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

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Abstract

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

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

Pedagogical leadership in ECE

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

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

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

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

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

Broad-based pedagogical leadership in ECE

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

Technical leadership	Interpretations and mean-	The web of meanings
Indirect pedagogical leadership	ings made from technical,	forms **cultural**
	pedagogical, and human	**leadership**
Direct pedagogical leadership	leadership formed into	
Strategic leadership Policy decisions	**symbolic leadership**	
Human leadership		
Indirect pedagogical leadership		

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

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

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

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

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

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

Methodology

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

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

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

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

Findings

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

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

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

Direct pedagogical leadership

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

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

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

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

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

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

Technical leadership – indirect pedagogical leadership

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Human leadership – indirect pedagogical leadership

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Discussion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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