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Title: Conclusion : Lessons Learned for Crises Leadership and Organizational Resilience

Year: 2023

Version: Published version

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Please cite the original version:

Strehmel, P., Tamir, E., Fonsén, E., Heikkinen, K.-M., Heikonen, L., & Ahtiainen, R. (2023). Conclusion : Lessons Learned for Crises Leadership and Organizational Resilience. In E. Fonsén, R. Ahtiainen, K.-M. Heikkinen, L. Heikonen, P. Strehmel, & E. Tamir (Eds.), *Early Childhood Education Leadership in Times of Crisis : International Studies During the COVID-19 Pandemic* (pp. 247-254). Verlag Barbara Budrich. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.2430379.17>

Chapter Title: Conclusion: Lessons Learned for Crises Leadership and Organizational Resilience

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Book Title: Early Childhood Education Leadership in Times of Crisis

Book Subtitle: International Studies During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Book Editor(s): Elina Fonsén, Raisa Ahtiainen, Kirsi-Marja Heikkinen, Lauri Heikonen, Petra Strehmel, Emanuel Tamir

Published by: Verlag Barbara Budrich. (2023)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.2430379.17>

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Conclusion: Lessons Learnt for Crises Leadership and Organizational Resilience

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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 whether 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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