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Leadership in early childhood education: Cross-cultural case studies before and during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract
Using a cross-cultural comparative study approach, this study analyses and compares the leadership discourses revealed through interviews with early childhood education (ECE) leaders in Finland and Singapore. The interviews were conducted both before the COVID-19 outbreaks in 2018 and during the pandemic in 2021. Conducted as focus group discussions, the data were analysed using discursive analysis. Finnish ECE leaders' identified discourses that revealed 'pedagogically focused leadership' and the 'desire for distributed pedagogical leadership'. In Singapore, the interviews highlighted discourses related to 'community spirit emerging from challenges' and the 'deepening of management demands'. An overall analysis of the discourses showed that COVID-19 resulted in changes in leadership discourses revealing that leadership was characterised with 'leading from a distance' and an 'emphasis on instructions and regulations'. Despite the challenges, leaders continue to place an importance on pedagogy in their practice. The study also showed that although cultural differences in leadership discourses were identified, time as a factor, remains significant as a crucial aspect for leadership in both countries.

Keywords
Early childhood education, leadership, cross-cultural comparison, discourse analysis, COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction

In recent years, early childhood education (ECE) has garnered the interest of governments and policymakers globally. The importance of ECE for the learning and well-being of children and its implication for the future of society has been strongly noted in international economic reports (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2019). The global

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COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020 has caused an enormous impact on the world and personal lives, economic systems and organisations. ECE has not been spared from the impact COVID-19 particularly those in preschool and childcare services.

In times of crisis, a well-structured leadership system can protect and support the challenges to an organisation's operations. Centres which feature strong pedagogical leadership have been observed to exhibit greater resilience (Korhonen et al., 2023; Keung et al., 2019). In this study, we examine the leadership discourses of ECE centre leaders in Finland and Singapore and the impact of the pandemic on leadership practices. Using discourse analysis, the study seeks to understand the contextual issues of ECE leadership through the lens of diverse national discourses. This contributes to the body of work which seeks to understand the practice of leadership in response to change.

Leadership in ECE

The impact of leadership, in particular, the impact of pedagogical leadership, on the quality of pedagogical work has gained much attention in recent times. A number of studies have shown pedagogical leadership having a significant effect on teachers' work and children's learning and well-being in ECE (Fonsén et al., 2022; Keung et al., 2020). Fonsén et al. (2019) identified the intertwined nature of leadership and institutional practices and structures in ECE leadership in international comparison of leadership studies. It has been argued that whilst the institution sets the parameters for leadership, it is the leader who guides and empowers staff through the creation and development of institutional structures and practices. The studies also show that ECE leaders undertake multifaceted roles and are challenged to manage the everyday functioning of their organisation whilst championing pedagogy as the fundamental priority in their work.

Modern leadership theories increasingly emphasise the importance of distributed leadership (e.g. Harris, 2008). Previous Finnish research indicates that distributed leadership strengthens teachers' professionalism and pedagogical leadership through the formation of a shared vision of pedagogy (Fonsén and Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019; Heikka, 2014). Nevertheless, in Finnish ECE, there is ambiguity regarding the roles and responsibilities of pedagogical leadership between leaders and teachers (Fonsén et al., 2021). To develop a distributed pedagogical leadership system, leaders and teachers need to reflect on the current conceptualisations of leadership. The main idea in distributed pedagogical leadership is the shared responsibility and shared vision of imparting high-quality pedagogy as a professional learning community with a collaborative, reflective and growth-oriented approach to teaching and leading (Denee and Thornton, 2021). However, the attitude and ability to pedagogical leadership and distributed leadership may vary due to the leaders' own educational background (Achituv and Hertzog 2020a, 2020b).

Pedagogical leadership can be divided into indirect pedagogical leadership, which includes technical leadership and leading human resources, and direct pedagogical leadership. Technical leadership comprises routine administrative tasks, making school schedules and financial management tasks; however, these are done with the aim of supporting the pedagogical work of an educational organisation. Similarly, it involves leading the support provided by human resources in pedagogical work while considering the psychological needs, motivation and well-being of employees. Direct pedagogical leadership focuses on the process of learning and teaching. It involves leadership through vision, strategy and curriculum work (Fonsén and Lahtero, in print; Lahtero and Kuusilehto-Awale, 2015). Overall, pedagogical leadership supports children's learning, development and well-being through the enhancement of human capital in organisations and the

professional development of teachers (Fonsén and Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019; Sergiovanni, 1998). Dinham (2016) states that leadership can have a major influence on teacher effectiveness. He uses the concept of instructional leadership to imply leading in teaching and learning of students. In the realm of ECE, instructional leadership has historically been regarded as the act of carrying out administrative instructions and regulations (Ho, 2011; Webb, 2005). Furthermore, it can be understood as closely aligned with the notion of direct pedagogical leadership. However, instructional leadership emphasises the implementation of the curriculum and outcomes of learning that can be assessed rather than pedagogical leadership where the focus is more on the pedagogical process itself and children as 'being' and not only 'becoming'. This implies that children being as they are, is important, not only considering them important as future citizens.

Pedagogical leadership is emphasised in the work of early childhood leaders in Singapore, but there are conflicts in its application. Lim and Lipponen (2019) described how leaders struggled in their ability to balance daily operations and simultaneously construct a vision of the curriculum that would comply with quality requirements as well as meet the needs of parents and children. Ang (2012) reiterated this and described the multifaceted role of Singapore EC leaders as educators, motivators, strategists, decision-makers, administrators and entrepreneurs. Leadership skills and competencies for leadership roles in Singapore have been clearly defined in the Skills Framework for Early Childhood (Skills Future, 2022). A review of the framework suggests that early childhood leaders in Singapore have a pedagogical leadership role within a distributed leadership structure, although it is unclear how this is translated into practice.

Leading in challenging times requires resilience and the ability to adapt to rapidly changing situations. Earlier studies have shown that leaders need, for example, strong communication skills, flexibility, optimism, ability to develop new solutions and to turn problems into opportunities (Poijula 2018; Smith and Riley 2012). Hence, the strong professional competencies of a leader are needed to ensure the operational capacity of the organisation and to ensure the high quality of the pedagogy. Weiss and Li (2020) state that using systematic tools to effectively lead change, it is possible to provide successful leadership in a demanding situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic. There is a global mission to ensure children's learning and well-being despite the restrictions of the pandemic (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2019) and find solutions for effective leadership to secure learning and well-being. However, recent studies on the ECE leadership of COVID-19 pandemic time have shown many difficulties in order to succeed in leadership but also many scoping strategies have developed in the time of crises. One particularly intriguing discovery is that leaders who prioritise pedagogical leadership have not only excelled in guiding their ECE centres but have also managed to enhance the overall quality of education (Korhonen et al., 2023, Styf and Arvidsson, 2023).

Administration and leadership in Finnish ECE

In Finland, the ECE system is multi-tiered. The general planning, guidance and monitoring of ECE are the responsibilities of the Ministry of Education and Culture. The National Agency for Education [FNAE] determines the curriculum of ECE (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, 540/2018). The aim of the guidance is to influence the direct or indirect direction of operations in terms of both quality and quantity in order to achieve the desired output. It is important that the guiding laws and documents must be implemented and the municipalities organising ECE have the responsibility and authority to do this, taking into account their individual situations.

ECE in Finland has been undergoing a transformation and it has developed significantly in the 21st-century in terms of content and structure. The catalyst for change is evident in the transition from the social sector to the administration of the education sector in 2013, in which ECE was also integrated into the education system. The updated Act on ECEC (540/2018) defines the following: 'Early childhood education and care refers to a systemic and goal-oriented entity that consists of upbringing, education and care, with a special emphasis on pedagogy'. The orientation from care emphasis towards stronger educational goals can be identified; however, the characteristic of 'educare' which combines the care and education as a holistic approach in pedagogy has been preserved (Fonsén and Vlasov, 2017; Ahtiainen et al., 2021; Fonsén et al., in print).

The National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (FNAE, 2022) requires all providers, municipalities and private services to follow local curriculums that are drawn from the National Core Curriculum. Nevertheless, leaders and teachers in Finland are autonomous actors, and they have a substantial amount of freedom to implement the curriculum. In Finnish society, there is strong trust in the professionalism of teachers and an absence of a strict steering or an evaluation system. The national guidelines broadly state that the leaders are responsible for the quality of ECE in their units and the teachers for the quality of ECE in their groups. Nonetheless, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) has launched guidelines and recommendations for evaluating the quality of ECE and care (Vlasov et al., 2018). Service providers are required to evaluate their operations or participate in an external evaluation process. However, as is characteristic for Finnish society, the FINEEC provides development-oriented quality management in contrast to inspection; in addition, it supports self-evaluation of pedagogical quality in ECE centres. Consequently, pedagogical leadership is a crucial skill for leaders and for the quality of pedagogy in ECE (FNAE, 2022; Fonsén and Vlasov, 2017, Ruohola et al., 2021).

The ECE centre leader often has 1–3 centres and 11–30 employees. The employees are teachers, special teachers, nursery nurses and assistants. In one child group, there usually works one teacher and two nursery nurses. There can be four children under the age of 3 or 7 over the age of 3 per adult, so in total there are 14 or 21 children. ECE leaders have at least one assistant leader, who is often a teacher.

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ECE in Finland

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Finnish government declared a national state of emergency on 16 March 2020. The Ministry's recommendation was to keep children at home and out of ECE centres if possible; however, ECE centres were not closed (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2020). Soukainen and Keski-Rauska (2023) argue that the pandemic affected the attendance of children in ECE and in pre-primary education. When the pandemic continued, there was more absence of children from the classroom than usual at the end of 2020. The situation returned to normalcy in the middle of 2021, but at the end of 2021 again the absence was more than that compared to the same time of year prior to the pandemic (Soukainen and Keski-Rauska, 2023).

Saranko et al. (2021) argue that the government's request for children to remain in home care significantly reduced children's participation in ECE. It caused several effects, restricted activities among different groups of children and created pressure to reorganise daily routines, for example, increased outdoor activities. In addition, distance teaching was a new task for ECE teachers and required a lot of adaptation and learning for leaders as well as teachers. In cases where children were mostly absent from ECE centres, personnel were transferred to other duties in municipal services (Saranko et al., 2021).

The effect of the pandemic was also evident in leaders' work. According to Korhonen et al. (2023), all leaders did not find the time for leading pedagogical work and think that there were insufficient staff resources during the pandemic. Leaders described resource shortages caused by sickness and difficulties in recruiting competent and capable staff. However, the situation varied between centres and leaders. Parrila and Mäntyjärvi (2023) stress that the pandemic taught much about leadership and resilience to the organisations and leaders. Consequently, we are more prepared to face future crises.

Administration and leadership in Singapore ECE

Over the last 10 years, Singapore's early childhood landscape has seen greater investment along with stronger regulation, which relate to the quality, accessibility and affordability of early childhood care and education services (Ng, 2020). It has also witnessed the implementation of several frameworks that have influenced the work of teachers and leaders. In particular, the Nurturing Early Learners (NEL) Framework sets the direction for quality teaching and learning of young children (Nurturing Early Learners Framework, 2022). Leaders implement the pedagogical goals of this framework through their practice and work with their teachers. Additionally, the quality of pedagogical practice is reflected when schools undertake the Singapore Preschool Accreditation Framework assessment exercise which is a quality assurance framework designed to assist preschools in achieving quality. The use of a Quality Rating Scale (QRS) is applied which addresses eight criteria: Leadership, Planning and Administration, Staff Management, Early Years Learning Environment, Early Learning and Development, Resources, Curriculum and Pedagogy (Early Childhood Development Agency, 2023). These frameworks support the work of leaders in ensuring effective leadership practice and the exercise of pedagogical leadership among others.

The early childhood landscape was also in a phase of transformation from a largely private one to one that would be 80% government-supported by 2025 (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2022). Hence, a phase of restructuring was underway before the pandemic. Researchers have characterised the various phases of ECE initiatives as 'policy waves' (Ang, 2012; Lim, 2017; Sum et al., 2018). The first policy wave, which took place from 1984 to 2007, highlights the bifurcated nature of ECE governance that existed within the sector, split across two ministries (Khoo, 2010). The second phase straddled a relatively brief four years, from 2008 to 2012, and was marked by a growth spurt in the early childhood industry. A third policy wave, which was initiated in 2013, proved to be a watershed moment for ECE in Singapore, as a hitherto mixed system of governance was consolidated with the formation of the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) as Singapore's single regulatory agency for ECE. During this phase, other new national agencies began to be involved in ECE policymaking, such as SkillsFuture Singapore and Workforce Singapore (formerly the Singapore Workforce Development Agency). This third wave featured a greater degree of involvement of the government in the sector and increased regulation of the sector, as it refined previous initiatives (Sum et al., 2018).

Lim (2017) noted that the various policy waves addressed four areas of high leverage: child outcomes, teacher quality and professional status, government regulatory frameworks and policies to promote accessibility and affordability. ECCE policymaking has been embedded in a complex, fluid space that has intensified over the years. Preschool settings have also evolved and leaders work in multiple types of environments. Some may be taking care of small centres with just 40

children and others working in leadership teams overseeing a school enrolment of up to 1000. Whilst child-to-teacher ratios is determined by regulation standards, in reality practices may vary due to manpower issues or programme requirements.

The influence of multiple stakeholders with varied agendas raises a concern over the impact of such changes on the ground (Ng, 2020). The profit-driven obligations of private companies were now mixed with the need to address a wider national agenda. This created a conflict of priorities and pressure, particularly for leaders who were responsible for the day-to-day operations of preschools. The strong regulatory oversight also implied that there was undue emphasis on ensuring that regulatory requirements were met. In addition, leadership work required the ability to balance organisational and national demands, which set a challenging arena for ECE leaders to work in. Such was the intense context within which leaders were operating before the emergence of COVID-19.

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ECE in Singapore

A review of the press releases reveals the impact of COVID-19 on preschools (Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA), 2022). The rapidly increasing cases of COVID-19 infections prompted the dissemination of an advisory to preschools, which was effective beginning January 2020. In February, the ECDA issued an advisory to parents as well. The ECDA closely watched the infection levels, prompting the temporary closure of preschools with confirmed cases between March and April 2020. On 3 April 2020, the prime minister announced the closure of all schools, including preschools and kindergartens from 8 April 2020 to 4 May 2020. Home-based learning was adopted but limited services were still provided to children of parents who had to continue working and were unable to make alternative care arrangements. From 19 May 2020 onwards, the multi-ministry taskforce in charge of managing COVID-19 safety measures, announced a phased reopening of preschools from 2 June 2020 onwards.

Wu (2022) described how after the detection of COVID-19 cases in January, schools were required to exercise COVID-safe ABC's, which were steps to regulate A – Access, B – Behaviours and C – Classrooms. This required a change in the operational procedures within centres as preschools needed to implement strict temperature checks and install sanitising equipment and cleaning procedures. Other measures such as limiting the interaction of children across classes, staggering the use of common areas, and the suspension of cross-deployment of staff resulted in a consistent pressure on leaders and staff to adapt to the regulatory requirements during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In June, all preschool staff were required to undergo swab tests, and where necessary a 14-day Leave of absence was issued and quarantine orders were placed on those in close contact with infected persons. Preschools in which COVID-19 cases were detected were also required to close for thorough disinfection and cleaning. These changes resulted in issues such as high absenteeism, a critical lack of manpower, increased workload of staff and burnout. To ensure the continuity of operations, leaders must step in and manage these changes (Qing and Patchymuthu, 2022). Amidst the work pressure which leaders were faced with, rapid changes in operations served to intensify the work in preschool centres in Singapore.

Research questions

The purpose of the study was to identify the ECE leaders' leadership discourses. Particular interest is in the discourses of pedagogical leadership. The aim was to investigate the changes that occurred

in discourses before and during pandemic time. Furthermore, the discourses in the context of ECE in Singapore and Finland were compared. Thus, the study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What kind of leadership discourses can be identified from ECE leaders' speeches?
2. What has changed in leadership discourses before and during pandemic time?
3. How do the leadership discourses of ECE leaders in Finland and Singapore differ?

Research methodology

According to Xu (2022), a cross-cultural comparison in educational science is replete with numerous challenges but also facilitates self-reflection and cultural self-awareness. A comparative study can lead to both an understanding of one's own culture and collective understanding of different cultures. Epistemologically, educational 'knowledge' can be seen globally but various ways of understanding exist both in local and global contexts. There is no single national or traditional understanding but a plural understanding of individuals, institutions, and micro-contexts. This aspect provides a critical perspective to comparative research.

Comparing in educational contexts has risks but also benefits. In cross-cultural comparisons can reach conclusions about the differences and similarities of various cultures as a whole, yet plural cultural identities can be found inside one culture (Xu, 2022). McNess et al. (2015) state that instead of trying to be in emic (knowing in culture) or etic (knowing through outside) positions researchers should be 'in-betweeners' of knowledge in cross-cultural comparative research. Through that understanding method may provide a fruitful perspective to inspect variation of educational systems and policies (Crossley et al., 2016; McNess et al., 2015).

In our study, we compare ECE leadership discourses in four case studies. In the first phase, between two periods of time, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, we compare the changes in leadership discourses between two different cultural contexts, in Finland and Singapore. The aim is to provide understanding about national strengths and needs of ECE leadership with intended to promote understanding and possibility to learn from each other (see Campbell and Tirri, 2004).

The discursive approach of the research implies that the researched phenomenon may have different implications for people in diverse contexts and situations. The basis of the approach is socio-constructivist theory, where the emphasis is on the construction of knowledge and reality through language (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000b; Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Discourses can be seen as an use of language as a social practice as well as revealing the power relationships through discourses (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000a, 2000b). In this study, the discursive approach is used to investigate the interpretations of leadership through the speech of leaders themselves. The aim of our research is to analyse the discourse of ECE leaders to examine the implications of leadership of ECE in various contexts and in the context of changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The discussions of the centre leaders are analysed through discursive analysis (Fairclough, 1992) aimed at identifying the country-wise characteristics of ECE leadership and thereby also identifying possible global implications for leadership. The purpose of the research is to enhance understanding and bring clarity to the essence of leadership in ECE.

Conducting the research

Data collection

Initial Finnish research data were collected from the focus group discussions of ECE centre leaders, which were conducted in three cities in 2018. The cities were small- (less than 50,000 inhabitants), medium- (50,000–200,000 inhabitants) and large-sized (more than 200,000 inhabitants) in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of different environments. Three leader groups in three cities included a total of 13 people (2, 4 and 7 leaders per group). The participants were: group 1 – two centre leaders, group 2 – four centre leaders and group 3 – four centre leaders and three assistant leaders. These leaders' centres were municipal ECE centres with the size of average Finnish ECE centres, which are 1–3 centres and 11–30 employees per leader. The invitation for the interviews was sent with the cooperation from the local ECE officials and discussion was organised face-to-face, in three different cities. The total duration of interviews in 2018 was 4 h 38 min. For anonymity, the interviewees are referred to as D1–D13.

During 2021, there was organised one online focus group discussion to which three Finnish ECE centre leaders participated. Online meeting was organised due to COVID-19 regulations. The invitation to the interview was sent to the leaders who participated in service training organised by University of Helsinki. The leaders worked at the municipal ECE centre, the municipalities were large- and medium-sized. The leaders had average-size Finnish ECE centres. The interview, held via an online session, lasted an hour and a minute. The interviewees are called as follows: D14, D15 and D16.

In 2018, the first set of Singapore's data was collected on four leaders through a face-to-face focused group discussion in Singapore. The leaders were two experienced leaders with more than 5 years of experience and two novice leaders with less than 3 years leadership experience. All of them worked in childcare centres with 100–200 students and managed between 12 and 25 employees. The participants have been named A1, A2, A3 and A4. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, a follow-up focused group discussion was conducted with a different group of three preschool leaders in 2021 via an online session in Singapore. The participants had responded to an email distributed to a group of 10 leaders identified for this study. These have been referred to as B1, B2 and B3. The three preschool leaders were all experienced leaders with more than 5 years of experience out of which two were childcare centre leaders whilst one managed a kindergarten. The discussions were transcribed and then coded into emergent themes for analysis.

The questions asked from the leaders are as following:

What is your view on the leadership of early childhood education? (What does it all involve? Who has leadership?)
As a leader, how do you support the employees in their work? (Knowledge management, personnel management, well-being at work, commitment of new employees, e.g.)
What are the expectations for leadership?
What do you expect from leadership?
What would you like to change in early childhood education leadership? What would you do differently?

Data analysis

The recorded data were transcribed and carefully read by researchers several times. The analysis focused on the meanings given to leadership in the speech of ECE leaders. The discourses were modified according to the interpretations made by the researchers. First, Finnish and Singaporean researchers formed a country-specific interpretation from data according to their respective interviews. We employed discursive analysis to examine the meaning of leadership as identified by the participants' speech in the context of ECE (Fairclough, 1992). The methodological approach was employed for the idea that people construct as well as introduce their reality through language (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000b). The interpretation was shared with the meaning of researcher's triangulation of analysis in the online meetings of the research group during the years 2021 and 2022.

The second phase was to investigate the changes that occurred in both national discourses. Several discussions were conducted with researchers to obtain a shared understanding regarding the changes in the discourses. In the third phase, the researchers compared the changes in Finnish and Singaporean ECE leadership discourses in consideration of the national framework and policies and with an understanding of the pitfalls that may be part of a cross-cultural comparison (McNess et al., 2015) In particular, attention was paid to how pedagogical leadership is discussed in these two different national contexts.

Ethical consideration

The responsible conduct of research was followed by using the guidelines of The Finnish National Board on Research Integrity [TENK] (2021) and we conform to the American Educational Research Association's Code of Ethics (2011) on research. Similarly, the research on Singapore ECE leaders adheres to ethical guidelines following the British Psychological Society Code of Ethics (2014) and the Association of Early Childhood Educators (Singapore) (AECES, 2015).

All matters related to respect for participants' rights, dignity, privacy and confidentiality, consent and protection were strictly upheld in the research process. Information related to the research was given to participants before the interview, and participation in the interview was voluntary. The anonymity of the participants was ensured, and background information was collected only for researchers' use. The data was stored on the university's safety platform. Furthermore, participants were also informed of their rights of non-response and withdrawal from the study at any time, without penalty.

Results

In this chapter, the ECE leaders' discourses of leadership are introduced separately in the context of Finland and Singapore. In both national cases, the identified changes in discourses before and during pandemic time are presented.

Leadership discourses in Finland

Pedagogically focused leadership. *Before the Pandemic in 2018*, pedagogy was an important aspect of leadership in the discourse of leaders. The documents guiding ECE appeared in the discourse of

leaders in such a manner that it was expected that the purposefulness of pedagogy be made more visible in the ECE centre:

> […] And the pedagogical objective has to be found from the new Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, and the whole action has to be mirrored to that, what we have done, why it's done, how it's done and evaluation from the whole thing…. (D1)

The goal of pedagogical leadership is seen as creating favourable conditions for well-being, growth, and learning for children. To achieve this, leaders need to know their employees, the children in the unit, and be aware of day-to-day matters:

> And really, I always hope that I can see it in such a way that if I, as the leader of the ECE centre, don't know what the children in the kindergarten are supposed to do… Because that's the mirror, that's the mirror of our pedagogy, what is going on with the children. If I don't know that, I can't judge whether our pedagogy is going in the right direction. (D3)

Pedagogical leadership is about showing direction. This cannot be only once but needs continuous assessment and development and should be based on evaluation information (Ahtiainen et al., 2021). The evaluation includes discussions with employees as well as observation of and interaction with children. The direction that the pedagogy must take arises from the needs of children, whose interests must be considered when organising and planning ECE.

In 2021, *during the pandemic,* the leaders continued to consider pedagogical leadership as essential. They wanted to continue to update their knowledge from pedagogical entities. Familiarising themselves with the latest research was also considered important. However, leaders feel that leading cannot be done from a distance. Instead, they wanted to be present for their employees (e.g. teachers and nursery nurses) and the children:

> Well, I have had this kind of experience now, that there (as leader) I really have to be awake. And present. I mean that, you cannot be, you cannot support the employees, if you are a leader in your own office, and not really in there. (D15)

Even though leaders describe themself as pedagogical leaders, the pandemic challenged the possibilities of pedagogical leadership. During the pandemic, the meetings were organised remotely and leaders could not walk around the unit and spend time with the groups. This lack of observation and inability to provide daily support for teachers challenged leading pedagogy, even though it is still considered crucial.

The Change. Pedagogical leadership was emphasised as part of the leadership at both points in time. The leaders describe themselves as pedagogical leaders, believe that they already have the requisite skills, and want to develop themself more. Pedagogical leadership involves building a shared vision and maintaining a pedagogical discussion thread. Rapid changes make it challenging to refine a common vision in ECE. The pandemic reduced the number of spontaneous conversations and has put leaders in a position in which they need to lead without being present on site in groups.

Our data reveals that before the pandemic, the leaders had numerous discussions on the evaluation of the pedagogy than during the pandemic. Leaders oversee the evaluation of the pedagogy in the unit (Vlasov et al., 2018). This evaluation needs to be continuous; however, without up-to-date

information on the groups' activities, the evaluation becomes challenging. During the pandemic, there were fewer possibilities to visit groups, conduct observation sessions, and co-develop pedagogy with teachers.

Desire for distributed pedagogical leadership. *Before the Pandemic in 2018*. The concept of leadership has changed over the years, as the idea of individual hero leadership has changed more to the ideal of shared leadership. This does not eliminate the ECE centre leader's overall responsibility nor does it reduce responsibility as a leader.

Distributed pedagogical leadership needs functional structures for discussion. In 2018, leaders described that they had created the concept for weekly pedagogical discussions. In addition, they also have teacher's meetings. In the units, there were workaday discussions on pedagogical goals of activities.

ECE teachers are responsible for the overall pedagogy in a child group. This requires planning, which should be noted in the work schedule. Leaders play a crucial role in making this possible, but they also must ensure that teachers are responsible for pedagogy:

> It's a bit like that old culture, that the kindergarten teachers aren't necessarily like Yippee, I can get a response from pedagogy. You need that kind of leader's intervention, you tell that ok this is your job. But they (teachers) do not have to do this alone, they do not need to become a despotic dictator, but it's like someone must take the reins and hold the whole in his/her hands…. (D2)

Although the responsibility for the group's pedagogy rests with the ECE teacher, everyone else also has the responsibility to the extent that their position will allow. Leaders need to make the responsibilities visible in discussions as well as in structures.

During the Pandemic in 2021, distributed pedagogical leadership was considered essential and empowering for employees. Everyone in the work community needed distributed pedagogical leadership, although the responsibility may differ in accordance with the job description. Responsibility was also shown through independent decision-making:

> […] every employee should have such leadership that they should have such self-management skills and, in a way, the ability to make decisions on their own, that you cannot go to the leader to seek approval for everything. (D15)

Collaborative ideation and solution-seeking for the development of pedagogy were considered important during the pandemic The structures for discussions, joint development, and joint discussion must be in order. During the pandemic, the conversation was moved online and this affected the environment of the conversation:

> […] It is like we are just working in our own potteries, and somehow developing common ideas has decreased. And especially at the beginning (of the corona), we had to use Teams for the meeting, so it felt like we were all very far from each other. (D15)

During the pandemic, pedagogical discussions were held online, and the absence of face-to-face interactions deeply affected pedagogical development. Leaders describe that closed doors and missing joint gatherings was a challenge for the community and caused the most struggles in the units.

The Change. Co-development of pedagogy and sharing of good practices was difficult during the pandemic. Before the pandemic, the structures for co-development were clear and functional. For the functionality of distributed pedagogical leadership, functioning discussion structures are critical (Fonsén, 2013, 1914). As Douglass (2019) disputes, leaders should support employee collaboration. Based on our data, it appears that co-development thrives in interaction, which was not present in working online as well as in original interaction. Thus, distributed pedagogical leadership is built on cooperation and interaction (Bøe and Hognestad, 2015).

During the pandemic, collective pedagogical discussion has not been as deep as earlier. The change in the conversation environment challenges the distributed pedagogical leadership and also affects the role of the leader and may tighten the tension between different roles and responsibilities. When there is a lack of common understanding of core tasks and leadership responsibilities and the responsibilities are not clarified, this may affect the quality of the pedagogy (Hujala and Eskelinen, 2013).

Leadership discourses in Singapore

Deepening management demands. *Before the Pandemic in 2018,* the leaders described leadership as a complex task which required a wide range of skill sets. They mentioned the need to undertake a wide range of tasks that would require them to skill-switch from manual work, such as helping to change diapers, to conceptual work, such as developing strategic plans.

> I can end up doing so many things in a day that I sometimes don't know what I am doing even though I have a to-do list. I can only do the paperwork after the centre closes and usually I bring my work home. (A1)

Leaders described the need to be ready to take on roles that needed to be fulfilled at the centre and mentioned that firefighting was a large part of it. Hence, leadership was not specialised work but generalised work that required them to have the ability to do everything and at any time that was required of them. As such, the work was physically exhausting and the leader described that it could very easily lead to burn out. Nevertheless, pedagogical leadership was seen as an important component in their work.

> I spend a lot of time helping my teachers with their lessons. It is challenging for me but I try to do this during our meetings. (A2)

During the Pandemic in 2021, it led to a multi-fold increase in the operational workload of the leaders. It required leaders to respond to ever-changing health protocols quickly and a creative response to regulatory requirements. The intensity of the work proved to be constructive for the staff, as it led to the development of stronger relationships.

> At first, we had to figure out a lot of things. My teachers were very, very tired. But we also grew closer together because we had to do so many things so fast. I think it brought us together, we took care of each other. (B2)

During the pandemic, home-based learning required the staff to prepare materials and deliver teaching online. Curriculum coverage was heavily reduced and filtered to the delivery of key learning concepts. As children needed parents to assist in these sessions, there was more communication

between the parents and school. Leaders were now challenged to extend their pedagogical knowledge not just to teachers but to support the teachers to teach parents.

> Finally, the parents understand just how difficult it is to teach children. My teachers became very creative. It was like they were doing a TV show. (B3)

The Change. The pandemic exacerbated the heavy operational and administrative workload of leaders. The pressure to respond to the multiple advisory and the short time given for implementation implied that distributed leadership needed to be exercised to cope with work demands. All the three leaders mentioned that they had to entrust a senior member of the teaching team to help manage the design of home-based learning. They also entrusted younger staff to advise on the setup of the online teaching platforms. In times of crises, leaders were able to deploy their staff faster in roles that they otherwise would not have done.

Community spirit emerges from challenges. *Before the Pandemic in 2018,* one significant pressure faced by the leader was meeting requirements such as those of the Singapore Preschool Accreditation Framework (SPARK) and other licensing requirements. Leaders were often faced with meeting key performance indicators (KPIs) for their centre, which included enrolment issues. Simultaneously, there was a continued pressure to ensure the centre to achieve awards (particularly centres which belonged to a chain) or achieve SPARK accreditation. These expectations implied that leaders had to balance their time to meet the daily demands of their centre but simultaneously push towards larger goals.

> Our centre needs to win awards if we want to meet our KPIs. So, I have to make sure we know our target for the year. Before, I didn't understand why. But now the teachers also know this is important for the school. (A4)

During the Pandemic in 2021, the leaders had to be more focused on their work tasks of managing the centre and balancing the needs of staff and the demands of the regulatory authority. The high-stress level experienced during the period propelled leaders to speak up for their staff when the situation worsened and pressures peaked. The leaders were compelled to protect staff and their welfare as they witnessed first-hand the struggles of the teachers.

> My heart really cried for them. I have never seen my teachers work so hard that I could not let them down. They made me brave and so I dared to stand up against the parent. It was just not fair. I was so scared but I had to say something. (B2)

The Change. Before the pandemic, the relationship between the leaders and staff appeared largely professional and interactions were driven by work tasks. The consuming nature of the pandemic resulted in a shift for two of the leaders who alluded to a stronger personal relationship with their staff. Thus, the pandemic pushed the leaders to review their work roles and introduce self-care as an important component of working life.

> I made a habit of asking how they are every day. Our WhatsApp chat was not just about work now. We would give each other encouragement. Some of their families were going through very difficult times. It was tough for everybody. (B3)

Changes in leadership discourses in Finland and Singapore

In this chapter, we compare the national differences of ECE leadership discourses and the changes identified in leadership discourses of investigated cases in Singapore and Finland.

Leading from a distance

The leader's work had become mostly remote work in both the countries. Most of the meetings were organised on Zoom or Teams. This implies that interaction changed from the face-to-face style to online, where the interaction was limited. Because of remote work, leaders needed to acquire information technology skills.

The leaders in Singapore had to pivot quickly to using technology to boost the morale of the staff. This required them to learn how to facilitate and be more conscious of how they presented themselves. Leading from a 'distance' also meant that effort had to be made to keep the bonds strong. B1, B2 and B3 all mentioned sending care packages to staff and making an effort to check in on the social and emotional state of their staff before any professional conversations were held.

The pandemic was an unprecedented situation. Instructions from governments and administrations demanded rapid reaction and leaders played an important role in implementing orders in their ECE centres. The need to respond to changes implied that little time could be devoted to improving pedagogy. Nevertheless, the intensity of the period led to greater communication among leaders who felt the need to support each other. Within their organisations and across organisations, leaders supported each other and developed strong emotional bonds. Finnish leaders' discussions did not find strengthened connections between teachers. Instead of that, more detachment from the sense of community was found. In Singapore, the leaders reported providing increased support to teachers and the creation of stronger bonds between them as a consequence.

Remaining importance of pedagogy

There was a dramatic transformation in the possibilities for pedagogical leadership. Finnish ECE leaders had fewer opportunities for visiting child groups during the pandemic, whereas, earlier, they had earlier gained crucial information regarding pedagogy in such children's groups as well as information related to employees' need for support. Therefore, the possibility of continuous evaluation of pedagogy by the leaders was endangered. In the light of distributed pedagogical leadership (see Fonsén and Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019; Heikka, 2014), co-development of pedagogy with the teachers was restricted. The reason for the lack of pedagogical discussions was the replacement of in-person meetings with online meetings, which did not provide the same opportunity for deep pedagogical conversation.

Emphasis on instructions and regulations

Leadership had to adopt a different management style during the pandemic in both the countries. The discourse of pedagogical leadership in the first phase of research was stronger in ECE leaders' discussions than in the second phase of research, particularly in Finnish discourses. Instead of a pedagogical leadership discourse, strong discourses on management and instructional leadership were apparent during the pandemic. Furthermore, the question is whether leaders had to

only implement the regulations or did they have freedom to interpret instructions according to their own understanding. Before the pandemic, leaders had an opportunity to deliver quality (of pedagogy), but during the pandemic it appeared to be more about leading administrative and safety matters. As described by one Finnish leader, 'It's no longer about leading the quality of pedagogy, now it's more about leading the legal ECE'.

In Singapore, leaders had more frequent advisories from ECDA than any other time. More interestingly, ECDA took a proactive role and supported the ECE community by issuing AN Advisory to Parents on safety management measures. In this manner, the ECDA took the lead in working with preschools to manage communication and supporting the work for leaders to account for changes in operations. The structural set-up of the sector appeared to support clearer organisation information and its dissemination.

Discussion and conclusion

As we consider the results of this research, we first need to understand the cultural and contextual characteristics (Fonsén et al., 2023). The high quality of ECE was in the focus, but the way to lead the ECE was different between these two national cases. Leadership in the context of ECE is considered differently in both countries, and pedagogical leadership is a more familiar concept in Finnish ECE than in ECE in Singapore.

The cross-cultural comparison of leadership discourses highlights not only the differences of leadership but also the cultural differences in how to experience challenges (see Campbell and Tirri, 2004). However, at the same time, remember that there is not only 'one' culture in one country, and various cultural characteristics can be found within one culture (Xu, 2022). Still, the cultural differences in style of ECE administration have an impact on the leadership. As we have earlier explained, the national traditions and ways to develop the ECE services differ and according to our results, it seems that pandemic time brings out what is considered the most important in leadership.

It was markable how strong the pedagogical leadership is for the Finnish leaders: even if the circumstances could have forced the leaders to do only administrative work instead of focusing on pedagogy, they still highlighted their interest in pedagogy and the quality of ECE in their speeches. Instead of this, in Finnish ECEC centres, the key challenge was the breaking of the sense of community. In Singapore, the sense of community was surprisingly strengthened although even before the pandemic and during the pandemic, administrative work took up a lot of the managers' time. The findings suggest a difference in the work cultures of the two groups of leaders in the two countries.

In Finnish ECE, distributed pedagogical leadership places substantial responsibility for centre leaders and teachers, while a more instructional leadership approach in Singapore causes pressure in other ways. ECE leaders in Singapore need to demonstrate that learning outcomes have been achieved and they are under pressure to ensure that the centre achieves awards or accreditations (see Denee and Thornton, 2021; Dinham, 2016). The pandemic led to increased pressure in both cases. ECE leaders in Singapore feel a lot of pressure due to the strict instructions and regulations from the administration during the pandemic. In addition to the existing regulations and instructions, the pandemic led to a flood of health-related guidelines. The workload of teachers and leaders seemed to grow even more overwhelming than before and the need to comply with these guidelines overshadowed the emphasis on teaching and learning.

Finnish ECE leaders felt more pressure because they lacked the time to engage in discussions with teachers on pedagogical issues during the pandemic. Yet, distributed pedagogical leadership was considered very important during the time (see Ahtiainen et al. , 2021; Denee and Thornton, 2021). Restrictions to have in-person meetings was perceived as undermining distributed pedagogical leadership. In a pre-pandemic study of leaders in Singapore, it was reported that the tensions already existed as leaders struggled to balance pedagogical leadership with financial priorities (Lim and Lipponen, 2019). Leaders were more focused on the operational aspects of leadership, with clear management structures existing within organisations (Selamat, 2021). In the challenging times during the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders showed more readiness in managing operational changes.

In conclusion, when the cultural differences in perceived pressure are considered, the time for leadership proved to be pivotal in both countries. In the face of rapid changes and challenging situations, the increased workload caused difficulties in succeeding at work and became more pronounced. The other side of the coin was that the difficult situations led to more emotional support for teachers from leaders in Singapore and leaders' peer support also increased in Finland. In future research, it would be interesting to also investigate the positive effects of common shared experiences of threats. Apparently, more research is needed to clarify the theoretical understanding and structures of ECE leadership, taking into account the context.

The possible limitations of the study are the small sample size of the leaders as a case study in both countries. Therefore, the results cannot be generalised, but it provides an interesting insight into the reality of the discourses of ECE leaders and changes that occurred in their interpretations of leadership during the pandemic.

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