal with the crisis and develop resilience towards future challenges.

Section 2 "Coping with stress, resilience and lessons learned from crisis leadership in ECE centres" focuses on changed demands and challenges for leaders during the pandemic, and brings out their subjective experiences and coping strategies. In addition, in this section the authors point out lessons learned for crisis leadership improvement. Section 2 includes studies from Finland, Sweden, Greece and Germany, and a paper comparing the results from an international research group from Finnish, German and Israelian contexts. The research reported in this section describes the leaders' struggle with governmental demands, the handling of uncertainty and anxiety among the staff members. Further, themes of taking care of one's own well-being, changes in the collaboration within teams as well as changed priorities and leadership styles in relation to coping with the crises are discussed in articles under this section. The researchers provide insights to ECE leaders' needs for support and competence areas that could be developed regarding leaders' capability to encounter future crises and to be better in engaging in the questions of well-being in their working communities. ECE systems have shown that they may have worked well during the pandemic crisis, but it is important that the systems should be further developed from the perspective of overall resilience.

In the conclusion the editors draw together a range of empirical results, elaborate international similarities and national specialities. The conclusion discusses theoretical approaches to explain the shared experiences of ECE

leaders in the pandemic and considers the differences in camping strategies and the experiences during COVID-19-pandemic. It will point out the essential lessons and develop criteria for crisis management in ECE centres and on the question how ECE centres can become resilient for future crises.

This book will contribute to the International discourse on the professionalisation of ECE leadership, inspire further research and consult practice and policy. We editors hope that our book provides you with new knowledge and fresh ideas to develop ECE all over the world!

Elina Fonsén, Raisa Ahtiainen, Kirsi-Marja Heikkinen, Lauri Heikonen, Petra Strehmel and Emanuel Tamir

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Part I:
Leadership Practices
during the COVID-19-Pandemic

Pedagogical Leadership in Early Childhood Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Finland

Taija Korhonen, Elina Fonsén & Raisa Ahtiainen

Abstract

The daily life of early childhood education and care (ECE) in Finland changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020. The pandemic has had a significant impact on society at many levels, and it also has affected the work and workload of ECE leaders and the realisation of leadership. The aim of this research was to investigate ECE leaders' views on pedagogical leadership from the perspective of opportunities and challenges during exceptional times. The research uses the conceptualisation of broad-based pedagogical leadership as an analytical framework.

The data consisted of the responses of ECE leaders (n = 492) to an electronic survey conducted in February 2021. There were several sections in the questionnaire, and in our research, we focused on two open questions concerning pedagogical leadership. In their responses, ECE leaders dealt with contrasting experiences of exceptional time leadership. Some leaders perceived that there was more time for pedagogical leadership than before; some felt the opposite. The widespread use of digital devices and programs that allowed distance working, meetings, and education brought significant changes to ECE. The success of strategic pedagogical leadership contributed to the development of practices and pedagogy; distance education was developed in many centres. The leaders highlighted the importance of leading the staff to ensure their well-being, professional competence, and capacity building.

Keywords: early childhood education, pedagogical leadership, broad-based pedagogical leadership, COVID-19

Introduction

The education sector experienced a new situation around the world due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The effects of the pandemic on education have been studied from many perspectives while researchers have tried to understand the phenomenon (e.g., Beauchamp et al. 2021; Lindblad et al. 2021). Several studies have shown the significance of communication and atmosphere to a solid and functional educational organisation (Ahtiainen et al. in press; Beauchamp et al. 2021; Hargreaves and Fullan 2020). Research at the beginning of COVID-19 in the United Kingdom claims that external factors, national structures, mandates, support, and advice affected the responsiveness of leaders, as well as subsequent management changes (Beauchamp et al. 2021). Hyvärinen and Vos (2015) identified creative thinking, problem-solving, and improvisation as critical elements of crisis management. In the event of a crisis, leaders try to maintain the coherence of a working community and to respond in a timely manner, according to changing situations. Moreover, researchers have highlighted the importance of trust and a positive atmosphere as fundamental structures of an educational organisation in a sustainable culture, even in times of crisis. In exceptional situations, an organisation must be stable to withstand external pressures (Ahlström et al. 2020). In addition, Fogarty (2020) drew our attention to distinctive categories of the four pillars of pedagogy in early childhood education and care (ECE): reassuring relationships, clear communication, continuous curiosity, and enabling environment. That is, the studies highlighted the aspects of a working community that are based on a confidential atmosphere and a robust shared vision formed through discussions.

In the Finnish context, the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018) defines ECE as a goal-oriented entity formed through education, teaching, and care, emphasising pedagogy. In Finland providing ECE predominantly is the responsibility of its 309 municipalities, which must organise ECE according to the legislation and normative guidelines. Private service providers of ECE also follow the same legislation and guidelines as municipal ECE. In the work of the ECE leader, the essential element is pedagogical leadership. Educational changes in ECE require the realisation of solid pedagogical leadership. Finnish ECE leaders understand the importance of the curriculum as an instructor and developer of pedagogy and practices (Ahtiainen, Fonsén and Kiuru 2021). Also, the leadership of the educational plan process requires knowledge and understanding of the reforms and related expectations (Ahtiainen 2017).

During the past ten years, the Finnish ECE has encountered many changes before the ones caused by COVID-19, which again changed the course of work by introducing several new guidelines and instructions for the organisation of activities, that were continuously updated at various phases of the pandemic.

ECE leaders were leading their centres while simultaneously updating instructions and informing staff and guardians about the changes. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic brought a new element to pedagogical leadership that broadly influenced the everyday life and leadership of ECE. With COVID-19, pedagogical solutions and everyday practices had to be changed. Further, ECE leaders had to consider how ECE could be organised in exceptional circumstances, and all work had to be undertaken without an existing operating model. At that point, some ECE centres had not yet established evaluation practices for their services (see Ahtiainen, Fonsén and Kiuru 2021). Gillberg and Ruokonen (2022) argue that the impact exceptional times have had on the daily practices in ECE has varied between the municipalities regarding the actual changes, decisions, and guidelines given by the local administration and in turn, that has affected the realisation of ECE during the pandemic.

This research investigated ECE leaders' views on pedagogical leadership opportunities and challenges during exceptional times. The conceptualisation of broad-based pedagogical leadership was used as an analysis framework (e.g., Lahtero et al. 2021).

Pedagogical leadership in ECE

The leadership of an ECE institution should be viewed through the basic mission of that field. Male and Palaiologou (2015) who highlight that the leadership of an educational institution should be viewed through practices and not through management theories. This is important because when we look at leadership practices, we note teaching, learning and outcomes, the expression of teaching, community ecology, and social relations within the educational organisation and the integration between them with each other. The social realities and educational outcomes in the educational environment are interconnected (Male and Palaiologou 2015).

The ECE Act (540/2018) emphasises pedagogy as one of the key responsibilities related to ECE leadership. Hjelt and Karila (2021) have studied the tensions related to the leadership in ECE and pointed out struggles between increasing efficiency and pedagogical quality demands. However, several studies have shown that pedagogical leadership affects the quality of teaching and pedagogy and through these, to the learning and well-being of children (Cheung et al. 2019; Fonsén et al. 2020; Strehmel 2016). It shows that pedagogical leadership is needed and leaders themselves have mentioned pedagogical leadership and human resource management as the most important in their work (Hujala and Eskelinen 2013).

Processes of pedagogical leadership are carried out following the ideology of shared leadership in educational organisations (Akselin 2013). Halttunen,

Waniganayake and Heikka (2019) found that ECE teachers recognise their pedagogical responsibilities and support the professional competence of other team members. Previous studies (Heikka, Halttunen and Waniganayake 2018; Waniganayake, Rodd and Gibbs 2015) have also shown that leaders should clarify team members' responsibilities and provide professional development courses for teachers to strengthen the realisation of pedagogical leadership in team leading.

Pedagogical leadership is formed in the interaction between the ECE leader and the staff. Research has shown that the leader's assessment of his/her competence affects the assessment of staff and children (Soukainen 2019). Fonsén (2013; 2014) argues that successful pedagogical leadership is based on four dimensions of pedagogical leadership: context, organisational culture, professionalism, and management of the pedagogical content knowledge. In addition to these four dimensions, the value dimension affects all of them and is most relevant in successful pedagogical leadership (Fonsén 2013; Fonsén 2014, Fonsén and Lahtero in press). The concept of pedagogical leadership remains unclear to many leaders. Fonsén et al. (2022) have noted how many leaders have deficiencies in structuring their competency needs (Fonsén et al. 2022), and pedagogical leadership has become challenging when the leader has a multi-centre to lead and broad responsibilities.

Broad-based pedagogical leadership in ECE

The job description and responsibilities of education leaders are multifaceted. They plan structures to support learning, facilitate teaching, and lead teachers' professional development. Leaders also support and help teachers in decision-making, learning, and mental growth (Raasumaa 2010). A broad-based pedagogical leadership framework defines these leading positions as indirect and direct pedagogical leadership, the implementation of which affects the symbolic and cultural meanings given to leadership (Fonsén and Lahtero in press; Lahtero et al. 2021; Lahtero and Laasonen 2021; Lahtero and Kuusilehto-Awale 2015). Figure 1 shows direct pedagogical leadership and indirect technical and human leadership, as well as symbolic and cultural dimensions to be equally relevant and influence each other.

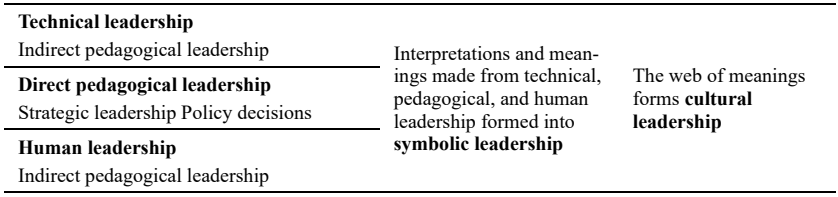

Figure 1. Broad-based pedagogical leadership in ECE (modified, original by Lahtero et al. 2021; Lahtero and Kuusilehto-Awale 2015).

The concept of direct pedagogical leadership (Figure 1) focuses directly on leading the learning and teaching context and related processes such as curriculum development and goal setting. These include setting shared objectives and the strategic leadership associated with them, maintaining a pedagogical discourse, and pedagogical alignments for the whole educational institution (Fonsén and Lahtero in press; Lahtero and Laasonen 2021; Lahtero and Kuusilehto-Awale 2015). In ECE, significant areas of direct pedagogical leadership, leading children's learning processes realisation by guiding staff include (1) pedagogical discussions and alignments in individual teams and in the community and, 2) shared and agreed guidelines, and (3) strategic management of the previous ones. The common guidelines and procedures call for a shared discussion on values, agreement on pedagogical guidelines and evaluation, and the development of a working culture based on them. (See also Lahtero and Kuusilehto-Awale 2015). Akselin (2013) sees that the objective of strategic leadership is to increase the quality of ECE by supporting symbolic tasks. Symbolic leadership aims to strengthen the community through shared views.

Indirect pedagogical leadership (Figure 1) is directed at the environment and context in which the process of learning and teaching occurs. These include leadership through technical structures and human resources. Technical leadership guarantees the implementation of the requirements, structures and strategies demanded and supported (Fonsén and Lahtero in press; Lahtero and Laasonen 2021). Leadership tasks include administrative decisions and routines, scheduling, and strategic financial resourcing (Lahtero and Kuusilehto-Awale 2015). Technical leadership is a fundamental requirement for the day-to-day process of an educational organisation. Functionally planned, organised, coordinated, and scheduled structures support the work community's awareness of the tasks and objectives of each person (Fonsén and Lahtero in press, citing Sergiovanni, 2006). In ECE, the day-to-day structure leadership cover (1) planning shifts and meeting procedures, 2) strategic resourcing and budgeting, (3) administrative decisions and related routines, and 4) making annual plans and action plans. Leadership through technical structures ensures the adequacy of resources and budget for direct and indirect areas of pedagogical leadership.

Leading human resources is another dimension of indirect pedagogical leadership. It manifests the attention to staff needs, motivation and well-being. Leading human resources is typically related to leading the competence and capacity building of the staff and interacting with and supporting them (Fonsén and Lahtero in press). Human resources leadership in ECE, the psychological aspects, needs and motivation of staff, includes 1) leadership of competence and capabilities, 2) leadership of interaction, 3) supporting staff, and 4) the presence of a leader in the centre. The staff's professional competence and the capacity-building development requires motivation and a sense of professional empowerment. The leaders support staff through discussions, by providing a role model, that is, the leader influences the culture of interaction within the working community (Lahtero and Kuusilehto-Awale 2015). Successful leadership of competence and capacity building is possible when the leader succeeds in self-management (Raasumaa 2010). Further, a broad-based pedagogical leadership framework emphasises the competence of leadership and building capacity (Lahtero et al. 2021).

In the leadership of an education community, symbolic and cultural leadership (Figure 1) enable staff to achieve engagement and implementation (Fonsén and Lahtero in press). To understand the actions and symbolic meanings of the leader, one must see the reasoning behind the leader's actions. With their actions and choices, the leaders model the meanings and values central to the working community (Lahtero and Kuusilehto-Awale 2015). Symbolic leadership can be seen in all dimensions of leadership. More critical than happenings in the organisation are the meanings and interpretations of the leader's activities perceived by the staff (Lahtero 2011). Moreover, with symbolic leadership the leader builds trust, engages staff, and allows changing behaviour (Fonsén and Lahtero in press).

Cultural leadership contains all the networks of meanings that the members of staff attribute to the leader's actions. Essential tasks of cultural leadership include influencing the structure of reality and clarifying the more profound meanings of the work. When staff participate, interpret, and give meanings to the leader's activities, all dimensions of a broad-based pedagogical leadership become visible in the process (Lahtero et al. 2021). The change is possible if the leader allows the staff to use their creativity and knowledge to find new solutions. The connection between all the broad-based pedagogical leadership dimensions is essential; when the leader considers all the dimensions, he/she can be called a highly qualified leader and the organisation is well-led (Fonsén and Lahtero in press).

Methodology

The purpose of this research was to examine the views of Finnish ECE leaders on the opportunities, challenges, and meanings of pedagogical leadership during the exceptional times of spring 2020. We looked at the topic through two questions.

First, we asked how Finnish ECE leaders described the meanings of pedagogical leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. And then further looked at the opportunities and challenges that could be identified in relation to the framework of broad-based pedagogical leadership?

The data were collected in February 2021 as a part of a research project on the COVID-19 pandemic and ECE (Nurhonen, Chydenius and Lipponen 2021). The survey was sent to the local ECE administrations in 146 municipalities. It was forwarded to leaders working in public and private ECE centres. In total, 679 leaders representing 120 municipalities responded to the survey. Respondents were from public (n = 433) and private (n = 59) ECE centres. In this research, we focused on written responses to an open-ended question concerning pedagogical leadership: What effects have the coronavirus-related exceptional circumstances had on pedagogical leadership? Please respond about the following resulting from the exceptional circumstances a) opportunities and b) challenges. Of the respondents, 72% (n = 492) answered at least one of these (a or b).

This research was based on a qualitative approach and theory-based content analysis method. The analysis was conducted deductively using the broad-based pedagogical leadership research framework. Qualitative content analysis is a systematic process of coding (Assarroudi et. al. 2018). In theory-based analysis, the data are coded according to the definitions of concepts in scientific theory (Potter and Levine-Donnerstein 1999). Data management and analysis were undertaken using Atlas.ti 9 (2021). The first step was to classify the data set according to the broad-based pedagogical leadership framework. In the second and third rounds, we constructed more specific classifications of dimension contents.

Findings

Exceptional times awakened a wide range of emotions and experiences in ECE leaders. Some leaders raised the same issues as both an opportunity and a challenge to pedagogical leadership. ECE leaders' responses are summarised in the context of broad-based pedagogical leadership dimensions in Table 1.

Broad-based pedagogical leaderships dimensions		Opportunities (n)	Difficulties (n)
TECHNICAL LEADERSHIP	Shifts and meeting procedures	4	66
	Distance work	19	12
Indirect pedagogical leadership	Strategic resourcing and budgeting	265	217
Leading structures and conditions for daily operations	Administrative decisions and related routines	2	15
	Annual year-plan and action plans	7	7
Direct **PEDAGOGICAL LEADERSHIP**	Strategic management	164	140
	Pedagogical discussions and alignments	64	72
Leading learning and learning processes	Agreed guidelines (values)	16	6
HUMAN LEADERSHIP	Leading of competence and capabilities	150	72
Indirect pedagogical leadership	Leading interaction	25	134
	Supporting staff	11	89
Leading human resources	The presence of a leader at the centre	23	51

Table 1. Distribution of responses (n = 492) into dimensions of broad-based pedagogical leadership.

Direct pedagogical leadership

Some leaders felt they had more time for pedagogical leadership; others felt they did not have time as much as before the pandemic. Many ECE centres focused on the basic dimensions of pedagogy, attendance, and engagement with children. In a few ECE centres, teachers also designed and prepared materials for distance learning and pre-school education.

Many leaders highlighted that reduced participation in ECE made it easier to achieve the goals of ECE. Small group activities were strengthened at many centres, and outdoor pedagogy was better realised. With lower attention rates of children, it was also possible to focus better on children's needs for support and to engage in pedagogical discussions on issues related to child development. At some ECE centres, pedagogy and activities disappeared entirely, and leaders were forced to justify the goals of ECE and the importance of pedagogical activities. The attitudes and professional competence of the staff also posed challenges.

> Also, the loss of all the excess of so-called daily pedagogy has repeatedly taught staff to stop at the child and essential tasks. (Leader_117)

Leaders provided symbolic meanings in the dimensions of direct pedagogical leadership to highlight differences in the workload experienced by leaders and the way they lead their ECE centre. In some centres, pedagogical leadership was emphasised more strongly than in others. Some leaders had more time to talk to the staff and developed work culture and pedagogy together. However, many leaders felt that there was less time for pedagogical leadership than before. A few leaders raised the values to be discussed in the work community. They saw the low number of children as a contributing factor because it was now possible to implement activities in line with the curriculum for ECE.

> It seemed that all spring, "we talked pedagogy"! (Leader_503)

> Uncertainty about the necessity of pedagogy increased in the spring. For what are plans needed? Will the groups open? Will children come back to preschool? Uncertainty about the future. (Leader_156)

Technical leadership – indirect pedagogical leadership

Strategic resourcing employed leaders a lot because previous practices had to be re-evaluated and operations considering COVID-19 restrictions had to be planned. Leaders felt the expansion in digitality and re-examining structures both as an opportunity (n = 265) and a challenge (n = 212) to ECE development. The widespread use of digital devices for meetings and participation in professional development courses was considered to be a good development. Distance meetings and education saved time.

The distance meetings also allowed more centres to be engaged simultaneously, having the same information. The discussions together had a cohesive impact on the working culture. However, the leaders perceived that distance meetings affected interaction and on the quality of discussions. Many felt that discussions in distance meetings were not profound enough. Some leaders mentioned that the meetings were taken up addressing changed COVID-19 practices and guidelines. At some ECE centres, regular meetings were not held during the spring but were postponed until the following autumn.

> The meetings have come to fruition by using the distance meetings -- Meetings stay on schedule and are thus more effective. Professional development courses have been completed remotely. (Leader_287)

> Not all new ideas have been taken into the field because of the lack of joint discussion forums. You cannot handle everything in distance meetings (Leader_158)

In spring 2020, many children stayed home for an extended duration, which was reflected in a decline in the participation rate in ECE. ECE centres devoted time to developing staff competence, joint pedagogical discussions, work cul-

ture, and learning environment development. The time was also used to improve everyday structures responding to the needs of COVID-19. Some ECE centres planned normal daily pedagogical activities and completed pedagogical plans. Annual plans and action plans were handled at few ECE centres. In some centres, the time was used to clean up the premises.

> During the exceptional period in the spring, when there were few children in the ECE centre, there was time to do unfinished work with the staff -- and discussing what is essential for staff and children. (Leader_637)

ECE leaders reflected on the benefits of distance meetings. They felt that distance working allowed uninterrupted and more efficient work time than when working at the ECE centre. Although leaders said they benefited from the opportunities provided by distance working, they felt it was not a workable way to lead because they were not present and available for their staff.

Due to the reduced number of children at some ECE centres, many staff members could also do distance work. Some leaders raised the challenges of designing valuable and beneficial distance work for the staff. Many teachers wrote pedagogical documents and made pedagogical plans. Time was also spent reading professional literature and education and discussing those with others.

A few leaders mentioned the difficulties of increasing administrative decisions, related routines of organising everyday life, and budgeting. Some leaders had to spend much time working on shift planning and the centres' time arrangements. Following the guidelines from the ECE administration led to controversial feelings, as the staff were forced to have holidays in spring instead of the preferred season, summer. Some of ECEs were also subject to layoffs. Staff absences caused significant problems when qualified replacements were not obtained, and those who were working were forced to be resilient.

> Even before the corona, it was difficult to recruit qualified staff and, with the coronavirus, a lack of resources, and constant absences ate up those on the scene. (Leader_100)

Human leadership – indirect pedagogical leadership

The increased distance education opportunities and more time allowed ECE staff to participate in professional development courses. At some ECE centres, the knowledge achieved from education and the reflections and knowledge that aroused reading literature were shared with other staff members. Staff strengths, competencies, and specific competence were also shared in the work community.

> What we reflect on is learning from each other and having things in common. Because few children were attending, especially in the spring of 2020, it gave us time for this. (Leader_612)

At some of the ECE centres, there was staff fatigue. There was no energy and resources for everyone to participate in professional development. On the other hand, some leaders felt that there was too much distance professional development provision. Several courses were also made compulsory at the municipal level. Leaders hoped the learning would be put into practice, which would have taken time to think and plan things together after the education and training sessions.

At ECE centres where cooperation was accustomed to cross-group cooperation, COVID-19 pandemic restrictions were perceived to be weakening cooperation. Leaders also raised the issue of commitment to work. Some of the staff were committed and did much to promote the pedagogical activities. Some did not get their basic work done.

> I feel that most groups operate according to a survival principle. It's also annoying that you can't collaborate with other groups and come up with mundane stuff that you get used to. (Leader_64)

Many leaders spoke about the importance of leading workplace interaction in exceptional times. Leaders stressed the importance of having a conversational culture for a shared vision and shared pedagogical activities and development, and well-being. The conversation increased in some work communities, and staff got to know each other better. Yet, some ECE centres turned out to be the exact opposite. Conversation culture diminished, and no time and place were found for shared encounters.

> Scarce resources and limited interest mean that work communities do not have a common forum to discuss issues. There have been no joint gatherings and organising them is challenging. (Leader_32)

The COVID-19 caused uncertainty and fear. Many staff lacked energy and strength, and the motivation needed for work. Leaders thought it was important to encourage and motivate staff, listen to and discuss their concerns. Challenges were caused by uncertainty, tolerance, mental load, and many emotions brought about by the changing situations. The leaders placed great importance on presence and accessibility within their centre. Leading by example and the readiness to discuss issues to consider with staff influenced the work community positively. The COVID-19 restrictions created challenges and meant the leader could not visit groups as before. Also, running more than one ECE centre caused absences from centres.

> When the COVID-19 shock struck, people kind of collapsed. As a leader, I encouraged the staff – it was essential to be there at the ECE centre to hear what is being discussed. Attendance was most important at this point. (Leader_18)

Discussion

These research data were collected almost a year after the onset of the exceptional times in Finland. When examining the results of this research, one must consider that research questions have been part of a more extensive survey, in which case respondents may not have repeated all of their previous responses. ECE leaders spoke of their views about pedagogical leadership during exceptional times during the spring of 2020. All leaders remarked on the importance of direct pedagogical leadership, but many did not find the time for it or felt there were insufficient staff resources. Resource shortages were caused by sickness absences and difficulties in recruiting competent and capable staff. This is worrying because, as The Early Childhood Education Act (540/2018) emphasises, leading pedagogy is one of the essential key responsibilities in the ECE leader's job. Also, according to many studies, pedagogical leadership affects the quality of the ECE centre's teaching and pedagogy practices (Cheung et al. 2019; Fonsén et al. 2020; Strehmel 2016).

Researchers have highlighted learning and the leadership of related processes as one of the essential tasks of an educational organisation's leadership. Determining common goals, maintaining discussion, and agreeing on pedagogical policies are essential parts of the leader's work (Fonsén and Lahtero in press; Lahtero and Laasonen 2021; Lahtero and Kuusilehto-Awale 2015). ECE centres, which had a shared view, a shared culture of values and activities, and open discussion before the exceptional times, worked better than centres at which the working culture had not developed adequately. The importance of the value debate was raised in the responses of some leaders. Fonsén (2013; 2014) has argued that values play a significant role in all activities of an educational organisation.

In the human resources dimension, leaders highlighted the importance of the staff's motivation, well-being, education and training, and their own presence in the centre to support staff. The leaders raised the need for professional development, yet at the same time, many leaders perceived that there was too much distance education already. It is essential that the leader is clear about the individual needs of the staff and knows how to support their motivation, competence and capacity building (see Fogarty 2020; Fonsén and Lahtero in press; Lahtero and Laasonen 2021; Lahtero and Kuusilehto-Awale 2015). Moreover, through development discussions, the leaders can support and encourage their staff regarding professional development, and that can be of great importance, especially for those who are hesitant to educate themselves further. The pedagogical leaders' role is also to lead work-community interactions and discussion culture. According to several studies, communication and atmosphere are significant to a solid and functional educational organisation (Ahtiainen et al. in press; Beauchamp et al. 2021; Hargreaves and Fullan 2020).

Leading competence and capacity building emphasises a broad-based pedagogical leadership framework (Lahtero et al. 2021).

The leaders highlighted that the exceptional times had affected the wider exploitation of digitality in ECE centres. Specifically, this came to light in both dimensions of indirect leadership, technical and human leadership. Distance meetings and education should be viewed critically, and the meanings, necessities, and implications of using ECE for quality implementation need to be evaluated. As the number of educational distance webinars and course offerings increases, one also needs to look at the quality of these programs and how learning benefits the staff and the ECE centre. When developing the competencies of the work community as a whole and individual staff member, critical evaluation of the competence and personal development required by the ECE centre should be critically assessed. Technical leadership has an essential role in leading an educational organisation (Fonsén and Lahtero in press). The leader should consider how resources are used.

Leaders noted the effect of the reduced number of children as an enhancer of pedagogical activity. It would be essential to find out how decreased numbers of children affected staff working and the pedagogy of teams. To achieve the ECE objectives, the leader should pay attention to strategic management, content, and quality of pedagogical discussions and the guidelines and shared values (see Fonsén and Lahtero in press; Lahtero and Laasonen 2021; Lahtero and Kuusilehto-Awale 2015). In addition, the leader supports quality through symbolic leadership by strengthening the shared views of the working community (Akselin 2013), guiding confidential interactions, engaging staff, and giving meanings to issues and events (Fonsén and Lahtero in press). Successful leadership requires considering all the broad-based pedagogical leadership framework dimensions (see Fonsén and Lahtero in press).

The meanings given by leaders to pedagogical leadership in exceptional times are shown via the dimensions of broad-based pedagogical leadership, through which changing practices and limitations affect all its dimensions. Distance meetings and education and low attendance rates of children were described as factors facilitating ECE centre processes. ECE centres, which had shared visions and values, and functional structures for pedagogical discussion and teaching before, developed their processes even more in exceptional times. A skilled pedagogical leader was able to solve the challenges of exceptional times into opportunities.

This research was implemented when the COVID-19 pandemic had affected in Finland for one year. ECE leaders encountered many challenges and opportunities, which influenced leadership and the activities of the ECE centre. Further research could explore whether these challenges and opportunities have changed the activities of ECE leaders and what topics the leaders would highlight in new changing situations.

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Leadership in Early Childhood Education during a Time of Crisis: The Case of Sweden

Maria Styf & Catarina Arvidsson

Abstract

Previous research describes the assignment of a formal leader in Early Childhood Education (ECE) settings as a balancing act between being an administrative manager who creates opportunities in the organisation and a pedagogical leader who creates a good learning environment for both teachers and children, with trust and collaboration as key elements. The leadership role is described as distributed leadership in which professional staff are important (Palaiologou et al. 2022). The aim of this chapter is to illuminate and understand how ten Swedish ECE principals describe their leadership during a time of crisis, in this case the COVID-19 pandemic. The research questions asked were: How do the principals describe and reflect on their leadership, management and leading change during a crisis? Can the principals' descriptions of leadership be understood as trust-based, distributed, pedagogical leadership? Ten interviews were conducted through an online platform (Zoom). During the COVID-19 pandemic there were no lockdowns in Sweden that affected ECE settings. Nevertheless, activities were re-arranged, for example all meetings with parents took place outdoors or digitally and almost all the pre-school activities were conducted outside, which has led to more advanced teaching in the outdoor environment. In most cases, the heads of ECE centres worked in home offices and our findings show that leadership during the COVID-19 crisis entailed leading remotely, which meant that staff became more autonomous and the leader was able to focus on pedagogical issues rather than minor administrative matters. On the other hand, conflicts between the conflicts sometimes arose when the leader was not close by to see and address such conflicts in time. Leaders have become more digitally available and aware. Leadership skills have had to become more refined, and maintaining continuity and acting as a role model have become key issues for ECE leaders to create a sense of security and trust. Another key issue was receiving clear information and communication from municipalities and ECE leaders regarding the COVID regulations and how these applied. This was essential and enabled the head and their staff to deal with their own and the parents' questions and concerns. Trust-

based, distributed, pedagogical leadership was essential to cope during crisis caused by the pandemic.

Keywords: early childhood education, pedagogical leadership, distributed leadership, trust-based leadership, COVID-19

Introduction

As has been discussed elsewhere in this book, the ongoing COVID-19 crisis has hit humanity all over the world and affected people's health and social well-being during 2020/21, and it still continues. Children in Early Childhood Education (ECE) are no exception. Every country handled the crisis and ECE activities differently. The crisis has affected the assignment and roles of leaders in ECE settings and altered the conditions underpinning the principal's work all around the world (Pollock 2020).

In Sweden precautions and social distancing were the key measures taken during the pandemic, which is a strategy based on trust (Ahlström, Leo, Nordqvist, and Isling 2021). To handle and prevent the spread of the infection, Sweden's approach has entailed substantial personal responsibility and alignment with the recommendations and regulations of the Public Health Agency (PHA) of Sweden. All ECE settings[1] in Sweden stayed open throughout the pandemic on the basis that this was crucial for small children's development and well-being. According to the PHA, ECE settings are also important for society's ability to function. In the beginning of the pandemic, the youngest children were not viewed as the main group causing the spread of the virus and the personnel working in ECE settings were not perceived to be at high risk of infection compared to other professions (Public Health Agency 2020).

During the pandemic the requirements for leading ECE settings changed and, whilst there were no lockdowns in Sweden, each setting was obliged to take precautionary measures to ensure safe meetings, in accordance with the restrictions and general guidelines. For example, all meetings with guardians took place outdoors or digitally and most activities were conducted outside. Those changes have led to more advanced teaching in the outdoor environment for many ECE settings. Meanwhile, principals mostly worked remotely in their own homes for precautionary reasons, with working and leading remotely having both negative and positive effects. Being a formal leader has been a challenge during this time of crisis and the crisis has changed some of the prerequisites for leadership and leadership practices (Harris, 2020).

1 In Sweden the term used is 'pre-school', but for the purposes of continuity throughout the book, in this chapter we refer to 'ECE settings' or 'ECE centres'.

The aim of this chapter is to illuminate and understand how ten Swedish ECE principals describe their leadership during a time of crisis, in this case the COVID-19 pandemic. The research questions asked were: How do the principals describe and reflect on their leadership, management and leading change during a crisis? Can the principals' descriptions of leadership be understood as trust-based, distributed, pedagogical leadership?

Leadership in Swedish ECE settings – a contextual description

ECE in Sweden is the first step in the educational system for children from 1 year to 5 years of age. ECE is voluntary and starts with general ECE settings for children from the age of 3, or from the age of 1 if this is necessary because their guardians work, study or need help meeting the child's needs. From the age of 3 years, every child has the right to three hours a day of public ECE attendance free of charge, even if the parent is on parental leave or is unemployed. The municipality or education provider determines the fees for those who need to attend for more hours. The Educational Act (2010:800) states that fees must be reasonable, and they are therefore calculated based on income with a maximum fee. The municipality is responsible for, and is obligated to provide, ECE. Both municipal and independent ECE settings exist. Independent ECE settings may be run as parental or staff cooperatives, by a foundation or by a limited-liability company, however they are subject to the same regulations as for municipal ECE settings. Municipalities approve independent ECE providers and are responsible for ensuring that their activities fulfil the quality and safety requirements. ECE settings operate on goal-based systems stipulated by the Swedish parliament, and the government draws up the overall national goals in accordance with the Education Act (2010:800) and the Curricula for ECE (Swedish National Agency for Education 2018). The ECE settings also have local goals from the municipalities or the local board of independent ECE settings.

ECE leadership and management in Sweden

In Sweden and internationally, ECE settings are regarded as an important educational institution and good leadership is seen as a prerequisite to high quality in these institutions. Being an ECE leader is a complex mission entailing responsibility for financial issues, personnel, pedagogical management and ad-

ministration (Arvidsson, and Styf 2021). To successfully manage this complexity, it is mandatory for all Swedish principals to participate in the national school leadership program (30 credits, studied over three years). The purpose of ECE has changed in the revised curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education 2018), towards a clearer focus on education and teaching. This has provided clearer direction for the professional assignment of ECE principals in terms of the school's institutionalised concepts, education and teaching. The revised curriculum describes that the ECE teacher has management responsibility for the rest of the team with a focus on the teaching. These changes clarify the objective of each professional group and the management of the ECE centres. This means that the principal has become further away from leading pedagogical development in direct activities, and has shifted to a more management-based role.

As mentioned, the responsibility of the principal of the ECE centre entails a more general supervisory role in terms of the education. ECE teachers are responsible for the actual teaching; the head of the ECE centre (the principal) is responsible for the quality of the ECE centre and making sure that education is steered towards the national goals. In other words, the principal's mission is to create the best possible conditions for education, teaching and care through systematic quality work. Håkansson (2019) describes that ECE principals perceive a dilemma in relation to the municipal systems for systematic quality work and their own freedom to develop and improve quality. In research by Lunneblad and Garvis (2017) on the leadership of ECE centres, ECE managers describe themselves as the coach, manager and organiser and an overall boss with a desire for distributed leadership. The various responsibilities for the quality and financial performance of the ECE centres (and obligations towards guardians and the municipality) make leadership difficult to manage (Lunneblad, and Garvis, 2017).

Leading throughout a crisis with trust-based, distributed, pedagogical leadership

In a book chapter regarding a project in which England, Greece and Sweden collaborated (Palaiologou, Male, Ince, Argyropoulou, Styf, and Arvidsson 2022) the leadership practice is described similarly to the description by Lunneblad and Garvis (2017), that is, distributed leadership wherein a professional team or group of employees is important for development and change. The assignment of educational leaders is described by Palaiologu et al. (2022) as a balancing act between being an administrative manager who creates opportunities in the organisation and someone who creates a good learning environment for teachers and children. Trust and cooperation are essential elements

of this mission. The authors' conceptualisation of pedagogical leadership was in line with Palaiologou and Male (2019), namely praxis that is responsive to contextual and psychological factors and dimensions. This praxis changed during the pandemic as the conditions for leadership changed (Pollock 2020). For example the relationship between leaders and followers was tested in this situation. Being a leader requires treading a fine balance between power and trust in a constant state of motion. Sørhaug (1996) express this balancing act in this way:

> Leadership is of course first and foremost a relation. It is based on a mandate, but the mandate is a living social process of power and trust that the leaders both are given and must take. It is a vertical relationship that is open at both ends. Leaders get and take power and trust both from above and below. This continuous exchange process turns leadership into perpetual motion (Sørhaug 1996, 45, [translation from Liljenberg 2015, 30]).

Literature describes trust-based leadership as being open with information, delegating to allow room for manoeuvre, ensuring professional support, collaborating and disseminating knowledge development and learning (SOU 2018:38). The question is whether the core of leadership can be defined as trust-based leadership in times of crisis. Nevertheless, trust is also a key element in various definitions in which leadership is defined as a social process in a leadership practice (Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2004). Trust is also a key ingredient in distributed leadership. For example, Liljenberg (2018) discusses trust in staff who initiate actions that support the local change and improvement work. One factor varies in the leadership practice triangle though (see Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond 2004), and that is the situation where the leadership takes place. In other words, the leadership of ECE settings was shifted to a virtual world which affected the relation between leaders and followers in positive and negative ways.

Harris (2020) states that COVID-19 has changed the understanding of leadership and its practice, as leaders were separated physically and disconnected from their followers, shifting to remote digital leadership in which there is no way to know the next step nor when it ends. According to Harris, now more than ever interaction in shared and collaborative work is important to 'get the job done' (2020, 325). Heikka (2014), whose research is set in a Finnish ECE context, describes shared leadership, that is distributed leadership, as distributed pedagogical leadership with interdependence between leadership enactments with the purpose of pedagogical improvement. Heikka's (2014) research contributes a valuable perspective to the discussion regarding the results of this study. Her perspective gives a broader understanding of the concept of distributed leadership on the one hand and provides a more targeted perspective on the other. It is broader in the sense of levels of interdependence between stakeholders yet gives more precise direction to the mission of a pedagogical leader of a pedagogical organisation. Her perspective is valuable since leader-

ship during the COVID-19 pandemic entailed both 'business as usual' in terms of meeting expectations for pedagogical improvement and at the same time, handling a crisis with fast-changing circumstances impacting the day-to-day activities.

Method

This chapter is based on the results of ten semi-structured interviews with the principals of Swedish ECE centres. The principals were contacted by e-mail and invited to take part in the study. The interviews were conducted during the first half of 2021. The principals work in ECE centres located from the north-west to the south-west of Sweden, some in larger cities and others in sparsely populated areas. Nine of the interviewees work as principals in municipal ECE centres and one works in a privately operated ECE centre. The interviews lasted about 30-50 minutes and were conducted through an online platform (Zoom). All participants were informed about the research ethics guidelines in the email and at the start of the interviews. To ensure the confidentiality of the participants, all interviews were coded and numbered. The interviews evolved around the following topics:

- ECE leaders' perceptions of crises
- Leaders' response/s to crises
- How contextual changes and constraints impacted effective leadership
- Whether leaders changed their leadership style and/or modified their skills to meet new challenges and adapt to new circumstances
- Lessons learned

The key findings in this chapter were extracted from a thematic analysis (Richards, 2009). During the process of analysis, a mutual matrix was used to collect and sort condensed statements from the interviews (see Graneheim and Lundman 2004). The results of the study are presented as overall themes from the interviews, first covering leadership and management and secondly, leading change during a time of crisis. The sub-headings reflect our conclusions as sub-themes based on the results of the analysis. The Findings section reflects upon the first research question: How do the principals describe and reflect on their leadership, management and leading change during a crisis? In the Discussion section, we reflect upon the second question: Can the principals' descriptions of leadership be understood as trust-based, distributed, pedagogical leadership?

Findings

In this section the findings are presented in three main parts. The first part is an introduction to the principals' descriptions of leadership and management in a time of crisis. The second part covers leading change and the last describes the lessons learned from leading and managing during a crisis.

Leadership and management during crises

The interviews revealed that several aspects changed the conditions that dictate how ECE principals lead and manage their organisations during this low-intensity crisis, as they described it. One principal referred to it as 'boiling a frog'.

> The crisis has been long and low-intensity, you get used to it, like boiling a frog, it's about expectations and development. In the beginning everyone was on their toes, and thought it was a state of emergency and us against this crisis. But the more time goes by, you get tired, and you turn on each other and there are conflicts. You stop thinking "good enough" and start placing the same demands on yourself and the teachers. Guardians get pandemic-weary and think that a bit of a runny nose is not the end of the world. (Principal 8)

Despite this, according to the principals improvements have been achieved in a variety of areas in their ECE centres during this time, such as digitalization (how to organise meetings and information, crisis management, etc.). The crisis has required everyone to think outside the box and deal with things differently than before. The principals also expressed that all the professional groups in the ECE centres had to become more professional in their behaviours, as this principal explains.

> They have developed professionalism around the situation, it has been great. I would not say that, but it has been a good experience for my organisation… And we have forced ourselves to become more professional. (Principal 10)

However, one major negative factor that was expressed by several of the principals in more socially challenged areas was the impact of the pandemic on the development of the children, and mainly the linguistic development. In these areas children stayed at home for long periods of time and the principals were concerned about their development and their opportunities to start school under good conditions. According to two principals, even though there were fewer children in ECE centres the number of concerns reported increased. This may partially be due to some guardians losing their jobs which affected their well-

being, and also that many family members were at home in close quarters for a long time. This is an example from one concerned principal.

> In general, this has meant that our children have had deteriorating conditions growing up because many have been home for a long time…They may have [learnt] zero Swedish. And not met so many people, so I think this may cause problems in the long run for our children in our area because many have lost a year in Swedish society. It does not have to mean they will fail, but it does impact our children. (Principal 10)

In the next section we focus on the prominent factors in the sub-themes from the interviews that illuminated leadership, management and change.

Leadership of trust

Leadership in ECE centres during a time of crisis was described by the interviewees as leadership of trust. The leaders described a number factors that were relevant to how they led and managed during a crisis that were consistently needed in order to gain trust. These factors were important in both low-intensity crises, like the pandemic, and in short high-intensity crises, like gang shootings and terrorist attacks. The factors are clarity, continuity and being a role model.

Clarity was referred to by all the principals in terms of clarity of leadership, clarity of information, and clarity of and from management. According to the principals, clarity creates trust both upwards and downwards through the system and it was mentioned as a sign of professionalism in leadership. This principal described it as follows:

> We have worked with clarity and confidence, but as a leader I had a boost in my own development because I have had to be more professional as well. A big push forward. It has affected the entire leadership. (Principal 10)

Clarity and being constant and consistent in leadership throughout the pandemic reduced anxiety and created trust in the principal as leader among parents and staff. At the same time, the clarity around 'what' and 'why' shifted based on the differences and needs of the staff. The principal quoted below, who was relatively new to her job, explained the differences in her leadership and management that were needed during the pandemic.

> I can be a leader in four different ways; some need guidance management and others I have confidence in. Some people needed more guidance. The difference between what I need to be and what they need from me varies in the four ECE centres. (Principal 9)

Many principals believed that clarity was an important factor for increased trust, according to them greater clarity meant fewer conflicts with guardians. In most cases, guardians understood the seriousness of the situation. Providing clear guidelines that applied for everyone and referring to the responsible government authority facilitated the dialogue and reduced conflicts. However, our results show that there were differences between the more affluent areas and the more socially challenged areas. In more affluent areas where, according to two of the principals, guardians considered themselves to be more indispensable in their workplaces (for example if they were doctors), it was more difficult for the teachers to argue that the children should stay at home, despite their having symptoms.

As mentioned in the introduction to this section, principals who worked in more socially challenged areas noted that guardians kept the children at home for longer which led to concerns about the children lagging behind linguistically and developmentally. In these cases, using simpler Swedish to convey information and phoning the guardians were measures used to help them understand and created confidence to let the children return to the ECE centres. Another ECE centre adopted special measures for children who were at risk of lagging behind. The principal quoted below was concerned about the children's language development.

> For the children [it is] a big change to come back and many of those who have been away for a long time are the foreign children who need to be at the ECE centre for the language. We don't have the same language development. We have [to make] efforts to catch up (Principal 9).

In other areas, as reflected by other principals – some of whom work in sparsely populated municipalities and some in larger cities, and with guardians from neither affluent nor socially challenged areas – there was a great deal of acceptance by guardians about the guidelines enforced during this period. As previously mentioned, according to the principals this was due to the clarity of the information given. As this principal explained, clear information led to fewer questions.

> Clarity from the ECE centre and the municipality has contributed to [the lack of] conflict with guardians and [confirmed] that this is happening all over the world. It is not just happening here. (Principal 7)

'Role model' is another term that was used. In their roles as leaders, principals needed to be role models for their staff in terms of how they handled restrictions, took precautions and kept to the agreed-upon rules. Clarity, consistency and being a role model were three recurring concepts related to creating a sense of security and availability for both teachers and guardians. Moreover, according to the principals these three concepts were essential tools for dealing with this type of low-intensity crisis.

Remote management, being near in time and space

All principals apart from one described that they worked from home in compliance with central decisions. They were always available to their staff by text message, phone or online meetings, and on a few occasions, they were physically present at their ECE centres. Many stated that another reason for working from home was that they were afraid of infecting their staff as under normal circumstances, many of the principals travel to several ECE centres. One of the principals worked in her ECE office. She rationalized this by saying that there was a need to be there for her staff if problems arose.

> We felt we needed to be there. [Ask] how are you doing, can we help? (Principal 8)

Relationship building was mentioned as both an opportunity and a challenge. It presented opportunities for the staff to become more autonomous and self-confident to make decisions and develop trust in their own professionalism. In some cases it created challenges, especially for principals trying to lead work from their home office. One principal mentioned this as being particularly challenging.

> I rarely sit down with the team. We do it digitally. As a leader, I'm further away from the employees. If trouble arises anywhere, I'm not there to deal with it directly as a leader with daily dialogue and small talk. Relationship building is more difficult at a distance. It is the part that does not function when we work remotely. (Principal 4)

One of the principals mentioned that being allowed to work from home was crucial for her to manage her leadership.

> If the manager [had not been] clear that the principal would not be at the ECE centre, I probably would not have stood on my feet now. Not having to go to the center was a salvation. (Principal 6)

Working from home also helped this principal realise that she does not always need to be physically present to lead. Leading staff groups remotely was a process of growth for some of the groups that took greater professional responsibility for their ECE centre. In other cases, it sometimes led to conflicts when a leader was not near the staff group and thus did not have the opportunity to notice conflict areas between staff members.

According to the interviewees, one advantage of working from home was the lack of commute that was otherwise part of many of their everyday jobs. This saved a lot of time and allowed them to focus on development issues or to keep up with the extra work that the pandemic entailed. This work involved matters such as ongoing communication with guardians and staff, as well as emergency planning and crisis management that continuously evolved. Many principals stated that they will continue with online meetings after the pan-

demic to some extent, as they allow for guardians and staff to participate in important meetings.

Communication and information for safety and trust

During the interviews, everyone mentioned that information was a key factor and that it was an invaluable tool in a crisis. Furthermore, irrespective of the crisis situation, continuous information and communication were emphasized as being prerequisites for creating security and trust.

> Information…we inform, inform, inform to be proactive and transparent… and a lot of information, we got very good support, things that were already prepared that we could send out, so it was nice. Information is a good tool, as much information as possible and transparency, and it is appreciated that you will not be more worried but less if we can say what we're doing and why. (Principal 8)

In regard to information, interviewees pointed out the value of being able to refer to information that was similarly formulated for everyone as it came from the central administration. They also described that having clear guidelines to refer to when questions arose from staff and guardians was also helpful. This helped leaders because they did not have to formulate information themselves.

> It has been easy to contact HR and the head of school, and the information about corona [virus], how we should behave and that it's the same for all ECE centres… it has come centrally, and we have not had to 'reinvent the wheel'. (Principal 8)

The fact that everyone received the same information and guidelines also reduced the number of questions from guardians. The staff felt more secure when they could refer to central decisions or to the principal if guardians did not accept the current regulations. In most cases, the informing and communication took place digitally in various online forums. In some cases, as mentioned earlier, material was translated into the relevant language for guardians or information was given in simpler Swedish.

In some municipalities, other staff were made available to support the principal, in addition to the head of school, such as a medical director, a manager in charge of the COVID-19 procedures, a security director, a special-needs teacher or a psychologist. They supported the principals in various issues. A management team consisting of other principals was also seen as a further essential source of strength, as the principals were able to discuss thoughts and ideas and get a great deal of support. The principals expressed that they were well supported, although some felt pressured to continue with business as usual when it came to change and improvement work. This is described in the next section.

Leading change in times of crisis

This section describes the interviewees' experiences and thoughts of being a leader in an ECE centre and leading change in times of crisis. Interviewees expressed that they wanted to keep improvement work going despite the ongoing pandemic. Perhaps this can be understood as a desire for some kind of normality in the midst of the crisis. One principal expressed it as follows:

> Our systematic quality work is something to hold on to so that the children still get what they are entitled to, even though the world is turbulent or the situation is around us is turbulent, so this was also a lesson learned. (Principal 2)

The results thus show that principals were eager to maintain a high level of ambition despite the pandemic. However, it is also clear that they sometimes inevitably had to lower their ambitions. One example was the need to decrease the teaching ambitions of ECE and concentrate on providing good care to the children.

> We start with…. How can we make the children's day safe, what kind of meaningful day will they have today? (Principal 3)

A recurring image that emerges of principals' work during the pandemic is an overall responsibility for reorganization and the need to solve acute problems. As previously mentioned, Swedish ECE centres remained open during the pandemic, but activities were conducted outdoors far more. Principals' responsibilities were thus modified to support teachers in reorganising and conducting successful activities and teaching as well possible, despite the circumstances. When teachers were concerned, it was important for the principals to be available to discuss solutions, sometimes on a daily basis.

According to some principals, maintaining some focus on continued improvement may be helpful in crises. On the other hand, some found it difficult and felt it was wrong to demand efforts for improvement when so many other urgent changes had to be dealt with. The following quote illustrates this struggle.

> I think I have had a hard time holding back and thinking like this. We cannot demand improvement in a low-intensity crisis, because that is what we have. You cannot ask for it, but I think we might have achieved it anyway. (Principal 8).

A further matter that principals had to deal with during the crisis was a higher degree of expectations from management and guardians. This led to an increased workload and to new tasks for both principals and teachers.

> The pressure has been higher, we are doing things we have not done before.…The workload has increased during some periods, but not all the time. (Principal 4)

Our material demonstrates that principals sometimes experienced a higher workload. Some also criticised and expressed disappointment with the central administration for having too high expectations to keep on operating as usual. The different ECE centres represented in our study suffered to very different degrees from illness, but it is clear that the pandemic nevertheless meant increased efforts and changed working conditions for everyone. This also led to some lessons being learnt and these are presented in the next section.

Lesson learned

The principals included in this study are spread across a large area of Sweden. Some of them lead ECE centres in large cities, some in small or medium-sized cities, and others in smaller towns or rural areas. The results reveal differences in their workplace conditions that can be linked to contextual and socio-economic conditions. Those differences made it necessary for the principals to deal with the crisis in different ways. Another aspect that was central to working conditions was how seriously their respective ECE centres were affected. In some ECE centres, not many of the teachers were ill, others had very few illnesses amongst the children, and others stuck to the teaching and development work. Regardless of their circumstances, it is clear that cooperation was vital.

> ….so far, not so much impact. We have not had any cases [of COVID-19] in my organisation, which has allowed us to hold on and persevere well, to be able to continue teaching and other activities. However, we have had to help each other [between ECE centres] as well. (Principal 4)

Helping each other was thus pointed out as being necessary. Another way the centres dealt with the effects of the pandemic was to spend most of the time outdoors; much of the teaching that was previously conducted indoors moved outside. In most cases, this has led to an improvement in outdoor education. However, it was not easy, nor did it enable better teaching in all situations, as some activities are not deemed to be suitable for the outdoor format. One principal described it as follows.

> We are out a lot but miss [some] indoor activities. Most things can be done outside but small-group activities are difficult when there is so much more distraction outside than in a smaller room. Small stations, but [we have] lost working with small groups and to the detriment of individual children and their development. (Principal 5)

Our material indicates that spending more time outdoors and making the best of this situation is seen as one aspect of improvement. Another important area

of improvement that was pointed out concerns the use of digital tools. Since they were forced to use digital tools for social meetings, the skills of the personnel improved and resulted in effective meetings. It also led to other positive factors – online parent-teacher meetings have made it possible for parents, and sometimes, whole families to take part.

> Learning groups, digital meetings that you save time [with] and yet enable you to actually have collegial learning, or then as I said, that more people have attended the parent meetings than they otherwise would have done because then one [of the guardians comes]. It was like a whole family was with us. (Principal 8)

Discussion

This discussion focuses on the second research question: Can the principals' descriptions of leadership be understood as trust-based, pedagogical leadership. Trust was the key facet in the Swedish national COVID-19 strategies, which were based on people's trust in the state (Ahlström, Leo, Nordqvist, and Poromaa Isling 2021). In this study it is clear that trust was one of the key leadership strategies used to create a feeling of security. This strategy is both about trust in staff and about creating trust in themselves as leaders. As previously mentioned, trust-based leadership is about being open with information, allowing room for manoeuvre, ensuring professional support, collaborating and disseminating knowledge development and learning (SOU 2018:38). In many ways, this is similar to the ECE principals' descriptions of their leadership during the time of crisis of our study. Information and communication were mentioned repeatedly as key factors in handling a low-intensity crisis successfully. The principals also talked about having positive expectations and allowing room for manoeuvre in the organisation. The question is whether the core of the leadership approach identified in this study can be defined as trust-based, pedagogical leadership. The themes that emerge in this study are comparable with previous studies or perspectives on leadership, for example leadership practice (see Spillane, Halverson, and Dimond 2004). During the time of our study, the circumstances were different and challenging in many ways and relations between leaders and followers were different, digital and remote. This led to the emergence of different ways to handle the balance between power and trust as leadership was performed remotely. However, the attributes at the core of this leadership – clarity, consistency and acting as a role model for the follower – were essential to creating a sense of security and trust in praxis.

The research on distributed pedagogical leadership (Heikka 2014) helps us understand capacity building on several levels for pedagogical improvement

and leading change despite an ongoing crisis. Support from central administration was described as crucial by the principals in our study. When continuous, consistent information from a central administration was delivered to the principals and shared with staff and guardians there were almost 'no questions asked'. However, for some of the principals, the central administration expected 'business as usual' in regard to change and development work. Working with change during the crisis was thus an external pressure but appears sometimes to also be an internal force. An example of this was when a focus on quality improvement became something to hold on to for keeping the activities on track and focusing on something more stable than the ongoing crisis. In this study, interviewees describe ECE centres differently in terms of levels of capacity and ambition. Some mainly focused on keeping children safe and secure, some had the capacity for improvement, and others handled the crisis in the best way possible with an ongoing focus on pedagogical improvement.

Conclusions

The purpose of this chapter was to illuminate and understand how ten Swedish ECE principals describe their leadership during a time of crisis, in this case the COVID-19 pandemic. It is safe to say that leading, managing and conducting education was challenging for the principals. The conditions for leaders in ECE centres were demanding, with more work and new tasks. Nevertheless, this period made them and their staff more professional, forcing them to unite together to handle the pandemic and mitigate concerns and frustrations from guardians. They created new ways to meet and cooperate with guardians and carry out day-to-day activities.

Overall, the crisis has brought about positive pedagogical improvements but also some negative outcomes. In most of the ECE centres, the pandemic led to pedagogical improvement in outdoor teaching and better skills and routines for using digital tools. However, the higher workload and increased stress for the principals trying to keep things together cannot be neglected. The pandemic has according to some principals affected some children's development and learning, which is distressing and requires essential follow-up. This study consists of only ten ECE principals' descriptions and reflections on leading and managing during a crisis, which is a limitation and means the results cannot be generalized. However, the strength of this study is that it provides a picture from diverse areas of Sweden that differ geographically, in size of the community and socio-economically.

In conclusion, the period of the COVID-19 pandemic has been an intense time and it is not over yet. Leadership skills have had to become more refined, and ECE leaders had to lead from the front but needed support from central

administration and their staff. As a leader it has been crucial to practice trust-based, distributed leadership to manage through the crisis. This brings to mind a quotation from Nelson Mandela that summarises this chapter.

> 'It is better to lead from behind and to put others in front, especially when you celebrate victory when things occur. You take the front line when there is danger. Then people will appreciate your leadership'. (Nelson Mandela, in Quartz Africa)

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Leadership Development of Early Childhood Centre Leaders through Peer-to-Peer Shadowing in Demanding Times in Norway

Marit Bøe

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the leadership development of early childhood education (ECE) centre leaders through peer-to-peer shadowing introduced as an assignment in the Norwegian Leadership Programme for centre leaders when COVID-19 was disrupting the fulfilment of their everyday leadership duties. A qualitative hermeneutic study was conducted to gain insight into how the 24 centre leaders changed how they thought about and enacted their leadership after shadowing each other at work. The research question posed was the following: what changes did the ECE centre leaders refer to in their leadership thoughts and actions after shadowing each other at work? The study applied a distributed and hybrid leadership framework to investigate the leadership accomplishments resulting from the shadowing. This study builds on data collected from reflections that the participants wrote after the shadowing. On the basis of thematic analyses, three sub themes have been identified: changes regarding 1) coping with leadership flexibility, 2) social interaction with staff and 3) power relations. Research limitations and implications are discussed.

Key words: peer-to-peer shadowing, early childhood leadership development, leadership education, qualitative empirical research, COVID-19

Introduction

This study reports on an investigation into peer-to-peer shadowing employed in the National Leadership Programme for early childhood education (ECE) centre leaders in Norway. Peer-to-peer shadowing was initiated in response to the suggestion put forward in research that shadowing provides professionals with experiential learning opportunities that support leadership development

(Lalleman et al. 2017; Service, Dalgic, and Thornton 2018; Tulowitzki 2017). Furthermore, the study responds to the growing literature calling for investigation into more engaged approaches in leadership programmes that have the potential to develop centre leaders' ability to cope with leadership demands and thus change the way they work (Douglass 2019; Jensen, Bråten, and Svalund 2020).

The purpose of this study was to investigate ECE centre leaders' reported leadership development as the result of engagement with peer-to-peer shadowing in the National Leadership Programme offered at a university in Norway to enable the participants to better cope with leadership demands. The research question posed was as follows: what changes did the ECE centre leaders refer to in their leadership thoughts and actions after shadowing each other at work as part of their leadership education? A hermeneutic investigation was undertaken to study the written reflections of 24 centre leaders on their leadership learning and development as a result of the peer-to-peer shadowing.

The Norwegian Leadership Programme

The Norwegian Leadership Programme for ECE centre leaders is a nationwide leadership programme that has been offered by selected universities in Norway since 2011 and which was revised in 2020 to meet new leadership demands. It is a three-semester course (30 credits) at the master's level which the centre leaders enrol in part-time while continuing to work. The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training funds the places on the leadership programme, while the owners of the respective ECE centres pay for the participants' travel and expenses. The overall aim of the programme is to strengthen the leadership skills of centre leaders and contribute to quality improvement at ECE centres (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 2017). According to Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner (2017), effective professional development includes features such as learning in context, collaboration, the observations of peers, sharing of expertise, reflection and feedback, and reflection on changes in participants' practice. Therefore, experiential learning methods and peer learning are valuable for building new leadership practices. This research-informed knowledge accounts in part for the use of peer-to-peer shadowing in the leadership programme.

Peer-to-peer shadowing for leadership development

A variety of approaches to shadowing in professional development have been reported in the literature (see Tulowitzki 2017) for an overview of shadowing). In short, shadowing means following people wherever they are, whatever they are doing (Arman, Vie, and Åsvoll 2012, 301). Shadowing has been described variously for different purposes, such as 'work shadowing as a process for facilitating leadership succession in schools' (Simkins, Close, and Smith 2009), a 'method of promoting learning on placement' (Parker, Hughes, and Rutter 2006), 'on-the-job learning' and 'leadership learning intervention' (Service, Dalgic, and Thornton 2018), and 'as a means of understanding practice' (Hognestad and Bøe 2016). Furthermore, Lalleman et al. (2017) define shadowing as 'a technique for inquiry into current routines and norms of peers' expected to prompt reflection on variations in leadership actions and on roles, tasks and problem-solving strategies. As a 'collaborative structured learning experience', shadowing can provide 'a context for learning about professionals' situated knowledge and practice' (Hanuscin et al. 2021). Both during shadowing and after, collective reflection conversations can be framed by the issues arising from the activities observed as well as by broader issues that go beyond what was observed and by the context of leadership (Simkins, Close, and Smith 2009).

In peer-to-peer shadowing, the learning relationship is reciprocal (Lalleman et al. 2017), which differs from studies in which the novice practitioner shadows the more experienced leader (Roan and Rooney 2006; Service, Dalgic, and Thornton 2018; Simkins, Close, and Smith 2009; Hognestad and Bøe 2019). Thus, peer-to-peer shadowing provides learning opportunities for both the shadower and shadowee (the person observed) (Service, Dalgic, and Thornton 2018).

Description of the shadowing assignment in the leadership programme

The shadowing assignment was a response to the results of a previous study in order to help centre leaders to better cope with leadership demands (Kristiansen, Tholin, and Bøe 2021). It was framed as a collaborative structured learning experience informed by empirical studies on shadowing (Lalleman et al. 2017; Hanuscin et al. 2021). Wenger, Trayner, and de Laat (2011, 9) define peer learning as a 'learning partnership among people who find it useful to learn

from and with each other about a particular domain. They use each other's experience of practice as a learning resource'.

In the context of the Norwegian Leadership Programme, ECE leadership is the domain bringing together the community/group of centre leaders enrolled in the programme. The concept of boundaries and brokering (Wenger 1998) helps to explain how the centre leaders can learn from each other's practice by crossing the boundaries between the different communities they belong to. According to Wenger (2004), 'practice' is the knowledge, methods, tools and resources that members share and develop together.

The practical preparation for implementing peer-to-peer shadowing involved organising participants into pairs to shadow each other at work for one whole working day. The teacher educator selected the 12 pairs of shadowing peers on the basis of geographic considerations. While shadowing, the shadower (observer) took notes on the leadership actions of the leader which were to be given back to the shadowee (the person observed) along with any comments or questions as a way of prompting self-reflection. The shadowing pair engaged in conversation directly after the shadowing to discuss their first-hand experience.

After the shadowing period, the shadowing pair would engage in collective reflection online with another shadowing pair to share their experience and make sense of their observations using theory from the course, which is highly valued in shadowing for maximising learning (Service, Dalgic, and Thornton 2016; Simkins, Close, and Smith 2009).

Finally, later in the semester, each participant was asked to write a 3,000-word reflection report in which they were encouraged to reflect on their personal practices and development and to articulate any perceptions they might have of changes. Leadership development includes self-evaluation and the changing roles of the centre leader (Fonsén and Soukainen 2019). The written reflections were a mandatory work requirement. They were not graded, but the teacher would comment on the participants' insights. The deadline for submitting these reports was the end of the semester, which meant that participants were free to decide when to conduct the shadowing and group discussion. This was important, as the participants came from different geographic areas where different COVID-19 guidelines and restrictions were being applied.

Theoretical framework: distributed and hybrid leadership

Distributed leadership is defined as having the capacity to support collaboration, interdependence and pedagogical development in early childhood

(Heikka 2014; Douglass 2019; Fonsén and Ukkonen-Mikkola 2019). Heikka (2014) has identified five interdependent ways of enacting leadership tasks, functions and responsibilities: 1) enhancing shared consciousness of visions and strategies between the stakeholders, 2) distributing responsibilities for pedagogical leadership, 3) distributing and clarifying power relationships between stakeholders, 4) distributing the enactment of pedagogical improvement within a centre and 5) developing a strategy for distributed pedagogical leadership (see also Heikka et al. (2019) for an overview of these five dimensions).

For distributed pedagogical leadership to be successful, the leaders of ECE centres must play a key role in using pedagogical, administrative and relational leadership to facilitate the development of strong collaborative cultures and learning communities (Douglass 2019; OECD 2019; Fonsén et al. 2020; Heikka 2014). In distributed leadership, centre leaders' ability to lead themselves is important in order for them to be able to lead staff and achieve professional goals (Fonsén and Soukainen 2019). According to Klar et al. (2016), distributed leadership has focused less on the head leader (principal/centre leader) when it comes to fostering the leadership capacities of others so as to create the capacity for distributed leadership.

Gronn has revised the theory of distributed leadership (Gronn 2008, 2009, 2011) in the belief that the individual leader's contribution and influence as a leader are limited. He argues that it is necessary to consider how the leader functions in close relationships and in mutual dependence with staff. The concept of hybrid leadership reflects the combined work of individual and collaborative leadership and highlights the relationships between power and democratic leadership. Centre leaders must deal with many elements that may emerge, which demands flexibility with regard to how to act in different situations (Fonsén and Soukainen 2019). Hybrid leadership can help to enhance leadership flexibility.

Hybrid leadership theory builds on configuration theory (Gronn 2011). Configurations are seen as arrangements of elements that take a particular form, or as combinations of parts that are integrated and create an overall whole consisting of many different approaches, roles and relationships that are connected to each other and can be characterised as hybrid. In the configuration process where the different parts are connected to each other, the properties of the different parts constitute a hybrid form of leadership that can expose itself in new ways that consist of many interconnected approaches, roles and relationships (Gronn 2011). Hybrid leadership theory reflects the combined work of individual and collaborative leadership. A hybrid approach to collaborative distributed leadership emphasises collaborative, interdependent activity where the ECE leader both influence the performance of staff and engages in collaborative relationships (Bøe and Hognestad 2017).

Research methods

Methodological approach

This study has assumed a hermeneutic methodology, which is suitable for work of a textual and interpretive nature such as written reflections (Gadamer 2004; Kinsella 2006). As regards the attempt to understand collected data, in this methodology it is acknowledged that the researcher interprets the data and tries to make the approaches used as transparent as possible so that others can make sensible and reasoned judgments as to their potential value in other contexts (Kinsella 2006). This is of particular importance in insider research (Fleming 2018).

Participants

The student ECE centre leadership group as a whole consisted of 24 participants (1 man and 23 women), these being ECE teachers (with a bachelor's degree) between the ages of 30 and 60. They were leaders of public and private centres who led in different organisational contexts and with overall responsibility for leading in accordance with the goals of the Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergarten (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2017). The group of centre leaders was asked to participate in research at the beginning of their first semester, when they were introduced to the shadowing assignment and the research study. The shadowing assignment was one of the curriculum activities and did not incur any extra expense for the participants. The evaluations show that the expenses of every participant enrolled in the leadership programme were covered (Jensen, Bråten, and Svalund 2020).

This shadowing was carried out at a university in Norway six months after ECE centres had reopened following the pandemic in April 2020; the participants were dramatically affected in different ways by the situation brought about by the pandemic. The participants experienced a difficult work situation in which they faced many additional work tasks but without additional resources. A big increase in sick leave at the centres and a lack of budget for temporary staff made the work demanding (Union of Education Norway 2020). Centre leaders became the 'hub' in the local implementation of crisis measures; they played a significant role in all of the communication between the author-

ities and staff and in translating into practice at their centres national guidelines that were constantly being updated (Os et al. 2020).

Data collection

Twenty-four individual written reflections by centre leaders provide the qualitative data for this study. These written reflections offered a valuable source of information on the centre leaders' insights into their self-perceived changes in leadership work as a result of the shadowing. Written reflection enables participants to become more aware of their thoughts in relation to learning and professional development (Bashan and Holsblat 2017). For the teacher/researcher, written reflections provide an opportunity to gain insight into participants' thoughts and the changes they undergo as part of their learning experience (Dunlap 2006).

Data analyses

The data analysis involved the use of thematic analyses and was conducted by the teacher/researcher/author, who began this process by inductively reading the printed written reflections (Braun and Clarke 2006) while bearing the research question in mind. Highlighters were used to mark important elements and meaningful words and phrases. Next, through abductive analyses (Thompson 2022), the data was condensed and preliminary emergent themes were tracked. In accordance with the distributed/hybrid leadership theory, in-depth quotes were included in the interpretation and presentation of the data. The main themes that emerged from the data were summarised as follows: changes regarding leadership flexibility, social interaction with staff and power relationships.

Ethical considerations

Ethical dilemmas were considered in relation to insider research and the use of students as research participants in an effort to improve the leadership programme (Fleming 2018; Bashan and Holsblat 2017). In an attempt to minimise the potential for the implicit coercion of the participants and to avoid a lack of confidentiality and an absence of meaningful informed consent (Comer 2009),

the educator explained the purpose of the research design when introducing the shadowing assignment, including how the design supported the use of centre leaders as research participants.

The research complied with the guidelines of the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD). The participants were informed that the submission of their reports as research data was voluntary and that they could withdraw their consent at any time. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the shadowing period began. Prior to the submission deadline, the educator reminded the participants that their reports would be used as data, but no one withdrew their consent.

Results and discussion

The results have been categorised on the basis of a comprehensive understanding of all the collected data. The data will thus be presented and discussed according to three categories and in relation to the research question, distributed/hybrid leadership theory and the relevant literature. Taken together, the three main themes of changes perceived by the centre leaders indicate that the shadowing experience has supported them in coping with leadership demands and has thus contributed to their leadership development.

Changes regarding coping with leadership flexibility

The analyses of the written reflections show that the act of leadership during the pandemic led to a tension between being present and accessible so as to accommodate staff needs and coping with work fragmentation and stress. The centre leaders found it important that the staff feel they were available to meet their needs. Therefore, they left the door to their office open during the day so that everyone could stop by for a chat and ask for help and guidance when needed. One of the participants refers to this leader availability as an investment in preventing absence:

> I believe it will have a preventive effect against sick leave, that the staff feel seen and helped. Therefore, I have invested time in helping staff, which has led to expectations among the staff that I am always available to help with everything.

Such an "open door" policy indicated leadership flexibility (Fonsén and Soukainen 2019) with regard to whatever the staff needed to ask or talk about there and then. This seems to characterise their leadership approach as one that

put limits on their self-care. For some centre leaders, this flexible leadership approach served to compensate for social distancing, which meant holding fewer meetings and not being sufficiently available to staff in such demanding times. For others, it was an approach that they implemented to get through the day and to help their staff maintain their job and not get too overloaded. Through their collective reflections, the centre leaders became more aware of why they had been always so available. One of the participants describes this as follows:

> I have reflected a bit on why I do this (open door policy) and conclude that some of it comes from the fact that I try to compensate for the occasional lack of presence. At the present, I often choose the path of least resistance to simply survive. I work a lot to motivate, encourage (and often serve) the staff so that they will be able to stay in their job. However, being aware of this has given me many thoughts about the way forward for leading myself. I have now realised that I have let it go too far, and this is something I must address together with my leadership team.

The relational aspect that defines the flexible leadership approach can be understood as not only as an acceptance of and a necessity in the working conditions brought about by such a demanding situation, but also as an approach to helping and supporting staff so that they can work as professionals within a distributed form of leadership (Bøe and Hognestad 2017; Fonsén et al. 2020; Heikka 2014). According to Harris (2020), distributed leadership has become the only way to lead in the face of the realities of COVID-19, and specifically when it comes to leadership interactions and ensuring the capacity to get the job done. However, the findings from the analyses show that on many occasions the participants did the work that needed to be done by themselves. One of the participants describes this as follows:

> The shadower told me that I answered the staff requests straight away and solved the problems instead of asking them to consult with the person with the distributed responsibility.

The findings from the analyses show that centre leaders' open-door policy and leadership flexibility were experienced as sources of stress. This contrasts with the Norwegian TALIS Starting Strong survey (Gjerustad, Bergene, and Lynnebakke 2021), according to which centre leaders experienced collaboration on solutions to problems as helping to reduce their stress levels. However, in demanding times and in crisis, centre leaders may feel alone with the responsibilities and tasks, which is a heavy burden to carry (Os et al. 2020). Research has found that centre leaders lack social support (Kristiansen, Tholin, and Bøe 2021). This indicates a need to discuss how interdependent ways of leading can contribute to social support, which adds a new dimension to the existing five dimensions of interdependent ways of enacting leadership (Heikka 2014).

The written reflections reveal that the experience of stress was intensified by continual staff interruptions and problem-solving during the day. One cen-

tre leader states that her shadower documented 13 staff interruptions. To better cope with her stress and work fragmentation, she summarised the interruptions and prioritised those that she needed to respond to. In order to manage all their tasks and better protect their working hours, the centre leaders needed to find ways to deal with the extra work load caused by the pandemic (Os et al. 2020).

The reflections on the peer-to-peer shadowing reveal changes in how the participants led, as some have begun to use the 'interruptive moments' to facilitate more interaction with staff. For example, one comments as follows:

> Now, I try to use more dialogue and open-ended questions to encourage my staff to come up with their own thoughts and ideas.

A sign of hybrid action can be seen when the centre leader combines a more interactional style of leadership support with addressing the concrete demands of the situation (Bøe and Hognestad 2017). Rather than viewing the staff interruptions as extraordinary, one of the participants considers those interruptions to be part of her everyday leadership:

> Whereas before, I could feel frustration over the interruptions and multiple tasks in my work, I have opened my eyes to the fact that they are also an important part of the job and my leadership development.

The changes described by the centre leaders indicate that they have developed coping strategies for better self-care, which is essential when coping with combined roles and tasks in hybrid leadership.

Changes regarding social interaction with staff

The findings show that the centre leaders were concerned about how the pandemic restrictions would impact on the collaborative environment of the centres. Norwegian ECE centres have a tradition of close collaboration, and important elements of this can be lost when children and teachers are 'locked up' in small units (Os et al. 2020). For the centre leaders, it was important to be a visible leader, which they saw as more than simply being seen by staff. The analyses of the participants' self-reflections show how social interaction with staff had changed. For example, almost all of the participants changed the routine of a morning meeting, which had provided a regular opportunity for daily meetings with staff. The purpose of the morning meeting was to share practical information so that the day would go smoothly. Due to the risk of infection, the cessation of the traditional morning meeting meant less physical contact with staff. Therefore, almost every centre leader was carrying out morning visits with each group in the centre to give and receive information and discuss

everyday issues. In the following quote, we can see that one participant found these morning visits different to the previous morning meetings.

> When I visit the groups (classrooms), there is more social interaction and relationship building with the staff. The conversations are often about small things, such as what happened over the weekend, or other things that have come up there and then. I experienced these visits as a dialogical space with the staff. Because of infection control, this change in my everyday leadership has improved both my accessibility and my visibility as a leader and has become a natural part of my working day.

The centre leader found that the use of small talk addressed the need for communication between leader and staff. In addition, it led to fewer interruptions and more constructive work. These changes highlight the significance of leaders engaging in small talk with staff, which, according to Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003), helps to create trust within groups as well as emotional support. Similar to the findings of Os et al. (2020), the situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have reinforced the need for communication and relational leadership approaches. One of the participants states in her written reflections that she was happy that her shadower had noticed the care and consideration she showed for her staff, as her goal that semester had been to build stronger relationships with and among staff members. Trust and collaboration are essential for distributed leadership to function well (Harris 2008; Heikka 2014). Small talk, emotional support and humour can therefore provide for a balance of power within close leadership relationships and help build strong relationships and collegiality within distributed leadership (Bøe and Hognestad 2016).

Changes regarding power relationships

The analyses of the participants' written shadowing reflections show that they were aware of creating positive and supportive relationships with their staff. Moreover, they discovered how power played into their relationships with staff and how their overall role as a centre leader created an imbalance in the power dynamics. They seemed to have developed a greater awareness of the importance of balancing relational approaches with authority and power. This is of crucial importance, because how leadership approaches are combined can assist or challenge an organisation's achievement of its goals (Gronn 2011). One of the participant's refers to an occasion when she assumed the lead in a meeting that the teacher leader was supposed to lead. The collective reflections with her peer gave her insight, as she states in her written reflection report:

> Reflecting on my leadership power has made me more aware of my role in relation to the teacher leaders.

This was followed by another participant reflecting on how leadership power and the tension between trusting the teacher leaders and leadership control created challenges to distributed forms of leadership:

> In the shadowing dialogue, I was asked questions about my intentions behind the follow-up on various distribution tasks. I am concerned that this may be perceived by the teacher leaders as a kind of check that the work has been done, and it became clear to me that I show little trust in my staff. By frequently checking up on tasks, I can hinder the development of the staff and lose [their] trust and have fewer independent staff. As a way of improving, I initiate discussions in the leadership team about our roles and responsibilities as a team.

As found in the study by Heikka (2014), centre leaders did not completely trust their teachers' leadership abilities because of their lack of suitable qualifications. Therefore, a strong centre leader was seen as a prerequisite for practice development. Additionally, interdependent ways of enacting leadership are a prerequisite for pedagogical improvement, where the clarification of power relations is essential (Heikka 2014). This indicates that centre leaders should make use of hybrid leadership actions (Gronn 2011).

The findings show that several of the centres have worked on joint development projects involving all of the staff according to national guidelines (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 2017). As the centres spent a long time organised in cohorts, when they were reopened they required a new focus on collaboration. For some of the participants, the development projects provided a basis upon which collaborative and investigative work among the staff groups could be developed. As one of the participants reflects:

> During the shadowing, I observed a meeting where the centre leader was acting as a collaborator when investigating pedagogical practices with the staff group. At the same time, she was leading the enquiry giving direction to the collective reflections. Compared to my peer, I realised that I rarely participate collaboratively in such collective reflections.

This indicates that providing opportunities for professional development requires leadership and combinations of (hybrid) leadership approaches (Townsend 2015). Additionally, this finding demonstrates that peer-to-peer shadowing can provide learning opportunities for both the shadower and the person being shadowed (Lalleman et al. 2017; Service, Dalgic, and Thornton 2018).

Conclusions and implications

This study has provided insights into centre leaders' perceptions of changes in their thoughts and actions as a result of shadowing each other at work in a context where they were influenced in different ways by the situation caused by COVID-19. The study was empirically rooted in the Norwegian Leadership Programme, where peer-to-peer shadowing was used to provide a collaborative structured learning experience for leadership development. The perceptions of change contained in the participants' written reflections on leadership flexibility, social interaction with staff, and power relationships indicate that the shadowing experience has contributed to leadership development that supports distributed and hybrid leadership.

This study has implications for ECEC leadership at the national, regional and local levels. At the national level, the findings support Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner (2017) as regards using methodologies in leadership programmes that can support leadership flexibility and change that are relevant to the current situation. At the regional level, creating networks for centre leaders in the form of peer-learning communities is important in order for them to understand the effects of the social comparison experienced through shadowing and similar peer-learning activities. Finally, at the local level, it is suggested that the framework of interdependent ways of leading (Heikka 2014) and the addition of the dimension of an emotion-focused coping strategy (social support) (Lazarus and Folkman 1984) are productive in terms of how to distribute leadership successfully.

Limitations of the study and its validity

Firstly, as is true of all qualitative studies, the sample size in this study is a limitation. Secondly, although the nature of insider researcher was experienced as positive as regards motivation to conduct the research, the limitations of the study related to the desire for a positive outcome (Comer 2009). The self-reflection reports were written as academic assignments, and it was necessary for the researcher to bear in mind that the outcome of the assignments needed to be seen in the light of the fact that the leaders were writing their self-reflections with the knowledge that they would be read by the educator/researcher and the leader of the programme. Thus, the self-reflections may not contain entirely authentic utterances with regard to what the participants learned and their perception of changes. Given the researcher's close link with the participants, consideration has been taken of bias such as individual care and extra

supervision in relation to the writing of the report. This may limit the validity of the study, as the researcher may have been more benevolent in interpreting these reflections. Thirdly, while shadowing as a form of structured leadership learning can result in changes in participants' practice on the basis of their reflections on actions, the methodological approach relies on self-reported changes, which is a limitation when it comes to demonstrating a clear link between professional leadership development and changes in actual work practices.

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Leading Early Childhood Education Centres under the Conditions of the Pandemic: The German Case

Bernhard Kalicki, Sina Fackler, Mariana Grgic, Hanna Maly-Motta, Franz Neuberger & Susanne Kuger[1]

Abstract

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a general lock-down in Germany that suddenly affected the routines of families and children, Early Childhood Education (ECE) centres, and staff. Over the following months, centre leaders faced various challenges, expectations, and demands such as hygiene and protection regulations, COVID-19 infections, reduced opening hours, and limited staff availability. This took place within the complex governance structure of the German ECE system with its distributed responsibilities between counties, umbrella organisations, and centres themselves. ECE centre leaders, who play a crucial role in pedagogical quality, had to organise pedagogical work while balancing the tensions between the necessities of health protection and the conflicting demands of early education. In the following, we describe the German ECE system and discuss the crucial role of centre leaders in this system. This chapter aims to describe the course of the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany and how centre-based ECE was implemented under pandemic conditions (e.g., occurrence of COVID-19 infections and centre lock-downs), as well as assess which hygiene and protection measures where implemented and how they contributed to coping with the pandemic. Based on representative nationwide survey data from 2,600 ECE centre leaders, we analyse which challenges during the pandemic were most debilitating for centre leadership. Management tasks such as procurement of devices and organising the limited service emerged as most challenging. The organisation of ECE during the pandemic had a clear impact on interaction quality, as detailed analyses showed.

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Key words: ECE, centre management, COVID-19 pandemic, Germany

The German ECE system

Structure and governance of ECE in Germany

The beginnings of Kindergarten pedagogy originate with Friedrich Fröbel in the middle of the 19th century and spread across the world. Initially, it was conceptualised as the first stage of a general educational system and has since developed into an important economic support structure. However, the current ECE context is insufficient to meet the existing demand for spaces (Klinkhammer and Riedel 2018). Furthermore, shifting attitudes concerning the importance of early education for child outcomes, maternal labour-force participation, and extra-familial childcare, as well as labour-force shortages fuelled by an ageing society, have led to substantial expansion of the German ECE system over the last two decades (Grgic 2021). In 2020, 96% of children aged 3 to 6 (2,564,715 children) participated day-care in Germany. For children under 3 years old, participation rates more than doubled from 2006 (13.6 percent) to 2020 (35.0 percent; BMFSFJ 2021), when 829,163 children participated in day-care. The ratio of children to staff member, calibrated to a full-time employee, varies by age-composition, pedagogical setting, and region. For settings with children under age 3, the median staff to child ratio differed markedly among eastern (1:5.2) and western (1:3.3) German states in 2020. Similarly, for settings with children of Kindergarten age (age 3 to school entry) the median staff to child ratio differed between eastern (1:10.2) and western (1:7.6) German states (Autorengruppe Fachkräftebarometer 2021, 28). As a result of the expansion of the ECE infrastructure, the typical size of a German day-care centre increased from 7.5 staff members on average in 2007 to 11.7 staff members on average in 2020 (Autorengruppe Fachkräftebarometer 2021, 53).

Apart from its rapid growth, the German ECE system is characterised by distributed responsibilities. On the federal level, there is an overarching legal framework (SGB or "Social Act" no. VIII) within which each of the 16 states (Länder) can enact their own ECE legislation ("Kitagesetze"), which is implemented at the community level. Communities are responsible for licensing, regulating, and funding child-care services, as well as ensuring there are enough places, as parents are entitled to a kindergarten spot from age three onwards. In 2020 one third of the 57,594 day-care centres in Germany were community-based, whereas two thirds were run by welfare organisations. These centres served 3.752 million children and employed 675,645 pedagogi-

cal staff (Autorengruppe Fachkräftebarometer 2021, 50-52). There is a high diversity among providers with regard to organisational structure and professionalisation, they range from small parents' initiatives to huge metropolises and employ a range of pedagogical approaches such as Montessori, inclusion, or situational learning.

This fractured system of regulation and management with multiple interdependent actors at different institutional levels has been conceptualised as 'educational governance' (Altrichter 2010; Evers, Lewis and Riedel 2005; Kuronen et al. 2015). The interplay of actors can be described using a theoretical framework that has been developed in order to monitor ECE quality at different levels and from different perspectives (Riedel, Klinkhammer and Kuger 2021). Pedagogical quality on the micro level of settings (Figure 1) is conceptualised as the quality of interactions, influenced by structural features (e.g., group size, caregiver-child ratio) as well as by subjective orientations of kindergarten teachers (e.g., beliefs and knowledge), and leading to short-term output and long-term outcomes for children and families (e.g., child well-being and development, family functioning). Centre leaders are responsible for centre management and for pedagogical leadership. Their performance ('process quality') depends on structural characteristics (e.g., time budgets for leadership tasks, qualification for leadership) and on subjective orientations (e.g., understanding of one's leadership role). The actual exercise of leadership feeds back on staff (job satisfaction, fluctuation), families, and children. The quality on the centre level is influenced by the quality on the next higher level, the provider organisation and the local authority with their structure (size, degree of organisation and professionalisation) and orientations (e.g., mission). Their main task is planning and fulfilment of demand as well as regulation of day-care services (centres as well as home-based care) to provide the number of spaces needed. At a macro level, governance of the ECE system takes place at state level or federal level). Their actions (legal acts, investments) are targeted to goals like equal access, customised supply, or equivalent living conditions for families and children. Within this structure, pedagogical leadership is sandwiched between centre and team dynamics on one side and provider and community support on the other.

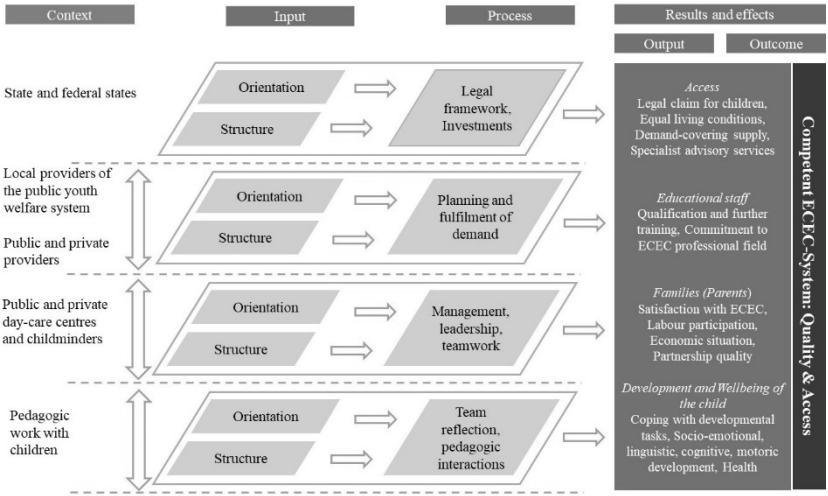

Figure 1: Levels of governance, actors and aspects of quality in the German ECE system (Riedel et al. 2021).

Pedagogy and pedagogical leadership

In brief, German kindergarten pedagogy is characterised by social-constructivist conceptions of an active child that learns in social interactions right from the beginning (Kalicki and Koenig 2021). Communication, collaboration, and creativity are at the heart of early childhood-educational approaches (OECD 2004). This is implemented through, for example, play-based learning that is facilitated in a stimulating and interesting environment that supports autonomy in the context of close and stable social relationships (Ryan and Deci 2017). Co-constructivist didactics include dialogue, posing questions, scaffolding, and sustained shared thinking (MacNaughton and Williams 2003). Children's peer interactions are of major importance with regard to child well-being and child development.

Leadership in ECE centres, then, can be differentiated on centre management and pedagogical leadership (Strehmel and Ulber 2014). Management tasks include a) complying with all legal and structural requirements, b) procuring and managing resources (budget, personnel, building), and c) operational and organisational structuring (setup and work-flow, internal and external communication). Pedagogical leadership refers to a) developing and updating a formal pedagogical concept for the centre, b) shaping, executing, and coordinating pedagogical work, and c) quality management. Cooperation with

parents or families affects each of these tasks, as in the German ECE system parents possess granted rights for participation, varying by type of provider (public versus private) and culture of cooperation (formal versus informal). A concept commonly used in ECE discourse stresses an 'educational partnership' (Smith 1980) between day-care centre and family, even though core features of this relationship such as symmetry of power, exclusiveness or voluntariness only exist to varying degrees (Kalicki 2022).

The corporate culture in German ECE centres tends to be rather egalitarian and centre leaders and staff work together. Many organisations (providers, centres) recruit new centre leaders from their pool of team members (Klaudy et al. 2016). In addition to their leadership tasks, centre leaders often also work within the pedagogical setting to complement staff shortages (Turani, Seybel and Bader 2022, 119). This results in a high workload for centre leaders, and has been further amplified by the quick and often changing regulations during the COVID19-pandemic.

ECE under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic

The pandemic in Germany

In Germany, the first COVID-19 infection was confirmed on January 27, 2020. Since then Germany has faced five confirmed waves of infections. The first wave (March-April 2020) showed a maximum of approximately 700 daily cases, the second wave (October 2020-January 2021) a maximum of 15,000 confirmed daily infections. During the third wave (March-May 2021) the maximum number of new cases was over 23,400. In the autumn of 2021 the fourth wave had a peak with some 47,000 daily infections, and the fifth wave (spring 2022) a record peak with 219,000 new infections.[2]

2 See RKI dashboard: https://www.rki.de. COVID-19 cases are notified to the local health authority (LHA) in accordance with the German Protection against Infection Act ("Infektionsschutzgesetz", IfSG). The LHA transmits reported cases from all 401 German districts via the respective federal state health authority to the RKI. The 7-day incidence includes the number of newly reported cases within seven days in a population of 100,000.

Monitoring data on ECE in the pandemic

In 2020, the German Youth Institute ("Deutsches Jugendinstitut"; DJI) and the Robert Koch-Institut (the national public health institute; RKI) joined forces to monitor the situation of children attending ECE during the pandemic.

The following descriptive findings are based on panel data ('ECE centre registry') from a nationwide weekly online survey of ECE centre leaders (starting in August 2020), including on average 5,000 centres. Since August 2020, this registry records on a weekly basis information about the pandemic situation and its effects on daily routines in ECE centres and the functioning of the system (Neuberger et al. 2022a).

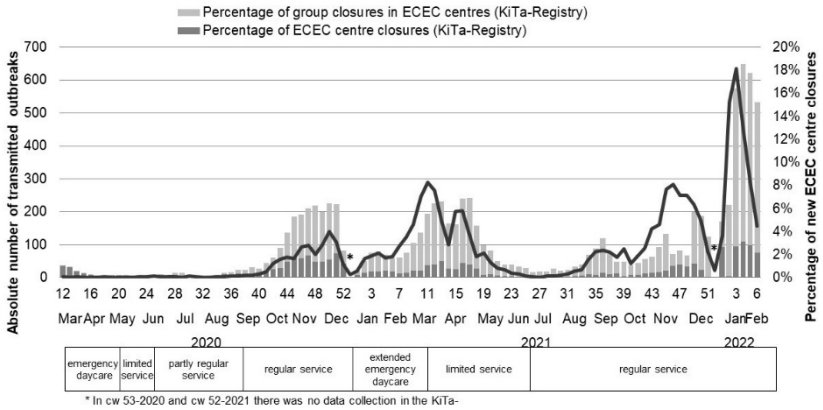

Figure 2: Number of ECE centres as COVID-19 hotspots (with at least two confirmed infections; dark line) and proportion of new group and centre closures due to COVID-19 incidences (grey bars) in ECE centres as recorded by the KiTa-Registry [3]

The ECE centre registry data recorded weekly closures due to COVID-19 Infections affecting groups within an ECE centre or closures of the entire centre. The development of these two patterns is depicted in Figure 2, overlaid with official health statistics, reflecting laboratory confirmed cases. In Figure 2, the curve shows the number of reported ECE centre outbreaks for which at least two confirmed COVID-19 cases concerning children or staff were reported. It should be noted that closures may have occurred both because of suspected cases and because of confirmed infection cases. In contrast, at least two confirmed cases of infection were always reported in the ECE centre outbreaks. Therefore, the data are not perfectly comparable. The key figures of both monitoring systems have been strikingly congruent since the beginning of the year

3 Information for CW 12-32/2020 was gathered retrospectively.

(c.f. Figure 2). Since October 2021, both the reported closures due to suspected cases or cases of infection and the number of ECE/ECE centre outbreaks reported to the RKI have increased rapidly again. Compared to the previous year, however, it is noticeable that while about 3 times more outbreaks were reported in mid-November 2021, the proportion of day-care centre closures has so far been similar to the previous year's level.

Attempts of governing the ECE system during the crisis

The first general lock-down in Germany resulting from COVID-19 pandemic caught the day-care system just as suddenly and unprepared as other areas of public life. Many day-care centres switched to a mode of emergency care almost from a standing start, providing care for the children of essential workers to the extent possible. Instructions and guidelines for organising this emergency care were not available from the beginning, but emerged over time. Quickly changing regulations that were constantly being updated posed a challenge as the pandemic progressed. Measures to minimise risk included that children were to be cared for in fixed groups that were isolated from each other, as well as measures to minimise contact between staff and parents (e.g., wearing mouth-nose coverings, parents not to enter the centre; Kuger et al. 2022). On April 28, 2020, the 16 German states issued common guidelines for a stepwise re-opening of ECE services (JFMK 2020). These guidelines specified the criteria for access to ECE during the first general lock-down and were based on both characteristics of the child (children under child-protection; children with special needs; children with crowded living conditions including children in placement under public law; children transitioning to school) and the situation of the parents (children of single parents, especially of working single parents; children of disabled parents). Furthermore, these guidelines contained comprehensive information and specifications on infection control and hygiene measures, as well as advice on staff deployment. Pedagogical recommendations stressed that no social distancing was necessary within groups of children, but contact between groups of children was to be minimised. The reopening process was completed in August 2020, and ECE centres were allowed to provide regular services ("under pandemic conditions") for all children until December 2020, when a second nationwide lock-down was mandated due to rising infection rates that lasted until until February 2021. At this time, most federal states appealed to parents to keep their children at home if possible (Autorengruppe Corona-KiTa-Studie 2021). In the third pandemic wave in Germany (February to June 2021), ECE restrictions and the implementation of measures largely depended on the incidence of individual counties.

Over the course of the pandemic, the incidence of COVID-19 infections varied strongly across regions and changed over time, leading to a complex tapestry of regulations within the different jurisdictions. As infection rates decreased in 2021, restrictions were relaxed, and the start of the new ECE year in late summer 2021, included adjusted recommendations for the implementation of non-pharmaceutical protective measures in ECE centres. For example, within the framework of then-current hygiene plans, the wearing of mouth-nose coverings or the care of children in fixed groups was no longer strongly advised. During the fourth and fifth waves of the pandemic in Germany (August 2021 to spring 2022; Schilling, Buda and Tolksdorf 2022) ECE centres remained open.

Centres were still able to implement exclusively non-pharmaceutical measures during the first, second, and the beginning of the third pandemic waves (until March/April 2021), which either addressed the centre organisation (e.g., fixed staff allocation to groups) or the behaviour of individuals (e.g., regular hand washing, keeping distance from colleagues and children in other groups). Monitoring data from a nationwide leader survey from 2,600 centres showed for times of high infection rates during the second and third pandemic wave that nearly all ECE centres adhered to measures such as group separation and wearing mouth-nose coverings. During this time, staff were also increasingly affected by infections, however, leaders reported that it was particularly difficult to implement social distancing measures. About 50 percent of the ECE centres attempted to implement social distancing between staff and children in the same group, however, interviewed leaders reported that this was not viable within an ECE setting (Autorengruppe Corona-KiTa-Studie 2021). Pedagogical implications and the resulting dilemma between education and care on the one hand and health protection on the other hand will be discussed below.

The implementation of measures can be demonstrated with monitoring data from the ECE centre registry. Figure 3 shows data collected from June 2021 to February 2022 on infection control and a large variety of hygiene measures, including regular ventilation of the rooms and regular surface disinfection (e.g., furniture surfaces, door handles or toys), testing of staff, face masks for staff and/or children, and fixed staff assignment to groups. Along with the rise of the fourth wave of infections (fall 2021), these measures were implemented with increasing thoroughness. During this time, testing of children for COVID--19-infections was introduced nationwide. Measuring temperature had not been suggested and, correspondingly, was rarely practised.

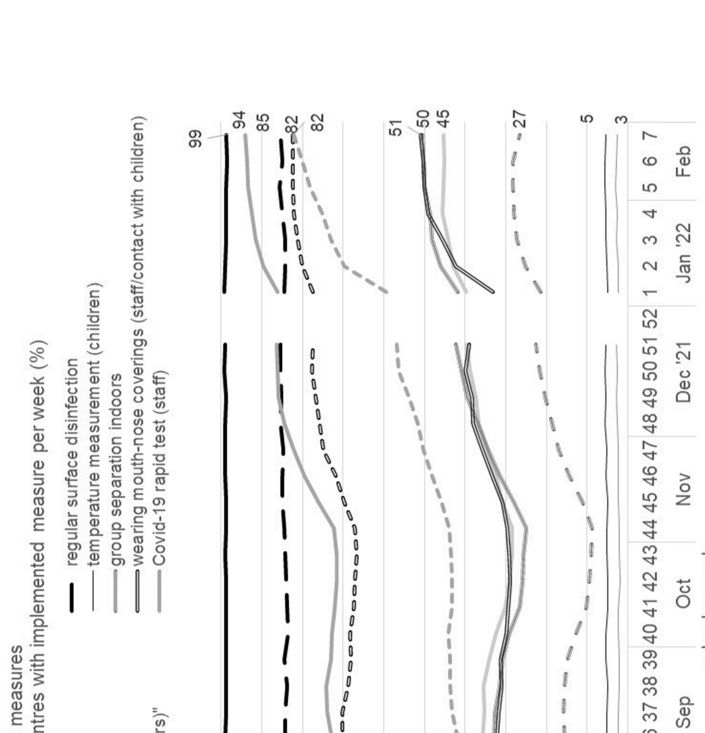

Figure 3: Proportion of ECE centres with implemented protection and hygiene measures per week (June 2021-February 2022); Source: ECE centre registry, approx. 4,200 participating ECE centre leaders on average in the corresponding weeks own calculations.

Beginning in spring 2021, vaccination technologies were available for pedagogical staff, who had prioritised access to vaccines that were initially still in short supply. The vaccination rate was not collected in our survey until the end of May 2022, when it was 77%. In December 2021, the vaccination rate among ECE staff (at least one jab) reached 90 percent.

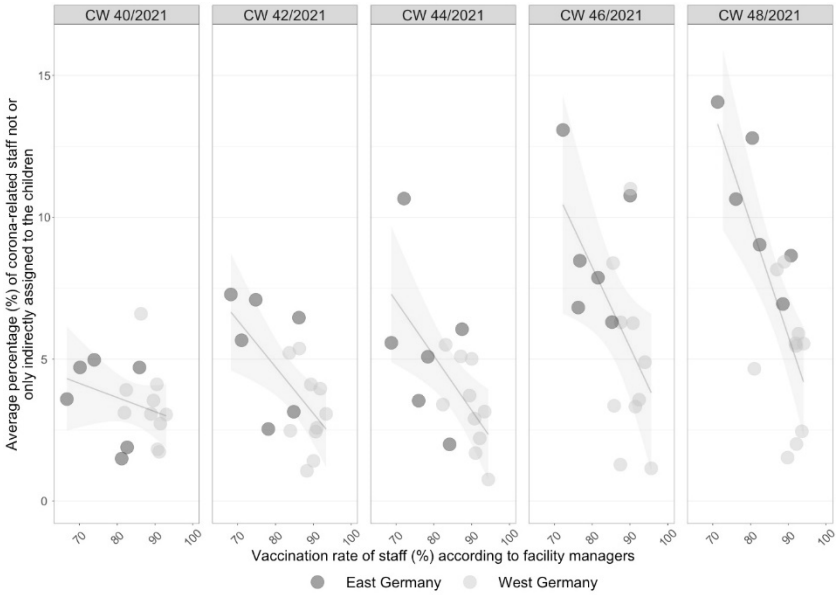

Figure 4: Average percentage of corona-related staff who were not or only indirectly assigned to the child and average vaccination rate of staff according to ECE centre leaders per federal state. Five selected weeks during the 4th wave of the pandemic. Source: ECE centre registry, approx. 4,200 participating ECE centre leaders on average in the corresponding weeks own calculations.

Figure 4 illustrates the correlation between vaccination rates and the share of staff not deployed due to corona per federal state for selected calendar weeks. The X-axis of the sub-graphs shows the proportion of pedagogical staff in child day-care facilities per federal state who had received at least one vaccination against COVID-19 (according to the facility management). The Y-axis shows the sum of the proportion of staff who had not been assigned to group care due to the corona pandemic and the proportion who had not been vaccinated at all, expressed in percentage points per state. The individual states are shown as dots, with eastern German states in dark grey and western German states in lighter grey. This correlation is shown as an example for calendar weeks 40 (04.10.-10.10.2021), 42 (18.10.-24.10.2021), 44 (01.11.-07.11.2021), 46 (15.11.-21.11.2021) and 48 (29.11.-05.12.2021) in one sub-graph each to provide a dynamic overview of the start of the fourth wave. A regression line is

drawn in each of the graphs in Figure 4 to show the relationship between the two mapped metrics in a linear fashion. If only the distribution of the federal states is considered on the X-axis of the graphs, the increase in the vaccination rate in the federal states between calendar week 40 and calendar week 48 can be seen. The points move further to the right overall. On the Y-axis, the beginning of the fourth wave can be seen: whereas in week 40 (04.10.-10.10.2021), only one federal state reported a staff shortage of significantly more than 5%, in week 48 only four federal states were still below this threshold, and three federal states even reported a staff shortage of more than 10% due to the pandemic.

As Figure 4 shows, higher vaccination rates among ECE staff are statistically associated with lower rates of personnel absence. This effect increased substantially during the fourth wave of COVID-19 infections. Whereas staff absences were still relatively independent of the average vaccination rate of staff in the federal states in week 40 (October 4-10, 2021), an increasingly clear correlation between the two indicators became apparent at the beginning of the fourth wave: The higher the vaccination rate in the facilities, the lower the pandemic-related staff absences in the fourth wave. Accordingly, vaccinating staff helped to maintain day-care operations during the pandemic – although this effect seemed to regress again in the fifth wave with Omikron (Neuberger et al. 2022b)

Challenges for centre leaders and their subjective experiences

In the following section, we focus on challenges and difficulties reported by day care centre leaders. Here, we draw on representative nationwide survey data from the CoKiSS leader survey of the Corona-KiTa-Study. The sample based on the ERiK leader survey which is a random sample of ECE centres in Germany (proportional stratified random sampling across the federal states), carried out for a monitoring project (Schacht et al. 2021). 2,529 leaders from the ERiK sample participated in the first survey of the Corona-KiTa leader survey (participation rate: 65%). The leaders were contacted for two survey waves. Data collection started in October 2020 and ended in June 2021. The ECE centre leaders reported on centre management during the pandemic, ECE pedagogy, communication with parents, and the situation of the staff. The results show a wide variety of findings regarding pandemic-related challenges for and solutions in ECE centres (e.g., constantly improved implementation of hygiene measures, need for new media devices and training).

The specific questionnaire on challenges and difficulties included a large number of questions on various topics in which difficulties were suspected, such as the procurement of different materials, contact and communication with parents, and the implementation of hygiene measures. Considering procurement, we asked two questions regarding whether the ECE centre leaders experienced difficulties in the procurement of technical devices, such as tablets, and hygiene articles, such as disinfectants or mouth-nose coverings. In relation to difficulties with parents, we asked five questions, namely if there have been difficulties in 1) the care for children with colds, 2) creating acceptance among parents for the new regulations, 3) meeting the demand for care, 4) contact with parents regarding exchange of information, and 5) queries. Considering hygiene measures, we asked seven questions. We asked specifically whether there were problems with planning staff resources in times of limited service, in the general organisation of the limited service, in the implementation of hygiene measures, in the correct implementation of the privacy policies, the organisation of cleaning of premises, restructuring rooms and material as well as on how to get information on hygiene measures. All questions were rated on a 5-point Likert scale. The selection of questions was based on qualitative results of an ad hoc telephone survey (as a pilot study) conducted during the first wave of the pandemic in spring 2020 with 84 ECE centre leaders (Autorengruppe Corona-KiTa-Studie 2020).

Figure 5 provides a descriptive overview (box plots) of each item, with the different question types (procurement in light grey, parents in medium grey, and hygiene in dark grey) highlighted in different grayscales. The questions are sorted according to the perceived difficulty reported by centre leaders. Besides the widespread difficulties in the procurement of devices, the most common problems reported were with parents, especially related to how to deal with children with colds. Further, creating acceptance among parents for the new regulations was reported to be a major burden, as well as meeting the demand for care, and, less so, the selection of children whose parents claimed a right to use limited care. With respect to hygiene measures, the organisation of the limited operation was especially challenging for management.

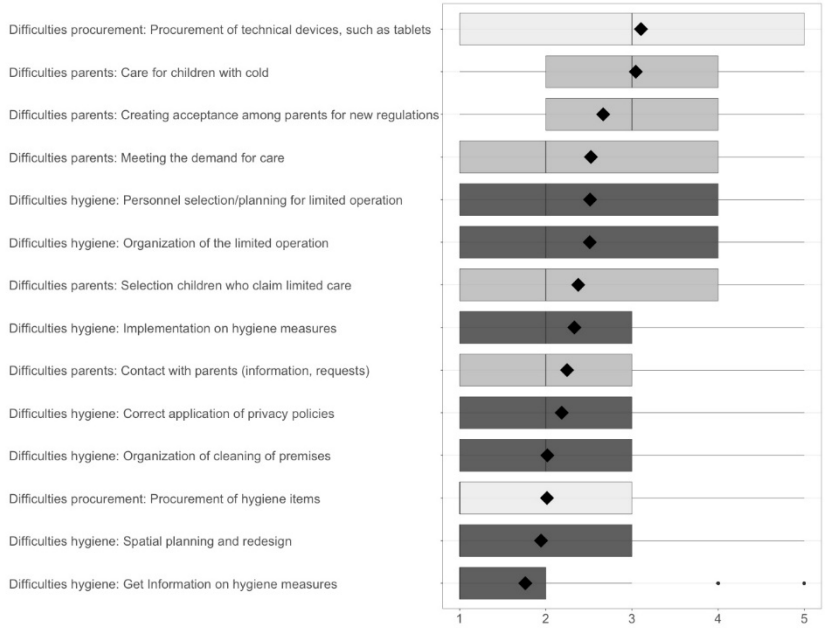

Figure 5: Difficulties as reported by the ECE centre leaders. Boxplots of various items on reported difficulties, 5-point Likert scales, mean values indicated as black squares. Source: Questionnaire of 2,600 ECE centre leaders, own calculation.

Problems were less pronounced related to the other questions regarding hygiene, the general contact with parents, and the procurement of hygiene articles. Overall, Figure 5 shows that the problems faced by ECE leaders were not so much in learning about and implementing the government's hygiene requirements, but rather in communicating them to parents. In particular, the handling of children with cold symptoms stands out here, as for a long time it was unclear what type of illness was involved due to the lack of Covid-19 rapid tests or recommendations for temperature measurement in the centres (see Figure 3: temperature measurement was relatively unusual. Centre staff were regularly tested, but tests for children were not available until the fall of 2021). Nevertheless, decisions had to be made by the ECE leaders. Overall, due to the pandemic, the ECE centre management was suddenly in a position of needing to explain, justify, and apply government decisions made at short notice, and these decisions sometimes put livelihoods at stake, for example, when self-employed people suddenly lost the possibility of employment.

Detailed analyses of the consequences of the difficulties[4] experienced by leaders indicate that pedagogical practices fostering children´s linguistic, motor, and socio-emotional skills declined when leaders reported more difficulties in the implementation of protective measures or difficulties in contact with parents (Diefenbacher et al. 2022). Difficulties with new pandemic-related management tasks also influenced the pedagogical work of the centres. In addition, there was a correlation between reported difficulties and the interactions among children, staff, and parents. Specifically, there was a strong negative relationship between reported difficulties with the implementation of protection measures and the reported child-staff-interactions and a weaker negative relationship with difficulties with parents. As expected, difficulties in tasks concerning contact with parents was associated with worse staff-parent interactions (Grgic et al. 2022). Management difficulties thus not only affected the pedagogical work, but also the pedagogical relationships among parents, staff, and children.

Conclusions

The responsibility for the German ECE system is distributed among federal, state, and community administrations with regard to licensing, regulation, and alimentation. Providers of ECE centres as well as local authorities differ in size, degree of organisation, and professionalisation. Within this structure of educational governance, pedagogical leadership strongly depends on centre and team dynamics as well as on provider and community support. On the one hand, centre leaders typically had to perform an increasing number of provider tasks (e.g., development of hygiene concepts, adaptation of pedagogical concepts), and on the other hand, time resources for leadership were restricted by their high involvement in pedagogical work. During the pandemic, pedagogical leadership in ECE centres was often deferred because urgent management tasks emerged due to instructions and guidelines for organising emergency care and for implementing hygiene and health protection measures. Regulations were released suddenly, they differed between jurisdictions, and they changed permanently over time. With regard to the interpretation and implementation of guidelines, many centre leaders were left to their own devices. The measures implemented due to health protection ran counter to pedagogical concepts. Many children had no access to ECE. And within the centres, children's possibilities for movement and interaction were severely restricted.

4 An exploratory factor analysis showed that the items load on two distinct scales that we labelled "Difficulties with parents" (Cronbach's $\alpha = .74$) and "Difficulties with hygiene measures" (Cronbach's $\alpha = .79$)

Over the two years of the pandemic, many ECE centres faced COVID-19 infections in families, children, and staff. Hence, many centres closed groups or even the whole centre temporarily. Survey data show that ECE centre leaders experienced major difficulties with centre management, for example in the procurement of devices and in organising the limited services. Creating acceptance and compliance among parents were reported to be a major burden. For centre leaders, these challenges led to increased stress.

We can draw conclusions from the experience gained during this two year-long state of emergency that will hopefully provide guidance for the future. These conclusions are based not only on data presented in this paper, but rely on experiences gathered with the whole project (Rauschenbach et al. 2022). First, the process of communicating and implementing regulations has proven to be inefficient and the responsibilities of the administrations (federal government, state, and community administration) should be more clearly defined. The systematics, clarity, and reliability of the regulations should also be increased. In addition to the uncertainty of this new situation, the often unclear guidelines and communication thereof provided an additional layer of stress for everyone involved. This seems especially important given the complex structure of the German ECE system. Second, centre leadership should be strengthened, as noted in the federal 'Good Childcare Act'. Autonomy and time seem to be crucial elements that factor into successful leadership in times of crisis. Third, ECE providers should be professionalised. Establishing support structures such as a pandemic manager, for example, could smooth transitions, and ease decision making and implementation processes. In sum, the various actors have to strive for a competent (Urban et al. 2012) and resilient ECE system.

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Leadership in Early Childhood Education and Care Facilities – Meaningful Work, Even in Times of Crisis in Austria, Germany and Switzerland

Manja Flöter, Eva Pölzl-Stefanec, Susanne Kammerhofer & Catherine Walter-Laager

Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, ECE centre leaders play a central role in maintaining the physical and mental well-being of others. This article presents data from a survey based on (inter-)national studies on stressful factors (stressors) and positive elements (resources). In our study, we used quantitative and qualitative data to analyse the perceived stress levels of ECE in leadership roles in ECE centre. The aim of the study was to find out what stressors and resources the ECE leaders were exposed to during the rapid spread of the COVID-19 infection in spring 2020 and what impact the pandemic had on their professional and private lives. The online questionnaire focused on the second wave of the pandemic. The semi-standardised questionnaires were answered by 3,619 ECE leaders in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. We analysed the qualitative data using content analysis with inductive categorisation and the quantitative data using correlation and regression analysis.

Keywords: COVID-19, leadership, early childhood education, physical and mental well-being, online questionnaire, quantitative data

Introduction

The rapid spread of the COVID-19 infection in spring 2020 led to a large number of restrictive political measures that had an enormous and rapid impact on citizens' professional and personal lives (Park et al. 2020; Lafave, Webster, and McConnell 2021). In the field of ECE. To contain the spread of the virus,

various measures were introduced in early childhood education institutions that have massively changed existing procedures.

A central role in the planning and implementation of the measures was played by institutional leadership. To ensure high-quality ECE and to manage human and material resources, leaders must possess a wide array of competencies (Strehmel and Ulber 2017). Moreover, demanding professional requirements lead to a high degree of stress, even in normal day-to-day operations (Nagel-Prinz and Paulus 2012; Hocke and Wichtl 2011; Eadie et al. 2021). This article examines the additional challenges that ECE centre leaders faced due to the COVID-19 pandemic and explores which professional aspects they found stress-relieving.

Theoretical framing

Professional requirements for ECE leaders include the organisation and coordination of pedagogical work, as well as the assurance and development of quality in relation to legal and agency-specific requirements and current scientific findings. In addition, leaders are responsible for motivating the team and for checking that the educational, upbringing and care mandates are implemented (Strehmel and Ulber 2017; Timmermann, Hogrebe, and Ulber 2021; Muijs et al. 2004). In this article, following Kyriacou (2001), stress is understood as a predominantly negative emotional experience. For example, Jungbauer and Ehlen (2014) surveyed 834 EC educators regarding the general perception of stress in their profession and found that the pedagogues perceived the inadequate staff situation to be particularly stressful and identified team cooperation as an important factor when it comes to the stress-related experiences of ECE professionals.

Regarding the management personnel of ECE institutions, studies have shown that they exhibit higher mean values in various stress indicators than EC professionals without a management function (Nagel-Prinz and Paulus 2012; Timmermann, Hogrebe, and Ulber 2021; Almstadt, Gebauer, and Medjedovi 2012). For example, Viernickel, Voss and Mauz (2017) pointed out that a higher hourly workload is a health risk, especially for managers. Nagel-Prinz and Paulus (2012) conducted a qualitative study of 35 managers to investigate the stresses they experienced and found indications of both stressful factors (stressors) and positive elements (resources). Six work areas were identified, some of which may contain both stressors and resources. The stressors included personnel management (e.g. an intermediary position between the provider and the team), administration (e.g. tight bureaucratic guidelines) and managing illness (e.g. staff shortages). Resources included educational leader-

ship (e.g. freedom of design), personnel management (e.g. appreciation within the team) and public-facing work (e.g. confirmation from outside).

Nagel-Prinz and Paulus's study (2012) was based on the concept of 'salutogens'. This concept was developed by Aaron Antonovsky in the 1970s and refers to the development and maintenance of health (physical well-being). This concept explains why some people cope better with high stress than others. The basis of the model is the sense of coherence (SOC), which describes a fundamental attitude to life consisting of the following three components:

1. *Understandability* – the person experiences the situation as predictable.
2. *Manageability* – the situation is assessed by the person as manageable.
3. *Meaningfulness* – the person appreciates the value of the activity that he or she is engaged in (Poulsen 2009).

A high SOC helps, for example, to classify stressful situations, to interpret them as manageable and meaningful and thus to develop coping strategies instead of despairing about the situation (Poulsen 2009; Antonovsky 1993).

The stressful situations identified in the study were mostly related to decision-making, control and planning tasks, which were described by the managers as complex and confusing (Nagel-Prinz and Paulus 2012), thus corresponding to a low SOC. Under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, additional challenges have arisen regarding the day-to-day running of ECE. For example, responses to ECE operation varied internationally, regionally and temporarily (Atiles et al. 2021). The spectrum of implemented measures ranged from complete closure to limited operations, with varying forms of emergency care (e.g. for Germany JFMK 2020). In addition, different measures and recommendations were provided by governments for the implementation of daily educational routines, which impacted the daily routines and organisation of ECE. For example, parents were not allowed to enter the interior of the facility. Flexibility concepts were introduced to flexible group and closed group concepts. Staff members who were at risk of severe COVID-19 outcomes were withdrawn from direct interactions with children (Alemzadeh 2020). The effects of these measures, which were usually implemented with little notice, on managers' SOC have not yet been investigated and were the subject of our study.

Research questions

The purpose of our study was to analyse the stress perceptions of the leaders of ECE institutions under changed COVID-19 conditions. We posed the following research questions:

1. What stressors did educational professionals in leadership roles experience due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and what did they understand to be the causes of the stressors?
2. Did the pandemic have any positive effects that helped circumvent the challenges?
3. Were there any factors correlated with the professionals' perceived stress levels?

Research design

Our study was based on cross-sectional data from the International Corona Kindergarten Survey (ICKE Study), a collaborative research project carried out by the Department of Pediatric Respiratory Medicine, Immunology and Critical Care Medicine in Berlin and the International Center for Professionalization in Early Childhood Educational Practice at the University of Graz. The following topics were examined by the ICKE survey:

- the occurrence of the COVID-19 disease
- the measures were implemented in the facilities on a monthly basis
- how well the leaders felt supported by different agencies (the youth welfare office and parents)
- the extent to which the managers found the measures and the pandemic stressful
- whether there were elements perceived as positive alongside the burdens

Our survey was conducted retrospectively for the second wave of the pandemic from August to January 2021.

To reach as many ECE educators as possible, the link to the online questionnaires was shared on social media from the end of January to the end of March 2021 and involved snowball sampling. The survey language was German.

After survey completion, complete data were available for 3,619 participants (2,512 from Germany, 809 from Austria and 298 from Switzerland). In 50% of the day-care centres participating in the study, at least one proven COVID-19 infection (with a positive test result) occurred during the surveyed period (Germany 45.3%, Austria 66.4% and Switzerland 45.0%).

Analysis

The quantitative analyses were conducted using SPSS 27, both descriptively and inferentially. Evaluations of the open responses were performed using qualitative content analysis with deductive-inductive category formation according to Mayring (2015) and technically supported by MaxQDA. For category formation, the rough categories of positive aspects and negative aspects were established deductively. Subsequently, the information was subjected to an inductive content analysis – that is, the categories were formed directly on the basis of the managers' statements. To check the category system, 60% of the statements were reclassified by a second coder. Intercoder reliability was over 85%.

Then, the categories were grouped into main categories, and finally, the number of mentions was determined, with multiple mentions of a category by the same person being counted only once.

Results

The following subsections first present the qualitative and then the quantitative results of the survey on the burdens experienced by ECE institution staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, we highlight the positive elements and support mechanisms for dealing with these challenges.

Qualitative results

Negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic

A total of 3,222 EC institution leaders responded to the open question, 'What was the most stressful thing for you during this time?' We identified eight main categories of stressful factors, which are presented below. A detailed overview can be found in the Appendix.

Lack of Information (2,252 mentions)

Frequently, the leaders described significant problems with information flow. Such problems included the fact that administrative staff received different in-

structions at short notice from various governmental bodies (state ministries, institutions, regional districts, etc.) and were required to implement the new regulations immediately. This made long-term planning impossible and required extreme adaptability.

Increased workload (892 mentions)

The leaders reported more managerial work, such as filing reports to various authorities, filling out forms (including compensation payments, statistical surveys, quarantine reports, needs surveys and vaccination registrations) and increased documentation requirements.

The creation and constant revision of hygiene plans and the planning of 'emergency care' programmes were also described as highly time consuming, given that requirements changed frequently. The leaders had to manage a flood of emails, filter and summarise information and then pass it on in a compact and readable form to various stakeholders (parents and internal staff). Many institutions transitioned to (partially) closed group work, which, in addition to logistical changes, required a complete conceptual redesign.

The leaders experienced parents' high levels of stress, exasperation and mental exhaustion firsthand. They provided parents with telephone support to encourage them and reduce their uncertainty, all while experiencing tragic circumstances themselves.

Consequences of anti-COVID-19 measures (1,506 mentions)

The requirement to wear a mask was described as particularly restrictive because it made interactions with children much more difficult. The reduced communication with other leaders, colleagues and families caused by the restrictions was also described as stressful. The limited interactions with parents during pickup at the facility entrance were described as abnormal. Parents for whom German was not their first language were particularly difficult to reach. Despite ECE professionals' attempts to contact families via other means, the situation in many cases only worsened. Many felt that every colleague was 'working for his/herself' and that the team was split into several differing camps, which reduced team cohesion.

The respondents described a significant decline in instructional quality, particularly due to the use of small groups. Other important pedagogical elements, such as singing and physical activity, were forbidden. The respondents frequently noted that in certain areas, they could no longer encourage children's independence. Many opportunities for children to act independently (e.g. free choice of rooms and friends) were made impossible by room assign-

ments and fixed small groups. Transitions often took place without parents and with frequent interruptions. The respondents frequently mentioned hygiene requirements, especially the negative consequences associated with wearing a mask over a long period of time, such as hoarseness from speaking loudly and headaches, migraines and fatigue caused by difficulty breathing.

The leaders also reported a large number of psychological and psychosomatic complaints. Many were confronted with feelings of 'never being finished with work' or 'never having worked enough'. Several felt an inability to 'switch off' or experienced constant tension, fear of infection and the need to self-isolate to protect others. These feelings caused psychological stress, irritability, malaise, weakness, sleep disorders, depression and burnout.

Stressful interpersonal conflicts (584 mentions)

The leaders felt forced into the role of being a 'COVID Officer' while providing both practical and psychological support. Managers had to deal with deteriorating team cohesion caused in many cases by limited contact. This resulted in uncertainty and 'competitive thinking' among staff as exasperation grew. Some employees refused to implement certain rules (testing or mask requirements and social-distancing restrictions), forcing leaders to implement stricter regulations and observation while team morale worsened.

Often, employees' schedules were changed on Thursday and immediately implemented on Monday next week. This required extreme flexibility from employees and added additional strain to the team.

The leaders' role as mediators charged with appeasing all parties while simultaneously meeting the demands of young children caused significant stress. The respondents reported many instances in which parents tried to drop off children with visible signs of infection. Often, parents refused to accept the staff's refusal to take in the child. These conflicts were exacerbated by the widespread assumption still held at the time that children did not transmit COVID-19 or did not become ill when infected.

Lack of resources (460 mentions)

Staff shortages became particularly noticeable during the pandemic. This was due, in part, to quarantine requirements for ECE professionals, sick leave and 'high-risk' staff members' inability to work. These difficulties were then worsened by increased demands for personnel, as the need for smaller groups and social distancing became more apparent. Staff members were unable to fill in for their colleagues. Under such conditions, team coordination became extremely challenging. The leaders were forced into the dual role of 'Educator-

Leader'. Additional problems were caused by a lack of material resources. In some cases, sufficient numbers of FFP2 masks, disinfectant and testing equipment were unavailable. The leaders also reported a distinct lack of adequate IT equipment. Devices and/or programmes were either unavailable or out of date. Internet connections were too slow. They felt 'digitally disadvantaged' and that their institutions had not yet arrived in the '21st century'. The respondents did not just want a General-Data-Protection-Regulation-compliant video conference tool for staying in contact with parents and colleagues.

Lack of support and intense pressure (143 mentions)

The leaders felt a significant amount of pressure from authorities to keep their facilities open but received very little information and found structures and guidelines to be missing or incomplete. They felt ignored by politicians, who made no reference to the situation and took no action to protect staff. The questions and concerns directed to authorities were answered insufficiently; worries and fears were downplayed. Wait times for test results were also protracted, leading to crucial delays in starting quarantine procedures after a positive result.

Emotional stressors (2,789 mentions)

Many respondents felt alone during this time, as if they were not seen as other individuals affected by the pandemic and were, instead, seen purely as service providers. They felt they were not taken seriously by politicians and the public, experiencing very little understanding and appreciation from external sources. The number of attending children was consistently high, especially during the second lockdown. So-called 'emergency ECE' programmes were well attended. Uncertainty about coming procedures and test results was also mentioned as a stress factor. Many leaders were concerned that children's well-being was being put at risk. They worried about the children who were required to stay at home and witness their parents' struggles. The respondents observed abnormal behaviours in children, setbacks in children's development (due to a lack of support) and saw children enjoy fewer social and educational opportunities. The leaders also reported that their employees and teaching teams were operating at the limits of their physical and mental capacities, constantly wavering between confidence and fear and suffering from deteriorating mental health. The respondents described situations in which parents who had tested positive brought their children to a ECE institution in which a colleague had nearly died of COVID-19 and situations in which the leaders themselves fell ill. They described their fears that the 'corona would inevitably reach them in

their facility' and spread rapidly, infecting them and those around them. In addition, the leaders reported intense worries about team members, whom they feared they could not protect. Some leaders worried about their institutions' economic situations, fearing the potential consequences for their job security. Many received lower salaries due to reduced working hours.

Work-life balance (388 mentions)

Many respondents struggled to manage all of their personal and professional responsibilities. Some leaders had children who, depending on their age, needed to attend a separate institution for 'emergency childcare'. Others received home schooling. For many respondents, getting their children into 'emergency ECE' was not easy, and some struggled with feelings of guilt.

For many, separating their professional and private lives became extremely challenging. According to the respondent's statements, they were forced to be available 24/7 to families and employees and were in regular telephone contact with their institutions. The leaders felt the need to be constantly available and prepared to make enormously consequential decisions with almost no time to recuperate.

Positive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic

A total of 2,747 leaders answered the following open-ended question: 'Were there any positive developments that you believe should be continued after the COVID-19 pandemic?' We grouped the responses into five main categories, which are presented below. For an overview, a table 4 can be found in the Appendix.

Digitalisation (1,253 mentions)

Digitalisation-related positive aspects were emphasised by the managers, such as time and cost savings and greater flexibility due to the use of digital media – for example, for training purposes and meetings. They claimed that digitalisation had finally arrived in the elementary education sector and that its importance had been recognised.

Closely linked to digital media was the reorganisation of parental work, which involved trying out new ways of staying in touch with families – for example, through digital communication channels, such as email, digital newsletters, parents' Zoom meetings and the use of a day-care app. However, beyond digital contacts, 'door-to-door visits' (at a distance), outdoor meetings,

conversation walks, phone calls and a day-care newspaper were also cited as positive COVID-19 innovations.

Improved care key (728 mentions) and Rethinking old concepts (621 mentions)

The leaders positively perceived the increase of the staff–child ratio through emergency care and the use of everyday helpers. The managers emphasised that high-quality work, individual attention to individual children and additional activities, such as observation and documentation, were made possible by the improved professional-child ratio and expressed hopes for a general change in this direction. They also stated that care in small groups was more beneficial for some of the children, especially shy children and children with higher support needs, and that they intended to adopt this concept, at least temporarily, in their everyday lives without COVID-19. In addition, the leaders often positively mentioned that many offers had to be rethought due to the changed conditions and that the results were so good that they would be continued in everyday life. One frequently mentioned point here was the relocation of offers outdoors, as well as the stronger focus of the offers on the children, away from the orientation towards the external effects on the parents.

The restrictions on facility entry and the resulting changes in the handover modalities for parents were perceived highly differently among the management staff, as both stressful and relieving. Relieving factors included the fact that for the children who had already arrived at the facility, there was less restlessness and fewer reminders of possible separation; in addition, improvements in children's independence and self-confidence (e.g. through independent arrival, dressing and undressing) were noted.

Increased hygiene and disease awareness (542 mentions)

Another positive aspect was the increased awareness of hygiene. Infectious diseases decreased, and the awareness that people with symptoms of illness (children and staff) should not come to the facility increased.

Emotionally relieving aspects (701 mentions)

Emotional relief came from a significantly increased appreciation of the work by parents and society (experienced through the media and politics). In addition, the leaders mentioned strengthened team cohesion, the self-confidence

that crises can be mastered, the reflection on the essentials and a willingness to be more flexible.

Quantitative results

The ECE centre leaders were asked to evaluate their experienced burden during the second wave (August 2020 to January 2021) using a 10-point scale. Approximately 84% of the managers chose a value of seven or higher to evaluate their workload, while 21% even chose the maximum value of 10.

In addition, a four-point scale (not at all good; rather not good; rather good; very good) was used to measure how the managers felt supported by different agencies. The results showed that only a small proportion (41%) rated support from the health department as rather good or very good. At the same time, 81% of the managers were positive about the support they received from their providers.

Features	r	p (two-sided)
Number of months affected by COVID-19	.148	<.001
Size of the day-care centre, measured by the number of children in care	.110	<.001
Measure:1 Work in separate small groups	.121	<.001
Measure:1 Restricting access to materials for children	.101	<.001
Measure:1 Restricting access of external persons (such as language support staff, etc., in the facility)	.122	<.001
Measure:1 Access ban for parents	.074	<.001
Perceived support:[2] Support	-.092	<.001
Perceived support:[2] Health department	-.136	<.001
Perceived support:[2] Parents	-.176	<.001

Table 1. Relationships between various aspects and stress perception (scale 0–10; 10 = highest stress)
Notes. Pearson correlation; $N = 3{,}503$; [1] recorded as number of months affected by the measure; [2]recorded via the question of 'How well do you feel supported by the institutions and persons named below during the COVID-19 pandemic?' (for providers, parents and health authorities) on a four-point scale ('not supported at all' to 'very well supported').

Based on the information available from the study, we conducted a correlation analysis to examine whether there were characteristics that could be identified as stress or relief factors caused by the pandemic conditions. We examined the correlations of the characteristics listed in Table 2, along with the information provided using the 10-point scale regarding stress perception.

The results of the correlation analysis (Table 1) showed significant correlations (with low effect sizes) with stress perception for almost all the characteristics considered. The alignment of the correlations showed that there were both stressors (positive value) and resources (negative value) during the pandemic.

In general, managers of larger facilities reported higher levels of stress ($r = .11$; $p<.001$). In addition, facilities that were confronted with infections for more months and implemented measures to contain infections over a longer period of time exhibited a higher sense of burden. By contrast, the managers who felt supported by various agencies reported lower stress levels.

These variables were tested using a common regression analysis to predict the respondents' perceived stress levels (Table 2). According to this analysis, the number of months during which a facility was directly affected by COVID-19 incidences emerged as the strongest predictor of stress. A high value for this variable was associated with a high perceived stress level ($\beta = .102$; $p<.001$). By contrast, stronger perceived support levels, especially from parents and the health department, were associated with lower stress levels.

The overall model exhibited a mean correlation of .30 ($p<.001$) between the predicted and the actual values. Therefore, we concluded that the model was of sufficient quality. Together, the combination of predictors explains 9% of the variance ($p<.001$) and thus falls within the range of 'low' effect size (Cohen 1992).

Coefficients	**β**	**Sig**
Number of months affected by COVID-19	.102	<.001
Size of the ECE measured by the number of children in care	.061	<.001
Measure: Work in separate small groups	.075	<.001
Measure: Restricting access to materials for children	.060	<.001
Measure: Restricting access of external persons	.062	<.001
Measure: Access ban for parents	.041	<.001
Perceived support: Support	-.040	.013
Perceived support: Health department	-.110	.020
Perceived support: Parents	-.120	<.001
Model summary: $R = .30/R^2 = .09$; $F= 37.173$; df(9)		<.001

Table 2. Stress rating prediction model: 'Thinking about the time from August to today, how would you rate your stress level on a scale from 1 (no stress) to 10 (extremely high stress)?'

Discussion

Our study had some limitations due to its research design. For example, the sample was obtained via snowball sampling and was, therefore, not representative of the respective countries. In addition, the type of survey via the online tool Limesurvey involves participants who are accustomed to the use of digital media. In addition, as with all online surveys, the conditions under which the survey was conducted could not be controlled (Thielsch and Weltzin 2012). Overall, however, the data were reliable due to the sample size. The possibility of multiple participations was limited by the recording of the IP address and the exclusion of incomplete entries. A bias due to COVID-19 infections in the ECE did not seem likely, as ECE with and without COVID-19 infections participated in the study to the same extent. Data collection by means of self-reporting usually entails the bias of social desirability. However, this risk was negligible due to complete anonymity.

Another limitation was the primarily inductive category formation related to the qualitative answers. However, the room for interpretation was not so large because the answers were very short and question-led, and the category system was checked with regard to observer agreement.

Data from the overall ICKE study sample demonstrate an intensification of stressors for childcare leaders in various areas (e.g. personnel management, administration, management of illness and work organisation). The very extensive range of tasks involved in everyday pedagogical life was further expanded by the restrictive measures implemented to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, many essential resources that contribute to the development of feelings of self-efficacy and SOC in professional life, such as sufficient space for creative and independent planning, were lost. This can lead to high levels of perceived stress, as the quantity, complexity and intensity of work responsibilities become disproportionately large compared to available coping options (Viernickel and Weßels 2020).

The qualitative results showed that certain conditions could not be clearly classified and, depending on the perspective, were evaluated positively by some participants and negatively by others. One such case was the increasing digitalisation. The leaders were positive about the flexible use of digital media, which saved them time and money. They could switch to digital meetings or participate in training and continuing professional development despite the lockdowns. At the same time, equipment and resources were lacking in the institutions. Therefore, it is clear that even after the pandemic, investment in hardware and software is needed in institutions, as well as more training in the use of digital media. New technologies could also be used in parental work to increase accessibility, as every household now has a smartphone (Eichen et al. 2021).

In dealing with hygiene and illness, the leaders reported greater understanding on behalf of the parents who did not bring their sick children to day-care centres and a lack of understanding on behalf of those parents who, nevertheless, brought their sick children to the centres.

The experience with emotionally stressful situations also revealed ambivalent results. The leaders perceived increased appreciation and good team cohesion. At the same time, they were overwhelmed by the needs and conflicts of parents and staff.

In the emergency care times, the leaders recorded a lower number of children on site; the resulting improvement in the educator–child ratio was experienced as positive, as it allowed educators to respond to the needs of the children in a more differentiated way while doing justice to the range of the tasks required (documentation, support services, etc.). The sometimes-high number of children per educator should be tackled politically.

Due to the regulations associated with the pandemic, the existing concepts had to be reconsidered. Some leaders considered the change to work in small groups a step backwards and felt that their colleagues in small teams were isolated. Other leaders noted that the care in smaller groups benefitted some children (e.g. shy children and children with special needs) and stated that they would like to offer this framework to the children after the pandemic, at least temporarily. In addition, some leaders reported experiencing a greater burden due to the ban on parents entering the facility during the drop-off and pick-up situation, while others emphasised how independent and self-confident the children had become as a result of this change. A creative and practical solution was, for example, to have a receptionist who was responsible for greeting and saying goodbye to the children. A sensible restructuring of daily routines also contributed to the sense of relie.

The quantitative results revealed a very strong sense of stress among the leaders. In addition, a large proportion of the leaders (59%) did not feel well supported, especially by the health authorities. As the leaders' stress perceptions were related not only to facility size and the duration of the pandamic but also to the support measures taken by various agencies, the results make it clear that leaders cannot solve all problems by themselves and need support from outside (e.g. agencies or politicians).

Our study also shows that the changed conditions forced leaders and teams to break with everyday routines and find creative solutions, a step for which motivation is often lacking in normal everyday life (Ulber and Strehmel 2019).

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Appendix

	Category	N
Problematic information flow (N=2,252)	Constantly new rules, no ability to plan	870
	Information at short notice, too late	661
	No or unclear, not comprehensible or implementable information	613
	Information flow not through official channels	108
increased effort (N=892)	more effort (work, time)	797
	High need to support parents emotionally	95
Consequences of the measures (N=1.506)	Lack of communication through distance rules	474
	Lack of normality and restrictive measures	548
	lower pedagogical quality	380
	Psychological and physical effects	104
stressful conflict situations (N=584)	in the team	64
	With parents	520
Lack of resources (N=460)	Staff	339
	Equipment (technical)	50
	Lack of equipment to implement the measures (material and spatial)	71
Lack of support (N=143)	Porters (lack of support and pressure)	71
	Health Department, etc.	72
emotionally stressful factors (N=2,789)	Fear of infection (self, MA, children)	686
	Insecurity, lack of perspective	472
	Burden of social responsibility	577
	Feeling of being left alone with everyone, lack of appreciation	502
	Inequity of opportunity, concern for children	219
	Full groups despite emergency care	137
	Actual or suspected cases of disease, quarantine in the environment	101
	Responsibility: Children's health	49
	Fears for the future of one's own job	46
Other stressful factors from private life (work-life balance) (N=388)	constant obligation to be available	198
	Lack of normality in private life	100
	Double burden due to family and career	90

Table 3. Frequencies of the description of stressful factors during the pandemic (stressors)
Note: in the case of multiple entries in the category, only one entry was made per manager.

	Category	N
Digitisation (N=1253)	Use of digital media	768
	New ways of communicating with parents	340
	Readiness and knowledge enhancement in the use of digital media	71
	Use of the home office	74
Improved educator-child ratio (N=728)	Relief through fewer children in emergency care	207
	Work in small groups and improved pedagogical quality	371
	Time for unfinished business, preparation, documentation	121
	Everyday helpers	29
Rethinking old concepts (N=621)	New forms of supply/sometimes reduction	180
	Handover situation redesigned with the parents	441
More awareness of hygiene and disease (N=542)	Increased hygiene awareness associated with fewer infectious diseases overall	452
	Awareness that sick persons are not allowed in the ECE	90
Emotionally relieving aspects (N=701)	Appreciation of the work	112
	Team cohesion	236
	Good cooperation with the families	96
	Positive experience in cooperation with providers, youth welfare offices and other external agencies	48
	Reflection, deceleration, attention and mindfulness	147
	Increased sense of responsibility, more flexibility, self-confidence, ability to cope with crises	62

Table 4. Frequencies of the description of relieving factors (resources)

Change or Inertia? Plans for the Day after the Corona Crisis: ECE Leaders' Concepts in Israel

Emanuel Tamir

Abstract

The Corona crisis brought with it many administrative challenges in the early childhood education system.

The present study examines the work of ECE leaders' administrators in Israel during the COVID-19 crisis and their steps to improve their resilience after the end of the challenging crisis. The article focuses on the third wave of the epidemic and is based on 15 interviews with ECE leaders whose perceptions and theories underwent interpretive analysis.

ECE leadership in Israel is unique in that educators are employed in a small and independent organizational unit and serve as administrative and pedagogical leaders of the ECE centres. The research questions examined 1. How did ECE leaders overcome educational difficulties created during the crisis? 2. What insights were gained during that period as well as their future plans?

The findings revealed three stages of action: in the first stage, leadership invested efforts in mastering the use of ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) through self-learning and assistance from social network, mainly using Zoom and WhatsApp. Then, the ECE leader focused on pedagogical aspects introducing innovations and changes relevant to the crisis. In the third stage, ECE leaders grew in confidence, encouraged their staff, and planned future processes integrating practical insights gained during the crisis. The study's added value reveals the actions of early childhood pedagogical leadership and analyses their practices when dealing with an ongoing crisis, where technological control was significant in assimilating changes and established a sense of personal competence.

Keywords: Crises, COVID-19, ECE leaders, Pedagogical leadership, ICT, Cracking leaders.

Introduction

The world has been turned upside down by the COVID-19 pandemic. Similar to other education systems around the world, the education system of the State of Israel was also forced to cope with the virus (Education International 2020; UNICEF,2020). The first wave of the pandemic broke out in Israel on 13.3.2020 and the education system was shortly afterwards drawn into a new organizational situation where it was obliged by the Ministry of Health to cease activities in its physical worksites. Staff in ECEs, and schools were instructed to remain in their homes and to immediately transfer to online teaching (Donitsa-Schmidt and Ramot 2020).

Research dealing with the coping of ECE leaders working with early childhood groups during the COVID-19 pandemic reveals how they coped with the pandemic initially, when they were required to transition to distance learning, and especially traces the technical difficulties they encountered, their own health concerns (Dayal and Tiko 2020; Dos Santos 2021; Munastiwi and Puryono 2021) and their willingness and mental abilities to adapt to these changes (Stoiljković 2020). In the perspective of more than a year, after several waves of Corona have spread throughout the world, and as a fifth wave is rampant in various countries, it is possible to observe the Corona pandemic as an extended crisis, rather than a flood disaster. It is interesting to investigate how ECE centre leaders organized for the day after it began, even if this was not an orderly structured program. There is not much extant research literature on this issue or observation of the necessary process of adaptation of ECE centre leaders to the crisis. This study therefore asks: How do ECE leaders surmount the educational disintegration created during the crisis as the year ends? What insights do ECE leaders take with them from the crisis? What are leaders plans for the future?

The findings can be useful for the to management of early childhood systems, ECE leaders and policymakers who wish to strengthen the education system against the background of an ongoing crisis (Boin, Kuipers & Overdijk, 2013;) and ability for reflection and learning (Wooten & James, 2008).

The research began with an investigation on coping with organizational crisis, and its findings can contribute a process perspective to extant research literature, which relates to both ECE leaders coping with ICT (Internet Communications Technology) and their pedagogic leadership. The findings can be useful to the management of early childhood systems, and policymakers wish to strengthen the education system against the background of an ongoing crisis.

Literature Review

The research literature examining how organizations cope with crises describes three phases of coping: 1. preparation in the pre-crisis period and attempts to prevent the crisis (Bechky and Okhuysen 2011; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2008); 2. Managing the crisis when it happens (Graffin, Haleblian, and Kiley 2016; Mazzei and Ravazzani 2015; Vera & Crossan, 2004); 3. Dealing with consequences and recovery (Grissom & Condon, 2021; Jin, Pang, and Cameron 2012).

Most of the research literature on educational institutions focuses on the second phase of crisis management as it appears and the same with regards to COVID-19. The epidemic struck education systems when they were not prepared for it, and thus presented educators with many pedagogical challenges and psychological difficulties (Dabrovsky, 2020; Rodríguez et.al, 2022). Schools were forced to suddenly change their work patterns and move to distance teaching (Hodges et al. 2020).

In early childhood education, ECE leader's role is viewed as essential in helping children readjust to a new reality in crises – before, during and afterwards (Ebbeck, Yim and Wei 2020). Yet, there is very little literature that discusses how ECE leaders coped with change in centres during the pre-crisis period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Early childhood systems around the world were forced to face unique difficulties during the lockdowns, such as preventing children from learning based on experience (Monstivi and Poriono, 2021), with technology that was not adapted to staff and in some cases also to families. The differences in the struggles in the different countries stemmed from the importance placed on early childhood in these countries, from resources allocated, including human capital resources, and from the attitude to weaker populations (Visenjic-Jevtik et.al, 2021; Foti 2020).

During the pandemic, ECE centre leaders in the Pacific voiced strong feelings such as fear of losing their jobs, fear of dependence and concern for their pupils, especially in homes where the family situation was unstable. The coping strategies used by ECE leaders were collective discussions and communication with parents on Viber and Zoom meetings (Dayal and Tiko 2020).

But the pandemic also generated the dropout of ECE leaders from their jobs and from the profession. Thus, for example in the United States and in Iceland, ECE leaders left their work because of the pressure of family duties and fear for their own health, because they could not protect themselves in the centres, and the pressure they felt. This was especially true among teachers whose families included the elderly or small children (Dos Santos 2021, Dýrfjörð & Hreiðarsdóttir, 2022). In addition to their fear of becoming ill, Brazilian ECE leaders suffered from economic harm to their working conditions

and frustration resulting from the lack of ICT end means in the children's families, as well as parents' unwillingness to help children participate in the virtual activity (Malta Campos and Vieira 2021).

The use of technology for teachers required effort on their part. In some countries, such as Spain, the State created the infrastructure and teachers used it for asynchronous teaching (Foti 2020).

In Turkey, there were difficulties because the non-user-friendly ICT platform for Early Childhood Education (Ümran 2021). Additionally, a survey in China found that ECE leaders found it difficult to manage distance teaching on ICT.

One of the most common difficulties was the need for active mediation by the parents, which teachers do not need in their daily work. Because of the children's young age, the need for supervision, and their inability to use the technology, parents were expected to help, often actively, while activities were being conducted.

There were gaps in support by parents for their children (Shi et al. 2021). Thus too, in Indonesia, ECE leaders reported difficulties and gaps between different children and their families in adapting to the new pedagogic culture (Munastiwi and Puryono 2021).

As a result, the children and their parents' participation was affected, which frustrated ECE leaders (Yildiz, Kilic, and Akar, 2022). In Israel, most ECE leaders reported that they coped well with the distance learning processes during the crisis. Only a minority were satisfied with asynchronous messages to the children's families (Eisenberg and Zylka, 2022)

The literature indicates a lack of knowledge concerning the overall process of coping with a crisis in the early childhood education system. The article addresses this gap through comprehensive coping in Israeli centres during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

The research employed qualitative methodology, chosen in order to understand the experiences of the ECE leaders in the field and the interactions, interpretations and contexts that shaped their coping strategies over the initial periods of the Co COVID-19 pandemic (the first three waves in 2020-2021). Qualitative methodology enables the researcher to categorize common topics that reflect the different viewpoints of the respondents and to elicit their complex textual descriptions of the studied phenomenon (Taylor et al. 2016). The research used an interpretative approach (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011), allowing the identification of the respondents' experiences and considerations.

The respondents

Respondents were 15 female ECE leaders from the north of Israel, working with children aged 3-4 years. The leaders were recommended by their supervisors, together with recommendations from lecturers in the college who knew the leaders. The mean age of the respondents was 41 years (range 28-55), with a mean of 15 years' teaching experience (range 4-32 years). Each interview lasted approximately one hour and the respondents were given the opportunity to express their viewpoints concerning the research subject (Rossman and Raliss 2012). The interviews were recorded and their voices were transcribed. Respondents were informed that they could stop their participation at any stage. The interviews were semi-structured and included questions such as: "How did you cope with the first wave of the pandemic in the ECE centre?", "Describe the issues on which you focused in the first three waves of the pandemic", "What is your professional experience after a year of coping with the pandemic?", "What are your plans for the period after the pandemic?", "What would you be interested in changing in ECE leadership after the pandemic ends?" The interviews continued until no new insights were raised and the subject was exhausted (Morse 2000).

Data analysis

The data underwent a three-stage analysis: thickening, encoding, and classification. The analysis's thickening stage identified data connected to the research question.

In the encoding stage, excerpts from the leader's testimony were encoded. The coding was inductive, developed by direct examination of the viewpoints narrated by the leaders. In the classification stage, the data were consolidated into categories, sorting statements that did not align with each other, and discretion was used to present the information in categories. An inductive process was used to identify common patterns based on different perspectives expressed by the participants (Rossman and Ralis 2012). In some cases, there was an additional conversation with the leaders to ensure their interpretation corresponded to their experiences.

Context

Israel's early childhood education system is split between two government ministries – the Ministry of Labor and Welfare (birth till three years old) and the Ministry of Education (three-five years). The number of children in an ECE centres is, on average, 29.4 in comparison to 19.6 in OECD countries, while the number of assistants in a kindergarten in Israel is the lowest in OECD countries (OECD, 2019).

In the last decade, several reforms have been introduced into early childhood education in Israel, relating to the addition of assistant staff, the inclusion of children aged three-four years, and the amendment of the Supervision Law for Pre-Schools from birth to two years. The ECE leaders are divided in their opinions concerning the State system's commitment to early childhood education (Tamir 2021).

Most ECE leaders in Israel do not work in a centre that is part of an elementary school or in a complex of classes. Instead, they manage an independent centre unit responsible for the pedagogy and organization of the entire unit processes (Tamir, 2021; Studni and Oplatka, 2020).

The ECE leaders experience loneliness and are forced to manage the centres according to their professional ability, based on guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education (Aizenberg & Oplatka, 2019). In recent years, due to the burden on supervisors, the role of senior ECE leader has been added (ECE leader also), which helps with pedagogical advice to colleagues.

Findings

Three main aspects emerged from the findings concerning the ECE leaders handling the COVID-19 pandemic: ECE leaders who overcame the challenges associated with Information and Communications Technology (ICT) technologies, ECE leaders who created pedagogic innovations in the centres and leaders who experienced their own emotional development, becoming more inclusive, and beginning to make plans for the day after the crisis. There were 4 interviewees who described all the characteristics of these categories, and for others, one or two characteristics of the categories were found.

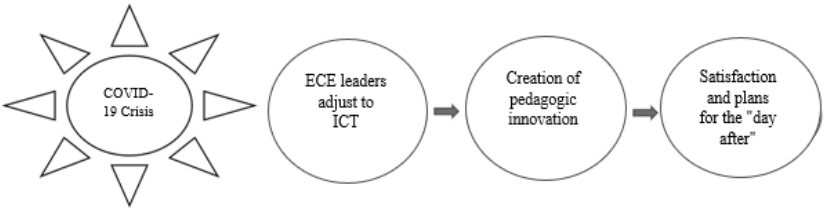

Figure 1. The course of leadership's adaptation to and exit from a crisis

The names of the leaders whose words are presented in the next findings are fictitious to preserve their anonymity.

ECE leaders' coping with ICT

The leaders related to the way in which they coped with their community and explained how they led the online discourse between them, their interaction with the children's parents and their communication with the establishment responsible for them with self-learning of technology, some of which was based on social networks. Most of them (13 out of 15) described their adaptation to ICT (in Israel the Zoom platform was used in addition to e. mails, WhatsApp and rarely- Telegram).

Liza (aged 39, 13 years' experience) described the leadership challenge she faced in a simple way:

> "Everything that was done in the centre to enable it to continue to function in the confusing period depended on things that only I could organize, my ability to find technological solutions and the energy I invested in supporting both staff and families".

Nina (aged 36, with 12 years' teaching experience) described the process of coping with ICT tools, which helped her to continue her contact with the children and their parents during the pandemic waves:

> "There were moments when the technology exhausted me. Other managers I spoke with also said that this was their situation. I didn't give up on myself. I convinced the assistants to get into it. Zoom helped me to hold meetings with the children and their parents… And my WhatsApp was active over time – with the parents' group where I sent out notifications, from technical explanations to advice on effects that could be produced…I wrote few emails, mainly in order to transmit formal messages. Google-Drive was something that I learned… used Google-Drive with the supervisors".

All the interviewees described their use of Zoom, whether it was their initiative to use it or the initiative of the establishment responsible for them. Iris (aged 50, with 22 years' experience) expanded on her coping with the technological challenges:

> "At first, I didn't know how to use the Zoom tool. My colleagues helped me, a little help from an Internet film, and my husband helped me understand how to use Zoom… In order to contact the children and also to see them… Zoom was a relatively good solution. The difficulty was that I needed the parents' help to operate Zoom. Children are too young to operate the computer by themselves. Also, parents and children participated when I wanted to perform activities, such as banging on percussion instruments at home, and using kitchen utensils".

In addition to the direct work with the children, Zoom served other organizational needs that necessitated intensifying the ECE's leadership.

Elizabeth (aged 31, 7 years' experience) spoke about work meetings:

> "The first period of Zoom usage required a lot of investment from me to learn how to use the technology. Sometimes I sought solutions by myself or discussed things with my colleagues on the phone so they could explain how to use it. Zoom allowed me to conduct staff meetings. sometimes short meetings in the evening, on an urgent issue. In those meetings we sometimes showed photographs and shared one screen or another, used Zoom with the supervisors and with the multi-professional staff such as the psychologist, music teacher and drama instructor".

Shir (aged 31, 7 years' experience) shared her insights as a result of her insistence on leading the staff she manages to use ICT and talks about future activity:

> "I am glad I pushed the team to 'crack' the technology. We understood that it was worth integrating more technology into our everyday life. It is easier to organize meetings with a multi-professional team and conversations with parents using Zoom. Although you need to know how not to exaggerate, I intend to carry on with work tasks regardless of the epidemic. There are advantages to connecting children with far families and caring for sick children. I told the staff about continuing to use the technology in the future and am getting a positive response".

ECE leaders needed to cope with the technology and harness technology for centre's needs.

Pedagogic leadership creating innovations

Listening to ECE leaders' voices, it is clear that their coping with ICT was more than mere technological coping. After the first shock with the outbreak of the pandemic and the dramatic change in work methods that involved the

investment of energy in learning the technology, leaders focused on leading a discourse in the ECE centre on pedagogic facets. The waves of the virus involved lockdowns interspersed with work in the centre with the children, and the leaders (7 out of 15) related to this. Yardena (aged 41, 12 years' experience) explained and spoke about the future:

> "Using Zoom, I performed a sort of puppet theater telling short stories. I encouraged the parents to prepare a character for the child with materials they had at home; sometimes a puppet from a sock filled with rags with stickers. We did shared plays. For example, the fable 'Wolf, wolf', the child and the parent held the puppet representing people who came to protect the sheep and also recited a sentence of their own that they had prepared with their child. In most cases it worked well. But there were parents who found it difficult…so I suggested that their child should use a ready-made puppet. After the pandemic, I would conduct conversations from time to time with parents on Zoom… coordinated beforehand. It only meant a few minutes out of their work time but it created a difference in how they participated".

Lisa (aged 35, 9 years' experience) used Zoom rooms to conduct work between groups of children and their parents:

> "I exploited the possibility of using Zoom rooms for work on different subjects. Once, I included groups of parents and their children in rooms. I chose children who had been friends before Corona and put them together. Before the meeting, I told the parents to ask the child to draw a painting showing something from their daily lives. Another time, I asked the parents to present something that the child liked, such as a toy, together with the child and… to describe it. In both cases I stayed on after the activities to talk with the parents about their children's experiences… I analyzed it with the staff".

Moran (53 years old, with 30 years of experience) whose work in recent years at a "forest ECE centre" as part of the class' external learning had insights that strengthened her beyond the technological concept:

> "It's clear to me that in addition to integrating Zoom, it should be balanced with physical activity. In recent years, my centre has become a forest centre. Now, I plan to transfer even the activities that have been taking place inside the classroom such as the cooking corner, musical activity, outside in nature, weather permitting. I have begun to think about different protected constructions outside with some sort of roofing and I'm trying to progress that with the help of the Municipality and some of the parents".

Gina (aged 28, 4 years' experience) also talked enthusiastically about interaction that developed that was not related to technology but actually stemmed from the limitations related to coping with Corona:

> "The Corona period caused a change in my thinking about the annual program. Starting with birthdays, shared parties, a morning meeting with the parents … when it was possible to meet with the children, everything was done in smaller doses, I feel that allowed more space for the children. Although I overcame the

> difficulties with technology, and perversely because of that, I intend to go deeper into the concept that I feel to be correct, to adopt a format of minimum presence of the parents in the centre".

The crisis offered the ECE leaders' opportunities to lead new pedagogy. The leaders developed various pedagogic initiatives in their centres. There were some who developed ICT-assisted processes in order to create greater cooperation with the parents while others felt that in the future they would put emphasis on the anti-thesis to that approach, working in natural environments, separating the parents from the children. Common to these two approaches was the desire to assimilate the new processes in the centre even after the COVID-19 crisis ends, irrespective of the constrictions due to the pandemic.

Emotional preparedness for future crisis situations

For some ECE leaders (8 out of 15), the upheaval of the COVID-19 waves created an experience of overcoming adversity. The leaders referred to their feelings regarding their work during this period. They described their feelings toward the possibility that the COVID-19 virus is here to stay in one form or another, and they described what helped them overcome it. Tal (aged 42, 15 years' experience):

> "In the first Corona wave, as always, I felt pretty alone. We work alone with our small staff. The confusion in the country and in the education system, all the conflicting messages, and the lack of knowledge about what to do were not easy. Pretty soon, we got in touch in a WhatsApp group of colleagues and started coming up with ideas to support each other. We held several conference calls. Mostly we listened to everyone's troubles. We were looking for what calms us down… shared with each other ideas that helped us and how we could do something good for the children. We were also debating how to support the team that has its own personal problems. From this period, I came out strengthened. I know I can rely on the colleague's forum".

An emotional insight in a different direction, which arose as a result of the COVID-19 period, was Doreen's decision (aged 40, 15 years' experience):

> "After virus waves, I felt that I was more professional, more able to cope with the difficulties that the children and their families were experiencing. My husband was not working and my son was suffering… I consulted a friend, psychologist. In my family, we moved to a clearer daily agenda, I even played quiet music at home. I recommended it to the parents who consulted me and my two assistants' employees also did the same in their homes… From my point of view, I am calmer, also more focused when needed. intend to go deeper into this with the staff, maybe organize further professional training together with the municipality".

In both cases, the leaders described how they looked by themselves for solutions to their emotional distress through their social network, not as part of institutional processes, and how they led the process for their staff and the children's families. Another emotional aspect that arose among five leaders related to the contribution of physical proximity in the encounter with parents. Mira (aged 43, 15 years' experience) described her feelings:

> "Although I managed with my team members to produce a 'zoom routine', we felt it was quite annoying, even depressing. Recently, I have started meeting parents with children in the public park next to our centre, for a few minutes at a time. We tried half an hour before the end of the working day to meet two parents. Fresh air, we wear masks and keep our distance from each other, but we saw that it was a good atmosphere for us as we reduced the feeling of alienation. Even after the epidemic, I will continue to do this once a week. There is something good in a few minutes of attentiveness and walking about outside, regardless of Corona".

The ongoing COVID-19 crisis has led the leaders to learn more about themselves and their feelings of self-sufficiency and to look for solutions to help them deal with the sense of alienation that distance has imposed on everyone. This pleased some of them and encouraged them to continue planning processes to learn more, preserve their activities in the centre and motivate them to lead their staff in the same direction "the day after" the crisis.

Discussion

The research aimed at understanding the professional way that ECE leaders in Israel coped during the COVID-19 pandemic, to elicit their insights from this crisis period as well as the lessons they learned for "the day after" the pandemic.

The study sheds light on the second, management phase (Graffin, Haleblian, and Kiley 2016; Mazzei and Ravazzani 2015; Vera & Crossan, 2004) in organizational handling crises, as well as on the beginning of the third phase, dealing with the results, learning and planning for the future (Grissom & Condon, 2021).

The findings related to technological aspects; the leaders' mastery of ICT components that they needed for successes in their work in synchronic meetings, as had occurred in other places worldwide (Dayal and Tiko 2020; Foti 2020; Munastiwi, and Puryono 2021; Zecca 2021). Initially the Israeli leaders were upset. Like other ECE leaders around the world, they had to deal with technological infrastructure difficulties, the need to get help from the parents in need themselves, and the inadequacy of remote education that would answer the needs of the young children (Foti 2020; Shi et al, 2021). Later, when they

felt relatively skilled enough to use the ICT tools, the leaders were able to lead their pedagogy by practical tools and instruments (Strehmel, 2016) to try to interpret the curriculum process (Ahtiainen, Fonsén & Kiuru, 2021), adapt it to the new situation and introduce changes and innovations in their work processes. Most of them wished to continue to sustain and develop professional processes experienced during this period, including planning for the following year. It was possible to see that the processes that they underwent established positive attitudes towards any possible future crises, and a feeling of emotional capability to cope with the necessary technology. Former research found that positive attitudes towards ICT in ECE can reinforce the assimilation of technology in the centre (Magen-Nagar, Firstater, and Schwasbky 2013).

The current study demonstrates that the ECE leaders also interpreted their mastery of technological aspects and pedagogic leadership as reinforcing them. Perhaps these stems from frequent changes and reforms in Israel's early childhood education that occurred in the last decade (Tamir 2021) together with the challenges of the education system in the face of the State of Israel's security constraints (Kremnitzer 2020). This, together with the political instability situation in the pandemic period (Maor, Sulitzeanu-Kenan, and Chinitz 2020), or the adaptation of the leadership to independence due to the educational system structure (Aizenberg & Oplatka 2019; Studni and Oplatka 2020) obliges them to produce solutions themselves. This in turn led to the independence of Israeli ECE leaders, their reduced expectations from the establishment and their swift organization that enhanced their pedagogic leadership and their strong sense of self-efficacy.

From an organizational viewpoint, mastering and exploiting the technological resource that is mostly available online is an example of a "cracking" culture (Tamir and Ganon-Shilon 2021). Organizations that succeed in developing such a culture are able to realize the resources that they receive in an optimal manner. Yet there are few successful cases about the ECE leaders even though there is a lot to learn from them (Tokić & Vukašinović, 2020). Many of the ECE leaders, who responded to the research, succeeded in exploiting ICT resources and the crisis and emerged strengthened by this process.

Limitations of the study

The research relied on a relatively small sample. The qualitative methodology used enabled light to be shone on the ECE leaders coping with the pandemic and its consequences, but it is possible to expand this study and to examine quantitative aspects of the meanings of their initiatives and the changes that the leaders placed on integration in the future. It would also be informative to understand additional background factors such as the educational approach of

the centre in which the leaders work and at which stage of their career they encountered the pandemic. An additional limitation relates to the fact that the pandemic has not yet ended and so it is difficult to test the axis of leaders resilience as revealed here.

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Returning to in-Person School during COVID: Perspectives from Kindergarten Classrooms in Florida

Melissa Rodriguez-Meehan & Clarisse Halpern

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic imposed challenges to education worldwide, including ensuring a safe return to in-person classes. Despite numerous uncertainties, an emergency order required schools to reopen in Fall 2020 in Florida, United States. Limited research explored K-12 settings during the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States; thus, the purpose of this study was to explore teachers' and students' experiences returning to in-person instruction. The following research questions guided the study: 1) What are teachers' and young children's face-to-face learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic? (2) What barriers/challenges have the teachers experienced during face-to-face learning during the COVID-19 pandemic? A case study explored the phenomenon of young children's and teachers' experiences post-COVID-19 pandemic school closures in a public elementary charter school in Florida. Multiple data sources were collected in Spring 2021 to ensure a detailed case description: direct observations, field notes, artifacts, and semi-structured interviews. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the data were organized and categorized using descriptive and focused coding. Three themes were identified using content analysis: (1) "gel in, gel out," (2) "it's a totally different way of teaching," and (3) bridging a socially-distant community. The themes indicated teachers' efforts to provide a safe environment to protect the children from getting infected with the virus while maintaining a sense of normalcy in the classroom. This study revealed the challenges experienced by the participants during highly challenging times returning to in-person schooling.

Keywords: early childhood education, COVID-19 pandemic, teachers, kindergarten, case study

The COVID Pandemic and Reopening of Schools

By April 2020, more than 1.5 billion students worldwide experienced school closures in an effort to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus (Bao et al. 2020; Marshall & Bradely-Dorsey, 2020). Likewise, the pandemic and school closures resulted in major unplanned changes for students and teachers across the United States (Kaden, 2020). The sudden forced school closures during the pandemic required schools to rapidly adapt and shift to remote instruction (Ghazi-Saidi et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2021; Serhan, 2020). In Fall 2020, all U.S. public K-12 schools reopened in broadly three learning modalities, namely, strictly remote learning, hybrid, and in-person learning (Liu et al., 2021). The determination of which of the three modalities would be available varied by state. For instance, Marshall and Bradley-Dorsey (2020) found that recommendations for schools reopening were either based on the viral spread in each state and school district or a preferred teaching and learning modality.

School Closures and Educational Continuity in Florida

On March 17, 2020, the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE) issued guidance that all public and private K-12 schools were to be closed through April 15, 2020. In the statement, Richard Corcoran, the Florida Commissioner of Education, stated, "The containment of COVID-19 is essential, and this is not a decision we made lightly. Districts have instituted distance learning as a necessary precaution to protect students, educators, families, and Florida's overall public health" (FLDOE, 2020a, para. 2). On March 31, 2020, the Florida commissioner recommended all Florida public and private K-12 campuses extend campus closures through May 1, 2020 (FLDOE, 2020b). However, on July 6, 2020, the commissioner issued an emergency order (FLDOE, 2020c) stating the need to open schools fully to ensure: (a) the quality and continuity of the educational process, (b) the comprehensive well-being of students and families and (c) a return to Florida hitting its full economic stride. The order dictated school openings be consistent with safety precautions as defined by the Florida Department of Health and local health officials (FLDOE, 2020c).

Teachers' and Students' School Experiences during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Research on teachers' and students' perspectives of distance-learning during COVID-19 has been completed (Bao et al., 2020; Kaden, 2020; Niemi & Kousa, 2020; Pawilen et al., 2020). However, limited research is available on in-person school experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic after the return from school closures from April to September 2020, especially in K-12 settings in the United States. Much of the research focuses on pedagogical issues of e-learning in addition to access and equity issues for students, particularly in higher education institutions in both the US and internationally (Ananga, 2020; Ghazi-Saidi et al., 2020; Nambiar, 2020; Serhan, 2020).

However, some studies have explored the school experiences of teachers and children in K-12 settings during the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide (Halpern, 2021; Hebebci et al., 2020; Kaden, 2020; Niemi & Kousa, 2020; Schwan, 2021), albeit focused on distance learning transition. For example, Niemi and Kousa (2020) found that distance learning in a local upper secondary school in Finland was implemented successfully, but students complained of heavy workloads and fatigue, and loss of motivation. Teachers quickly learned to use technological platforms, but high-quality interactions were not implemented through these platforms. Teachers worried about students' progress but did not perceive students' heavy workload and motivation problems in the same ways the students described them (Niemi & Kousa, 2020; Schwan, 2021). Halpern (2021) found significant differences between private- and public-school teachers' experiences transitioning to distance learning in Brazil, including the availability of resources, school administration support, access to technology, parental involvement, and student motivation. Such differences can potentially impact and widen the achievement gap of students of different socioeconomic statuses in Brazil. Similarly, teachers and students in Turkey revealed issues with restricted interaction, infrastructure problems, and lack of equipment but viewed distance education as an option for the future with necessary improvement and training (Hebebci et al., 2020). In the United States, Kaden (2020) found that, although American teachers experienced increased and changed workload during Spring 2020, it may have worked as the catalyst for the creation of future hybrid models for educating students. Furthermore, Kaden (2020) concluded that no single online learning model would provide equitable educational opportunities for all students and that virtual learning could not be seen as a solution to the ongoing financial crisis in funding education.

As mentioned, researchers have highlighted the experiences of teachers and students as they transitioned to online learning environments during the

height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Recognizing the challenges teachers and students faced during school shutdowns and shifts to e-learning[1], the researchers in this study aimed to explore the experiences of early childhood teachers and students who returned to in-person school in Fall 2020, in the midst of the pandemic. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are teachers' and young children's face-to-face learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What barriers/challenges have the teachers experienced during face-to-face learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Method

A qualitative case study explored the contemporary phenomenon of young children's and teachers' school experiences post-COVID-19 pandemic school closures within the real-life context of an elementary school in Southwest Florida, United States (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2018). Next, the case will be described as well as participants' selection, the data collection and analysis procedures, and the researchers' positionalities.

The Case

The ABC School is a Southwest Florida public charter elementary school that attends to 766 students. The student population demographics in ABC School include 62.5% White, 1.6% Asian, 2.6% Black, 29.1% Hispanic, and 3.9% multiracial. Economically disadvantaged students comprise 32.3% of the population, while 2.6% of the students are English language learners and 4.4% are students with disabilities.

The case of ABC School was selected using convenient sampling as it is located within the geographical area where both researchers reside and work. In addition, the first author used to work in the school before her doctoral studies, having access to the school administration, teachers, and staff to recruit participants. This aspect was critical as the research was conducted while measures to prevent the spread of the virus were in effect, thus, increasing the school administration, staff, teachers, and children's parents' comfort level in the researchers' access to the school facilities to have safe interactions with the children and teachers.

1 Online, e-learning, distance and remote learning" used interchangeably

Participants

After the researchers received approval from their university's institutional review board (Protocol #2020-113), the first author sent a recruitment e-mail to the school principal, who forwarded the invitation to participate in the study to their teachers. The recruitment message included information about the purpose of the study, the need for consent forms for teachers and parents, the benefits of participation in the study, and that minimal to no risks would be involved. As a result, two kindergarten teachers volunteered to participate in the study.

Participant	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Education	Years Teaching
Teacher 1	38	F	White, Non-Hispanic	BA, Elementary Education; MA in Reading	11
Teacher 2	36	F	White, Non-Hispanic	BA in Elementary Education	4

Table 1. Teachers' Demographic Information

	Participant	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	English Language Learner
Teacher 1 Students	Student 1	6	M	White, Non-Hispanic	No
	Student 2	5	F	White, Hispanic/Latino	No
	Student 3	5	M	White, Hispanic/Latino	No
	Student 4	5	F	White, Non-Hispanic	No
	Student 5	5	F	White, Hispanic/Latino	No
	Student 6	6	M	White, Non-Hispanic	No
Teacher 2 Students	Student 7	6	F	White, Hispanic/Latino	Yes
	Student 8	6	F	White, non-Hispanic	No
	Student 9	5	F	White, Hispanic/Latino	No
	Student 10	5	F	White, Native Hawaiian	No
	Student 11	6	F	White, non-Hispanic	No
	Student 12	6	F	White, Hispanic/Latino	No
	Student 13	6	M	White, non-Hispanic	No
	Student 14	5	F	White, non-Hispanic	No
	Student 15	6	M	White, non-Hispanic	No

Table 2. Students' Demographic Information Distributed by Teacher
Note. F= Female, M= Male. Race/Ethnicity data were obtained from the school administration.

Subsequently, the researchers asked the volunteer teachers to forward the invitation to participate in the research via e-mail to their students' parents to consent to their children being interviewed. A total of 15 kindergarten children were interviewed for the study. Before the interviews, the researchers collected the signed consent forms of the two teachers and the children's parents that ensured the participants' rights to non-participation and non-response during the study and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. The forms also described measures to protect the confidentiality of the participants' identities and information using non-identifiable information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Table 1 depicts the teachers' demographic information and Table 2 depicts the students' demographic information.

Data Collection and Analysis

Multiple data sources were collected to ensure a detailed description of the case exploring the learning experiences and challenges of the teachers and students (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018). Specifically, the data were collected through direct observations, semi-structured interviews, artifacts, and field notes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018).

The direct observations occurred once to twice a week between January and April 2021 in the two kindergarten classrooms. They allowed the researchers to observe the actions in real-time while taking part in some of the students' classroom activities. Furthermore, the researchers sought to establish a way of working and interacting with the children, allowing the children to become familiar with them and creating a naturalist environment that increased participants' engagement in the study and rapport between them (Gibson, 2007; Yin, 2018). In addition, the observations allowed the researchers to "learn things that [the participants] would be unwilling to talk about in an interview" (Patton, 2015, p. 501). The observations revealed behaviors, relationships, and interactions that could go unnoticed by the participants during the interview process. Each observation lasted an average of one hour.

The semi-structured interviews explored the participants' perceptions, experiences, feelings, opinions, and attitudes towards returning to school after the COVID-19 pandemic school closures (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The semi-structured format allowed flexibility during the interview process in which the researchers could react to the participants' comments, change the order of the questions asked and the direction of the interview, and ask probing questions for clarification. Most importantly, the semi-structured interviews encouraged a dialogue between the researchers and the participants (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). After a minimum of two weeks of observations, the interviews were conducted to increase the children's familiarity and comfort level talking to

and interacting with the researchers. While the interviews with the teachers lasted approximately 45 minutes, the interviews with the children lasted approximately five to ten.

The teachers were interviewed simultaneously by the two researchers; however, the children's interviews were conducted separately to reduce the inherent power imbalance between adult researchers and the children (Lahman, 2008). Moreover, the researchers understood the importance of conducting children's interviews in their real-life settings (i.e., their classrooms) in an environment familiar and comfortable (Vygotsky, 1978). They knew that "the success of an interview [with children] is highly dependent on how comfortable the participants feel with the research and the way the researcher[s] interact with them" (Griffin et al., 2016, p. 24). Furthermore, the following measures were taken to ensure successful interviews with the children. First, the children were given initial control over the interview, talking freely about anything they wanted, with the researchers listening and interacting attentively to allow the children to feel relaxed and encouraged to talk about their school experiences post-COVID-19 school closures. The children were specifically asked about their understanding of what COVID-19 was, their experiences with COVID safety protocols, and general questions about their school day. These general questions included a description of their school day, what they liked and disliked about school, and their overall feelings about their friends and teachers at school. The researchers disclosed the purpose of the study to the children in simple language so they understood the importance of their contributions to the research. They emphasized to the children that there were no right or wrong answers and to speak of their experiences and feelings freely. Lastly, the researchers were aware of the importance of considering the children's nonverbal reactions, and their body language (e.g., smiling, nodding, shrugging, chuckling, and others) to help gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Griffin et al., 2016).

The artifacts included the kindergarteners' drawings and writings (Miles et al., 2014; Patton, 2015; Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). During one of the observation days, the researchers arranged with the classroom teachers to conduct an activity with the children to prepare them to produce artifacts for the study. The teachers introduced the topic of what they enjoy most about school. After initial discussions and oral responses, the teachers instructed them to draw what they liked the most about being back to school. The artifacts provided insight into what the children enjoyed about their school day. Finally, the researchers' field notes added more details to the data collected in the artifacts, observations, and interviews, including comments, initial analysis and interpretations, and reactions to the participants' experiences (Patton, 2015).

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. Then, the aggregated data were organized and categorized. Descriptive coding was used for the artifacts, while focused coding was used for the interviews to help the re-

searchers understand the participants' perspectives (Saldaña, 2016). After analyzing the transcripts separately, the researchers compared their interpretations to check for inconsistencies and increase the findings' accuracy, credibility, and trustworthiness (Patton, 2015). The coded data were analyzed using content analysis that allowed the researchers to systematically consolidate and reduce content to make sense of the data and identify relevant themes (Merriam, 1998; Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). Codes were organized into categories and themes were derived from the data through the discovery of iterations and patterns. Finally, member-checking and external audits were used to increase the study's credibility and trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Findings

Focusing on the overall experiences and challenges faced by the teachers and the students, three themes emerged as a result of the data analysis: (1) "gel in, gel out," (2) "it's a totally different way of teaching," and (3) bridging a socially-distant community.

"Gel in, Gel out"

Both the students and teachers had new learning experiences due to COVID-19 mitigation protocols. These mitigation efforts included universal masking, social distancing, extensive cleaning protocols, and the inclusion of cohort-style groups within classrooms. According to Teacher 1, at the beginning of any kindergarten year, much of the first week is spent on building community, getting to know the students and their families, and students learning expectations and procedures. COVID-19 was an additional topic prioritized this year. Teacher 1 explained,

> Normally the first week of school is all about families, but this year it was all COVID stuff like germs, what germs mean. I asked them what they know. Some of them – they know, 'the virus!'. I explained to them that we are trying to keep each other safe and that is why we are wearing the mask.

The teachers worked hard to educate the students and build procedures while also addressing misconceptions the children may have had. Hand-washing and the use of hand sanitizer were priorities in the classrooms, and the researchers often observed the hand-washing routines that were built throughout the day. The teachers used the phrase "gel-in, gel-out" to teach the children about safely

hand-sanitizing after each center rotation, after using the restroom, and before snack time. Teacher 1 described her experience:

> Every time we touch something the germs are on there. Gel-in, gel-out, [you] just try to keep their hands as clean as you can. We dedicated a full week to it. Every now and then I can recall where I overheard them say something like, 'you're going to die [if you get covid]'. No, that doesn't mean [that]—it makes people sick, some people get very sick, we just don't know. Most people are okay, but we need to protect people, we need to work together and try to get through it.

Teacher 2 spoke to children about how "germs, in general, can cause us harm so we wear masks and we wash our hands because we care about each other and to keep us healthy and safe so we can stay in our classroom together." She continued, "I know that I really want them in here [the classroom] with me so we just do what we have to do to stay together." She reflected on how March of 2020 (shutdown of schools) was something she did not want to experience again: "I'll do what I have to do to keep us healthy." Mitigation protocols impacted instructional procedures as well, resulting in some specific barriers for the teachers. Teacher 1 stated, "We do all the curriculum – it's all the same, everything. The rotating and the playing that we are so accustomed to, that I've been accustomed to for so long, has been more restricted to their certain cohort." This sometimes resulted in more redirection required of the teachers. Teacher 1 continued, "At centers, they can't rotate, so when they do centers, they are always with the same group, and sometimes that creates behavior problems, personal conflicts, friendship problems – things for them to work through." Teacher 2 shared a similar reflection and highlighted the need to include additional instructional materials for the students to stay engaged throughout their center rotations,

> I think separating them is the hardest – not the masks, I have to have so many more things for them because they can't share – toys, games. So, if they are at one center for an hour, I need that group to have at least four different options. They can't have just one thing – but then each group needs four things and sometimes they may have to wait all week for something really cool because I had to wait a day to give to the next group. It's just been a different year.

In addition to the procedural changes throughout the day and the need for more resources, the use of masks presented challenges. At the time of this study, all teachers and students were required to wear masks. Teacher 1 stated, "well, our days are different because we come in and wear masks." She continued, "they [the students] are more used to it and have more opportunity obviously to take it off." When asked whether they liked wearing the masks, student 13 nodded their head yes, and stated, "it's because I do not want to spread germs." Similarly, student 12 described how they liked to wear it "sometimes" because they were "scared that the COVID-19 gets me". A couple of students described how they did not like how they had to wear the mask all day in school.

During the observations, students were seen with their masks below their noses, or on their chins, but often with gentle reminders they would put them back over their noses. Some of the students complained about the masks being "too hot" and difficult to breathe out of, but the majority of the students interviewed indicated they understood why they needed to wear the mask. Teacher 2 reflected, "So, the masks are sad, but they don't notice. That's one thing I just had to keep reminding myself, they [the students] don't know how different [school] it is."

The learning environment shifted due to additional procedures and the implementation of mitigation efforts. The teachers supported the students' health and well-being while balancing the changes in instructional procedures. The students followed the procedures well and indicated a basic understanding of COVID-19 and the need for mitigation efforts.

"It's a Totally Different Way of Teaching"

The COVID-19 mitigation protocols, although necessary, resulted in challenges regarding planning and instruction for the teachers. Additionally, the teachers expressed concern about the lack of opportunities for differentiation and individualization and the lack of opportunities for students to explore a variety of activities on a daily basis. According to the teachers, in a typical school year, students would visit approximately four centers, reinforcing skills they had learned independently. This year, students would stay at one center the entire time (approximately one hour). Teacher 1 reflected, "I've never spent so long planning for centers. It becomes tricky when they are not allowed to rotate. The issue was – they could not all play with the same thing." She continued,

> I had to come up with a way to get at least an hour's worth of centers so I could pull guided reading groups to help them with the skills that they need. So, it was tough. I spent a lot of time [planning] – in the beginning of the year. It was incredibly difficult. The whole entire team and myself – I was staying late, making sure what activity they will do first, how will I organize that, what will they do second.

Teacher 2 shared a similar experience,

> Our planning for sure [has been impacted] because all of our – the way we teach anything—has to—a lot more of it is whole group, we can't group them together, we have to reevaluate how we teach that. It's a totally different way of teaching.

The inability for children to rotate to different activities limited the amount of time they had to practice skills they had learned, teacher 1 stated,

> This year my students' writing is not as good as it used to be because they only go the writing center once a week as opposed to once a day. It's been hard for me to see, but I feel like we all need some grace. There's nothing more I can do, I try to do more whole group, more one on one, then they are playing and doing other things, but it's definitely—I've had to get more creative than I've had to in the past. [In the past] they got things [activities] more frequently.

The teachers struggled to plan and prepare enough activities that would keep the students on task while meeting their individual academic needs. Furthermore, the use of face masks presented additional challenges to teaching. The teachers described how masks were a barrier to instruction, particularly with the phonics and phonemic awareness instruction required in kindergarten. "It's incredibly hard [the mask], it is incredibly hard to wear a mask and talk all day…It is hard to teach them sounds when they can't see my mouth", explained Teacher 1. Similarly, teacher 2 mentioned,

> So, masks do make it really hard to teach them. They gave us a shield, but we still have to have a mask on. They gave us a clear mask but it fogs up, so there's not really a great way.

The pedagogical approaches these teachers typically used did not align with the COVID protocols resulting in additional instructional planning and challenges in the implementation of teaching approaches.

Bridging a Socially-Distant School Community

Social distancing rules impacted the teachers' perceptions, interactions, and relationships with students, families, and colleagues. Teacher 1 described how she felt at first,

> In the beginning, I definitely think it was in the back of my mind [getting sick from the virus] but I just think they [the students] are more important, and their well-being and health is more important than the virus. I would rather them be happy and risk myself getting it than making them think they were in a place that wasn't a loving space.

Teacher 2 discussed how when she found out they'd be returning face-to-face, she was relieved. However, she stated,

> But then I was scared, because I didn't know what 'back' meant. Could we come back but we couldn't touch them – can't hug them, can't get close to them? What if they get sick? Was it my fault? In the beginning, it was scary to come back, but it was scary to be home.

Teacher 2 also reiterated how she was not afraid of hugging the students but did worry about them getting sick. The teachers were cognizant of meeting the

social and emotional needs of the students and emphasized how they did not want students to feel as if the classrooms were not safe or loving environments. Teacher 2 even mentioned how parents had shared with her that the biggest fear they had was sending them back to a classroom that would cause them to feel isolated and unloved.

Additionally, teachers described differences in their interactions with families. They discussed how they were not allowed to hold face-to-face conferences, and that Zoom and phone call conferences were not required at the beginning of the year. Teacher 1 mentioned reaching out to parents and asking where they would feel the most comfortable to conference with her, which resulted in meetings at local parks, for example. Teacher 2 reached out to families of students who were struggling and honored requests from parents who wanted conferences. Additionally, she made a video so families could see what she looked like, and emphasized how it was a "weird feeling, [because] they didn't know me" since they were unable to meet in person. Similarly, COVID-19 precautions, and the social distancing rule, had an impact on these teachers' interactions and relationships with their colleagues. Teacher 1 discussed,

> We didn't meet together at first. We were told we needed to stay separated in case someone ended up with COVID; we would all have to quarantine, but then we realized we can't do this. We had to work together and needed adult interaction.

Teacher 2 also expressed how difficult it was to keep her distance from her colleagues,

> Our team is super close and we have team meetings once a week – we still meet but we have to be so far apart. I feel like I'm missing out on the social part of our team…It's the emotional/social side piece we always had.

Although social distancing protocols impacted the classrooms, the students indicated they enjoyed their overall school experiences. They described their teachers as "sweet," "nice," and "kind." When asked what he liked about his teacher, Student 15 mentioned, "When I get to ask her questions. When I get to be here to see her". When Student 6 was asked about what he liked about his teacher, he responded, "She's the best teacher. Because I love her." The majority of the children reflected on how playing and centers were their favorite parts of the day, and they were seemingly unaffected by many of the things mentioned by the teachers. In their artifacts, not one student drew themselves with a mask on.

Although adjustments needed to be made in how communication and interactions occurred with both students and families, the teachers demonstrated great effort in balancing the social and emotional needs of students, academic demands, and reinforcing measures to prevent the spread of the virus. The teachers strived to make the kindergarten year as "normal" as possible for the students, and themselves.

Discussion

The 2020-2021 school year was challenging as teachers, students, and families faced many uncertainties. The majority of the literature that exists focuses on the transition to e-learning during the pandemic, making this study unique as it captured the in-person experiences of the teachers and the students in two kindergarten classrooms. The teachers persevered to provide a safe environment to protect the children from getting COVID-19 while maintaining a sense of normalcy in the classroom. The teachers' voices in this study highlighted the creativity, problem-solving skills, and ingenuity that is often required in the day-to-day of this profession, even more during the unprecedented event of a global pandemic.

The teachers were met with various challenges, particularly the concern over their students' learning, as seen in Niemi & Kousa (2020) and Schwan (2021). The teachers in the current study had to innovate within their classrooms to ensure that the students' academic, social and emotional needs were being met. Furthermore, the teachers indicated significant increases in workload as seen in studies where teachers moved to online learning (Kaden, 2020), specifically mentioning how much more time they spent planning centers and specific activities that would keep their students engaged. The teachers were concerned about their students' academic abilities; however, the children did not perceive any struggles regarding their learning or the amount of work they were doing in school (Niemi & Kousa, 2020). The children in their classrooms indicated a basic understanding of COVID-19 and understood the need for mitigation measures. The students followed procedures and protocols and still found their classrooms to be loving environments.

Limitations and Implications

One of the limitations of the study is the generalizability factor. The case of one school in Southwest Florida may not represent the experiences of teachers and students of other schools in Florida or the United States. Nonetheless, the case offers lessons that can be learned from the participants' experiences and perspectives (Stake, 2005). Furthermore, excluding additional grade levels and other stakeholders could be considered a limitation. Collecting data from various grade levels may provide broader insight into the experiences of teachers and students during this time. Including the voices of school adminstrators and families could provide more diverse perspectives. Future studies could explore the experiences of teachers and students longitudinally to investigate the im-

pacts of COVID-19 on their social, emotional, and academic learning during an extended period of time.

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The Leadership Role of Australian Early Childhood Education Organisations in Communicating Health Information during COVID-19: Lessons from Elite Interviews

Sandie Wong, Lauren Sadow, Manjula Waniganayake, Yvonne Zurynski, Janaki Amin, Rebecca Bull, Maria R. Dahm, Sheila Degotardi, Michael J. Donovan, Fay Hadley & Linda J. Harrison

Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, early childhood education (ECE) organisations had to source, evaluate, and communicate information effectively, and implement appropriate strategies and processes to keep children, families, and educators safe. Based on a knowledge brokering perspective of health communication, this chapter reports on an Australian study that investigated the leadership role of ECE organisations in communicating health messages. Thematic analysis of twenty elite interviews with leaders in ECE and health organisations identified five overarching themes: (i) roles and responsibilities in communicating health messages; (ii) sourcing and assessing health information; (iii) communicating health information to ECE services; (iv) factors influencing effective communication; and (v) resources needed to communicate effectively. Overall, the study findings demonstrate that ECE organisations are willing and able to communicate health messages, but they require consistent, timely information that is accessible, from "one source of truth", specific for the ECE sector, and contextualised for different service types and geographic locations. Closer engagement between the health and ECE sectors, contextualised health information, and adequate leadership support and resourcing, are required to sustain effective public health messaging within the ECE sector.

Key Words: health communication; elite interviews; knowledge brokering

Introduction: Australian context

Australia has had one of the world's most effective management strategies of the COVID-19 pandemic (Blau and Tonkin 2021). When compared with other developed countries, through strict government interventions – such as international and state border closures, mandated mask-wearing, restrictions on travel, limits to crowds, extensive lockdowns in areas with high COVID-19 cases, and high levels of vaccination – the rate of infection and deaths from COVID-19 remained relatively low in Australia in 2021. Nevertheless, as in other countries (Atiles et al. 2021), COVID-19 has had a huge impact on the early childhood education (ECE) sector throughout Australia.

In Australia, ECE services (that is, services where children receive early childhood education and care) are recognised as serving the dual purpose of supporting parents' workforce participation as well as educational and social outcomes for children. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian Government announced that the provision of ECE was an "essential service" (Parliament of Australia 2020). Thus, the majority of ECE services across Australia remained open – closing only when there were cases of COVID-19 within the service, or when operational issues, such as staff shortages, created non-compliance and viability problems, forcing services to close.

Several research projects have been conducted on the impact of COVID-19 on the Australian ECE workforce. Logan et al. (2021), for example, in a study of the ways ECE service providers supported educators' well-being during the pandemic, found that both leaders and educators had strong feelings of betrayal by policymakers, unions, and governments. Other studies have shown that staying open during the pandemic increased the workload (e.g., intensified cleaning requirements) of Australian educators (The Front Project 2020), increased their stress, and negatively impacted their psychological and physical well-being (Eadie et al. 2021; McFarland et al. 2022; Quiñones, Berger, and Barnes 2020). One of the major causes of concern for educators was the uncertainty surrounding COVID-19, due to what educators considered to be poor or unreliable communication of public health information (McFarland et al. 2022).

Despite widespread COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns, such as school closures and work-from-home orders for the general public, ECE services in Australia remained open. As they continued to operate during the pandemic, educators in ECE services had to rapidly and appropriately respond to health messages, and implement changes to their practice to keep children, families, and other educators safe. Health information needed to be accurate and unambiguous, and communication pathways had to be efficient (Harris and Dakin 2021). It was the role of public health officials in each state/territory to formally communicate health messages. Leaders within services and/or within

ECE organisations that either provide and/or support ECE services and educators, were responsible for sourcing, evaluating, and communicating health information effectively to educators and families, and for ensuring that appropriate strategies and processes were implemented every day. The focus of this chapter is the leadership role of ECE organisations in communicating public health messages to educators, children, families, and communities.

The role of health and ECE organisations

The role of Australian health and ECE organisations to communicate health information must be considered within the context of our unique geography and federated system of governance and healthcare delivery. Australia is the world's sixth largest country, and its governance is divided into eight jurisdictions comprising six states and two territories. While most Australians live in the major cities of each state/territory, there are significant rural and remote communities scattered unevenly across the country. As a mixed economy, health and ECE services are delivered through a combination of both public and private providers, with funding and responsibility for legislation and regulation divided between federal and state/territory governments.

Nationally, the Australian Government Department of Health was charged with the central role of providing medical and public health information about COVID-19. At the height of the pandemic in 2020, the Australian Chief Medical Officer stood side-by-side with the Prime Minister of Australia to provide televised daily updates on COVID-19, especially on federal policies such as border closures, primary care responses, and the procurement and roll-out of vaccines. This daily duet of presenting scientific evidence-based health information together with political leadership was also replicated at the state/territory levels. Subsequently, the Prime Minister also convened emergency meetings with the State Premiers and Territory Chief Ministers, leading to decisions about matters such as ordering vaccines and setting a staged and prioritised vaccination roll-out plan.

As the pandemic advanced and impacted on the states and territories to different degrees – thus requiring different responses – the fragmentation between federal and state/territory government systems and communication methods started to buckle under pressure. State and territory political and public health officials made swift, strong, and decisive responses to the COVID-19 crisis based on the best available information and identified needs in their own jurisdiction. This led to significant variations in public health orders, border closures, venue-capacity restrictions, and mask-wearing orders across the eight jurisdictions (Stobart and Duckett 2021).

In Australia, the ownership, management, and funding of ECE services are highly diversified (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA] 2022). Services vary in terms of type (e.g., long day care, preschool, family day care, and outside school hours care); ownership, finances, and governance (e.g., large and small not-for-profit and for-profit organisations, small business, and community owned and operated); size (e.g., number of staff, children, and families); quality (as assessed by national standards); and location (e.g., urban, regional, or remote). Australian public schools are primarily funded and regulated at the state/territory level and are compulsory educational settings for children aged five to seventeen years. In contrast, most ECE services cater for children from birth to five years of age, and come under national legislation (ACECQA 2022).

A knowledge brokering model of health communication

ECE services routinely receive health information from public health authorities in their state/territory. This information mostly relates to outbreaks of infectious diseases. An efficient and effective knowledge brokering system facilitates the reciprocal transmission and translation of information to the benefit of both partners (Dagenais, Laurendeau, and Briand-Lamarche 2015). In situations where communication is about risk and risk prevention, two-way communication which is honest, transparent, and based on mutual respect is particularly critical (Leask and Hooker 2020). In a bi-directional knowledge brokering partnership between the health and ECE sectors, evidence-based health information needs to be communicated to and through the multi-level ECE sector, to ultimately reach services and inform educators, children, and families. Reciprocally, these stakeholders' goals, concerns, and information needs are then communicated back through each level, ultimately reaching health agencies and policymakers. Translated to the Australian ECE context, a partnership communication model between the health and ECE sectors that reflects bi-directional knowledge transfer is represented in Figure 1. As will be shown in this chapter, the complexity of this system created a challenge for public health communication within the ECE sector during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia.

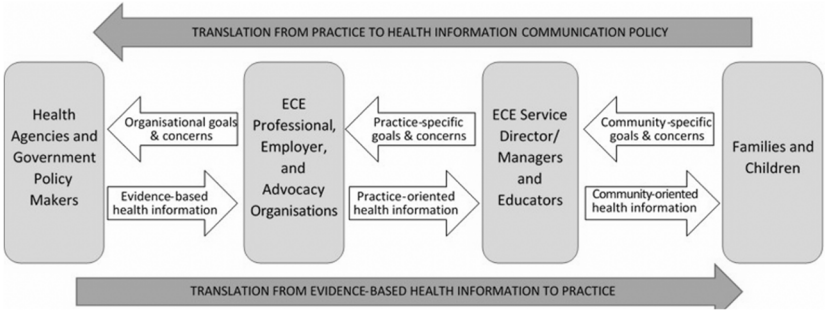

Figure 1. Model of bi-directional health–ECE communication and knowledge transfer.

The study

For the study presented in this chapter, we partnered with twelve ECE organisations in Australia to investigate the effectiveness of health messaging to the ECE sector, and the factors that can maximise the effectiveness of the health information and its uptake. The overarching project was a large, multi-tiered, mixed-methods study that included document analysis, survey questionnaire, case studies, and elite interviews. In this chapter, we share findings from the elite interviews, conducted to address two research questions (RQs):

- **RQ1:** What health information is received, sought and communicated by the health and ECE sectors in order to minimise the chance of infection of families and staff?
- **RQ2:** How does the ECE sector communicate health information to staff, families and children?

Methodology

Elite interview (Dexter 1970/2006) methodology is grounded in the qualitative theoretical perspective of social constructionism. Elite interviews distil specialised knowledge and views (Dexter 1970/2006), in this case relating to the development and dissemination of health information to ECE services. Ethics approval was applied for and received from the lead university, and interviews were conducted with four representatives from key health agencies and twelve representatives from ECE organisations. The ECE organisations were ECE peak bodies, ECE employer organisations, and advocacy organisations with a

remit for providing professional support to ECE services. Combined, they have reach across Australia. These organisations were identified from the research team's extensive knowledge of the Australian ECE and health sectors, and they reflect the kaleidoscope of stakeholders involved in managing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia. Informants for the elite interviews were individuals in a senior position (e.g., Chief Executive Officer or District Manager) with responsibility for the development and dissemination of health advice and information to ECE services, educators and other staff, and/or families and communities, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Potential interviewees were contacted by a research team member by email or phone. For those individuals who gave informed consent to participate, interviews lasting up to one hour were conducted via video link and audio recorded. Interviews were completed in 2021, while Australia was experiencing the Delta variant of COVID-19. The semi-structured interviews were guided by overarching questions related to the type of health information interviewees had access to relating to COVID-19; their roles, responsibilities, strategies, and approaches in sharing this health information within their organisation; factors that influenced this communication; and suggestions for improving future communication of health information. Audio files of the interviews were transcribed, and the transcripts were sent to participants for checking. The returned "approved" transcripts, consisting of 211 pages, formed the corpus for analysis.

Analysis

The elite interview analysis used an inductive analytical approach consisting of coding and thematicising (Denzin and Lincoln 2017). Initial coding of two transcripts (one health; one ECE) was conducted by the second author using the NVivo software package. This identified 137 unique codes. Three authors then checked the coding until there was agreement. They then double-coded four transcripts using the existing codes to check consistency. There was strong agreement on these codes, with NVivo reporting Kappa coefficients of 0.67–0.87 which is fair–excellent (McHugh 2012). Coding was continued by the second author, using an inductive–deductive approach according to the code book, while inductively identifying additional codes to capture further nuanced meanings (Xu and Zammit 2020). Additional codes were especially needed when analysing responses from informants in the health sector. This analysis was performed by an author with deep insight into and understandings of the health sector contexts, and the additional codes were cross-checked and agreed with the first author. At the end of coding, a total of 206 codes were identified. Next, these codes were organised into themes.

Results

The coding process resulted in five major interpretive themes from a practical stance of the project. As discussed below, these themes reflect the potential for practical application of our findings in improving future practice in health communication during a pandemic or any other national health crisis.

Theme 1: Roles and responsibilities in communicating health messages

The first theme is related to what interviewees considered were the roles and responsibilities of ECE organisations in communicating health messages to the ECE sector. Overall, interviewees saw their organisation's role in communicating information to be that of providing accessible, credible information, which filled information gaps needed by ECE services. For the most part, this supported the educators but also informed the wider community.

Accessibility of information, in terms of the audience's ability to understand it, became important because of a mismatch between the linguistic level of provided information, and the level of understanding of educators and families. Rather than simply passing information on, interviewees felt that it was their role, and the role of their organisation, to pre-empt any gap in understanding which could be a result of language or framing. For example, one participant noted:

> Also really trying hard to make the communication straightforward so not lots of waffling bureaucratese. I can't stand that when people are 'actioning things' and all that kind of stuff and there's 'key takeaways.' It makes no sense to people, so being really clear, saying, 'We're going to start closing at 4 o'clock from this day. Here's why we're doing this.'

We will return to this point later.

Many of the interviewees also mentioned that their goal was to provide credible and meaningful information for the ECE sector, and this primarily meant sourcing information from the government and passing it on accurately. Respondents were careful to use verified sources, to validate information, and to provide links and sources when communicating it to others.

However, the necessity of providing credible information did not outweigh the need to fill gaps from information sources. At times this meant sourcing additional information and/or making additional decisions for the specific needs of their service context, such as long day care, family day care, preschool, or outside school hours care.

An additional subtheme mentioned in the interviews was the importance of taking on an additional advocacy role for the ECE sector, and communi-

cating information back up the leadership chain. In most of these cases, these roles were informal or in addition to formal advocacy roles held. As one participant noted:

> So you've moved into this spot of trying to advocate on behalf of the sector because it became apparent the people who were supposed to be helping us, had no idea about us. And, in all honesty, their primary focus was on aged care. The only reason – because they were having fatalities – the only reason there was a focus on us was because they needed to keep us open in order to keep the economy stimulated, and parents continuing to work.

We also found interview comments which referred to the need to press government agencies for more information, faster, and to stay continuously visible so that the sector was not forgotten during future public health crises impacting young children and their families. While some interviewees had advocacy as part of their substantive organisational role, the pandemic increased the time and focus that they placed on this aspect of their role. They noted that they expanded the number of organisations and government departments that they engaged with, as well as the number of contacts in those organisations.

Theme 2: Sourcing and assessing health information

A second theme relates to how ECE organisations sourced and assessed health information. Interviewees received information from a broad range of sources, but generally the most significant were the federal and state/territory government departments of health and education. This meant that each person received formal information from at least four sources, plus a variety of sector, organisational, and individual sources such as peak bodies, other federal health agencies, professional organisations, networks, and personal contacts.

As previously mentioned, the interviewees did not simply pass on all the information they received, but rather they assessed it against the needs of their services and community. One major criterion they used was how relevant the information was to their context. Unfortunately, in almost all interviews, respondents discussed the lack of information specific to the ECE sector and the different service types within the sector, as noted above. For instance:

> Interestingly, in relation to early education, they weren't saying much at all, and one of the big problems for early education, was that they were very clear about what to do in schools and a lot less clear about what to do in ECE centres [services].

The second missing contextual piece was that of location. A lack of specific information for the interviewee's location was mentioned at the level of state/territory-based information. For example, when one state/territory had implemented specific ECE restrictions, others had not. This pattern was also

noted at the level of city and rural locations, and COVID-19 hotspots versus general rules and restrictions. As one participant stated:

> If they can't get contextualised information that applies in their jurisdiction or their local area in a timely manner, then that would impact their ability to provide that service. And I think that's probably one of the core gaps where information's coming out from health departments, and there would be – and understandably so – there would be a time lag between when that information was contextualised to different service types, or to the ECE sector as a whole.

Another challenge was the difficulty of finding information, especially when it came from multiple sources and things changed quickly. The diversity of sources resulted in many interviewees calling for a single repository of information which was up to date and targeted at ECE contexts. The following statement was typical of many:

> What we really wanted was to have a single source of truth around early childhood education and care, and AHPPC [Australian Health Protection Principal Committee] did put up a specific early childhood piece of advice, which was really, really valuable which became a source of truth for providers. But then each jurisdiction unhelpfully unpacked that slightly differently and at times used different language to each other. It was very intense.

The need for a "single source of truth" was also related to the interviewees' struggle with inconsistent information, which required ECE decision-makers to rule on which source of information to follow. Because of the lack of detailed information, and state/territory-based inconsistencies, this resulted in ECE organisations having to modify internal policies and procedures to align with the rapidly changing public health orders from federal and/or state/territory governments. At times, these modifications happened several times in the wake of a single public health order as finer details and specific contexts were discussed and confirmed for ECE services and organisations.

Further factors which hindered the smooth processing of information by the interviewees' organisations included missing information pieces which could have enhanced understanding. Of foremost importance was the missing justification for why there was such a difference between the expectations of schools and ECE services, the latter of which remained mostly open throughout the year. The lack of ECE sector-specific information led to a lowering of trust in government-supplied information, and affected the implementation and understanding of each media release. Typically, these either ignored the ECE sector, responded to it only briefly or contradicted recommendations targeting school settings. One participant said, for example:

> I think what would have been particularly helpful is some additional explanation as to why things were different for different sectors – so, for example, schools which are virtual classrooms and yet early childhood services had to stay open. Why was that health information different? Is it that they didn't perceive that early

> childhood education and care could happen from a home distance learning perspective? Or is it that the two professions are valued differently? Or is it that the health advice was different?

Specific details of practical information that was missing included definitions of terms such as "essential worker". The meaning of this term varied throughout the pandemic. Also missing were explanations of new terminology such as "deep cleaning", as was referred to in this quote:

> The Department of Health didn't have clear guidance on what types of cleaning were required. The Victorian Government and the AHPPC were referring to this notion of deep cleaning for a while, for which there was no technical definition, and no sense of … what did deep cleaning require? Could educators do the clean? Did you need a certificate? All those sorts of technicalities caused a whole raft of queries for us for a number of weeks as we had services that needed to be shut and have cleaning done.

Theme 3: Communicating information to ECE services

The third theme relates to how ECE organisations communicated information to ECE services. Once COVID-19 information was received and processed, people from each ECE organisation then sent that information to their staff, families, and broader community. While social media, emails, and websites were the primary means of communication, twenty-seven different communication methods in total were identified during our interviews.

Interviewees were clear that they had considered many factors in communicating their messages to ECE services. Of the most often mentioned, three factors map directly onto the challenges they faced with received information. The first was considerations other than audience, such as location-specific information and timing of information. Timing was a particular challenge, as information was often slow to filter down through different levels of each organisation, and it was also slow to be approved by management to be sent to educators and families. One participant said, for instance:

> …we're a national [organisation], and we have centres in all states, so we have to have a national response. So it became not helpful because they didn't consolidate what was happening at each state level. So the job was made twice as hard because you had to read up what each state was doing, and then come up with an appropriate response either for the entire national network, or for Western Australia versus other states, or Victoria, or whatever that looked like.

The second factor was how the messages were tailored for the different audiences. Most interviewees discussed culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) audiences as the main reason for tailoring information. Additional reasons included tailoring information for educators versus families, for families of essential workers versus other families, for educators with specific

needs, and for different types of ECE services such as family day care. In many cases, tailoring information for CALD audiences was done directly by the educators themselves, acting as informal translators and interpreters. As this participant explained:

> We have a very diverse centre team as well who obviously have to communicate to families and children, as well as their peers, and I'm aware that our centre teams who are bilingual, did an incredible job of explaining what was going on in those contexts. Like for people who didn't understand what was going on. And that still gives me goosebumps. They took that ownership over themselves for their families and children to explain what was going on. Which is amazing.

Third was the consideration of what kind of information was needed and transforming the received information in some way, such as combining sources, adapting language for accessibility, adapting information to highlight the actions which needed to be taken, and adapting for the ECE service context. This participant explained their process for sharing this information as follows:

> I had tables, Excel sheets, basically, with advice from different places, and members would come to me with questions. … and then we then had to step it out and create processes for our members to easily understand what they should be doing, whereas there was just no detail in any of the information we were given about any of that.

Theme 4: Factors influencing effective communication

The fourth theme emerging from our findings relates to factors that influenced ECE organisations' capacity to communicate information. At the organisational level, interviewees spoke of several challenges which impeded the effectiveness of communication. In identifying those factors, interviewees explained the pushback that occurred, reflecting disagreement on decisions from management and from staff, particularly where instructions from health authorities were unclear and interpretation was needed. There were also many comments regarding the struggle of balancing communication needs with educators' usual daily work demands, and continuously implementing COVID-19 safe practices.

From the perspectives of our interviewees, as has been found in other studies (Eadie et al. 2021; McFarland et al. 2022; Quiñones, Berger, and Barnes 2020), the primary factor which influenced educators' understanding of messages was stress and anxiety about the pandemic, augmented by the uncertainty of public health communication, and future funding of ECE services. For educators, the conflicting requirements and priorities of work and home were also a barrier to acting on information effectively. One participant commented:

> We were kind of having to make decisions ourselves, so try to balance continuing to operate with ensuring that particularly our teams could manage the risks for themselves and for their own families.

While there were other factors for families and at the broader political level, the key factor which influenced people across the ECE sector was the importance of cultivating, or already having, firm trusted relationships, both up and down the lines of communication. For the elite interviewees who had contacts in government departments, response times were faster, they were able to get information clarified better, and they could ask more questions and even set up meetings and webinars for their staff. For families, the pre-existing strong relationships between families and educators meant that educators were thought of as reliable sources of information. For educators, to retain this trust and credibility, it was imperative that they had a thorough understanding of the pandemic health messages, so they were able to respond to parents' questions.

The importance of these relationships was also highlighted by the interviewees in regard to the ways their organisations preferred to communicate — while most communication was online, educators themselves spoke in person to families in their centres, and management spoke in person to educators in their centres. Both strategies were highly appreciated and selected as the modes which got the most positive feedback. This interviewee, for example, explained how their organisation met the communication needs of CALD families as follows:

> We find that families often don't want – they don't respond well to the piece of paper, to hand them a piece of paper. And I suspect that is probably why, that even those translated documents are still difficult for them, whether they're literate or not. And … if that's then pitched at a higher level of language development or language skill, even in a home language, then perhaps that wasn't accessible to them. So we find that a majority of what we do with our families is verbal.

Theme 5: Resources needed to communicate effectively

The final theme relates to the resources that ECE organisations need to communicate information effectively. ECE organisations drew on a wide range of resources to keep up with the flow and demand for COVID-19 information by staff and families in their services. Most large ECE organisations relied on a dedicated communications person or even a team of communicators who were able to source, interpret, write, and distribute information. In many cases these individuals or teams were formed in response to the COVID-19 crisis and did not exist beforehand. This meant that people were redeployed into communication roles or had communication roles added to their regular roles in order to keep up with the demand. As one participant shared:

> I can honestly say that I never thought in my career that I would be doing what I've had to do in the last eighteen months. The steepest learning curve ever when, you know, the buck stopped with me until that new person started three weeks ago.

This demand also meant that many staff in ECE organisations went above and beyond in terms of their regular working hours. Interviewees themselves often took on this role, and they also acknowledged other staff who took on additional work, and this time was often unpaid. Working outside of normal hours was particularly important due to the timing of announcements that were made. Often, these announcements were made in the evening or on a Sunday and needed to be implemented by 9am the next day. For example:

> My day would run from, I'd get up about 4:30, I'd read any media that had generated out overnight, particularly from overseas. And then I would meet with one of my team at 7, my 2IC [second in command].

Finally, interviewees acknowledged the commitment and extensive efforts by educators and other staff in a variety of roles, but especially in translating and interpreting messages for CALD families, often unprompted. This role was especially important because of the prevailing trusted position held by educators with families. That is, trusted to care for their children, families also tended to rely on educators as a source of credible information during the pandemic.

Views from the health sector

Accessing health sector officials for interviews in our study was difficult due to continuous demands on their expertise and time. In the context of the pandemic where health officials were focused on timely and comprehensive responses to the impacts of COVID-19 on health services and the health of the population, this was not surprising. Nevertheless, important themes emerged from four interviews that were completed, as discussed next.

During their interviews, the health officials identified a lack of two-way communication with the ECE sector. They confirmed that the ECE sector lacked "a seat at the table" at high-level government meetings when it came to formulating or conveying health messages about COVID-19 to ECE services. They also mentioned the highly hierarchical and fragmented nature of government organisations and their responsibilities. For example, some health department officials stated that relevant information was passed to the Department of Education for distribution to schools. Any further decisions regarding distribution beyond schools were at the discretion of the Department of Education. Health officials recognised that there was little specific consideration of the communication needs nor the specific contexts of the ECE sector when developing communication strategies about COVID-19.

Despite this one-way communication from health officials to the ECE sector – but not the other way around – all health officials interviewed recognised the importance of the ECE sector to provide wide reach to families. They acknowledged their need to better understand the ECE sector and its health communication needs, by reinforcing the importance of finding ways for the health and ECE sectors to work more collaboratively.

Conclusion and policy implications

Our research captured the perspectives of elite informants from ECE and health organisations, performing leadership roles in public health communication during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia. The study is limited by the number of participants and its geographical specificity and is therefore not generalisable. Nevertheless, our approach, based on elite interviews, is an international first in being able to reflect on one country's response at a macro level, demonstrating the complexities of public health communications to and from the frontline of service provision involving children and adults.

This project has highlighted how during COVID-19, leaders in ECE organisations played a pivotal role in accessing, collating, translating, and disseminating public health information that was meaningful for the specific needs of the end-users – be it children, parents, or educators. At the frontline of service delivery, educators, parents, and children were ready to take action, but they wanted to receive clear and consistent directives from sector leaders.

We found that despite the strong advocacy role played by the ECE organisational leaders in this study, there are some fundamental challenges in health communication between the ECE and health sectors. From a knowledge brokering perspective, health communication is most effective when it is reciprocal (Dagenais et al. 2015), honest, transparent, and based on mutual respect (Leask and Hooker 2020). There is no doubt that the complexity of the Australian ECE sector created a significant challenge to two-way communication of health information during COVID-19. This study has highlighted the faultlines of public health communication, emerging through the fragmentation of political and professional structures, overlaid by geographical distances and demographic diversity. Moreover, the role and capacity of each ECE service to provide accurate, relevant, and just-in-time information about COVID-19 to its educators and other staff, children, and families varied according to factors such as service type, ownership and governance, size and quality, and finances and location – in an urban, regional, or isolated rural community.

A pandemic does not discriminate. Therefore, it is imperative to establish a nationally consistent systemic response in improving communications to and from the ECE sector to health and other areas of government involved with

young children and their families. It is evident that a new model of public health communication between governments and ECE is required to better address the complexities as discussed in this chapter.

Specifically, our research indicates the power of the ECE sector to perform the role of a knowledge broker between the health and ECE sectors. By aggregating and contextualising critical health information appropriately for the ECE sector, the health and well-being of young children, families, and educators can be improved for the benefit of the wider community.

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Part II:
Stress, Coping and Resilience of ECE-Leaders during the COVID-19-Pandemic

The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care

Ulla Soukainen & Marja-Liisa Keski-Rauska

Abstract

In Finland, the Ministry of Education and Culture and Regional State Administrative Agencies have studied the impact of the pandemic on early childhood education from April 2020 to December 2021. The aim of the study was to obtain up-to-date information on the situation in municipalities. The information was used in early childhood education (ECE) leadership and policy making. The research was carried out by sending a questionnaire to municipalities at least once a month. The questionnaire has included several permanent questions, like different kinds of changes and children's participation in both public and private ECE, and some topics have varied depending on the current situation of the pandemic and the need for answers. We focused on the impact of the exceptional situation, and the overall resilience at different levels of the ECE organisation. Early childhood education activities have had to be organised in different ways due to the epidemic situation. Difficult situations have challenged leaders in many ways.

Key words: COVID-19 pandemic, early childhood education and care, Finnish, Finland, resilience, leading, leadership

Introduction

The national education administration comprises two levels. Education policy is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Culture (OKM). The Finnish National Agency for Education (OPH) is responsible for the implementation of the policy aims. At the regional level, regional state administrative agencies (AVI) monitor the implementation of early childhood education and care. In Finland, every child has a subjective right to attend early childhood education and care. It can take place at ECE centres or family day-care groups.

Pre-primary education is compulsory for children of the age of six. This is provided at both ECE centres and in schools (Ministry of Education and Culture & Finnish National Agency for Education 2018).

Helsingin Sanomat (Finland's largest newspaper) reported on the first suspicion of COVID-19 on the 29th of January 2020 (Hakkarainen 2020):

> "The first case of coronavirus has been diagnosed in Finland. According to the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL), a suspected case of coronavirus at Lapland Central Hospital in Rovaniemi was confirmed by laboratory tests on Wednesday."

At first, as in many countries, no one could know what was coming. On the 11th of March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that the coronavirus (COVID-19) had expanded into a pandemic. By the 15th of March 2020, approximately 240 laboratory-confirmed cases of the coronavirus disease had been diagnosed in Finland. On the 16th of March, the Finnish Government published an announcement on its website: "Government, in cooperation with the President of the Republic, declares a state of emergency in Finland over coronavirus outbreak."

Government recommendations for education were given on the 16th of March. According to those recommendations, early childhood education units and the pre-school education organized in connection with them would be kept in operation. This ensured access to early childhood education for the children of staff in sectors that are critical to the functioning of society, allowing the parents to work. The Government outlined that those parents and guardians who were able to arrange childcare at home would do so. The Government and Ministry of Education and Culture implemented decisions and recommendations in accordance with the Emergency Powers Act, the Communicable Diseases Act and other legislation. The competent authorities would issue further instructions in accordance with their responsibilities. The Government submitted a decree implementing the Emergency Powers Act to Parliament on Tuesday the 17th of March 2020.

At the beginning of the pandemic, recommendations varied greatly between authorities. They were given for short periods of time because no-one knew what was going to happen. As the situation continued, recommendations were given by considering the disease situation. For example, summer 2020 saw fewer regulations due to the situation being better. Still, feedback to our query received by authorities was fairly negative. ECE providers did not know what instructions to follow at any given time. The Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL), the Ministry of Education and Culture and local authorities imposed several restrictions and gave various instructions. For example, it was difficult for the providers to know if the instruction was a recommendation or a requirement. They limited the daily life of early childhood education.

In informal discussions, a representative from the Ministry of Education and Culture put forward the idea of monitoring how the COVID-19 pandemic

affects early childhood education and basic education. This discussion took place in late March 2020. And as soon as the 6th of April, the senior officers of Early Childhood Education in six Regional State Administrative Agencies had the possibility to comment on the survey questionnaire. The first survey (titled Covid Query) covers the situation on the 8th of April 2020. A more detailed explanation can be found in the method section. The data for our survey was collected through the Covid Query.

The purpose of the study is to monitor the COVID-19 pandemic's situation and its effects on early childhood education including preschool. The research also aims to support decision-making and to give some "tools" for the leaders in ECE centres. This article focuses on identifying what kind of resilience is needed in leading early childhood education and care.

A review of the concept of resilience in the light of research

In recent years, there has emerged a need to develop the resilience of the individual and society, meaning the ability to tolerate disruption and crisis situations and to adapt to the situation accordingly. Resilience has been studied extensively (e.g., Bourbeau 2018; Adger 2000; Alexander 2013; Bonanno 2004; Chandler 2017; Walker & Salt 2006). However, research related to the concept of resilience is more explanatory research than validated case studies. Resilience is described both in terms of its endurance and its ability to preserve the identity of an individual or community despite an exceptional situation and the readiness to recover from adversity. Resilience also refers to society's ability to maintain its capacity to function and to develop despite crises and disruptions (Hyvönen et al. 2019). At the individual level, it means confidence in one's own abilities, self-confidence, and various coping strategies (Beltman et al. 2011).

The perceived resilience of individuals and communities has been highlighted in research literature (Kimhi & Shamai 2004). Hyvönen et al. (2019) notes that empirical resilience research should pay attention to how crisis situations affect individuals' perceived resilience and how individuals' perceived resilience and functioning can be strengthened before, during and after a disruption or crisis. Resilience is then viewed as a subjective and individual experience.

Adaptive resilience, in turn, refers to the general social, economic, and cultural characteristics and capacities of communities that enhance the activation of natural resilience in the event of prolonged disturbances and crises, and promote community organization and self-organization in a situation-specific

way (Hyvönen et al. 2019). Adaptive resilience is built on community interaction, social capacity, skills, and general intelligence. Adaptive resilience sets the boundary conditions on a case-by-case basis for how the inherent characteristics of organizations can be utilized during and in times of crisis (Tierney 2014).

Adaptive resilience consists of both *ingenuity and speed*. Ingenuity is the social and cultural characteristic of communities and organizations of, for example, being able to adopt ingenuity for the benefit of its community, to adapt to the adverse effects of a crisis and to adapt to a new situation. This may include, for example, the ability of community members to maintain practices that are central to the community's collective identity. Speed, in turn, is the ability and readiness of a community to identify resourceful resources that accelerate the process of recovery and adaptation required by a new situation. Speed is especially seen as the reaction rate to different situations (Hyvönen et al. 2019).

Resilience is not a one-off phenomenon; therefore, it is also described (see Figure 1.) as a process-driven feature or ability in which the community prevents or mitigates the acute adverse effects of a crisis without paralyzing its functioning. Resilience helps to maintain resilience flexibly as a crisis continues and prolongs and enables adaptation to the post-crisis situation, utilizing the experiences of the experienced crisis to further develop resilience (Hyvönen et al. 2019; Rademaker et al. 2018).

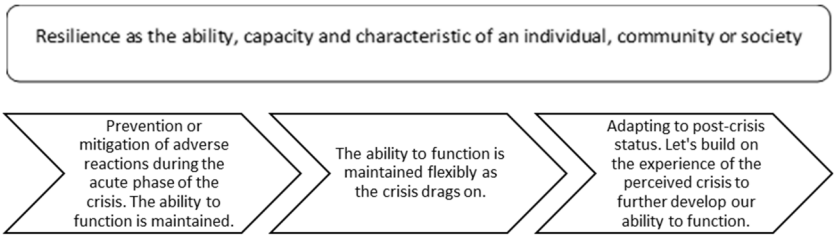


Figure 1. Description of resilience as a process-progressing feature or ability (in accordance with Hyvönen et al. 2019; Rademaker et al. 2018)

Hyvönen & Juntunen (2018) describe resilience, respectively, through three different phases: a) resilience, b) maintaining functional capacity, and c) the ability to adapt to a post-crisis situation and the readiness to learn and renew (Figure 2). As an exception to the previous process description, the preparedness of the authorities, industry and citizens is considered an essential factor in normal conditions. This requires leadership and information need in the situation. It is also important that trust in society's institutions is maintained (Hyvönen & Juntunen 2018). In both descriptions, special attention is given to the phase of maintaining functioning during a crisis, and the ability to learn and renew despite crises remains.

Figure 2. Resilience as a process (Hyvönen & Juntunen 2018)

Examination of the concept of overall resilience from the perspective of early childhood education and care leadership

Resilience can also be viewed from the perspective of overall resilience, where different levels of resilience are individual, community, and institutional resilience. The different levels are linked to each other. For this reason, the concept of overall resilience is used. According to the model, resilient institutions support individual resilience both in crisis situations and in the preparation for them, and on the other hand, individual resilience is channelled as a feature of the community and ultimately also of society (Hyvönen et al. 2019). The concept of overall resilience has not been used before in research related to early childhood education and care. Early childhood education is a service that cuts through all levels of resilience, and therefore examining it from the perspective of only one level would be ineffective and more narrow-scoped than in reality.

This study focuses on identifying the role of leaders and municipalities according to the overall resilience model. The leader is responsible for ensuring the resilience of the community they manage to support the community's preparedness for possible exceptional circumstances. As the community consists of individuals, human resources leadership is emphasized especially during the crisis (Nurhonen et al. 2021). For leading and supporting the resilience of individuals and communities, the support and importance of institutional levels to maintain resilience are essential. During the coronavirus crisis, 20 % of leaders have felt that they have not received sufficient support at municipal level during the pandemic and have also been unclear about the national guidelines (Nurhonen et al. 2021). The research's area of interest is how the ECE system strengthens resilience at different levels of overall resilience.

Overall resilience Levels in the context of ECE	Description of Levels
Individual Staff	• The effects of the social environment (in ECE) on the mental capacity of individuals to withstand the effects of a crisis (coronavirus) • The ability to adapt to a new situation after a crisis.
Community ECE centres Leaders	• Experienced work environment and its quality • Interaction with staff, children and parents • Leadership structures in exceptional circumstances • Staff: participation in the reorganisation of the work community in a crisis
Iinstitutional State/ Government/Ministry of Education and Culture Region Municipality	• Factors affecting resilience: preparedness, instructions and recommendations • Communication and Information • Maintaining trust in the key institutions of society

Table 1. Description of overall resilience in the context of ECE

Research questions comprised:

1. What effects did the COVID-19 pandemic have on the organisation of early childhood education and care in Finland?
2. What kind of resilience is needed in leading early childhood education in exceptional circumstances?

Research methods

This survey was carried out as the collection of data concerning exceptional circumstances by the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Regional State Administrative Agencies. The first questionnaire (Covid Query) was sent to municipal registries in early April 2020. The questionnaire had been sent by the Regional State Administrative Agency for Western and Inland Finland on Thursday mornings according to a specific plan. It was sent to the register of each municipality in mainland Finland (293 municipalities). The register of each municipality was asked to also forward it to private ECE providers. During spring 2020, the survey was sent more frequently, because the situation was new. Data collection was done to create an up-to-date situation. In addition, the information is important for leadership needs.

The research data results ('Covid-Query') were presented by province, and they varied depending on the severity of the pandemic in each region. This article examines resilience, so the results are considered nationwide. Covid-Query contained also open-ended questions that explained the quantitative

data. The study's materials will be discussed in a comprehensive review of research question 1, What effects did the COVID-19 pandemic have on the organisation of early childhood education in Finland, while research question 2 will be answered by examining the overall resilience at different levels of the ECE organisation.

Every municipality's administrative sector responsible for ECE was asked to fill in the questionnaire once for their ECE centres and family day care groups. There was a different link for private ECE providers. The Webropol survey tool was used to make the survey. A few changes were made to the process. At the beginning, municipalities got the questionnaire on Thursday and answered by Friday. During 2021, the questionnaire was sent on Friday and the answers were given according to the situation on Tuesday of the following week. The response time was until Thursday at noon. The process is described in Figures 3 and 4.

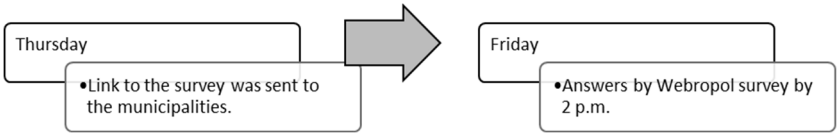


Figure 3. The process during 2020.

Respondents felt that the time frame for the questionnaires was quite short. The suggestions for the improvement of the survey made during the study were taken into account. One of these was scheduling. In autumn 2021, questions were also sent in writing to enable the respondents to prepare for the questionnaire.

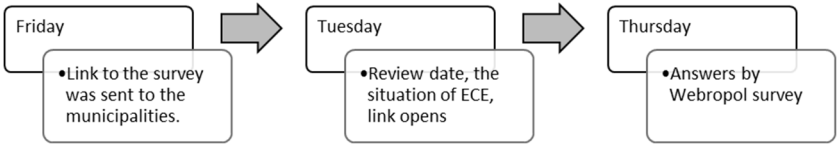


Figure 4. The process during autumn 2021.

There were certain permanent questions/statements in the survey. Depending on the situation, there had been some varying questions. For example, the first questionnaire of autumn 2021 asked how ECE providers had managed to follow the plans for the summertime. During the spring of 2020, surveys were sent nine times in weeks 14-22. In week 22, respondents were asked for a summary of experiences of spring 2020. During autumn 2020, surveys were sent during weeks 38, 44 and 50. Table 1 shows the changing questions for different surveys. Open-ended answers were classified by content analysis.

Spring 2020	Autumn 2020	Spring 2021	Autumn 2021
9 times, weeks 14-22	3 times, weeks 38, 44, 50	5 times, weeks 3, 7, 11, 15, 19	3 times, weeks 36, 46, 50
assessments of compliance with hygiene and facility recommendations	assessments of compliance with hygiene and facility recommendations	assessments of compliance with hygiene and facility recommendations (summarizing the experiences of school year 2020-2021)	Summer 2021: *Possibility to follow the recommendations and instructions of OKM and THL *the extent of early childhood education *the extent to which open early childhood education is provided
In week 22 a survey summarizing the experiences of spring 2020		In weeks 22-23 a survey summarizing the experiences of school year 2020-2021: *organizing municipal and private early childhood education *organizing municipal and private pre-school education *arranging enhanced cleaning *the success of the enhanced hygiene required by food care *organizing support measures for children in need	*organizing ECE during the summer (duty) *dissemination of false and misleading information about coronavirus
implementation of support during exceptional circumstances		Possibility to follow the recommendations and instructions of the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish institute for health and welfare	

Table 2. Weeks and changing questions for ECE providers (Kyllönen 2021)
*OKM = Ministry of Education and Culture, THL = Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare

The timing of the surveys and specific questions are shown in Table 1 above. The recurring questions in each survey were:

- the number of absences of children compared to previous years (same time of the year)
- closure of entire ECE centres due to COVID-19 (in how many municipalities, how many ECE centres, readiness to provide ECE when the ECE centre is closed/preparedness)

- comments on closure
- time spent by children in early childhood education compared to previous years (estimated, same time of the year)
- duration of absences of children compared to previous years
- customer groups for which absenteeism/staying home has increased due to COVID-19, and possible reasons

The open-ended questions for evaluating the COVID-19-situation during weeks 21-22/2021 in ECE were:

- other things concerning the organization of ECE during 2020-2021
- what main effects has COVID-19 had on the organization of ECE during 2020-2021
- what measures were needed to correct the side effects of COVID-19
- other comments regarding compliance with the instructions and recommendations of the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare
- tell us the views you consider necessary on the importance of public support for early childhood education
- briefly describe how early childhood education is/would be organized when ECE centres must be closed
- briefly describe how early childhood education is organized for children in quarantine (exposure) or isolation (infection)
- other observations related to the organization of ECE services in summer 2021

Week/-20	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	38	44	50
% of municipalities	85,4	90,5	91.8	87.4	86.4	87.4	83	69.4	76.9	75.8	76.5
Week/2021	3	7	11	15	19	36	46	50			
% of municipalities	78.5	79.2	71.3	68.9	78.2	75.8	73.1	74.5			

Table 3. Percentage of respondents of municipal ECE providers over the duration of the study

Table 2 shows the percentages of municipal ECE provider respondents given by municipal level (not including answers by private ECE providers). Similar information is not available from private ECE providers, because it was not reported at the beginning. The amount of private ECE providers was also variable, so calculating the percentage was difficult. The register for each municipality sent the link for the questionnaire to private ECE providers, so we were not able to say how many of these providers received it. Table 3 describes the overall assessment from spring 2020 to autumn 2021.

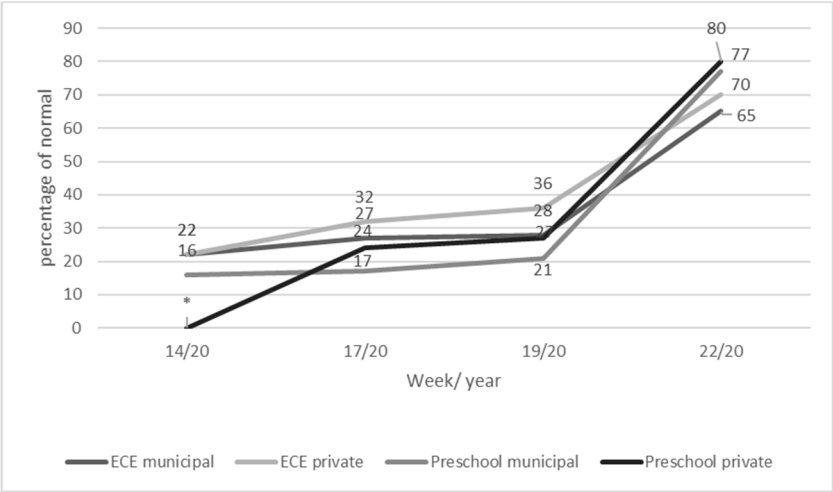
The reports were compiled by the senior officers of the Regional State Administrative Agency and can be read on the Regional State Administrative Agency's website

https://avi.fi/en/about-us/what-we-do/we-produce-information/situational-picture-of-basic-education-and-early-childhood-education-and-care

Impacts of COVID-19 on ECE in Finland

At the beginning of the pandemic, the number of children participating in early childhood education was limited. Children were only allowed to participate in early childhood education if their guardians worked in a sector that ensured general well-being. Such occupations included the employees of hospitals and rescue services (figure 5). The situation changed as the pandemic continued: at the end of 2020, 34% of respondents reported that children's absences were higher than usual or that absences were longer than normal. During week 19 (2021), an increasing number of respondents (69,4%) estimated that the participation of children was normal when compared to the same time of year prior to the pandemic. The situation changed during autumn 2021. At the end of 2021, 63,4 % of respondents estimated that there was a greater number of absences among children compared to the same time of year prior to the pandemic. Based on these answers, it can be said that the pandemic has also affected the presence of children in early childhood education and in pre-primary education.

Compliance with early childhood education is a challenge when ECE centres are closed. Overall, very few ECE centres have been closed during the entire pandemic during 2020-2021. The situation changed during the end of 2021 when Omicron became a common variant of the virus. The closures of ECE centres in 2021 are shown in Table 4. At the beginning of the pandemic, small private ECE centres were closed. Municipal ECE centres organised early childhood education by combining ECE centres while also taking hygiene guidelines into account. There was no final indication of the total number of ECE centres that closed, as the same ECE centre may have been closed early in the year and later in the spring or autumn.



*no answers
Figure 5 Participation in ECE and pre-primary education during spring 2020

The open answers revealed that in some municipalities there were few alternatives if a part of the ECE centre had to be closed down. There were no additional facilities in the municipality where the rest of ECE centre could have been transferred to. Small ECE centres were closed completely, as the entire staff and all children had to be quarantined. Municipalities also introduced payment credits to families in case of difficulties in arranging early childhood education. Children in quarantine had the opportunity to participate, for example, in the ECE centre's reading hour or music lesson.

Week	% of respondents
3	2,2
7	4,1
11	5
15	8,2
19	7,8
36	2,2
46	2,9
50	1,9

Table 4 Closures of ECE centres during 2021 according to responsibilities

Some municipalities had to inform parents of a possible situation in which early childhood education cannot be provided in accordance with the law

(Aholainen 2022). From the surveys, sometimes even major differences between different counties and municipalities emerged.

	% of respondents									
estimate	**always**		**often**		**sometimes**		**seldom**		**never**	
respondents	M	P	M	P	M	P	M	P	M	P
It has been possible to organize municipal early childhood education	92	*	7	*	1	*	-	*	-	*
It has been possible to organize private ECE	50	90	6	8	2	-	1	-	41**	1**
It has been possible to organize municipal preschool	91	*	8	*	1	*	-	*	-	*
It has been possible to organize private preschool	34	74	4	4	2	1	-	-	60**	21**
Cleaning is handled more efficiently	45	62	42	35	10	3	3	1	-	-
The improved hygiene required for food supply has been successfully organized	60	78	36	21	4	1	-	-	-	-
The facility arrangements according to the facility and hygiene recommendation have been successful	25	38	60	46	11	12	3	4	-	-
The organization of support measures for children in need of support has been successful (e.g., therapy, rehabilitation, special education)	41	57	51	33	8	7	-	1	-	2

Table 5. Assessments of the extent and the quality of service from spring 2020 to autumn 2021 (M= municipal, P= private)
* only responses from municipalities
** the municipality does not normally provide private ECE or preschool

Table 5 shows assessments on the extent and quality of services from spring 2020 to autumn 2021. After all, the activities of early childhood education were considered to be of high quality throughout the period, even though some is-

sues had to be abandoned. It has been estimated that the greatest challenges have been posed by the recommendations on latitude and hygiene as well as the implementation of enhanced cleaning. According to guidelines, it was not desirable to merge groups and transfer staff from one group to another. Keeping distances in early childhood education was considered challenging.

The open-ended questions were classified by content analysis, and they clarified the answers already given: for example why it was difficult to implement hygiene recommendations. Coding highlighted the following main categories:

- absenteeism (e.g. reasons for absenteeism, wishes to limit participation)
- staff related (e.g. availability of substitutes)
- interaction (e.g. difficulty of cooperation)
- information (e.g. informing families)
- pedagogy (e.g. limited joint development)
- activities related (e.g. organisation of meals, outdoor activities)
- economic (e.g. sufficiency of resources)
- workload (e.g. increased workload of leaders), and
- concern (e.g. support for children).

A problem that came up in open answers was anticipating the need for early childhood education and, consequently, the planning. Transferring pupils back to schools could have significantly changed the need for early childhood education. During the acute period of the pandemic, early childhood education was seen more as a social service provided to guardians than as early childhood education received by the child. The responses often referred to families who did not have a subjective need for early childhood education. This model of thought stems from a time when children's subjective right had been restricted (Act 1395/2019).

Leading ECE in exceptional COVID-19 situation needs overall resilience

As previously stated, resilience can also be viewed from the perspective of overall resilience, where the different levels of resilience are 1) individual, 2) community, and 3) institutional resilience.

Table 6 describes the results of this study for the different resilience levels received from open-ended questions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, overall resilience in Finland consisted of the activities of the state administration and the ability of individuals, early childhood education workers, leaders, and communities, i.e., ECE centres, to act in a crisis.

Overall resilience Levels in the context of ECE	Description of Levels
Iindividual Staff	Results: • Exhaustion of personnel • The staff had to face the guardians; some opposed the restrictions • Concern over the resilience of families • Constant uncertainty and fear • Worry about children
Community ECE centres Leaders	Results: • Availability of substitutes • Unpredictability of arrangements and instructions (instructions came from many quarters and different authorities) • Increase in the leader's workload (information, meetings, arrangements)
Institutional State/Government/Ministry of Education and Culture Region Municipality	Results: • Insufficient preparedness plans for early childhood education at both municipal and day-care level (survey spring 2020) • Leaders were dissatisfied with information • The importance of cooperation at municipal level (the doctor responsible for communicable diseases was the right person to give instructions)

Table 6. Levels of overall resilience related to the results of the research data. (Adapted according to Hyvönen et al. 2019)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, guidance and regulations have been issued at various levels. In municipalities, the municipal board has the highest decision-making power, but a large part of the decision-making power has been delegated to lower levels for practical reasons (Fonsén, Pesonen & Valkonen 2021). The orders came from the Finnish Government, and the recommendations from the Ministry. Regional operating models were defined by the doctor responsible for communicable diseases (Table 6). Open-ended questions showed that most of the early childhood education arrangements were left to the leaders of ECE centres. The list of categories comprises the content of the director's work during the COVID-19 pandemic. The days in ECE centres were full of various tasks to see to. If there was a shortage of personnel, the director had to find substitutes, which was very difficult. The director bore primary responsibility for informing families and personnel about changing situations. The head of the ECE centre also had to support the implementation of pedagogy in exceptional circumstances. There were no budgets for an increasing quantity of cleaning products etc. The director is also responsible for ensuring the well-being of personnel.

Examining the research results from the perspective of overall resilience and Implications to ECE leadership

The resilience of **the individual level** has proven to be high despite the experience of exhaustion among staff in ECE centres and stress among managers (Nurhonen et al. 2021). In a study by Yonezawan et al. (2011), individual characteristics that support the high resilience of teachers include optimism, determination, insight, creativity, initiative, persistence, sense of humour, morality, strong relationships and self-reflection. These can also be seen to correspond to the characteristics of Finnish ECE staff and managers. According to this study, even though the staff sometimes got tired and were worried about the ability of families to cope, the leadership of municipal early childhood education did not report the staff's long absences.

Community resilience has demonstrated readiness to anticipate risks, to weaken their impact and to recover swiftly. Recovery is seen as coping with the crisis, adapting, and evolving in a changing situation (CARRI 2013). ECE centres remained functional almost throughout the pandemic. Only the Omicron variant caused severe situations at the end of 2021 and at the beginning of 2022. The community resilience of ECE centres is supported by the leader of each ECE centre. The leader of the ECE centre supports the ability of the community to withstand disturbances, helps it to recover from crises and promotes the readiness to respond better to possible new setbacks, uncertainties, and surprises (Kimhi & Shamai 2004; Magis 2010). According to this study and other studies, Finnish ECE centres showed the ability to recover from various hardships, unclear instructions, etc. (Nurhonen et al. 2021).

The results should also be viewed from the perspective of overall resilience: adaptive resilience including ingenuity and speed, perceived resilience, and resilience as a process. Based on the results, there is a lot of adaptable resilience in the operating culture of ECE staff and ECE centres. According to Hyvönen et al. (2019) adaptive resilience consists of both ingenuity and flexibility. During the crisis, the personnel and managers showed resourcefulness in adapting to the adverse effects of the crisis and adapting to new varied situations. An example of this is the community's ability to maintain and even develop practices that are central to the culture of early childhood education and care: individual consideration of the child and development of digital tools in cooperation with the parents (Nurhonen et al. 2021). The results of this study show that more than nine out of ten leaders of ECE units felt that their unit was at least well prepared for future restrictions. Nurhonen et al. (2021) have obtained similar results.

Speed refers to the speed of response to different situations and the ability and readiness of the community to identify measures that speed up the recovery and adaptation process required by the new situation (Hyvönen et al. 2019). The staff and leadership of ECE centres demonstrated on numerous occasions the ability to react to rapidly changing instructions and rules and adapt them to everyday activities. A good example of this was whether or not you were required to wear a mask during the working day and sometimes suddenly, the children's parents were not allowed to enter the ECE centre due to the acceleration of the pandemic.

At the institutional level at the beginning of the crisis, it was essential to note that the maintenance of the functional capacity of individuals and ECE centres was made possible by the state administration. The aim was to keep early childhood education open and not restricted by the state, as originally intended (The Ministry of Education and Culture 2020). The first research surveys however revealed that there were significant shortcomings in the municipalities' preparedness regarding early childhood education (Survey summer 2020). Substitute arrangements, extensive information, cooperation between the municipality's authorities and remote working were not properly planned. This was an important observation for the future as well. However, studies show that contingency plans alone are not sufficient to build resilience. Developing organisations' ability to respond to everyday challenges usually also promotes their ability to act resiliently in emergencies and disasters. Small organisations, such as ECE centres, are usually resilient because their operating culture encourages ingenuity, learning from mistakes (instead of punishing), cooperation and activities (Denhardt & Denhardt 2010).

Promoting resilience among the population requires paying particular attention to the wellbeing of children. The resilience of an individual created in early childhood is seen as a central part of the entire human life cycle. Children's well-being and resilient growth require that the situation of vulnerable children be addressed effectively even during crises. (Hyvönen et al. 2019) Effective intervention plays a greater role in determining resilience than individual factors (Ungar 2012). However, ECE staff were able to maintain the working methods for the needs of special support at the ECE centres.

The Finnish early childhood education system showed that it worked very well during the pandemic crisis, but it is important for it to be further developed from the perspective of overall resilience (including leadership). Dialogue between individuals, communities and institutions must be increased and developed. Attention should be paid, among other things, to information. Early childhood education is an important institution from the perspective of both families and children. Early childhood education must also be safeguarded during crises and disruptions, and sufficient resources must be guaranteed for it.

Discussion

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, restrictions on the higher level (Government) facilitated the situation as the subjective right to early childhood education was restricted. This meant that parents who were at home for one reason or another also kept their children at home. Throughout the pandemic, efforts have been made to organise early childhood education normally because it is statutory, and it could not be transferred to remote activities. It remains to be considered how parents working remotely at home have managed the situation in their families. The staff's concern over the continuity of families may have arisen in situations where the presence of children from families working at home increased in the ECE centre. On the other hand, there were families whose children would have been expected to participate in early childhood education, for example because of the need for support or language learning. The wishes of the staff to limit the subjective right were also surprising.

The challenges of obtaining qualified substitutes also highlight the wider problem of early childhood education in Finland. For a long time, there has been a shortage of ECE teachers, even though the state has increased the number of places for students in universities. Many ECE teachers have also continued their studies and moved on to other tasks. Changes in the qualification conditions of staff and personnel structure of the Early Childhood Education Act will enter into force at the start of 2030. It will not make the situation easier. During the COVID-19 pandemic problems were caused by the lack of comprehensive contingency plans for early childhood education and care. There is room for improvement: in many municipalities, early childhood preparedness plans did not provide for different situations during the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the answers received, ECE centres had no other choice than to do whatever they could to meet the requirements.

Open-ended answers showed, if there were few children present, they could be taken into account individually. Some responses stated that quality may even be better for the aforementioned reason. Common infectious diseases were also low, as children had to stay at home even with minor symptoms. Some municipalities transferred ECE staff to the health care sector, and for example in some municipalities library staff were transferred to ECE centres. The transfer of staff affected the quality of pedagogy, as staff qualified for early childhood education was not available. It was difficult to arrange family day-care if there was COVID-19 at the home of the family day-care provider.

The study showed that the effectiveness in the different levels of overall resilience is important for maintaining the functioning of early childhood education and care, the ability to adapt to the post-crisis situation and the readiness to learn and renew from the perspective of crisis leadership. By recognising the importance of leadership at different levels of overall resilience, strength-

ening resilience also has an impact on the wellbeing of children. The managers of early childhood education who are good pedagogical leaders have an impact on staff and children through their own actions (Soukainen 2016). Leadership supports the ability of individuals and communities to learn and renew, and its significance must not be forgotten even in times of crisis.

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Crisis Leadership in Public Early Childhood Education Centers in Finland – Relation to Wellbeing at Work and Resilience

Sanna Parrila & Marjo Mäntyjärvi

Abstract

This study addresses leadership enactment in the context of municipal early childhood education and care (ECE) centers in Finland. It was conducted at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic has spread worldwide, thereby posing new challenges to the ECE leadership. The research draws from crisis leadership and resilience theories to address the following questions: How does crisis leadership link to organization- and individual-level resilience? What kind of expectations are placed on crisis leadership? We understand resilience as one of the key elements of wellbeing at work in today's complex working life. This study conceptualizes crisis leadership as a context-dependent phenomenon constituted by shared meanings and relationships among leaders and practitioners in ECE centers. The data was collected through online focus group interviews with ECE leaders, teachers and researchers. The interviews were conversational in nature and guided by a semistructure of themes. The discussions were analyzed with theory-based content analysis. The aim was to recognize the key elements of good crisis leadership.

Keywords: COVID-19, crisis leadership, resilience, leadership, early childhood education and care (ECE)

Introduction

In March 2020, the COVID-19 global pandemic resulted in a historically unprecedented change in Finnish early childhood education (ECE). The Finnish Parliament introduced the Contingency Act (1552/2011) for the period from 16 March to 15 June 2020 owing to the exceptional conditions in the country. Under this Act, the State Council stated that ECE for under-school-age children should be arranged at home only if possible. Nonetheless, during the pan-

demic, early childhood services officially remained open, and children continued to be admitted to them. However, the transition of schools to distance education for the first time from 16 March to 14 May 2020 clearly reduced the number of children in ECE.

The responses of municipalities and ECE providers to the pandemic have varied greatly at the organization and individual levels. They were impacted by the management culture, crisis management expertise, and resilience of the organization and individuals. A crisis often reveals an organization's management culture better than any other situation (Seeck 2009). People show their true selves and go back to basics in a crisis: some are crippled by fear, and others get moving. Valli (2020) noted that the management of resilience potential can result in better wellbeing at work and increase the ability of workers to deal with increasingly complex changes in the workforce and the crises it contains. Although resilience is considered a controversial concept (Luthar, Ciccetti**,** and Becker 2000), it has provided a perspective to examine various phenomena in educational science (Smith and Ulvik 2017; Wosnitza et al. 2018).

This study aims to identify the key elements of good crisis management in ECE that supports both organization- and individual-level resilience and wellbeing at work. The study draws upon crisis leadership and resilience theories to address the following questions: How does crisis leadership link to organization- and individual-level resilience? What kind of conceptions and expectations are placed on crisis leadership?

Theoretical underpinnings

Our theoretical underpinnings are drawn from research of leadership, especially crisis leadership and resilience. The success of crisis management is reflected by the wellbeing of a community that retains its capacity to operate, that is, its own resilience to cope with various stages of a crisis.

A crisis refers to a situation that causes great uncertainty, hinders the basic organizational functions, and calls for an immediate response (Bundy et al. 2017; Steen and Morsut 2020). A crisis can also refer to a combination of circumstances that threaten life, property, or security, including temporal pressure to react and uncertainty about the consequences of the crisis and extent of the impact (Steen and Morsut 2020, 37–38). Bundy and colleagues (2017, 1663) define a crisis as a source of disruption, uncertainty, and change as well as behavioral phenomena. A crisis can also be described as a test of the firmness of an organization (Carayannopoulos and McConnell 2018). Crises may arise within an organization or, as in the case of the pandemic, may be directed at the organization from outside.

In early education, the staff's wellbeing is of a multidimensional nature. It can be viewed from the perspectives of individual employees as well as the interaction of the entire work community. Logan and colleagues (2021) define ECE workers' work wellbeing as a dynamic state involving interaction and relationships between individuals, work environment, various socio-political factors, and context. Cumming (2017) compiled four wellness categories from studies of occupational wellbeing with ECE staff: work environment, workplace relationships, job satisfaction, and psychological and emotional wellbeing.

In this study, wellbeing at work is linked to the concept of resilience, which has been defined differently in different disciplines. According to Nieminen and colleagues (2017, 13), the various definitions are united by the idea of recovering from adversity and adapting to changes. Studies have evaluated the factors that affect resilience and how it can be evaluated and led (Nieminen et al. 2017). Individual resilience refers to an individual's ability to cope with crises and their mental recovery capacity (Nevalainen, Tukiainen and Myllymäki 2021; Valli 2020). Individual resilience is supported by adaptability, self-control, self-help, optimism, perseverance, creativity, and humor (Nevalainen, Tukiainen and Myllymäki 2021; Valli 2020). Valli (2020) highlights how all people have opportunities and abilities to elastically adapt even in demanding situations; in other words, resilience is not a favorable character trait that only some individuals have. Resilient individuals embrace change and use it creatively to develop better ways of living (Lazaridou 2020). Individual resilience is also influenced by environmental factors; the individual must feel that they are a crucial factor in their environment. Notably, some theorists suggest that resilience is better understood as a learnable process rather than as a trait of an individual (Patterson and Kelleher 2005; Valli 2020). Resilience is therefore not a congenital or permanent property. Resilience is a process built in its context, and it is activated in interpersonal relationships and social networks, for example, by working together (Poijula 2018; Teo, Lee, and Lim 2017). Resilience has been identified as one of the conditions for wellbeing at work in the educational sector (Fernandes et. al. 2019).

Wosnitza and colleagues (2014) stated that, for teachers, resilience refers to the positive process, ability and outcome of adaptation, and professional engagement and growth in challenging conditions. Resilience is shaped individually, situationally, and contextually as a dynamic process to create risky (challenging) or protective (supportive) factors. An individual can use personal, professional, and social resources not only to recover but also to succeed professionally and personally and to experience job satisfaction, personal wellbeing, and a constant commitment to the profession (Wosnitza et al. 2014). According to Steen and Morsut (2020, 38), in crises, organizational or community resilience refers to the capacity of an organization to quickly resume its im-

portant activities after a shock. The personal and organizational values that coincide during crisis support increase resilience (Smith 2017a; Valli 2020).

The organizational culture may include capacities for change, which reinforces resilience (Nevalainen, Tukiainen**,** and Myllymäki 2021); by contrast, in a more static community, the policies become inflexible, causing the resilience to deteriorate (Nieminen et al. 2017). Organizational resilience refers to a form of learning in which an organization copes with adversity through positive adaptation and strengthens the ability to cope with future challenges (Teo, Lee, and Lim 2017). Adaptation to changing conditions implies an increase in resilience (Nieminen et al. 2017). At the organizational level, resilience therefore relates to the capacity for renewal.

During crises, awareness of others and the importance of joint work is emphasized. Therefore, the leader should be able to quickly establish an understanding of the relevance of work in their community and devise concrete solutions and make decisions on how to proceed and generate confidence and faith in the future (Dýrfjörð and Hreiðarsdóttir 2022; Teo, Lee**,** and Lim 2017). Social capital is the main source of recovery from crises (Teo, Lee**,** and Lim 2017, 137). Resilience can be activated through traditional means of organizational management: interaction, division of labor, care for basic needs, feedback (Valli 2020), and communication enhancement (Seeck 2009; Teo, Lee**,** and Lim 2017). During a crisis, management should aim to drive action toward common values and basic tasks (cf. Valli 2020), as resilience is supported by the possibility of working without trade-offs (Smith 2017a). The leader must support the interaction, act as a model, lead themselves (Valli 2020), and rely on information about the current situation (Seeck 2009).

Crisis management focuses on various aspects at distinct stages of the crisis. Different stages of a crisis include preparedness (preparation for crisis), measures during the crisis (what was taken and how quickly), and recovery (Aldrich et al. 2015; Steen and Morsut 2020). The challenges identified in crisis management occur in information transmission and communication, capacities of renewal, issues of power, and human behavior (Steen and Morsut 2020, 43–43).

Crises have also been identified as triggering a positive change in crisis management (Steen and Morsut 2020, 37—38). The success of crisis management can be viewed at both individual and community levels: in what way the resilience and wellbeing of the community was maintained, and how learning manifested itself (e.g., as a change in policies). For example, in England, Fogerty (2020) identified the pandemic period in his community and reinforced the focus of conversations in pedagogical development and learning in a way that supports adults and children alike. According to Fogerty (2020), this also supported welfare. Learning is also important from the viewpoint of crisis management, as it will enhance crisis management and help in better preparing for the next crisis (Steen and Morsut 2020, 42).

In this study, crisis management refers to the management practices and means of managing the effects of a crisis within an organization in pursuit of maintaining its operational capacity at the beginning, during, and end of a crisis. In the context of ECE, management is based on leadership that is interactively shaped in the relationships among the leader, staff, and environment (cf. Mäntyjärvi and Parrila 2021). Organization-level resilience can be seen to interfere with these relational-interactive relationships (Teo, Lee, and Lim 2017). Therefore, resilience is understood as a dynamic process that encompasses positive adaptation in the context of adversity experienced during various stages of the pandemic (Luthar, Ciccetti, and Becker 2000).

Implementation of research

The research data has been collected through focus group interviews aimed at ECE leaders and teachers. This method is commonly used in educational research and early childhood management studies (Heikka 2014; Fonsén et al. 2021). In a group interview, people gather to talk about a common topic, making the interview conversational in nature (Liamputtong 2011). This methodology is suitable for research such as that in the present study, which seeks different perspectives on the phenomenon being studied and provides opportunities for participants to bring their own experiences into the discussion on the subject. The interaction that emerged in the group also provided participants with understanding and peer support as they discussed their experiences and revealed shared experiences and interpretations (Liamputtong 2011).

The study was publicly communicated in in-service-training- groups and with e-mailing several ECE centres and leaders, asking for volunteer participants. However, the pandemic also challenged the implementation of the research: finding common time for participants and researchers proved difficult in the rapidly changing situation. Focus group interviews invited ECE leaders and teachers working in various municipalities and units across Finland. The discussion of the group interview was supported by the fact that the participants were sufficiently similar in terms of their occupation and educational background and they shared the interest to discuss the issue (Pietilä, 2017). All 13 participants had several years of work experience in ECE. Interviews with ECE leaders were conducted in groups of four in November 2021 (FG1) and January 2022 (FG2). The ECE teachers focus group interview involved five ECE teachers and was conducted in February 2022 (FG3). The interviews were conducted using Zoom and were recorded; the recordings were then transcribed into text.

During the analysis, the thinking of the researchers was guided by both the theory and dataset. To paraphrase theory-driven content analysis, the tran-

scribed text was read by considering key concepts to produce descriptive content (Rosqvist et al. 2019; Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2018). Subsequently, a search for data-oriented recurring themes was conducted, and these were then further grouped and restructured based on the theory and previous research. Notably, what remains unsaid can be as important as what is said in all qualitative research encounters.

The discussions revealed different experiences, sensations, and descriptions from the pandemic period, and the debaters formed different interpretations together. Both leaders and teachers described their own but also their colleagues and co-workers experiences in these discussions. The discussions covered the period from the initial stage of the pandemic to the present day, and the interlocutors felt that the interviews were important opportunities for themselves to share their experiences during the pandemic. This approach provided rich data to understand the phenomenon from the participants' perspectives.

Results

Individual and organizational differences

The results indicate that ECE leaders play a vital role in coping with a crisis and maintaining staff capacity and wellbeing at work. Successful crisis management requires identifying and responding to different organizations and employees. According to the leaders, individuals and staff showed extreme responses to an acute crisis. Some staff responded through doing (cf. agency) to the crisis quickly and set out to think about concrete means to continue their work. Some were crippled by fear caused by, among other things, fear of their own or loved ones being ill as well as a lack of awareness of what was to come.

> "Some were really scared and kind of crippled of that situation. They needed a lot of clear instructions, even though supervisors or others had no knowledge of what to do, how to act, what makes sense. Others responded well and adapted to the change. We had to modify our work, and the kids suddenly disappeared from the centre or preschool. Some adapted quickly whereas others were fearful and needed to be dealt with the leader." (FG1)

The ability of an employee to recover from adversity and adapt to changes is commonly linked to resilience. Other related traits include adaptability, self-control, self-help, optimism, perseverance, creativity, and humor (cf. Nevalainen, Tukiainen and Myllymäki 2021; Valli 2020). This research supports the notion that resilience is an existing individual ability or capacity and is developed communally and in combination with doctrines (cf. Patterson and

Kelleher 2005; Valli 2020). Good crisis leadership has a key impact on the development of both individual and organizational resilience.

According to the ECE leaders, it was crucial to find solutions to maintain control and respond quickly to the needs and emotions that arise among staff: getting the most panicked empolyee to calm down to avoid the spread of panic, helping employees overcome their fears and return to their basic mission of promoting children's wellbeing and learning and supporting families.

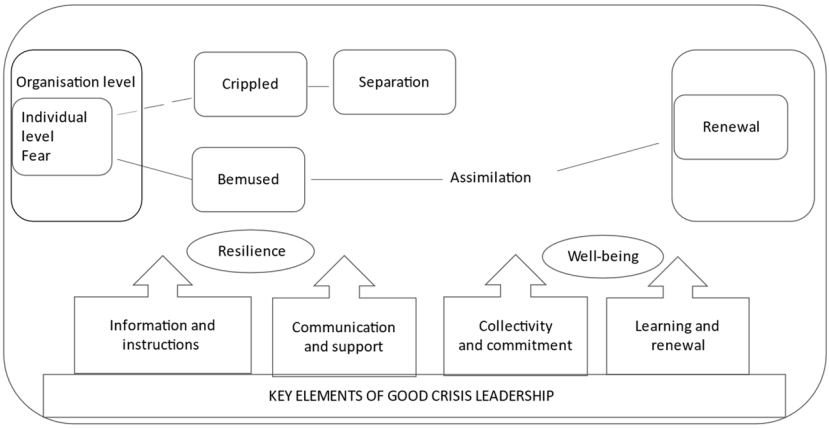

Figure 1. The key elements of good crisis leadership in relation to resilience and well-being

The ECE leaders noted differences between not only individuals but also ECE centres in responding to the crisis (cf. Nevalainen, Tukiainen and Myllymäki, 2021 Nieminen et al., 2017). In an ECE centre, where the staff had learned to deal with challenging events and accustomed to working with diversity of families and children, the staff greater flexibility and readiness to face the pandemic. By contrast, in homogeneous centers where the staff was not accustomed to greater concerns or crises showed negative response and strong fear, and there a leader was needed on a daily basis to deal with concerns.

> "My big house is in a socioeconomically good area. The other has many families with immigrant backgrounds and is nonhomogenous. In the more homogeneous area, people were very scared and reacted strongly. I had to have Teams- meetings every day, we just dealt with things and emotions… some workers self-regulation betrayed. Whereas, the second place …of course there were feelings and questions, and things were going through. However, they started brainstorming what we can do for the children who were at home…" (FG2)

In the Figure 1, we have compiled the key elements of good crisis management that we open in the following subchapters.

Information and instructions

Overall, leaders impressed that at an acute crisis stage, staff expectations of leadership regressed and staff capacity for shared leadership, self-direction, and shared responsibility deteriorated. During the crisis, staff longed for authoritarian, rigid and strong front management, as well as clear and detailed instructions, for example meeting memos were not perceived as adequate guidance. In times of uncertainty, the behavior of a leader that was otherwise considered unwanted was now perceived as positive (Halverson et al. 2004).

> "… leading from the front, setting an example, and conveying clear rules. People greatly needed this." (FG1)

Instructions were needed, although no one necessarily could provide them. Fear and uncertainty were compounded by constant changes in guidance. Effective information transmission has emerged as one of the key elements of good crisis management (cf. Logan et al. 2021; Steen and Morsus 2020).

The experiences of ECE leaders differed in how quickly information was managed during the crisis. Some of the ECE leaders had been involved in quickly setting up a Corona Fist- group, which responded and coordinated the guidelines. Some of the leaders had to wait a long time for a clear entity to take over the crisis and act. In addition, some of the ECE leaders had to seek and interpret the 'received guidelines to fit to early education context (c.f Dýrfjörð & Hreiðarsdóttir 2022). The lack of clarity and constant change in guidance was also influenced by the continued change in nationwide guidelines and instructions, reflecting general uncertainty about the direction in which the pandemic was moving and how to respond to it.

Communication and support

During the pandemic, wellbeing at work was undermined not only by living in fear, but also by the experience of not valuing or supporting the work of early educators enough (also Logan et al. 2021). However, the ECE teachers and other staff described a moral responsibility to enter the workplace and be available to children, while at the same time knowing they were putting themselves at risk of becoming ill (also Logan et al. 2021).

> "It was just as difficult for everyone to be in that situation, but many employees felt it very strongly that we were not supported by the management, here we are at the front line…" (FG3)

In this research, staff longed for more support and emotion sharing what ECE leaders provided. Especially the centres where the leader was not physically present experienced fear and disappointment that the support received was less than desired. The staff, especially in the early stages of the crisis, longed for the leader's presence, listening and supportive interactions as well as the sharing of emotions (also Valli 2020). The ability of a leader to act interactive, listening, supporting, and interested in their staff is highlighted in the more difficult situation. When the concerns of the employees are taken seriously without belittling and ignoring, supporting, and understanding, the leader acts on the support of emotions, which is a key part of resilience derivation (Valli, 2020).

> "In the work community, for us staff, there was no possibility of dismantling, i.e. to talk to a manager or someone about it, about the feelings of what that situation produced and what impact it had on the team. You needed some dismantling, because we were pretty much in the eye of the vein. Everyone was in the same situation and stayed quiet about it…" (FG3)."

A leader was expected to provide hope for getting out of the crisis. Providing hope is important for achieving resilience (Valli 2020).

> "I really feel that there should have been someone to say that everything will be all right and that we would survive… even though I was almost the oldest one, I felt a little bit helpless… (FG3)

In units having strong confidence in the leader and good interrelationships, the crisis brought the work community closer. The ECE leader's role was perceived as being significant for building confidential and good interactions and perpetuating a positive atmosphere and sense of community. Although reducing the risk of infection by minimizing close contact between children, guardians, employees, and teams, some units devised creative solutions to support and interact within the community, for example by providing informal gatherings through Teams. Strengthening interactions between the working community is crucial for achieving resilience (Teo, Lee, and Lim 2017) and according this research, also to increase wellbeing at work.

> "…everyone feels and is stressed differently, but I could say that there is a lot of convergence and unification spirits for everyone. And help has always been received from another team, if needed … And I do believe that it goes back to the leader and ones' ability to lead this." (FG3)

The importance of a good working team and with humor that endures even through the most difficult times was found crucial for supporting wellbeing at work.

Collectivity and commitment

The quality of interaction, each employee's commitment to their basic role at work and the work community were strongly linked to resilience management. The results suggested that it seemed to involve certain challenges. The leaders described identifying early on the workers who had a low threshold for sick leave and broke away from their work communities. Decoupling from the work community was also carried out by the senior organization by directing, for example, nurses to health care tasks and disconnecting from their main tasks. According to the experience of the teachers, this was done quite strongly and caused anxiety and fear in some employees.

> "When the announcement came late in the evening that one had to go to a nursing home in the morning, it seemed a bit like going to war. It lacked discretion. Personnel were treated like cattle in that situation …they were driven from place to place." (FG3)

The work communities and teams were therefore broken up, and they attempted to unite. How the transfer to other positions was perceived was central to whether the move was made while listening to the employee's own wish or by order from senior management. According to the leaders, employees who had been allowed to share their strengths in advance and to accordingly hope for a move perceived the move as a positive and educational experience.

> "Interestingly, when they got an easier situation and they got back to normal work … it was like fun, when they had seen this crisis from a different perspective…they saw management and work on the frontline, not with COVID-19 patients, by healthcare professionals. They also received positive feedback from them about the situation here, and they felt that we also were doing well and that the work community was effective…" (FG1)

The experience gave them a new perspective and positive outlook for their own work, which they also conveyed to their entire working community when they returned to their own mission.

Learning and renewal

Considering that over two years have passed since the first wave of the pandemic, both ECE teachers and leaders reflected on what has been learned and what has changed. The development of new forms of activity was actively started with the first wave of the pandemic, when a large number of children stayed at home. The staff had to adopt the so-called hybrid model that would serve children in the ECE centre unit and at home. The leaders felt that adopt-

ing a new approach and acting in accordance with the basic mission did not arise from all employees self-direction; instead, pedagogical leadership and guidance were required.

> "… I was surprised by that, especially when there were only a few children and they should have time to write group plans or make an assessment or…it was interesting that you had to guide even teachers, naturally not everyone…some of them could do it independently… but at least during the first spring, I had prepared a letter where I wrote instructions on what is worth doing in this situation. This was like a to-do list for teachers and teams… But then some people came up with wonderful and creative ideas and solutions. We helped families with outdoor activities and made QR code tracks for families to use in the evenings and on weekends." (FG1)

In ECE, the development of the hybrid model was also hampered by the fact that digital systems remained undeveloped in the early stages of the pandemic, and there was little experience about remote pedagogy for young children. During the pandemic there was a developmental step in ECE in the use of digital tools when the ECE staff started to use these tools for interaction and distance learning with children at home and for various meetings, trainings, and conversations with guardians, work community, supervisors, and other collaborators. Some leaders noted that telecommuting required a new kind of time management owing to the lack of transitions for example in taking care of breaks, even if remote connections are within reach all the time.

The staff's descriptions, attitudes, and expectations of the leader also changed substantially. In the early stages of the crisis, the ECE leader was needed for everything. Later, the ECE teachers and other staff were aware of the workload of their leader and considered better to avoid overburdening the leader and approached the leader only for the most urgent issues. Thus, the leader's support was still needed, especially for the substantially increased problems of children and families during the pandemic.

> "In relation to the leader, by knowing their workload as an employee, I prioritized the issues I sought help for as she was in our unit only a couple of days a week. Even though we used digital communication, I wondered how I could burden her with these concerns of the children and families in my own group and what were the things for which I really needed support." (FG3)

With this research, our understanding has been confirmed through our finding that good (crisis) leadership, wellbeing at work, and resilience are dynamic, relational phenomena are strongly interconnected. They are verified in a certain time and place and become ennobled with experience. They strengthen one another, and all are needed for wellbeing at work.

Discussion

Our study aimed to identify the key elements of good crisis management that support both organization- and individual-level resilience and wellbeing at work in ECE. This is essential for the development of not only crisis management but also, more generally, ECE leadership.

Today's work life is characterized by various crises and complex problems that can seem chaotic but allow a new stage of creative transformation. The COVID-19 pandemic was initially perceived as a shock two years ago in March 2020 and was accompanied by fear, paralysis, and decline. It challenged the ability of ECE leaders to lead individuals and communities in crisis in such a way that staff remained operational. Initially, it required strong frontal management, clear guidance, and strong emotional support to calm staff and enable them to reorient themselves toward their basic role. Interestingly, the staff's self-referential and shared leadership and longing for the so-called old authoritarian leadership model disappeared.

The protracted and wave-like nature of the COVID-19 crisis has impacted crisis management. The pandemic began in March 2020 and continues today, although it is being controlled better. These two years have seen various phases that have affected the expectations and experiences that leaders and staff associate with the pandemic and good crisis management. Whereas precise guidelines were expected and followed in the initial stages, as the crisis drags on, people are becoming rebellious and questioning. This has contributed to the fact that whether the crisis will end or has become part of the norm remains unknown.

In this study, we identified the factors that teachers and leaders linked to good crisis management and how these can be used to support both community- and individual-level resilience. The following factors emerged as important ones on the early stages of the crisis: *clear transmission*, *information and instructions*, *functional communication and support*, *collectivity and commitment*, and *learning and renewal ability*. Leaders and teachers also identified the differences in people, which we interpreted as a difference in resilience. Some had stronger resilience, were more optimistic about the crisis, and recovered and oriented themselves to action more quickly. Some staff with lower resilience became depressed, felt intense fear, and even disengaged from their work and work community by remaining on sick leave. Our interpretation of the reliability of the link between weak resilience and disengagement from work is in part undermined by the fact that no employees in our research team explained their reasons for disengagement in more detail. Overall, the reliability of our research in terms of resilience at both individual and organization levels would have been increased by the inclusion of more different ECE organizations as well as representatives from all different professional groups in

ECE. We recognize that in our study the interpretations of personnel are those told by ECE leaders and teachers. More research on the crisis management and how to support the wellbeing in ECE is needed (also Logan et al. 2021), not only by the involvement of all professionals of the staff, but also by involving other parties such as children and parents.

However, our research showed how coping with the organization's crisis is both a resilience and leadership issue (also Teo, Lee, and Lim 2017). Resilience develops by exposure (cf. Smith 2017), but at both the individual and organizational level, it also requires leadership that supports resilience potential, to which the factors of good crisis management structured in our study are substantially related. According to Smith (2017a), in the context of crises, it should be known that resilience is not an endless energy system but must be replenished, since prolonged crises and long-lasting changes can lead to a period where the need for resilience exceeds its supply. This is not so much a lack of skill, but rather an energy deficit that prevents the use of positive resources associated with resilience. In these situations, individuals often withdraw and feel disconnected from their work, emotions, and other people. This might also inform a coping mechanism that protects the individual and creates recovery time. Thus, resilience would appear to be not just the personality traits or skills that exist in an individual in difficult situations, but a more complex entity (Smith 2017a, p.16).

In relation to good crisis management, this makes the leader's ability to lead and take care of their own wellbeing an important factor. "Put an oxygen mask on your own face first before helping others" is a good guideline in this regard. In our study, leaders described considering, among other things, whether their vacation was enough to recover and how long it would take to recover from the pandemic. As factors supporting their own wellbeing, leaders raised issues such as the support of a senior supervisor, opportunity to share their experiences with colleagues, prioritizing and taking care of their own physical condition and getting adequate rest.

In this research, leaders and teachers considered the wider consequences of the pandemic and raised concerns about increasing problems with children and families. The pandemic has clearly increased the need for support for the whole family and the impacts of this long-lasting crisis to an extent remains unclear. Staff were concerned about the adequacy and timeliness of support services to children and families. They found it important to be sensitive overall in relation to each other to identify those for whom the burden has been too heavy and what kind of help is needed.

Finally, we note that, as with all superheroes, strength is created through difficulties and requires perseverance. After this pandemic, plenty of superheroes, both in leaders and staff, will remain in early childhood education.

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Pedagogical Leadership in Crises: The Greek Context

Eleftheria Argyropoulou

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to investigate and document how Greek ECEC leaders manage and respond to systemic crises. The recent COVID-19 crisis was used as the framework for analysis and discussion on ECEC leaders' decision making, behaviors and attitudes.

Based on previous evidence on ECEC leadership roles and responsibilities in Greece, pedagogical leadership in ECEC, conceptualization of crises and/or critical incidents with an emphasis on education, as well on educational leadership response to COVID-19 challenges in Greece, we conducted further qualitative research in state-funded ECEC settings regarding how their leaders responded to the pandemic conceptualized as a crisis. Research questions evolved around the following:

- ECEC leaders' perceptions of crises and/or critical incidents
- leaders' responses to crisis
- how contextual changes and constraints affected leading effectively
- whether leaders changed their leadership style and/or modified their skills to meet new challenges and adapt to new circumstances
- how education stakeholders [teachers and parents] responded to crisis challenge
- lessons learnt

Nine (9) semi-structured interviews were conducted from February to March 2021. All respondents were ECEC leaders from various areas around the country. Due to pandemic restrictions interviews were conducted via online platforms. All data were collected on the legal basis of informed consent, were anonymised, coded and analyzed thematically.

Major findings include the abrupt change of teaching styles and the necessity of introducing alternative teaching procedures, the need for adopting a more empathetic and creative style of leadership, the necessity of close cooperation among all education stakeholders, the impact of the new situation to the family as a whole and the increase of parental involvement in the provision of home-based education, the pathogenesis of government policies and the in-

equalities remote learning caused to less privileged students. Reflection on policies and practices was indicated as the best way to approach issues stemming from the COVID-19 crisis and lessons were learnt on how to achieve closer and meaningful cooperation bonds.

Key words: pedagogical leadership, ECE setting leaders, crises, crisis management, COVID-19 crisis

Introduction

Crises usually constitute a threat to the organized life of the community; people are taken by surprise, have limited time to respond and their information is usually unreliable and missing, especially in the initial phases of the crisis. Moreover, crises have a range of serious consequences (physical, psychological, material) in several sectors of social life and require arrangements by multiple responder agencies (JESIP, 2016). The most recent COVID-19 pandemic had and still has all the above characteristics, thus making humanity progressing with small and cautious steps towards stamping it out.

Education and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) –according to the OECD distinction- have been significantly affected. This paper presents the COVID-19 crisis impact on state ECE settings (nipiagogeio) in Greece. Data were collected during the second year of the COVID-19 crisis, school year 2020-2021. ECE staff (leaders and teachers), as well as children and parents had already experienced the initial closure (2019-2020) and the distant learning/homeschooling. The first-year closure was less organized compared to the second period, although participants often made analogies between the two periods.

This paper presents the Greek Early Childhood Education context during the COVID-19 crisis and remarks and implications.

The theory behind this research

The present research is based on previous work on ECE leadership roles and responsibilities, the conceptualization of pedagogical leadership in ECE in a comparative European level and the definition of crises and critical incidents and their contextualization in ECE.

Early Childhood Education and Pedagogical Leadership

Leadership in early childhood settings is tightly interwoven with the notion and the ethics of care for young children; it cannot be seen only as functions and structures responding to government policy guidelines and instructions. What matters more is the welfare of children and ECE leaders work towards this goal (Argyropoulou, 2013, Argyropoulou and Hatira, 2014). Pedagogical leadership has been conceptualized as a separate construct of leadership with emphasis on pedagogy, children- learning and a sensitive approach to other constituents of the school environment [i.e. parents, community] that can contribute to the success and welfare of children (Male and Palaiologou,2017). Research on European level indicates that the pedagogical approach to ECE leadership is shared by several colleagues (Palaiologou, Argyropoulou, Styf, Arvidsson, Ince and Male, 2021, Tirri and Husu, 2002). From this point of view, pedagogical leadership is often critical [and skeptical] towards the neoliberal pressures on the educational system for standardization, increase in outcomes and the persistence for homogeneity (Male and Palaiologou, 2017). The COVID-19 crisis indicated that these constraints were often impossible and meaningless to follow in sensitive environments, such as early childhood centres.

Crises and critical incidents

There is a distinction between crises and critical incidents in schools. In this paper, we identify critical incidents as mini-scale, organizational occurrences which are restricted within the boundaries of a specific working environment. According to Shapira-Litchinsky (2011, 649) critical incidents in schools, though undesirable, may not involve a lot of tensions; "their classification as critical incidents is based on the significance and the meaning the teachers attribute to them".

On the other hand, "a crisis is an extreme situation requiring timely decision-making about the response to real or perceived threats and opportunities, often exceeding available resources, and based on limited or unreliable information, with a risk of accountability and personal consequences" (Pine, 2017, 1). Crisis management requires a quite different approach than incident management, though some procedures may be similar. Most researchers of crisis management situate the crisis analysis and discussion only in the organizational level, though they recognize that external factors play an important role. Pearson and Clair (2008, 1) mention that their literature review revealed the need for a "systemic approach" when studying and/or managing a crisis" and

that a multidisciplinary approach is recommended as "psychological, socio-political and technological structural issues should be explicitly considered and integrated" in examining crises.

Crises and schools

Crisis relevant literature mostly comes from the USA and deals with national issues such as fires, floods, disasters in general, extreme weather phenomena or terrorist attacks. Minor crises or incidents in schools include shooting, bullying, violence, abuse and neglect, mental health issues and suicide (Brock, Sandoval and Lewis, 2001).

The COVID-19 pandemic as a crisis in education

In this paper, we see the COVID-19 pandemic as a major crisis in education which had a tremendous impact on schools around the world and triggered the production of relevant literature in a quite short time.

Though pandemics are not something new in the world (University of Crete, 2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has been an unprecedented catalyst for social transformation; it has had a tremendous impact on schools around the world and severely affected very young children (Baker and Bakopoulou, 2021; Nagasava and Tarrant, 2020, a, b; Cowan et al, 2021). Though social distancing was initially indicated as the best practice to avoid mass contamination, it proved less effective. The use of technology made it possible for schools to work on a distant basis. Social media played an important role in the interactive communication among teachers, parents and children and helped to reduce the negative effects of social isolation. Blogs, twitter, facebook and other social media platforms have been used by organizations to cope with crisis management in the past.

The negative effects of COVID-19 on schools and students are multiple as there is more than one reason to cause them. This crisis exacerbated existing inequalities of vulnerable and marginalized students: students with disabilities and/or learning difficulties, refuge and or displaced children, children who identify as LGBTI, students from ethnic or race minorities (W.B., 2020). Besides the psychological side effects associated with social isolation and the uncertainty the pandemic created for families, technology-related issues are likely to increase the risk for a child to be left behind: access to technology and

literacy, parental capacity, availability and/or willingness to assist home-learning.

Thus, international organizations, national governments, independent organizations and local authorities started to publish guidance on how to proceed with the pandemic and the reopening of schools (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020; W.B., 2020).

The Greek Context

The ECE system in Greece

There is a dual ECE system in Greece. The first level refers to Care and includes nurseries [*vrefonipiakoi/paidikoi stathmoi]* for children 0-4 years old, which are not compulsory. They may be private or municipal with fees and operate under the auspices of the Ministry of Interior Affairs. The second level includes ECE settings (*nipiagogeio)* which form part of the mandatory education in Greece and, thus, are supervised by the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs. *Nipiagogio* includes two years of study, 4-5 and 5-6, and has a specific curriculum. State *nipiagogeia* outnumber the private ones and each class has no more than 25 pupils on full-day provision. For every full-day class, there are two teachers, one in the morning zone (8.15-11.45) and one in the afternoon zone (12.00-16.00). There are also additional teachers for children with special learning difficulties. Nipiagogeia do not usually exceed the number of 60 students per school. However, there are exceptional cases –mostly in large urban areas- when this number can be increased.

All teachers must be university graduates to be eligible to work in the state sector schools. In *nipiagogeia* with one to three teaching posts, the leader is the senior among the teaching staff. In those with more than four teaching posts, the leader is selected among teachers with increased qualifications who apply for the leading post. ECE leaders are obliged to teach their full time programme. In this paper our sample comes from state *nipiagogeia,* called from now on ECE settings.

The COVID-19 crisis and the Greek education

This crisis came as a shock to everyone. The central government was mainly preoccupied with the public health danger from the pandemic and imposed se-

vere measures of social distancing to safeguard it. Education was left last for decisions to be taken. In the beginning, the first official reactions [Ministry of Education] were rather fragmentary. After the first closure, a hybrid operational plan was decided: schools would remain closed when the pandemic rates were high and re-open when it was safer. Thus, there were opening and closing periods during the first two years: a. September 2019-February 2020 = open schools, b. March 2020- June 2020 = distant learning (schools open only 20 days in June 2020), c. September – November [the 17th] 2020 = open schools, d. November [the 18th] 2020- May [the 16th] 2021= schools close, e. May [the 17th] – end of June 2021= schools re-open.

Throughout this time, many health and technical regulations were issued daily by the central government (both the National Public Health Organization and the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs) with a mind to achieving homogeneity of application throughout the country; but those rules were not appropriate for every school in terms of context and facilities. The first-year closure [b. as above] was less organized compared to the second year [d] when distant learning was established. The Ministry of Education, in a less coordinated attempt to control this new crisis, set up several e-platforms and asked school leaders to record multiple data daily.

The research profile

Methodology

The aim of this paper is to explore how leaders of Greek ECE settings manage and respond to systemic crises. The recent COVID-19 crisis was used as the framework for analysis and discussion on ECE leaders' decision making, behaviors and attitudes. As our aim is to explore leaders' perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and assessment of the setting's functioning during COVID-19, the qualitative approach is most appropriate. Our research is, thus, situated within the social constructivist paradigm, according to which "the social reality is constructed by the way individuals interact and give meaning to their acts" (Tsiolis, 2014,26-27). A publication on primary and secondary school leaders' response to COVID-19 (Argyropoulou, Syka and Papaioannou, 2021) provided feedback on designing the questions for this paper. Six research questions are to be answered through the data analysis:

1. What were the leaders' responses to the crisis?
2. How did contextual changes and constraints affect leading effectively?
3. Did leaders change their leadership style and/or modify their skills to meet new challenges and adapt to new circumstances?
4. How did teachers and parents respond to crisis challenges?
5. What are leaders' perceptions of crises and/or critical incidents?
6. Were there any lessons learnt?

Ethics

This research has been approved by the University of Crete, Research Ethics Committee (Ethics Review Statement 18.02.2021) and observes regulations set by L. 4521/2018 (23, § 2).

Data collection and analysis

Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted from February to March, 2021. Because of physical distancing restrictions all interviews were conducted via Skype and were recorded Prior to the interview, informed consensus of the participants was obtained.

For the sake of anonymity, interviews were codified and given cardinal numbers. To facilitate the analysis of data, participants were given codified names to avoid any chance of resemblance or identification.

We used five-step Thematic Analysis (Tsiolis, 2014) to analyse the collected data: i/transcription of recorded answers in written form, ii/careful reading and collecting speech fragments relevant to research questions, iii/grouping of repeated fragments and codification, iv/building themes from previous-step codification, v/presentation of findings. Thematic Analysis was preferred because it facilitates the systematic spotting, organizing and understanding of repeated nuances or phrases providing meaning within the whole set of participants' answers. The researcher focused on those repeated phrases-motives which answer the set research questions. Thus, the research questions formed a guide along the analysis process. The researcher was in a continuous creative and dialogical relation with her data, organizing, grouping and constituting larger entities from what already exists within the data rather than discovering them. To save time and space here we present only the last step of the Thematic Analysis, under the title "Findings".

Sample-Participants' demographics

The sample included leaders (eight female and one male) from various areas of the country. Details of the participants and their ECE settings are shown on Table 1 below. Four of them (Sinead, Gillian, Rory and Deirdre) had postgraduate degrees in education or educational administration. Deirdre and Rory had also work in private ECE before they joined the state system. All of them were mature teachers and leaders except for Deirdre who was leader only for one year when data were collected.

Name	Age	Years of teaching	Years as leader	Type of school	N of teaching staff	N of Pupils	Type of Area
Shannon	53	24	14	Full-day	5	60	island
Glynis	54	29	7	Full-day	9	86	island
Tara	54	32	18	Full-day	3	34	Semi-urban
Riona	49	20	9	Full-day	2	17	urban
Myrna	45	18	10	Full-day	2	9	rural
Sinead	53	24	14	Full-day	5	60	Urban
Gillian	53	22	12	Full-day	8	58	Urban
Deirdre	50	26	1	Half-day	1	9	Rural
Rory	44	17	5	Half-day	1	6	rural

Table 1. The sample: participants' demographics and their school profile

Findings

Findings concerning the COVID-19 crisis were organized into 3 major groups: the first two represent periods c and d [as described above] and the third one includes answers to general opinion questions.

I. Period 1: face-to-face teaching: September to November [the 17th]2020
II. Period 2: distant learning: November [the 18th] 2020- May [the 16th] 2021
III. General opinion questions

The themes emerging from the two periods-groups are similar; however, the content of each theme is often diversified depending on the different situational background. These major themes were divided into sub themes/categories. Table 2 shows the emerging themes.

Themes	Period 1	Period 2
Management and Leadership	Relative/limited autonomy New roles Increased bureaucracy Collaboration with colleagues Simultaneous teaching and leading	Technical equipment responsibilities New roles Increased bureaucracy Collaboration with colleagues Simultaneous teaching and leading
Parents and Children	Children and parents-families Teaching and learning	Children and parents-families Teaching and learning
Dilemmas	Distance between regulations and praxis	Contradictions in ministerial instructions Contradictions in [new] EC teaching methodology Managing intrusion in families' privacy Managing disruptive situations-SEN children
Challenges	Maintain cooperation among staff	Be creative, be inventive with teaching material Maintain cooperation and networking
External Relations	Educational planners/school advisors Central government [ministry] Borough/municipal services Miscellaneous stakeholders	

Table 2. Emerging Themes per period

Period 1

Management and leadership

Central health instructions increased managerial time *"the new tasks absorbed my energy*" (Tara). Though e-governance was supposed to decrease bureaucracy, it seemed to increase it. ECE leaders had to assume new roles, to:

- be responsible for supervision of school cleaning daily
- significantly reduce the number of shared objects in class
- undertake nursing duties to check children for symptoms and convince parents to keep them home to recover.

The last task proved difficult as several parents did not always have the option of letting the child stay home, despite the leader's refusal.

The leaders' duality of roles (teaching and leading) resulted in their staying at work for the whole day. Quality leading time was *now* (i.e. during the pandemic) more necessary than ever before, as leaders had two major issues to deal with:

a) The *leader-staff* relations: to work with the teaching staff and take decisions on how they would apply instructions within their facilities. Quite often this was in contrast with other health instructions, to inspire and encourage staff to go on despite the difficulties, "*My concern was to keep the staff united"* (Gillian).
b) The *inter-staff* relations: cooperation among staff was necessary for activity planning, creating and sharing teaching material. This "*sharing experience*" was mentioned repeatedly as one of the "opportunities/strengths" of the COVID-19 crisis.

Parents and children

Several issues have been raised regarding children, parents and the teaching process itself. Children had to learn how to apply the "health rules", both in class and in play, and avoid touching classmates and objects. Both teachers and leaders had to explain this lack of intimacy to young children.

Some parents were "*another headache*" for leaders, as they urged their children not to wear masks. ECE leaders had to employ several approaches to deal with such attitudes. This theme pops up frequently in the participants' reports.

External relations

ECE leaders mentioned two groups of external stakeholders they either asked for help or collaborated with: the regional educational coordinators (RECs) and the borough. Both groups are decentralized stakeholders and offered help and material to support schools, teachers and families.

The RECs organized seminars to help with the new teaching situation and managing class material "*…the burden fell on the RECs' shoulders*" (Myrna). The municipal services were responsible for supplying cleansing and disinfecting material, providing extra cleaning staff, supporting facilities rearrangement [where possible] and, in certain cases, offering laptops and tablets. Sometimes boroughs were equipped with psychologists who were able to provide psychological support to families.

Almost all participants reported the RECs' significant role in terms of psychological support and professional guidance on distant learning process and material. However, leaders were dissatisfied with the Ministry's management of the crisis and their *"lack of understanding the real situation",* and *"treating the periphery [i.e. rural areas] differently than the center* (Rory)*".*

Several participants stressed the Parents' Committee's contribution to laptops and tablets. One participant mentioned that she had received help and support from an NGO being active in their area.

Dilemmas and Challenges

The most common dilemmas [and challenges, at the same time] had to do with how to apply central government regulations to their context and praxis, *"instructions were not context-specific*" (Sinead). Re-planning of the teaching and learning process in class to meet the new instructions was a real challenge. The actual teaching time was inevitably decreased due to the health protocol routines. Emphasis was placed on keeping in touch with the children, not observing the regular daily schedule. Much of what was taught in past school years had to be omitted.

In certain cases, however, the crisis was an opportunity for tightening working relations. Participants' challenge was *to* have staff concentrated on their mission. On the other hand, continuing this cooperation in the post-COVID-19 era constitutes a major challenge.

Period 2

Data from this period indicated similar themes but their content often differed significantly.

Management and Leadership

ECE leaders continued to work from their office as before. As they were alone at school, they had to carry out all kinds of administrative tasks, such as fill in data in the *e-gov* platforms or be in touch and constant collaboration with other

services. *"It was a change of culture on how to proceed with the daily school operation"* (Shannon).

Leaders' priorities now were to secure electronic equipment provision for children and teachers, as well as technical support and guidance on how to use the equipment and the online teaching material. Consequently, they often assumed the role of the IT specialist. The majority had already acquired IT skills, but there was a small number who did not and had to "*acquire the skills themselves first, before helping others"* (Glynnis).

There were several ECE settings [mostly in semi-urban and rural areas] where the equipment (laptops and/or tablets) was scarce. The leaders of those settings often decided to provide teachers with the necessary equipment so as to be able to teach their classes, instead of giving it to needy children who had to connect through their parents' mobile phones: *"I had to support teachers first; they are parents themselves with two or more children at home using computers to attend their own classes"* (Rory). Deciding to whom leaders give equipment created an ethical dilemma. Equipment sufficient for all did not arrive in many settings on time or, when it arrived it was very late for the struggling ones to catch up with learning.

At the same time, leaders had to perform their teaching duties in their own classes and prepare online teaching material in collaboration with the rest of the staff.

Critical issues and dilemmas

The major areas of concern were again children and their parents. Some of the participants reported "*a rather limited attendance of online teaching because online ECE teaching was provided at the same time with primary school teaching*" (Gillian). Some mentioned various factors which could also contribute to the limited attendance of children:

a) the *lack of intimacy and cordiality between teachers and children in online teaching*, mentioned by almost all participants (Deirdre)
b) the *awkward situations with SEN children during online teaching* now that classwork was in common view, "*in online classes SEN children are exposed to everyone*" (Riona, Sinead)
c) the issue of "*invading privacy"* was mentioned by almost all participants "*we enter children's homes uninvited*" (Riona)
d) *parents who could not support their children with online teaching* (Rory)
e) *technical problems in semi-urban and rural areas*, such as discontinuous or problematic internet connection and crashing overloaded platforms.

ECE leaders reported they often had to be in constant contact with parents to provide guidance on how to connect and stay connected to the e-platforms. Three participants noted that they "*organized online seminars for parents*". Some participants tried to keep in touch with parents and children using mobile phone facilities and encourage them to continue; yet many parents were discouraged.

Dilemmas are mostly based on contradictions, caused by either the peculiarities of the crisis or by the abrupt shifting from face-to-face teaching and learning methodology to online and remote teaching.

Challenges

Challenges in this period are associated with:

a) *Implementation of new public e-governance bureaucracy:* During school closure the combination of information and communication technologies has been intensified. ECE leaders reported that this shift from traditional operation into the remote mode resulted in significantly altered administrative processes. Such a shift demanded immediate familiarization with e-government strategies and e-governance practices. Those with a previous IT capacity adapted easily to this new culture. It was both a challenge and an opportunity to achieve the impossible.

b) *Use of remote learning platforms, tools and websites:* The need to find solutions to immediate online teaching material drove ECE leaders and teachers to new paths:

   i. social media were implemented for fast networking and combinational creativity was put forward to help transform traditional teaching material and resources to new teaching formats

   ii. cooperation among colleagues was strengthened and the pre COVID-19 setting culture changed. Preserving this change after the COVID-19 era sets a major challenge for the majority of ECE leaders.

Two of the participants (Riona and Myrna) described ways they came up with to encourage students, "*keep the team spirit alive*" and help young children "*socialize online"*. Myrna pointed to the creativity triggered by the awkward situation and provided a detailed example on how she and her colleague organized Christmas festivities online.

c) Some emphasized on *the mismatch between the goals and objectives of ECE settings* (socialization, play, happy and creative learning) *with virtual reality and the distance learning using computers* (Sinead, Shannon). During distance learning they admitted more time was spent on the psychological support and the attempt to *'show affection through the screen'*, than using conventional teaching methods [where possible] or improvising. Others (Myrna,

Glynis, Shannon) thought it *useful to have a provisional, ready-made distance teaching curriculum*, equivalent to the conventional one for similar emergency cases such as the COVID-19 crisis. Almost all leaders emphasized the drawbacks of distance learning for very young children. Physical distancing is in opposition to early childhood learning where the main goal is learning to be social.

d) Deidre pointed out that *socializing through the internet is utopic for young children*. Some participants also referred to *the screen-debate and the question of allowing children to use computers for a long time.* Some others emphasized on the contradiction between what they urged children and parents to do before the crisis and what the emerging situation made them actually do.

General opinion questions and answers

Defining crisis

Participants pointed out that the "*COVID-19 pandemic is the definition of crisis*" as it is novel, unique and unprecedented. Certain respondents used metaphors to describe it:

- Sinead compared it to an unknown enemy and an unexpected war, while Deirdre described it as "*chimaera*". She noted "*no one could imagine what was going to happen; I suppose that this was the way people felt at the outbreak of World War II*".
- Tara, Glynis, Shannon and Riona found some analogies with the 2010 economic crisis in Greece as that had also affected, though indirectly, the ECE settings through their parents' job losses. However, they thought that the COVID -19 pandemic was a rather severe crisis as the danger of life losses is still increased and extended to the whole country, compared to anything that happened before.
- Riona and Myrna also mentioned the H1N1 flu and the swan flu pandemics, but they both thought that those were less dangerous. No other type of crisis was mentioned though quite recently the country had experienced environmental catastrophes.

Lessons learnt

According to the respondents, the COVID-19 crisis taught humanity and education that

a) *'Nothing can be taken for granted any more'* (Riona, Rory and Glynis). Society should be prepared for similar situations in the future. It is considered wise to prepare a protocol or a plan of actions for both face-to-face and distance learning teaching in awkward circumstances (Sinead). Emphasis was given to new, computer-based, teaching methods; activities and lessons should be designed for distance learning, as ECE goals require a holistic approach to developing a child's personality. This also means that all ECE teachers and leaders acquire high level IT skills, not just basic computer literacy.

b) *The crisis revealed good and bad aspects of the individuals' character*. The optimistic views included the opportunities the crisis created. "*It taught us to*:

   i. *value health, socialization and the true meaning of life* (Riona, Sinead)
   ii. *be humble and value important things ignoring the petty, materialistic and trivial* (Tara)
   iii. *see deep inside, to reflect and become better persons, better teachers* (Deirdre)
   iv. *work under pressure and achieve more things in a short time than we could imagine* (Myrna)".

Some were more optimistic than others. Myrna, for example, used a metaphor for courage 'a*fter the rain comes the rainbow'*. Rory and Shannon, on the other hand, were frustrated with the way the authorities were supposed to help and support schools and were pessimistic that policy and policies would ever improve.

c) *The loneliness of the leader (Gillian, Glynis) and the qualities s/he must master to cope with such situations* (resilience, patience, persistence); the decisions to take to overcome obstacles and meet the needs of the preschool, to assume the sole responsibility of their actions.

Results

Our research was based on *Voices from the Field*, those of ECE school leaders, in order to depict the impact the COVID-19 created on ECE in Greece. Though our material came from only nine in-depth interviews with ECE school leaders, it produced rich findings and can trigger further discussion and research. Table 3 recapitulates our research.

Research Questions	Findings
What were the leaders' responses to the crisis?	• Build leader-staff relation on a new basis and encourage inter-staff cooperation • Take school-individualized decisions, often outside the regulated framework – relative autonomy • Seek help, material and support from external stakeholders • Increase time staying at school due to increased workload and central government bureaucracy
How did contextual changes and constraints affect leading effectively?	• Leaders were obliged to assume new roles and responsibilities • Dealt with several dilemmas on a daily basis • More quality leading time • Offer IT help • Start to work closer with other school leaders and exchange ideas on practices • Become more creative in leading • Employ social media and technology in leading
Did leaders change their leadership style and modify their skills to meet new challenges and adapt to new circumstances?	• Increase empathy and inspiration • Become more sensitive in their relations with families and teachers as professionals and as family members • Balance leading and managing equally and effectively • Devote [leading] time to psychological support • Consider all dimensions of the school context inclusively • Realize the need for crisis-planning
How did teachers and parents respond to crisis challenges?	• Both groups had to reconsider their relation in order to help young children • Re-planning of teaching and the learning process in new circumstances • Find new ways to resume intimacy, affection and cordiality with young children • Stronger collaboration to work out difficulties arising from IT • Reconsider attitudes and behaviors towards SEN children • Teachers understand the need of providing constant support to parents and children
What are leaders' perceptions of crises and critical incidents?	• COVID-19 is the ultimate definition of crisis, never experienced before • Urged us on reconsider our values and our practices • 'Nothing can be taken for granted any more' • 'The crisis revealed good and bad aspects of the individuals' character' • Remain optimistic is essential in order to carry on

Table 3: Research questions and findings per question

Concluding remarks and implications

The participants' answers mirror areas of concern mentioned in previous ECE studies. Inequalities of various reasoning and the impact on children's lives were also reported by W.B. (2020), Reimers and Schleicher (2020), Baker and Bakopoulou (2021) and Nagasava and Tarrant (2020 a, b); the lack of physical play and outdoor activities and the renewed "screen debate" by Cowan et al; the inconsistency of authorities demands by Nagasava and Tarrant (2020a, b).

ECE leaders acted in consistency with the principles of Pedagogical Leadership as described by Palaiologou et al (2021), Male and Palaiologou (2017) and Argyropoulou (2013). They demonstrated resilience and empathy, acting as mentors to teachers and parents. This was also found in previous research in Greece concerning primary and secondary school leaders (Argyropoulou, Syka and Papaioannou, 2021). More specifically, ECE leaders performed a human-centered, ethical and authentic approach to achieve organizational coherence and psychological integrity for all.

The Greek education system had to switch to remote teaching overnight and was unprepared for such a sudden switch. This study offers some implications for policy development in future similar cases on the national level:

a) leaders and staff should receive further IT training and familiarization with alternative teaching modalities
b) initial ECE teacher training should include development of their own online teaching materials, blogs, sites
c) leaders and teachers should also receive training on adult teaching and learning
d) each ECE setting should devise "a crisis plan" , that is, a set of crisis management strategies for modifying and adapting provision of teaching and learning in awkward circumstances
e) alternative curricula should be designed for similar situations which will explore the possibilities of online and remote teaching and learning, according to circumstance. On the international level, this study is expected to trigger interest of ECE practitioners and researchers to work together to explore and exchange ways of reaction to crises.

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Challenges, Stressors and Coping Strategies of ECE Leaders in Germany

Petra Strehmel

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic caused tremendous changes in the tasks of ECE leaders. In Germany, in the first phase of the pandemic ECE centres were closed. When the centres carefully were reopened, ECE leaders found themselves in a field of tension between different expectations and were exposed to multiple stressors. They e. g had to communicate restrictions and regulate social contacts between children, parents and team members according to containment regulations and this changed the quality of social relationships to the various stakeholder groups. The study investigates in the question, how leaders experienced these multiple challenges in reorganizing the pedagogical work and leading the staff, how they mastered these tasks and coped with stress. 35 ECE leaders from 10 German states were interviewed between September 2021 and January 2022. Topics of the interviews were changes and challenges in leadership roles and their impact on stress, coping and self-management. The results show changes in the leadership role e.g. due to the implementation and control of the containment measures as well as the handling of the staff's anxieties, conflicts and exhaustion in the teams.

Keywords: leadership role, stress, personnel management, self-management

Introduction

Providers of ECE in Germany mostly delegate the majority of tasks to run an ECE Centres facility to the leaders: The leaders' task profile includes pedagogical leadership, management and administration and covers pedagogical leadership, staff leadership and teambuilding as well as administrative tasks including the controlling of the budget and the maintenance of the rooms (Strehmel, 2016, Geiger, 2019).

The present study investigates the question of how ECE leaders experienced and mastered the challenges in the COVID-19-pandemic. The corona-

virus pandemic posed a particular challenge to ECE centres. In the first lockdown in March 2020, ECE centres, schools and public playgrounds were closed. Emergency care in the ECE centres was only available for parents working in the health system or institutions, which were regarded as relevant for the survival and security of the population as staff from food shops, pharmacies, police and fire brigades. From end of April 2020 ECE centres where carefully reopened. The leaders were responsible to implement health protection measures, inform parents and staff and reorganize the pedagogical work again and again. This was accompanied by serious challenges for the children, teams and parents. In addition, there were fears of infections among the educational staff as well as discussions about compulsory vaccination.

The study investigates the question, how ECE leaders experienced their role during the pandemic and how they coped with the new challenges. How did ECE leaders describe the challenges of managing their centre, reorganize the pedagogical work according to containment regulations and in care for children, parents and staff? How did the situation change the work relationships between leaders and team members and the cooperation within the teams? How did the leaders cope with the challenges and stresses in the human resource management during the pandemic?

The theoretical framework of the study refers to the task profile of ECE centre leaders (Strehmel & Ulber, 2020) and examines the stresses and coping processes based on stress theory as developed by R. S. Lazarus (Lazarus & Folkman 1984, Lazarus 1999, 2015).

Theoretical framework

Task profile of ECE centre leaders

Strehmel & Ulber (2020) developed a theoretical model that describes a task profile for ECE leaders. It is derived from a model for the management of non-profit organizations (Simsa & Patak, 2016). Leaders have a key position in ECE centres: they are responsible for pedagogical leadership, management and administration (Rodd, 2013), for personnel management and team leadership and for the cooperation with parents, providers and external organizations (e.g. cultural institutions, public authorities for child protection, schools or family services). In addition, leaders have to design and promote the organizational structure and processes within the centre. They must be informed about frame conditions and trends in society and politics related to ECE at federal, state and local levels. And they have to manage themselves and reflect their professional learning and development, work organization, self-care and career planning.

These diverse tasks of the ECE leaders are interwoven (Figure 1). Changing demands in pedagogical leadership have consequences in personnel management and team leadership and sometimes require organizational development and the mobilization of additional financial resources.

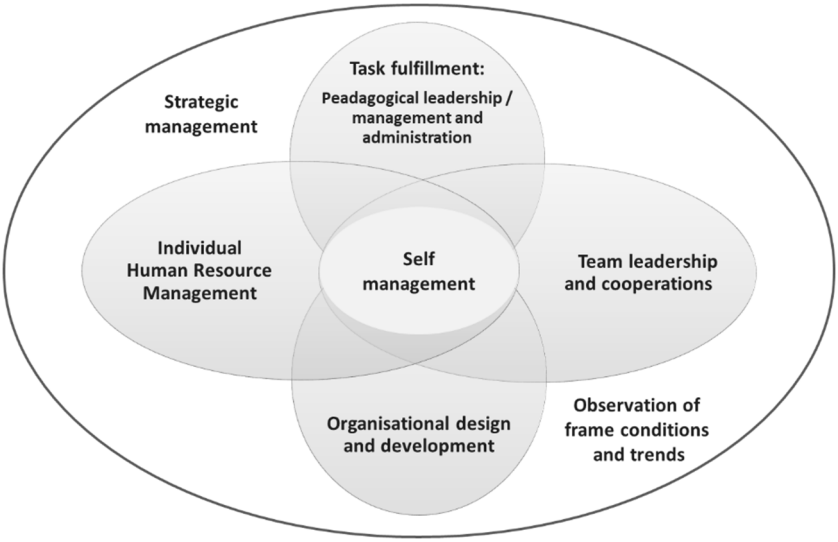

Figure 1. Profile of leadership tasks in ECE centres (Strehmel & Ulber, 2020)

Already before the pandemic, the focus for ECE leaders in Germany laid on personnel management and leadership. Inadequate child-staff ratios and the lack of qualified staff on the labour market are serious current problems for the operation of ECE centres in Germany (Autorengruppe Fachkräftebarometer 2021, 157).

The changes in the Corona pandemic affected all areas of the leaders' responsibilities and required new considerations and problem-solving. The situation required a high degree of flexibility and acceptance of the regulations, which were directed by the health authorities, by all parties involved. The question arises how the leaders experienced and mastered these challenges. Stress theory enables the analysis of such challenging situations.

Stress theory

Stress arises when external and/or internal demands severely strain or exceed the coping resources and adaptability of an individual or a social system

(Lazarus & Folkman 1984, Lazarus, 1999, 58). Stress is therefore a relational concept: it is about the relationship between the requirements of a situation on the one hand and the adaptability of the individual on the other.

The theoretical model helps to understand the origin of stress processes (see Figure 2): prerequisites for the emergence of stressful situations are, on the one hand, demanding objective frame conditions and on the other hand the subjective goals of the person. If subjective goals and strivings as moral values, ego ideals or the well-being of other persons are called into question by the situation and appraised as no longer to be reached with own resources, the feeling of being overwhelmed can arise. The central concept to understand the stress process is the cognitive appraisal of the extent to which the situation is experienced as challenging or threatening (primary appraisal) and to what extent the person can rely on resources which are helpful to cope with the situation (secondary appraisal). These coping resources can be in the person or in the situation. Personal resources are, for example, experiences with challenging situations, self-esteem, self-confidence and resilience. As situational resources, the person can, for example, draw on information, concrete opportunities to act or social support (Lazarus, 1999, 114).

Both appraisal processes run in parallel, are interlocked and result in the experience of stress: Depending on the requirements of the situation and what is at stake for the person on the one hand and on which resources the person can fall back on according to his or her subjective appraisal on the other hand, the stress is experienced to a greater or lesser extent. The stress can manifest itself in emotions like anger, anxiety, guilt or compassion, feelings of helplessness or other psychic or physical symptoms (Lazarus, 1999, 96).

Individuals try to cope with stressful situations on the one hand by focusing on problem-solving in order to change the situation or on the other hand influence emotions by attempts to calm down, by denial or reinterpretation of the situation in order to regain the ability to act in a rational way. Mostly, different coping attempts take place in parallel. The results of the coping attempts are evaluated in a process of reappraising the (changed) situation and available resources. After successful coping attempts, the stress is overcome and the stress episode finished ("exit", see Figure 1). If this is not the case, the person undertakes further coping attempts. From repeated experiences that coping attempts are in vain, the person experiences the loss of control and feelings of helplessness and depression can emerge (Peterson, Maier & Seligman, 1993).

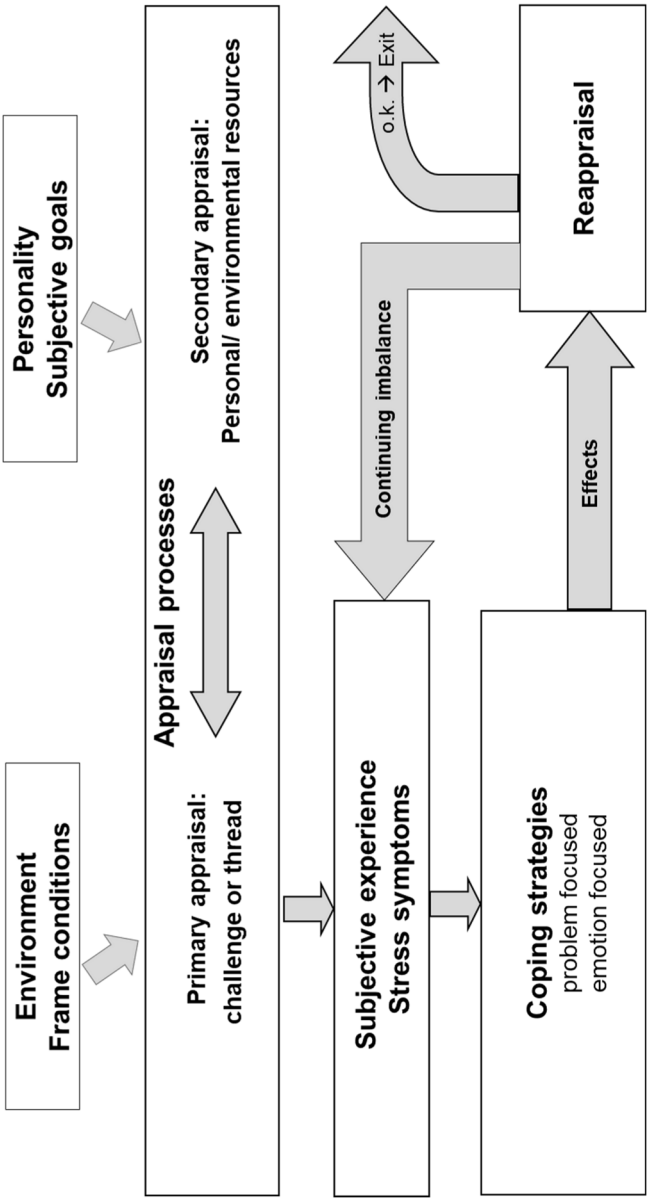

Figure 2: Stress model (based on Lazarus & Folkman 1994, Lazarus, 1999)

During the pandemic the ECE leaders' competencies and resilience were put to a hard test. The requirements from the public health authorities were demanding and by this the leaders' subjective goals and their self-concepts as a good leader were called into question. The leaders were expected to implement and control containment measures and to take responsibility for the health of all groups involved in the ECE centres. These factors – situational demands, subjective goals and the appraisal of coping resources – shape the experience of stress. Thus, the stress model is suitable to explain the psychological consequences of demanding situations such as the pandemic in more detail.

State of research on psychosocial consequences of the corona pandemic in German ECE centres

Almost since the beginning of the pandemic, the changes in German ECE centres were empirically investigated by two central research institutes, the Robert-Koch-Institute and the German Youth Institute. In the so called "Kita-Corona study" they continuously collected data on infections and social processes in ECE centres during the pandemic (Autorengruppe Corona-Kita-Studie, 2021). In the meantime, there are also numerous other studies in Germany on the situation in ECE centres during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some studies focused primarily on the situation of children and families (e.g. Cohen, Oppermann & Anders 2020), others investigated the situation of the ECE staff. A number of studies were regionally limited (Oeltjendiers, Dederer, Rauscher-Laheij & Broda-Kaschube, 2021, Müller, 2020). The studies help to understand the situation in the ECE centres, but research on the subjective experiences and coping strategies of ECE leaders in the pandemic is still missing.

As part of the Corona-Kita-Study (Autorengruppe Corona-Kita-Studie, 2021 a and b), ECE leaders and pedagogical staff were surveyed. Accordingly, the pedagogical work in ECE centres – except during the lockdowns and phases of reduced access for children – could most of the time be continued (Autorengruppe Corona-Kita-Studie, III/2021, p. 16f.). From the leaders' point of view the scope for pedagogical leadership was reduced by the implementation of the containment measures. They reported difficulties in dealing with additional tasks of coordinating and implementing the prescribed measures. The fear of contagion and conflicts within the pedagogical teams and with parents were important reasons to reduce pedagogical supplies from the point of view of both leaders and the pedagogical staff (n = 4366 leaders, August 2021; n = 566 pedagogical staff, June 2021). Neuberger et al. (2022) showed that in ECE centres with many children from families with a low income, the risk of infections for children and educational staff was larger. However, strict

adherence to containment measures in ECE centres, closed team constellations and fixed groups of children were associated with lower numbers of infections.

Fläming and Kalicki (2020) reported results from a qualitative interview study with ECE leaders (n = 83 in spring 2020). Leaders were confronted with a dilemma between the needs of children and parents on the one hand and the health protection of educational staff on the other. They felt challenged by the communication with the parents about the repeatedly new hygiene rules for the ECE centres and by the decisions they were demanded about children's access to the centres. Parents felt under pressure in their jobs and thus often expressed their displeasure with new limitations.

In a regional online survey of 3996 ECE leaders in Bavaria (Oeltjendiers, Dederer, Rauscher-Laheij & Broda-Kaschube, 2021), more than three-quarters of the managers felt pressured by the constant changes of specifications and measures and often exhausted after work. More than half of them felt constantly under time pressure and were often confronted with difficult problems. The strains were exacerbated by tensions in the team and insufficient support from the provider (Oeltjendiers et al., 2021). In a supplementary interview study with 25 ECE leaders, the roots of the leaders' stress experience were named more concretely (Oeltjendiers, Doblinger & Broda-Kaschube, 2020): unclear requirements by the public administration on the one hand and the pressure from the parents to be able to pursue their employment on the other hand required permanent negotiation processes. In addition, there were uncertainties and fears of the staff and the need to repeatedly reorganize everyday pedagogical life with regard to risk groups and the lack of staff. In their leadership behavior, the leaders focused more than before on an individualized leadership style towards the staff. They reported a greater sense of personal responsibility, as they often had to make decisions that had to be justified towards the staff and parents and they tried to consider the interests of as many people as possible. The support from the providers, however, was very heterogeneous: some leaders felt very well supported, others rather left alone. The support from the parents was also very different.

Müller (2021) surveyed 42 pedagogues from a social association in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. In this study, the requirements and expectations towards the centre leaders became clear. More than 90% of these respondents were concerned about their health. More than half did not feel sufficiently protected from infections in their work situation and developed fears. However, more than four-fifths of the staff surveyed felt well supported by the leaders and teammates.

Conclusion: The studies on the situation of children, parents and staff in German ECE centres give a picture of the additional demands on ECE leaders and their experience of stress. The studies mostly describe practices and subjective appraisals, but are not based on theoretical models. Some studies revealed severe stress for ECE leaders and give an insight in issues that leaders

faced during the pandemic: the dilemma between health protection for the educational staff and pressure from parents to have their children looked after in order to be able to pursue their employment. Centre leaders had to mediate and make decisions in the face of vague specifications from the public authorities, which then had to be communicated to parents and staff. In personnel management, they had to deal with the worries and fears of the staff as well as conflicts which occurred more frequently in the teams. Due to the responsibility for the implementation of the containment measures, ECE leaders were exposed to considerable workload, which was often accompanied by feelings of stress. The support from the providers was appraised very differently, other coping resources were not explored in the studies.

Empirical Study

Research Questions

Recent studies rarely focused on the subjective stress experience of the leaders and there are hardly any data available on individual coping strategies. The present study can close this research gap. It asks about the stresses and coping strategies in various areas of responsibility of the ECE centre leaders. This paper focuses on two questions:

1. How did leaders experience changes in the requirements for pedagogical leadership under the conditions of the pandemic? Which aspects were experienced as stressful and how did the leaders cope with these stresses?
2. Which new challenges emerged in team leadership? How did the managers experience the new demands? With which leadership strategies did they deal with the challenges and stresses?

Context of ECE centres in Germany

In Germany, the 16 federal states hold the sovereignty over the system of ECE. Children and families in Germany have a legal right to early education and care from the age of one year until school entry (Social Welfare Act VIII). Each federal state has its own curriculum for early childhood education as well as its own laws and rules for equipment and financing. In addition, the municipalities are involved in the regulation and financing of ECE centres, the youth welfare offices are responsible for monitoring and controlling the centres. Ac-

cording to the principle of subsidiarity municipalities are not allowed to run their own ECE centres as long as other – mostly non-profit – providers offer enough places for children in ECE centres (Pothmann & Schmidt 2022). More than 80% of the independent providers are united in central associations of welfare care: the "Arbeiterwohlfahrt", the German Red Cross, the "Paritätische Wohlfahrtsverband", the "Caritas" for centres of the Catholic Church, the "Diakonie" for centres of the Protestant Church and the Jewish Welfare Association. Within these welfare associations, there is a large diversity of provider organizations. Many providers, including parents' initiatives, operate only one institution, but there are also medium-sized or larger provider organizations with sometimes several 1000 employees. Even within the provider organizations, the variety in size and structure of the ECE centres is large: some ECE centres care for less than 20, others for more than 300 children (Autorengruppe Fachkräftebarometer 2021). About one third of the ECE centres are run by independent non-profit institutions, another third by church institutions and another by municipalities (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2021). More than a quarter of provider organizations are non-profit organizations or foundations, which are managed by a board of volunteers, some of them employ professional managers. Private profit organizations as ECE providers hold less than 3% of the ECE centres (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2021, Strehmel 2021).

Research methods

Design and study group

In this qualitative study 35 ECE leaders were interviewed between September 2021 and January 2022. One of the interviewed leaders was male, the others female. The majority had a professional education on level 6 of the European quality framework (EQF), which was obtained in a professional school ("Fachschule").

The interview partners were mainly recruited via multipliers from the ECE system. The sample included leaders from ten federal states in Germany. The leaders were responsible for large, medium-sized and smaller ECE centres with team sizes between three and more than 50 employees. The sample included ECE centers in non-profit church and non-church ownership, ECE centers run by municipalities, and one private-commercial provider. Due to the tremendous variety in the structures of ECE centres in Germany (see above), the sample cannot claim representativeness, but it covers a wide range of contexts of ECE centres in Germany.

The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the compliance with EU data protection guidelines guaranteed, which contain rules about anonymity and voluntariness. The ethical guidelines from the professional society of educational science in Germany are fulfilled.

Data collection and analysis

Qualitative data were collected in semi-structured interviews. The interview guideline was based on the task profile of ECE centre leaders on the one hand and on stress-theoretical dimensions on the other. The interview guideline contained the following topics:

- Context data: Number of children, information on staff and providers
- Leadership tasks and workload for the leaders, connected with
  - pedagogical leadership
  - administration
  - personnel management and team leadership
  - self-management.

  In these fields of work the leaders were asked, how they appraised and experienced the situation, and how they coped with the challenges or stress.
- Future prospects: main experiences in the pandemic, "lessons learned" and challenges for the future.

The interviews were mostly carried out by telephone calls, some in video conferences. They lasted between 25 and 70 minutes and were recorded and transcribed anonymized.

The data analysis included theoretical categories from the leadership profile and stress theory. In the first step was conducted by a theoretical based content analysis, digitally supported by search criteria (Kukartz 2016). Search criteria were, for example: “staff”, “parents”, “team”, “leaders”, “provider” or the “public health office”. Other search criteria were referred to stress theory, e.g. “feelings”, “fear”, “anxiety”, “vaccination”, “stress”, “conflict”, “coping”, “support”, “resources” etc.). In this way, interview statements referring to the research questions were identified. In a second step the records were ordered and bundled according to criteria derived from the theoretical categories (“Ordering”, Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014): pedagogical leadership, administration, staff leadership, teambuilding and cooperation as well as self-management. Inside these categories, new demands and subjective goals, appraisal processes, stress symptoms as well as coping strategies were identified. By this the qualitative material could be ordered in a data matrix according to the theoretical framework.

Results

This paper focuses on two areas of ECE leadership: pedagogical leadership, team leadership. For these tasks, stressors were identified and coping strategies analyzed.

Pedagogical leadership

Experienced stress

Four main stressors were identified from the qualitative data:

1. shift in the priorities in the pedagogical work connected with the neglection of the children's needs during the pandemic
2. increased workload and time pressure to implement measures which had to be rolled out at short notice
3. staff absences due to understaffing, quarantines and increased cases of illness
4. an increased responsibility towards all groups involved in the ECE centre.

Some examples from the interviews[1]:

(1) *Shift in priorities:* Some teams lost sight of the pedagogical tasks with regard to the children due to the containment regulations and fears of team members. The leaders reflected on the teams' pedagogical values to focus on the needs of the children:

> "Colleagues no longer have the best interests of the child in mind, but only act strictly in accordance with the law (…). There was a (…) very fearful colleague (…), who really always attached great importance to the fact that everything is very strict. She then also prevented hugs. It took us a long time to break it up, according to the motto: We have to keep an eye on the well-being of the children (BW2)."

(2) *Increased workload:* The objective frame conditions for working in the ECE centres differed between regions and phases of the pandemic, depending on the levels of incidence and the politically decreed measures. In the most states groups of children and their pedagogues were to be physically separated, access by parents to the rooms of the facilities was sometimes prohibited. Later the staff and also the children were to be tested regularly.

1 The references from the transcriptions are signed with the states.

The implementation and control of these measures was delegated to the leaders and caused a lot of additional work and responsibility for them:

> "The workload has increased dramatically under Corona. Extremely increased. All these hygiene instructions and another letter and another one and again. And how to communicate: Are the parents angry when they hear this now? (…) How do we manage this in connection with colleagues? So, this thought-making, to do justice to all groups and to still meet all the requirements, that has increased so much, that is actually not to be described. And then to bear the responsibility if something happens." (HH6).

Often the regulations were issued by the authorities at very short notice and were not always clearly formulated:

> "We have often experienced that regulations entered us on Friday afternoon at 5 p.m. or over the weekend and then this should already be running in the next few days. A lot of things were unclear and you often had to improvise and also discuss in the municipality (…) and communicate openly with the parents (…) And also regulate these things with the team" (BW 2).

(3) Staff absences: In addition, there was an increased number of staff absences due to cases of illness or quarantine, and sometimes sick leave in fear of infection. This hit the ECE centers in a situation of understaffing and made it even more difficult to maintain the pedagogical work:

> "Personally, I can (…) understand the fears, but as a leader I have serious problems with it, because I can no longer occupy the services. I have all the kids here and just too few staff." (MV2)

(4) *Increased responsibility:* Some leaders experienced the responsibility for all the groups involved to create a good quality of early childhood education in spite of the pandemic as stressful:

> "It is a constant burden, because we are always on site, always in the spotlight, bear a high responsibility, not only towards the children and team, but also a high responsibility towards parents" (HH7).

Coping strategies

Many leaders reflected on the pedagogical concept and turned more to the needs of the children. They motivated the teams to pay more attention to the needs of the children. Some leaders more than ever focused on the participation of the team members in important decisions about the pedagogical work:

> "By always involving the employees in the decisions in a good way, they have supported this well. They also carry the burdens" (HE 2).

Helpful and relieving in this situation was the mutual support in a network of ECE centre leaders:

> "What has helped me personally a lot is this enormously good cooperation between us leaders here on site. We could always rely on each other, really day and night. (…) And everyone was at a point where they said, 'I can't do it anymore.' And then we encouraged each other again and again and supported each other enormously. So, when specifications came, for example, from the health office. We always met immediately. What to do? Who does what? Write to all parents. Everything coordinated with each other. I say we speak with one voice. We clarify this with the town hall, with the provider. So, without this cohesion and this mutual support. I don't know where I would be today" (BW2).

Often, but by no means always, providers and municipalities were helpful in the pandemic situation and supported the leaders to explain the measures and thus also protected them from the displeasure of the parents:

> "We knew the mayor was behind us. (…) When it had become apparent that we have to do this cohort formation, that a lot will change for the parents. Together with the mayor and the Protestant pastor, we had a joint parents' evening here. They were standing fully behind us, supported us, also made it clear to the parents: This is how things will work now and we stand behind the leaders. They decided that in consultation with us. So that's why there was always backing. There was always appreciation." (SH1)

From the statements of the leaders it became clear how important the networks with other leaders, providers and municipalities were. As a result, they not only received confidence how to act, but also got emotional support as a resource for coping processes in their leadership role.

But not all the leaders experienced this kind of support to cope with the situation, as an example from an ECE leader in a rural area shows:

> "The situation was such that we often felt like we were on an island here. (…) So we had support from the provider (…), but that was all very far away. We experienced ourselves like this: We are at the front line here and have to regulate everything (…). So, the only support that the staff had was in my person as a leader. And of course, that's a very big pressure" (HE3).

The lack of social support as a resource to cope with the burdens made some leaders feel abandoned and experienced an even higher stress due to additional responsibility in their leadership role.

Team leadership

Experienced stress

Three main stressors were identified in the area of team leadership. The leaders experienced the following challenges or stressors:

1. the dealing with the staff's anxieties
2. the new role as performer and controller of the decreed measures of the public health authorities
3. the lack of communication during lockdowns and times of working in separate groups.

Again, some examples from the interviews:

(1) *Staff's anxieties*: Completely new challenges for the leaders were the uncertainties and anxieties among the staff. The leaders reported experiences with sick colleagues and were aware that health protection for the staff while working with the children could not very well be realized:

> "So, a lot of fears, insecurities. On the one hand, what does that do to us as a team? (…) And, of course, the fear of contagion. So, we had a lot of employees here with Corona. (…). In any case, there was the feeling of 'we are exposed to this without protection'".

The leaders often felt themselves helpless and not able to solve this dilemma.

(2) *New role as controller*: The new responsibility for the implementation of containment measures in the pandemic caused tensions in the work relations between the team members and other stakeholder groups in the ECE centres:

> "On the one hand, of course, I am very challenged in my role as a leader, because I have to pass on a lot to the team, what actually comes in such regulations and am simply in such a special role now. I am the one who has to say: these are the rules. You have to comply with this and also check if necessary."(BW 2).

The leaders' control function for measures of the health authorities changed the relations with the staff and the trust between leaders and team members became fragile:

> "I'm in this role as the controller now and that does something to me and that also does something to the colleagues. (…) And then it is Sayed: 'You don't trust me anymore'. (…) And that's where you get into something in your leadership role where you are the extended arm of the health office." (BW 1).

(3) *Lack of communication*: The teams could not work together in the usual way. They were ordered to work in separate groups and avoid face-to-face meetings. The leaders described the associated stress for the staff:

> "If they are used to working in a large team, working across groups (…) and then suddenly are limited to their own group. So, this exchange with each other was missing, this togetherness was missing. So, it was a very, very high stress for the staff members."

Conflicts arose in particular due to the question of vaccination, which was not taken for granted by all people in Germany. These tensions also affected the social support in the teams:

> "Mutual support is very, very difficult at the moment. Also, because opinions are so different when it comes to vaccination. Because the educators are so different, how to deal with the situation. Some are only annoyed by Corona, others are afraid and the third do not know who to believe. So that's very hard" (MV1).

Coping strategies

Some leaders tried to absorb the fears of the employees in many one-on-one conversations:

> "We talked to each other. And have shown the ways, what is feasible. Or even to show again in support what other ways there are to deal with it" (HH5).

The handling of the manifold burdens was particularly successful if the teams had already cooperated well before the pandemic:

> "Due to the good cooperation of the employees, this does not escalate (…)."

However, most managers waited for opportunities for restoring working relationships and teamwork in the future.

Discussion and conclusions

The profile of leadership tasks in ECE centres in Germany combined with stress theory laid the basis for data collection and analysis. In this paper the leaders' stress experience and coping strategies were described for the areas of pedagogical leadership and team leadership.

Pedagogical leadership

In the area of pedagogical leadership, it is one of the leader's duties to organize the pedagogical work, aiming learning opportunities for the children and con-

sidering the needs of children, but also staff concerns. Under pandemic conditions the interviewees reported unease and stress due to the shift of priorities away from children's needs, increased workload and time pressure to implement the measures, staff absences and the increased responsibility towards all groups involved in ECE.

The focus of pedagogical leadership is normally on the needs of the children and the promotion of pedagogical quality. Especially in the beginning of the pandemic there was a lot of uncertainty and a lack of knowledge about infection routes. Some pedagogues regarded the children as possible risks of infection. The distance rules were contradictory to the children's need for body contact. Some teams reflected on these needs and revised their strategies in the work with the children in spite of their own fears of contagion.

Many leaders complained about the enormously increased workload. They felt under pressure by the health authorities, who directed containment measures often to be implemented at short notice. They were given the responsibility to avoid infections, for example to urge staff and parents to wear masks or conduct tests. With new rules from the health authorities they permanently had to decide and create solutions for implementation in their centre. In addition, they had to communicate the new rules to the staff and the parents and to endure the tensions caused by the distress of the parents and new impositions for the staff. This also required increased efforts to resolve the related conflicts.

Staff absences made it more difficult to maintain the pedagogical work and care for the children to support the parents to pursue their work. The leaders were in a conflict between the responsibility for the children and staff on the one hand and their goal to support the parents on the other. Their goal to supply pedagogical quality and reliable care for each child and the parents were called into question.

The leaders felt responsible for caring for the well-being and health of children, parents and staff in a situation of tremendous uncertainty during the pandemic. The leaders' personal goals to be responsible for the well-being of children, parents and staff were at stake. This caused a lot of stress for the leaders, who had to cope with dilemmas and not knowing the best way to act.

Some leaders coped with these burdens by seeking social support from other ECE leaders in their communities and from providers and public authorities, who supported the communication with the parents. But not all leaders could rely on those social resources and felt abandoned.

Team leadership

Challenges for *team leadership* were the dealing with the staff's anxieties, the new and special role as "extended arm of the public health authority" and the lack of communication with the staff and parents.

The leaders on the one hand tried their best to support the team in reducing anxieties, stress and strain, for instance by finding individual solutions. On the other hand, they were aware that they had to withstand the tensions, because they had to deal with the dilemma between the goal to keep the centre open to support the parents in their employment and the goal of caring for the health protection of the staff.

The new role as a person responsible and controller of the measures from the public health authorities could undermine the trust between leaders and staff. This shift in responsibility threatened the leaders' identity as a good leader, who is able to create professional and trustful work relationships with the staff. The lack of communication aggravated this erosion of team relations. Pedagogical concepts drifted apart in the separated teams, but for a long time there was no opportunity to talk about this in team meetings. As coping strategies some leaders reflected on the pedagogical concept to guide the staff back to the focus of their work: the children. Others involved their teams in decisions and seized opportunities for team meetings outdoors to promote team cohesion. Many leaders were aware that with the end of the pandemic the team process would have to be reworked.

The results show what was at stake for the leaders facing the demands during the pandemic: pedagogical values, focusing on the needs and interests of the children, their self-concept as a good leader with trustful relationships to their team and the parents and the feeling of responsibility to care for the health and well-being of all groups involved in the ECE centre. They tried to find solutions to meet the various interests of all stakeholders. Most of the leaders mastered the situation by relying on their own resilience or by successfully seeking social support. Without any support or at least appreciation from providers or society, some felt at the mercy of the pandemic and abandoned. Many of them felt exhausted after the long lasting pandemic. One leader expressed a yearning back a lightness, which she had considered as the important basis for staff motivation before the pandemic:

> "You are a bit always looking for the lightness, for the lost lightness that you want to find again. And as a leader you are of course more responsible to try to transport at least this lightness." (HH5).

Limitations

The study was conducted by qualitative interviews to reveal the ECE leaders' subjective experiences, stress and coping strategies. The sample of 35 leaders was spread over 10 German states, who were found by a convenient sampling via multipliers from the ECE system (professional consultants, experts from associations, owners of ECE centres etc.). Thus, the study cannot claim representativeness, but an attempt was made to depict as wide a range of providers as possible. In addition, the interviews were conducted in a phase of the pandemic, where infection rates unexpectedly raised rapidly and might have influenced the subjective appraisals of the interviewed leaders. The statements of the interviewees in the beginning of 2022 signalled more feelings of helplessness and exhaustion than those in autumn 2021. These effects of the pandemic process were not followed up any more. Further research is necessary to update the subjective well-being of ECE leaders and their strategies in the expiring pandemic to find out, how to regain pedagogical quality and team cohesion in ECE centres.

Outlook

Future data collection should include larger samples, more standardized measures for subjective goals, coping resources, stress experience and coping strategies and more context data, e.g. about the respective support systems ECE leaders can fall back on. This could open a pathway for a better crisis prevention for ECE centres and their leaders and staff in a competent system (EU, 2011).

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Stress, Coping Strategies and Resources of Early Childhood Education Leaders during the COVID-19-Pandemic in Finland, Germany and Israel

Kirsi-Marja Heikkinen, Elina Fonsén, Lauri Heikonen, Raisa Ahtiainen, Emanuel Tamir & Petra Strehmel

Abstract

The exceptional circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021 caused unexpected challenges for the leaders in Early Childhood Education (ECE) centres. The range of measures implemented for preventing the infection from spreading reduced opportunities for face-to-face communication and changed the form of professional cooperation. All that has affected the working conditions and work well-being of the leaders. In this article we examine the ECE centre leaders' experiences regarding stress, their coping strategies and coping resources according to the Lazarus & Folkman (1984) stress model during the COVID-19-pandemic in Finland, Germany and Israel. The aim is to understand leaders' work performance in a crisis situation in these three different societies and to provide information that support leadership in practice as well as the future training of leaders to make them more prepared to lead rapid changes. Further, the findings aim at supporting ECE centres in becoming more resilient to face the challenges of post covid time and future crises (e.g., climate change). This article examines the topic from the perspective of case studies from three countries and combines these findings with differences and similarities as lessons learned. The data are ECE centre leaders' interviews from Finland (N=23), Germany (N=35) and Israel (N=19). The data were analyzed by employing the Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model of stress and coping. The findings indicate that communication and emotional support of colleagues and superiors are essential in supporting the well-being of ECE professionals.

Key Words: COVID-19, Early Childhood Education, Leadership, Stress and Coping, international comparison

Introduction

Since 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the whole world including early childhood education. In many countries the spread of COVID-19 has led to the lockdowns of cities and affected human activities of all age groups. During the worst times of the pandemic in 2020, only essential services such as hospitals, pharmacies and grocery stores were allowed to stay open in several countries. Nevertheless, the Executive Committee, World Organization for Early Childhood Education (OMEP) has formulated a position paper for ECE to remind the importance of continuing high quality ECE in spite of the pandemic (OMEP, 2020). The quality requirements, classified as an essential service for the society, are new for the field of ECE. Consequently, the question of leadership and leader wellbeing are crucial for ensuring the wellbeing of employees and children with the quality of the ECE despite the crisis (Cumming and Wong, 2019).

The participants of our research are ECE leaders and their role and tasks may vary in different national contexts. Common to these three researched contexts are the main responsibility of leading pedagogy and teachers' (educators') pedagogical work in their center. Furthermore, before the pandemic, ECE leaders have reported changing requirements from authorities, a lack of resources and staff which are primary sources for stress at work (Elomaa et al., 2021; OECD, 2019). The pandemic has led to changing leadership requirements and demands for questioning taken-for-granted assumptions, adopting new vocabularies, recognizing tension and embracing emergence (Crevani et al. 2021). Further, it has affected the leadership conditions, practices and leader roles, and created stress. The need for coping strategies has been high as a global pandemic of this scale is something we have not witnessed before. Also, there is little research on ECEC leaders' work related stressors and coping strategies (Kristiansen, Tholin & Bøe, 2020) and consequently the aim of our article is to explore this matter among Finnish, German and Israelian ECEC leaders.

Logan, McFarland, Cumming and Wong (2021) have studied educator well-being in ECE during pandemic. In their results, psychological symptoms including fear of exposure to physical risk, anxiety and moral injuries when compromising professional standards because of COVID-regulations were found. Communication, support of physical safety, well-being resources and programs were essential in supporting educators' wellbeing. They also emphasized the downside of moral injuries which may have long-term effects. In all these, the roles and awareness of leaders, governments and policymakers are essential to better protect ECE in future crises. The results from the USA revealed the great impact of the pandemic on both financial and psychological well-being of leaders (Bassok et al. 2020). The shut-down of the centres caused

leaders not receiving salaries and insurances they were entitled to. This led to insecurity, poor mental health and depression with trouble sleeping and focusing on everyday chores. Despite these hardships, leaders still felt that they were well supported by their staff, by the families they served as well as by the administration that governed local ECE (Bassok et al. 2020). Saxena and Yau (2021) argued that resilience-building is a critical skill for leaders both professionally and personally. In their study, they claimed that all educational leaders must implement four key themes: construct, create, mentor, and engage in order to strengthen the resilience of the ECE centre community. One crucial factor for coping was how clear, sufficient and timely information was given from the administration to ECE leaders. Saranko et al. (2021) found out that in Finland half of the ECE leaders assessed the instructions of the state administration as adequate while one third considered the instructions to be insufficient.

Theoretical framework

In our studies we focused on the theoretical approach of stress theory as developed by Richard Lazarus (Lazarus & Launier, 1978, Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This model can help to explain the ECE leaders' experience during the pandemic and their coping strategies.

Stress and coping

Stress arises when external and/or internal demands strain on or exceed the adaptability of the individual or a social system (Lazarus & Launier, 1978, Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Stress is defined as a result of the relationship between situational demands and personal resources. It signals a disturbance between the person and the environment when a situation overwhelms the person's coping resources.

The core of the stress model is the cognitive appraisal of the experienced imbalance between demands and individual capacities. If a situation is demanding and individual strivings or goals are called into question, conscious or unconscious appraisal processes are activated. If the situation is appraised as significant for well-being, the person explores how to deal with the situation and which resources are available. Thoughts about possible coping resources can be found in the individual competencies or in the situation. Situational coping resources are e.g. environmental conditions that the individual can refer to, such as social relationships and social support, information, time or tech-

nical equipment in the workplace. Individual resources can be found in learned competencies, coping experiences or personal characteristics such as self-confidence and cognitive control (Heckhausen & Heckhausen, 2018). Another individual coping resource discussed is the sense of coherence, which is defined as the expectancy to be able to understand events and encounters in the environment, to master challenges and to be able to interpret situations as meaningful (Antonovsky, 1987). Resilience is defined as the capability to successfully cope with adversity (Werner & Smith, 2001). Temperance is associated with self-control, psychological functioning and social functioning (Pulkkinen 2017, 204). These personal characteristics are also prerequisites for successful leadership and the ability to cope with crises.

The appraisal processes result in the experience of stress with psychological, physical and social symptoms, e.g. anxiety, fury or depression, increased susceptibility to disease or feelings of isolation, social retreat or hostility against others. Depending on the subjective significance of the situation and the importance of the goals at stake, the person experiences more or less stress. To reduce the feelings of stress, the person tries to cope with the situation. Coping behaviour can be roughly broken down into two main forms. Problem focused coping refers to all activities, with which the person tries to change the situation. Emotion focused coping aims to change the negative sensations and alleviate stress symptoms – often in order to become able to act again at all. The goal of coping is that the person regains his or her ability to act and secures or expands his or her possibilities. Various coping attempts take place in parallel and are not necessarily conscious. In the process of reappraisal after initial coping attempts, the fit between person and environment is evaluated again (reappraisal).

Poijula (2020) emphasizes the resilience of an organization to cope with difficult situations. The role and act of the leader is important to provide an atmosphere where personnel may feel hope, self-confidence and resilience to cope with the hard situation. To develop an organization's resilience leaders need to concentrate on a system perspective, human needs, motivation and organizational culture. Resilient organizations need an adaptable leader who knows how to use problems as opportunities to build organizational resources.

In this study, we investigate ECE leaders' experiences of the time of pandemic crises, utilizing Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model of stress and coping (Table 1). Adapted to the situation of ECE leaders in the Covid 19 pandemic the model can be summarized in the following categories and be explained by the following questions and contents:

Theoretical categories	Contents
Objective frame conditions	Context and frame conditions during COVID-19 pandemic
Subjective goals	Professional goals Personal goals
Primary appraisal: Demands and stressors	Challenges perceived
Secondary Appraisal: Coping resources	Resources to master the challenges. Social resources Practical resources Personnel resource
Symptoms of stress	psychological physical social
Coping strategies	Problem focused Emotion focused
Effects	Personal Social Organisational Societal

Table 1: Theoreticals dimensions of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model of stress and coping

Research contexts

Next, we will briefly describe each national ECE context and situation during the COVID-19 pandemic in Finland, Germany and Israel.

In *Finland*, the national-level guidelines for ECE are laid by the Ministry of Education and Culture and Finnish National Agency for Education. Municipalities (N=309) are responsible for organising the ECE locally for children who are from 9 months up to five years of age. In the beginning of the pandemic *Finnish* government declared a national state of emergency on 16th March 2020. By decision of the Government, ECE centres were kept open. However, the recommendation was to keep children at home if the guardians had the possibility to do that (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2020). According to Saranko, Alasuutari and Sulkanen (2021), the government's call for children to move into home care declined participation of children in early childhood education significantly. ECE centres remained mainly open but there were many changes in activities. Some centres provided distance teaching and activities for children but practices varied between centres and municipalities. The Ministry of Education and Culture and Finnish Institute for

Health and Welfare provided detailed recommendations for ECE regarding the organization of teaching in May 2020 (OKM & THL, 2020a), yet, these were mainly focusing on hygiene, avoiding contacts, quarantines, testing and vaccinations.

In *Germany*, at the beginning of the pandemic, a lockdown was imposed for the entire public life, including the closure of ECE centres, schools and public playgrounds. Only children of parents working in essential positions (e.g., staff in the health system or food vendors) were admitted to emergency care. In summer of 2020, the centres were gradually reopened, but had to adhere to restrictions. The respective regulations were set by the state governments and varied depending on regional incidences. The pedagogical work e.g. was to take place in isolated groups (cohorts), parents were not allowed to enter the ECE centres. Team meetings and parent talks had to be arranged online or outside. In some states the staff had to wear masks and staff and children had to be tested regularly (Autorengruppe Corona-KiTa-Studie, 2021).

In *Israel*, three closures have been imposed on the education system for 188 days (State Comptroller, 2021). Colleges, schools, and ECE centres were initially forced to stay at home and teach remotely using computers (Donitsa-Schmidt & Ramot, 2020). Within a short time, only special education ECE centres were allowed to return but not centres in which children are integrated across the continuum of special education. There was no central technical support for the ECE leaders. The official guidelines were mainly technical, concerned the non-entry of parents into the kindergarten building, the obligation to perform antigen examination results and instruction for working in small groups – "capsules" (when it opens), and the encouragement to create an activity routine. Almost 99% of Israeli ECE centers are run in small separate organisational units with few staff members, which are not part of schools. An outgrowth of this was a variety of activities related to the kindergarten teachers' motivation for their initiatives such as joint consultation, sharing of ideas, and moral support in the various ECE centres.

Aim and research questions

The study aims to gain a better understanding on similarities and differences and also lessons learned on how ECE leaders confronted the difficult times during Covid-10 pandemic and the strain related to it. The focus is on exploring the challenges encountered, stress symptoms experienced and the coping resources and strategies applied by Finnish, German and Israelian ECE leaders during the pandemic. The following research questions are addressed: What were the a) demands and stressors, b) stress symptoms, c) coping strategies? ECE leaders describe during the pandemic in Finland, Germany and Israel?

Methods and materials

In this study, we analyzed the ECE leaders' experienced stress and coping strategies in three countries. We understand that three contexts of research have similarities but at the same time differences as the education systems as well the national policies differ. The aim of our study is not to provide generalizations of national situations in ECE leadership, but to open the phenomena in similar challenging times of crises within three countries and to provide results that can be used as guidance for supporting the ECE field to develop sustainable leadership with resilience and wellbeing. As an analysis we used theory based thematic analysis and applied Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model of stress and coping, from which we focused on three categories 1) subjective experienced demands and stressors 2) symptoms of stress and 3) coping strategies to analyze the data.

Data collection and participants

Finland

In Finland, the data were collected through individual online-interviews with 23 ECE center leaders in November and December 2020. Participation was voluntary and responses were received from three major cities in the country. All participants worked as leaders in the public sector ECE centres, usually being responsible for leading more than one ECE centre and on average 34 employees. The interview questions concerned issues that supported or challenged the leader's wellbeing in their work during Covid-19 pandemic.

Germany

Semi structured qualitative interviews were conducted with 35 ECE centre leaders in 10 of 16 German states between August 2021 and January 2022. The centres varied in size (from 25 to 230 children, 3 to more than 50 employees) and in the type of provider organization (municipalities, churches or non-confessional non-profit social enterprises) and were located in bigger or smaller cities and rural areas. The interviews were conducted by phone or online, recorded and transcripted. The interview guidelines included questions concern-

ing the leaders' subjective experience of different areas of responsibility during the pandemic, such as pedagogical work, communication with the parents, team leadership, personnel development and self-management and their strategies to cope with the situation.

Israel

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 ECE leaders in January and February 2021 (managed 2-6 employees with 25-36 children in each center). The interviews were conducted by phone or through an online platform (Zoom). The questions asked addressed the feelings and emotions of the interviewees during the closures, their personal and professional experience of coping with the situation, and the techniques and ways they adopted to cope with the period.

Analysis

To increase coherence between three national contexts, and to organize the data, discover patterns, and to make sense of a variety of ECE leaders stress-related experiences during the COVID-19, we employed a theory-driven thematic analysis that enabled us to look at each data set through similar lenses (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Miles, Huberman and Saldana 2014). Based on the focus of our joint research, we focused on three categories of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model of stress and coping: experienced demands and stressors, symptoms of stress and coping strategies (Table 2). That is, we focused on the subjective perspective of the leaders and analyzed the qualitative interviews, which were conducted in each country in different phases of the pandemic, to reveal

- which aspects of the situation in the pandemic were experienced as demanding and stressful by the leaders and which situational and personal resources were appraised as helpful to cope with the situation
- which symptoms of stress were reported by the leaders?
- which coping strategies were used to master the challenges.

Researchers from each country read their data through these thematic lenses and then the interpretations were discussed together in the research meetings. The analysis required several similar rounds to form a shared understanding of the results.

Results

Finland

Demands and stressors: The main demands and stressors were linked to rapid changes the pandemic created in society which reflected the ECE leader's work. Firstly, the unexpected future created psychological tensions and negative affections in the ECE center. Secondly, the unclear and changing regulations and simultaneously growing workload were major challenges. Moreover, the lack of healthcare resources created a situation where leaders were main supporters of their frightened staff but also parents especially in the beginning of the pandemic.

Stress symptoms: ECE leaders reported variations of negative personal feelings and symptoms of poor performance. Anxiety and anger, tiredness and lack of joy were most often mentioned. These led to poor sleep, continuous worry and feelings of powerlessness. Also, over-excitement and inability to concentrate and prioritize were reported. This affected mostly to tasks that require time and effort such as pedagogical leadership. Most of the leaders lacked psychological support but also practical advice on how to control the situation. Many leaders mentioned anger and frustration when they didn't get enough "real help" from their own supervisors.

Coping strategies: Strong leadership competence and working experience were coping resources that helped leaders to manage the pandemic. Most of all, colleagues who offered emotional support were seen as central coping resources in the crisis. Also the ability to accept the current situation and lead your work with an open mind to new skills helped to go through the stressful situation. ECE leaders tried to be creative and do their usual practices the way they could and that was possible during the pandemic. Leaders stressed how they rather quickly learned to organize the work in a novel way, which they perceived as motivating and helped them move forward in difficult situations.

Despite multiple stressors, leaders reported effective coping strategies to maintain their ability to function and lead the staff. Leaders emphasized taking care of their health by doing some exercise and spending time with loved ones. All activities that helped to forget the work for the moment were welcomed. Moreover, the leaders mentioned they were encouraged to lighten up the work but many experienced this as difficult because they did not know what they could have had and were allowed to drop out. Also, attitude towards the pandemic was mentioned as central for wellbeing and the leaders tried to keep up hope and accept the situation as it was.

Germany

Demands and stressors: The workload for ECE leaders increased enormously during the pandemic. Often new rules were announced at a very short notice. The ECE leaders were responsible for the implementation of the instructions, had to make a lot of decisions under conditions of uncertainty and to rapidly communicate them to staff and parents. The high pressure to implement and control the measures were perceived as very demanding. In addition it changed the leaders' relationships with staff members and parents due to the new role as a controller of the measures. The leaders experienced a tension between the need for healthcare for the staff on the one hand and the need of children and parents for childcare and education on the other. Frequent staff absences due to fear of contagion or due to illness, sometimes caused by the rejection of vaccination meant additional stress to the leaders to maintain operations in the ECE centres. The staff's anxieties, dissatisfaction and conflicts challenged their leadership competencies.

Stress symptoms: The leaders themselves reported fear of contagion. Some experienced the feeling of continuous tension and were exhausted after the long period of the pandemic. Some reported anger and resentment when conflicts in the team could not be resolved, for example concerning the question of vaccination. In general, ECE leaders experienced less stress during the pandemic, when the team in their centre worked well together and supported each other already before the pandemic. Some leaders mentioned their own strength, resilience and problem-solving capacities. They appraised the situation as a challenge and developed feelings of mastery and pride. If they found themselves well supported by other ECE leaders, providers and the municipalities they had the feeling of not being alone, others reported feelings of being "forgotten" by the society and not being appreciated in their work.

Coping strategies: Most of the ECE leaders approached the tasks to be mastered and tried their best to implement the measures. They had many conversations with their staff to find solutions that made them feel well protected in their work situation. However, due to a very tight staff assessment and sometimes a lack of staff, there were strict limits on this problem-solving coping strategy. Many discussed the challenges in the team to support the staff's coping with anxieties and let them participate in the development of adapted solutions for their centres. Overall, leaders whose teams were already working well together before the pandemic were better able to cope with the challenges of the pandemic than leaders from facilities where there were already many unresolved issues before. Many ECE leaders actively sought contact with other ECE leaders to gain emotional support and confidence in action by mutual professional consulting. Also some ECE leaders actively demanded support from the ECE provider and the municipality and created a strong cooperation with

these leaders. To cope with the workload and stress, many leaders searched for emotional support by their families.

Israel

Demands and stressors: The government was in a period of political instability and demonstrated dissatisfaction with the educators. In the private sector, the issue of payment for the cancellation of kindergarten activities also arose. The irregularity in the guidelines from the Ministry of Education frustrated ECE leaders. Kindergarten leaders had to deal with unfamiliar technology, lack of privacy in their homes while trying to deal with their family and children, financial apprehension when spouses had to quit work and support, frustration and pressure from parents, and a change setting of their work such as late staff meetings and damage to their and their family's sleeping habits. They were not given regular national support, and the government announcements that came out were confusing and contradictory, which intensified their frustration.

Stress symptoms: The first wave of the epidemic intensified the sense of loneliness of ECEC leaders. They also showed ambiguity about the guidelines from the government. They distrusted the Ministry of education because of the unstable political situation. This was accompanied by feelings of helplessness. They were frustrated and annoyed about the financial apprehension, the pressure of the parents and because they didn't feel appreciated in their work.

Coping strategies: In a relatively short time, ECEC leaders have strengthened themselves through a social support network and shared support talks to alleviate stress. The leaders took help from social networks such as WhatsApp and Facebook and began communicating with each other. The supervisors did not object to this and allowed the local initiatives. Family partners who are working in the relatively developed Israeli high-tech helped to cope with the technological challenge. ECE leaders developed pedagogical innovations and adapted pedagogical processes such as online instruction sets, games that can be adapted at home, and activities involving one of the family members using the Zoom platform. Sessions and processes that have been found to be successful have been shared on social networks with colleagues. At the same time, conclusions have been drawn that it is not necessary to teach by Zoom for an entire working day. When it was possible to go back and work in capsules, not all the children came to the kindergarten, which made it easier for the kindergarten teachers.

Comparisons

In table 2 we have placed the national findings of analysis in columns for comparing results from ECE leaders' stress and coping in Finland, German and Israel according to Lazarus and Folkman's categories 1984.

Categories	Finland	Germany	Israel
Primary appraisal: Demands and stressors	• Rapid societal changes • Unexpected future • Changing regulations and instructions • Growing workload • Negative psychological symptoms like anxiety and anger	• Rapidly changing new rules and their implementation • Uncertainty • Fear of contagion • Pressures on high demands and responsibilities • Anger • Conflicts in working teams • Absences of the employees	• Sense of Loneliness • Irregular guidelines from the Ministry of Education • Hardships dealing with the technology they were unfamiliar with • Working from home and lack of privacy • Late staff meetings at home • Financial apprehension frustration and pressure from parents • Frustration and helplessness
Secondary Appraisal: Coping resources	• Strong leadership competence • Working experience • Emotional support from colleagues • Lack of psychological support from provider • Ability to adapt the situation • Creativity	• Trusting cooperation between employees and parents • Support from providers/ municipalities • Other ECEC leaders • Personal strengths and resilience	• Social support network • Creativity
Coping strategies	• Taking care of personal health • Lightening the workload • Keeping up faith and hope	• Cooperation with working teams • Seeking social support from other ECEC leaders and provider/ municipality	• Shared support conversations to ease the stress • Developing both personal and joint innovations • Use of ICT and social media

Table 2. ECE leaders' stress and coping in Finland, German and Israel according to selected theoretical categories from Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model of stress and coping

In the light of the Lazarus and Folkman (1984) stress theory, the main demands and stressors challenging ECE leaders resources in all three countries were

rapid societal changes and an unexpected future with constantly changing national COVID-19 regulations. Moreover, in Germany and Israel the wellbeing of the working teams and conflicts with the parents were highlighted by leaders whereas in Finland and Germany, increasing workload was one of the main sources of stress. The feelings and sensations that emerged in the context of experienced stress in all three leadership contexts were fear, loneliness, anxiety, loss of joy at work with feelings of powerlessness and poor work performance.

The coping strategies benefitted when dealing with stress were diverse. It could be said that in the Finnish context the coping strategies were personal whereas in Germany and Israel leaders used more social coping strategies. Finnish leaders emphasized balanced personal life and personal health when in Germany the most important way to cope was cooperation in the working team and emotional support from leader colleagues. Leaders in Israel highlighted social networks and social support via using ICT and social media. In all three countries leaders saw leadership competence, working experience and creativity as important dimensions when coping with stress.

Discussion of findings and comparison

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the demands to fulfil leadership tasks and thus, there was an increased need for ECE leaders to develop the ability to cope with multiple stressors and create resilience (Cumming & Wong, 2019; Crevani et al. 2021). Our study aimed to gain a better understanding of how ECE leaders confronted the difficult times during COVID-19 pandemic and the strain related to it. Kristiansen, Tholin & Bøe (2020) state that there is little research on ECE leaders work related stressors and how leaders cope with these demands. Therefore the focus of our article was on exploring the challenges and stress symptoms experienced and the coping resources and strategies applied by Finnish, German and Israelian ECE leaders during the pandemic.

Our results indicate a link between leadership challenges, rapid societal changes and new regulations the pandemic created in all three countries. Also growing workload, conflicts and dissatisfaction among staff with lack of emotional support for ECE leaders were among the challenges leaders encountered (see also Kristiansen et al., 2020). Psychological stress reactions like fear, frustration and anxiety grow affect ECE leaders' wellbeing and the ability to operate. Logan et al. (2021) pointed that psychological symptoms – including anxiety and fear – are activated when people get exposed to a physical risk like

COVID-19. In Finland, the data indicated that main demands were an uncertain future and rapidly growing workload. In Germany, ECE leaders were stressed by high demands and constantly changing administrative instructions, while in Israel the main demands were distance work and loneliness. The consequences of these experiences might be that ECE's leaders can be burnt out or leave their positions (Dýrfjörð & Hreiðarsdóttir,2022)

According to our results, resilience and the leaders' personal strengths proved to be important prerequisites to cope with the adverse situations of the pandemic. Also, Saxena and Yau (2021) state that coping resources can be considered crucial in building resilience both personally and organizationally. Moreover, our results showed that ECE leaders' personal coping resources were intertwined with the resources of the professional community. In Finland, for example, leadership competence and practical experience were resources that enabled leaders to be present to their employees and focus on the community's wellbeing. In Germany functional cooperation and a trusting atmosphere in the professional community were central coping resources of ECE leaders. In Israel, the strategy of using social media and ICT helped to go through difficult situations created by COVID-19 regulations. Wong and Cheuk (2005) state that social support can reduce stress effects.

When reflecting on our results it can be said that the leader was a role model and a coach, the one who was willing to keep up hope and find novel solutions. Also, an open mind for new ways of doing old practices can work as coping strategies which may increase motivation when surviving stressful situations at work (see also Kristensen et al., 2020).

Conclusions

The results of our studies concerning coping resources and coping strategies have points of connection with earlier studies (Logan et al., 2021). It seems evident that communication, support of physical safety, healthcare, well-being resources and programs are essential in supporting the well-being of ECEC professionals. What is noteworthy in our results is the emphasis on the significance of emotional support from ECE leader colleagues and professional support from their own superiors. In unstable times ECE leaders' main duty – to secure the wellbeing of staff, children and the quality of ECE pedagogics – remained the same (Cumming and Wong, 2019: OMEP, 2020). In this, the pandemic called for leaders' personal resilience to be able to be present and help others in need (Nurhonen, Chydenius & Lipponen, 2022).

It appears that some ECE leaders identify stressors but have difficulty in using and finding resources and coping skills (Kristensen et al., 2020), and the downside is related to the moral injuries emerging when the vision stays, but

the focus of ECE leadership has to change, which makes leaders compromise their professional standards (Logan et al., 2021). Consequently, in the current situation it is important to rethink how to find resources and strategies to implement good leadership in a crisis and how to adapt moral and ethical standards and still be able to operate in complex situations.

In addition it would be crucial to consider to reform the preparation and training of ECE professionals and leaders (Visnjic-Jevtic et al. 2021) and to rethink what kind of training ECE leaders need. Saxena & Yau (2021) state that all educational leaders should implement four key themes: construct, create, mentor, and engage in order to strengthen the resilience of the ECEC center community.

In the future, our mission is to increase the awareness of how to protect and support ECE leaders' performance in the unknown future. We follow the argument of Visnjic-Jevtic et al. (2021) that we need to promote policies for the welfare of all children, because that would be one way to support ECEC practitioners and leaders to develop their resilience for future crises too.

Limitations

We presented qualitative data from small samples in three countries with different systems of ECE. The data are not representative for the respective countries and were collected in different phases of the pandemic. We focused on subjective experiences of stress and related coping strategies in the historically unique situation of a worldwide pandemic. That is why our results can hardly be replicated, but exemplarily pointed out how to develop professional education, training and support for ECEC leaders in future crisis situations.

Ethical considerations

The study was conducted responsibly through honesty and accuracy (Steneck, 2007). This means guaranteeing confidentiality and anonymity for the participants. They were well informed about the research with voluntary participation and a possibility to disengage at any phase. The participants were treated respectfully throughout the process without causing any harm to them.

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Conclusion: Lessons Learnt for Crises Leadership and Organizational Resilience

Petra Strehmel, Emanuel Tamir, Elina Fonsén, Kirsi-Marja Heikkinen, Lauri Heikonen & Raisa Ahtiainen

Overview: approaches and ECE leadership research

The collection of studies on ECE leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic reveals insights in the challenges, experiences and coping strategies of ECE leaders. It became evident that leaders played a new role in the ECE system to implement measures at their centres. This change not only influenced their pedagogical leadership, but also social relations with the staff, parents, children and authorities. Consequently, the leaders' self-conception and their professional self-image as good leaders were called into question. The pandemic and the crisis management in the ECE system left marks in the ECE centres, the teams and in the families.

The questions the studies investigated comprised general issues on changes the leaders had to deal with and their ways of coping with them. More special questions focused on the meaning of pedagogical leadership, face-to-face learning, team leadership, health communication and knowledge transfer or the use of ICT (information and communications technology). Some studies addressed the subjective experiences of leaders and their dealing with the crisis, connected with personal resources and resilience as well as resources and support from other levels of the ECE system. They drew conclusions on crisis leadership and lessons learned to improve resilience.

Correspondingly, the papers show a wide range of theoretical approaches including models about management tasks for ECE leaders, broad-based pedagogical leadership or trust-based distributed leadership. Other issues included in the book are leadership styles and organisational culture as well as models of salutogenesis, stress and coping, and resilience at the individual, organisational and system levels.

The methods of data collection and analysis varied between data from nationwide surveys to online studies and smaller-scale convenience samples like snowball or other forms of non-representative sampling. Data were collected via standardised questionnaires, questionnaires with open ended questions, qualitative interviews or focus group interviews. In one study, the children were involved in the interviews.

Thus, the studies in this book represent a large variety of approaches on leadership in ECE and vary in scope and the depth of their findings.

Highlights from the first part

The first part of this book describes empirical results on leadership practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, presenting eight research papers coming from nine countries (Finland, Sweden, Norway, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Israel, Florida/USA and Australia). The main topics are internal organisational leadership of the ECE centres including the management of teams, taking care of safety and concern about the staff's competence and pedagogical support.

Other aspects are the challenges the leaders had to face during the pandemic. The main message that emerged from the studies indicated pedagogical compromises. Some educational leaders also reported that the conditions created by the crisis brought pedagogical advantages, including working in small groups and focusing on children. This was connected to pedagogical innovation and support for the creativity of the teams. In some countries, teams felt the refuge was in creativity and innovation.

In most of the studies, ECE leaders mentioned the need for flexible leadership that is much more attentive compared to normal days and leadership that is ready to compromise and deal with frequent changes. Difficulties in human resources, including the absence of employees who fell ill or who were part of groups that were at risk, are described in most of the studies. The physical and personal workload was also mentioned. In some countries this was connected with a lack of manpower that existed even before the crisis, but worsened during the crisis. Some papers also stress the need for equipment, mainly technological. Other burdens were the lack of clarity in the guidelines, the lack of coordination between the authorities and an increased administrative workload.

Most of the studies mention the complex dialogue with the parents, who were also in distress. Some authors describe the challenge of conveying government information to the parents. The leaders' technological struggle is reflected in coping with the team's difficulties in using technology, but mainly in the team's dialogue with the parents. The parents were primarily concerned with their health, with family, and financial concerns and were only sometimes available to communicate via the technology they were not used to. The staff of the centres occasionally had to guide the parents and no less deal with the fact that not all families had appropriate technological equipment. The experience was often accompanied by the parents' stress, frustration, and dissatisfaction.

There were cases when the teams faced children who identified themselves as being exposed to risky situations due to the tensions they experienced at home. The lack of readiness of the system for a large-scale process and the difficulty of mediating the prohibitions in the pedagogical world of ECE centres was complicated for the leaders and their staff. Most of the writers also referred to the physiological needs that the crisis intensified in their countries – the need for hygiene and a large amount of time devoted to it.

Children participating in ECE often benefit from empathic contact and the closeness of staff members. In contrast to that, leaders and staff experienced physical alienation from each other as well as alienation from the parents, some of whom were themselves in distress. In some cases, the distancing of the parents was described as a pedagogical advantage in expanding the empowerment of the children, alongside a disadvantage in the overall communication and harmony typical of early childhood education. This is something that raises thoughts related to the basic assumptions of the educational teams, of work methods, and no less than that of differences between cultures

Highlights from the second part

The second part is composed of studies that shed light on new demands and challenges ECE leaders had to face. This was discussed through theoretical concepts about stress, crises, coping and resilience. It presents findings from Finland, Greece, and Germany as well as a comparative paper from the editors, including data from Finland, Israel and Germany.

The theoretical concepts investigated the leaders' individual stressors, resources and strategies and also analyzed the meaning of trustful social relations to the staff, parents, providers, and authorities in the ECE system. ECE stakeholders and policymakers are responsible for the centres' conditions and thus shape the leaders' positions and tasks. This broad view allows to distinguish between responsibilities at different levels of the system to create effective crisis management. ECE centres are mostly small units with close work relations between leaders and staff and a sense of community among the families. During the pandemic, many leaders felt empowered to guide all the groups involved successfully through the crisis, if they could act autonomously, play to their own strengths, felt supported by the team, and parents, and could successfully seek help from supervisors and other people in the ECEC system or public authorities in the municipality.

The results show that during the pandemic, the leaders' relationships with the staff, parents and authorities were at stake and these evolved during the pandemic. Several studies reveal ambivalent demands the leaders had to face: on the one hand, the leaders wanted to protect the staff from infection and care

for their well-being in a sense of managerial occupational responsibility. On the other hand, they felt managerial pedagogical responsibility, a commitment to enable the staff to create high-quality learning environments for the children, which were adapted to constraints related to body contact and the risk of infection.

Many studies describe a "Matthew effect" in coping with the crisis: leaders in ECE centres, which were well-positioned in their pedagogical concepts, team climate, and trustful relations with the parents, turned out to be more successful in crisis management than ECE centres, which had to struggle with a range of adversities. Thus, effective and caring leadership (Siraj-Blatchford & Hallet, 2014) creating a usually well-functioning organization proved to be an essential characteristic of organizational resilience.

The studies reveal the need to cooperate closely with all educational stakeholders to master the challenges of the pandemic for children, families, the staff and the leaders themselves. Problems emerged if providers and authorities dealt with the crisis in a less competent way and failed to provide clear instructions and sufficient resources in a timely manner for the ECE centres. Often, a lot was expected from the leaders by public health authorities. The leaders were instructed to implement the containment measures promptly, but also to communicate the associated impositions for all parties involved and to absorb the resulting tensions. Many leaders could master these demands but felt exhausted in the long run.

In spite of high stress for the leaders during the pandemic, some leaders took advantage of the crisis by rethinking pedagogical concepts and daily routines, reflecting on lessons learnt and renewing their ECE centre. The importance of support by parents and staff on the one hand and responsible people on the governance level on the other became visible in several studies. Individual coping strategies, crisis leadership and organisational resilience proved to be influenced by decisions and social support from people at the provider and governance levels. Their communication, decisions and expectations on the behalf of ECE leaders shaped the leaders' role set in their centres, including any potential conflicts contained therein.

Lessons learnt about crisis leadership and resilience of ECE centres

What lessons have been learnt from the studies about crisis leadership? And what can we conclude to make ECE centres more resilient?

To describe the prerequisites of effective crisis leadership we followed the concept laid down by Parilla and Mäntyjärvi (in this book) and added or modified some aspects from the findings arising from other studies:

- *Information, instruction and participation:* leaders have to be competent in gaining information and preparing it for communication to staff and parents. They have to decide from case to case, when it is better to give instructions to the staff or let the team members participate in decision making concerning the implementation of instructions from the authorities, for example.
- *Communication, appreciation, and support:* Leaders have to be able to communicate in a comprehensible way to all directions: towards the staff and parents as well as to providers and policymakers. To be able to communicate in a crisis situation, they need sufficient media and IT devices and should have the opportunity to fall back on IT support if necessary. Competencies to communicate in an appreciative way are important in maintaining mutual trust between leaders and collaborators, and the parents. Especially in crisis situations, ECE leaders should know what can be expected from every single team member in the centre. They should also know which resources are needed or wether a team member needs emotional support and relief in a crisis situation.
- *Collectivity, commitment and team cohesion:* In crisis situations ECE leaders have to keep their teams together by maintaining close contacts and readiness to discuss questions, respond to worries and needs, and organise team events which maintain the team members' well-being and promote team cohesion.
- *Self-management, learning and renewal:* For effective crisis management ECE leaders have to be well-trained to analyse changes and consequent demands in different areas of leadership in their entire organisation. They should be sure in their assessments and able to react in an appropriate way. They need a professional standing for flexible decisions and coping strategies during the crisis as well as the ability to reflect and learn from their experiences in an uncertain situation. Crisis can be an opportunity for the reassessment of concepts and routines and leaders should be able to take this chance for renewal, to implement innovations, develop their ECE centre and for this purpose unlock resources from the provider or public funders. The leaders themselves need support from the providers and from the system: they need clear information, opportunities for participation and empowerment. This is most important in stemming the burdens of leadership and management in a crisis situation in the ECE centre. As part of this, the leaders need room for manoeuvring and professional independence and know on which resources from the support system they can fall back on.

What is important to make ECE centres more resilient?

Resilience is a crucial resource to cope with crises, which can emerge in early childhood and has to be developed in a lifelong learning process (Werner & Smith, 2001). It is characterised by the ability to cope with crises and overcome adversity. Individual resilience is associated with a sense of personal control, self-confidence, self-regulation and optimism and connected with competencies to solve problems, build social contacts and seek help if neces-

sary. Resilience is not a personality trait but has to be maintained and developed by experiences of successful coping in stressful episodes or gaining personal strength in the course of overcoming critical life events. The concept of resilience can be transferred to social units: teams, organisations and social systems, as described in the model of a competent ECE system (EU, 2011).

Lessons learned from the studies in this book to make ECE centres more resilient in future crisis can be summarised in the following aspects:

- Prevention: Excellent leadership and good conditions for the ECE system (working conditions, child-staff ratio, qualification and continuous professional development for the staff etc.) could help leaders to create resilience at the individual and organizational levels in their ECE centre to be prepared to cope with a new crisis.
- *continuous professional development:* For most of the leaders and their staff it is a matter of course to participate in continuing education, professional learning communities (NESET, 2017) or other opportunities for professional reflection and learning. These lifelong learning processes contribute to developing a confident professional performance, including competencies to react flexibly and creatively in new and challenging situations. Leaders who continuously learn and reflect on their leadership experience based on systematic knowledge in all areas of leadership not only act adequately in crisis situations, but also communicate the needs of the centre to other stakeholders and authorities in the system.
- *Preparedness for crisis:* Several authors proposed plans and training to improve the leaders' preparedness for crisis in the ECE system and competent and flexible answers to rapidly appearing challenges. The preparation of crisis management should include different levels of the ECE system and ensure two-way communication and participation of leaders and staff when developing measures. Dilemmas and role conflicts can be buffered by enabling leaders to analyse demands, necessities and the scope for decisions quickly, and thus strengthen their confidence in action in a crisis situation. Social support networks and effective work relationships between actors at the various levels of the system proved to be critical coping resources for leaders. The cooperation with local authorities, crisis intervention experts, and experts for the system of early education should be prepared and tested in advance.
- *A competent system:* An understanding of education in the broadest sense leads to a holistic understanding of competence requirements for the work in the system of ECE (EU, 2011, 32-33). The model of a competent system as developed in the CoRe Project on behalf of the European Union describes the levels of the ECE system: the individual, the institutional, the inter-institutional and the governance level with knowledge, practices and values necessary on each level to gain excellent pedagogical quality for the children. Activities, cooperation and support from the various levels of the ECE system were mentioned in a number of studies as being necessary resources for the ECE leaders in crisis situations. Actors and stakeholders at the inter-institutional and governance levels are responsible for prevention by ensuring good working conditions and equipment within ECE centres. They also need con-

> tinuous professional development to be at the state-of-the-art for managing ECE centres in provider organisations, to find flexible and creative solutions in crisis situations and ensure the availability of resources and support for the centres. They also need preparedness for crisis situations by creating concepts to deal with a crisis in cooperation with leaders and centre teams and try out these concepts and bring them to the test to be sure about its effectiveness in a crisis situation.

Even if the COVID-19 pandemic will expire soon, new challenges for ECE centres are already present: climatic hazards, a war in Europe, refugee families and their children in the centres etc. Leaders have to be aware of the needs and consequences for all groups involved and face the challenge to maintain excellent pedagogical quality for the children and at the same time be able to care for their staff. ECE centres permanently have to learn and develop new skills and pedagogical concepts and be ready for organisational change (Rodd, 2015). They will have to face new challenges as will all actors and stakeholders in the various ECE systems worldwide. The empirical knowledge about leadership practices and ways of coping in a crisis situation like the COVID-19 pandemic as presented in this book, might help ECE experts to understand the processes and be better prepared for future challenges.

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Author Bios

Ahtiainen, Raisa, Ph.D., University lecturer, Swedish-language teacher education, Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki, Finland, Visiting researcher, School of Educational Sciences, Tallinn University, Estonia. Active in research groups for Leadership in Educational Contexts (LeadEd), Centre for Educational Assessment (CEA), and Helsinki research community of special educational needs (SEN). As a Principal Investigator (PI) and research leader she is involved in several in national and international projects that cover the themes of leadership in inclusive ECE and school context, questions of schooling, teaching and well-being in schools during the COVID-19 epidemic, the leadership for collaborative practices and teacher involvement, and leadership groups in schools.

Argyropoulou, Eleftheria, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Organization, Management and Leadership in Education at the University of Crete, Greece. She is academic responsible for the postgraduate module "Leadership and Training in Education" and has participated in many research projects either as academic responsible or as a partner. Her research interests include Ethics and Ethical Leadership in Education, Pedagogical Leadership in ECE, teachers and leaders' professional development.

Amin, Janaki holds a PhD, is a Professor of Public Health at Macquarie University. She is an infectious disease epidemiologist and as led research among diverse populations. Her research and public health practice includes epidemiological analysis and reporting of population data for COVID-19 in New South Wales, Australia.

Arvidson, Catarina holds a PhD and is a Senior Lecturer in Pedagogics at the Department of Education at Mid Sweden University. Her research areas are leadership and education in preschool and teacher education. A central focus in this research is gender equality in both preschool and higher education.

Bøe, Marit is Professor in Educational Leadership at the University of South-Eastern Norway. She holds a PhD on teacher leaders. She led the secretariat of the expert panel appointed by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research to investigate and document the role(s) of early childhood education teachers/leaders. Her research interest focuses on ECE leadership and professional development.

Bull, Rebecca, holds a PhD, and is Professor at the School of Education, Macquarie University, Australia. Her research interests focus on child development and learning and the impact of home and centre-based environments on child outcomes. She also focuses on early childhood educator wellbeing and the impact of educator wellbeing on their interactions with children.

Dahm, Maria R., Dr, is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Communication in Health Care (ICH) at the Australian National University. She holds a prestigious 2022 Discovery Early Career Researcher Award Fellowship from the Australian Research Council where her 3-year project addresses how communication can affect diagnosis and patient safety. Her research focuses on investigating the impact of health communication in public health, transition of care, and diagnostic error.

Degotardi, Sheila is a professor of early childhood education at the Macquarie School of Education, Macquarie University, Australia. Sheila specializes in infant-toddler pedagogies and learning in early childhood education centers. With a deep interest in relationship-based pedagogies, she investigates the nature of social interactions between children, their educators and peers, to consider how these interactions contribute towards very young children's learning.

Donovan, Michael holds a PhD, Pro Vice Chancellor Indigenous at La Trobe University. He led the "Mudang-Dali Indigenous Connected Curriculum Framework at Macquarie University and the "Indigenous Strategic Plan 2022-2030" at La Trobe University. He is a life member of the NSW Aboriginal Educational Consultative Group. His research interests focus on Indigenous education and pedagogical practices.

Fackler, Sina, Dr is head of the research unit "Education and Provision of Services of the Welfare State" in the Children and Childcare Department at the German Youth Institute (DJI) and operative project lead of the study "Indicator based monitoring of structural quality in the German early childhood education and care system (ERiK)". Her current research interests include quality in ECEC, self-efficacy, child development and quantitative methods.

Fonsén, Elina, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Institute of Educational Leadership, Faculty of Education and Psychology, University of Jyväskylä, Finland. She leads national and international research projects (Discourse of leadership in the diverse field of early childhood education and leadership studies for the educational field, i.a. VEPO johtaminen 2035 – development and research project of leadership studies for the educational field. She is Member of the Board of Early Childhood Education Association Finland (ECEAF) and chief of coordination group member in the International Leadership Research Forum

(ILRF -EC). Furthermore, she is a member of the Executive Board of the Education, Administration and Research (SIG) of Finnish Society for Education.

Flöter, Manja is a Research Assistant at the 'International Centre for Professionalisation in Early Childhood Educational Practice' at the University of Graz/location Berlin. She led the project 'ICKE -International Corona Daycare Survey'. Her research interest focuses on participation, interaction quality, instrument development and quantitative research methods.

Grgic, Mariana is research associate at the Children and Childcare Department at the German Youth Institute (DJI). Her research interest focuses on structures of early childhood education and care, professionalization of ECEC at a collective level, and occupational mobility and closure.

Hadley, Fay is an Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education and the Director of Education at the School of Education, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. She is currently a Co-Chief Investigator in a tripartite partnership with two other Universities to revise two national Australian Learning Frameworks for the provision of early childhood education and care and outside school hours care. Her area of research examines leadership in early childhood education and child and family diversity.

Halpern, Clarisse is a Doctoral Candidate in Multicultural/Multilingual Education at Florida Gulf Coast University, USA. Her areas of academic expertise and scholarship are multicultural/multilingual education, cultural and intercultural competence in teacher preparation programs, acculturation experiences of international students and faculty in the U.S., academic freedom, and human rights.

Harrison, Linda is a Professorial Research Fellow in Early Childhood Education at Macquarie University, and Adjunct Professor of Early Childhood Education, Charles Sturt University. Her research uses mixed methods designs and innovative methodologies to address current issues in early childhood education and care settings. She leads the Exemplary EC Educators at Work and the Observe, Reflect Improve Children's Learning (ORICL) research projects.

Heikkinen, Kirsi-Marja, MA (eds.), PhD Researcher, University teachers at the university of Helsinki. She previously worked as ECE center leader and teacher in Finland for almost twenty years. Heikkinen is now teaching future ECE teachers and working in a project VEPO johtaminen 2035 – development and research project of leadership studies for the educational field. Research topic of Heikkinen's research is ECE leadership, leader identity and power relations between ECE leader and the working community.

Heikonen, Lauri, Ph.D., Post-doctoral researcher, Centre for Educational Assessment, Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki. He is a member of the Leadership in Educational Contexts research group (LeadEd). He is interested in how teachers learn in the classroom, how they develop schools together as professional communities and what is the role of leadership in supporting such learning and development. He has worked in several national and international research projects and acted as a peer reviewer in top journals of the field (e.g., Journal of Teacher Education, Teaching and Teacher Education).

Kalicki, Bernhard, Dr is head of the Children and Childcare Department at the German Youth Institute (DJI) in Munich and Professor of Early Childhood Education at the Protestant University of Applied Sciences in Dresden, Germany. His research interests comprise early education, monitoring and governance of ECE systems, and cooperation between daycare centres and families.

Kammerhofer, Susanne was a student assistant and project collaborator on the project 'ICKE -International Corona Daycare Survey' at the Department of Early Childhood Education at the University of Graz until 2021.

Keski-Rauska, Marja-Liisa PhD, has worked as a Senior Officer and Director for Educational and cultural services in Regional State Administrative Agency for Western and Inland Finland since 2016. Her research interest focuses on supervision, governance and leadership in Finnish municipalities, how to increase understanding how good leadership and management can deliver trust instead of strict control under the supervision of early childhood education

Korhonen, Taija has studied for a Master's degree in Education (Early Childhood Education) and deepened her teaching skills through the studies of a special teacher. She is currently working in preschool and primary education as a special education teacher and studies on the International Master's Programme in Changing Education at the University of Helsinki. Her research interests focus on educational leadership and educational equality and inclusion.

Kuger, Susann, Dr is head of the Department of Social Monitoring and Methodology at the German Youth Institute in Munich, Germany and Full Professor of Educational Science and Social Research on Childhood and Youth at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich. One of her research interests is quality and effectiveness of learning environments in childhood and youth. She directs several large-scale studies on children's growing up, quality and uptake of childcare services.

Maly-Motta, Hanna is research associate at the German Youth Institute in Munich. She worked in the “Corona-KiTa Study” as part of the module "Challenges and Measures in the Field", which focused on the impact of the pandemic on daycare centers, children and their parents. Her research interest focuses on early child development, parenting stress and well-being.

Mäntyjärvi, Marjo is a PhD researcher and a University Teacher at the University of Oulu. Her research interests are on leadership, professional development and cooperation in the early education.

Neuberger Franz, Dr is research associate at the Children and Childcare Department at the German Youth Institute (DJI). His current research interests include COVID-19, childcare, child poverty, inequality, family sociology, and quantitative research methods.

Parrila, **Sanna,** Doctor of Education, is a University Teacher and project coordinator at the University of Oulu. Her research interest focuses on leadership, professional development and evaluation in the early education.

Pölzl-Stefanec, Eva holds a PhD, is Assistant Professor at the University of Graz, Department of Early Childhood Education at the University of Graz. She is co-editor of the journal ’ElFo – elementarpädagogische Forschungsbeiträge’. Her research interest focuses on professionalisation of early childhood professionals, quality development, interaction quality & digital knowledge transfer.

Rodriguez-Meehan, Melissa holds an Ed.D in Educational Leadership and is an Assistant Professor of Early Childhood/Elementary Teacher Education. She is a former K-12 teacher with the majority of her experience being in kindergarten classrooms. Her research interests include play, project-based learning, and fostering student voice and choice in K-12 and higher education classrooms.

Soukainen, Ulla, PhD has worked as a senior officer (ECE) in Regional State Administrative Agency for Southwestern Finland since 2019. She has been actively involved in developing Joy in Motion -programme since 2012. During the year 2022 she is a part of the quality assessment team led by Finnish Education Evaluation Centre.

Strehmel, Petra, Dr., Professor for Psychology at the University of Applied Sciences in Hamburg, Germany, focusing on the psychology of work and organisation and its application in the field of early childhood education and social work. Research projects about stress and coping at the workplace,

knowledge transfer, personnel development in ECEC centres and provider organisations as well as leadership, management and organisational development on different levels of the ECEC system. She is member of the board of the Federal Working Group on Childhood Education in Germany and member of the Advisory board of the ILRF-EC.

Styf, Maria holds a PhD, is a senior lecturer in education at the department of education at Mid Sweden University. She is the first in Sweden to write a thesis about leadership and leadership management in early childhood education. She led a research group called educational leadership and school development at her department. Her research areas are leadership in early childhood education, schools and school development.

Tamir, Emanuel, Ph.D., Senior lecturer, Educational Administration and Leadership program, The Faculty of Education, Tel-Hai college Israel. He is a head of master's degree in Educational Administration and Leadership program at Tel-Hai college. Other previous work experience consists of being a consultant to various public organizations, management role in educational organizations (including in the academy), academic research and academic teaching. His research focuses on changes, dynamics, reforms, and decision-making in early childhood education systems and schools.

Walter-Laager, Catherine holds a PhD and a Habilitation, is Professor of Early Childhood Education at the University of Graz and head of the Centre 'International Centre for Professionalisation in Early Childhood Educational Practice' at the University of Graz in Graz and Berlin. She led the project 'ICKE -International Corona Daycare Survey'. Her research interest focuses on didactics in early childhood education, professionalisation and quality of interaction.

Waniganayake, Manjula is an Honorary Professor of Early Childhood Education, at Macquarie University, in Australia. She has an extensive track record spanning four decades of working in the early childhood sector. Manjula was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Tampere, Finland for her scholarly contributions to advancing knowledge about Early Childhood Leadership.

Wong, Sandy is a Professor in early childhood at Macquarie University, Australia. Sandie conducts collaborative research with academics, early childhood organisations and practitioners, and governments, on early childhood practices, workforce issues, educator well-being and the history of early childhood.

Zurynski, Yvonne holds a PhD and is Associate Professor of Health System Sustainability at the Australian Institute of Health Innovation, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. She is an expert in health services research, implementation science and health policy. A member of the International Society of Quality and Safety in Healthcare, she advocates for safe accessible care that is fit-for-purpose. She has a special interest in children's health and wellbeing and in innovative models of care that span health, community and education sectors.

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Early Childhood Education Leadership in Times of Crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically affected all aspects of professional and private life worldwide, including the field of early childhood education and care (ECE). This volume sheds light on leadership in ECE: How did leaders experience the challenges they were facing and what coping strategies did they apply in order to deal with the changes in everyday life and practices in ECE centres? Authors from twelve countries present empirical findings gaining information on different crisis management mechanisms in ECE systems around the world.

The editors:
Elina Fonsén, PhD, is Associate Professor at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland.
Raisa Ahtiainen, PhD, is University Lecturer at the University of Helsinki, Finland, and Visiting Researcher at the Tallinn University, Estonia
Kirsi-Marja Heikkinen, M.A., is PhD-researcher at the University of Helsinki, Finland.
Lauri Heikonen, PhD, is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Helsinki, Finland.
Prof. Dr. Petra Strehmel, is professor at the Hamburg University of Applied Sciences, Germany.
Emanuel Tamir, PhD, is a senior lecturer in educational administration and leadership program, campus of education, Tel-Hai College, Israel.

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