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# Leadership discourses in early childhood education during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa and Finland



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**Background:** This study explores the experiences of early childhood education (ECE) leaders during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, drawing insights from case studies in Finland and South Africa. Theoretical frameworks of contextual and pedagogical leadership inform the understanding of ECE leadership.

**Aim:** The aim is to analyse and compare the experiences of ECE leaders in two diverse contexts, Finland and South Africa, during the pandemic.

**Setting:** The study involves two case studies conducted in Finland and South Africa, focussing on the experiences of ECE leaders amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Methods:** Discursive analysis of interviews was conducted to uncover the experiences of ECE leaders. The study compared the discourses from Finland and South Africa.

**Results:** In Finland, the discourses revealed the persistence of pedagogical leadership's importance, challenges to distributed pedagogical leadership and deepening difficulties in maintaining leadership quality. In South Africa, discourses included reconfigured pedagogical leadership, acceptance of new experiences driven by fear of uncertainty and changes in leadership practices and teachers' roles. Despite national diversity, both cases emphasised the resilience of pedagogical aims.

**Conclusion:** The study underscores the significance of pedagogical leadership in ECE, even in times of crisis. The contextual leadership model offers valuable insights into ECE leadership across diverse contexts, highlighting the need for adaptive leadership strategies.

**Contribution:** This research contributes to understanding ECE leadership dynamics during the pandemic, providing insights into the challenges faced by leaders and the resilience of pedagogical goals across different national contexts. It also emphasises the importance of contextual leadership models in developing effective leadership practices in ECE.

**Keywords:** early childhood education; leadership; comparative case study; discursive analysis; COVID-19 pandemic.

## Introduction

Global interest in early childhood education (ECE) has been rising because of the significance of ECE for children's learning and wellbeing. In addition, its relevance for the future of society has recently been highlighted. However, ECE was impacted significantly by the global coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, which began in 2020 and put children's rights to learning and their wellbeing in jeopardy. The Executive Committee of the World Organization for Early Childhood Education (OMEP) asserts that maintaining high standards for ECE, notwithstanding the pandemic, is our shared worldwide responsibility (OMEP 2020). In many ways, adjusting to COVID-19 has evolved into a massive, global social experiment that not only resulted in lost learning during lockdown but may also eventually result in fewer possibilities for education (Jandric 2020). The global health pandemic has disrupted education and affected many aspects of human existence in unprecedented ways (D'Orville 2020; Zhu & Liu 2020).

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Recent studies have indicated that leadership is essential for ensuring that education is of a good quality (Fonsén et al. 2022; Keung et al. 2019). Effective leadership becomes more important during difficult times. Rapid organisational change brought about by the pandemic demanded considerable resilience to maintain operational capability. One of the most crucial factors affecting an organisation's resilience is its leadership. Bassok et al. (2020) argue that leaders' experiences during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic were extremely stressful and difficult for the leaders. Experienced stress caused negative effects on their mental health, such as making it difficult to focus and sleep. Thus, the increased understanding of essential leadership concerns in ECE and the idea of establishing strong leadership are essential to building ECE organisations' resilience and vitality to withstand sudden changes and challenges. Good leadership and management are linked to effective and successful organisational outcomes. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate how ECE leaders lead their organisations in challenging and difficult times (Rabl et al. 2014).

To understand the fundamentals of ECE leadership, we reviewed two small case studies of leadership discourses of ECE centre leaders from Finland and South Africa during a pandemic. Owing to the uniqueness of the situation in the pandemic, the theoretical understanding of ECE leadership was based on the contextual leadership theory (Hujala 2013; Nivala 1998), which also includes Bronfenbrenner's (1999) chronosystem thinking. In this study, we utilised a socioconstructivist approach with a discursive method (Alvesson & Kärreman 2000b; Jokinen, Juhila & Suoninen 2016). To comprehend the national differences in perceptions and constructions of leadership in the framework of the contextual leadership model, the study design included the comparison of these case studies.

In this article, we refer to ECE, which in the contexts of South Africa and Finland encompasses the frame of ECE and care. Additionally, we use the abbreviation ECE leader in both the South African and Finnish cases, but we are aware of the different leadership titles used in different contexts.

### **South Africa's early childhood education and the pandemic**

South Africa's ECE system exhibits persistent inadequacies, and a significant portion of young children remains unenrolled in learning programmes, while many women encounter challenges in balancing work and caring for their young children (Le Mottee 2022).

Early childhood education in South Africa is recognised as pivotal for addressing social inequalities and breaking the cycle of poverty (Shisana et al. 2016). It is considered crucial for promoting optimal child development, health and well-being (Van der Berg 2016; De Kock et al. 2018). However, perspectives on ECE vary across different communities, with urban areas generally exhibiting higher awareness

compared to rural communities (Zakwe & Bhengu, 2019). Factors such as cultural beliefs, socioeconomic status and government policies significantly influence access to quality ECE programmes. The South African government has implemented initiatives such as the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy to improve ECE services and ensure holistic development from birth to 6 years old (Department of Social Development 2015). Efforts to professionalise the ECE workforce are underway, including training, support and recognition for practitioners (Naicker, Mbele & Chetty 2018).

Challenges facing ECE in South Africa include limited resources, unequal access to quality services and the need for ongoing support for practitioners (Motala, Dieltiens & Wedekind 2018). Community-based centres struggle because of underresourcing and difficulties in meeting quality standards (Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation 2019). Government policies and advocacy efforts are crucial in addressing these challenges and shaping the ECE landscape (Department of Social Development 2015).

In April 2022 the function shift of ECE from birth to 4 years was transferred from the Department of Social development to the Department of Education (Department of Basic Education 2022). Efforts to professionalise this phase include the development of standards and qualifications, with universities applying for accreditation for their ECE programmes (DHET 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic presented additional challenges for the ECE sector in South Africa. Nationwide school closures impacted ECE centres, with private and community preschools facing financial strains, particularly those without government funding (Mhlanga & Moloi 2020). Nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) played a significant role in developing activities for ECE centres during the pandemic, with parents utilising tools like WhatsApp for remote learning (Ebrahim, Martin & Excell 2021). Despite disruptions, ECE centres showed resilience in maintaining progress with children (Jalongo 2021).

Although there have been strides in recognising the importance of ECE and efforts to improve the sector in South Africa, challenges persist, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Continued collaboration among stakeholders and sustained government support are essential for advancing early childhood development and ensuring equitable access to quality services.

### **Finnish early childhood education and the pandemic**

The operating environment for ECE professionals working in Finnish ECE has undergone significant changes in recent years (Kopisto et al. 2015). Since 2013, the Ministry of Education and Culture has overseen ECE, and the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018) establishes a framework for it. The framework and philosophy revolve

around care, education and parenting (Fonsén & Vlasov 2017). Finnish National Core Curriculum for ECEC underlines a goal-oriented whole consisting of education, instruction and care with particular emphasis on pedagogy (FNAE 2022). The orientation has shifted from an emphasis on care towards stronger educational goals with a new curriculum (Hujala, Vlasov & Alila 2023). The Government Decree on ECEC 753/2018 (Ministry of Education and Culture 2024) contains provisions on the number and composition of staff in ECE centres. Employees must be certified and ECE teachers must have a bachelor's degree in education, the social sciences or a Master's degree in education. The staff of ECE centres also consists of ECE nurses whose must have vocational training. Pre-primary teachers must have either a bachelor's or a Master's degree in education. As a result, the need for skilled ECE teachers is currently a concern across the country. A Master's degree will be required of leaders starting in 2030 (Act on ECEC, 540/2018).

Municipalities are obligated to provide ECE services, and every child has the right to participate in ECE (Act on ECEC, 540/2018). Today, over 90% of ECE services are municipally provided, but the private sector is growing. All providers must create local ECE curricula based on the National Core Curriculum for ECEC (FNAE, 2022). The National Core Curriculum guides the development of ECE quality and specifies the key contents of practice. Further, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) gives guidelines for the ECE evaluation by building quality indicators (Vlasov et al. 2019). The National Core Curriculum and ECE regulations both emphasise the pedagogical team leader's role of ECE teachers as well as their educational responsibilities within the multiprofessional team. At the same time, ECE teachers report facing increasingly complex demands, such as increasing documentation and time pressure (Sirvio et al. 2023). A multiprofessional personnel structure is prioritised. Additionally, ECE teachers collaborate with other experts including schoolteachers, social workers, health professionals and special educators (FNAE 2022). In large municipalities, there may be regional area managers besides the ECE centre leaders and municipal ECE leaders (Siippainen et al. 2021).

In March 2020, the Finnish Government announced that there was a state of emergency in the country because of the COVID-19 outbreak (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2020). Since then, the Ministry of Education and Culture has given varying instructions on how to organise ECE and pre-primary education in ECE centres. During spring 2020, the Finnish Government decreed that ECE centres and the preschools in connection with them would be kept in operation. This secured the access to ECE for the children of workers in sectors critical to the functioning of society and enabled parents to work (Kangas & Niinistö 2022). However, the Ministry of Education and Culture continued to recommend that ECE would be organised so that teachers or child groups are not mixed or combined.

Different efforts were made to enable education services in ECE environments. The distance pedagogy of ECE was formulated,

and ECE teachers continued implementation of the pedagogy self-initiated through distance solutions. About half (47.7%) of ECE centres offered the possibility of participation to children who were at home via a remote connection. Eighty-three percent of families reported that their children did not participate in ECE or in local or distance education, and 17% said that their children participated in distance education during the state of emergency in spring 2020 (Kangas & Niinistö 2022; Saranko, Alasuutari & Sulkanen 2021).

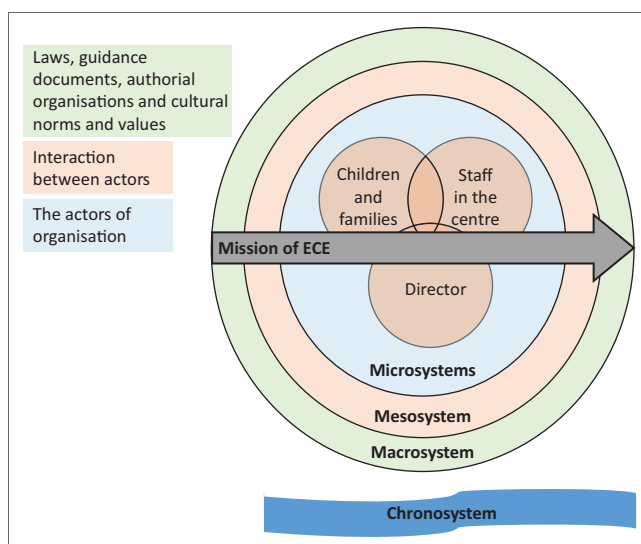
Generally, during the pandemic, the workload of leaders in Finnish ECE units increased and their job description also changed in many ways. Staff meetings were avoided, and teachers' meetings were organised remotely. Altogether, there has been a particular emphasis on work tasks concerning personnel management (Nurhonen, Chydenius & Lipponen 2021).

## Leadership in early childhood education

### Contextual leadership

Leadership is the driving force behind every organisation, including ECE centres. According to Hujala, Waniganayake and Rodd (2013), leadership is a wide-ranging theoretical phenomenon, and scholars have various leadership philosophies from various perspectives. The theoretical framework of this study lies in the contextual leadership theory, which is built on Bronfenbrenner's (1999) bioecological theory of education (Hujala 2004, 2013; Nivala 1998).

Figure 1 suggests that leadership is built using the same paradigm as the mission of the organisation and that leadership



Source: Modified from Hujala, E., 2004, 'Dimensions of leadership in the childcare context', *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 48(1), 53–71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031383032000149841>; Hujala, E., 2013, 'Contextually defined leadership', in E. Hujala, M. Waniganayake & J. Rodd (eds.), *Researching leadership in early childhood education*, pp. 47–60, Tampere University Press, Tampere and Nivala, V., 1998, 'Theoretical perspectives on educational leadership', in E. Hujala & A.-M. Puroila (eds.), *Towards understanding leadership in early childhood context. Cross-cultural perspectives*, pp. 49–61, Oulu university press, Oulu

ECE, early childhood education.

**FIGURE 1:** Contextual model of leadership.



goals are formed based on the organisational mission. The theoretical understanding of ECE and pedagogy serves as the basis for leadership in the ECE context. Understanding both micro- and macro-level phenomena in an organisation is essential, as leadership is shaped by cultural elements, social norms and legal frameworks in the environment (macrosystem) (Hujala 2004, 2013; Nivala 1998). The contextual leadership theory is based on the notion that context constantly affects leadership (Figure 1).

The mesosystem (Figure 1) illustrates the significance of communication between participants at the microsystem level, where all members participate and have an impact on the leadership. A shared knowledge of the organisation's mission is essential; hence distributed pedagogical leadership is required to assure this understanding. For a clear and adequate grasp of the challenges behind effective organisations, the functionality of the mesosystem is crucial. Furthermore, interaction between the micro- and macrosystems should be continuous and clear (Fonsén & Soukainen 2020; Hujala 2013).

The chronosystem develops in interaction with sociohistorical events, circumstances and time (Figure 1). According to Bronfenbrenner (1999), the historical era in which we live has a significant impact on how our lives are shaped. For the ECE sector and all other sectors in countries, the COVID-19 pandemic represents a unique historical epoch. However, because of contextual variance, the effects of this time may vary.

### Pedagogical leadership

Leadership can be seen through four elements: purpose, followers, context and work. The interactions between these elements model a core for leadership practices (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins 2008; MacBeath & Cheng, 2008). The purpose of a leader is to build a shared vision and set expectations for high performance (Leithwood et al. 2008). The leader must then influence their *followers* to get actively engaged in a collective design of the desirable future for the centre (Mokhber 2015). Together with the staff, the leader redesigns the centre to improve the *context* in which learning occurs. Strehmel (2016) supports this idea by noting that leadership in early education is essential for enhancing pedagogical quality.

According to numerous studies (Fonsén et al. 2022; Keung et al. 2019; Ruohola et al. 2021; Babu & Kushwaha 2024), pedagogical leadership in ECE has a significant impact on the quality of teachers' pedagogy and, as a result, the well-being of teachers and children. Cheung et al. (2019) argue that distributed pedagogical leadership is crucial for guiding the implementation of the ECE curriculum. National curricula provide the standards for educational activity on a national level. Pedagogical leadership, however, is required to achieve the introduction of the guiding principles as explicit practices of high quality (Vlasov & Fonsén 2017).

The focus of pedagogical leadership is on the organisational learning of teachers and their professional growth. However, as a result of the nature of pedagogical leadership, it must be shared with the teachers, who are ultimately responsible for leading and enacting educational advances (Heikka 2014). According to Fonsén (2013, 2014), pedagogical leadership necessitates human capital, which is built inside the curriculum and the knowledge framework of pedagogical thinking. Additionally, pedagogical leadership needs management and evaluation abilities for the pedagogy being used. However, the capacity to defend the chosen pedagogical values that direct the used pedagogy is what matters most. Without a solid pedagogical education, leaders are unable to use pedagogical reasoning to support the optimum execution of the ECE purpose. Human resource management is within the theory of broad-based pedagogical leadership (Fonsén & Lahtero 2024). The focus of leading personnel and the whole organisation is to provide pedagogically high-quality education to children (Modise 2021; Keung et al. 2019).

### Research questions

In this study, the aim is to find out how the leaders describe leading ECE during the COVID-19 pandemic. We are especially interested in what kind of leadership discourses can be identified in the speech of ECE leaders about the leading pedagogy. In the comparative part of the study, we reflect on the differences between ECE leadership discourses in Finnish and South African case studies. The study aims to answer the following questions:

1. *What kind of discourses can be found in leaders' discussions about leading ECE during the COVID-19 pandemic?*
2. *What differences and similarities are found in ECE leaders' discourses in the context of South Africa and Finland?*

### Research methodology

The study involves two case studies, one from South Africa and one from Finland. The research design is built on a comparative analysis of these case studies and discursive knowledge. Socioconstructivist thought informs the methodological strategy. Language and discourses are used to generate knowledge from reality in this case (Berger & Luckman 1966; Jokinen et al. 2016). Reality is perceived in contextually defined national, local and distinct temporal as well as spatial contexts. According to the discourse analysis (DA) we used, the examined phenomena may have different meanings as situations and circumstances change (Alvesson & Kärreman 2000a, 2000b). Discourse analysis is also interested in the behaviours that people maintain and develop through speech. As a result, the nature of reality can be revealed, and the role of individuals in shaping reality can be acknowledged (Habermas 1984; Ingram 2010).

We use DA to identify the meanings and interpretations that people assign to reality. We can use speech analysis to uncover the interpretations and meanings underlying conversations. As stated by Berger and Luckman (1966), this allows one to understand how reality is socially constructed.

The important aspect of DA is that the meaning of an act or practice is not always bound to a single discourse; rather, it may have a variety of meanings depending on the circumstances (Alhanen 2007).

The changing conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic era have aided discourse research. In times of transition, people adopt new occurrences through speech and translate them into their own realities. Discourses differ according to the meanings that the performers wish to convey. Despite differing interpretations, organisational players developed shared meaning systems. As a result, each organisation develops a shared social construct to represent its reality (Suoninen 1993). In this study, we specifically call attention to the regional and national variations in these interpretations and constructions. Our goal is to investigate the phenomenon of ECE leadership and the discourses surrounding it in the context of two nations and cases in Finland and South Africa.

## Limitations

We use the leaders' descriptions of managing ECE during the COVID-19 pandemic as a case study to better understand a specific occurrence. The pandemic affected the entire world, and this study looks at the leadership discourses that ECE leaders used while speaking about how to lead education during the pandemic. We selected two cases that provide excellent illustrations of the issue under consideration (Patton 1990). Additionally, we wanted to document any variances or discrepancies between cases.

We have focussed particularly on the case study's representativeness and the generalisability of its findings. However, the modest number and size of the cases in this study are a limitation. Additionally, the circumstances are distinct from one another, and the leaders in South Africa and Finland had various positions. In this study, we analyse the two cases in their unique contexts. To demonstrate the study's findings as well as to have a broader sociocultural relevance and a degree of generalisability or transferability, we explore the influential elements and processes that occurred during the pandemic to gain insights into pedagogical leadership during that time. Although a case study can lead to theoretical generalisations, Stake (1995) argues that its primary goal is to offer thorough and precise knowledge on the issue. Analytic generalisation is a term that is frequently used in case studies (Yin 2002). At the very least, the theoretical ideas or models developed can be used to explain other cases in the same or similar circumstances.

## Conducting the research

### Data collection

In this study, we used focus group discussion as a qualitative method to investigate how leaders describe managing ECE during the pandemic period. The focus group discussion is a method that is suitable for this research topic, as it enables members to develop a shared understanding of the phenomena (Cheng 2007; Melaku et al. 2024)

Focus group discussions with ECE centre leaders were held online in Finland in November 2021. The leaders who took part in an 18-month in-service training programme run by the University of Helsinki received an invitation to the discussion. The course emphasised stable leadership in a dynamic context. Three leaders took part in the focus group discussion for this substudy. The participants had backgrounds as ECE teachers and graduates in educational sciences. The duration of their work experiences varied: some had been working as ECE directors for several years, while one was doing substitute work. Participants were informed about the study beforehand, and all three agreed in writing to allow the research to use their focus group discussions. The interview was taped, and the length was 90 min. The conversation was transcribed and translated into English.

In South Africa, five ECE and elementary phase employees participated in a virtual focus group interview and their consent was obtained. The five participants included one district official, two principals of a community ECE centre, the principal of a private school and a public primary school principal. The centre's founders and owners were the principals; the others were not owners. The ages ranged from 54 to 63 years, while qualifications were elementary teachers' qualifications, Grade 12 plus NQF level 5 in ECE and a diploma in Grade R funded by the Department of Education. Details about the interview process were communicated to the willing individuals who accepted to be interviewed. All research participants were made aware of the voluntary nature of their involvement as well as the anonymity and privacy of the data they would share. All participant comments were recorded verbatim.

The questions primarily focussed on the support and strategies implemented to ensure uninterrupted teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were asked about their experiences during the pandemic, the support received from stakeholders and the measures taken to sustain teaching and learning. Variations in results were observed across countries because of differences in contextual factors. The participant group was homogeneous in these aspects, which is advantageous for cross-cultural qualitative research (Robinson 2014).

### Data analysis

To extract the leadership discourses from the data, all the researchers reviewed the focus group interview transcript during the analysis. Both case studies used a similar method for data analysis. The analyses were structured based on the thematic categories of leadership discourses, following a thorough examination of each participant's input. Through the interpretations derived from the analysed data, insights into social realities, underlying assumptions and leadership implications were uncovered, in line with Suoninen (1993). These two national case studies are first individually analysed and then compared considering cultural differences,

with the acknowledgment that cultural nuances contribute significantly to diverse interpretations within societies, as emphasised by Xu (2022).

### Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of South Africa College of Education Ethics Review Committee (No. 2021/03/10/90284267/23/AM). In both Finland and South Africa, participants' informed consent was obtained as part of the ethical conduct of the study. Besides confidentiality, participants were informed about the study's aim and design. Participants were volunteers and they were aware that they were free to withdraw at any stage of the investigation. Participants' anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. To ensure anonymity, participants' identifying information was replaced with codes. The participants from South Africa were identified with the following codes: Primary School Principal (PP1), Private School Principal (PP2), Owner of a Community Centre (PP3), Community Centre District Official (PP4) and District Official (PP5). The Finnish participants were Leader 1 (L1), Leader 2 (L2) and Leader 3 (L3).

### South African early childhood education leadership discourses

The analysis process yielded the following discourses. Extracts from the participants' voices, depending on the previously stated study question, are used as evidence of these discourses.

#### Reconfigured pedagogical leadership

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a significant re-evaluation of leadership roles within the ECE sector in South Africa. This crisis compelled ECE leaders to shift their focus towards fundamental care, children's welfare and family support, as highlighted in the DA conducted by various participants (PP1, PP2, PP3). These leaders recognised the imperative of distributed leadership, acknowledging that the burden of childcare could not rest solely on their shoulders during such trying times. They assumed multifaceted roles, including those like healthcare workers, implementing stringent health protocols and fostering digital literacy among parents to facilitate remote learning. In the following excerpt, one of the participants expressed the reconfigured role:

'The way and mode of training changed to self-training due to the lack of full support from the Government to those centers that were not registered with the Government and support was offered to those centers that were registered together with NGO agencies. Websites and online material were not a constant feature in the ECE classroom before COVID-19 – thus ECE leaders took it upon themselves to fill the gap created by the pandemic.' (PP1)

Despite facing challenges such as resource constraints and adapting to new modes of training, South African

ECE leaders demonstrated resilience and commitment to sustaining learning continuity, as emphasised in the discourse. They utilised contextual leadership approaches by leveraging available resources and empowering parents to facilitate learning continuity, as highlighted by existing literature on distributed leadership and contextual leadership theories (Heikka 2014; Hujala 2004; Nivala 1998). Moreover, the discourse highlighted the impact of the pandemic on teacher roles and leadership practices within ECE centres. Teachers faced increased responsibilities and challenges yet demonstrated resilience and commitment to sustaining learning outcomes.

The COVID-19 pandemic created an opportunity for parents to be empowered irrespective of their educational background. They used technology not familiar to them in the form of WhatsApp, websites and emails according to how familiar they were with the communication channel. Learning became reciprocal as children taught their parents how to use the devices and parents taught their children the learning content sent to them by the teachers through the centre leadership:

'The parents needed support as they could not assist their children; they are not teachers; they consider themselves to be the worst ECE teachers; they do not have a specialisation.' (PP1)

At the same time, children felt uneasy about being separated from their teachers and the other children. This uncertainty was leveraged by the introduction of technology especially for those children whose parents could access emails and search the internet. The government used daily newspapers to publicise websites that could be visited by parents to ensure there was continuity of learning. Hunger was another factor that had a negative impact on children. ECE leaders in different centres contributed to easing the tension felt by teachers, parents and children who were working away from centres. Through the guidance of ECE leaders, teachers were able to keep children engaged in ensuring that any progress attained was not lost.

The discourse revealed several key themes, including reconfigured pedagogical leadership, empowerment of parents through technology, and the importance of collaboration and adaptation during uncertain times. These findings emphasise the importance of flexibility, collaboration, and resilience in ensuring educational continuity and child well-being amid unprecedented challenges. Through DA and existing literature, this integrated discussion provides insights into the multifaceted nature of leadership roles and practices during a global crisis, with a specific focus on South Africa.

#### Fear of uncertainty translated into acceptance of new experiences

Early childhood education leaders encouraged teamwork within and across ECE centres. Teachers and principals as pedagogical leaders met in their forums to develop and design activities in the simplest form so that parents could



assist their own children to ensure that learning continued during the pandemic. This was an effort on their part to entrench their pedagogical leadership during the time of crisis. They did not give up on their calling to be the custodians of the welfare of children entrusted upon them. Contextual leadership became the order of the day as they made sure that resources available to most of the society were used to continue education (Hujala 2004; Nivala 1998). One of the participants expressed the view in the following:

'Parents were empowered irrespective of their educational background to use new technology in the form of WhatsApp, websites, and emails according to how familiar they were with the communication forum. Learning became reciprocal as children taught their parents on how to use the gadget and parents taught their children the learning content sent to them by the schools.' (PP2)

Early childhood education centre leaders with the support of teachers were made to think out of the box and improvise so that learning can take place. This is supported by the contextual theory (Hujala 2004, 2013; Nivala 1998) that states that leadership is embedded within the context – even more so during the time of crisis when the few resources available are used optimally to address the need in the absence of external support. According to Modise (2021), adaptive leadership behaviour was needed in response to the changing circumstances of the sector and for ECE leaders to look at what strategies would enable them to continue operating during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Changed leadership practices and teachers' roles

Coronavirus disease 2019 lessened the daily management responsibilities of leaders in ECE centres and at the same time alienated the centre from children. The distance between the centre and children was increased, thus negatively affecting the social and emotional development of children. The holistic development of children affected by the separation was compensated through the initiative of ECE centre leaders who were concerned about children losing the progress they had so far acquired. In this way they entrenched their professional role as pedagogical leaders and demonstrated a high level of commitment (Fonsén & Vlasov 2017):

'The teachers [are] the first people to be affected and with me I had people from outside the country and it was even worse because now they could not get a COVID-19 relief fund as they were not registered, and they were just on my shoulders with everything. Thinking of them month after month going by, it was more frustrating. Now the parents could not afford to pay school fees because they were also not working, it was like, it was a pandemic to us. I have lots and lots of parents calling me, the kids want to come to school.' (PP3)

The challenges experienced by the ECE centre leaders built a sense of tenacity that helped them resolve to continue with their pedagogical leadership despite the odds being against

them. Matters related to sustaining learning were high on their agenda as they were determined to achieve success.

## Finnish early childhood education leadership discourses

In the discourses of leadership during the pandemic, we identified three prevailing themes that influenced leaders to develop their leadership. The results are presented in the following sections. To clarify the leaders' voices, certain quotations were included with the findings.

### The importance of pedagogical leadership persists during the pandemic

The leaders have faced a range of challenges because of the pandemic, but pedagogical leadership is still regarded as crucial. Leaders want to make time on their calendars for it. Even though the ECE centre leaders have a demanding workload and must prioritise their activities, they are valued for their pedagogical leadership. According to one of the leaders, the job description for ECE leaders is broad and includes duties they feel do not even relate to their line of work:

'I feel like expectations may be for what the task description contains, somehow, I thought that for the pedagogical leadership, it would be nice if you have more time. But it feels like maybe something like that has trickled into this task description little by little, like everything from excess. A little secretarial work. It's really a lot of things like working with the papers, which is not necessarily, in principle, in my opinion, even part of the job description of an ECE center leader. It takes so much time.' (L2)

The leaders explained that they must be present in their centre to facilitate a pedagogical discussion. They viewed group discussions as crucial for guiding pedagogy. Therefore, finding time for the discussions was a vital leadership duty. The continuation of a pedagogical debate inside the workplace community is one of the leader's primary responsibilities, according to earlier research (Fonsén 2014; Fonsén & Lahtero 2024). Working structures are required for that.

The leaders regarded knowing the staff's competency to direct their pedagogical work as an essential aspect of pedagogical leadership. Leaders said that because they are curriculum translators, teachers' competency occasionally needs to be updated to reflect the most recent pedagogical perspective, which is based on new curriculum and educational research. There currently remains a high demand in Finnish ECE for pedagogical leadership at the team level. This called for skilled educators with pedagogical proficiency and educational preparation. Therefore, it may be conceivable for the distributed pedagogical leadership to be successful.

In Finnish ECE, distributed pedagogical leadership has been found to be effective and is the preferred method. Although leaders are accountable for the pedagogy of the ECE centre, everyone in the work community should exercise pedagogical leadership, according to one of the leaders:



'Everyone has distributed pedagogical leadership. Everyone should lead the pedagogy in the work community, so nobody can stay out of it or say that this does not belong to me.' (L3)

Pedagogical leadership is seen as the shared responsibility of pedagogical work and a shared understanding of its principles. Similarly, Heikka (2014) has found distributed leadership in Finnish ECE as a shared vision and purpose of pedagogy.

### Jeopardised distributed pedagogical leadership

Although distributed pedagogical leadership is highly valued and has been demonstrated to be essential to the quality of ECE (see Fonsén, Marchant & Ruohola 2023a), it has been put to the test by the pandemic. The challenges of maintaining a sense of community are mostly to blame for this, as the context for discussion and interaction among staff has rapidly shifted.

Movement within the units was prohibited during the pandemic. Meetings were conducted virtually rather than in person to reduce interaction. This has drastically altered the climate for discussion, and as leaders note, our data indicate that it has had an impact on collaboration and interaction:

'Yeah, the interaction in Teams just does not work. At least I didn't get it to work in our work community, it has been just like I just do all the talking and I try to ask if someone wants to comment here, and I know that they [employees] have in mind the things they would like to say and if we would be interacting face-to-face, they would say those, but when we are meeting just with the screen, nobody says anything.' (L3)

A common community dialogue is necessary for distributed pedagogical leadership to be successful. One of the most crucial duties of a leader is to lead the educational discourse, and throughout the pandemic, this has been weakened because the setting of the pedagogical development dialogue has shifted from face-to-face meetings to online ones. Although leaders are regarded as the interpreters of the laws and regulations (FNAE 2022), local ECE curricula provide guidelines. However, teachers have the authority and responsibility to carry out the pedagogical plan in their own child group (Fonsén et al. 2023b). There is a conflict between power and responsibility because teachers oversee the group's pedagogy and leaders oversee the ECE centre's pedagogy. Therefore, it is essential to have a pedagogical conversation.

### The deepening challenges of leading quality

High-quality ECE is the primary goal of the leadership, and leaders play a crucial role in achieving and developing the quality of ECE in their unit. According to the study's findings, leaders see themselves as catalysts for quality:

'I expect that I can lead ECE towards the much-discussed quality, with my actions, knowledge, and skills.' (L2)

Leaders discussed how they could improve the calibre of ECE, but qualified staff are still needed. The agonising

employee dilemma has worsened because of the epidemic, which is challenging ECE leadership. The core of Finnish ECE has been highlighted by pedagogy, but the effectiveness of pedagogy is realised in practice and is connected to the educational background of employees. As the leaders put it:

'And so, it's also a challenge for leadership, the fact that we have so many unqualified employees. It is quite difficult to divide pedagogical leadership into groups if there are no qualified teachers in those groups. If a nursery nurse is a substitute teacher, they cannot necessarily take the pedagogical leadership in the group, when they do not have qualification or know-how for it.' (L3)

Leaders are in control of the overall unit's pedagogy, but ECE teachers oversee the pedagogy in their child group. To the extent possible in their role, every employee is accountable for pedagogy. Pedagogy is given significant consideration in Finnish ECE. Our research demonstrates that the capacity to meet the legal requirements for ECE and at the same time ensure the high quality of pedagogy has been disturbed by the pandemic:

'Yeah, this. So, it would be nice to lead the quality of the ECE and not just provide legal ECE. That would be the goal.' (L3)

While pandemic-related difficulties are driving leaders to prioritise legitimacy over high-quality development, it appears that they do not want the scenario to persist. According to Fonsén (2014), pedagogical leadership is imaginative development of the core mission through comprehensive action. Our research reveals that leaders describe leading not just in terms of following the law but also in terms of leading quality.

## Comparison of Finnish and South African early childhood education leadership discourses

The leadership discourses were analysed in the framework of contextual leadership theory to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the leading of ECE in Finland and South Africa (Hujala 2013; Nivala 1998). As previously said, this implies that leadership is developed in accordance with the same paradigm that is the focal point of the organisation. Therefore, the educational mission is the focus of ECE leadership. Considering the chronosystem, the pandemic era has placed society in situations where many guidelines, instructions and even legislation have been issued. Between Finland and South Africa, the ECE systems already reflected national and cultural diversity, and the responses during the pandemic varied. The powerful pedagogical purpose, the control of the macrosystem and the impact of the chronosystem, however, were not always in line, and it became necessary to resituate the mission within the new context.

### Macrosystem and chronosystem: National variation and shared pandemic time

Looking at our findings through the chronosystem, the COVID-19 pandemic shaped the lives of everyone in various

ways and had impacts on all levels. The contextuality, cultural variation, has affected the resilience of the ECE system and its organisations. The legislation in both countries was distinct when examining the macrosystem-level variations. In Finland, the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018) protected the children's and families' right to have ECE services. The Finnish government agreed that ECE centres should remain open in the spring of 2020 since doing so ensured that the children of workers in industries that are essential to society's ability to function can access ECE while also allowing their parents to work (Finnish Government 2020). To allow parents to work, the social goal of ECE was diminished, and the children's right to high-quality education was disregarded. The discourses of the ECE centre leaders showed they were forced to focus on legitimacy instead of pedagogical leadership and ensuring high-quality pedagogical work. This might have affected the organisation's mission and, as a result, the leadership in ECE. The lack of pedagogy or propensity to ignore the pedagogical component in favour of maintaining operations and safety management may have been reflected in the leaders' remarks. In contrast to this, instructional leadership was nevertheless essential during the pandemic.

In South Africa, the government managed the distribution of the COVID-19 protocols to ECE centres from a variety of departments, including health, social development and education. All community-based, for-profit and educational ECE centres were required to comply before benefitting from any support by the government. Those who did not comply were hit hardest by the pandemic, with the result that they closed their doors to all. For countries and regions with different COVID-19 testing policies, the influence of national values is different. Our example from South Africa suggests that only in countries and regions with high testing rate policies and complete systems for the prevention and control of COVID-19 did the influence of cultural values prove to be significant. National policies set the frame within which the ECE pedagogy could take place.

### **The mesosystem: Communication between and within contextual levels**

As aforementioned, interaction between the micro and macro levels should be continuous and clear (Heikka 2013, 2014). Crisis showed how the administrative level succeeded in their communication. The leaders' role as responsible for communicating laws and regulations was mentioned as a main duty during crises in Finnish ECE. In South Africa, communication with families had a bigger role in leaders' statements. The cultural differences affected the mesosystem communication, but the significance and role of technology was highly recognised in both countries.

During the pandemic, the communication and community dialogue in Finnish ECE centres between personnel and leaders was challenged in many ways. Because of that, the functionality of the mesosystem was also compromised. Based on our findings, these communication challenges had

consequences for the goals and methods of pedagogical leadership. In South Africa, communication between ECE centres and parents increased during the pandemic, as leaders and teachers desired to continue instruction at home. As teachers engaged them in educating their children, parents became more interested even though they were complaining that they were not teachers. As leaders in their classrooms, the teachers and parents exchanged information. Communication among ECE centre leaders also improved as they met on a regular basis via forums to exchange best practices and share solutions to the pandemic's challenges. In Finnish ECE, there was not much distance education because of the lack of total lockdown periods. In addition, discussions were about pedagogical issues at the centre level and parents were not mentioned in leaders' discussions.

In both countries, the pandemic highlighted the role of technology, as the nature of communication within the microsystem changed. In South Africa, technology was used to ensure children's learning, and, regardless of their educational background, parents were given access to and support in using unfamiliar technologies so that they could assist their children. This was an effort on teachers' part to confirm their pedagogical leadership during the time of crisis. At the same time, children felt anxious about being separated from their teachers and classmates. This uncertainty was also eased and helped by technology. The pandemic changed the structures of the microsystem in such a way that it reduced the teachers' responsibilities and at the same time alienated the teachers from their educational responsibility.

In Finland, the units started to use virtual meetings because movement within the units was prohibited during the pandemic. Consequently, the central role of the leader in leading the pedagogical discussion was weakened, as the framework for pedagogical development dialogue moved from face-to-face meetings to online discussions. Our findings describe that the virtual meetings changed the atmosphere for discussion, which in turn had an impact on cooperation and interaction. In Finland, leaders also emphasised their presence in the work community to support and guide the pedagogical discussion and thus activities of the teams. In concrete terms, this meant making time and organisational structures for this purpose.

### **Microsystem: Interaction with early childhood education centre participants, children and families**

The lack of possibilities to participate in education was hard for children and families in South Africa. Children missed an opportunity to achieve certain milestones because of the lack of stimulation and intervention in their lives by preschool teachers. School closures because of the pandemic disrupted the normal distribution channels through which school meal programmers operate, leaving many children without this vital source of nourishment (Kwatubana & Molaodi 2021). Teachers were also exposed to hunger as their income decreased when some organisations stopped even bothering

to pay them. Meals offered at preschools were no longer available (Casale & Posel 2020). The NGOs had to step into the void created by a lack of compliance, which then translated into a lack of support. Schools enjoyed support from the government, which was also delayed, or they were supported by NGOs. Otherwise, they had to close the preschools permanently.

The negative effects of COVID-19 on South African families included a change in daily routines, limits on family gatherings, a lack of socialisation and loss of relationships, family tensions, financial restraints and psychological effects. Family members lost their jobs, and tuition payments were sporadic. Teachers were also not paid by the principal as there were no funds coming in. Therefore, a lot of preschools closed and never reopened. Instead, favourable results included more family time and communication, cleanliness and high health status, as well as enhanced financial management, and the personal growth of family members' improvement of their studies (October et al. 2021).

In Finland, families were able to participate even in limited ways. Some parents worked remotely during the COVID-19 and kept their children at home. As described previously, about half of the centres offered remote participation for the children staying at home. Although distance education was an option for some, not every parent could take advantage of this opportunity. The cooperation of the parents of the children participating in ECE with the ECE centre's staff was minimal and brief. To avoid contact, parents could pick up their children from the centre's yard and conversations with teachers were short.

In both countries, improvements in pedagogical quality were found through good teaching, knowledge transfer, and the increased understanding of ECE stakeholders because of innovations, as well as in pedagogical quality and values. Enhancing educational quality and direct and indirect pedagogical leadership dialogues have a beneficial relationship. ECE authorities from both nations, however, talked about the shortage of skilled ECE teachers. The personnel crisis has been worsened by the pandemic, and similar concerns about how it may affect the calibre of ECE were noted. This could be taken to mean that the mission's quality is given top priority in leading ECE pedagogy.

## Discussion and conclusion

In this study, we examined the leaders' experiences of managing ECE during the COVID-19 pandemic. To identify certain leadership discourses in their responses, we employed DA to examine the viewpoints of ECE leaders throughout the pandemic. The time of the pandemic that arose in the chronosystem in this study and affected all systems put leaders in a position where they were unable to accomplish fully the organisation's primary goal and mission (Bronfenbrenner 1999; Hujala 2013; Nivala 1998).

The educational approach outlined after the pandemic calls for pedagogical leadership to increase the overall academic performance. Pedagogical leadership is the most important driver of organisational performance, quality enhancement, and innovation and best performance in a variety of environments and contexts (Fonsén & Lahtero 2024; Modise 2021). We need to consider how to ensure the implementation of the educational mission of ECE during future crises. Even if we are not able to prevent future crises (chronosystem), by looking through the lenses of contextual leadership theory, legislation and administrative directives (the macrosystem), we can support and protect the pedagogical mission of ECE centres. Effective information flow is crucial (mesosystem) both between the levels (macro and micro) and within the microlevel for the pedagogical mission to have the opportunity to succeed.

The contextual model of leadership (Hujala 2004, 2013; Nivala 1998) highlights the meaning of context and, as we can see in the results of our study, national variety and cultural differences need to be considered. In South Africa, the global COVID-19 pandemic has drastically affected organisational operations and impacted negatively on economic sustainability. Among the organisations affected, the early childhood sector is vulnerable. In Finland, cultural values are based on the principles of equality and the welfare state. Even though there were challenges that influenced the ECE sector and its leadership, the ECE services were guaranteed by the national funding for municipalities. The challenges experienced were more about the quality of pedagogy and pedagogical leadership possibilities (Korhonen, Fonsén & Ahtiainen 2023). Yet there was still variation between municipalities, and more preparation for future crises is needed (Saranko et al. 2021).

The study recommends that ECE leaders recognise the importance of sustaining lessons learned from the pandemic, which has challenged and changed the ECE status quo. To address the fears of uncertainty, there is a need to reconfigure pedagogical leadership through stakeholder interaction by embracing new experiences. The contextual model of leadership may offer a framework that provides possibilities for national agencies to consider how to improve the resilience of ECE systems on a range of levels.

In conclusion, the contexts representing case studies in both Finland and South Africa are different. Finland is an equal society whereas South Africa is an unequal society with a large majority of the population affected by poverty. It was therefore difficult to compare the two as they were on unequal footing. Finland was concerned with the provision of pedagogical knowledge whereas South Africa was concerned with ensuring that children's health and welfare needs were taken care of during the pandemic.

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## Authors' contributions

Each individual author made a significant contribution to the article by actively participating and carrying out their assigned tasks. E.F., the lead author, played a pivotal role in the conceptualisation, design and overall leadership of the writing process. Her influence extended to shaping the research methodology, conducting research and analysing the data collected in Finland. Additionally, V.R. made substantial contributions to data collection from the Finnish site, while P.K., and T.L. played a key role in the section writing and ensuring alignment with the journal's author guidelines. M.R.M. and S.T.M. were instrumental in collecting data from South Africa and were actively involved in writing sections related to the South African context. N.C.P. and H.A.M.E. significantly contributed to section writing and the analysis of the South African data. The combined efforts of these authors, each bringing their unique skills and knowledge to the table, resulted in a well-rounded and informative article.

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## Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, M.R.M., upon reasonable request.

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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