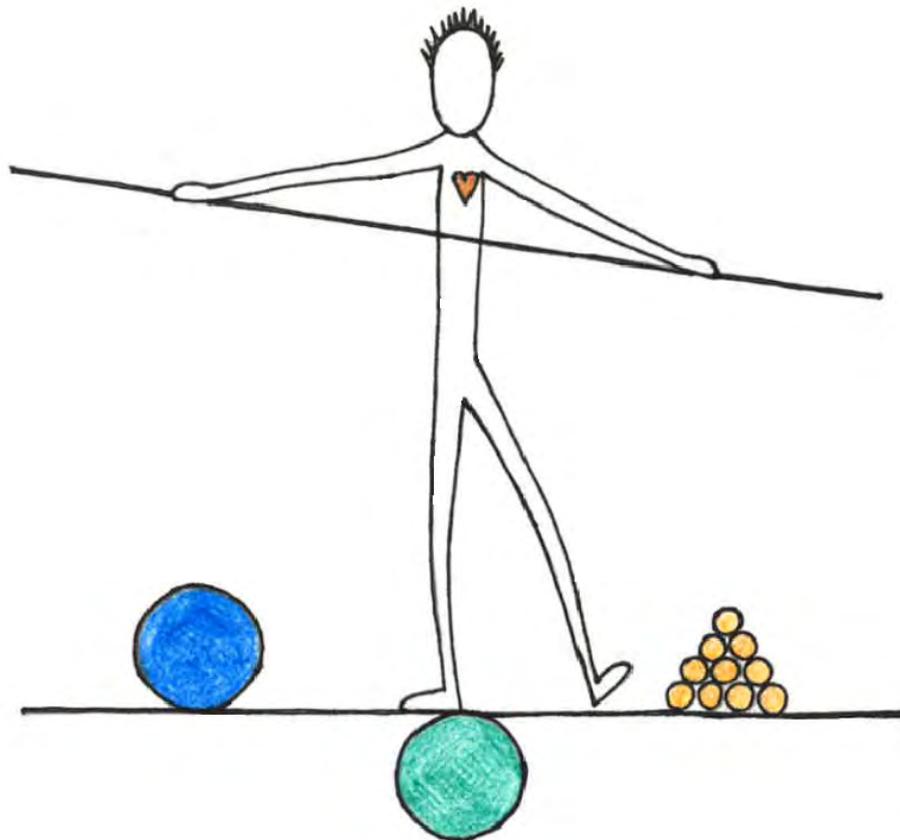


JYU DISSERTATIONS 601

Mailis Elomaa

Educational Leaders' Occupational Well-Being

“With cool head and warm heart”



UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ
FACULTY OF EDUCATION AND
PSYCHOLOGY

JYU DISSERTATIONS 601

Mailis Elomaa

**Educational Leaders'
Occupational Well-Being
“With cool head and warm heart”**

Esitetään Jyväskylän yliopiston kasvatustieteiden ja psykologian tiedekunnan suostumuksella
julkisesti tarkastettavaksi Agora-rakennuksen Lea Pulkkisen salissa
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in building Agora, Lea Pulkkisen sali, on February 10, 2023, at 12 o'clock.



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ABSTRACT

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The present thesis focuses on educational leaders' perceptions of their occupational well-being and work as leaders. The specific research questions are as follows: (1) How do educational leaders in Finland perceive demands and resources that influence their occupational well-being? (2) How can educational leaders' work in Finland be conceptualised from an ecological systems theory perspective? The thesis comprises three peer-reviewed sub-studies, the data for which were drawn from the larger Teacher and Student Stress and Interaction (TESSI) project. Data for the sub-studies were collected from 18 day-care centre directors (Sub-study 1) and 76 elementary school principals (Sub-study 2) via questionnaires, plus semi-structured interviews with 22 school principals (Sub-study 3). Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data in all three sub-studies, and the quantitative data were analysed using correlations and nonparametric tests in the first sub-study. The results indicate that educational leaders' perceptions of their work can be described through personal and job-related demands and resources, contextual factors and ecological systems. Most extensive demands on educational leaders are related to interpersonal relationships and interactions with and between different stakeholders, and also entail dealing with elements or issues that leaders cannot influence or control. The results highlight the importance of social support in the workplace, as well as support from family and friends in personal lives. Furthermore, both physical and emotional self-care are crucial for balancing demand and resources to maintain well-being. Overall, the results deepen the understanding of educational leaders' occupational well-being and work. Based on the results, practical suggestions are offered on how educational leaders' well-being could be promoted on different levels of their work-related ecological system and who could promote it.

Keywords: educational leaders; occupational well-being; demands; resources; stress; coping strategies

TIIVISTELMÄ (ABSTRACT IN FINNISH)

Elomaa, Mailis

Kasvatusalan johtajien työhyvinvointi: "Kylmäpäisenä ja lämminsydämisenä"

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Tässä väitöstutkimuksessa tarkasteltiin kasvatusalan johtajien käsityksiä työhyvinvoinnistaan suhteessa työhön kohdistuviin vaatimuksiin ja resurssihin. Lisäksi tarkasteltiin heidän näkemyksiään omasta työn kuvasta johtajana ja vuorovaikutuksesta eri tahojen kanssa ekologisen systeemin näkökulmasta. Väitöstutkimus on osa laajempaa Teacher and Student Stress and Interaction (TESSI) -hanketta ja se koostuu kolmesta osatutkimuksesta. Ensimmäiseen osatutkimukseen osallistui 18 päiväkodin johtajaa, toiseen 76 perusopetuksen alakoulun rehtoria ja kolmanteen osatutkimukseen osallistui 22 perusopetuksen rehtoria. Kahden ensimmäisen osatutkimuksen aineisto kerättiin kyselylomakkeilla ja kolmannessa osatutkimuksen aineisto kerättiin puolistrukturoidun haastattelun avulla. Laadullinen aineisto analysoitiin sisällönanalyysin menetelmin ja määrällisen aineiston muuttujien välisiä yhteyksiä tarkasteltiin ei-parametrisilla testeillä. Väitöstutkimuksen tuloksia tarkastellaan kasvatusalan johtajien työhön kohdistuvien vaatimusten, resurssien, kontekstuaalisten tekijöiden ja ekologisen systeemin kautta. Kasvatusalan johtajien työnkuvassa keskeisintä on vuorovaikutus eri sidosryhmien kanssa ja niiden välillä. Hyvinvointiin vaikuttavana tekijänä tunnistettiin sellaisten tehtävien tai asioiden käsittely, joihin johtajat eivät voi itse henkilökohtaisesti vaikuttaa. Sekä työoverien että yksityiselämän sosiaalisen tuen merkitys korostui hyvinvointia ylläpitävänä tekijänä. Työn kuormittavuudesta selviytymistä tukivat sekä fyysiset että psyykkiset tekijät. Väitöstutkimuksen tulokset lisäävät ymmärrystä kasvatusalan johtajien työhyvinvoinnista ja siihen liittyvistä kuormittavista tekijöistä sekä selviytymisstrategioista. Väitöstutkimus antaa käytännön ehdotuksia siihen miten ja kenen toimesta kasvatusalan johtajien työhyvinvointia voitaisiin tukea työelämän ekologisen systeemin eri tasoilla.

Asiasanat: kasvatusalan johtajat, työhyvinvointi, vaatimukset, resurssit, stressi, selviämisstrategiat

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Mailis Elomaa
Jyväskylä, February 2023

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

This doctoral thesis is based on the following publications, which are referred to as sub-studies or Sub-study 1, Sub-study 2 and Sub-study 3 in the text. The articles are reprinted with the permission of the publisher. Copies of the articles are appended to the thesis.

- Article 1** Elomaa, M., Pakarinen, E., Eskelä-Haapanen, S., Halttunen, L., von Suchodoletz, A., & Lerkkanen, M-K. (2020). Directors' stress in day care centers: Related factors and coping strategies. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 34(6), 1079–1091.
- Article 2** Elomaa, M., Eskelä-Haapanen, S., Pakarinen, E., Halttunen, L., & Lerkkanen, M-K. (2021). Work-related stress of elementary school principals in Finland: Coping strategies and support. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*. Advance online publication). <https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432211010317>
- Article 3** Elomaa, M., Eskelä-Haapanen, S., Pakarinen, E., Halttunen, L., & Lerkkanen M-K. (2022). Elementary school principals' work from the ecological systems perspective: Evidence from Finland. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143221125999>

The present thesis was part of the larger Teacher and Student Stress and Interaction study (TESSI; Lerkkanen & Pakarinen, 2021). The author of the present thesis is the first author of all three articles, which are based on the TESSI project's design and data. The first author of each article was responsible for the research questions, searching and reviewing the literature, conducting the analysis and writing the manuscripts. She also was responsible for designing and conducting the semi-structured interviews for Sub-study 3. The co-authors had advisory roles in the studies' design, data collection and analysis, and interpretation of the results, and they provided comments on all three manuscripts.

FIGURES

FIGURE 1	Theoretical approach to the work-related ecological system.	15
FIGURE 2	The relation among the general aim, research questions and empirical studies.	21
FIGURE 3	Educational leaders' work-related ecological system.....	40

TABLES

TABLE 1	Overview of the sub-studies.....	26
TABLE 2	Educational leaders' perceptions of the demands and resources involved in their work	31
TABLE 3	Practical suggestions for promoting educational leaders' occupational well-being	40

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

TIIVISTELMÄ (ABSTRACT IN FINNISH)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

FIGURES AND TABLES

CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION	11
2	THEORETICAL BACKGROUND	14
2.1	Work-related ecological system.....	14
2.2	Job demands and resources.....	15
2.2.1	Educational leaders' job demands and resources	16
2.2.2	Educational leaders' personal demands and resources	16
2.3	Occupational stress and coping.....	17
2.4	Finland's education system.....	18
3	THE AIM OF THIS THESIS.....	20
4	METHOD	22
4.1	Participants and procedure	22
4.2	Instruments.....	23
4.3	Data analysis.....	24
5	OVERVIEW OF THE ORIGINAL STUDIES	27
5.1	Sub-study 1. Directors' stress in day-care centres: Related factors and coping strategies.....	27
5.2	Sub-study 2. Work-related stress of elementary school principals in Finland: coping strategies and support.....	28
5.3	Sub-study 3. Elementary school principals' work from the ecological systems perspective: evidence from Finland	29
6	GENERAL DISCUSSION.....	31
6.1	Educational leaders' occupational well-being from the demands and resources perspective	32
6.1.1	Educational leaders' job demands.....	34
6.1.2	Educational leaders' personal demands in their job.....	35
6.1.3	Educational leaders' resources in their job.....	35
6.1.4	Educational leaders' personal resources in their job	37
6.2	Educational leaders' work from an ecological systems theory perspective.....	38

6.3	Practical implications to promote educational leaders' occupational well-being.....	41
6.4	Ethical considerations	44
6.5	Limitations and future directions.....	44
7	CONCLUSIONS.....	46
	YHTEENVETO.....	47
	REFERENCES.....	51
	ORIGINAL PAPERS	

1 INTRODUCTION

Educational leadership is viewed as an essential element of school development (Harris & Jones, 2016). The importance of educational leadership for successful educational institutions is accepted and supported widely by empirical evidence (Bush & Montecinos, 2019; Leithwood et al., 2020). In the present thesis, school principals and day-care centre directors are viewed as individuals holding *educational leadership positions* and, therefore, are referred to as 'educational leaders' (see also Connolly et al., 2019). The research community has recognised their evolving, exceedingly more complex and demanding role (Beusaert et al., 2016, 2021; Darmody & Smyth, 2016; Drago-Severson et al., 2018). As education systems become more ambiguous in their pursuit of education equity and excellence, greater expectations will be placed on present and future educational leaders (Robinson, 2019). For example, expectations of the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) and leaders' work have become more complex and demanding (Heikkinen et al., 2022). According to Beusaert et al. (2021), the demands placed on educational leaders, in combination with the perception that they must carry all the burdens of management, make their job more complex and often lead to them feeling isolated. Interactions involving education authorities and policy, staff and the teaching process, students, families, the school community and society often present problems and challenges that leaders must face (Tintoré et al., 2020). Managing these requires various skills (Acton, 2021) and diverse types of support from different sources (Beusaert et al., 2021; Burke et al., 2022).

The challenging nature of educational leaders' work has been found to impact their well-being (Beusaert et al., 2021; Burke et al., 2022; Collie et al., 2020) and has proven to be multi-layered and complex. Their experience is affected by, for example, varying contexts (Tamadoni et al., 2021), work experience and training (Cruz-González et al., 2021), and personal characteristics, such as, gender, age and length of service (Darmody & Smyth, 2016). According to Leithwood et al. (2020), a set of cognitive, social and psychological personal leadership resources – including problem-solving expertise, managing emotions and optimism – explains a large proportion of the variation in leadership efficacy.

In recent years in Finland, school principals' work-related stress levels have demonstrated a tendency toward becoming more intense, increasing the risk of burnout (Kumpulainen, 2017; Leppäaho, 2020). However, international research has been limited, and even less is available in the Finnish context despite the threat to educational leaders' well-being from a widening variety of assigned roles and tasks (Beusaert et al., 2021), growing workloads, a lack of time available to concentrate on pedagogical leadership (Riley, 2020; Trade Union of Education in Finland, 2020) and lack of social support (Beusaert et al., 2021). Considering that surveys have been used to conduct most research in this field, further investigation using open questions would provide a deeper understanding of factors that influence educational leaders' occupational well-being and help consider leaders' individual needs. Research also is needed on such factors as educational leaders' professional roles (Middlewood, 2019), internal and external social support (Beusaert et al., 2021), their backgrounds' effect on their perceptions (Burke et al., 2022) and contextual issues (Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017).

In the present thesis, educational leaders' perceptions of demands and resources are described by utilising the job demands and resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti et al., 2001; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), which views each person as the one appraising the demands and resources that influence their well-being. In describing educational leaders' perceived stress and coping, the present thesis draws from cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which argues that how leaders interpret stressors determines how they respond to them in terms of reactions, behavioural responses and coping efforts. In the present thesis, the educational leader is viewed as being influenced by and actively interacting with close and more distant surroundings. Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1989) ecological systems theory (EST) was used as a lens through which to examine educational leaders' perceptions of their work-related ecological system by placing the person in the middle of interrelated systems formed by different elements of their work. EST emphasises an active person as being the central force of development, influenced by reciprocal interaction with other people, objects and symbols in their surrounding environment (see also Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Griffiore & Phenice, 2016).

This thesis builds on a social constructivist paradigm proposing that educational leaders' perceptions of their occupational wellbeing and work are formed in social, historical and cultural contexts through action and discourse (Young & Collin, 2004). According to Boyland (2019), individuals live in an individually interpreted reality, leaving researchers to construct a diverse and complex image of their experience without expecting a universal result. In the present thesis, the researcher has been particularly careful in not overinterpreting the data and presenting the participants' perspectives and taking them into account when making sense of meanings that others have about the world, realising that researchers' own experience and background shape their interpretation of data (see also Creswell, 2013).

The importance of interaction between a person and their environment is strongly present throughout the theoretical background – first, in outlining educational leaders’ perceptions of their work-related ecological system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1989), viewing the person as “an active participant in the experience and attempts to make sense of it” (Shelton, 2018, p. 17). Second, it also is present in describing the JD-R model (Demerouti et al., 2001; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), viewing the individual as being the one who appraises the demands and resources emerging from the work context (see also Bakker & Demerouti, 2018b). Finally, it is present in respect to perceived stress and coping experiences – drawing from cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) – in which psychological stress is viewed as a “particular relationship between person and the environment” (p. 19), with the coping process described as being influenced by the environment and its demands and resources, individuals’ personality characteristics and social context (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

This thesis aimed to investigate educational leaders’ perceptions of their occupational well-being and work as leaders. Based on the sub-study’s results, this thesis offers practical suggestions on how educational leaders’ well-being could be promoted on different levels of their work-related ecological system and who can promote it. The research questions were the following: (1) How do educational leaders in Finland perceive demands and resources that influence their occupational well-being? (2) How can educational leaders’ work in Finland be conceptualised from an ecological systems theory perspective?

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

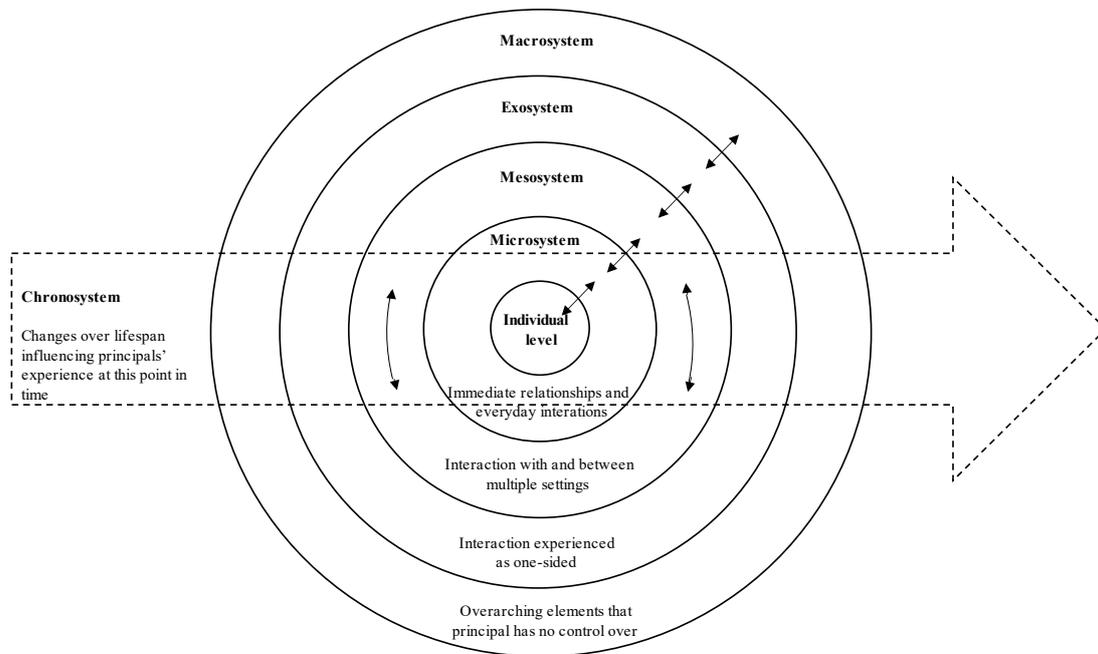
2.1 Work-related ecological system

In the present thesis, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST was used to describe educational leaders' perceptions of the elements of their work-related ecological system. EST was chosen because it fit well with the data and allowed data categorisation to describe the multidimensionality of educational leaders work-related ecological system and elements belonging there. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST conceptualises the environment as a series of nested and interconnected systems. As also encouraged by Bronfenbrenner, EST is used widely across disciplines, for instance, Hujala (2004) and Nivala (2002) used EST to define the structure of elements related to leadership in early childhood settings. In the present thesis, human development is viewed as taking place through reciprocal interaction between an active, growing human being and the changing properties in their immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). "The form, power, content and direction of the proximal processes affecting development vary systematically as a joint function of the characteristics of the person; of the environment - both immediate and more remote - in which the processes are taking place; the nature of the developmental outcomes under consideration; and the social communities and changes occurring over time through the life course and the historical period during which the person has lived" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 798).

In the present thesis, educational leaders' work is described through five ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) that are illustrated as concentric circles surrounding the person who is positioned at the centre (individual level) as follows: (1) microsystem - the circle closest to the leader, comprising everyday interactions with and between different elements; (2) mesosystem - describing interactions with and among multiple settings; (3) exosystem - interactions experienced as one-sided, with elements that leaders cannot influence, but which indirectly affect their work; (4) macrosystem - overarching elements that leaders

cannot control (e.g., social values and institutional values); and (5) chronosystem – changes that occur over a person’s lifetime that influence leaders’ experience at this point in time (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. Theoretical approach to the work-related ecological system.



2.2 Job demands and resources

The theoretical foundation of the present thesis regarding job demands and resources influencing the educational leaders’ occupational well-being is derived from the job demands and resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti et al., 2001; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), which proposes that “working conditions can be categorised into two broad categories, job demands and resources, that are differentially related to specific outcomes” (Demerouti et al., 2001, p. 499), including supplementation of personal demands (Chen & Fellenz, 2020). Compared with other occupational well-being models, the JD-R model’s scope is broad, as it “potentially includes all job demands and job resources, is flexible and can be tailored to a wide variety of work settings” (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014, p. 44). The JD-R model assumes that “any demand and any resource may affect an employee’s health and well-being” (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014, p. 44). According to Schaufeli and Taris (2014), high-level job demands cause stress and damage health, whereas high-level resources promote motivation and productivity. Thus, the presence of high levels of resources and demands increases work engagement (Schaufeli, 2015).

2.2.1 Educational leaders' job demands and resources

Job demands are “those physical, social or organisational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and/or psychological (i.e., cognitive or emotional) effort and are, therefore, associated with certain psychological and/or physiological costs” (Demerouti et al., 2001, p. 501), as well as aspects of work that require energy expenditures, such as workload, complex tasks and conflicts (Bakker & Demerouti, 2018b). According to Schaufeli and Taris (2014), such demands include, for example, insufficient time resources, workload, interpersonal conflicts and emotional requirements.

Job resources are “those physical, psychological, social or organisational aspects of a job that reduce job demands and are associated with psychological and physiological costs; they are functional in achieving work goals and stimulating personal growth, learning and development” (Demerouti et al., 2001, p. 501). According to Schaufeli (2015), autonomy, feedback, trust and social support, among other aspects, can be viewed as job resources. Considering that health is the result of reciprocity of demands and resources that can reduce or buffer the negative effects of stress and strain, for educational leaders, an imbalance between demands and resources can result in lower interest in the position and higher turnover intentions (see also Dadaczynski et al., 2020; Dicke et al., 2018).

2.2.2 Educational leaders' personal demands and resources

Schaufeli and Taris (2014) described personal resources as “the psychological characteristics or aspects of the self that are generally associated with resilience and refer to the ability to successfully control and affect one’s environment. Similar to job resources, personal resources are functional in accomplishing work goals and stimulating personal growth and development” (p. 49).

According to Schmitt et al. (2021), personal characteristics are an established component of the JD-R model. They also noted that “in contrast to conceptual and empirical work on personal resources as a personal counterpart of job resources, potentially negative impairing personal characteristics have thus far tended to be neglected” (Schmitt et al., 2021, p. 1). Furthermore, no widely accepted consensus on a definition of *personal demands* has been reached among researchers. Chen and Fellenz (2020) described personal demands as “tangible, social, psychological or symbolic factors that attract individuals’ attention and require physical, cognitive or emotional effort to prevent them from interfering with valued activities or with personal resources required to pursue such activities’ (p. 2). Similarly, Barbier et al. (2013) defined personal demands as “the requirements that individuals set for their own performance and behaviour that force them to invest effort in their work and, therefore, are associated with physical and psychological costs” (p. 751). However, Schmitt et al. (2021) criticised the latter definition, stating that “although being generally parallel with the conceptualisation of job demands, personal demands might not be able to encompass psychologically relevant and potentially demanding conditions. For

example, the definition above implies that “individuals intently act upon ‘setting requirements’” (p. 3). Furthermore, they proposed that “personal demands do not necessarily force individuals to invest effort in their work, but – on the contrary – might even impair such investments” (p. 3). Thus, they have defined personal demands – unlike personal resources – as “the requirements of the self that may impair individual goal attainment” (Schmitt et al., 2021, p. 3). Based on the aforementioned definitions, in the present thesis, personal demands are identified as factors that require effort to prevent interfering with achieving work goals, or with the resources required to achieve these goals, without tying them directly to personal resources.

2.3 Occupational stress and coping

Educational leaders experience more work-related stress than the general population (Mahfouz, 2020; Riley, 2015, 2017, 2020). It seems that regardless of the educational context, the quantitative workload and a lack of time to concentrate on relevant tasks are the main causes of stress for educational leaders. Furthermore, the complexity of leaders’ work caused by managing change (e.g., Mahfouz, 2020), bureaucracy and high work demands along with unreasonable expectations (Leventis et al., 2017), is creating challenges for educational leaders. Furthermore, Darmody and Smyth (2016) found educational leaders’ work-related stress to be related to a complex set of personal characteristics, working conditions, school context and teachers’ work climate.

How we appraise and interpret events defines whether these events can be viewed as psychological or relative stressors in our lives (Khoozani & Hadzic, 2010). With respect to perceived psychological stress and coping, the present thesis is grounded in cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which proposes that individuals’ emotional reactions, behavioural responses and coping efforts are determined by their interpretations of stressful events, i.e., how an individual interprets stressors determines how they respond to them in terms of emotional reactions, behavioural responses and coping efforts (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). “Psychological stress is seen as a particular relationship between person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 19).

Coping, in turn, is viewed as a “process that is sensitive to both the environment and its demands and resources, and to personality dispositions that influence the appraisal of stress and resources for coping” (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004, p. 747). People respond and adapt differently to the same stimuli corresponding to their personal system of interpretation (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). The nature of stressful experiences influences persons individual judgements, along with personal and social resources (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Park & Folkman, 1997).

Coping strategies differ based on the target of cognitive and behavioural efforts that are made to reduce external and internal efforts. According to Folkman and Lazarus (1980), these efforts serve the functions of (1) problem-focused coping by managing or adjusting the person-environment relationship that is the source of stress and (2) emotion-focused coping by regulating stressful emotions. Furthermore, researchers (e.g., Gottlieb & Gignac, 1996; Park & Folkman, 1997) have recognised meaning-focused coping as a process in which cognitive strategies are used to modify a situation's meaning by drawing on values, beliefs and goals. Social coping, which refers to coping responses that are influenced by and in reaction to the social context (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Gottlieb & Bergen, 2010), was integrated into the theory later. Previous research on educational leaders' coping with occupational stress emphasised social interaction by having positive relationships and interactions with staff, students and parents, as well as spending time with friends and family (Mahfouz, 2020). Furthermore, maintaining a balance between work and personal time, taking care of themselves physically and emotionally (Hancock et al., 2019), and in a work context, organising one's work and setting realistic goals (Denecker, 2019) were reported to be effective coping strategies to use to prevent stress among educational leaders. The coping strategies for maintaining occupational well-being are dependent on personal and contextual factors, and particular coping strategies' efficacy should be researched further (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Reed, 2016). Furthermore, to gain a deeper understanding of educational leaders' work-related stress and coping, more qualitative research is needed in addition to surveys with already-established measurement scales (e.g., Drago-Severson et al., 2018; Leventis et al., 2017; Riley, 2015, 2017, 2020).

2.4 Finland's education system

In Finland, every child younger than six has the right to have ECEC, and it is mandatory for children ages 6–7. ECEC is provided mostly by municipalities, but also by private day-care centres and family day care (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2014). Municipalities are also responsible for organising obligatory pre-primary education for children in the year preceding the start of their compulsory education (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2014; Salminen, 2017). The present thesis concentrated on directors working at ECEC centres managed by local municipalities. Pre-primary education is guided by the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2014). and the National Core Curriculum for ECEC 2018 (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019). ECEC providers developed the local curricula based on the national core curriculum. The director of a day-care centre must possess a qualification as an ECEC teacher, possess knowledge about the sector and have adequate management skills. Generally, day-care centre directors' work tasks are to direct and lead staff, oversee daily activities, prepare plans and budgets, and be

responsible for administration. Depending on the municipality's arrangements, directors may need to divide their time between leadership and teaching duties.

Concerning basic education, the national core curriculum (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2004) provides broad guidelines for local curricula, which are developed by the local municipality and school steering committees while considering local needs and perspectives. Each elementary school that provides compulsory basic education (first to ninth grade) has a principal in charge (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1998). Principals' work descriptions and staff sizes diverge based on varying contexts and the organising body. Principals are required to have a master's degree and pedagogical qualification, appropriate work experience and a certificate in educational administration or an equivalent (Paronen & Lappi, 2018).

Extant research on educational leaders and their work in the Finnish context is limited. Some issues that researchers have focused on include, for example, leadership practices in general (Ahtiainen et al., 2019), examining principals' views on leadership practices (Fonsén, 2019) and management systems at school, pedagogical leadership, job descriptions, principals' qualifications and in-service training (Lahtero, 2011; Lahtero et al., 2017). Furthermore, Hujala and Eskelinen (2013) and Hujala et al. (2016) described school leaders' tasks in the ECEC context in their research review. In addition, curriculum development (Uljens, 2017) and implementation (Lahtero et al., 2021) have captured researchers' attention.

3 THE AIM OF THIS THESIS

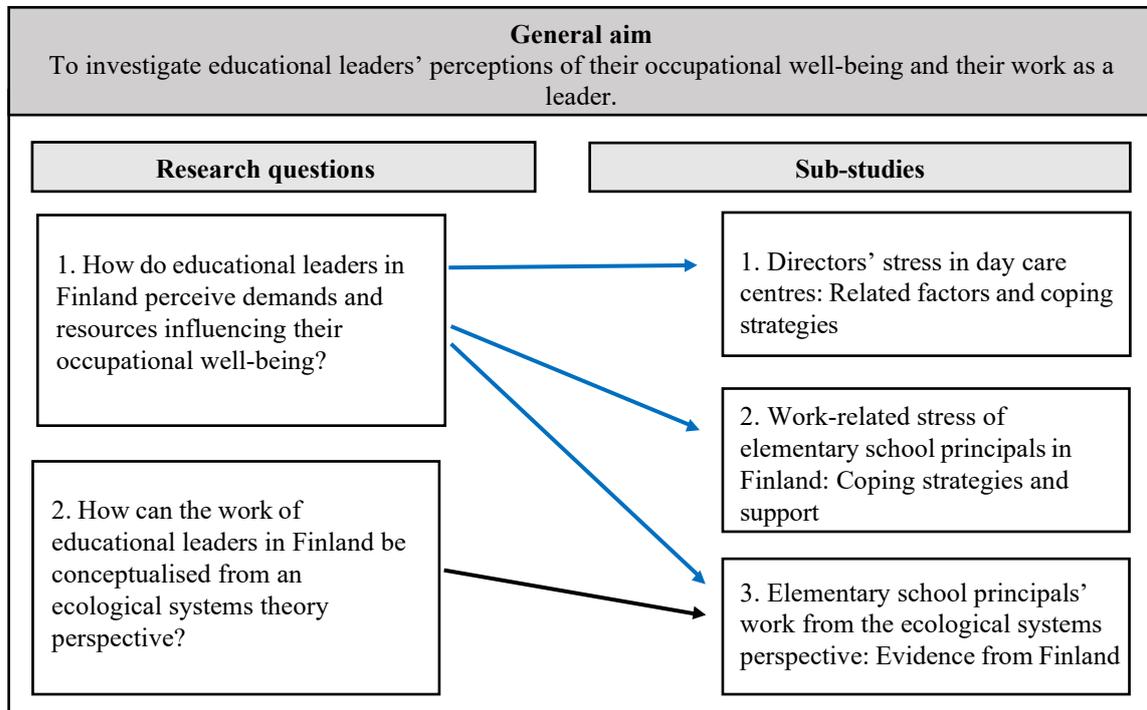
The research on educational leaders' well-being and their perceptions of their work has been limited internationally, and even less extant empirical research is available in the Finnish context. To fill this research gap, the present thesis intends to contribute to the educational leadership field by investigating educational leaders' perceptions of their work and occupational well-being. Considering that most of the existing research has been conducted using quantitative methods, using a qualitative, open-ended style can expand our understanding of the phenomenon beyond the limits of ready-made measurement scales. Based on the results, this thesis offers practical suggestions on how educational leaders' well-being could be promoted on different levels of their work-related ecological system and who could promote it.

The precise research questions were as follows:

1. How do educational leaders in Finland perceive personal and job demands and resources that influence their occupational well-being (Sub-studies 1, 2 and 3)?
2. How can educational leaders' work in Finland be conceptualised from an ecological systems theory perspective (Sub-study 3)?

The aforementioned research questions were targeted in three sub-studies. The relation among the general aim, research questions and empirical studies are presented in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2. The relation among the general aim, research questions and empirical studies.



4 METHOD

Grounded on the social constructivist paradigm, the present thesis is qualitative to a large extent to best present educational leaders' perceptions of their work and occupational well-being. The choice of methods aimed to elicit educational leaders' voice and perceptions effectively, with particular attention paid to not over-interpreting the qualitative data to best ensure researchers' objectivity in constructing the image of participants' experiences (Boyland, 2019). Furthermore, the universal result was not expected, as according to the social constructivist paradigm persons perceptions are highly individual and formed in social, historical and cultural contexts through actions and discourse (Young & Collin, 2004).

4.1 Participants and procedure

Data for the sub-studies were drawn from a larger project that investigated teacher and student stress, as well as classroom interactions (TESSI; Lerkkanen & Pakarinen, 2021). This study followed the same children, their teachers and parents, as well as educational leaders in settings spanning kindergarten through early school years. Altogether, 18 day-care centre directors and 76 elementary school principals participated in these studies. In addition to holding '*educational leadership positions*' in their context, day care centre directors and school principals both seems to experience high levels of stress. Also, the causes of stress and coping strategies were much alike. Therefore, they were considered and treated as homogeneous group of '*educational leaders*.'

The data for Sub-study 1 were collected in spring 2017 from 18 day-care centre directors (all females) from four different municipalities in Central Finland. All participants signed a consent form and filled out a questionnaire containing open- and closed-ended questions. Participants' work experience as centre directors varied from 0.5 to 35 years ($M = 11.22$; $SD = 10.5$). Six participants

were leading one centre, nine were leading two centres and three currently were leading three different centres. Furthermore, five participants did not have any leadership or management-related education, 10 had basic leadership studies education, three had received ECEC-oriented in-service leadership training. Eight participants had participated in other in-service training in the past two years and 10 had not followed any additional in-service training.

The data for Sub-study 2 were collected in spring 2018 and spring 2019 from 76 elementary school principals (38 male, 34 female and four who did not disclose gender) from 12 municipalities via questionnaires. All participants completed and signed a consent form. The principals' work experience varied from 1 to 29 years ($M = 11$, $SD = 7.6$), the number of staff in their schools varied from two to 130 people ($M = 38$; $SD = 31$) and the number of students in each school varied from 18 to 1,030 ($M = 372$, $SD = 290$). From all 76 participants 46 principals reported leading one school unit, 10 were leading two, five reported leading three and one principal reported leading five different units. No information was provided on the number of units led by four participants.

The data for Sub-study 3 were collected in autumn 2019 from 22 elementary school principals (six males, 16 females). Originally, 137 principals were asked to participate in the study. Interview times were scheduled with every participant personally and were conducted in person. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants' work experience as a principal ranged from one to 29 years ($M = 13$, $SD = 9$, data from one participant was missing), though they worked in their current schools from one to 19 years ($M = 7.7$, $SD = 5.9$). The number of students in each school varied from 30 to 1,030 ($M = 344$, $SD = 277.6$), and the number of staff members varied from four to 180 ($M = 40.6$, $SD = 39.8$, data from one participant was missing). Thirteen principals were leading one school unit, six were leading two and two were leading three. One participant provided no information on the number of units they led.

4.2 Instruments

In Sub-study 1, the sources of work-related stress and coping strategies were measured by asking following open-ended questions, 'What causes you the most stress at work?' and 'What are your ways of coping with work-related stress?' The responses varied from very brief descriptions of one to five words, to answers of more than 50 words. Quantitative data were collected via the same questionnaire using Likert scale questions with the following measures: *burnout* using a shortened Finnish version of the nine-item Bergen Burnout Inventory (BBI-9; Salmela-Aro et al., 2011); *experience of stress* with the question: 'Stress means a situation in which a person feels excited, restless, nervous or anxious or has difficulties in sleeping when something is bothering them. Do you feel this kind of stress at the moment?' (Elo et al., 2003; Länsikallio et al., 2018); *recovery*

from work with the Recovery Experience Questionnaire (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007); and *work engagement* was measured using nine items from the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

In Sub-study 2, data were collected via questionnaire, including the following open-ended questions: (1) What causes you the most stress at work? (2) What ways do you use to cope with work-related stress? (3) What kind of support do you feel you need for your leadership? Responses ranged from one to more than 50 words.

Data for Sub-study 3 were collected by conducting semi-structured interviews. Earlier empirical research results and the larger project's scope and goals were taken into account when designing the interview questions and structure, resulting in a combination of topics, including stress experience, support, issues related to working climate and environment, own expertise appraisal and skills development. The interview questions and structure's suitability was ensured by conducting two pilot interviews with principals who fit the sample by their demographics. All interviews were conducted in person, audio-recorded (44 to 84 minutes each) and transcribed verbatim (311 pages of text, Times New Roman 12, line spacing 1.0).

4.3 Data analysis

Sub-study 1 was conducted using a convergent mixed-method design to compare quantitative statistical results with qualitative findings to develop a complete understanding of the research problem (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Qualitative and quantitative data were collected via the same questionnaire but analysed separately and independently from each other. Considering the sample size of 18 day-care centre directors, using a mixed-methods design (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2018) enabled gaining a deeper understanding of causes of stress, coping strategies and factors associated with their occupational well-being. Problem-driven content analysis with abductive reasoning was used to analyse qualitative data (Krippendorff, 2013). The analysis was "guided by research questions that aimed to elicit answers from the data" (Krippendorff, 2013, p. 355). After formulating the research questions, relevant meaning units were identified by reading the data several times. The meaning units with similar content then were placed under subthemes and main themes. Finally, the existing literature was examined to detect the extent to which the data were related to existing theories (Krippendorff, 2013; Patton, 2015). With respect to the quantitative data, associations among the variables were investigated using correlation analysis (Spearman's correlation). Directors' stress, burnout, work engagement and recovery from work were compared in terms of their level of leadership training and participation in in-service training by using the nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis test and the Mann-Whitney *U* test.

In Sub-study 2, the principals' answers to open-ended questions were analysed by using qualitative content analysis with inductive reasoning. The

chosen method enabled gaining a more personalised view of different factors that influence principals' occupational well-being as a phenomenon studied most often using surveys (e.g., Drago-Severson et al., 2018; Riley, 2015, 2017, 2020). First, the relevant text units addressing the research questions were identified from the data using open coding, i.e., coding the data in every possible way (Glaser, 2016) to remain open to the data, label concepts and define and develop themes without over-interpreting them. Furthermore, open coding was used to maximise objectivity and minimise the influence of coders' own experience and background. After reviewing the existing literature to determine the extent to which the data supported existing theories, conceptualisations and/or results, analyses of principals' causes of stress remained inductive throughout the analytical process. An analysis of both principals' coping strategies and support needs was guided by Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) cognitive appraisal theory, which enables detection of similar factors in principals' coping strategies and support needs. Furthermore, intercoder reliability was calculated and found to be high (93%).

The semi-structured interview data of Sub-study 3 were analysed using inductive reasoning with theory-driven content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013; Patton, 2015). Like for Sub-study 2, open coding was used to maximise the principals' own voices in describing the ecological system of their work in finding text units with relevant content from interview transcripts. As a result of investigating the existing literature, Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1989) EST was used to describe principals' work-related ecological system, and the JD-R model (Demerouti et al., 2001; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) was used to analyse their perceptions of different elements of their work. Furthermore, intercoder reliability was calculated - first, per paragraph about emerging elements of work-related ecological systems (85%), and second, to determine whether the elements were experienced as demands or resources (94.5%).

TABLE 1. Overview of the sub-studies.

Sub-study	Aim	Research questions	Participants and data	Data analysis
1. Directors' stress in day-care centres: Related factors and coping strategies	To explore what causes stress for day-care centre directors and what are their coping strategies with stress as well as to examine the extent to which they experience work-related stress and the factors associated with their work-related stress.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To what extent do directors report experiencing work-related stress, and what is its association with burnout, work engagement and recovery from work? 2. What are day-care centre directors' self-reported sources of work-related stress and coping strategies? 3. What is the role of professional training in directors' work-related stress, work engagement and recovery from work? 	Answers to open-ended and Likert-scale questions asked from 18 day care-centre directors via questionnaire.	<p>Convergent mixed-method design:</p> <p>Qualitative: problem-driven content analysis with abductive reasoning.</p> <p>Quantitative: correlation analysis, nonparametric tests.</p>
2. Work-related stress of elementary school principals in Finland: Coping strategies and support	To investigate elementary school principals' self-reported causes of work-related stress, their coping strategies to deal with stress and their perceptions of the support they need for their leadership.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the work-related stressors that principals experience? 2. How do principals cope with work-related stress? 3. What supportive elements do principals need for their leadership? 	Seventy-six elementary school principals' answers to open-ended questions on a questionnaire.	Theory and data-driven qualitative content analysis.
3. Elementary school principals' work from an ecological systems perspective: Evidence from Finland	To investigate principals' insights into their work from the ecological systems theory perspective, as well as which elements of their work are experienced as demands or resources.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How can principals' work be described from the ecological systems theory perspective? 2. Which elements of the system are experienced as demands and resources? 	Semi-structured interview transcripts of 22 elementary school principals.	Theory-driven qualitative content analysis with inductive reasoning.

5 OVERVIEW OF THE ORIGINAL STUDIES

5.1 Sub-study 1. Directors' stress in day-care centres: Related factors and coping strategies

Sub-study 1 aimed to explore day-care centre directors' causes of stress and their coping strategies. Furthermore, the study examined the extent to which directors experience work-related stress and burnout, and the factors associated with their work-related stress, engagement and recovery from work. The study addressed the research gap in the literature on the causes of work-related stress among day-care centre directors, their coping strategies and factors associated with work-related stress and how to support directors in ECEC settings.

Altogether, 18 day-care centre directors participated in the study, which was conducted using a convergent mixed-method approach. Qualitative data were analysed using problem-driven content analysis, and quantitative data were analysed using correlation analysis and non-parametric tests.

Over 50% of participants reported experiencing stress at least to some extent, those participants were also more exhausted and felt inadequate and less engaged in their work compared with other participants. Leading oneself or others, lack of social support and managing change were reported as the main sources of stress. Furthermore, maintaining a balance between administrative tasks and dealing with various demands from stakeholders seem to create challenges for directors. In addition, leading others seemed to be one major cause of stress. It seems that the constantly changing nature of the ECEC field creates challenges for directors. Managing change was described as one cause of stress in addition to a lack of social support at the municipality level and from colleagues.

Three main themes describing directors' coping strategies with stress emerged from the data: leading oneself; leading others; and social support. Leading oneself was divided into professional (prioritising tasks, organising one's own work and keeping workdays at a reasonable length) and personal

(being physically active and keeping work and leisure time separate). Leading others refers to sharing leadership tasks and creating and applying commonly agreed-upon practices. Professional social support and personal social support were valued highly and described by participants as effective coping strategies. Professional social support refers to support from colleagues and those on the municipality level, and personal social support refers to support from friends and family, as well as social relationships. Quantitative analyses indicated that directors who had undergone leadership training were experiencing higher levels of recovery from work than those who had not. Furthermore, those who received in-service training in the previous two years was related to lower stress and exhaustion experience. The findings provided valuable insight on causes of directors' work-related stress, coping strategies and related factors. The results indicate that support and in-service training providers should consider directors' opinions about what is needed for them to succeed.

5.2 Sub-study 2. Work-related stress of elementary school principals in Finland: coping strategies and support

Sub-study 2 aimed to offer insight into elementary school principals' occupational well-being in a qualitative manner. The overarching aim was to investigate elementary school principals' self-reported causes of stress, their coping strategies for dealing with stress and their perceptions of the support they need for the success of their leadership. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse 76 participants' answers to open-ended questions on a questionnaire.

Analysis indicated that principals viewed quantitative workload and insufficient time resources for tasks they find important as challenges. The results emphasised social factors' role in principals' work. The main causes of stress were related to interpersonal conflicts regarding human resources management and student affairs. Furthermore, spending time with friends and family, and communication at work and in general were viewed as important coping strategies. Participants also noted that social support was needed from colleagues at school, other principals in the field and supervisors.

Furthermore, insufficient human and financial resources and, in some cases, internal pressures (e.g., health concerns and feelings of inadequacy) were noted as causes of stress for principals. Results indicated that principals are dealing with their work-related stressors by using emotion-, problem-focused and social coping actions. In addition to reaching out and receiving social support, principals used emotion-focused coping to manage stressful emotions and problem-focused coping to handle person-environment relationships. The results also indicate that principals greatly value problem-focused and social support. Furthermore, principals' coping actions are taking place after their workday during their free time by, for instance, spending time with family or concentrating on alternative activities.

The results indicated that principals highly value collaboration at different levels, which could be promoted through relevant informational support. Extra resources (time and human) are needed to facilitate principals' participation in in-service training. It seems that because of confidentiality issues, being a principal can be a lonely position for many despite the amount of social interaction involved.

5.3 Sub-study 3. Elementary school principals' work from the ecological systems perspective: evidence from Finland

Sub-study 3 aimed to investigate how elementary school principals' work can be described from an ecological systems theory perspective and which elements of their work are experienced as resources and demands. The transcripts from 22 semi-structured interviews of principals were analysed using qualitative theory-driven content analyses.

First, analyses concerning principals' experiences regarding their work-related ecological system were guided by Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1989) EST. Principals' self-reported elements of their work were identified and placed in interconnected structures surrounding the principal at the centre. The results indicate that principals experience their work in the microsystem as comprising everyday interactions with and among students, teachers, guardians, the work community in general, the management team at the school, other principals and staff, superiors and other facets. One-sided interaction with resources, other principals, those on the upper administrative level, superiors and legislation were noted as factors involved in the exosystem. The macrosystem comprises society, school context and publicity, which principals experienced as an overall element that impacts principals' work, but over which they have no control. Moreover, life history, work experience, education background and future vision were viewed as elements that influence how principals experience their work at this point in time in the chronosystem. Furthermore, some elements also appeared under different ecological systems, depending on how the principal experienced the interactions.

Second, the JD-R model guided an analysis concerning which elements of principals' work were experienced as resources and demands (Demerouti et al., 2001; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Notably, some elements can be experienced as both resources and demands, indicating the individual nature of principals' experiences. On the individual level, internal influences – such as, beliefs and personality, absorption, feelings of adequacy, health and recovery from work – affect how principals experience different elements of their work. Some of the most extensive demands that principals face appeared in the microsystem and were found to be related to interactions with different stakeholders in situations in which the principals played the role of mediator in resolving situations involving conflict, between teachers or among teachers, students and/or parents

or guardians. Furthermore, when interactions with supervisors and other principals in the field were experienced as elements belonging to the microsystem (daily interactions), they also could be experienced as resources, demonstrating the importance of support from supervisors and other principals. However, when these elements were placed in the exosystem (one-sided interactions), the interactions were experienced as demanding. Moreover, principals reported having demanding experiences caused by insufficient cooperation with social workers, other support providers and police from whom principals need support mainly to handle challenging student affairs. Furthermore, in relation to creating new comprehensive schools and solving problems involving old school premises, principals can find themselves in the middle of a construction project for which they do not have training nor appropriate professional help. The results also confirmed the importance of having available resources.

Principals' perceptions of their work also are influenced by physical and socioeconomic environments. The effects seem positive when these environments are perceived as supportive factors. However, they also can be challenging in terms of the student population and the socioeconomic context, as well as when large school units and out-of-date or unsafe physical environments create challenges that principals must face. Furthermore, society's overall attitudes towards school and education seem to affect principals' work in several ecological systems. For example, this may be one reason behind problematic interactions with parents or guardians, as their behaviour has been described as demanding and, in some cases, even offensive towards principals.

How principals currently experience their work is influenced by their education, work, personal history and future vision. Accumulating work experience seems to impact principals' perceptions positively. Also, more-experienced principals view conflicting social situations as less stressful, which may imply that offering support to principals in their early years on the job may reduce pressures and help them concentrate on relevant tasks, as well as prevent challenges from surfacing on the individual level, such as, turnover intentions or feelings of inadequacy.

Overall, the study's results demonstrated how principals' perceptions of their work are highly individualistic, as is the interplay between several internal and external factors. A significant number of challenges seems to be associated with interpersonal conflicts and related to elements over which they have no control.

6 GENERAL DISCUSSION

The importance and complexity associated with educational leaders' roles in conducting their duties in challenging and constantly changing educational environments are recognised and supported by research evidence (e.g., Connolly et al., 2019; Leithwood et al., 2020). Simultaneously, educational leaders' occupational well-being is being threatened by changing roles and working conditions (Beusaert et al., 2021), growing workloads and lack of time to concentrate on pedagogical leadership (Riley, 2020), among other factors. However, in the Finnish context, a limited, but growing, amount of research has been conducted on educational leaders' work (e.g., Ahtiainen et al., 2019; Fonsén, 2019; Hujala & Eskelinen, 2013; Lahtero et al., 2021), and even less on their perceptions of their work and occupational well-being. Internationally, leaders' well-being has been related to teachers and students' achievement and well-being, as well as the quality of education institutions' functioning (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019). Thus far, most research, particularly longitudinal, has been conducted using surveys and ready-made measurement scales. As Earley (2020) noted, a more personal approach (Earley, 2020) is needed to gain a deeper understanding of educational leaders' experience with different factors that influence their occupational well-being. Consequently, this thesis aimed to investigate educational leaders' perceptions of their occupational well-being and work as leaders.

With respect to the social constructivist paradigm, the results indicate that educational leaders' perceptions are influenced by numerous personal and contextual factors, as well as by interactions with different stakeholders. Also, the same elements of their work, for instance, availability of resources and school context, can be perceived differently depending on the aforementioned factors. Furthermore, the findings indicate that the most extensive demands placed for educational leaders are related to interpersonal relationships and interactions with and between different stakeholders, as well as dealing with elements or issues that leaders either cannot influence or control. Furthermore, both physical self-care and emotional self-care seem to be essential for balancing demands and resources and, thus, maintaining well-being.

6.1 Educational leaders' occupational well-being from the demands and resources perspective

To answer the first research question – how do educational leaders in Finland perceive personal and job demands and resources influencing their occupational well-being? – the results from all three sub-studies were integrated and described using the JD-R model (Demerouti et al., 2001; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), with supplementation of personal demands (Chen & Fellenz, 2020), because some of the reported demands were not job-related, but more personal in nature. An example of this analytical process can be found in the results from Studies 1 and 2, in which the causes of stress were identified as personal and/or job demands and coping strategies as personal and/or job resources. Furthermore, principals' perceptions of the elements in their work-related ecological system were grouped, depending on content, under demands or resources.

The results indicate that educational leaders' perceptions of their work can be described through personal and job-related resources, and personal and job demands (see Table 2). Furthermore, leaders' experience with personal and job demands, and resources does not seem dependent on whether they work in ECEC or school settings, which implies that they can be viewed as a homogeneous group to some extent. Personal and job-related demands and resources are discussed further in the following chapters.

TABLE 2. Educational leaders' perceptions of the demands and resources involved in their work.

PERSONAL RESOURCES	JOB RESOURCES
<p><i>Having an outlet outside of work (1, 2, 3)*</i>: physical activity; hobbies; changing the environment</p> <p><i>Friends and family (1, 2, 3)</i>: support from and spending time with friends and family</p> <p><i>Setting boundaries (1, 2, 3)</i>: separation of work from leisure time; work-life balance; keeping workdays at a reasonable length</p> <p><i>Taking care of one's own well-being (1, 2, 3)</i>: Sufficient free time; rest; relaxation; sleep/good nutrition</p> <p><i>Work management (1, 2, 3)</i>: prioritising; organising one's work; micro-breaks; leaving the workplace</p> <p><i>Social interaction (1, 2, 3)</i>: talking; having conversations; social relationships</p> <p><i>Internal features (2, 3)</i>: humour; positive future vision; absorption; feeling of adequacy; self-esteem; attitude towards work; nature and beliefs; establishing a beneficial mindset</p>	<p><i>Internal social capital (1, 2, 3)</i>: cooperation in the workplace; shared leadership; commonly agreed-upon practices; support from and communication with colleagues; positive feedback; trust; management team at school</p> <p><i>External social capital (1, 2, 3)</i>: communication and cooperation with those on the upper administrative level; positive feedback; trust; supervisor support (interaction, assistance, appreciation, feelings of being trusted and supported)</p> <p><i>Pre- and in-service training (1, 2, 3)</i>: leadership training; basic studies of leadership; other in-service training</p> <p><i>Informational support (2, 3)</i>: instructions/guidelines; new ideas; relevant information; constructive feedback</p> <p><i>Availability of financial, human and time resources (1, 2, 3)</i>: skilful employees; resources in general; time</p> <p><i>External facets (3)</i>: collaboration with social workers and other support providers</p> <p><i>School context (2, 3)</i>: school size; socioeconomic context; and physical environment</p>
PERSONAL DEMANDS	JOB DEMANDS
<p><i>Internal pressures (2, 3)</i>: beliefs and nature; feelings of inadequacy; absorption</p> <p><i>Physical well-being (2, 3)</i>: health concerns; age; sleep/good nutrition</p> <p><i>Setting boundaries (1, 2, 3)</i>: balance between work and leisure time and work and family</p>	<p><i>Interpersonal interaction (1, 2, 3)</i>: human resources management; student affairs; interaction with and between different stakeholders</p> <p><i>External social capital (1, 2, 3)</i>: lack of support from supervisor and those on the upper administrative level (implementing new curriculum, need for clearer guidelines)</p> <p><i>Workload (1, 2, 3)</i>: balancing tasks and available time; multiplicity of tasks; transformations; work's seasonal nature</p> <p><i>Availability of resources (1, 2, 3)</i>: procuring and securing resources; lack of financial, human and time resources</p> <p><i>Managing change (1, 2, 3)</i>: new position; planning a new school</p> <p><i>Interaction with other facets (3)</i>: social workers and other support providers; police; construction project-related; evening activities on school premises</p> <p><i>Publicity (3)</i>: coverage and communication with local and social media; being in the spotlight in the local community</p> <p><i>School context (2, 3)</i>: school size; socioeconomic context and physical environment; challenging student body</p>

Note: *Sub-study 1, Sub-study 2 and Sub-study 3 in the present thesis.

6.1.1 Educational leaders' job demands

The findings from the present thesis indicated that educational leaders' job demands were related to interpersonal interactions, availability of resources, workload, managing change, legislation, lack of support from supervisors and those on the upper administrative level, interactions with other factors, publicity and school context, which are, to a large extent, in line with earlier empirical research results in an international context. According to Bakker and Demerouti (2018a), workload, complex tasks and conflicts are aspects of a job that require energy expenditures and, therefore, are viewed as job demands. In some cases, job demands can be viewed as a counterpart to job resources and, similarly, to job resources, dependent on context. For example, a supervisor is experienced as a job resource when the needed support and trust are received, but as a job demand when great physical/mental distances or unfair treatment is experienced. The same applies to school context and availability of resources, both of which can be found under job demands or job resources depending on the content of the leaders' descriptions.

The difficulty in managing relationships with all the stakeholders is one of the challenges that educational leaders face (Tintore et al., 2020). Similarly, the present thesis results indicated that the issues related to interpersonal interactions and external social capital cause work-related stress for educational leaders in both the ECEC and school contexts and, therefore, are viewed as job demands. The universal challenge of heavy workloads and lack of time to concentrate on pedagogical leadership has been observed internationally and across education systems (e.g., Beusaert et al., 2021; Dadaczynski et al., 2020; Darmody & Smyth, 2016; Riley, 2020), suggesting that educational leaders' work description should be reviewed carefully in light of the balance between the amount and content of tasks, and the financial, time and human resources available. Similarly, in the Finnish context, leaders struggle with time constraints as they try to concentrate on the issues, they deem relevant, such as, pedagogical leadership and communicating more with staff, students and guardians. The present thesis results suggest that communication and collaboration with external facets (social workers and other support providers) are job demands when collaboration is experienced as insufficient, which challenges a leader's capacity to handle complicated student affairs. Furthermore, educational leaders experienced job demands in managing change, associated with being new in the position or managing construction of a new school building and all other administrative issues related to such a transformation.

Given the likelihood that school leaders will face challenges related to ongoing changes, they will be required to lead others in managing and adapting to change, as well as in changing themselves in ways that may lie beyond their present internal capacities, leaving them feeling stressed, overwhelmed and inadequate (Drago-Severson et al., 2018). Furthermore, as schools and day-care centres play an important role in the local community and in society, leaders' activities are covered in local and social media. According to leaders, the challenge arises in the case of negative coverage, which starts to 'live its own life',

and they lose control over it. As individuals well-known in local communities, particularly in smaller municipalities, educational leaders are also in the spotlight during their free time when, for example, grocery shopping or training. Some school leaders viewed this lack of privacy as a job demand. School context also is an important element that influences educational leaders' experiences with their work (Darmody & Smyth, 2016). In line with the earlier literature, the present thesis results indicated that school size, troublesome socioeconomic contexts and physical environment can be viewed as demanding elements of leaders' work (see also Berkowitz et al., 2017; Tamadoni et al., 2021).

6.1.2 Educational leaders' personal demands in their job

Results from the present thesis indicate that personal demands influencing educational leaders' perceptions of their work are related to internal pressures – such as , personal beliefs and nature, feelings of inadequacy and absorption – when they prevent leaders from keeping work and private time separate, and to issues related to physical well-being, for instance, health concerns, age and recovery from work, which were experienced as sources of work-related stress. Furthermore, setting boundaries – more precisely, the ability and possibility of maintaining a balance between work and leisure time and work and family – is creating challenges for educational leaders. When some of the aforementioned demands are in balance with work and personal resources, they can be viewed as 'positive' stressors that stimulate individual enthusiasm for personal challenges and reduce occupational stress (Waqas et al., 2019). However, without balance, they directly influence educational leaders' well-being (Schmitt et al., 2021). In the present thesis, personal beliefs, feelings of inadequacy and absorption might be viewed as such demands. For example, absorption can be experienced as a supportive element, but when not being supported by resources, it can be viewed as a demanding aspect of work.

The relevance of achieving a balance between work and leisure time is emphasised by the evidence that most recovery from work seems to take place during leaders' free time by having an outlet and meaningful relationships outside of work. Work-life conflict has been proven to generate stress and reduce job satisfaction, and work-life balance, in turn, is related to lower stress levels (Sirgy & Lee, 2018). According to Bakker and de Vries (2021), people with sufficient personal resources – for example proactive personality referring to “taking initiative to have an impact on their environment” (p. 12) and emotional intelligence by “being highly conscious of their own emotional states, and able to identify and manage them” (p. 13) – are handling emotional personal demands more effectively. Similarly, Drago-Severson et al. (2018) highlighted the effect from internal dimensions of leadership (e.g., how leaders feel about school colleagues and themselves) in relation to targeting challenges in their work.

6.1.3 Educational leaders' resources in their job

The present thesis results indicate that educational leaders' job resources include internal and external social capital; informational support; pre- and in-service training; availability of financial, human and time resources; collaboration with external factors; and school context. Educational leaders' work is social in nature, including a large amount of social interaction with different stakeholders (Tintoré et al., 2020); therefore, social capital's importance as a job resource is not surprising. Sufficient social capital may predict better mental and physical health (Ehsan et al., 2018), foster self-esteem, provide social support, expand access to resources and buffer stress (Ziersch et al., 2005), thereby nurturing occupational well-being. Having both internal (within the school or day-care centre) and external (crossing the institution and hierarchy levels) social capital appears to be an important job resource. The present thesis findings indicate that internal social capital emerges from collaboration and shared leadership, support from and communication with colleagues, receiving positive feedback and experiencing trust. External social capital comprises communication and collaboration with the upper administrative level and perceived trust and support from supervisors. Similarly, Beausaert et al. (2021) noted that "if principals can rely on colleagues in the school and the broader community of stakeholders, the support will help them face the increasing demands that tax their well-being" (p. 11). However, the value of job resources depends on context. What changes in the context is not the resource as such, but rather its effect (Van Veldhoven et al. 2020), according to the present thesis findings, if leaders view internal social capital as insufficient, it is not received as a job resource anymore, but rather as a job demand.

In addition to social resources, informational support and pre- and in-service training help leaders achieve work goals and stimulate personal growth. Informational support from the upper administrative level and supervisors may ease feelings of loneliness caused by decision-making obligations and confidentiality issues. Participating in in-service training offers leaders a source of information, as do forums that provide unofficial communication with other leaders in the field who also may be struggling with similar problems – a setting in which experiences and effective practices can be shared.

Furthermore, receiving constructive feedback from different stakeholders helps leaders assess their current situation and make decisions. In addition, when experienced as favourable, leaders viewed school context (e.g., size, socioeconomic context, physical environment) as a supportive element in their work, but notably, job resources are not always a fixed positive element of the job, and having more job resources is not always beneficial, as the number of resources should be in balance with demands and personal needs, (e.g., offering social support) to a person who does not need any might elicit feelings of incompetence and restricts one's freedom of choice (Van Veldhoven et al., 2020). Furthermore, some resources (e.g., available financial resources) will increase well-being and performance, as they increase until a certain level, when their

effects stop, indicating that to support educational leaders, the effect of and need for certain resources should be assessed on a regular basis.

6.1.4 Educational leaders' personal resources in their job

The results from all three sub-studies indicate that educational leaders view having outlets outside of work, spending time with and getting support from friends and family, setting boundaries, taking care of one's own well-being, work management and social relationships as personal resources. Furthermore, internal features – such as humour, positive future vision, absorption, feelings of adequacy, self-esteem, attitudes towards work, nature and beliefs, and establishing a beneficial mindset – were viewed as personal resources (see Studies 2 and 3).

According to Harris and Jones (2020), self-care and consideration must be the main priorities for all school leaders because leaders who take care of their own health and well-being will be able to support others (see also Drago-Severson et al., 2018). The present thesis results indicate that leaders are aware of and are acting on the need to nurture personal resources to balance job and personal demands. For example, both day-care centre directors and school principals viewed having an outlet outside of work by being physically active, having a hobby and changing their environment as important coping strategies/personal resources for handling work-related stress. However, some evidence indicates that in some cases, no energy or time remains for such activities related to heavy workloads and emotional pressures. Similarly, Mahfouz (2020) noted that investing in self-care can elicit unpleasant feelings, such as guilt, when leaders invest time in relaxing or working on their hobbies.

The importance of having meaningful and supportive social relationships (social capital) can foster well-being and general health (Beausaert et al., 2021). In accordance with Mahfouz (2020), the present thesis results indicate that receiving support and spending time with friends and family and social interaction (without clarifying the target or source) are highly valued personal resources among educational leaders. Furthermore, internal features – such as, humour, positive future vision, absorption and positive attitude towards work – were experienced as resources. Similarly, Burke et al. (2022) stated that leaders who manage their emotions and reflect on their work's meaningfulness can help them cope with stress more effectively. Furthermore, work management and setting boundaries emerged as personal resources for balancing leaders' demands and well-being (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014).

Based on our findings, it can be suggested that prioritising, organising one's work, taking micro-breaks during the workday and setting boundaries by keeping work and leisure time separate are strategies that educational leaders can use to control their environment successfully and, therefore, are viewed as personal resources. The results imply that leaders are aware of their responsibility to take care of their physical and mental well-being, and are acting on that. However, in some cases, heavy workloads and long workdays hinder these actions, implying that leaders' work descriptions should be reviewed and

adapted with respect to workloads and available time, and opportunities to contribute to well-being should be offered to leaders when needed.

6.2 Educational leaders' work from an ecological systems theory perspective

The second research question of the thesis pertained to how educational leaders in Finland perceive their work from an ecological systems theory perspective. Sub-study 3's findings indicated that leaders' perceptions of work elements and interactions are multidimensional and can be described through five interrelated systems surrounding the person in the centre. Elements of the leaders' work were placed into different ecological systems based on the leaders' perceptions of their relationship with them as follows.

Starting at the personal level, leaders' experience of their work is influenced by several individual factors and personal characteristics. According to the leaders' descriptions, such elements can include beliefs and personality, health, age, recovery from work, feelings of adequacy/inadequacy and absorption. The significance of personal characteristics – such as age, length of service (Darmody & Smyth, 2016) and social-emotional dimensions, such as “inter- and intrapersonal work” (Drago-Severson et al., 2018, p. 318) – in leaders' perceptions of their work has been recognised in an international context. Furthermore, Leithwood et al. (2020) asserted that a “set of cognitive, social and psychological ‘personal leadership resources’ could explain a high proportion of variation in the practices enacted by school leaders” (p. 15). Moving farther out from the personal level, the *microsystem* comprises those elements that leaders described as having immediate relationships and everyday interactions. These elements include students, teachers, parents and guardians, the working community in general, the management team at the school, other principals and staff, superiors and other external factors (social workers and other support providers), including the police. Furthermore, interactions between teachers, between students and teachers, between guardians and teachers and among students, guardians and teachers formed independent elements that leaders described as belonging to a microsystem. For example, effective collaboration and communication inside these groups ease leaders' work on an everyday basis.

The elements with which leaders described having one-sided interactions that affected their work fell within the *exosystem*, for instance, lack of availability of resourced interactions with upper administrative-level and superiors (i.e., insufficient interactions leading to mental and/or physical distance). Laws and legislations also were described as such elements. Cultural and social elements that leaders cannot control were placed into the macrosystem. Leaders described society, school context and publicity as overarching cultural and/or social elements that they cannot control, but which indirectly influence their work and, therefore, belong to the *macrosystem*. For example, being prominent in a local

community (particularly in smaller municipalities), including during their free time; being covered on social and in local news media, and schools' socioeconomic context were mentioned as such elements. Finally, the *chronosystem* involves life history, work experience, education background and future vision as elements described as influencing how leaders experience their work throughout all ecological systems at this point in time. With respect to the personal nature of leaders' experiences, some elements appear under different ecological systems, for example, when described as part of the microsystem (everyday interaction), superiors were viewed as an important support for leaders, but also as a demand when placed in the ecosystem (interactions experienced as one-sided) because of insufficient or nonexistent support and physical and/or mental distance. The same also applies to collaborations with other facets (see Figure 3).

The present thesis findings are in line with earlier international literature (Darmody & Smyth, 2016; Drago-Severson et al., 2018; Tintoré et al., 2020) with respect to noting that educational leaders' work comprises numerous responsibilities and a large quantity of interactions with various stakeholders. The growing workload and lack of time to concentrate on educational leadership have proved to be problematic for leaders in different countries and education contexts (Riley, 2015, 2017, 2020). According to Beusaert et al. (2021), the broad variety of roles and tasks threatens leaders' mental health and occupational well-being. For example, research is needed on leaders' professional roles and developmental needs (Beusaert et al., 2021), how leaders' backgrounds affect their stress levels (Burke et al., 2022) and contextual issues' roles (Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017). Describing educational leaders' perceptions of their work based on EST provides an all-inclusive perspective on the content of educational leaders' work.

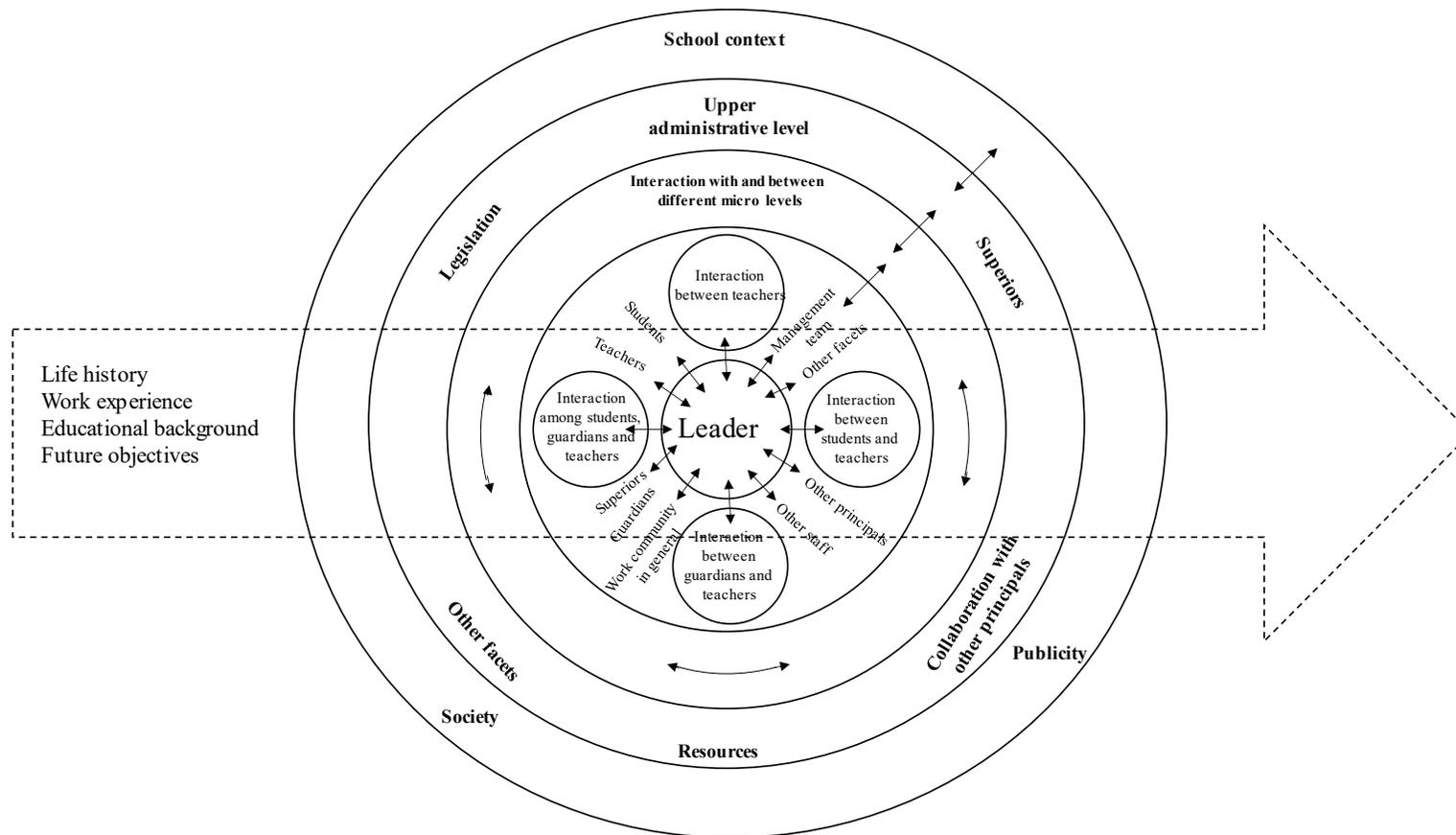


FIGURE 3 Educational leaders' work-related ecological system.

6.3 Practical implications to promote educational leaders' occupational well-being

Considering the individual nature of leaders' experience, it should be noted that no easy one-size-fits-all solutions to educational leaders' challenges exist, but that improvements need to be made in cooperation with and among different stakeholders in accordance with leaders' personal needs and contextual factors (Drago-Severson et al., 2018; Mahfouz & Gordon, 2021; Riley, 2020). Practical suggestions on how educational leaders' occupational well-being could be promoted at different levels of their work-related ecological systems and who could promote it are described below and are based on the present thesis results (see Table 3).

Personal level. The present thesis results imply that educational leaders who take responsibility for their own physical and emotional well-being benefit from such behaviour, and that many act on it. This can be accomplished by setting boundaries, keeping private and working life separate and having meaningful social relationships outside of work. Regarding work time, it is essential to share leadership tasks and responsibilities if possible and to recognise the need for suitable training. However, when stressing the need for collaboration between and with different stakeholders, and when a leader is reaching out for support or training, assistance should be available.

Microsystem. Work community was viewed as a great source of support for educational leaders which is not surprising when we consider that these are the people with whom leaders are in contact with daily. Despite all the social interactions, leaders' work can be a lonely vocation for many. This situation could be eased through the work community by offering social support, participating in decision-making and engaging in leadership actions when appropriate. Furthermore, avoiding and solving conflict situations before they end up on the leaders' desk would ease workloads and prevent occupational stress, as solving interpersonal conflicts was one of the most-often-mentioned causes of work-related stress. The results also indicate that in some cases, parents/guardians could collaborate more and share responsibility with schools/day-care centres regarding their children's education and development. Notably, according to leaders, interpersonal conflicts occur among a small number of parents/guardians. However, when they surface, the situation is highly emotional and challenging. Furthermore, relationships with superiors should be built on trust and support (Lerikkanen & Pakarinen, 2021).

Exosystem. To improve education leaders' occupational well-being, in- and pre-service training providers should consider leaders' individual needs when planning training and support for them. It seems that educational leaders would benefit from practical tools for dealing with heavy workloads and other challenges. Pre-service training also should offer as authentic an image of their future work as possible to ease stress during the settling-in period. According to leaders, participating in in-service training provides a great forum for

communication and sharing information in an informal manner. Furthermore, both in- and pre-service leadership training also should be offered to teachers to improve their capacity to lead themselves and assume leadership roles and responsibilities.

Considering that heavy workloads and a lack of time to concentrate on pedagogical leadership were cited frequently as causes of work-related stress, to support educational leaders, the upper administrative level could re-evaluate the content of principals' work with respect to the balance between the quantitative workload and tasks' relevance. Clear guidelines and support for implementing new practices could be offered to leaders. Furthermore, sufficient resources with respect to school/day-care centre needs should be available. Leaders also need specialised support when dealing with tasks that lie beyond their competencies and job description, for instance, in the case of renovations being done on the premises, construction experts could provide support. Collaboration with police, social workers and other support providers should be a regular occurrence to help leaders prevent conflicts and manage challenging student affairs.

Macrosystem. Keeping up the discourse on education's relevance and the role of educational leaders in society could increase the support that educational leaders receive in all systems. Furthermore, planning and offering support should be based on research evidence, as well as evaluations of actions' efficacy. Therefore, the research community should offer more longitudinal research to deepen the understanding of the impact of different elements associated with challenges that influence education leaders' occupational well-being.

TABLE 3. Practical suggestions for promoting educational leaders' occupational well-being.

Level	Action	
Person himself/herself	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set boundaries and keep private and working life separate • Take responsibility for their own physical and emotional well-being • Recognise the need for and reach out for training and support • Share leadership tasks and responsibilities when possible • Have meaningful social relationships and outlets outside of work 	
Microsystem	<i>Work community</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer social support, participate in decision-making and engage in leadership when possible • Take responsibility to prevent, avoid and/or solve conflicting situations with and between different stakeholders
	<i>Guardians</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooperate and share responsibility with the school/day-care centre regarding children's education and development
	<i>Supervisor</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be present both physically and mentally when support is needed • Establish a relationship based on trust
Exosystem	<i>In- and pre-service training providers</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer principals practical tools for dealing with workload and challenges; prepare future leaders for real situations in the field • Offer in- and pre-service training that considers educational leaders' individual needs • Offer forums to facilitate communication and foster information sharing and learning about concrete tools for handling workloads • Offer in- and pre-service leadership training for teachers so that they can improve their capabilities to lead themselves and assume leadership tasks and responsibilities
	<i>Upper administrative level</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-evaluate the content of principals' work with respect to the balance between the quantitative workload and tasks' relevance • Offer sufficient resources based on needs • Increase the availability of professional support • Provide clear guidelines and support for implementing new practices
	<i>Other facets</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide sufficient support for handling challenging student affairs
Macrosystem	<i>Society</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognise the importance of schooling and educational leaders' role
	<i>Research community</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborate with policymakers and training providers to offer up-to-date training based on leaders' individual needs • Provide longitudinal research and a deeper understanding of the diverse impact of elements associated with the demands that influence leaders' occupational well-being

6.4 Ethical considerations

The present thesis was conducted using the ethical guidelines of the Finnish Advisory Board of Research Integrity (TENK, 2019), following three general criteria: 1) respecting research participants' autonomy; 2) avoiding harm; and 3) ensuring privacy and data protection (TENK 2009). The data for the present thesis were drawn from the TESSI study, which the Committee of Ethics at the University of Jyväskylä approved in August 2017 and again in November 2018.

According to the guidelines that TENK established, participation in the study was voluntary, and written consent was secured from all the participants, who were able to stop participating in the study at any time. Participants received information about the studies' background and purpose, data processing, data protection, storage and archiving of personal data, and the presentation of research results. Participants' anonymity was ensured by assigning codes on identifying information (e.g., participants' names, municipalities and school/day-care centres where they worked). In the sub-studies, the participants were assigned random ID numbers to ensure confidentiality.

Participants in the interviews (Sub-study 3) were provided with the aforementioned consent information, and they signed a form to participate in the study before the interview was conducted. Interviews were audio-recorded, and all participants were provided with a random ID number, which the interviewer mentioned at the beginning of the interview to verify identities. Other identifying information was not mentioned during the interviews. The University's Ethics Committee Guidelines were followed throughout data management and storage.

6.5 Limitations and future directions

Certain limitations in the thesis should be considered. Although the sample size in all sub-studies was adequate for the qualitative analysis, for the quantitative analysis in Sub-study 1, it was relatively small, which might affect the results' generalisability. Furthermore, the open-ended questions in Studies 1 and 2 elicited rather brief answers. In all three sub-studies, particular attention was taken not to over-interpret leaders' self-reports and interview data to present participants' perspectives as accurately as possible. In the future, a greater quantity of preferably longitudinal data would be beneficial in gaining a deeper understanding of educational leaders' occupational well-being. In the present thesis, day-care centre directors and elementary school principals are viewed as a homogeneous group based on similarities in the results of their experience with stress and coping strategies. However, further comparative research using a similar framework is needed to confirm this. Furthermore, different data collection methods (e.g., observations and diaries), or a mixed-methods design that combines interviews with questionnaire data, would be beneficial in gaining a deeper understanding of leaders' work-related demands and resources.

Furthermore, Study 3's data provided information on interactions' existence, but did not allow us to draw any conclusions about the nature of the interactions, which originally were an essential part of the EST. These interactions should be investigated further. Utilising a similar theoretical underpinning employed in the present thesis would create more possibilities for comparison in different contexts. Furthermore, as participants were chosen on a voluntary basis, self-selection bias was possible regardless of the results' diversity. It is possible that leaders who felt more involved in work-related stress participated in the study.

Combining EST and the JD-R model elicited an overarching perspective on education leaders' work and the perceptions of related demands and resources. This could be developed further to investigate the content of and relationship with different elements of school leaders' work, as well as these elements' influence on leaders' occupational well-being. Also, to determine the nature of the interactions with and between leaders and different elements of their work, as well as develop practical tools for promoting leaders and whole school community well-being, different stakeholders' (e.g., students, teachers, parents, superiors) perceptions of their work could be investigated more closely.

7 CONCLUSIONS

The present thesis was designed to contribute to the field of educational leadership by documenting our investigation of educational leaders' perceptions of their occupational well-being and their work as leaders. Combining EST and JD-R enabled us to establish grounds for offering practical suggestions on how and by whom educational leaders' well-being could be promoted on different levels of their work-related ecological system. First, the elements of educational leaders' work-related ecological systems were conceived of as five interrelated systems surrounding the individual, who is positioned at the centre, starting from the microsystem and moving further out through the meso-, exo-, macro- and chronosystems. Second, the results indicated that educational leaders' perceptions of their work can be described through personal and job-related demands and resources. Our results indicate that the most extensive demands for educational leaders are related to interpersonal relationships and interactions with and between different stakeholders, as well as to dealing with elements or issues that leaders cannot influence or control. The results highlight the importance of the social support of having sufficient internal and external social capital in the workplace and support from family and friends in one's personal life. Furthermore, both physical and emotional self-care are crucial for balancing demand and resources and, thus, maintaining well-being.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that educational leaders experience numerous demands that should be balanced with personal and job resources. Their occupational well-being is dependent on many personal and contextual factors; therefore, no easy one-size-fits-all solution exists for promoting educational leaders' well-being. Actions should be taken in cooperation with and among different stakeholders in accordance with leaders' personal needs and contexts.

YHTEENVETO

Johtajilla on keskeinen merkitys kasvatusalan instituutioiden kehittämisessä. Samaan aikaan kasvatusalan johtajuuteen kohdistuu yhä enemmän odotuksia ja työ on kuormittavaa. Tutkimukset ovat osoittaneet, että johtajan työhön liittyvä kuormitus on myös haastanut johtajien työhyvinvointia. Toistaiseksi on kuitenkin vasta vähän tietoa siitä, mitkä tekijät ovat yhteydessä kasvatusalan johtajien työhyvinvointiin ja työnkuvaan, sekä siitä millainen merkitys sisäisellä ja ulkoisella sosiaalisella tuella sekä muilla kontekstuaalisilla tekijöillä on kasvatusalan johtajien hyvinvoinnille erityisesti Suomessa. Lisäksi aikaisemmat tutkimukset ovat olleet luonteeltaan kartoittavia kyselytutkimuksia ja yksilöllisempi näkökulma johtajien omiin näkemyksiin hyvinvointiinsa vaikuttavista tekijöistä on vähäistä.

Väitöstutkimuksessa tarkasteltiin kasvatusalan johtajien käsityksiä työhyvinvoinnistaan suhteessa työhön kohdistuviin vaatimuksiin ja resursseihin. Lisäksi tarkasteltiin heidän näkemyksiään omasta työnkuvastaan johtajana ja vuorovaikutuksestaan eri tahojen kanssa ekologisen systeemin näkökulmasta. Tutkimuksen tavoitteena oli selvittää koulutusjohtajien käsityksiä työnsä kuormittavuudesta ja selviytymiseen liittyvistä tekijöistä sekä lisätä alueen tutkimusta suomalaisessa kontekstissa. Väitöstutkimuksen tulokset tarjoavat käytännön sovellusehdotuksia siihen, miten ja keiden taholta kasvatusalan johtajien hyvinvointia voidaan tukea koulutusjärjestelmän ekologisten systeemien eri tasoilla. Tutkimuskysymykset ovat: (1) Miten kasvatusalan johtajat Suomessa selviävät työstä johtuvasta kuormituksesta ja miten he käsitteellistävät työhyvinvointiinsa liittyviä vaatimuksia ja voimavaroja? (2) Miten kasvatusalan johtajien työtä Suomessa voidaan käsitteellistää ekologisen systeemiteorian näkökulmasta? Väitöstutkimuksen aineisto on osa laajempaa Teacher and Student Stress and Interaction (TESSI) -hanketta (TESSI; Lerkkanen & Pakarinen, 2021), jossa seurattiin samoja lapsia, heidän opettajiaan ja vanhempiaan esiopetuksesta 4. luokalle. Aineistoa kerättiin myös kasvatusalan johtajilta.

Väitöstutkimus koostuu kolmesta osatutkimuksesta. Ensimmäisen osatutkimuksen tavoitteena oli selvittää päiväkotien johtajien työstä johtuvan kuormittumisen syitä ja heidän strategioitaan selviytyä kuormittumisestaan. Edelleen haluttiin selvittää, missä määrin kasvatusalan johtajat kokevat työperäistä kuormittumista ja työuupumusta sekä tekijöitä, jotka liittyvät heidän työperäiseen kuormittumiseensa, sitoutumiseensa ja työstä palautumiseensa. Osatutkimuksen laadullinen ja määrällinen aineisto kerättiin neljän keskisuomalaisen kunnan päiväkodin johtajalta kyselylomakkeella. Kvantitatiivista aineistoa kerätessä kasvatusalan johtajille esitettiin kysymyksiä työkuormittumisen kokemisesta, työuupumuksesta, työstä palautumisesta ja työhön sitoutumisesta. Laadullinen aineisto koostui varhaiskasvatuksen johtajien ja alakoulun rehtoreiden kyselylomakkeiden yhteydessä olleista avovastauksista (osatutkimukset 1 ja 2) sekä perusopetuksen rehtoreiden puolistrukturoidusta haastatteluaineistosta (osatutkimus 3). Määrällisen aineiston muuttujien välisiä yhteyksiä tarkasteltiin käyttämällä korrelaatioita ja ei-parametrisia testejä. Laadullinen aineisto analysoitiin

ongelmalähtöisen sisällönanalyysin ja abduktiivisen päättelyn avulla. Analyysien avulla tunnistettiin kolme johtajien kuormittumisesta selviytymisen pääteemaa: itsensä johtaminen (ammattillinen ja henkilökohtainen), muiden johtaminen ja sosiaalinen tuki (ammattillinen ja henkilökohtainen). Analyysit osoittivat, että yli puolet johtajista ilmoitti kokeneensa työuupumusta ainakin jossain määrin. Kuormittuneet johtajat näyttivät olevan uupuneempia ja kokivat riittämättömyyttä ja vähemmän sitoutumista työhönsä kuin aineiston muut johtajat. Pääasialliset kuormittumista aiheuttavat tekijät olivat itsensä ja muiden johtaminen, muutosjohtaminen ja sosiaalisen tuen puute. Lisäksi johtajat näyttivät kamppailevan ajanhallintaongelmien kanssa jakaessaan aikaansa hallinnollisten tehtävien ja eri sidosryhmien vaatimusten kesken. Tutkimuksen mukaan täydennyskoulutus ja johtajuuteen keskittyvät perusopinnot näyttäisivät tukevan johtajia kuormittumisesta selviytymisessä. Johtajat, jotka olivat osallistuneet täydennyskoulutukseen viimeisen kahden vuoden aikana, ilmoittivat kokeneensa vähemmän kuormittumista ja uupumusta kuin sellaiset johtajat, jotka eivät näihin olleet osallistuneet. Täydennyskoulutus tarjoaa mahdollisuuden dialogiin, kokemusten ja tiedon jakamiseen ja antaa konkreettisia työkaluja johtajien työtaakan hallitsemiseen. Täydennyskoulutuksen ja tuen järjestäjien tulisi ottaa huomioon kasvatustalouden johtajien mielipiteet, kun suunnitellaan koulutuksen sisältöjä johtajien kuormittumisesta ja uupumuksesta selviytymiseen.

Toisen osatutkimuksessa tarkasteltiin peruskoulun rehtoreiden työhyvinvointia. Transaktionaalinen teoria (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) ohjasi rehtoreiden työhön liittyvän stressin selviytymisen strategioiden ja tukitarpeiden laadullista sisällönanalyysia ja induktiivista päättelyä. Tutkimuksen aineisto kerättiin 12 kunnan perusopetuksen rehtoreilta avoimia kysymyksiä sisältävällä kyselylomakkeella. Aineiston analyysi osoitti, että perusopetuksen rehtorit kamppailivat valtavan työtaakkansa ja ajan puutteen kanssa pyrkiessään keskittymään oleelliseksi katsomiinsa työtehtäviin. Tulokset korostivat sosiaalisten tekijöiden merkitystä rehtoreiden työssä. Oppilaiden asioiden hoitaminen ja henkilöstön väliset konfliktit työpaikalla olivat pääasiallisia työperäisen stressin aiheuttajia. Lisäksi riittämättömät henkilöstö- ja taloudelliset resurssit sekä joissain tapauksissa terveyshuolet ja riittämättömyyden tunne aiheuttivat stressiä rehtoreille. Sosiaalista tukea tarvittiin esimieheltä ja työyhteisön kollegoilta sekä vertaistukea muilta rehtoreilta. Tärkeinä selviytymisstrategioina nähtiin vuorovaikutus ja keskustelut työyhteisössä sekä vapaa-aikana ystävien ja perheen kanssa. Rehtorit näyttäsivät olevan tietoisia työhönsä liittyvistä stressitekijöistä ja selviytyivät niistä käyttämällä tunne- ja ongelmakeskeistä sekä sosiaalista selviytymisstrategiaa. Tunne- ja ongelmakeskeisiä selviytymisstrategioita käytettiin ihmissuhteiden hallintaan ja stressaavien tunteiden säätelyyn. Lisäksi rehtorit etsivät ja kokivat saaneensa aktiivisesti sosiaalista tukea. Rehtorit näyttäisivät tarvitsevan tukea hyvin konkreettisten työhön liittyvien asioiden käsittelyyn. Tällaista tukea voisivat tarjota rehtoreille työnantajat ja kuntapäätäjät. Tukea voitaisiin tarjota myös rakentavan palautteen, tiedollisen tuen ja selkeän ohjeistuksen avulla. Jotta rehtorit voivat osallistua täydennyskoulutukseen, tarvitaan korvaavia henkilö- ja ai-

karesursseja. Vaikka rehtoreiden sosiaalinen vuorovaikutuskenttä on laaja, rehtorina olemisen voi olla monelle yksinäinen tehtävä päätöksentekovelvollisuuden ja luottamuksellisuusongelmien vuoksi. Myös tähän tulee kiinnittää jatkossa huomiota, esimerkiksi työnohjauksen, verkostotuen ja jaetun johtajuuden keinoin.

Kolmannen osatutkimuksen tavoitteena oli selvittää, miten perusopetuksen rehtorien työtä voidaan kuvata ekologisen systeemiteorian näkökulmasta ja mitä osuuksia työstään rehtorit kokevat toisaalta resursseina ja toisaalta vaatimuksina. Osatutkimuksen aineisto kerättiin puolistrukturoitujen haastattelujen avulla 22 rehtorilta kymmenestä eri kunnasta. Haastattelun teemat käsittelivät rehtorien työympäristöä, oman osaamisen arviointia, oman osaamisen kehittymistä, kokemusta työn kuormittavuudesta ja sosiaalisen tuen tarpeita. Haastatteluaineisto analysoitiin teorialähtöisen sisältöanalyysin ja induktiivisen päättelyn avulla. Ekologinen systeemiteoria (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1989) toimi rehtoreiden työhön liittyvän ekologisen järjestelmän analyysin viitekehyksenä, kun taas työn vaatimusten ja voimavarojen mallin (JD-R; Demerouti ym., 2001; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) näkökulma ohjasi analyysiä siitä, miten rehtorit näkivät työnsä eri elementit. Mikrosysteemissä tarkastelussa rehtorit kokivat työnsä koostuvan jokapäiväisestä vuorovaikutuksesta oppilaiden, opettajien, työyhteisön, huoltajien, koulun johtoryhmän, muiden rehtoreiden ja esimiesten kanssa. Mesosysteemin tason tarkastelussa rehtorit käsitteellistivät työnsä eri elementtien sisällä ja välillä tapahtuvaksi järjestelmäksi. Eksosysteemiin liitettiin rehtoreiden kuvaama yksipuolinen vuorovaikutus resurssien, muiden rehtoreiden, esimiesten, ylemmän hallinnon ja lainsäädännön kanssa. Esimerkiksi koulukonteksti, yhteiskunta ja julkinen rooli nähtiin sellaisina elementteinä, joihin rehtorit eivät voineet vaikuttaa, mutta joilla oli välillinen vaikutus rehtoreiden työhön. Lisäksi elämänhistoriaa, työkokemusta, koulutustaustaa ja tulevaisuuden visiota pidettiin elementteinä, jotka vaikuttivat siihen, miten rehtorit kokivat työnsä tällä hetkellä (kronosysteemi). Työn vaatimusten ja voimavarojen mallin (JD-R) avulla tulkittuna rehtoreiden työssä jotkut elementit voitiin kokea sekä resursseina että vaatimuksina. Tämä korostaa rehtorin kokemusten yksilöllistä luonnetta sekä niihin vaikuttavia erilaisia sisäisiä ja ulkoisia tekijöitä sekä konteksteja ekologisessa systeemissä. Rehtorit käsittelevät työssään lukuisia vastuita eri yhteyksissä ja ovat vuorovaikutuksessa useiden sidosryhmien kanssa. Suuri osa rehtorien kohtaamista haasteista voitiin liittää vaativiin ihmissuhteisiin. Rehtorien johtamiskoulutusta ja johtamisen täydennyskoulutusta suunniteltaessa tulisi ottaa huomioon tuki ristiriitatilanteiden käsittelyyn yksilö- ja ryhmäprosesien vuorovaikutuksessa rehtorien kuormitusta ja työstressiä keventävänä tekijänä.

Tämän väitöstutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat, että kasvatusalan johtajien käsityksiä työstään voidaan kuvata henkilökohtaisten ja työhön liittyvien vaatimusten ja resurssien näkökulmista. Kasvatusalan johtajien laajimmat vaatimukset liittyvät vuorovaikutukseen eri sidosryhmien kanssa ja niiden välillä sekä sellaisten asioiden käsittelyyn, joihin johtaja ei voi henkilökohtaisesti vaikuttaa. Väi-

töstutkimuksen tulokset korostavat kasvatustalalan johtajien käsityksissä sosiaalisen tuen merkitystä työssä ja työn ulkopuolella. Kasvatustalalan johtajat kohtaavat työssään lukuisia vaatimuksia, joiden tulisi olla tasapainossa henkilökohtaisten ja työhön liittyvien resurssien kanssa. Heidän työhyvinvointinsa riippuu monista henkilökohtaisista ja kontekstuaalisista tekijöistä, mistä johtuen ei ole nähtävissä helppoja ja yleistettäviä ratkaisuja kasvatustalalan johtajien hyvinvoinnin edistämiseen. Tulosten mukaan työpaikalla tulisi vallita sosiaalista vuorovaikutusta tukeva ilmapiiri. Lisäksi johtajien tulisi huolehtia henkilökohtaisesti sekä fyysisen että psyykkisen hyvinvoinnin ulottuvuuksista palautumisessaan ja työhyvinvoinnin ylläpitämisessään.

Väitöstutkimuksen tulokset antoivat merkittävää tietoa siitä, miten kasvatustalalan johtajien työhyvinvointia sekä työn kuormittavuutta sekä näihin liitettäviä tuen muotoja ja selviytymisstrategioita tulisi jatkossa tarkastella. Johtajien fyysisen ja psyykkisen hyvinvoinnin ylläpitoa haastavat työn suuri määrä sekä siihen käytettävän ajan riittämättömyys. Jatkossa tulisi tarkastella myös yksilöllisten tekijöiden, kuten johtajien persoonallisuuden piirteiden, uskomusten tai riittämättömyyden tunteiden, merkitystä kasvatustalalan johtajien työhyvinvointia tutkittaessa. Myös kontekstuaalisten tekijöiden tarkastelu, esimerkiksi johdettavien yksikköjen määrä ja laatu sekä kontekstin sosioekonomiset taustatekijät, voisivat tuoda tärkeää tietoa johtajien työhyvinvoinnin tukemisen tarpeista. Jatkossa voitaisiin kehittää integroituja teoreettisia ja käytännöllisiä malleja käsittämään kasvatustalalan johtamisen työn eri elementtien sisältöjä ja niiden välisiä suhteita työhyvinvointiin vaikuttavina tekijöinä.

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ORIGINAL PAPERS

I

DIRECTORS' STRESS IN DAY CARE CENTERS: RELATED FACTORS AND COPING STRATEGIES

by

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Directors' Stress in Day Care Centers: Related Factors and Coping Strategies

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Abstract

The present study aimed to explore what causes stress to day care center directors and what their coping strategies are. In addition, the study examined the extent to which directors experience work-related stress and burnout, and the factors associated with their work-related stress, engagement and recovery from work. Eighteen day care center directors completed questionnaires including both open-ended and structured questions. A mixed method approach was used. The results showed that the main sources of directors' stress were connected to leading oneself, leading others, managing change and lack of social support. Moreover, the main coping strategies with stress were leading oneself, social support and leading others. In addition, both pre- and in-service leadership training played a significant role in the experience of stress. The nature of factors causing stress and coping strategies with stress may imply that directors need further support in self-management and developing their internal competences. Because directors' stress impact on childrens' development and wellbeing through teachers' wellbeing, it is crucial to pay attention on directors' wellbeing and provide more support for them. The current study is among the few ones focusing on the stress of directors at ECE settings. Findings provide important information about the causes of directors' work related stress as well as their coping strategies and about factors that might be related to those.

Keywords: Day care center director, educational leadership, occupational stress, coping strategies, early childhood education

Introduction

Several studies have shown that teaching is one of the most stressful occupations (e.g., Clement, 2017) and directors have an important role in supporting teachers in their job (Zinsser and Curby, 2014). Considering the importance of the role directors have in supporting teachers in their job it is important to investigate what causes stress to them and what kind of coping strategies they use. Moreover, while teacher stress has been studied extensively at different school levels (e.g., Chaplain, 2017), less studies have been conducted in day care settings (Zinsser and Curby, 2014). Consequently, the current study tries to understand how day care center directors perceive their work and how to best support them in their job. Therefore, the aim of the present study is to explore what causes stress to day care center directors and what are their coping strategies, as well as to examine the extent to which they experience work-related stress, and the factors associated with their work-related stress, burnout, work engagement and recovery from work.

Directors' work related stress

Stress has been defined as a response syndrome of negative affects which develops due to prolonged and increased pressures that cannot be controlled by an individual's coping strategies (Kyriacou, 1987). Curbow et al. (2000), for example, describe work stress as a situation in which an individual feels that s/he does not have enough resources to respond to pressure, challenges, and requirements of work. The literature provides several theoretical models of work-related stress (e.g., Lazarus and Folkman; Siegrist et al., 2004). As an example, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) see psychological stress as a relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being. The judgement that particular person-environment relationship is stressful hinges on cognitive appraisal.

Work-related stressors may increase an individual's emotional exhaustion and a need for recovery from work. When confronted with stressors, person have to invest extra effort in order to meet the job demands (Zohar et al., 2003). High levels of work-related stress, when experienced over a prolonged period, can also lead to a state of burnout (Jepson and Forrest 2006; Maslach et al., 2001). Burnout is a typical stress syndrome which develops gradually in response to prolonged stress and physical, mental and emotional strain (Sharma and Cooper, 2017). According to Maslach and Jackson (1981), burnout comprises of three separate but related factors: (a) 'emotional exhaustion', which is described as feelings of being emotionally over-extended and exhausted; (b) 'reduced personal accomplishment' (cf. inadequacy), which is experienced by teachers as decreased feelings of competence and achievement and a tendency to evaluate oneself negatively with respect to work; and (c) 'depersonalization' (cf. cynicism), which is the development of negative feelings and attitudes about the profession.

Although day care center directors play an important role through their pedagogical leadership and their responsibility for managing, developing and evaluating teachers (Zinsser et al., 2016) there are no studies in our knowledge concerning directors stress in ECE settings. The decisions directors make related to hiring, supervision, professional development, and performance appraisal influence the quality and excellence of the center (Jorde Bloom and Abel, 2015). Directors may experience, to some extent, similar pressure as teachers but in addition they also have to balance the demands placed on them by various stakeholder groups, such as teachers, children, parents and governors. Moreover, directors' impact on teacher's wellbeing which then further has an influence on children's development and wellbeing (Jorde Bloom and Abel, 2015). In school settings Beausaert and colleagues (2016) categorises antecedents of directors stress and burnout into individual (e.g., age, gender, personality, coping strategies or perceived self-efficacy) and contextual (e.g., role

stressors, working conditions, student behaviour, the need for professional recognition, level of specialization, lack of resources, relation with colleagues and lack of social support) factors. For example, Chaplain (2001) reported the main stressors for primary headteachers' to be managing self, managing others, financial management, curriculum management, the management of change, and social support. There is also an increasing amount of research on how educational leaders should support staff with stress management (e.g., Clement, 2017). However, less research has been conducted on how to support directors, and in addition to that, existing literature has been mostly focused on school and not ECE settings.

Coping, engagement and recovery

The transactional model of stress by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identifies the importance of coping strategies for dealing with stress and reducing it. They see coping as constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person. Major categories of coping resources are health and energy, positive beliefs, problem solving skills, social skills and material resources. Wong and Cheuk (2005) found emotional support from supervisor to be an effective buffer to the impacts of work-related stress for day care center directors. Garcia-Herrero et al. (2013) indicated that positive experience of social support, especially support from leaders, has a significant association to better resources to work and higher quality of work. They found that it is important to feel appreciated and respected by both colleagues and leaders, particularly when encountering challenges.

Job engagement and recovery from work are seen as fundamental factors in stress management (e.g., Rich et al., 2010; Sonnentag and Fritz, 2007). Job engagement, defined as the investment of individuals' emotional, cognitive, and physical energies into task performance (Rich et al., 2010), is a motivational state driven by perceptions of psychological meaningfulness, safety, and availability at work. It predicts important outcomes, such as

performance, citizenship behaviour, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Hernandez and Guarana, 2018). Job engagement is seen as the positive antithesis of burnout (Maslach, et al., 2001), and is influenced by a number of individual- and organizational-level attentional sources (Hernandez and Guarana, 2018). Moreover, Rich et al. (2010) found job engagement having an impact to job performance.

Recovery from work is seen as one of the most important components in coping with occupational stress (Sonnentag and Fritz, 2007). Recovery refers to activities that repair the negative effects of stress and restore lost resources and create new personal resources that improve resistance to stress (Sonnentag and Fritz, 2007). Overall, recovery by gaining resources is considered to be important because it can stop, counteract, or even prevent the detrimental effects of resources loss (Gluschkoff, 2017). There are several ways to cope with stress and recover from work. For example, Richards (2012) has proposed the following ways for recovering from work and for successful coping with stress: making time for oneself, exercise, and for family and friends, getting enough sleep and eating a healthy diet, practicing meditation and solitude, indulging a sense of humour, determining some 'fun' in one's everyday working life, determining to display a positive attitude, and letting things go that are out of one's control. Furthermore, Sonnentag and Fritz (2007) found psychological detachment (i.e., mentally "switching off") from work, relaxation, mastery and control over leisure time to be important aspects of recovery.

Directors in Finnish ECEC settings

In Finland ECEC is provided by local authorities or private service providers as centre-based and family-based activities for 0-6-year olds. A director of day care center has a qualification as ECE teacher, in addition, also at least masters' degree in educational sciences. They can be

the directors up to five day care center units. Most often, day care center directors' tasks are to direct and lead staff, oversee daily activities, prepare plans and budgets, and to be responsible for administration. Directors may need to divide their time between duties as a part time teacher and part time director depending of the arrangements done at the municipality.

The Aim of the study

The aim of the present study is to explore what causes stress to day care center directors and what are their coping strategies with stress as well as to examine the extent to which they experience work-related stress, and the factors associated with their work-related stress, burnout, work engagement and recovery from work. The more specific research questions are:

1. To what extent do directors report experiencing work-related stress, and what is its association with burnout, work engagement and recovery from work?
2. What are day care center directors' self-reported sources of work-related stress and coping strategies?
3. What is the role of professional training in directors' work related stress, work engagement and recovery from work?

Method

Participants and Procedure

The study is part of a larger project investigating teacher stress in Central Finland (authors omitted for reviewing purposes, 2016-2017). Eighteen (66.67%) out of 27 directors (all female) agreed to participate in the study and signed consent form. The age of directors varied from 26 to 65 years ($M = 48$ years; $SD = 10.75$ years). Directors' work experience in the educational field ranged between 3 and 38 years ($M = 17.59$ years; $SD = 10.74$ years) and

their work experience as director varied between 0.5 to 35 years ($M = 11.22$ years; $SD = 10.5$ years). Six directors were leading one center, nine were leading two centers and three were currently leading three different centers. With regard to directors' leadership and management related education, five did not have any such education, three had in-service training focused on the leadership of ECE, and ten had been going through basic studies oriented to leadership. Ten directors had not followed any other in-service training in past two years and eight directors had followed at least some in-service training.

Measures

Burnout. Burnout was measured with a shortened Finnish version of the Bergen Burnout Inventory (BBI9; Salmela-Aro et al., 2011), which consisted of 9 items measuring three dimensions: Exhaustion (3 items, $\alpha = .65$), Cynicism (3 items, $\alpha = .69$) and Inadequacy (3 items, $\alpha = .84$). All the items were rated on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *completely disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*).

Stress. Experience of stress was measured with a question "Stress means a situation in which a person feels excited, restless, nervous, or anxious or has difficulties in sleeping when something is bothering her/him. Do you feel this kind of stress at the moment?" The participants were asked to answer on scale 1 ("*not at all*") to 6 ("*to a great extent*") (Elo et al., 2003; Länsikallio et al., 2018).

Sources of work-related stress. Sources of work-related stress were measured by asking them to write down their answers to an open-ended question: "What causes you the most stress and exhaustion at work?"

Recovery from work. Recovery from work was measured with the Recovery Experience Questionnaire (Sonnetag and Fritz, 2007) which consists of 16 items with respect to their free evenings on a 5-point scale (1 = *I do not agree at all* to 5 = *I fully agree*).

The questions produced scales for Psychological detachment (4 items, $\alpha = .81$), Relaxation (4 items, $\alpha = .74$), Mastery (4 items, $\alpha = .87$), and Control (4 items, $\alpha = .79$).

Work Engagement. Work engagement was measured with 9 items from the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). The scale produced subscales for Vigor (3 items, $\alpha = .86$), Dedication (3 items, $\alpha = .78$) and Absorption (3 items, $\alpha = .87$). All items were rated on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *never* to 6 = *daily*).

Coping strategies with stress. Coping strategies were measured by asking them to write down their answers to an open-ended question: "What are your ways of coping with work-related stress and exhaustion?"

Analysis

The present study was conducted using mixed method approach. The qualitative and quantitative data was analysed separately and independently from each other.

Quantitative data was analysed by using IBM SPSS statistical package. To investigate associations between the variables correlation analysis was used (Spearman correlations). To compare directors' stress, burnout, work engagement and recovery from work in terms of their level of leadership training and participation in in-service training, nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis test and Mann-Whitney U test were used. The groups were created based on directors' in-service training on leadership.

Qualitative data were analysed by using problem-driven content analyses with abductive reasoning (Krippendorff, 2013; Patton, 2015). First, qualitative data was read several times to find individual meaning units, that is words or sentences containing aspects related to each other through their content. For example from an answer about causes of stress "... Lack of time ... when I try to work as a class teacher and director at the same time.

One of these always getting less time and effort, which causes feeling of guilt and tasks to accumulate. Often, I do overtime to finish incomplete tasks and workdays stretch too long."

we identified two meaning units: lack of time and the amount of work. As can be seen from this example more than one meaning units could be reported by one participant, therefore the amount of meaning units is bigger compared to the number of participants. The total amount of meaning units under sources of stress were 40 and in case of coping strategies 57. Second, meanings were combined into main themes and subthemes (if needed) depending of their content. Finally, main themes were examined for illumination of predetermined sensitizing concepts and theoretical relationships.

Results

Day care center directors' experienced stress, burnout, work engagement and recovery

Descriptive statistics for directors' stress, burnout, work engagement and recovery, and correlations between these factors can be seen from Table 1. Firstly, results showed that 56% of participants reported experiencing stress at least to "*some extent*". Secondly, Spearman's correlations between directors' work-related stress experiences, burnout (exhaustion, cynicism, and inadequacy), work engagement (vigor, dedication, and absorption) and recovery from work (psychological detachment, relaxation, mastery, and control) indicate a strong positive relationship between directors' work-related stress experiences and exhaustion, and between their stress experiences and feelings of inadequacy. In addition, there was a moderate negative relationship between directors' work-related stress experiences and work engagement vigor, their stress and dedication to work as well as between dedication and feelings of inadequacy.

Sources of day care center directors' stress

Second, directors were asked to indicate what causes them the most stress and exhaustion at work. We identified six main themes concerning directors' self-reported stress (see Figure 1): (1) leading oneself; (2) leading others; (3) managing change; (4) lack of social support; (5) implementing new issues, and (6) financial planning.

One of the main sources of stress identified in the data was leading oneself, it was mentioned most often (46% from totally 40 meaning units). Not having enough time and having too much work seemed to be the main cause of stress under this theme. Directors also struggled with the great responsibility and, with problems and situations, which they were not capable to influence.

Another frequently mentioned theme "leading others" containing human resources management, unclear issues and student affairs, covered 22% of meaning units under stressors at work. One cause of stress reported under leading others was student affairs, containing the process of choosing children, because in some occasions there can be more applications from parents than there are places for children in day care.

Third mostly mentioned theme was "managing change," including meaning units: being new on a current position, the transferring process from old center to a new one, learning new programs and implementing new core curriculum which was launched in Finland in 2017. Furthermore, the lack of social support from ECE directors from municipality level was also seen as one cause of stress. Theme "lack of social support" included unfair treatment, poor management on higher level, poor information mobility and lack of emotional support from colleagues and in adopting new programs and projects. In addition directors' reported receiving stress also from implementing the new curriculum and from getting and securing resources.

Day care centers directors' self-reported coping strategies with stress

Next, directors reported what kind coping strategies they use to handle work-related stress. After qualitative content analysis, meaning units were organized into three main themes: (1) leading oneself; (2) leading others and, (3) social support among which leading oneself and social support were divided into two subthemes: (1) professional and (2) personal (See Figure 1).

Directors reported leading oneself to be the most important way to handle their work-related stress, forming 72% of all meaning units (totally 57 statements). This theme includes in professional level prioritizing and organizing own work and keeping workdays at a reasonable length, and on personal level being physically active, having a hobby, getting enough rest and separating work from leisure time.

Physical exercise was the most often mentioned on personal level to deal with work-related stress. By physical exercise respondents mentioned also, in addition to doing sports, doing other physical activities outside the house, for example, going for a walk and gardening. In addition to being physically active, keeping private and work life separated, having a hobby and getting enough rest were seen as an effective ways to handle stress. When it comes to managing oneself at professional level, prioritizing and organizing ones work and keeping workdays at a reasonable length were reported as effective coping strategies.

Social support was seen important way to deal with stress on both professional and personal level. On professional level involving support from colleagues and from municipality level and on personal level support from friends and family and social relationships.

In addition, leading others through shared leadership and commonly agreed practices was reported as an effective way to deal with stress.

The role of professional training

Finally, the role of professional training was investigated. Participants were divided into three groups according to their level of training in leadership (Group 1: no training (n = 5); Group 2: some in-service training focused on the leadership (n = 3); Group 3: at least basic studies oriented to leadership (n = 10). There was a statistically significant difference in recovery from work mastery scores for the three groups: $\chi^2(2, n = 18) = 8.77, p = .012$. The post-hoc comparisons indicated that experienced mastery in Group 1 (Md = 3.25) was significantly lower than in Group 3 (Md = 4.13). Groups 2 and 3, and Groups 1 and 2, however, did not differ significantly from each other in terms of directors' mastery experiences.

Thirdly, Mann-Whitney U-test was conducted to compare stress, burnout, work engagement and recovery from work between Groups 1 and 2. There was a marginally significant difference in stress between Group 2 (Md = 3.00, n = 8) and Group 1 (Md = 3.00, n = 10): $U = 19.00, z = -2.063, p = .068$. There was also a significant difference in exhaustion between Group 2 (Md = 2.50, n = 8) and Group 1 (Md = 3.67, n = 10): $U = 15.00, z = -2.245, p = .027$. Director in Group 2 reported lower stress and exhaustion than directors in Group 1.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to examine day care center directors' sources of stress and coping strategies as well as the extent of which day care center directors experience work-related stress and burnout, and the factors associated with their work-related stress, work engagement and recovery from work, and the role of training for leadership in stress. First, the results were in line with the recent working life barometer of the Trade Union of Education in 2017 (Länsikallio et al, 2018) in which more than half of directors reported experiencing stress at least to some extent. In addition, stressed directors were more

exhausted and felt inadequate and less engaged to work. The workload of educational leaders is increasing and at the same time they feel that the time to complete all the tasks in satisfactory way is decreasing (Jorde Bloom and Abel, 2015). That leads to a situation where demands are outweighing their personal resources. If a director is not capable to balance the situation by coping strategies it may lead to increased stress level and can eventually end up with burnout (Kyriacou, 1987). It is crucial to pay attention to their well-being and provide more support for educational leaders since their wellbeing have an influence on staff members' wellbeing in center (see Jorde Bloom and Abel, 2015).

Second, we explored day care center directors' sources of stress and their coping strategies. The results were only partially in line with previous research (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Chaplain, 2001). The directors' reports showed that the main sources of stress were connected to leading oneself or others, managing change, and lack of social support. It seems that directors struggle with time management, for example dividing their time between their work tasks and demands from different stakeholder groups such as teachers, children, parents and governors. Directors experiences of stress seem to be related to multiple responsibilities associated with their role as the person responsible for the centers' daily practice and as the advocate of the staff. In addition, leading others seems to be one major cause of stress for directors, whose work includes leading a large number of employees, to be more precise, they find the recruiting processes and finding substitute teachers as causes of stress. Not having enough time and too much work leads to accumulation of unfinished tasks and feeling of inadequacy, which by Maslach and Jackson (1981) can be experienced as decreased feeling of competence and achievement and tendency to evaluate oneself negatively with respect to work. It has been suggested that time management strategies might function as compensatory coping strategy to adjust to stressors.

The results of the present study suggest that offering time-management training might decrease day care center directors' experiences of stress (see Häfner, et al. 2014).

The directors reported managing change as an additional major source of stress. The landscape of ECE is in constant change (Haslip and Gullo, 2018), which makes directors' work challenging. It seems that keeping up with the development and learning new practices, for example, related to digitalization, may cause difficulties. Implementing the new curriculum to the center at the semester when data was collected may have caused stress to directors. In addition, in some cases, stress is caused by a lack of time and support from both ECE directors from municipality level and colleagues.

Directors' coping strategies were connected to leading oneself and others, and social support. It is possible to draw parallels with Lazarus and Folkman (1984) who found health and energy, positive beliefs, problem solving skills, social skills and material resources to be major categories of coping resources. Leading oneself was seen as the most common stress-related coping strategy. It should be noted that leading oneself was also seen as the most common stressor by directors. Directors seem to highly value their own responsibility in looking for ways to deal with stress. It seems that directors would benefit from support in self-management and developing/using their personal competencies. In line with previous research (e.g., Richards, 2012; Sonnentag and Fritz, 2007), being physically active (not only doing sports but also just spending time outside and in nature) was one of the most beneficial strategies in coping with work-related stress. In addition, keeping private and working life separated and having a hobby were seen as effective coping strategies. Successful recovery from work creates new personal resources, which can counteract and prevent the effects of resources' loss (Gluschkoff, 2017; Sonnentag, and Fritz, 2007). In line with that directors reported social support from not only employees, co-workers and ECE directors from municipality level but also from family and friends to be one coping strategy with stress.

Social support has been shown to buffer stress, depression and burnout (Beausaert et al., 2016).

An additional source of stress found in the present study was the lack of social support, in earlier research lack of social support has been found as a cause of stress also for school principals (Beausaert et al., 2016). The main problems are lack of support, unfair treatment and lack of information mobility from the higher level. Thus, support and training should be offered to directors for adapting and implementing new practices. Directors need emotional, informational, and /or tangible support from both their colleagues and ECE directors from municipality level. It seems to be that re-evaluating day care center directors' tasks in terms of time needed and content would be beneficial to reducing directors' stress. In addition, time-management training might be beneficial in planning their work better. Another possible buffer for directors' work-related stress could be sharing leadership tasks, which might ease directors' workload and through that reduce their stress level.

Finally, we examined the role of professional training in directors' work related stress, work engagement and recovery from work. Directors with no leadership training seem to have lower experience of recovery from work compared to those who had been going through in-service training and/or basic studies oriented to leadership. Similarly to Rich et al. (2010), the results of present study show that directors with higher level of stress are less engaged to their job which can lead to decrease performance, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. The importance of in-service training in keeping people's education updated for fulfilling the changing requirements and competences has been recognized (e.g., Norberg, 2018). The results showed that directors who had followed some in-service training in the last two years, reported experiencing less stress and exhaustion. Based on the results of current study it can be suggested that in-service training provide forums for communication, sharing information, and concrete tools for handling the work

load and therefore it might be beneficial for municipalities to develop and implement in-service training or stress-reduction programs for directors in ECE.

Limitations

The present study has limitations that need to be considered when making generalizations. First, a small sample size limits the generalization of the findings. Second, the study relied solely on one source of information, i.e., directors' self-reports. Third, data was collected only at one time point at the end of the year when stress levels might have accumulated. Finally, the study has been done in the Finnish educational context where day care center directors' job description varies depending on municipality.

Conclusions

The current study is among the few ones focusing on the stress of directors at ECE settings. In planning support for day care center directors, asking their opinion about what is needed is crucial for success. Directors' impact on teacher's wellbeing which then further has an influence on children's development and wellbeing. Findings provide important information about the causes of directors' work related stress as well as their coping strategies and about factors that might be related to those.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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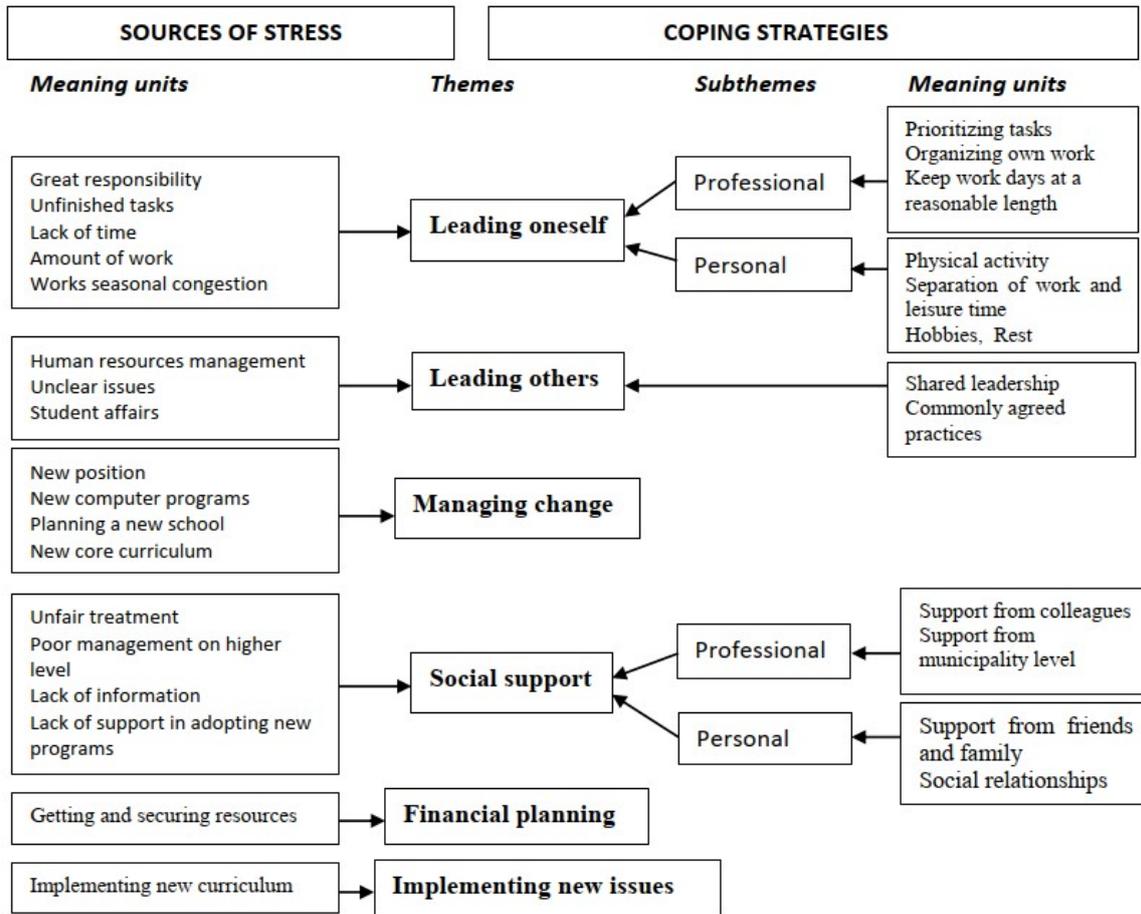
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Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations between study variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Directors' stress experiences											
2. Burnout: Exhaustion	.73**										
3. Burnout: Cynicism	.36	.36									
4. Burnout: Inadequacy	.79**	.74**	.74**								
5. Work engagement: Vigor	-.55*	-.52*	-.14	-.46							
6. Work engagement: Dedication	-.54*	-.49*	-.23	-.54*	.74**						
7. Work engagement: Absorption	-.19	-.32	-.38	-.23	.50*	-.56*					
8. Recovery from work: Psych. detachment	.03	-.31	.05	-.08	.24	.35	.15				
9. Recovery from work: Relaxation	.42	-.16	-.14	.08	.19	-.06	.23	.79**			
10. Recovery from work: Mastery	.03	-.22	.08	.06	.27	.14	.35	.41	.45		
11. Recovery from work: Control	-.30	-.29	-.07	-.32	.77**	.80**	.55*	.50*	.27	.15	
Mean	3.17	3.19	1.33	1.69	6.46	6.57	6.67	2.94	3.92	3.69	4.21
Median	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	4	4	4	3	3	3	3
SD	1.04	1.01	.49	.93	.65	.67	.64	.79	.64	.82	.70
Cronbach's alpha		.65	.69	.84	.86	.78	.87	.81	.74	.87	.79

Note. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. Two-tailed testing of significance.

Figure 1. Day care center directors' sources of stress and coping strategies.





II

WORK-RELATED STRESS OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN FINLAND: COPING STRATEGIES AND SUPPORT

by

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Abstract

The present study aimed to investigate elementary school principals' self-reported causes of work-related stress, their coping strategies to deal with stress and the support they need for their leadership. Seventy-six principals filled in the questionnaire, which included open-ended questions. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the data. The results showed that the main sources of stress were workload, interpersonal conflicts, a lack of resources and internal pressures. Moreover, principals used emotion-focused, problem-focused and social coping to deal with stress. Additionally, principals reported a need for problem-focused support and social support for their leadership. The results revealed the importance of social support and coping for principals' occupational wellbeing. A more intimate approach to principals' perceptions about the causes of occupational stress, their coping strategies and the support they need provides opportunities to consider diverse personal requirements, which may be fundamental in promoting principals' occupational wellbeing.

Keywords

Educational leaders, principals, occupational stress, coping strategies, support

Introduction

Principals play a key role in ensuring the quality of school functioning and teachers' and students' wellbeing at school (Darmody and Smyth, 2016; Radinger, 2014). However, over the last two decades, the role of the school principal has evolved, becoming exceedingly more complex and demanding with a range of new responsibilities in addition to the existing ones (Beausaert et al., 2016; Chaplain, 2001; Engels et al., 2008). They must carry out a great number of administrative,

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instructional, managerial and pedagogical tasks while handling daily issues that arise in schools (Beausaert et al., 2016; Darmody and Smyth, 2016). Additionally, as society has become more complex, schools now play a more prominent role in the community in response to the diverse needs of students and their parents, which might increase the pressures on principals as well (Darmody and Smyth, 2016). Furthermore, a decrease in central regulation and an increase in school autonomy have extended principals' responsibilities and, at the same time, increased the number of management domains they must account for (Engels et al., 2008). Therefore, it is not surprising that an international survey of principals' health and wellbeing conducted in four countries – Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and Finland – found that school leaders experience significantly higher stress than the general population, mainly due to the sheer quantity of work and limited time to focus on teaching and learning (Riley, 2015, 2017, 2020; Trade Union of Education in Finland, 2020). Researchers have recognised the importance of gaining a deeper understanding of the causes of principals' occupational stress and aspects they deem beneficial for their wellbeing at work (e.g. Beausaert et al., 2016; Darmody and Smyth, 2016). For example, according to Engels et al. (2008), many principals may feel that they lack the competencies to cope with the established performance standards, have too many different tasks to complete at work, and the available support from the working environment is insufficient. However, research on principals' wellbeing is still limited, and most extant studies have used surveys and established scales to assess principals' stress and wellbeing (e.g. Beausaert et al., 2016; Darmody and Smyth, 2016; Riley, 2015, 2017, 2020). Moreover, considering the rapid changes in principals' work, it is important to investigate principals' own perceptions about their occupational wellbeing.

In the current study, elementary school principals refer to principals who lead schools that provide compulsory basic education for Grades 1–9. Depending on the educational context, the position of elementary school principal may be described as, for example, head teacher or school administrator, all of whom fill the same kind of leadership role in their schools. In the Finnish context, elementary school principals lead effective organisations that offer basic education and prepare students for entry into secondary level education. Nowadays, comprehensive schools (Grades 1–9 and including pre-primary education) are on the increase, which can be large inclusive school units that have very diverse groups of students with individual needs (Official Statistics of Finland (OSF), 2019). However, elementary school principals' workloads and stress levels are growing steadily (Kumpulainen, 2017; Leppäaho and Aatsinki-Hämäläinen, 2020). Therefore, the risk of principal burnout is high (Leppäaho and Aatsinki-Hämäläinen, 2020). Despite the growing awareness of increasing pressures on school leaders, less is known about what school leaders themselves consider the most pressing challenges, or, importantly, how they experience these challenges internally (Drago-Severson et al., 2018). Therefore, the aim of the current study is to investigate elementary school principals' self-reported causes of work-related stress, their coping strategies to deal with the stress, and the support they feel they need for their leadership at school.

Principals' coping with stress and needed support

Occupational stress and coping strategies

Work-related stress is when an individual feels that he/she does not have enough resources to respond to the pressures, challenges and requirements of work (Curbow et al., 2000). According to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory, psychological stress is a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his/

her resources and endangering his/her wellbeing. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) proposed that psychological stress is best regarded as a subset of emotions. A stressful situation can be described as one in which a person feels excited, nervous or has difficulties sleeping when something is bothering him/her (Elo et al., 2003).

Previous research has shown that principals experience more stress than the general population (Leventis et al., 2017; Mahfouz, 2020; Riley, 2015, 2017, 2020). Regardless of the educational context, the main causes of principals' occupational stress seem to be the complexity of their work, the quantitative workload, insufficient time to concentrate on relevant tasks, interactions with different stakeholders, and the lack of social support and recognition. The challenges concerning the complexity of principals' work are caused by, for example, managing constant change (e.g., Drago-Severson, 2018; Mahfouz, 2020), bureaucracy and a lack of assistive staff (Leventis et al., 2017; Mahfouz, 2020), high work demands with unreasonable expectations (De Jong et al., 2017) and simultaneous teaching and administrative duties (Leventis et al., 2017). The quantitative workload and insufficient time to concentrate on relevant tasks are also noted by researchers (e.g. De Jong et al., 2017; Leventis et al., 2017; Mahfouz, 2020). Tintore et al. (2020) found that interactions with different stakeholders – that is, problems with educational authorities and educational policy, staff, students, families and the school community, and society – are a great cause of stress for principals (see also De Jong et al., 2017; Leventis et al., 2017; Mahfouz, 2020; Pollock et al., 2015). Additionally, Drago-Severson et al. (2018) found that although principals are surrounded by people, and, in some cases, strong support systems, they had feelings of solitary responsibility and weight bearing. Their work-related stress might be caused by feelings of loneliness and a lack of appreciation and/or recognition (Leventis et al., 2017; Mahfouz, 2020). According to Darmody and Smyth (2016), principals' occupational stress is related to a complex set of personal characteristics, working conditions, the school context and the teachers' working climate. However, since earlier research on principals' stress was mostly done via surveys (Darmody and Smyth, 2016; De Jong et al., 2017; Drago-Severson et al., 2018; Leventis et al., 2017; Riley, 2015, 2017, 2020) with ready-made measurement scales, it is important to obtain the principals' viewpoints in an open-ended style to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

Coping, in turn, is seen as a complex, multidimensional process that is sensitive to both the environment and its demands and resources, and to personality dispositions that influence the appraisal of stress and resources for coping (Folkman and Moskowitz, 2004). The current research draws on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) cognitive appraisal theory of stress and coping (see also Folkman and Moskowitz, 2004; Park and Folkman, 1997). The cognitive appraisal theory posits that the way an individual interprets stressors determines how he/she responds to it in terms of emotional reactions, behavioural responses and coping efforts. Concurrently, individual interpretations are influenced by factors such as personal and social resources as well as characteristics of the stressful experience. Folkman and Lazarus (1980) make a distinction between emotion- and problem-focused coping. They define coping as the cognitive and behavioural efforts made to master, tolerate or reduce external and internal demands and the conflicts among those demands. Cognitive and behavioural efforts serve two main functions: to manage or alter the person–environment relationship that is the source of stress (problem-focused coping) and to regulate stressful emotions (emotion-focused coping; Folkman and Lazarus, 1980). Later, researchers (e.g. Gottlieb and Gignac, 1996; Park and Folkman, 1997) supplemented Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory by identifying meaning-focused coping, a different type of coping whereby cognitive strategies are used to manage the meaning of a situation. Meaning-focused coping was seen as a suitable way for a person to talk about coping efforts by drawing on values, beliefs and goals to modify

the meaning of a stressful transaction (Park and Folkman, 1997). Furthermore, social coping was added to the theory later (Folkman and Moskowitz, 2004; Gottlieb and Bergen, 2010), referring to coping responses that are influenced by and in reaction to the social context. It has been suggested that the effectiveness of certain coping strategies is dependent on the specific context, personal characteristics and the situation (Dijkstra and Homan, 2016; Reed, 2016). In addition, Folkman and Moskowitz (2004) found that positive outcomes of coping actions are highly dependent on the characteristics of the appraised stressful encounter (see also Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). In an attempt to address this, Reed (2016) proposed that one important aspect of coping is flexibility, such as using different coping strategies, depending on the stressful situation. Additionally, increasing each individual's awareness of the effectiveness of coping strategies has the potential to decrease stress and increase occupational wellbeing. However, several researchers (Dijkstra and Homan, 2016; Folkman and Moskowitz, 2004; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Reed, 2016) found that the benefits and effectiveness of different coping strategies to reduce stress should be further investigated.

Earlier research on principals coping with work-related stress recognised the importance of social interaction. This could include spending time with family and friends (Mahfouz, 2020) or having good relations and interactions with staff, students and parents (Denecker, 2019). Drago-Severson et al. (2018) described the fuelling power of familial relationships within school as a recharging strategy unique to educators. However, it seems that a balance should be established between work and personal time (Denecker, 2019; Hancock et al., 2019). In the work context, for example, organising one's work (Boyland, 2011) and setting realistic goals (Denecker, 2019) are described as effective coping strategies. Furthermore, it has been noticed that time management skills are associated with lower principal job stress (Denecker, 2019; Grissom et al., 2015). Another effective coping strategy for principals is having outlets outside work (Mahfouz, 2020). This can be implemented through regular physical exercise (Boyland, 2011), engaging in less active non-work or play activities (Denecker, 2019) and taking care of oneself mentally and physically (Drago-Severson et al., 2018; Hancock et al., 2019). However, a limited amount of research on principals' perceptions has investigated both occupational stress and coping in the same study (for exceptions, see Boyland, 2011; Hancock et al., 2019; Mahfouz, 2020). Furthermore, as noted above, most previous studies have used surveys offering ready-made measurement scales. Thus, it is important to obtain the principals' viewpoints in an open-ended style to explain the causes of occupational stress and to describe effective coping strategies in more detail.

Support at work

A number of researchers have highlighted the significance of social support in fostering occupational wellbeing (e.g. Aizzat Mohd et al., 2018; Gottlieb and Bergen, 2010; Ju et al., 2015; Morelli et al., 2015). For example, social support has been found to predict decreased stress among school principals (Darmody and Smyth, 2016). Additionally, the importance of identifying different types and sources of social support and their impact on job-related stress has been investigated (Fenlason and Beehr, 1994; Van der Doef and Maes, 1999). Beusaert et al. (2016) presented three different sources of support for principals: (a) colleagues inside and outside school; (b) supervisor(s) and the broader school community, including parents, alumni and community leaders; and (c) school board members. First, colleagues are an important source of social support, and the quality of relationships underpins all management and plays a key role in school leaders' stress levels (Chaplain, 2001). Furthermore, cooperation with different partners inside and outside school could be considered an important issue to support school principals by taking responsibility for employment

matters, finance and school maintenance and to provide schools with a range of support services (Darmody and Smyth, 2016). Second, relationships with supervisors and clients were found to be one of the major stressors for school principals (Friedman, 2002). In addition, Mahfouz (2020) found that the most challenging relationships in principals' work were those with upper administrative levels, parents and teachers' unions. Third, researchers (e.g. Chaplain, 2001; Darmody and Smyth, 2016) have recognised the role of the school board as an effective source of support for principals. Principals' workloads could be reduced by giving more responsibility and decision-making power to school boards (Chaplain, 2001); however, currently, school boards often rely heavily on principals' advice and work (Darmody and Smyth, 2016).

In the current study, analysis of the support needed draws on the cognitive appraisal theory of stress and coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), describing emotion- and problem-focused coping, with supplementations from Folkman and Moskowitz (2004), who added social coping to the theory. The model gives us an opportunity to divide support into emotion-focused, problem-focused and social support. *Emotion-focused support* aims at ameliorating the negative emotions associated with the problem; for example, by engaging in distracting activities or using alcohol and drugs. *Problem-focused support* comprises addressing the problem causing distress by making a plan of action or concentrating on the next step (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). *Social support* draws on seeking or receiving social support from colleagues, supervisors or family and friends, and interactions occurring in social relationships that are subjectively appraised as supportive (Folkman and Moskowitz, 2004; Gottlieb and Bergen, 2010). However, to our knowledge, no research exists on principals' perceptions of the support they need for their leadership.

The aim of the current study

In the current study, we investigate elementary school principals' self-reported causes of work-related stress, their coping strategies and the support they need for their leadership. By doing so, the study qualitatively contributes to the existing literature by deepening our understanding of the different factors influencing principal's occupational wellbeing. Because elementary school principals' stress levels and workloads are growing steadily (Kumpulainen, 2017; Leppäaho and Aatsinki-Hämäläinen, 2020), the focus of this study is on them. First, we studied self-reported causes of stress in an open-ended style to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon most often researched using surveys (e.g. Darmody and Smyth, 2016; De Jong et al., 2017; Drago-Severson et al., 2018; Riley, 2015, 2017, 2020). Second, Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory of stress and coping (see also Folkman and Moskowitz, 2004; Park and Folkman, 1997) was used to describe principals' coping strategies. As the same theory evidently fitted the data, it was also used to interpret the support principals need for their leadership. This also gave us an opportunity to spot similar factors influencing how principals cope with stress and the support they need for their leadership. The current study provides important insights into elementary school principals' occupational wellbeing, as to the best of our knowledge this is the first one to investigate these issues together using qualitative methods. The more specific research questions are:

1. What are the work-related stressors that principals experience?
2. How do principals cope with work-related stress?
3. What supportive elements do principals need for their leadership?

The present study was conducted in Finland where each elementary school should have a principal in charge (Basic Education Act, 1998/628; 37§). However, a principal may also be in charge of more than one school. Principals' work descriptions can vary due to the wide variety of school units, the level of education provided and the organising body. Principals' workloads involve general administration and pedagogical leadership. Elementary school principals always have a teaching obligation that varies in amount, depending on the size of the school's student population. The number of assisting staff also depends on the aforementioned, and an assistant principal and school secretary are usually a principal's closest associates (Kumpulainen, 2017). Principals are required to have a master's degree and the pedagogical qualification, appropriate work experience, and a certificate in educational administration or the equivalent (Paronen and Lappi, 2018).

Methodology

Participants and procedures

The current study is part of a larger project investigating teacher and student stress and interactions in the classroom (Lerikkanen and Pakarinen, 2016). Principals from 12 Finnish municipalities involved in the larger project participated in this sub-study. The principals were working in elementary schools, delivering compulsory basic education to children in Grades 1–9. Questionnaires were mailed to principals in two cohorts in spring 2018 (78 questionnaires of which 37 were returned) and spring 2019 (137 questionnaires of which 67 were returned). The same principal was included in the study only once; that is, if they answered the questionnaire in both 2018 and 2019, their second response was excluded. This resulted in a total of 76 participants (38 male, 34 female and 4 gender not reported). All participating principals filled in a signed consent form. The participants' ages ranged from 30 to 65 years ($M = 51$ years, $SD = 7.5$). Their teaching experience ranged from 1 to 35 years ($M = 17.5$ years, $SD = 8.9$) and experience as principals from 1 to 29 years ($M = 11$ years, $SD = 7.6$). From all 76 participants, 69 had a teaching obligation, and the number of teaching hours ranged from 1 to 28 hours per week ($M = 12.6$ hours, $SD = 9.1$). School size ranged from 18 to 1030 students ($M = 372$ students, $SD = 290$) and the number of staff in each school from 2 to 130 people ($M = 38$ people, $SD = 31$). One participant reported leading 5 different schools, 5 reported leading 3, 10 reported leading 2, and 46 participants reported leading only 1 school unit. Fourteen participants did not provide any information about the number of units led.

Measures

Principals were asked to fill in questionnaires, which included open-ended questions concerning stress, coping strategies and the support they need for their leadership. The more precise questions were: What causes you the most stress at work? What ways do you use to cope with work-related stress? What kind of support do you feel you need for your leadership?

Analysis

The present study was conducted by using inductive reasoning with content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013; Patton, 2015). Open coding was used to remain open to the data, label concepts, and define and develop themes (Patton, 2015). First, verbatim text units with relevant content answering the research questions were identified from self-reports. Second, existing literature was

Table 1. An example of the analysis process concerning causes for stress and exhaustion at work.

Verbatim text	Meaning	Subtheme	Main themes	Mentioned n (%)	Not mentioned n (%)
<i>HURRY! As a principal of a big elementary school there is no chance to do all the things I should do. Compulsory office work takes priority over school management, planning and discussions.</i>	Time and amount relationship	Balancing tasks and available time (n = 35)	Workload	63 (82.9)	13 (17.1)
<i>New operating systems – one must take them over one's own time. As a principal, I must do all the paperwork because I don't have a secretary for my own.</i>	Construction process Secretary tasks Surprising tasks Difficult tasks	Multiplicity of tasks (n = 24)			
<i>Emptying the old school building and moving to a new one takes place in May to June. Planning timetables for the new comprehension school. Not knowing what am I doing and where am I going to work next August. It takes a lot of time to plan and complete tasks.</i>	Transformations in general Shift to new environment Transformation of profession Planning in general Planning the next school year	Transformations (n = 16) Planning (n = 8)			
<i>Preparation for the next school year, recruitments, practical arrangements.</i>	Seasonal variations in workload	Work's seasonal nature (n = 7)			
<i>Challenging parents and students with behavioural challenges.</i>	Challenges with students Home-school cooperation and communication	Student affairs (n = 16)	Interpersonal conflicts	27 (35.5)	49 (64.5)
<i>Feeling hurried when doing my work and meeting colleagues. Lack of mutual time for planning support.</i>	Staff affairs Care for staff wellbeing Challenging human relationships	Human resources management (n = 11)			
<i>Principal's heavy workload and expectations that I would adopt everything. Lack of resources.</i>	Expectations Demands Resources deficit	External pressure (n = 6) Resources in general (n = 6)	Lack of resources	10 (13.2)	66 (86.8)
<i>Lack of finance for springtime textbooks and studying materials. In other words, continuous pruning.</i>	Lack of money	Financial resources (n = 4)			
<i>A contradictory feeling; with this amount of work experience, I do not feel that I know or am able to do things well enough.</i>	Health concerns Feeling inadequate	Feeling of incapability (n = 6)	Internal pressures	6 (7.9)	70 (92.1)

Table 2. An example of the analysis process concerning principals' coping strategies.

<i>Verbatim text</i>	<i>Meaning</i>	<i>Subtheme</i>	<i>Main themes</i>	<i>Mentioned n (%)</i>	<i>Not mentioned n (%)</i>
<i>Regular exercise, music as a hobby, eating out on weekends.</i>	Physical activity Hobbies Changing the environment	Focusing on alternative activities (<i>n</i> = 47)	Emotion-focused coping	51 (61.1)	25 (38.9)
<i>By calming and slowing down.</i>	Rest Relaxation Enough free time	Switching off (<i>n</i> = 15)			
<i>Humour with colleagues.</i>	Humour Positive future prospects	Positive attitude (<i>n</i> = 3)			
<i>Putting aside when having family time. Forgetting (work) when being with family</i>	Spending time with friends and family Family, everyday life Good relationship	Spending time with friends and family (<i>n</i> = 22)	Social coping	39 (51.3)	37 (48.7)
<i>I discuss a lot with my principal colleagues, and it is very empowering. I constantly remind my heads about my workload and those tasks that have been delegated and added to principals' work. That is a relief as well.</i>	Positive feedback Conversations Communication with colleagues	Communication at work (<i>n</i> = 18)	Problem-focused coping	21 (27.6)	55 (72.4)
<i>Discussing with someone at work or during leisure/free time</i>	Talking Conversations	Communication in general (<i>n</i> = 5)			
<i>Prioritisation, scheduling and making to-do lists</i>	Organising one's work Taking one task at a time Prioritisation	Work management (<i>n</i> = 16)			
<i>I work and think about work from 7 am to 7 pm, but I never work on a computer during weekends.</i>	Setting boundaries	Work-life balance (<i>n</i> = 6)			

Table 3. An example of the analysis process concerning the support principals need for their leadership.

Verbatim text	Meaning	Subtheme	Main themes	Mentioned n (%)	Not mentioned n (%)
<i>Tools for dealing with difficult situations (e.g. conflicts between employees and processing those)</i>	Cooperation Instructions/guidelines New ideas Relevant information Training Constructive feedback	Informational (n = 30)	Problem focused support (Containing also elements of social support.)	38 (50)	38 (50)
<i>Time to do the right tasks properly. One should get an assistant principal for the primary school to share the tasks.</i>	Skilful employees Resources in general Time	Resources (n = 9)			
<i>In my opinion, the most important support is working in the management team, thinking and sharing together. However, I also consider important the support I get from the staff.</i>	Sharing tasks with colleagues Feedback Support from the leadership team	Support from colleagues (n = 18)	Unidentified social support (Concrete target or source of support was not described.)	38 (50)	38 (50)
<i>Sometimes it would be nice to get some positive feedback from my head . . . or feedback at all and to notice that my head is appreciating my work</i>	Conversations with supervisor Supervisor's assistance Appreciation	Support from supervisors (n = 13)			
<i>School leaders' meetings, trainings. Knowledge and awareness that you can ask for help/guidelines.</i>	Principals' network Sharing experiences	Support from other principals (n = 9)			
<i>Trust, reduction of excessive demands and expectations.</i>	Trust Sharing Knowledgeable support	Social support in general (n = 5)			

examined to determine the extent to which the current study's data supports existing conceptualisations, results and/or theories (Patton, 2015). Consequently, analyses of principals' causes of stress remained inductive throughout the analysis process (see Tables 1, 2 and 3 for examples of the analysis process, emerged themes and subthemes).

Analyses concerning how principals cope with stress was based on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) cognitive appraisal theory of stress and coping on distinguishing emotion- and problem-focused coping and seeing social support as an important coping resource. In addition, based on later supplementations to the theory by Folkman and Moskowitz's (2004), 'social factors' was added as a third category of coping (see Table 2 for examples of the analysis process, emerged themes and subthemes). After the first familiarisation with the data, the analysis on support principals need for their leadership was (similarly to analysis on coping strategies) guided by cognitive appraisal theory (Folkman and Moskowitz, 2004; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) as it fitted well to our data. As a result of theory guided content analysis, principals' support needs were divided into problem-focused support, addressing the cause of distress, but also including aspects of social support, and into unidentified social support where the social feature of support was strongly present but the concrete target or source of support was not described (see Table 3 for examples of the analysis process, emerged themes and subthemes). Using the cognitive appraisal theory gave us an opportunity to see whether similar factors influence principals' coping with stress and the support they need for their leadership. As an example, from an answer about the causes of stress:

In addition to my main work, there are a lot of small extra tasks. I don't really have enough time to concentrate on my main work as much as I would like to. I have a countless number of different roles here, and at the same time, one is responsible for a lot of things. (P32)

The researcher identified three meanings and placed those under subthemes as follows: (a) surprising tasks under 'multiplicity of tasks'; (b) time and amount relationship under 'balancing tasks and available time'; and (c) challenges with students under 'student affairs'.

In the third phase, intercoder reliability was counted. The first author performed the initial categorisation of verbatim texts; then, the second coder was given the data and the created themes. The second coder read through the data and did the coding based on the themes independently to ensure good reliability of the qualitative analysis. Intercoder reliability between the categorisations was 93%. Finally, the remaining 7% of the data extracts were discussed and categorised by the two coders in cooperation, and the coders agreed upon the most suitable category for these extracts. During the whole analysis, we paid particular attention to not over-interpret the principals' very brief self-reports. The participants were assigned random ID numbers from 1 to 76 to ensure confidentiality.

Results

Work-related stressors

The first aim was to find out what work-related stressors principals experience. As a result, principals' self-reported descriptions were divided into four main themes. The main themes were divided into smaller subthemes based on the patterns emerging from the data (Patton, 2015): (a) *workload* – balancing tasks and available time, multiplicity of tasks, transformations, planning and work's seasonal nature; (b) *interpersonal conflicts* – student affairs, human resources management

and external pressures; (c) *lack of resources* – resources in general and financial resources; and (d) *internal pressures* – health concerns and feelings of incompetence (see Table 1 for examples of developed themes, subthemes and the analysis process).

Workload. More than 80% of principals reported their workload as a cause of stress (Table 1). It seems that most of the participants perceived that the number of tasks exceeded the time available to execute them. For example, P56 described having trouble getting all the paperwork done while simultaneously doing all the planning and administrative work: 'HURRY! As a principal of a big elementary school, there is no chance to do all the things I should do. Compulsory office work takes priority over school management, planning and discussions.' Additionally, under the same theme, another principal explained how there is not enough time to concentrate on what was described as the 'main tasks' alongside a large number of extra tasks:

In addition to my main duties as principal, there are a lot of small extra tasks coming from somewhere. I don't really have enough time to concentrate on my main tasks as much as I would like to. One must be here and there with a countless number of different roles and responsibilities. (P32)

This participant also mentioned the 'countless number of roles' to fulfil. *Multiplicity of tasks* was the second most often mentioned subtheme under *workload*, consisting of tasks related to the construction process, secretarial tasks and dealing with surprising and/or difficult tasks. 'Doing many things at once' (P58) and 'having a versatile work field' (P19) were also stressors for principals. The third most often mentioned subtheme under *workload* was 'transformations', consisting of shifts to new environments, transformations in the profession and transformations in general; that is, participants only mentioned transformation but did not specify the content. For example, P39 reported that the implementation process of the new core curriculum was demanding: 'The demands of the new core curriculum and a contradictory feeling that with my working experience of this length, I do not feel or know things well enough.' Principals also mentioned 'adopting new operating systems and administration tools' (e.g. P30, P72) as stressful. In addition, construction work and planning work in a new and often restructured school were seen as causes of stress. For example, one principal said:

Emptying the old school building and moving to a new one, which takes place in May to June, cause stress. Planning timetables for the new comprehension school. Not knowing what I am doing and where I am going to work next August. (P71)

When talking about what causes work-related stress, P75 said: 'Preparations for the next school year, recruitments, practical arrangements'; preparing for the next school year was also mentioned by five other participants. Additionally, eight participants mentioned 'planning'. Under this subtheme, participants talked about planning related to the next school year as well as planning in general; that is, participants did not clarify the content.

The final subtheme emerging under *workload* was related to 'work's seasonal nature'. Seven principals described seasonal variations in workloads as causing them stress. For example, P59 reported: 'Cumulative issues. Sometimes there are no things to handle and sometimes they pile up, for example, during spring and autumn, and planning school events; it is always challenging.' In addition, 'accumulation of work between March and May' was described by P10 as a cause of stress, and P30 added: 'Spring – it burdens – schedules are too tight, reports after reports.' It seems

that when considering the workload, the end of the spring semester is the most stressful time of the school year for principals.

Interpersonal conflicts. More than 35% of the principals mentioned '*interpersonal conflicts*' as increasing their work-related stress. This main theme consists of student affairs, human resources management and external pressures. Sixteen participants mentioned student affairs as causing them stress. This subtheme consists of challenges with students and with home-school cooperation and communication. For example, P16 described 'challenging parents and students with behavioural challenges', and P32 added: 'Meeting challenging clients (parents) causes stress. Fortunately, there are only a few of them.' In addition, principals reported human resources management as a source of stress, or, more precisely, staff affairs, care for staff's wellbeing and challenging human relationships, as P47 described: 'Feelings of hurrying my work and meeting my colleagues. Lack of mutual time for planning support.' Six participants also mentioned external pressures, consisting of external expectations and demands. For instance, P7 described 'requests to perform tasks for which it has not been possible to prepare in advance nor ask someone to handle those... in this case, you handle these tasks yourself without compensation when budget planning is already done during autumn' as causes of stress. Similarly, P34 reported 'principals' heavy workload and expectations that I would adapt to everything'.

Lack of resources. Approximately 13% of principals mentioned a lack of resources. This theme consists of a lack of financial resources and resources in general; that is, participants did not clarify the type of resource. For example, P64 reported a 'shortage of resources' as a stressor. Concerning the lack of financial resources, P5 reported 'scarce resources for springtime textbook and material orders', and P14 added 'the lack of money for study materials'. Furthermore, P30 described 'children with special support needs' as 'demanding' because of a lack of money to hire assistants.

Internal pressures. Six principals reported experiencing '*internal pressures*', or, more precisely, feelings and emotions or because of personal health concerns. For example, P39 reported having 'a contradictory feeling because with this amount of working experience, I do not feel that I know or am able to do things well enough'. In addition, P33 and P49 reported 'feelings of inadequacy', without specifying the reason. Furthermore, one participant described 'certain health concerns' as a reason for increased work-related stress levels.

Principals' coping strategies

To answer the second research question, on how principals cope with work-related stress, the data was divided into three theory-based main themes, which were divided into smaller subthemes: (a) *emotion-focused coping*: focusing on alternative activities, switching off and keeping a positive attitude; (b) *social coping*: spending time with friends and family, communication at work, and communication in general; and (c) *problem-focused coping*: work management and keeping work and free time in balance (see Table 2 for examples of developed themes, subthemes and the analysis process).

Emotion-focused coping. More than 60% of the principals reported using '*emotion-focused*' strategies to cope with work-related stress. In other words, the principals in the current study were

attempting to manage emotional reactions to stressors. Concerning emotion-focused coping, 47 participants out of 76 mentioned the 'focusing on alternative activities' subtheme. Under this subtheme, participants mentioned being physically active, having a hobby and changing the environment as coping strategies. For example, P40 described regular physical activity as the best way to cope with work-related stress: 'Physical exercise. The best and working coping strategy, regularly three times per week is enough for handling stress'. P65 added: 'Leisure time: family, physical exercise, music and "compulsory" tasks of taking care of my own house and forest' as coping strategies. In addition to being physically active through sports or other physical activities, being in nature and having different non-physical hobbies, such as listening to or making music, doing handicrafts or reading, were also mentioned under *emotion-focused* coping strategies.

Fifteen participants reported 'switching off' after a workday as an effective strategy to cope with work-related stress, as P52 described, 'calming down and slowing down' after a workday. Principals also mentioned maintaining 'a positive attitude', thinking that 'tomorrow is a new day, and often it has been', and having 'humour with co-workers'. It seems that physical activity and rest often go hand in hand. For example, P16 reported 'exercise, relaxation, picking up berries and mushrooms in the forest, reading', and P13 added 'conversations, exercise and rest' as coping strategies.

Social coping. More than half of the participants mentioned *social coping* under coping strategies. This theme consists of spending time with family and friends, communication at work and communication in general; that is, participants mentioned talking to or having a conversation with someone without specifying whom. Support from family and friends was mentioned by 22 participants. For example, P52 described how 'family and especially my children take my mind off work-related worries', and P54 added getting support from a 'well working relationship'. In addition, 18 participants mentioned the 'communication at work' subtheme. For example, P75 explained what helps him/her to cope with work-related stress: 'Conversations with colleagues, making use of the management team's support and opportunities to share, leisure time with friends and family'. In addition, P2 shared similar coping strategies: 'Spending leisure time with family. Discussing work stuff with colleagues, sharing tasks'. Furthermore, P9 described a supportive work community with whom you can talk openly about your situation and they will understand: 'I'd say that when I haven't been able to take care of things because of some unexpected important tasks, being open about that situation, colleagues do understand.' Five participants mentioned 'communication in general'. As an example of this, P16 and P31 mentioned talking as a coping strategy and P13 mentioned conversations.

Problem-focused coping. Problem-focused coping was mentioned by more than 27% of principals, consisting of the subthemes 'work management' and 'work-life balance'. 'Work management' was mentioned by 16 participants reporting managing one's work, taking one task at a time and prioritising as coping strategies for handling work-related stress. For example, P22 said: 'Prioritisation, fragmenting and working systematically' are ways to keep the stress level low and under control. In addition, P26 explained: 'I try to compartmentalise different things and only handle one section at a time.' Furthermore, P5 mentioned '[c]oncentrating on one task at a time'. Six principals saw setting boundaries on working hours as a way to cope with work-related stress. For example, P9 said: 'I work and think work from 7 am to 7 pm, but I never sit at a computer during weekends', and P16 explained: 'I try to finish working by 4 pm and not to work during the

weekends'; he/she further revealed delving into his/her 'own business' during free time. Three other participants also highlighted the importance of counterbalancing leisure time with work.

Support needed for leadership

Our third aim was to find out what supportive elements principals need for their leadership. Principals' self-reported descriptions were divided into two theory-driven main themes: *problem-focused support*: informational support and resources; and *unidentified social support*: support from colleagues at school, support from supervisors, support from other principals and social support in general (see Table 3 for developed themes, subthemes and the analysis process).

Problem-focused support. Half of the principals mentioned problem-focused support. Under this theme, 30 principals mentioned a need for 'informational support' for their leadership, involving cooperation, instructions/guidelines, new ideas, relevant information, training and constructive feedback. For example, P4 mentioned:

Discussions and peer support. On the other hand, supervisors' support when there are no clear directions or guidelines. New administrative programmes should be used without induction. I would like to study leadership, but I can't handle it in addition to work.

P5 expressed similar feelings about the need for instructions and guidelines: 'Concrete directives for different situations, for example, to students' intake and language teaching. In addition, colleagues' support for everyday problems and letting off steam'. Both positive and negative constructive feedback seem to be needed to evaluate the quality of one's own work. As P6 mentioned: 'Sparring; whether I am doing right and how I can develop'. Feedback provided by one's own work community also seems to be highly valued, as P57 described needing 'feedback from my own working community – guidelines for how we will develop our functions at school, what is hoped for'. Eight principals reported a need for in-service training, which is necessary to keep track of different legislations. P74 reported needing training for 'support for staff appointments and for using administrative programmes', and P19 added needing training for 'updating administrative regulation files'.

Nine principals reported needing more resources, or, more precisely, skilful employees, as well as time and resources in general; that is, participants mentioned only 'resources' without further clarification. Four principals mentioned time as a needed resource; for example, P52 reported needing 'time to do work properly', and P56 mentioned 'time to do the right tasks properly'. He/she also reported needing 'a deputy principal for sharing tasks in elementary school'. Five other principals also mentioned a need for extra human resources.

Unidentified social support. Half of the participants mentioned unidentified social support where the social feature of support was strongly present but the concrete target or source of support was not described. This main theme was divided into three subthemes: support from colleagues, support from supervisor and support from other principals in the field. In addition, five principals mentioned social support in general; that is, the source of support was not possible to identify. Eighteen principals reported needing support from colleagues at school. As P75 described: 'In my opinion, the most important support is working with the management team, thinking and sharing together. However, I also consider important the support I get from the staff.' In addition, P40 mentioned

similar feelings: 'The management team at school is important – finding the solutions and drawing the lines together.' On the side of support from the management team, six participants mentioned needing support from subordinates, and three principals reported wanting the possibility to share leadership tasks with their colleagues. Thirteen principals considered support from their supervisor important. Some participants described needing feedback without clarifying the concrete purpose of it, as P28 said: 'Sometimes it would be nice to get some positive feedback from my head . . . or feedback at all.' Three principals needed guidelines and operating models for complicated situations that they face. Seven participants mentioned 'support from supervisors' without any further comments. Sharing and cooperating with other school principals were also seen as great support for everyday work. For example, P9 wished for a 'principals' network where we can talk and train together'; P39 added a need for 'conversations (with other principals) about everyday matters'; and P72 added needing 'school leaders' meetings, trainings. Knowledge and awareness that you can ask for help/guidelines'. Comments about needing trust, sharing and knowledgeable support, without clarifying from whom, were placed under the 'social support in general' subtheme.

Discussion

The present study contributed to filling the research gap on principals' perceptions about their occupational wellbeing, or, more precisely, the causes of their stress, their coping strategies and the support they need for their leadership. First, the results indicated that principals' occupational stress is mainly caused by high workloads and interpersonal relationships. Second, emotion-focused coping and social coping appear to be the two main strategies used by principals to handle work-related stress. Third, principals highly value problem-focused support and social support for their leadership. Finally, the results showed the importance of social support and coping for principals' occupational wellbeing.

The first aim was to identify principals' perceptions of the work-related stressors they experience. Similar to earlier research (e.g. De Jong et al., 2017; Leventis et al., 2017; Mahfouz, 2020), the results of the current study indicated that principals struggle with their high workloads and the lack of time to concentrate fully on the tasks they find essential in their work. This might refer to a problem of imbalance between the work setting and principals' personal perceptions about their work (see also Engels et al., 2008). The results of the current study are in line with the principals' health and wellbeing surveys conducted in Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and Finland (Riley, 2015, 2017, 2020; Trade Union of Education in Finland, 2020), which showed that regardless of the cultural differences and diversity in the school systems, the size of the principals' workloads and the lack of time to focus on teaching and learning were two main causes of their stress in all four countries. This suggests that principals' occupational stress is, to some extent, a universal phenomenon (see also Tintore et al., 2020). In addition to high workloads, principals are struggling with interpersonal conflicts. Considering the social nature of principals' work (Darmody and Smyth, 2016), it is not surprising that causes of stress are related to student affairs, managing human resources and/or external demands and expectations. The relevance of social and interpersonal challenges that principals face in their work was also pointed out by Tintore et al. (2020). They found that principals struggled with problems associated with educational authorities, the staff and the teaching process, the students, the families and the school community, and society. Furthermore, insufficient human and financial resources cause principals stress, both of which have been recognised in earlier literature; for example, Curbow et al. (2000). Furthermore, in some cases, principals' work-related stress is caused by internal pressures, such as health concerns and

feelings of inadequacy (see also Drago-Severson et al., 2018; Engels et al., 2008), which can result from the stressors mentioned earlier; that is, high workloads, lack of time and resources, and interpersonal conflicts (e.g. Mahfouz, 2020).

The second aim was to uncover how principals cope with work-related stress. The findings of the present study indicate that principals are aware of their work-related stressors and are coping with those in line with the theoretical underpinning we applied (Folkman and Moskowitz, 2004; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Emotion- and problem-focused coping were used by principals to manage the person–environment relationship and to regulate stressful emotions. In addition, they actively seek and receive social support, which is in line with Folkman and Moskowitz (2004), who described social coping as coping responses that are influenced by and in reaction to the social context. Emotion-focused coping strategies seem to be more widely used and are utilised mostly after the workday during principals' free time by focusing on alternative activities and switching off (see also Kaufman, 2019; Mahfouz, 2020). Principals seem to be aware that it is their own responsibility to take care of their mental and physical wellbeing and to act on its behalf. The findings of the present study indicate that social coping mostly takes place while spending time with friends and family and communicating with colleagues at work. Similarly, Mahfouz (2020) found that principals' coping strategies comprised spending time with loved ones and having outlets outside work. Furthermore, in accordance with Riley (2015, 2017, 2020), the results of the current study suggest that employers and policymakers could support principals. Reducing the job requirements and/or increasing the resources to help principals cope with their numerous demands might also help them to take responsibility for their own physical and emotional wellbeing (Riley, 2015, 2017, 2020). To successfully support principals in their work, it is essential to take into account their perceptions of the work and their diverse occupational needs. It seems that the majority of the principals' coping actions take place after the workday during their free time, mainly by focusing on alternative activities, switching off and spending time with friends and family (see also Boyland, 2011; Denecker, 2019; Mahfouz, 2020). Nonetheless, the principals themselves cannot deal with all the stressors. It is important to receive informational and social support from colleagues, supervisors and other principals in the field (Beausaert et al., 2016; Chaplain, 2001; Darmody and Smyth, 2016). Unbundling or repackaging the job responsibilities with an administrative team that shares the leadership of the school could also alleviate principals' stress (Beausaert et al., 2016). In addition, Riley (2020) suggested that increasing professional support to improve principals' wellbeing should be promoted.

The third aim was to investigate the supportive elements that principals need for their leadership. We found that principals highly value problem-focused support and social support for their leadership, which is in line with the cognitive appraisal theory (Folkman and Moskowitz, 2004; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), distinguishing problem-focused, emotion-focused and social support. However, it seems that the principals need support to handle very concrete work-related issues to make plans of action or concentrate on the next step. That might also be the reason why principals did not mention emotion-focused support.

The results of the current study indicate that principals also highly value promoting cooperation at different levels. Similarly, researchers have found that colleagues inside and outside school, supervisors and the broader school community and school board members are useful sources of support for principals (Beausaert et al., 2016; Chaplain, 2001; Darmody and Smyth, 2016; Dempster, 2008). Collaboration might be advocated to receive informational support, constructive feedback, relevant information and instructions, and appropriate in-service training. However,

it seems that despite the desire to participate in and the availability of relevant training, principals' high workloads and the lack of time to execute tasks create barriers, which results in their reluctance to be physically absent from their work (see also Hancock et al., 2019). There is an evident need for extra time and human resources to enable principals' professional self-development, which will result in reduced stress levels due to more efficient task solving.

Leadership involves working with teachers, students, parents and the wider community in order to improve schools (Townsend and Bogotch, 2008). It seems that despite the extent of social interactions, being a principal can be a lonely vocation for many in that position because of their decision-making obligations and confidentiality issues. Also, they might not receive enough social support from teachers or other colleagues. The results of the current study emphasise the role of social support and coping in principals' work. It can be seen under causes of work-related stress as interpersonal conflicts concerning student affairs, human resources management and external pressures. In addition, the importance of friends and family, communication at work and communication in general emerged as principals' coping strategies. Furthermore, regarding the support principals need for their leadership, they highly value social support from colleagues, supervisors and other principals in the field through principal networks and by sharing experiences. Similarly, Dempster (2008) described three support mechanisms to sustain principals emotionally and professionally throughout their careers: a mentor for conversations and consultations, well-developed avenues for immediate support when urgent issues arise, and opportunities for reflection in the company of others who face similar circumstances. When these support mechanisms are made available, experiences can be shared, insights gained and future practices enhanced (Dempster, 2008).

To offer practical propositions for global educational policy and practice, we need more high-quality longitudinal evidence of the diverse impact of different variables associated with the challenges that principals face in their work (Darmody and Smyth, 2016; Riley, 2020). The current research offers important knowledge about principals' own perceptions of their occupational well-being. Drawing from the results of the current research, it can be suggested that changes should be made in respect of the balance between the quantitative workload and the relevance of tasks to ensure that principals can concentrate on what is relevant in their work. As noticed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2016), sharing leadership tasks and responsibilities might ease principals' workloads. Moreover, by engaging not only staff, but also students and their parents or guardians in school decisions, principals can stimulate a shared sense of purpose among all stakeholders (OECD, 2016). Pre-service training should offer principals more practical tools for dealing with their work and the challenges they are going to face. Furthermore, additional pre- and in-service training on social interactions, stress management skills and mentorship programmes could be beneficial in preventing stress and burnout. The role of principals' leadership as a possible buffer for teachers' burnout, which is increasing as well, should not be forgotten (Salmela-Aro et al., 2019). Ensuring principals' wellbeing will enable a positive environment for teaching and learning, and, by supporting teachers, impact positively on students' wellbeing and learning outcomes (Liebowitz and Porter, 2019). This study is among the few to focus on all causes of stress, coping strategies and the support needed. Taking into account that earlier research on principals' occupational wellbeing was mostly done using surveys, we attempted to fill a research gap by using qualitative methods to gain a deeper understanding about the phenomenon. The study has some limitations that need to be taken into account. First, the principals' answers were relatively short, which provided limited space for interpretation. Further research is needed; for example, combining interviews with questionnaire data or using a mixed

method approach with a larger participant cohort to gain an even deeper understanding of the factors behind principals' occupational wellbeing. Second, the data was collected at the end of the school year when principals' stress levels might have accumulated. Third, despite the variety of results, there is the possibility of self-selection bias, meaning that because participation in the study was voluntary, it is possible that principals who were more interested or who were involved in work-related stress participated in the study. Fourth, in further research, the benefits of different coping strategies on principals' occupational wellbeing should be investigated.

Conclusions

The results of the present study provide important insights into elementary school principals' occupational stress, their coping strategies and the support they need, as it is among the few studies to focus on these issues from the principals' own perspectives. More attention should be paid to the social aspects of principals' occupational wellbeing. It is evident that principals' work descriptions should be reviewed and revised in respect of the balance between the quantitative workload, relevance of the duties and the time to execute tasks. In addition, extra time and human resources could enable principals' professional self-development and favour them in taking responsibility for their own physical and emotional wellbeing, which will result in reduced stress levels. However more high-quality longitudinal research, especially using qualitative methods, is needed to gain a deeper understanding of the different factors influencing principals' occupational wellbeing. This might be fundamental to successfully promote principals' occupational wellbeing, which will consequently improve teachers' and students' wellbeing and the overall functioning of the school.

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III

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' WORK FROM THE ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE: EVIDENCE FROM FINLAND

by

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and **Marja-Kristiina Lerkkanen** 

Abstract

The present study aimed to investigate elementary school principals' work from the ecological systems perspective and which elements of their work are experienced as demands or resources. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 principals. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the data. The results show that the way principals experience their work is individual and influenced by several internal and external factors. Some of the most extensive demands appear to be related to interaction with different stakeholders in situations where principals have the role of mediator in solving conflicting situations. Challenges also seem to arise in dealing with elements or issues that principals cannot influence or have no control over. Principals' current perception is influenced by their education, work and personal histories and future vision. The results also indicate that principals need in-service training concerning social interaction and human resource management, such as how to act in conflicting situations, interact with different personalities and get the entire school community to develop and work for common goals. In addition, our findings suggest that offering support to principals through, for example, mentoring programmes during their first years could reduce the pressures they face and help them concentrate more fully on relevant tasks.

Keywords

principal's work, educational leaders, ecological system, demands, resources

Introduction

Principals juggle multiple responsibilities and work under increasingly stressful conditions (Darmody and Smyth, 2016; Drago-Severson et al., 2018; Elomaa et al., 2021). The way principals

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conduct their leadership influences students' achievement, teachers' well-being, teacher instructional practices and school organisational health (Liebowitz and Porter, 2019). In addition to managing all the work tasks, principals themselves need to be part of an ongoing process of learning and development if they are to meet the exacting demands placed on modern schooling and the needs of teachers and students (Gümüşt and Şükrü Bellibaş, 2020). Principals do not work in a vacuum: in addition to dealing with elements they cannot affect but which directly influence them (e.g. school context and publicity), interaction with different stakeholders on an everyday basis is an essential part of their work (Drago-Severson et al., 2018; Tintoré et al., 2020). Job characteristics such as job demands and resources affect employees' health and well-being (Bakker and Demerouti, 2018). Moreover, employee well-being and organisational behaviour are functions involving factors positioned at various levels (i.e. organisation, team and individual levels), which influence each other within and over certain time periods (Bakker and Demerouti, 2018). According to Dadaczynski and colleagues (2020), increasing job demands and responsibilities can be regarded as a cause of the shortage of school principals and a possible reason for early retirement. Occupational stress is an inevitable part of school leadership (Burke et al., 2022) and, to some extent, a universal phenomenon as regardless of the cultural differences and diversity in the school system, the size of principals' workloads and the lack of time to focus on teaching and learning are seen as two of the main causes of stress (Elomaa et al., 2021; Riley, 2020).

However, the research on how principals themselves perceive the resources and demands related to their work is limited and has concentrated more on the content of their work tasks or their role as leaders (e.g. Buonomo et al., 2020; Leithwood et al., 2020; Milley and Arnott, 2016) and less on their experiences as principals. Considering the high workload and rapid changes in principals' work and the necessity that they receive the best support possible to deal effectively with these factors, it is important to investigate principals' own perceptions about their work and occupational well-being (Drago-Severson et al., 2018). The current study contributes to the existing literature by suggesting a framework which could be used to investigate principals' work and leadership in a more personal manner. Therefore, in the current study, we aimed to shed light on principals' insights into their work using the ecological systems theory (EST) of Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1989) and to investigate whether they experience different elements of their work as demanding or resourceful by drawing upon the job demands-resources (JD-R) model.

Overview of principals' practices

Principals face enormous implicit and explicit complexities in their work as they are required to deal with a variety of issues, such as distributing leadership, supporting everyone in their school community, adapting the Common Core and new evaluation systems and much more, all within accountability and sanction-driven context (Drago-Severson et al., 2018). Thus, managing multiple responsibilities and working under increasingly stressful conditions can result in lower levels of job satisfaction, increased occupational stress and burnout (Salmela-Aro et al., 2019) and have an impact on their occupational and overall well-being (Collie et al., 2020; Darmody and Smyth, 2016; Elomaa et al., 2021). Furthermore, being a principal can be a conflicting position, as despite experiencing significantly higher stress than the general population (Riley, 2015, 2017, 2020), some principals remain remarkably resilient while working in a turbulent environment and report high levels of job satisfaction (Darmody and Smyth, 2016; Hulpia and Devos, 2009). In addition to the wide variety of tasks included in their work description and external expectations placed on principals, numerous internal influencers and contextual factors affect

the way principals perceive and carry out their work. Darmody and Smyth (2016) found job satisfaction and occupational stress to be related to a complex set of personal characteristics, working conditions and school context. The personal characteristics influencing principals' work might be, for example, gender, age and length of service (Darmody and Smyth, 2016), health concerns (Elomaa et al., 2021) and internal dimensions of leadership (how a leader feels about the school, colleagues and themselves) (Drago-Severson et al., 2018). In addition, Leithwood and colleagues (2020) found that a set of cognitive (problem-solving expertise, domain-specific knowledge, systems thinking), social (perceiving emotions, managing emotions, acting in emotionally appropriate ways) and psychological (optimism, self-efficacy, resilience, proactivity) personal leadership resources can explain a high proportion of the variation in leadership effectiveness.

Clarke and O'Donoghue (2017) emphasised the importance of being sensitive to context while examining educational leadership. School context can be described through situated, material, professional and external dimensions (Braun et al., 2011) where 'situated context' is seen as a school's setting, its history and intake; 'professional context' includes values, teacher commitment and experience and policy management in school; 'material context' refers to staffing budget for staff, buildings, available technology and surrounding infrastructure; and 'external context' concerns pressures and expectations as a result of the influence of broad local and national policies (Braun et al., 2011; Clarke and O'Donoghue, 2017). Correspondingly, in their review, Tamadoni et al. (2021) found the challenges related to the principal's role and actions to be linked to institutional and sociocultural contexts, different stakeholders and the responsibility to lead staff and teachers.

Theoretical background

To address the multidimensionality of principals' work and to gain a deeper understanding of how principals perceive the different elements of their job and the complex sociocultural surroundings they work in, the present study, brought together two widely used theoretical models as a theoretical framework. First, Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1989) ecological systems theory (EST) was used to describe principals' perceptions of their work. This approach ascribes the active role to the developing person surrounded and influenced by multiple contexts in different sociocultural settings. EST emphasises reciprocal interaction between the active human organism and the persons, objects and symbols in its immediate environment, enabling us to describe principals' work in its entirety. Second, principals' experiences on different elements of their work are described based on the JD-R model (Demerouti et al., 2001; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). Compared with other theoretical models on work-related stress, such as Karasek's (1979) job demands-control (JD-C) model and Siegrist's (1996) effort reward imbalance (ERI) model, the JD-R model does not restrict itself to specific job demands or resources but rather assumes that any demand and resource may affect an employee's health and well-being (Schaufeli and Taris, 2014). Thus, the model has a wider scope and is more flexible. These two theoretical models have been used widely separately but the current study contributed to the existing research by bringing together the EST and JD-R models as the theoretical underpinning. Both theoretical models emphasise the relevance of interaction between a person and an environment and consider a person as an active agent in the environment who influences their own experience. Thus, they were considered as suitable for investigating principals' perceptions of their work.

Bronfenbrenner's EST

Current research draws on Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1989) EST, proposing that the ecological environment is conceived as a nested arrangement of structures, each contained within the next. The conceptualisation of EST enables describing principals' work through five systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) surrounding the person in the middle (individual level). First, the microsystem consists of the immediate relationships the principal has and everyday interactions among the school staff, students and parents. Second, the mesosystem comprises the interaction with and among different elements (Hujala, 2004) of their work. Third, the exosystem consists of elements with which the interaction is experienced as one-sided: superior, upper administrative level or resources, which is followed by the macrosystem including the overarching patterns and characteristics of a broader context in the society. Finally, the chronosystem consists of the changes happening over a person's lifespan that influence their experience at a particular point in time.

Principals' work is connected and influenced by a variety of stakeholders and contexts (Pollock et al., 2015), which construct their work-related ecological system, depending on how the interaction is experienced by the principal. For example, they interact daily with their schools' internal stakeholders, such as teachers, other staff members and students (see microlevel) (Prado Tuma and Spillane, 2019), in relation to human resource management and student affairs (Buonomo et al., 2020; Elomaa et al., 2021). Also, principals interact with external stakeholders, such as school districts, teacher unions, state educational agencies and students' families as well as diverse community actors such as libraries and after-school programme providers (see meso and exo levels) (Prado Tuma and Spillane, 2019). In addition, principals' work is influenced by interactions with upper-level policymakers and administrators as they function as a mediator of new policies and legislation that involve teachers (Tintoré et al., 2020).

Previously, EST has been used for conceptualising the contextual model of leadership in early childhood education (ECE) and defining the structural framework of the factors and actors related to leadership (Hujala, 2004; Nivala, 2002). The core of the contextual leadership model consists of the children, parents and guardians, childcare unit, local and state authorities and, finally, the whole society and its culture. In the present study, Bronfenbrenner's EST was used to address the complexity of principals' work and investigate how principals see the different elements of their work.

Job demands and resources model

In the current study, our intention was to gain a deeper understanding of principals' experiences in terms of their multifaceted job from the perspective of the JD-R model (Demerouti et al., 2001; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). The JD-R model proposes that high job demands lead to strain and health impairment, whereas high resources lead to increased motivation and higher productivity. In addition, the combination of high levels of resources and high demands increases the 'motivational potential' of the job and, hence, leads to work engagement (Schaufeli, 2015). According to Schaufeli and Taris (2014), job demands involve the physical, psychological, social or organisational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and/or psychological (i.e. cognitive or emotional) effort and are therefore associated with certain psychological and/or physiological costs. They noted that job demands can be, for example, cognitive and emotional demands, interpersonal conflicts, qualitative and quantitative workload, time pressure and work-home conflict. Job resources, in turn, are seen as those physical, psychological, social or organisational aspects of the job that reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs and

are functional in achieving work goals and stimulating personal growth, learning and development (Schaufeli, 2015; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). Some examples of job resources are autonomy, knowledge, performance feedback, social support and trust in management (Schaufeli, 2015). In addition, Schaufeli and Taris (2014) added personal resources into the JD-R model, defined as the psychological characteristics or aspects of the self that are generally associated with resilience and refer to the ability to control and affect one's environment successfully. They also added that similarly to job resources, personal resources are functional in accomplishing work goals and stimulate personal growth and development.

Bakker and Demerouti (2018) noted that it is important to differentiate among different organisational levels (organisation, leader, team and individual) because the various stakeholders in an organisation influence each other. However, despite the growing awareness of the mounting pressure placed on principals, less is known about how school principals experience their work (cf. see Mahfouz, 2020; Niesche et al., 2021). Therefore, the current study aimed to investigate principals' own perceptions of their experienced job demands and resources.

Aim of the current study

This study aimed to shed light on principals' insights into their work from the ecological systems perspective and investigate which elements of their work are perceived as demands or resources by applying the JD-R model.

The more specific research questions were as follows:

1. How can principals' work be described from the ecological systems perspective?
2. Which elements of the system are perceived as demands and resources?

Methodology

Participants and procedure

The current study was part of a larger longitudinal project investigating teacher and student stress and interactions in the classroom (Authors omitted for reviewing purposes). The university's committee of ethics approved the study. Principals from 10 Finnish municipalities participated in this sub-study. The requests to conduct the interviews were sent to 137 principals in 10 Finnish municipalities participating in the larger project, resulting in a total of 22 principals (6 male, 16 female) who signed consent forms to participate in the study. The participants' ages ranged from 37 to 65 years ($M = 52.4$, $SD = 7.2$). Work experience as a principal ranged from 1 to 29 years ($M = 13$, $SD = 9$, one was missing) and working in the current workplace ranged from 1 to 19 years ($M = 7.7$, $SD = 5.9$). Fourteen principals worked in elementary schools that were delivering primary education for children in grades 1–6, and eight principals worked in lower secondary schools with grades 1–9. School size ranged from 30 to 1030 students ($M = 344$, $SD = 277.6$), and the number of school staff ranged from 4 to 180 people ($M = 40.6$, $SD = 39.8$, one was missing). Thirteen participants reported leading one school, six were leading two, and two participants were leading three separate schools. One participant did not provide information about the number of units led.

Data were collected by conducting semi-structured interviews. Interviews concerned themes such as working environment, assessing one's own expertise, competence development, need for support, experience of stress and social support. Interview themes were developed in accordance

with the scope of the larger project and in relation to earlier research results. In addition, pilot interviews were conducted with two elementary school principals who were not participating in the study and were selected because their demographics fitted with our sample. Pilot interviews were not included in the final sample. Testing the interview questions and structure ensured the suitability of the collected data to answer the research questions. There were no significant changes made in the interview structure. All interviews were conducted in person by four interviewers who were also involved in the preparation and planning process in September 2019. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the length of interviews varied from 44 to 84 min, resulting in 311 pages of transcribed text (Times New Roman, 12; line spacing 1.0). To gain familiarisation with the data to the greatest extent possible, the first author was present for all interviews, acting as an observer in the interviews she did not conduct.

In Finland, the obligation to make educational policy lies with the Ministry of Education and Culture, and the Finnish National Agency for Education is responsible for the implementation of the policy aims. Every school is supposed to have a principal in charge. However, one principal can be in charge of more than one school. Principals' immediate superior is the municipality director of education, who is responsible for supervising their work. The national core curriculum of education (Finnish National Agency for Education [OPH], 2014) provides broad guidelines for local curriculum, which is developed by a local municipality and school steering group, taking into account local needs and context (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2008). Principals' work description varies due to differences in organisational and educational context. In Finland, principals are required to have a master's degree and the pedagogical qualification, appropriate work experience and a certificate in educational administration or the equivalent (Paronen and Lappi, 2018).

Analysis strategy

The present study was conducted using inductive reasoning with theory-driven content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013; Patton, 2015). The participants were assigned random ID numbers from 1 to 22 to ensure confidentiality. Open coding was used to remain open to the data and label concepts and to define and develop themes (Patton, 2015). First, verbatim text units with relevant content that answered the research questions were identified from interview transcriptions. Second, existing literature was examined to determine the extent to which the current study's data supported existing conceptualisations, results and/or theories (Patton, 2015). Consequently, analysis concerning the principals' experience involving their work-related ecological system was guided by EST. Correspondingly, principals' self-reports were divided into five interacting levels (see Figure 1) as follows: (1) Microsystem – the circle closest to the principal, containing everyday interaction with different elements; (2) Mesosystem – describing interaction with and among multiple settings; (3) Exosystem – interaction experienced as one-sided, with elements principals cannot influence but have an indirect effect on their work; (4) Macrosystem – overarching elements that principals have no control over (e.g. social values and institutional values); and (5) Chronosystem – changes that occur over a person's lifespan which influence principals' experience at a particular point in time.

Analysis concerning how principals experience different elements of their work was guided by the JD-R model (Demerouti et al., 2001; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). Using theory-guided content analysis, principals' descriptions of different elements of their work were divided into resources and demands (see Table 1 for examples of the analysis process).

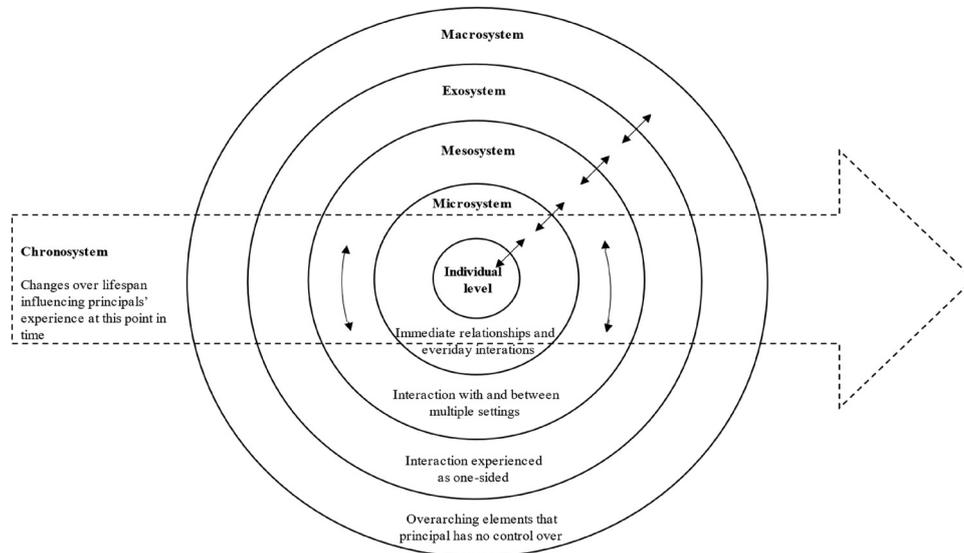


Figure 1. Theoretical approach to principals' work-related ecological system (modified from Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1989).

In the third phase, intercoder reliability was calculated on two levels: first, it was checked per paragraph whether the same elements appeared, and second, if the elements were experienced as demands or resources. Initially, the first coder performed the coding of verbatim texts; then, the second coder was given the data and created categories. The second coder read 23% of the data (five interviews) and coded these independently based on the provided categories to ensure the reliability of the analysis. Intercoder reliability on the appearance of elements was 85%, and on the nature of experience, 94.5% (the remaining 5.5% were discussed and revised in cooperation with two coders). Finally, the remaining 15% of the codes on the appearance of elements were discussed and revised by the two coders in cooperation. This process was concluded with an agreement on whether those elements were experienced as demands or resources.

Results

Principals' work-related ecosystem

The first aim was to determine how principals' work can be described from the EST perspective. As a result, principals' self-reported descriptions were divided into six theory-based main levels, which were divided into smaller elements based on the patterns emerging from the data (Patton, 2015): (a) *The individual level*; (b) *Microsystem*; (c) *Mesosystem*; (d) *Exosystem*; (e) *Macrosystem*; and (f) *Chronosystem*. Some elements could appear under two systems (e.g. superior under microsystem and ecosystem) due to principals' descriptions of the experience (see Figure 2).

The individual level. The results indicated that principals' work was affected by several personal and internal influencers, such as personal beliefs and personality, absorption, feelings of adequacy/

Table 1. Principals' experience of different elements of their work.

	System	Element	Meaning	
Resources	Microsystem	Work community in general	Positive descriptions of work community as: excellent, independently operating, with good team spirit, skilled, demanding, ambitious, self-directed, humorous, accepting, understanding, supportive, cooperative, committed, flexible, with high professional goals and similar pedagogical view, diverse, hardworking, relaxed, with high work ethics, fair and honest	
		Management team at school	Sharing tasks and responsibility Having a vice/assistant principal Presence of other principals	
		Other principals	Experienced colleagues for support Non-formal relationships and meetings, common sense and a sense of humour Information exchange and sharing Official principals' network	
		Superiors	Feeling of being supported and trusted	
	Exosystem	Other external facets	Cooperation with social workers and other support providers Occupational healthcare provided to principals Cooperation in work groups International cooperation	
		Macrosystem	School context	School size Socio-economic context Physical environment
	Chronosystem	Work experience	Competencies have increased in time	
		Current life situation	No need to take care of small children anymore	
	Demands	Microsystem	Interaction with parents or guardians	Challenging and demanding situations Offensively behaving parents or guardians
			Interaction between teachers	Responsibility to solve conflicting situations and disagreements between different parties
Interaction between teachers and students				
Interaction between parents or guardians and teachers				
Interaction among students, parents or guardians and teachers				
Exosystem	Official principals' network	Content and number of meetings Structural differences of the official network in different municipalities		
	Superiors	Insufficient or non-existent support from superiors Physical/mental distance from superiors		

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

System	Element	Meaning
	Other facets	Cooperation with social workers and other support providers Insufficient cooperation with police Extra load from construction projects Evening activities in school premises
	Availability of resources Legislation	Lack of time and financial and human resources Need for clearer instructions for implementation Changes concerning the new core curriculum
Macrosystem	School context	School size, socio-economic context and physical environment Challenging student body
	Publicity	Coverage by and communication with local and social media Being in the spotlight in the local community
Chronosystem	Work experience	Being new in a current position Being new in the leadership position
	Work community	Raise from teacher to leader in the same work community

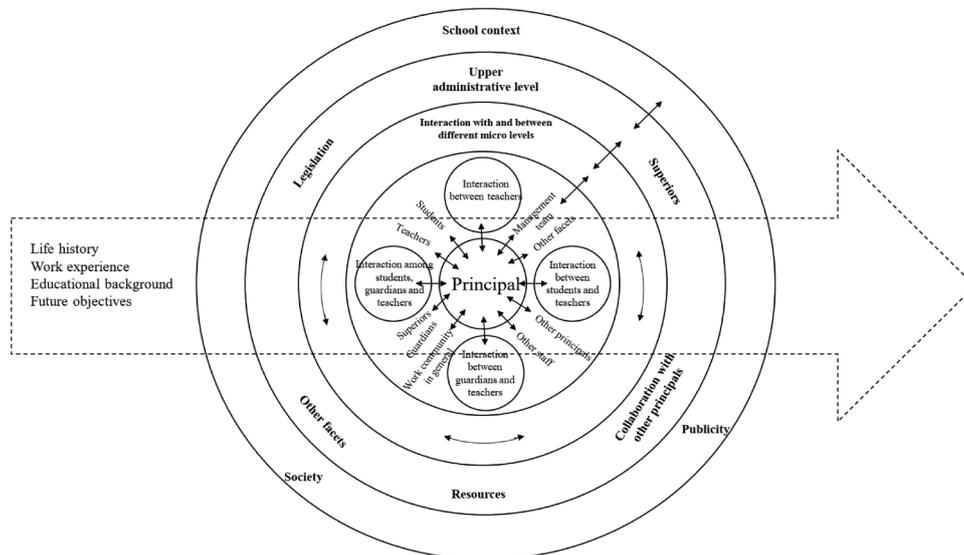


Figure 2. Principals' perceptions of their work-related ecological system (modified from Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1989).

inadequacy, health and recovery from work. For example, P11 described personal traits that a principal should have: 'You need to have guts, to make unpleasant or unpopular decisions and strongly stand behind those'. In addition, a feeling of adequacy/inadequacy was described by P2: 'Now what is the hardest, what burdens me the most, is if I do something wrong. Or if I don't notice or understand something or don't recognise a problem, when I should have'. Principals also mentioned the importance of physical well-being, for example, when P19 pointed out: 'You have to be physically fit. Someone can think that we are not doing physical work here, but you have to take care of yourself and then, if the physical condition is okay, so is the mental side'.

Microsystem. The microsystem consists of different elements among which everyday interaction takes place. Principals reported the work community in general, teachers, students, parents or guardians, superiors, other staff, other principals, other facets and the management team at school to be such elements. In addition to the work community in general (without further specification), participants reported having day-to-day interaction with teachers. For example, P2 mentioned that: 'Teachers are doing good work in interacting with parents. That is the best support for me. They do their work with joy and professionalism. They are self-directed and constantly want to develop'. Even though principals noted that they highly value teachers working in their school, some of them felt that they do not have enough time to meet with them. As P15 pointed out: 'I wish that I would have more time for teachers and students, that I would have more space for pedagogical leadership. Administrational tasks are taking too much energy and time. It would be nice to visit classrooms more often and give feedback to teachers.'

Students were characterised as the ones the schools are meant for, and taking care of their well-being was seen as an important task for principals. P8 stated that the small size of a school is beneficial for the reason that: 'It is a good size school. It is still possible to know all the children. Of course, they have their own problems, but then again, compared to worries they wrestle in bigger schools...'. A principal from bigger schools added: 'The children like to come to school. They behave well. They are happy because there are a lot of things to do here, and friends. They are getting along with teachers very well. We do not have many problems with students. I do understand that in the areas of weak socio-economic environment, students need a lot of support'. Principals also interact with students' parents or guardians on an everyday basis and see them as an integral part of the school's functioning.

Furthermore, the management team at school can include other principals from the same school (depending on the school size, in larger schools, there can be separate principals responsible for different school levels) and vice principals as well as the school secretary, special education teachers, teachers and other staff. For example, P4 noted: 'We have in our management team a deputy principal and the school secretary who are involved. With them, we are unravelling different issues there'. Superiors' role in principals work is mainly to offer support and help when needed, as P22 explained: 'I have a good cooperation with our director of education. It is one reason why I have energy to come to work every morning. That...I kind of have the city's support'.

According to the participants, other principals in the field are seen as the main channel for sharing experiences and having more experienced colleagues for support. We found that principals highly value non-formal discussions and meetings for exchanging information and experiences. However, the principals had varying views about whether official principals' network meetings are taking place often enough or not.

In addition, principals described (1) interactions between teachers, (2) interactions between students and teachers, (3) interactions between parents or guardians and teachers and (4) interactions

between students, parents or guardians and teachers where the student is actively present as important elements of the microsystem. For instance, P1 described one challenging situation: '[When] there is a conflict between the teacher and the student and then the parents come into the picture, if their communication with teachers becomes impossible, then I need to be there as a referee handling those things'. Furthermore, P20 described handling disagreements between teachers as part of their job: 'What is stressful in a principals' job are the contradictions between teachers. For example, when some bonuses are divided between teachers, then I negotiate with them... it causes conflicts between them'.

Mesosystem. Principals' mesosystem involves interaction with and among different elements of their work. For example, P15 described this: 'Sometimes, it feels like there are a lot of things to report and respond to quickly. There is a lot to remember. Especially when there are two buildings here...that everybody knows who organises what. Of course, the weekly meetings are taking a lot of energy and time'. Thus, the nature of the interaction is described more precisely under the systems the elements belong to.

Exosystem. Our results further indicate that an exosystem consists of interactions that are experienced as one-sided with elements principals cannot influence but have an indirect effect on their work, such as legislation, upper administrative level, superiors, official principals' network, resources and communication and cooperation involving other facets such as social workers and other support providers, police and construction project-related cooperation. The principals expressed concern regarding legislation that required them to implement the new core curriculum in a limited time frame and guide teachers in that effort. As P18 reported: 'Of course, a big deal is the new core curriculum which confuses teachers. If you take that literally...it is difficult. Teachers have so-called pedagogical freedom in the classroom. Naturally, there is a lot of simultaneous teaching and cooperation among teachers, and you can do your work in your own way, but if you check that [new core curriculum] too literally, there are many kinds of new things involved'.

The upper administrative level, referring to municipality-level educational services, was seen as the provider and regulator of information, financing and in-service training. Principals expressed a wish for more clarity from the upper administrative level and narrowing down their work description. In some cases, it seemed to the principals that the upper administrative level really did not know what was happening in the field. Superiors were placed under the exosystem in cases when a participant reported not having two-sided interaction with them, as P10 pointed out: 'My superior is a service manager who is so far away from here, like from what we do here. It is hard to go and ask some small things, those seemingly insignificant...and I am not sure if I would get an answer'. Collaboration with other principals was placed under the ecosystem. In cases where principals experienced one-sided interactions, they mostly described the functioning of the official principals' network. Also, limited time and financial and human resources were reported as influencing principals' work. For instance, P7 stated: 'When working in a small unit, you really do not get help needed for dealing with challenging students'. In addition, P8 acknowledged that: 'Sometimes, I know that something could be done better, but there are not sufficient time and financial resources. It is frustrating when it is expected that issues should be taken care of, but there are no resources for that'. Some interviewees noted that communication and cooperation involving other facets consisted of construction project-related cooperation and collaboration with healthcare providers, police, psychological support providers and international cooperation.

Macrosystem. Our results indicate that the macrosystem consists of overarching elements that principals have no control over, such as school context, publicity and society. School context can be constructed of, for example, the size and location of the school, different characteristics of the student population (e.g. number of students with special needs), school buildings' physical features (e.g. the number of different ones, the age and condition, construction projects), schools' attractiveness to employees and the socio-economic environment. For example, P4 described it this way: 'We have a lot of kids from challenging home conditions. We have here the whole imaginable spectrum of homes and children', and P5 added when describing the factors affecting the daily working life: 'That huge size of our school, that great number of people. The large number of human contacts.' Furthermore, the public nature of principals' work was described by P11 as a cause of stress: 'Pressure starts when some incident happens to end up in social media. Then it starts to live its own life. Then it is not in your hands anymore. You cannot control it', and P22 also noted this: 'Well, I am a public person here. For example, everyone knows who that guy is in the shop, who lifts the box of beer into a shopping cart on Friday evening and so on.' In addition, the interviewees stressed that society has an indirect influence on principals' work through its attitudes and beliefs about education. For instance, P2 called attention to polarisation: 'Those families who invest a lot in education and children's hobbies and do everything. They are open, positive, open for support Anything is possible for them. And then again, those who are not doing so well are not contributing at all...so the gap between those two groups is only getting bigger'.

Chronosystem. According to the principals' reports, their work-related chronosystem includes life history, work experience, educational background and future vision, all of which influence the way they experience their work at any given point in time. For example, P16 acknowledged that how they ended up being a principal was the sum of many coincidences: 'I was a class teacher before, but then, six years ago, I had an accident. I fell down the stairs and broke my leg. Then, after that, I was working as a teacher for two years, but then the pains got so bad that I had to quit and think about what I want to do when I grow up, and then there was an open principals' position and not one of the teachers wanted to take it, and so I was asked'. Also, P2 described the changes that had happened over time: 'Well, I have been doing this for almost ten years now. It has become easier in that sense that my skills have developed... through experience, doing, growing, aging and getting wiser, that happens through aging. You start to see the proportions of things more accurately. A sense of relativity is better than as a young principal when I could not necessarily distinguish what was more or less important and relevant'. The role of future vision was described by participants through future orientation in school functioning and also as more personal future plans. For example, P7 reported not having to deal with too much stress from work because of their approaching retirement.

Principals' experience on different elements of their work

As a second aim, we investigated which elements of principals' work are experienced as demands and resources. Our qualitative content analysis was guided by the JD-R model (Schaufeli and Taris, 2014) and divided into two theory-driven themes: (1) resources and (2) demands (See Table 1 for the content of developed themes, and the analysis process).

Resources. The work community in general was seen as a resource by principals. For example, P3 stated: 'Like I said, we have here an autonomous and highly competent work community. And...it is good to come here, as it was in the very first days. I had been in more than sixty teachers' lounges as a substitute teacher during my studies, and somehow there was exceptional atmosphere here, and I think that still is [the case]'. In addition, the management team at the respective schools was seen as 'important support for the principal and the whole school community', as noted by P12. Other principals were described as an important source of support in dealing with daily challenges, as P8 reported: 'In the beginning, it was extremely helpful for me that there happened to be experienced principals from whom I could directly ask, 'Hey what do you think about that' or 'Have you been in this kind of situation?'. Furthermore, having a non-formal relationship, for example, sharing the similar sense of humour, was described as a great source of recovery. Superiors, when placed on the micro level, were seen as a great resource, particularly if they created a feeling of being supported and having a trusting relationship with one's superiors. Principals also saw collaboration with other external facets as a resource, for example, cooperation with different support systems for students, occupational healthcare providers for principals themselves and local workgroups as well as opportunities for international cooperation. School context was seen as a supportive element in principals' work, including the aspects of favourable school size, socio-economic context and physical environment. Furthermore, on the chrono level, work experience and current life situation were seen as resources, as described by P8: 'The fact that I have enough experience, ability and knowledge to do that work helps me a lot'. P15 added, when describing the work situation and recovery from work: 'I recover in silence...at home. There is just my wife and me, just two of us. Our children have moved out already, and there is no need to take care of them anymore. That helps.'

Demands. Superiors, the official principals' network, other external facets and school context were noted by the interviewees as job demands. When described under the microsystem, superiors were seen as an important support for principals, but when placed under the exosystem, they were considered as demanding due to what the principals described as one-sided interactions resulting from insufficient or non-existing support and physical and/or mental distance. For example, P10 described the mental and physical distance from their superior: 'My immediate superior is so far away from what we do here, there is a high threshold to go and ask some small things from him.' The structure and functioning of the official principals' network might be seen as demanding by principals because of the content and number of meetings and the size of municipality, meaning that in small municipalities, there are very few principals to network with, was noted by P14. When describing the interaction with other external facets, principals mentioned insufficient cooperation with social workers, psychological support providers for students and police. For example, P11 noted: 'We have those really demanding student situations. Last year we did about twenty incidents reports due to violence. I think the biggest support would be to get help for those children. Now, that support from child psychiatry is not working. Also, those children's affairs do not progress because of parents hiding their own mental health and coping problems. There are not enough low-threshold services for families and no psychological and psychiatric support for those children. Those are the most demanding situations.' In addition, they pointed out the extra workload resulting from construction projects and other external users of the school premises. P5 provided an example of the construction process of forming a new comprehensive school: 'Construction process is taking a lot of time. There are two forms of construction, the physical construction and kind of building

a culture of operating, in addition to normal human resource management, student work and work with parents. Then, youth work providers, library and preschool came also to our premises, so we need to adapt those actors here.’ In addition, P10 stated: ‘Last week, they started evening activities. It means that we rent our premises to sport clubs and others. And it brought its own stressing factor. There was a quite clear stress peak, because it happens after the working hours, and if there is a problem, for example, that the key does not work, they are in contact with me’.

Furthermore, publicity and the public nature of the principals’ role was seen as demanding because of coverage and communication with local and social media and being in the spotlight in the local community. For example, P16 described this: ‘In the morning, I am afraid to read that [Shortly] column from local newspaper because maybe there is something negative about our school. That fear that I have been careless and doing something that develops into a bigger problem. That constant fear coming with the responsibility, when something happens, I stand 100% behind my employees.’ Additionally, lack of time and financial and human resources influenced the principals’ work, as P20 pointed out: ‘Well, the constant shortage of money affects the most, because every single day we have to keep track of where the money goes. The Finnish schools are running on a rather tight budget, and we have, for example, a curriculum reform going on, which requires us to renew all the schoolbooks. Then, we should also invest in information technology’. As this participant underlined, changes concerning new legislation are demanding for principals, and in addition to financial resources, participants reported needing clearer instructions for implementing new legislation to provide sufficient support for teachers. Concerning the school context, principals found the size of school and troublesome socio-economic environment as demanding. For example, according to P5: ‘We are in such socio-economic environment that here are a lot of challenges. I do not mean only immigrants now, but there is a high level of unemployment, single parents...other social problems, and students’ disruptive behaviour is higher than average’. They also described poor physical environment as a demanding aspect of their work.

Interaction with parents or guardians was seen as demanding by many principals. However, this concerned mostly interaction in challenging situations, as described by P8: ‘Sometimes there are these challenging situations with guardians. So there have been situations where there is a debate about whether we should take this question into court or if are we capable to figure it out in another way. These are always exhausting situations’. Principals explained that solving problems among teachers, students and parents or guardians was one of the most demanding aspects of their work. Furthermore, work experience and starting in a principal’s position in the same school where they worked previously as a teacher were seen as demands by principals. For example, P12 reported: ‘At the moment the most challenging is that I have started as a new principal here. Starting a school year is always demanding, but doing that as a principal for the first time is extra challenging. There is so much new, and you don’t have routines yet. That is challenging.’ This was echoed by P8: ‘In the beginning it was hard, because it was the same work community...to jump from being a teacher buddy to be a supervisor. That change of role.’

Discussion

The present study contributes to filling the research gap concerning elementary school principals’ perceptions of their work by combining the EST and JD-R models. The first goal of the study was to describe principal’s perceptions of their work from the perspective of EST. The results indicate that, not surprisingly, principals indeed have to deal with multiple responsibilities in different contexts

and interact with several stakeholders, which has also been noted by other researchers in the field (Darmody and Smyth, 2016; Drago-Severson et al., 2018; Elomaa et al., 2021; Tintoré et al., 2020). In line with the theoretical underpinning we applied, participants reported their work to be influenced by individual factors. On the micro level, their work consists of immediate relationships and everyday interactions with and among students, teachers, parents or guardians, the work community in general, the management team at the school, other principals and staff, superiors and other facets. In addition, one-sided interactions with resources, other principals, upper administrative level, superiors and legislation were involved on the exo level. Further, society, school context and publicity were seen as overarching elements that principals have no control over, but which have an indirect influence on their work. Moreover, on the chrono level, life history, work experience, educational background and future vision were noted to be elements that change over one's lifespan and influence the way principals perceive their work at various points in time (see Figure 2). Human development takes place through bidirectional interaction between the active, evolving, biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects and symbols in its immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998). In the current research, this pertains to the interaction with various elements, such as superiors, other principals and other facets appearing within different ecological systems and how these interactions are perceived by principals. It underlines the individual nature of principals' perceptions which should be taken into account when planning support and pre- or in-service training for them (see also Drago-Severson et al., 2018; Elomaa et al., 2021; Mahfouz and Gordon, 2021).

The second goal was to investigate which elements of the work-related ecological system were perceived as demands and resources. We moved from the individual level through all ecological systems by describing how principals perceived different elements from the perspective of the JD-R model. In line with the theoretical basis we applied, on the individual level, principals' work is influenced by beliefs and personality, absorption, feelings of adequacy, health and recovery from work. According to Schaufeli and Taris (2014), the aforementioned internal influencers can be seen as personal resources moderating the relation between job characteristics and well-being, and they may buffer the negative effects of job demands on burnout and exacerbate the positive effects of job resources on engagement. Similarly, Leithwood et al. (2020) found that a small handful of personal traits, such as problem-solving expertise, managing emotions and optimism explains a high proportion of the variation in leadership effectiveness. Moreover, principals' job satisfaction and work-related stress have been found to be related to personal characteristics by Darmody and Smyth (2016) and to internal pressures, such as health concerns and feeling of inadequacy, by Elomaa et al. (2021).

In terms of the microsystem, communication and collaboration with and among the work community in general, management team at the school, other principals and superiors were seen as job resources by principals and as factors that support achieving work goals and stimulating personal growth, learning and development (Schaufeli, 2015). Collegiality and collaboration have been found to lessen the decline in well-being; thus, it is especially important for principals to have internal and external collegial networks (Beausaert et al., 2021). Furthermore, principals interact on a daily basis with several stakeholders in different contexts (Pollock et al., 2015; Tamadoni et al., 2021). Our results suggest that when the interactions with supervisors and with other principals in the field were perceived as elements belonging to the microsystem (daily interaction), they could also be recognised as resources, showing the importance of support from superiors and other principals. This claim is supported by Elomaa et al. (2021) who found that principals highly value social support from colleagues, superiors and other principals in the field. By definition, job

demands consume energy and may therefore eventually lead to exhaustion and related health problems (Schaufeli and Taris, 2014). Some of the most extensive demands for principals seem to be related to interaction with different stakeholders in situations where the principal has the role of mediator in solving conflicting situations, for example, among teachers, teachers and students and/or parents or guardians. The conflicts that end up on the principal's desk often involve strong emotions of different parties and can evolve into highly complicated and demanding situations.

The exosystem contained one-sided interactions with resources, other principals, upper administrative level, superior and legislations. From which cooperation with other principals, superior, availability of resources and legislations were reported as demands and cooperation with other facets was seen as both, demand and resource. Similarly, the importance of sufficient resources in regard to school leadership has been highlighted in earlier literature. For example, Leithwood et al. (2020) described allocating resources in support of the schools' vision and goals as something successful leaders do. In addition, Tintoré and colleagues (2020) found the lack of resources and support from local authorities to be some of the challenges principals face. However, surprisingly, time and human resources were reported as more important than financial resources. The reason might be that in principals' experience, schools are fairly well financed, but the problem is, especially in smaller municipalities, to find qualified staff. According to Collie et al. (2020), a staff shortage is often caused by issues beyond principals' control such as budgetary constraints. Principals' job demands and responsibilities seem to increase when the interactions with superiors, other principals and other external facets are not based on cooperation. The importance of professional support from colleagues and superiors has also been highlighted by Elomaa et al. (2021). Moreover, our results indicate that the demanding perception of other external facets is caused by insufficient cooperation with social workers, other support providers and police from whom principals need support mainly to manage challenging student affairs. Similarly, Prado Tuma and Spillae (2019) found that principals struggle to make sense of external stakeholders' demands that they perceive to conflict with their own understanding of the goals and values of the school. Furthermore, principals often need to deal with long and time-consuming construction-related issues they do not have training for, without any professional assistance, which takes time away from tasks they consider to be more relevant (Collie et al., 2020; Niesche et al., 2021).

In respect to the macrosystem, school context was seen by the study participants as both a resource and a demand, and they considered publicity to be a demanding aspect of their work. School context has been reported to be related to principals' job satisfaction and occupational stress in terms of their personal characteristics and working conditions (Darmody and Smyth, 2016). Similarly, our results indicate that schools' socio-economic context and physical environment have an influence on principals' experience of their work. That influence can be positive (resources) if these factors are experienced as supportive, or it can be challenging depending on the student population and the socio-economic context as well if it involves large school units and an out-of-date or unsafe physical environment. In addition, as noted by Tintoré and colleagues (2020), increasing demands and expectations placed on principals by the families and the entire society are two of the main factors related to the complex nature of their job.

The results indicate that on the chrono level, principals' current experience of their work is influenced by their educational background, work, personal history and future vision. For example, the choice of occupation can be related to changing a life situation or as a natural continuation of one's

working life. Accumulating work experience has a positive impact on principals' perceptions. Also, the conflicting social situations are perceived as less stressful by more experienced principals, according to our findings. Demands appear when being new in the position without previous experience and current guidance. That situation may affect the experience of elements of all ecological systems and can appear on an individual level as turnover thoughts or feelings of inadequacy (Drago-Severson et al., 2018) during the first years on the job. It may imply that offering support to principals through, for example, mentoring programmes (Dempster, 2008) during their first years could reduce the pressures and help them to become familiar with their role and recognise and concentrate on relevant tasks.

Using the EST and JD-R models as the theoretical basis of the current qualitative study gave us an opportunity to gain a comprehensive view of principals' work and their personal perceptions on various essential elements. The importance of interaction between the person and the environment is strongly present in both the EST and JD-R models, where the person is seen as an active agent operating in immediate and more remote contexts. EST places importance on a person's agency in relation to their engagement with self-development (Sangrá et al., 2019), and the JD-R model regards a person as one who appraises the demands and resources influencing their well-being (Demerouti et al., 2001; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). The results of the current study indicate that contextual factors influence principals' work as can be seen from the example of the appearance of the same elements in different ecological systems and the differences in individual perceptions on demands and resources. As also noted by Merçon-Vargas et al. (2020), the bidirectional processes between humans and the environment which nurture human development vary considerably as a function of personal and contextual characteristics (see also Griffiore and Phenice, 2016). However, despite evidence that principals' occupational stress is caused by, to some extent, similar challenges (Elomaa et al., 2021; Riley, 2020), the role and relationship of and between contextual and individual factors of principals' work should be further investigated (see also Tamadoni et al., 2021).

The study has some limitations that need to be taken into account. First, the sample size was rather small. Thus, further research is needed that would combine interviews with questionnaire data from a larger sample to gain more understanding of the principals' job demands and resources. Second, how individual factors such as beliefs and personality, absorption, feelings of adequacy, health and recovery from work affect principals' experience of their job and how contextual factors such as the number of units they lead and their socio-economic context influence principals' perceptions should be investigated more deeply. Finally, the data were collected from Finland which might have an impact on the generalisability of the results. Different results might be reached in other cultural and educational systems.

Conclusions

Based on the results of the current research, we conclude that principals indeed deal with multiple responsibilities in different contexts and interact with several stakeholders in their work. Their perceptions of their work are highly individual and influenced by various internal and external factors and contexts within different ecological systems, which should be considered when planning training and support for them. Our results also indicate that a substantial number of challenges principals face are related to interpersonal relationships, suggesting that they would benefit from pre- and in-service training for managing conflicting situations with and among different stakeholders. Furthermore, leadership training for teachers, to better prepare them for accepting leadership

tasks, might ease principals' workload and occupational stress. However, there is a need for further research on the relationships and interactions of elements within and among ecological systems from the perspective of demands and resources to gain a deeper understanding of mechanisms influencing principals' work which might be reached by using the theoretical underpinning we applied in the current study.

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