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Title: Introduction

Year: 2023

Version: Published version

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Please cite the original version:

Fonsén, E., Ahtiainen, R., Heikkinen, K.-M., Heikonen, L., Strehmel, P., & Tamir, E. (2023). Introduction. In E. Fonsén, R. Ahtiainen, K.-M. Heikkinen, L. Heikonen, P. Strehmel, & E. Tamir (Eds.), *Early Childhood Education Leadership in Times of Crisis : International Studies During the COVID-19 Pandemic* (pp. 9-12). Verlag Barbara Budrich. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.2430379.3>

Chapter Title: Introduction

Chapter Author(s): Elina Fonsén, Raisa Ahtiainen, Kirsi-Marja Heikkinen, Lauri Heikonen, Petra Strehmel and Emanuel Tamir

Book Title: Early Childhood Education Leadership in Times of Crisis

Book Subtitle: International Studies During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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

Published by: Verlag Barbara Budrich. (2023)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.2430379.3>

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Introduction

*Elina Fonsén, Raisa Ahtiainen, Kirsi-Marja Heikkinen,
Lauri Heikonen, Petra Strehmel & Emanuel Tamir*

Times of crisis further underlines the meaning of leadership as the common thread of an educational organisation. Leaders in early childhood education (ECE) have been forced to face tremendous challenges and changes within a very short timeframe. A global pandemic of this scale is something that no one has witnessed before. The Executive Committee, World Organisation for Early Childhood Education OMEP has formulated a position paper for ECE to remind the importance of continuing high quality ECE in spite of the pandemic (OMEP 2020). The position paper points out that “the global crisis has tested the political, health, and economic systems of many countries” and how all that may jeopardise the children’s right to education and the quality of education. Therefore, the question of leadership in ECE is crucial to ensure educational rights.

Our book strives to meet the research cap of ECE leadership during the crisis. The book discusses the phenomenon of leadership and captures leaders’ experiences during the pandemic in the context of ECE. Timely collected evidence-based information is aimed at guiding future policy-making and educational development, inspiring academic research, giving new insights to university courses, and supporting leaders and practitioners in ECE centres. The added value of this volume is in cracking mechanisms of dealing with a systemic crisis and change. Moreover, the book adds to the understanding of the ability of the ECE centres’ to recover from the crisis, and introduces potential promotive factors of resilience in the future.

The purpose of this book is to provide understanding of leadership strategies, leading ECE practice, and a number of ways to cope with unstable and rapidly changing states of affairs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The crisis situation makes visible the (un)sustainability of practices in leadership. This book brings together researchers from different corners of the world, and enables the identification of ways of crisis leadership and management in ECE centres in many national contexts. The research reported here contributes to the knowledge about leadership, necessary skills and competencies of leaders but also the need of resources (e.g. for digitalisation). Moreover, the book draws a picture of a variety of conditions where leaders have mastered the crisis.

The book is composed of peer-reviewed original research articles approaching the theme of COVID-19 pandemic from various perspectives

providing a forum within which we can learn, share our lessons learned, and develop new insights regarding leadership in ECE for the future. The book process started in 2021 with a call for papers that was sent to a worldwide research network, the international leadership research forum (ILRF-EC). ILRF-EC has been established in Finland, and it currently has members in all continents. This edited book is the 4th publication of the ILRF-EC network (<https://ilrfec.org/>) and in Series International Leadership Research Forum Early Education (ILRFEC) Research monograph #4.

The book is divided into two sections of which the first “Leadership practices during the COVID-19-pandemic” considers administrative, leadership and pedagogical practices and solutions concerning ECE in times of the pandemic. That section is composed of papers of researchers from Finland, Norway, Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Israel, the USA (Florida) and Australia. Exceptional circumstances brought up pedagogical leadership challenges but also new opportunities, and changes needed to be implemented in both daily pedagogical leadership and ECE pedagogy. Some of the studies indicate that professional development, social support and distributed leadership may be developed even in times of crisis. In this section researchers also discuss challenges such as time returning to ECE centres on a daily basis and communicating health messages from the government. Studies indicate that leaders, teachers, parents and even the government had to try different alternatives to deal with the crisis and develop resilience towards future challenges.

Section 2 “Coping with stress, resilience and lessons learned from crisis leadership in ECE centres” focuses on changed demands and challenges for leaders during the pandemic, and brings out their subjective experiences and coping strategies. In addition, in this section the authors point out lessons learned for crisis leadership improvement. Section 2 includes studies from Finland, Sweden, Greece and Germany, and a paper comparing the results from an international research group from Finnish, German and Israelian contexts. The research reported in this section describes the leaders’ struggle with governmental demands, the handling of uncertainty and anxiety among the staff members. Further, themes of taking care of one’s own well-being, changes in the collaboration within teams as well as changed priorities and leadership styles in relation to coping with the crises are discussed in articles under this section. The researchers provide insights to ECE leaders’ needs for support and competence areas that could be developed regarding leaders’ capability to encounter future crises and to be better in engaging in the questions of well-being in their working communities. ECE systems have shown that they may have worked well during the pandemic crisis, but it is important that the systems should be further developed from the perspective of overall resilience.

In the conclusion the editors draw together a range of empirical results, elaborate international similarities and national specialities. The conclusion discusses theoretical approaches to explain the shared experiences of ECE

leaders in the pandemic and considers the differences in camping strategies and the experiences during COVID-19-pandemic. It will point out the essential lessons and develop criteria for crisis management in ECE centres and on the question how ECE centres can become resilient for future crises.

This book will contribute to the International discourse on the professionalisation of ECE leadership, inspire further research and consult practice and policy. We editors hope that our book provides you with new knowledge and fresh ideas to develop ECE all over the world!

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Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation to all sponsors and reviewers who made this book possible to publish.

Providers of Funding:

Robert Bosch Foundation, Germany
Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki
Department of Education, University of Jyväskylä, Finland
Open Science Centre, University of Jyväskylä, Finland
Tel Hai college, Israel
Hamburg University of Applied Sciences, Germany

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