

Preschool staff perceptions of leader capabilities during COVID-19 early stage in Iceland

Kristín Dýrfjörð¹, Anna Elísa Hreiðarsdóttir²

Abstract: In mid-March 2020, leaders of Icelandic preschools faced a new reality: the task of leading and keeping their preschools open during the early stages of a pandemic. Suddenly, everything changed, and dystopia became the “new normal”. The proximal closeness between unrelated people was forbidden, and everyone was supposed to practice social distancing. This article discusses the attitudes of preschool staff towards their leaders (principals) during that time. How successfully did the leaders handle the first weeks of the pandemic? Data were drawn from an online survey conducted between 8 and 18 April 2020 during a time when feelings were running high. The results showed that staff felt that most of the leaders supported and did their best to take care of their staff members. Leaders established new ways to communicate and get information from both staff and parents. They showed assertiveness and used their former leadership training and skills. However, staff perceived leaders had problems setting boundaries, and their insecurity affected their leadership skills. The unique contribution of this study is that its data were collected during the early stages, which may be helpful for later stages or other crises affecting preschools in the future.

Article History

Received: 17 December 2021

Accepted: 15 February 2022

Keywords

COVID-19; Leadership;
Preschool staff; Principal

Introduction

The Icelandic preschools, unlike in many other countries, did not close during the earliest stages of the pandemic (Visnjic-Jevtic et al., 2021), but were kept open for all children, with reduced hours for most students. Unexpectedly, preschools' leaders (principals) and their co-workers were defined as “frontline workers.” The leaders were hit with unprecedented situations and decisions to be made, all while simultaneously working to do their best to keep everyone safe and uphold the quality of education. The pandemic changed society's worldview and had a far-reaching impact on communities' infrastructures. Iceland went into its soft lockdown with a public ban on social gatherings on March 16, 2020. This decision immediately affected the nation's schools. In preschools, criteria were set calling for groups to be small and always kept separate from other groups (Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management, 2020). Leaders were given the weekend of 14–15 March to reorganise their facilities based on the new criteria and to ensure that the new requirements for cleaning and daily disinfection were met (Pálsson, 2020). The organisation of preschools and the working conditions of their staff underwent unprecedented changes. Preschool leaders were in a situation that no one could have foreseen or been fully prepared for. They were faced with running schools where they had to regularly review both the daily logistics and the pedagogical work with all children. Both leaders and their staff were under a lot of pressure, and the risk of becoming sick or carrying the infection home was real for most.

On March 23, 2020 the ban on social gatherings was tightened, and again schools had to adapt to new and even more demanding circumstances (Government of Iceland, 2020a). On April 14, 2020, the Government of Iceland issued a statement declaring that all children could be in schools at the same time, beginning on May 4, 2020. On May 19, 2020, schools were exempted from the two-metre distance rule

¹ University of Akureyri, Faculty of Education, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Akureyri, Iceland, e-mail: dyr@unak.is, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1559-713X>

² University of Akureyri, Faculty of Education, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Akureyri, Iceland, e-mail: annaelisa@unak.is, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1094-1010>

between people (Government of Iceland, 2020b).

This article discusses the attitudes of preschool staff towards their leaders. According to their staff, how did leaders manage to navigate between leading and administrating in the weeks after the pandemic hit Iceland? This article is based on data drawn from a larger study conducted between April 8–18, 2020, a time when feelings were running high. The research aimed to examine preschool staffs experiences during the early stages of COVID-19, with special attention paid to their working conditions and well-being. The special contribution of this study is that the data were collected during the early stages of the pandemics and should therefore give a fair representation of the situation in preschools across the country during that time.

Theoretical Framework

According to Farazmand (2007), there are various kinds of crises, such as natural disasters or ones arising from social problems, human-made or otherwise. What they have in common is that “they disrupt the routine events of life and governance, disturb established systems, and cause severe anxieties; they produce dynamics that no one can predict and control” (p. 159). By their nature, they are rarely expected.

Baran and Adelman (2010) note that with the growing need for crisis plans, school leaders have increasingly responded to and prepared schools for unexpected events. Jones and Paterson (1992) point out that it is essential for schools to be well prepared, to have a working response team that has received training and education, and to have response plans available and memos for staff and parents. According to Drake (2018):

These pre-existing written crisis management plans were universally praised [...] as invaluable resources—providing detailed action plans that included specific steps to be taken by particular individuals; when faced with certain conditions during defined types of crisis events. (p. 180).

Jenkins and Goodman (2015) argued that no matter how good a plan is, it is never possible to prepare a school for all the factors that may arise. Schoenberg (2005) points out that, during a crisis, management and leadership skills are a combination of these strengths and are more important than response plans once in action. This view goes hand in hand with Johnson’s (2018) writings. He defined crisis leadership as:

The ability of leaders not to show different leadership competencies but rather to display the same competencies under the extreme pressure that characterise a crisis - namely uncertainty, high levels of emotion, the need for swift decision-making and at times intolerable external scrutiny. It is this that will define success or failure. (p. 15).

From Johnson’s (2018) perspective, leaders must be prepared from the beginning with leadership skills that they can apply both in good times and in times of crisis. Leadership skills, by this definition, are tools all school leaders need in their armoury. It is not enough to have a plan to fall back on. Instead, the leader herself needs to be the plan on which she falls back. Johnson (2018) also notes that leaders always need to show exemplary behaviour and establish a positive organisational culture because their followers will look to what they are used to, not what they are doing amid the crisis. Leaders do not act alone during times of crisis; they need to be part of a team yet also able to take control if needed. Johnson (2018) claims that, during a crisis, most organisations need leaders who can apply situational leadership. Part of such leadership during a pandemic could be efforts “to get communities on board to help themselves wherever possible and make people face things that have to be faced, like social distancing and quarantine” (Grint, 2020, p. 2).

Mutch (2020) pointed out that even though schools have made crisis management plans, they often have not been updated or do not fit the crisis in question. She adds that school leaders report that they are not well prepared for crisis management, so they end up letting their instincts rule; while this may turn out to be useful, there are also examples of the contrary. Mutch (2020) reminds us that crises have different stages or processes. In the beginning, there is a lot of solidarity, and everyone is willing to help and make things work. Still, the manager must be visible and able to make straightforward decisions. Mutch (2020) calls this the “honeymoon period”.

At the next level, leaders must be able to show empathy, have a broad view of the crisis, and make plans for the next steps. At the same time, leaders must be on their toes and skillfully share power and tasks. Information sent out needs to be tailor-made. For example, parents and staff need different sets of information. When crises are long-lasting, there is a period of fatigue and a risk that it will erode people's solidarity. During this time, the leader must pay special attention to the well-being of staff, but not least to her well-being, which leaders often forget. Finally, Mutch (2020) reminds us:

Along the recovery journey, the setbacks and secondary stressors wear people down. The goodwill that was seen in the honeymoon period starts to disintegrate. Bureaucracy becomes tedious and interferes with our ideas of a swift and smooth recovery. Tension starts to build as people feel that some individuals or groups are being favoured over others. The social ties that existed before the event have weakened. (p. 6).

Drake's (2018) study found that leaders who successfully dealt with crises were characterised by sharing power, and the most effective way to do this is through communication, competence, credibility, decision-making and planning. Hall (2020) says that employees assess the competence of managers based on five criteria: that the staff know they care, showing social responsibility, aiming for big goals, showing sympathy, and seeing the opportunities in the situation. Yet another study of the same nature identified six themes leaders must address: dealing with the event, planning or preparing, conducting collaboration and communication, whether or team meetings are held and how meetings are conducted (Nelson, 2019).

Boin et al. (2013) determined that leader's performances in times of crisis are often assessed based on weak criteria. Effective crisis management can save lives, protect infrastructure and restore trust in public institutions. They further point out that crisis management is, by definition, about planning, managing and implementing decisions, and the person in charge can be both a leader and a manager, a duality that is well known to school leaders. These are issues that have been under pressure testing during the COVID-19 pandemic in many parts of the world, as has been shown in some leadership research done through the early stages of COVID-19 (Beauchamp et al., 2021; Bush, 2021; Logan et al., 2021; Longmuir, 2021; Thornton, 2021). Logan et al. (2021) argues that leadership approaches that aim to support educator well-being are needed to protect the early childhood sector in the case of crises. Longmuir (2021) declared that the work of leaders was complex and that leaders prioritised compassionate, humanising goals as a grounding for all other actions. They mobilised communication practices that were reassuring, as well as open and honest. Thornton (2021) points out the importance of effective leadership practices that leaders may wish to reflect on during the pandemic, which are relevant during everyday leadership and can strengthen trusting relationships within schools, increasing their ability to recover.

When summarising the results of the above research, it becomes clear that the human factor within leadership is essential—that is, cooperation, communication and information and responsibility, competence, and organisation.

Method

This research builds on an online questionnaire aimed at Icelandic preschool staff working with children. We used a mixed method in which both quantitative and qualitative data are used (Robson, 2002). The quantitative data were used as a backdrop for this study. The qualitative data consisted of open-ended answers to two questions. An analytical grid (see Table 2) was created with categories based on the theoretical data that are summarised and presented in Table 1. The open-ended answers were coded using codes related to the theoretical background of the study by identifying patterns, themes, and similarities (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The questionnaire concerned staff well-being during the pandemic, how they felt, their views on keeping the preschools open, the daily schedule, and the information they received from different authorities. The questions were either open-ended, semi-open-ended, or closed-ended. We asked two open-ended questions to address the aim of this study, which explored preschools' staff members viewed the performance of their leaders during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. The two questions are: "Can you give an example of what you think your leader did well in your preschool during the early stages

of COVID-19?" and "Can you give an example of what your leader could have done better?" Selected members of the preschool community reviewed and commented on the questionnaire as part of the study's preparation phase, as they were considered to have inside knowledge about the mindset of preschool staff.

The research was funded by a grant from the University of Akureyri Research Fund, and went through the official procedures of the research fund.

Research Question

This study focused on the attitudes and experiences of preschool staff regarding their leaders' efforts during the ban on social gatherings during the early stages of the pandemic. We aimed to answer the following research question: According to their staff, how did preschool leaders perform their work during the early stages of COVID-19 in Iceland?

Data Collection

The survey was conducted using Survey Monkey. It was posted in two private Icelandic-speaking Facebook groups: Play and Preschool and Preschool Teachers Chat. According to a public survey, around 92% of Icelanders over 18 years of age have Facebook accounts (Market and Media Research, 2019). The Play and Preschool had over 5300 members and is accessible to all preschool personnel with Facebook accounts. Preschool Teachers Chat had almost 1800 members and granted membership to those with a teaching licence or in the process of obtaining one. A master of education is required to obtain a teaching licence in Iceland. All responses were anonymous and untraceable. Information concerning the intention of how the data will be used was part of an introduction to the questionnaire. As a limitation, the use of social media to collect answers can be problematic (Tjøndal & Fylling, 2021), as participants are self-selective, and the answers may mirror those interested in the topic.

In all, 658 responses were received; the total number of preschool staff directly educating Iceland's children in 2018 was 5,698 (Statistics Iceland, 2020). The respondents had different backgrounds; the majority had a teaching licence (61% of respondents, which accounted for up to 25% of the population of preschool teachers in Iceland 2018 (Statistics Iceland, 2020)). Others (14.6%) had other university education, 6.9% were educated assistants, and 17.5% were unskilled staff. By age, 16% of the responses came from people under 30 years, 52.3% from people aged 31–50 years, and 31.7% from respondents over 51 years. Overall, 123 respondents identified themselves as leaders/principals of preschools and, therefore, did not answer the questions about the leader's performance. The questionnaire opened on Wednesday, 8 April 2020, in the early stage of the first wave of the pandemic in Iceland. A reminder was sent the following week, and the introductory text was changed to appeal more directly to those without a formal teacher's education based on a lower response rate from that group. This resulted in more than 100 new responses. However, the ratio of those with a teaching licence to those without remained unchanged.

Data Analysis

In total, 464 people responded to the question that is the backbone of this study: Can you give an example of what you think your leader did well in your preschool during the early stages of COVID-19?, and 355 people answered the question, Can you give an example of what your leader could have done better? After cleaning the data, 453 answers (7200 words) remained as responses to the former question, and 233 answers (4132 words) were retrieved as responses to the second question, all of which were subjected to the coding process. The responses were transferred to Excel, read, and reread to identify recurring themes, followed by applying selective coding based on themes and theories.

A theoretical frame based on the relevant literature was established during the analytical process to define and categorise the relevant and different aspects of crisis leadership skills (see categories in Table 1. *Preferable leadership skills during a crisis*).

Table 1. Preferable leadership skills during a crisis

Category	Task – Analytical concepts	Literature
Prioritising reactions	Showing leadership skills and being able to prioritise action and deeds, showing grit	Boin et al. (2013); Drake (2018); Johnson (2018)
Making critical decisions	Being able to make difficult decisions and follow them through	Drake (2018); Mutch (2020)
Trust and solidarity	Showing care; ‘We are all in the same boat’; empowerment	Drake (2018); Hall (2020); Mutch (2020)
Coordinating information	Being able to select and give appropriate information when needed	Boin et al. (2013); Mutch (2020)
Communication	Being able to communicate and use different channels of communication	Drake (2018); Mutch (2020); Nelson (2019)
Assertive leaders	Having the self-confidence to stand by their own decisions and follow them through	Johnson (2018); Mutch (2020)

Results

Based on the frame, *Preferable leadership skills during a crisis* (see Table 1), we created an analytical grid which also was partly built on Boin et al. (2013) writings on leadership during a crisis and adapted to this research (see Table 2). The qualitative data were projected into the grid to gain a deeper understanding of the emerging trends in the data. The answers were read and reread to identify patterns and similarities. Special attention was given to quotes concerning how the leaders fared in the early stages of the pandemic—that is, the constraints they encountered and their triumphs. The grid was used to analyse the data, selecting, and marking quotes that were deemed relevant. At this stage, short codes and keywords were selected and placed on the grid. The grid was a helpful tool for forming and deciding how to present the results.

Table 2. Analytical grid showing preferable leadership skills during a crisis and selected quotes from the data

Analytical themes	Triumphs	Constraints
Prioritising reactions Showing leadership skills and being able to prioritise action and deeds, showing grit	Boldness and determination. Good organisation, good flow of information, attentive to the staff.	There was lack of cooperation. Management showed powerlessness.
Making critical decisions Being able to make difficult decisions and follow them through	Do well, do your best, difficult, miserable conditions.	The administration could do better, show more support and understanding. Instructions from public authorities did not fit the reality of the preschool.
Trust and solidarity Showing care: ‘We are all in the same boat’ Empowerment	Listens to staff, creates solidarity Positivity, praise, understanding, support Informed decisions, consideration, trust	The preschool management powerlessness Inform everyone and be careful that information is aimed at all groups of staff The message needed to be clearer and there was a lack of determination
Coordinating information Being able to select and give appropriate information when needed	Coordinated decisions and actions Consultation, flexibility Diverse technologies used for communication	Utilising a variety of digital technologies would have been preferable
Communication Being able to communicate and use different channels of communication	Provides information, is good at planning Quality communication	There was chaos in providing information
Assertive leadership Having the self-confidence to stand by their own decisions and follow them through	Shows flexibility Makes decisions Strength and balance Takes a stand with the staff A step ahead of the municipalities Shows determination	Lack of making just decisions Be better at addressing the issues that came up Stand firm

The frame in Table 1 and the grid shown in Table 2 were used as tools to narrate a story of how leaders in Icelandic preschools fared through the earliest stage of the pandemic, according to their co-

workers. It helped to identify what stood out as exemplary leadership behaviour, what problems the leaders encountered, and what lessons can be drawn from the experience. Some of the data could fit into more than one category; therefore, we decided where the data fit best to tell a story.

Prioritizing Reactions

The ability to plan and be prepared for different scenarios and to prioritise tasks is always essential for leaders, and even more so during times of crisis. How did the leaders fare? The data showed that most of the leaders acted swiftly and split children and the staff into groups. They made rules about how parents and staff should conduct themselves during arrivals and departures from school, how the schools were sanitised and cleaned, directed teachers to remove some of the learning materials and so on. The staff realised that leadership in these circumstances is different from day-to-day management and requires leaders to make decisions and directives without, for example, consulting others. The leaders needed to show self-confidence and be visible—they had to be the ones who acted. One respondent said, “[I] think they have organised this well! This is good leadership in these circumstances, but not necessarily good leadership when the pedagogy is in focus.”

The answers repeatedly stated the importance of careful planning, and 134 specifically mentioned organisation and the importance of reacting quickly in new and unexpended situations. Many said that their leaders were solution-oriented and able to send a clear message to their staff. As one respondent said:

They have informed us about the situation and acknowledged when they did not have information on some issues. They have tried to support the activities of all classrooms and strive to solve the problems that have arisen. The preschool leader is a real genius in giving words of encouragement to all members of the staff.

The respondents were thankful for many things. One said this about prioritising children’s wellbeing at her school:

We put the children’s well-being first. At first, there were few children of frontline workers, so no decision was made regarding them. They mixed with both groups [Groups A and B, which showed up every other day]. We are a small kindergarten with four classrooms, and we divided the children into two groups and took turns working at home. After Easter, some had the idea of putting all the priority children [of frontline parents] in one classroom together. But we decided that the mental wellbeing of the children was more important than the risk of infection. And putting children in a separate classroom away from their friends would not improve the children’s mental wellbeing. I am immensely grateful to the leaders who decided this and took care of the mental health of both staff and children at the same time.

The results indicated that employees want school leaders to be firm, bold and determined, “take matters into their own hands immediately” and be “more persistent in decision-making”. Even though most leaders appeared capable of this, there was also criticism, especially of local governments, that did not seem to understand both some procedures and feelings among the staff, such as how groups were divided and their fears of infection.

Some suggested that leaders should be persistent with the local governments, for example, “They could have stood firm against their superiors.” Another pointed out, “The municipality could have consulted the schools, have a meeting with the leaders and jointly decide what should be done”. Another said:

[The leaders ought to] stand better with us and not sit and stand as the school board wanted us to do. Most people who do not work within preschools do not know what it is like to be on the floor, let alone at times like this. So [they] should listen better.

Here, the schools’ unique position within the community crystallises; the leaders represent the local government and are under their authority. Final decisions are not always in their hands, and the staff may become tense when what they think is best clashes with the government’s will or decisions.

Making Critical Decisions

Having decision-making power and making the right decisions are not the same. To make decisions in times of crisis, leaders need up-to-date information that is not always available. In these cases, leaders must be able to fall back on their training and decision-making procedures. According to our data, the

national emergency task force lacked sufficient working knowledge of preschools' logistics, which likely made things difficult for the leaders in the preschool. One respondent stated that official directives from the task force were not based on first-hand knowledge of preschools: "[School leaders have] done well in following the instructions from the epidemiologist, which I found completely out of place". Another said:

[The leader] tried to find a way out of all the vast amount of information received from the task force, [but] that information was often difficult to read and does not apply to all preschools. Everyone is under the same that despite working in different types of buildings and accessibility.

Informed decisions are one of the basics of understanding and being able to cope with a situation. Another respondent wrote:

I just generally feel that in my school, everything has been done well. If they [leaders] have been asked questions that they cannot answer 100%, they have sought information to answer them. That way, I have 100% confidence in what we are doing and am therefore not nervous or stressed about this situation in general.

These results highlight the aspects of school leadership that worked well early on. As one participant wrote, "Principals have done well, done their best in difficult circumstances."

However, it seems that other aspects of the government did not always perform well. Here is an example of such an experience: "[The leader has] tried to do her best in miserable conditions with little support from the municipality. The education council and the preschool leaders' supervisors have sent unclear messages to parents." Another said, "[School leaders have] stood their ground in organising the schools, and they had to stand their ground against their superiors." In a third example, the respondent said the municipalities could do better and act more swiftly, stating "... [school leaders] take action and plan everything despite the delay by the municipality."

Trust and Solidarity

Building a sense of collective understanding and shared values is vital for every school, and doubly so during a crisis. Keeping people's spirits up and helping them make sense of what is happening can be the difference between success and failure in a crisis. Our results indicate that positivity, trust, encouragement, praise, understanding and support matter most to preschool staff.

Concepts connected to positivity and encouragement appeared more than 70 times in the leadership descriptions. One person described it this way: „My leader has been positive, encouraging and supportive of the staff through this situation. She/they deserve a lot of praise in my opinion." Another said, "[School leaders] were very active in providing information. They show us a lot of understanding. We were often praised for a job well done and regularly reminded of how important we are." Another reported, "Good flow of information, [she] is positive and solution-oriented and tries to make the best of this situation, a lot of praise and encouragement."

Thoughtfulness and understanding were words strongly connected to how the staff felt about the leaders; here is one example:

[My school leaders are] thoughtful and calm, doing their best to provide important information without creating unnecessary stress, with too many stressful announcements. Encourage staff to be positive, praise them and build good morale.

It is important that leaders manage to create solidarity in times of crisis, and this is evident in the results. School leaders' ability to develop shared values and to reach out to the children's families was important: "Solidarity and that everyone has a voice. We call and take care of our families."

Some respondents mentioned that the leaders cared for their staff's mental health. "[They] encourage and support those who are depressed. [...] We had a happy hour on Friday through Zoom." Encouragement and praise also went a long way towards strengthening the work ethic and creating calmness in the group. Let us look at examples: One said, "She has done her best to keep everyone calm and always tell us how best to carry on and does a very good job at it". "[She] provides all information and keeps the staff as calm as possible given the circumstances. It is crucial for the staff that leaders take care of their team and that everyone feels listened to. Understanding the leader's position was also noted among

the answers: "Everyone is doing their best and trying to walk in strange shoes along a footpath that no one has gone before".

Being able to build and maintain morale, culture and trust is essential. Trust is an issue important for staff, and they highlighted positive aspects of school leadership during the earliest stage of the pandemic. One said, "Trusting staff in challenging situations and [being] ready to answer questions that arise about the job." Another put it this way: "Good information flow, good cooperation, all employees are trusted. The leaders understand and take as much care as is possible of everybody's well-being during these times." Being positive and not losing the ability to joke and have good times is also important: "Solidarity, good information, respect for the feelings and wellbeing of employees. Positivity, joy and general jollity to maintain morale."

Not all leaders were up to the job, according to their co-workers. On a more critical note, some pointed out that it is necessary to consider giving necessary information to people in part-time jobs and not to forget that younger people may need more care from the leader than older, more experienced staff. One respondent said:

It could have been both a more explicit message and confirmed. Too much chaos, unclear decisions, and decisions changed from one hour to the next. Messages on both Facebook (an unprofessional communication platform for decisions) and via e-mail were inconsistent with each other.

A reminder that within the preschool, there may be inequity between members of the staff that leaders must consider.

Coordinating Information

Preschools are complex organisations that require leaders to coordinate and organise people, time, different departments or classrooms and connections with other institutions and local governments. During the soft lockdown, most preschools were divided into quarantine compartments, which people were not supposed to breach. Within each compartment, staff and parents were also supposed to maintain a social distance. This layout required coordination. In some of the preschools on any given day, some of the employees worked from home. Examples of such coordination can be seen here:

They [the preschool leaders] come into the classrooms every day and hear from all the staff, saying "good morning", which is very positive for the morale. Then, employees get all the information they need through the staff's Facebook group. If you need to talk to or inform someone, they will do so. It is also good that they encourage staff to use the days they are at home to prepare and read academic material, which is then useful in the job. They have also been diligent in encouraging people to continue and thanking us for a job well done, making it clear to everyone that it is vital to come to work and that it is well valued.

It was stated that the staff might also appreciate being involved in decisions when possible, and many mentioned that an understanding leader is important in times like these. "Flexibility" and "listening to staff" came up several times when discussing organisations.

At the beginning of the pandemic, a considerable amount of information was sent to schools from various public institutions, and it was the leader's role to sift out crucial information at any given time. This was a task some leaders were not up to, as reflected in the words of one of the respondents: "Too much information flow has increased the anxiety of some. It's like walking on a tightrope". It was important for the staff to make the flow of information about their work and its organisation manageable, and the leaders needed to be accessible, despite the pandemic. One respondent said:

We have rapport between groups, so everyone knows how the days are. The leader is in one group, so she only meets half of the staff, but she calls the people in the other group to be able to chat about their well-being and other things.

When respondents answered what could be done better, various things were mentioned. Most commented that the flow of information could have been better. As one said, "Information can always be improved, but it can be difficult if you [as a leader] don't always have the best information yourself", as this coworker understood was often the case. Others said, "More information is needed" or "Information flow could be better". At the same time, some felt it important for staff to receive different information from the parents: "The information flow to parents and staff should not be the same". Or they wanted

information before parents received it. They felt that teachers needed to be particularly well informed and instructions needed to be clear:

[The leaders needed to] explain better what the staff need to do to ensure better hygiene. There were many examples of inconsistencies between classrooms. Some people used the same toys for two days and then stored them for two days. Others replaced their toys each passing day. Still, others disinfected all toys AND then stored them for two days.

As may be evident, leaders must coordinate the information they give; not doing so can cause insecurity among members of the staff that in the long run can hurt the running of the preschool.

Communication

Breakdowns in the chain of communication during a crisis can be a real threat. It is critical to keep communication paths open and to establish and support communication. It was clear that some leaders had to jump unexpectedly into the 21st century, technology-wise, but luckily others were already there.

Many leaders use a variety of digital technologies to disseminate information or hold meetings. They used technology to strengthen connections with staff or between classrooms and to enhance the school's culture. Participants described different uses of phones and e-mail, as well as teleconferencing software such as Zoom, Skype, Teams and Messenger. Providing everyone with information via Snapchat and private Facebook groups was also mentioned. In some cases, however, the participants reported that leaders could use technology in better ways.

Staff sometimes needed opportunities to meet colleagues who worked in other quarantine units. Then, technology and various methods came in handy: "Video conferences daily for all staff who want to "meet", and there you can discuss issues and see co-workers we are not allowed to see during the day". Another said: "[There are] a lot of phone calls, a lot of talking about our wellbeing, good information about everything, listening to our voices, information about anxiety and insecurity sent to staff, beautiful messages and encouragement on social media".

Very few criticised the use or methods of communication. Most were both thankful and happy for the improvised and creative ways of communicating.

Assertive Leaders and Unruly Parents

Being an assertive leader in a time of crisis is undoubtedly important. Some leaders had problems showing this side, and that irritated some staff members who thought assertiveness was needed in dealing with some parents and staff who had problems following rules. Most parents followed the rules, but there were exceptions. Some parents had problems following directions, and the staff felt that leaders should take such matters seriously. Some were concerned about the risk of infection. Here is an example from one respondent:

Specific rules were established in the beginning, but they were not enforced and possibly not well enough introduced to staff or parents. Many rules, such as, that parents should not come into the classrooms, were only words on a paper that no one followed. It would have been important for parents to respect these rules, especially the 2 m rule. Great disrespect on the part of parents not respecting her with, staff, as preschools' staff suddenly had to endure being close to many parents daily who do not respect the rules and are therefore at multiple risks of infection.

Lastly, some wanted their leader to address parents who showed up with sick children: "[They] could have taken much better care of children who came again and again with phlegm, cough and sneezing". Those examples shows the difficulty some leaders faced and their powerlessness against the situation they found themselves in.

Discussion

The point of departure was, "How did Icelandic preschool leaders fare in their jobs during the early stages of the pandemic?" According to their co-workers, they seemed to have carried out their jobs professionally and mostly showed good leadership. They stood their ground, gave out information, showed solidarity and care, praised co-workers, and opened new communication lines and not at least they

showed fairness. However, some struggled to set boundaries or were unable to organise or prioritise information, for example. They showed similar character as school leaders in many other countries (Beauchamp et al., 2021; Bush, 2021; Logan et al., 2021; Longmuir, 2021; Thornton, 2021).

Many leaders showed skills that seemed to be an existing part of their professional role; they did not seem to change their leadership behaviours, but instead showed their ability to work under pressure and deliver in a new context, which is a sign of good leadership and professionalism according to Johnson (2018). Some leaders skilfully empowered their staff, enlisting them to organise logistics and pedagogy. They were able to listen and show encouragement; they became the rock in a turbulent sea for many, an accomplishment during a pandemic when the leaders had to take care of the well-being of children, parents, the staff and, hopefully, themselves.

Overall, the staff reported that their leaders were considerate and showed solidarity. They were able to show empathy and generally look after their co-workers according to Hall's (2020) definition of good leadership, which is based on the importance of showing concern and empathy to staff. When the results are compared to the analytical table (Table 1), it is apparent that staff members value leaders with the following competencies: being able to carry out critical decisions (Johnson, 2018; Mutch, 2020), being assertive and handling problems promptly (Drake, 2018; Mutch, 2020), and the ability to take good care of their staff and establish trust and solidarity (Drake 2018; Hall, 2020; Mutch, 2020). With that in mind, supporting leaders who struggled is crucial, not only for their welfare but also for the interest of those who work with them and children and families at their preschool. It must be a priority for the municipalities that run the preschools to identify and support leaders that are struggling and supporting them in any way possible. It must however be pointed out that most of the municipality's organisations are under pandemic pressure and identifying those that are struggling not an easy job.

As stated above, this research was carried out in the early stages of the pandemic when the staff members were still in what Mutch (2020) calls the honeymoon period, where unity and friendship run high; however, it was clear and worrisome that some people were becoming exhausted. The question remains: Does the school system, including preschools, have the grit to follow through, or are school communities in danger of becoming fragmented, especially as younger children are getting the disease and becoming carriers of the virus. The next stages of the pandemic will be trying times that reveal leaders' resolve, and some may crumble under pressure if nothing is done. It will ultimately be costly for society if preschool leaders are burnt out or leave their positions because of the unbearable pressure, fatigue and stress associated with it. To prevent this, preschool leaders must practise self-care and learn to prioritise their well-being. However, it is also society's responsibility to offer necessary affordances to leaders, enabling them to practice essential self-care and support them to support others. This study did not ask the leaders themselves about their experiences during this difficult time. However, it is a worthy next step to get their views on how COVID-19 has affected their work, well-being and their takeaways from the situation. It is also worth asking what kind of support the leaders received from their municipalities during the pandemic.

At the time of this study most people hoped that the pandemic would soon be over. However, as history has shown, more was to come, and the long-term effect on the Icelandic preschool system is something that is for later studies.

Declarations

Editorial Acknowledgement: The editorial process of this article was carried out by Dr. Mehmet Toran.

Acknowledgements: We acknowledge our participants' engagement in our research study and appreciate their time.

Authors' contributions: The contributions of authors are seamlessly integrated and equal; Kristín Dýrfjörð and Anna Elísa Hreiðarsdóttir work more and less together during the writing process.

Competing interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Funding: This research was funded by a grant from the University of Akureyri, Iceland research fund, R-2102. The Research fund is not otherwise engaged in data collection or writing.

Ethics approval and consent to participate: Ethical consent is obtained from researcher's institution, and informed consent forms are collected from participants.

References

- Baran, B. E., & Adelman, M. (2015). Preparing for the unthinkable: Leadership development for organisational crisis. *Industrial and Organisational Psychology*, 3(1), 45–47. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2009.01196.x>.
- Beauchamp, G., Hulme, M., Clarke, L., Hamilton, L., & Harvey, J. A. (2021). 'People miss people': A study of school leadership and management in the four nations of the United Kingdom in the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 49(3), 375–392. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220987841>
- Boin, A., Kuipers, S., & Overdijk, M. (2013). Leadership in times of crisis: A framework for assessment. *International Review of Public Administration*, 18(1), 79–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/12294659.2013.10805241>
- Bush, T. (2021). Leading through COVID-19: Managing a crisis. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 49(3), 373–374. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143221997267>.
- Department of Civil Protection and Emergency Management. (2020). The ban on COVID-19 will take effect 16 March 2020. <https://www.almannavarnir.is/frettir/samkomubann-vegna-covid-19-tekur-gildi-16-mars-2020/>.
- Drake, J. M. (2018). *It's a dangerous world in there: Leadership methods and actions of school administrators during emergency situations and times of crisis* [Unpublished Doctorate Thesis, Northern Illinois University]. <https://commons.lib.niu.edu/handle/10843/21327>.
- Farazmand, A. (2007). Learning from the Katrina crisis: A global and international perspective with implications for future crisis management. *Public Administration Review*, 67(1), 149–159. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2007.00824.x>
- Government of Iceland. (2020a). Advertisement for restriction of meetings due to epidemics 243/2020. <https://www.stjornarradid.is/library/04-Raduneytin/Heilbrigdisraduneytid/ymsar-skrar/Augl%C3%BDsing%20um%20samkomubann%2022.%20ma%C3%AD%202020.pdf>.
- Government of Iceland. (2020b). Advertisement for restriction of assembly ban due to epidemic 360/2020. <https://www.stjornartidindi.is/Advert.aspx?RecordID=ab3485b5-a616-48bd-8db2-476a28fb45ce>.
- Grint, K. (2020). Leadership, management and command in the time of the coronavirus. *Leadership*, 16(3), 314–319. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715020922445>.
- Hall, J. (2020, March 20). Focus on trust: Successful leadership in times of crisis. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnhall/2020/03/22/focus-on-trust-successful-leadership-in-times-of-crisis/#3b39018267b0>.
- Jenkins, S., & Goodman, M. (2015). "He's one of ours": A case study of a campus response to crisis. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 23(4), 201–209. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jccm.2015.23.issue-4>.
- Johnson, T. (2018). *Crisis leadership: How to lead in times of crisis, threat and uncertainty*. Bloomsbury.
- Jones, M., & Paterson, L. (1992). Preventing chaos in times of crisis. A guide for school administrators. Southwest Regional Laboratory. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED350700.pdf>.
- Logan, H., McFarland, L., Cumming, T., & Wong, S. (2021). Supporting educator well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic: A case study of leadership in early childhood education and care organisations. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 46(4), 309–321. <https://doi.org/10.1177/183693912111040940>.
- Longmuir, F. (2021). Leading in lockdown: Community, communication and compassion in response to the COVID-19 crisis. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432211027634>.
- Market and Media Research. (2019). Facebook still the most popular social media. <https://mmr.is/frettir/birtar-nieurstoeur/781-facebook-enn-vinsaelasti-samfelagsmidhillinn>.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expended sourcebook*. Sage.
- Mutch, C. (2020). How might research on schools' responses to earlier crisis help us in the COVID-19 recovery process? *New Zealand Council for Educational Research*, 1(2), 69–71. <https://doi.org/10.18296/set.0169>.
- Nelson, J. (2019). *Crisis management preparing school leadership to manage critical incidents: A qualitative case study*. [Unpublished doctorate thesis]. University of Phoenix. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2212210951?accountid=49537>.
- Pálsson, S. Á. (2020). That's how lockdown is done in some primary schools. <https://www.visir.is/g/202020638d>.
- Robson, C. (2002). *Real world research. A resource for social scientists and practitioner-researcher*. Blackwell.
- Schoenberg, A. (2005). Do crisis plans matter? A new perspective on leading during a crisis. *Public Relations Quarterly*, 50(1), 2–6.
- Statistics Iceland. (2020). Personnel in pre-primary institutions by age, education and region 1998–2019. https://px.hagstofa.is/pxen/pxweb/en/Samfelag/Samfelag_skolamal_1_leikskolastig_1_IsStarfsfolk/SKO01301.px/?rxid=6

[7762319-517b-4fdc-9622-eab941318ba2&fbclid=IwAR01Hb8PEv158543oo-
yxBueBMw5w0jVeiFsIPmiTD5nhpDNZrp_2lQ3Taw](https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220985110)

Tjøndal, A & Fylling, I. (2021). *Digitaliske forskningsmetoder*. Cappelen Damm Akademisk.

Thornton, K. (2021). Leading through COVID-19: New Zealand secondary principals describe their reality. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 49(3), 393–409. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220985110>.

Visnjic-Jevtic, A., Varga Nagy, A., Ozturk, G., Şahin-Sak, İkbāl T., Paz-Albo, J., Toran, M., & Sánchez-Pérez, N. (2021). Policies and practices of early childhood education and care during the COVID-19 pandemic: Perspectives from five countries. *Journal of Childhood, Education & Society*, 2(2), 200–216. <https://doi.org/10.37291/2717638X.202122114>.