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Research Article

Leading in times of uncertainty: Early childhood directors navigating the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract: Early childhood (EC) directors played a critical role in the successful operation of childcare centers during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Directors were responsible for adhering to health and safety protocols and caring for the well-being of their staff, children, and families. Due to the need to remain open for other first responders' families, Directors were challenged with fluctuating numbers of staff and children, and in other cases, they were tasked with transitioning their programs online to serve children. This study examines 10 US EC Directors' perspectives and leadership experiences during the Pandemic. From interviews with the participants, themes emerged to illustrate how EC Directors utilized adaptive leadership skills and strengths-based leadership. Findings from this study are beneficial not only to understand how EC Directors led during the Pandemic, but also which skills, resources, and supports are necessary for future times of crises and challenging times. This article offers recommendations for researchers, policymakers, and other decision-makers on how best to support EC Directors in future times of uncertainty.

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Introduction

Leadership in early childhood education and care (ECEC) plays a critical role in delivering high-quality care and education for young children. Effective ECEC leadership establishes the foundation for the entire program by cultivating a positive culture that promotes growth and learning for all involved (Kirby et al., 2021). ECEC leaders are regarded as gatekeepers of quality since they are mainly in charge of creating an environment where children feel safe, respected and motivated to learn as well as building strong relationships with program staff and families and advocating for early childhood field through solid communication, and strong organizational and interpersonal skills (Movahedazarhouligh et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic as one of the greatest threats in recent human history as the virus spread rapidly worldwide, affecting the lives and livelihoods of billions. Particularly in the ECEC field, the pandemic dramatically impacted every aspect of the field (Jalongo, 2022). Everything from having to implement new health and safety precautions and procedures to teacher-child interactions, lack of teachers and staff due to illness, to the most extreme impacts where facilities had to either close for short periods or worse, having to close forever (Logan et al., 2021). The pandemic was a learning experience for the field, especially for the early childhood center directors (EC Directors). They were forced to solve novel problems with rapidly changing, and oftentimes insufficient, information and support from local, state, and federal agencies (Jalongo, 2022; Kirby et al., 2021; Logan et al., 2021).

This qualitative study aimed to describe how early childhood directors in one Southeastern State in the United States (US) managed the pandemic by adapting their leadership practices to ensure center operations, play and learning, and care continued. There is currently a dearth of literature specifically looking at directors' leadership and lived experiences during the pandemic and this study seeks to add to the body of literature. Understanding directors' leadership practices during this time can be valuable to

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policymakers, researchers, higher education faculty, and other early childhood directors. The themes that emerged from the data are not only helpful in illustrating how participants were adaptable and resilient during the pandemic but may also give insight into how directors might lead during future emergencies or crises (i.e. the aftermath of a natural disaster).

The COVID-19 pandemic was stressful to everyone in the early childhood field, but directors experienced notable stressors (Jalongo, 2022). For example, the planning, organizing, and enforcing new health protocols were added to the work of directors. This meant they were responsible for making sure a family kept a sick child home or were responsible for finding a replacement for a sick teacher or staff member. Directors were also responsible for gathering and distributing personal protective equipment (PPE) and ensuring staff wore them and followed protocols for disinfecting the environment. The addition of these adaptations greatly impacted the responsibilities of directors, likely leading to higher levels of stress and symptoms of burnout (Jalongo, 2022).

Bigras et al. (2021) evaluated the level of well-being of early childhood managers during the winter of 2021 during the pandemic. Three hundred twenty-eight managers completed a survey about perceived stress, burnout symptoms, self-compassion, and depressive symptoms. Eighty percent of participants reported experiencing average or high levels of stress, and all participants indicated feeling low levels of accomplishment at work – a possible indicator of burnout (Bigras et al., 2021). Interestingly, most respondents indicated they practiced average or high levels of self-compassion. Researchers suggested that social support, opportunities to reflect and share within a team, and engaging in self-care activities are ways professionals can practice self-compassion in other stressful times.

The COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted the critical need for trauma-informed supervision, particularly for center directors, as they were forced to deal with personal trauma and that of their staff and children and families they serve (Nagasawa, 2022). For example, Logan et al (2021) found that early childhood directors from Australia were aware of the trauma their staff was experiencing and that they needed greater access to and understanding of trauma-informed practices and resources for the future. Similarly, in Nagasawa's (2022) study of childcare directors within New York City, the researcher found that participants realized they were not adequately prepared to handle the amount of trauma the pandemic brought to their childcare programs.

During the pandemic, directors had to quickly adjust their leadership strategies to meet new and challenging circumstances, such as transitioning to online learning and dealing with increased stress and uncertainty. This shift in leadership style exemplifies adaptive leadership. The implementation of adaptive leadership enables leaders to create creative solutions based on current and sometimes unpredictable demands. Leaders must reconfigure, adapt, and brainstorm creative solutions to problems (Linsky & Lawrence, 2011). Tollman et al. (2021) note adaptive leaders are receptive to input, prepare for inevitable change, and are skilled at adapting to problems. Heifetz et al. (2009) identify four main principles of adaptive leadership. First, adaptive leaders need to have emotional intelligence in order to recognize their own feelings and those of others in order to build trust that will foster quality relationships. Second, adaptive leaders foster a culture of honesty and implement policies and practices best for the organization. Next, adaptive leaders are open to learning new things and discovering new strategies and techniques that will lead to the growth and development of the organization. Finally, adaptive leaders have a deep sense of character, are transparent, and creative.

Additionally, center directors relied on strengths-based leadership as it helped to motivate, uplift, and build resilience with their teachers and staff. For example, directors had to identify and use the strengths of their staff to create effective and safe learning environments, create opportunities for teachers to collaborate and problem-solve, and emphasize the positive aspects of the situation to build team morale and motivation. This type of leadership promotes efficiency, productivity, and advancement by concentrating on the constant development of its employees' strengths (Rath & Conchie, 2008). It also enhances the emotional commitment of team members by using positive psychology in leadership, which suggests that strength is the most remarkable element of employees' growth and development (Ding & Yu,

2020).

To our understanding, this is the first study, specifically the leadership experiences of early childhood directors during the COVID-19 pandemic. While technical reports and resources are available for strengths-based leadership in ECEC (see the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement's (2020) *Guidance for Supervisors: Using a Strengths-based Approach*), research studies are lacking. Strengths-based leadership has been examined in other disciplines, such as education in general (Mcnae, 2015; Orr & Cleveland-Innes, 2015; Ting & Yang, 2021), psychology (MacKie, 2014), management (Akter et al., 2021) and healthcare (Lamb et al., 2014; Spiva et al., 2021) to name a few. Strength-based leadership has resulted in positive outcomes, including organizational innovation and transformation, uncovering and validating experiences that stakeholders bring to leadership learning (Orr & Cleveland-Innes, 2015), fostering leadership competencies and skill development, promoting the organization's resiliency (Spiva et al., 2021) and execute a significant influence on sustainable employment along with nurturing personal wellness (Akter et al., 2021). Mcnae (2015) suggests that viewing leadership through a strength-based framework enhanced confidence by acknowledging positive leadership attributes and providing a forum to discuss complex issues within individual leadership contexts. MacKie (2014) also states that strength-based leadership is a significant predictor of the ultimate degree of change in leadership behavior and may influence the development of transformational leaders.

Conceptual Framework

Given the myriad ongoing demands center directors routinely face, we opted to employ Bolman and Deal's (2013) four frames model of organizations as the conceptual framework for this study. This model offers a multifaceted lens to analyze and understand the intricate dynamics of organizational functioning. The four frames encompass:

Structural Frame: This pertains to how the parts of an organization are organized and structured. Examining the structural frame provides insights into the formal hierarchies, roles, and processes that shape the leadership landscape of early childhood education.

Human Resource Frame: Focusing on how people interact with each other and the organization, the human resource frame delves into the interpersonal dynamics, communication channels, and the overall human element in the context of early childhood leadership.

Political Frame: This frame explores the dynamics of attaining power within the organization, either through coalition-building or authoritative means. Understanding the political frame is essential for comprehending the influence and decision-making processes within the realm of leadership.

Symbolic Frame: Centered around cultural activities, the symbolic frame sheds light on the values, beliefs, and cultural aspects that shape the identity of the leadership environment. This frame considers the symbolic significance attached to actions, rituals, and traditions.

The integration of these four frames into our study's conceptual framework provides a holistic approach to understanding the complexity of implementing, overseeing, and evaluating initiatives and programs in the field of early childhood and allows for a nuanced exploration of the challenges and opportunities inherent in the diverse tasks undertaken by directors during the pandemic.

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to understand how center directors navigated the global pandemic. More specifically, this study focused on exploring challenges directors navigated to provide educational and developmental services to young children and their families, the leadership practices they utilized to overcome those hardships and the lessons they learned that will guide their future practices. The following research questions guided this study:

- How did the ECEC directors perceive leading their programs during the pandemic?

- What strength-based leadership practices did the directors utilize to face the pandemic challenges?
- How will their lived experiences as a program director during the pandemic guide their future practices?

Method

A qualitative research design was used to explore participants' perceptions of their experiences providing educational and developmental services to young children and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic and the leadership practices used to overcome hardships. The open exploratory nature of the study included key characteristics of qualitative research such as (a) the researcher serving as the data collection instrument through a focused interview protocol, (b) deductive and inductive logic in data analysis, and (c) multiple interviews to obtain a variety of participant perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Specifically, the approach included a targeted purposive sample of participants (Miles et al., 2013) who were interviewed to develop themes and subthemes related to their experiences. The first author conducted individual interviews with a subset of center directors from one Southeastern State in the US. The interviews occurred at a single point in time during 2021.

This qualitative research study employs Bolman and Deal's (2013) four-frame model of organizations as the conceptual framework presented above. The four frames offer a comprehensive lens for understanding the multifaceted dynamics inherent in the administration of special education programs. This frame is chosen for its suitability in examining the organizational perspectives within the context of early childhood leadership during the pandemic. By emphasizing different facets, the framework aligns with the complexity of challenges faced by leaders, allowing for a nuanced exploration of the complexities involved in implementing, overseeing, and evaluating initiatives and programs by directors during the pandemic.

Participant and Setting

Participants in this study included ten (n=10) early childhood directors who were all females, between 33-53 years of age, provided services in birth through age five centers, and were primarily white. The inclusion criteria for the participants included (a) having served as a program director during the COVID-19 pandemic. For this study, we defined EC program directors as "program-level agents in leadership and administration positions who are in charge of providing early education and development services to young children from birth through 5 years of age and their families in local program settings (e.g., Child Care centers, Head Start/Early Head Start, School District Preschool)". No specific leadership training requirements were expected to be able to participate in this study. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the participants in this study.

Table 1. Characteristics of Participants

Participant	Education	Age	Race	Program Served*	Program Geographical location (Urban, suburban, rural)	Years of Experience as EC director	Gender	Type of the program (public, private)
1	Master	39	White	3-5	Urban	17	F	Private
2	Master	35	African American	0-3	Suburban	17	F	Private
3	Master	33	White	0-5	Suburban	10	F	Private
4	Bachelor	43	White	0-5	Rural	21	F	Public
5	Master	33	White	0-5	Urban	15	F	Public
6	Master	57	White	0-5	Urban	21	F	Private
7	EC certificate	44	White	0-5	Rural	26	F	Private
8	Bachelor	36	White	0-5	Suburban	13	F	Public
9	Bachelor	53	White	0-5	Rural	20	F	Private
10	Master	48	African American	0-5	Rural	18	F	Private

Note. *3-5 serves children three years old to five years old; 0-3 serves children birth to age three; 0-5 serves children birth to age five

Procedure

Once University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted, participants were recruited through a recruitment flyer that included introductory information about the study's aims and scope and an embedded survey. The recruitment survey specifically asked the participants if they were a director of a center that provided educational and developmental services to children 0-5 and their families as program directors in local program settings (e.g., Child Care, Head Start/Early Head Start, School District Preschool-K) during the COVID-19 pandemic and if they were willing to participate in the study. The recruitment survey was shared with the State's local early childhood service providers and program coordinators at one higher education institution, including a leadership preparation program for ECEC professionals. A total of 41 professionals completed the recruitment survey, out of which 26 met the inclusion criteria and were contacted via emails and follow-up phone calls to participate in the semi-structured individual interviews. Ten center directors responded to the interview invitation, completed the consent forms, and were scheduled for one-on-one Zoom interviews due to the COVID-19 restrictions. Permission to participate in the study was obtained through verbal and written consent of the participants.

Interview Development and Process

The first author developed the interview protocol. Once the protocol was finalized, the interviews were conducted by the first author in a casual, conversational manner via Zoom, and participants were encouraged to discuss their lived experiences as directors during the pandemic, the challenges they went through, and the strength-based leadership practices they utilized to overcome those challenges (see Table 2 for interview questions). The interviews were digitally audio-recorded, while the researcher took notes as a backup for content analysis. The interviews lasted 40 to 50 minutes. Specific prompts related to the interview questions were provided when necessary. To establish member checks, multiple strategies were implemented. First, at the end of each interview, the interviewer summarized the major points participants made to ensure she understood the major points raised and to seek clarification if needed. The interviewer also frequently rephrased participants' comments throughout the process to ensure the data were accurate. Second, participants were offered a copy of the interview transcript for review, although none chose to do so. These strategies ensured that the data accurately reflected participants' perceptions.

Table 2. Interview questions

1. Please describe your program.
    - What early learning and developmental services do you provide?
    - Size of the program?
    - Size of the staff? Pre Covid vs Covid
    - Geographical Location (urban, suburban, rural)
    - Type of the program: private, public
2. What was it like to lead a program during Covid-19 pandemic?
    - Any shifts in shifts in your professional philosophy as a director in the field?
    - Any shifts in your leadership style?
    - Any shifts in your service provision?
    - Any shifts in your program logistics?
    - Any other shifts that are worth mentioning?
3. What were the main challenges you faced as a director during the pandemic? Why?
4. What did you do to overcome those hardships?
5. If you were asked to identify any strength-based leadership practices that helped you as a program director during the pandemic, what would it (they) be?
6. Are you planning to carry on any of those strength-based leadership practices post Covid?
7. If we were to experience another pandemic, what would you do differently?
8. What were the "lessons learned" out of this past years' experience for you as a program director?
9. From your perspective, what are the "lessons learned" for the field?
10. What informal support did (e.g., peer support, tips and tricks) benefit you in dealing with the challenges? What kind of informal support do you wish you had access to?
11. To deal with such adversities, what supports (system-level: local, state, federal, individual, etc.) should be in place to help you do your job effectively? What kind of formal support do you wish you had access to?
12. Any additional comments that we did not ask you, but you think need to be shared?

Data Analysis

Data analysis was explored through the lens of a constructivist paradigm (Guido et al., 2010). In this paradigm, themes emerge as the phenomenon is uncovered, and interconnections between the narrative interviews of participants are identified through a reflective process (Suter, 2012). The recorded conversations were transcribed by one of the researchers. Transcription and notes were used in the content analysis of the data.

Data Analysis Procedures

The organization of the data and systematic analysis were carried out in line with the procedures delineated by Braun and Clarke (2006) and following the quality indicators of qualitative studies proposed by Brantlinger et al. (2005). An inductive approach was used for the data analysis. First, the interviews' recording was transcribed, and an analysis of the descriptive content by reading and rereading the data was performed. Any initial ideas taken from the text were also noted during this first step. Second, the interview's representative topics were categorized based on the developed units of meaning (Willig, 2013). Third, specific topic categories were defined around each of the broad categories. Finally, each topic that had emerged was defined, and the most representative verbatim statements were selected for each. Credibility procedures, such as peer review, were used to ensure that the coding of the topics was consistent. The initial set of codes from the interviews was created by one researcher, who then met with a second researcher to discuss the initial coding frame. The researchers met regularly throughout the coding process to discuss emerging codes and reach a final consensus. Written field notes were used to examine the trustworthiness of the data throughout the study. In addition, a doctoral-level researcher familiar with qualitative research analysis volunteered to review summaries, confirm their accuracy, and provide corrections via member check (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Table 3 presents category systems developed during the content analysis and outlines a summary of the emerged themes and subthemes.

Table 3. Summary of themes and subthemes and the number of occurrences

Themes	Subthemes	Frequency
Not Leadership Philosophy but Leadership Actions	Managing vs planning	8
	Flexibility and autonomy	7
	Professional recognition	5
Staffing, inconsistencies, and trauma	Teacher shortages	7
	Resignations	4
	Enrollment impact	6
Communication, connection, and confidence	States' unclear communication	7
	States' inflexible policies	6
	Building connections	7
	Collaborative leadership	4
	Reflective leadership	2
Proactivity, advocacy, and professionalism	Proactive mindset	6
	Acknowledging staff	5
	Recognition	6
	Attracting talent	8
Professional partnership, transparency, and funding	Peer connections	7
	Peer support	6
	Parental support	5
	Funding concerns	7

Findings

The results reflect the views of participants regarding their lived experiences as early childhood program directors during the COVID-19 pandemic. Concerning the research questions, six main codes were identified. The results are organized starting with the code, *not leadership philosophy, but leadership actions* followed by the code related to *staffing challenges and trauma*. Next, *communication, connection, and confidence* are discussed, followed by the remaining codes, including *proactivity, advocacy and professionalism,*

and professional partnerships.

Not Leadership Philosophy but Leadership Actions

Through the interviews, directors shared that leading their programs through a pandemic did not necessarily change their leadership philosophy but their leadership actions. They suggested their leadership actions changed from doing their best to meet the developmental and educational needs of the children and their families to barely meeting the fundamental needs and preserving, slowing down, and making difficult decisions. A common struggle for participants was the unknown nature of the pandemic and the uncertainty of daily life and tasks. As Participant Four explained:

> In the beginning, it was just not knowing. I mean, we were at the forefront of this pandemic when everyone else was shutting down around us. We were still here and trying to serve families and everything, and it was hard because nobody really knew what was going on but having us be forefront and actively caring for these children was kind of stressful not just for me but my staff because they were all concerned about getting sick and what they were going to take home to their families.

Participants believed the core of their leadership philosophy was about supporting children's learning and development and their families. However, being an EC director during the pandemic, they went through different learning curves and had to learn, change, or update daily. Many directors (n=8) mentioned that their leadership included more of managing the day, instead of planning for the future. Participant Seven stated:

> So obviously, being a program director during the pandemic was completely different from anything I've ever experienced. Not with the way we had to, you know, adapt to lower numbers of children and hours being or the many shifts that we had to make to our program's logistics, but just the overall unknown! It was like kind of dark and felt like I couldn't see a foot ahead! It felt like I had to take cautious baby steps.

To many of the directors (n=7), the increased accountability, flexibility, and collaborations within their programs helped them navigate and lead more confidently through the pandemic and achieve some positive outcomes. According to one participant: "When something like this gets thrown at you, you have to be able to switch gears and go the other direction real quick." However, with the flexibility required, some participants (n=6) noted how the State's division of child development and early learning was not allowing for enough local-level autonomy to help with the kind of decision-making needed at the time. Not receiving in-time communication from State officials made it difficult for the center directors to properly guide their programs, creating logistical challenges, including reimbursement issues for many of them. As Participant One stated:

> It was complicated to start the 2021 school year because as far as these programs, which are regulated by State, we had to push our start date back twice because we did not get communication from [States division for early learning] until late August about what would be allowed. We were relatively quick to shift our focus and our service delivery once the pandemic started. I think we had two weeks with no services, and then we shifted right into remote learning, which really required extremely high levels of support and meetings with teachers. So that made it very difficult because if we couldn't okay a program to continue providing virtual instruction and virtual options, we would not be reimbursed for that.

Participants shared how they were stretched as leaders to look at things in many different ways, which caused them to have a lot more confidence in their leadership abilities. Five participants explained that leading their programs through the pandemic created opportunities for them to experiment with being creative, collaborative, and understanding toward their staff. These were traits they had not exercised intentionally before the pandemic, and often, they were not aware of such absence. According to one of the directors:

> The biggest change was in my leadership style or steps and the lens I started to look at myself as a leader. Probably as even if I wasn't previously flexible, during the pandemic, I learned to become even more so because you have to see the issues from different angles out of necessity. After all, your service provisions depend on it. But the philosophy was still the same and still there; I wanted to do my best for my kids and their families in a totally new and, let's say, unknown and kind of scary time.

Five directors also brought up the notion of starting to question themselves as professionals since they witnessed the differences between the field of ECEC and public education in terms of responsibility,

respect, and risk-taking. According to Participant Ten:

> The public schools were not allowed to be open anymore, yet childcare facilities were required or were asked to remain open. It made us feel like we were not essential, even though that was the opposite. We were because how can public schools be allowed not to be open, but then we had to stay open? And it was just the back and forth of why we aren't as important as teachers in the public school system, and we should be…, you know! So, does that mean we were not as important as the public-school staff? So, I think it hurt us professionally.

Learning about virtual aspects of doing their job, COVID-19 health check routines for staff, parents, and visitors, lack of parents' presence in the buildings, and loss of parental involvement were among the other logistic shifts mentioned by the participants.

Staffing Challenges and Addressing Trauma

When asked about the main challenges the participants faced during the pandemic, all the directors' first response was staffing. Seven directors mentioned they had to take care of the staff morale and could not hire qualified staff or substitute teachers when faced with their regular staff leaving, resigning, or going on sick leave. Many teachers were not ready to return when virtual school ended, resulting in many unqualified people applying for jobs. Five directors talked about their experiences interviewing many candidates who showed up to keep their unemployment rather than get into a job. In the U.S., unemployed people must actively apply for jobs in order to keep their unemployment benefits. As Participant One commented:

> It's been a struggle to try to find people and to be able to find people who can work for what I was able to pay and also get quality people to show up… like I wasn't finding quality candidates coming in. To keep unemployment, all you have to do is to show that you're looking for a job, and that is as simple as applying because it's much more affordable if people are making more money staying home, and that was across the board, and we also had the no show up for interviews. I would say between 50% and 70% of people that applied and were scheduled never showed up for an interview.

Similarly, Participant Eight explained how many childcare teachers resigned in order to apply for teaching positions in elementary school settings, which pay more. They shared:

> We're still dealing with the staff issues. I mean, continuing to have staff who resign. You know…, it's typical this time of year to have staff who begin leaving from private sites to go to public sites because they can pay more later. But this year, we had that added layer of the base, getting that additional funding and offering higher pay. So, now we're seeing that staff are leaving private sites and public sites to go to other sites. So, it's hurting, and I'm really concerned about next year…what staffing could look like, and I'm worried we may have to close some of our pre-K classrooms because we don't have staff for them.

Addressing trauma and changes the children and families were experiencing was another common challenge shared by participants. Participants had to ensure teachers were addressing children's fears and questions about the new protocols in place. As Participant One explained:

> It was very hard for children to understand why we wear masks or why they couldn't play with their friends anymore or couldn't cuddle up in a specific corner. Just what that is, you know, talking to children one and two years old was really hard to explain and help them understand why we're washing hands so much while we're disinfecting. Even more, getting used to the new way of teaching and our new routines and transitions was a question mark for many of our kids. There were many question marks and dealing with all that in addition to what we were already dealing with was overwhelming.

Three participants shared they started doing mental health and trauma training, which covered self-care, self-help skills, how to teach children to cope with trauma, and some open-ended conversations they can have with children. According to these directors, the training provided them with practical tips and tools that they could use. For example, Participant Five shared:

> The pandemic did show us that when children do come back to us, how we needed to kind of be equipped and prepared to help them, try to understand and still make those connections with them even though our environment has changed significantly, and the mental health trainings that we received, and were supported to provide to our families, and staff were a great tool in helping us, and families do so. We definitely need more of that as we are all healing.

Communication, Connection, and Confidence

When the directors were asked about their strengths-based leadership practices to lead their programs through the pandemic, they used myriad terms and definitions. Mostly, they mentioned the use of "effective communication." According to six participants, effective communication developed an open forum and made it a priority for all voices to be heard, helping the directors become more accommodating and making adaptations easier. As Participant Nine explained, "I think the increased communication is really what has got us through this because without communication having increased to the level that it did and just transparency, it was not possible to take things under control." Participant Three described how effective communication helped her staff deal with the challenges the pandemic created. She shared:

> A lot of times, sites that lost a teacher wouldn't tell us about it until the moment we knew that we needed to get special approval for that. But now they're calling us ahead of time saying, "hey, I've got this person I know they're leaving. I don't know what I'm going to do…" and so, we're able to kind of brainstorm topics and reach out to [state division for early learning] and say, "hey, here's our situation, here are the efforts that have been made, here's why we can't find a teacher. We need this person to be approved and have this time window."

Participants also described "collaborative leadership" or "collaborative partnership," which included providing guidance and support for one another to collaborate, communicate and create a safe space where they were supported to approach things and solicit ideas and opinions of all stakeholders involved. Collaborative leadership also helped these directors delegate their responsibilities and experience much more progress in their daily agenda. According to Participant Two:

> I think the teamwork brought us closer together, it came up as a tool for increased quality, and even though we felt like an outcast compared to the public school system, we felt kind of elevating each other, and we showed compassion for one another. It also helped me with executing more to my staff and colleagues, and that taught me patience along the road.

Interestingly, seven participants mentioned the confidence they gained in themselves and their staff from that leading through this pandemic. The directors stated that working together as a team through the pandemic created a special bond and connection between them and their teachers and staff and prepared them to deal with unknown situations like the pandemic. Participant Seven acknowledged:

> You don't know what's coming up now, and so it's like a whole lot of unknown, and so I guess I have more confidence in my ability, and my confidence in my teachers and staff has increased because we've already done it. Hopefully, we don't have to walk through anything like this again, but we're seeing the light at the end of the tunnel now, not an individual but as a team!

Proactivity, Advocacy, and Professionalism

As the participants reflected on the lessons they learned throughout the pandemic, nine of them highlighted the issues they had with the State's Division for Early Learning inconsistencies in communication. They talked about learning to become more proactive and prepared instead of waiting to hear from the state officials. Such waiting created confusion and frustration for the participants. As Participant Four mentioned*:*

> I told myself don't wait on feedback. Don't wait for guidance! Have a plan in place…a plan A, B, or C, and then probably even a date. I found that when we waited on guidance, we ended up having to scramble, and we already knew this is what we'll do if they allow it out and we'll do them over, but I was just sitting in waiting on guidance from them. That was not productive for me, my kids, or my program!

Similarly, Participant Eight pointed out how they had to slow down and focus on the day ahead. She shared:

> I started realizing that I just needed to know day by day. I think we took a lot of things day by day and then week by week, and to know that we may not be doing exactly the same thing as we would in the classroom, but we're somehow still making a difference was reassuring.

In the U.S., there was a stark difference in how public school teachers and childcare workers were recognized and supported during the pandemic. This led several participants to reflect on how they began advocating for the ECEC field. Six directors became more involved in advocacy for the field. Some participants engaged with state-level advocacy campaigns to advocate for higher wages for childcare

professionals, while others advocated for the same recognition for childcare professionals that public school teachers received. Participant Two described her advocacy efforts with State advocacy campaigns:

> So, I think one of the lessons that I've learned is that with the right avenues, there is a way to speak up and advocate for my teachers, my families, and my field. I think the pandemic has given us more opportunities to know where to look, or it's made us more willing to share because I believe many of these organizations have been around for a while. They've been doing stuff and sending emails, but when I'm feeling overwhelmed because I can't find someone who will work for $10 an hour, which is what I can afford to pay them, then when I get an email from the [a state advocacy campaign for low wages in EC education], I'm like yes, yeah! Sign up because this is such a need. So, I think the lesson has been that there are ways to be heard.

Participant Four described the need for recognizing childcare teachers as essential workers the same way public school teachers were recognized. She explained:

> There's been a lot of talk in recent years about childcare teachers or EC teachers versus public school teachers, as the school teams tend to be the ones who get most of the recognition, but I think through Covid, there have been some type of acknowledgment that we are also professional, and people and families started to look at as an academic and educational program. We need to act and remember this through our education, our support, and through just the way that we do our day-to-day operations.

Participants believed that by acknowledging ECEC teachers as essential workers who deserved higher wages could lead to greater recruitment and retention of childcare teachers. As Participant One summarized this by saying:

> We talk a lot about teachers' shortages in EC or public schools, but to me, we do not have a teacher shortage! We have a shortage of a system that recognizes us as professionals with fair compensation, salaries, and work conditions. Although there is a ton of research out there on what benefits we are making to these kids, their families, and our communities, we do have a shortage of policymakers and governments who are willing to take all this evidence into account and step up.

Professional Partnerships

The pandemic led to participants connecting and supporting each other as they navigated similar challenges. These partnerships were described by many participants as they discussed peer support, EC director coalitions across the state, and smaller partnerships between local childcare centers. These professional partnerships continued after the pandemic. For many participants, being able to talk to colleagues locally and across the State was emotionally and professionally beneficial. Participant Eight stated:

> So, one of the informal supports I've enjoyed was the partnership of the lead directors for [a state's county]. We started having weekly meetings, which we still do, where it's just kind of like everyone can pop in and say what they need and how they do things, like a peer mentors circle with the other directors, where we hear stories from other directors, and if we can support one another. It is a beautiful kind of peer support and comes as a huge benefit.

Six directors reflected on how they benefited from the social media support groups (local, national, and international) that gave them ideas and uplifting encouragement from other providers to overcome their challenges. The constant nature of the posts kept them motivated to persevere and learn about pandemic-related initiatives both locally and across other states. Finally, four directors reflected on the support they received from the parents they served. Parents expressed appreciation and recognition for working as partners with the childcare directors and teachers. This appreciation fostered parent-professional relationships in times of need. Participant Seven shared:

> Well, I guess the parental support was amazing. I mean, of course, you've had some that did not agree or always were very negative about things. Still, the parental support from the majority was absolutely astonishing for the center as a whole because it lifted the teachers' spirits. It was very uplifting when we saw parents realize and were understanding of the hardship that was going on and were hands-on to support us. It was like it takes a village… you know!

Discussion

Interviews with participants suggest the Pandemic forced them to adapt and grow as leaders during unprecedented and uncertain times. Findings show that at the beginning of COVID-19, EC directors had to adapt their leadership actions to reevaluate and prioritize their focus on operating their centers, ensuring

everyone's health and safety by implementing new procedures and practices, and juggling staff issues with dwindling funding and resources. In other words, directors had to triage their normal tasks and operations to keep their doors open. As new information emerged from federal and state levels, directors had to brainstorm solutions and strategies to remain open and operational. However, the cycle of rapidly changing information created an uncertain and stressful environment (Dunn, 2020). Being able to adapt quickly to rapidly changing information and resources required participants to use different leadership skills to run their centers.

Adjusting Leadership Practices and Communal Coping

For center directors, maintaining organizational leadership during the pandemic took creativity and flexibility. Perceptions of participants from the current study illustrate how they relied on adaptive leadership strategies. A common theme from the data suggested participants had to be creative with daily tasks and operations, problem-solving (e.g. teacher retention, health and safety protocols), and had to be prepared for unavoidable change (i.e. constant updates from local and State agencies). Heifetz et al. (2009) note it is a practical approach to organizational leadership and problem-solving that embraces change, experimentation, and innovation. Participants also described their use of strengths-based leadership during COVID-19. These practices included being collaborative, relying on peer support, recognizing the needs of their staff, and being proactive. These findings echo findings from Pedroso et al. (2021) interviews with school principals about their leadership practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. Whether intentional or not, educational leaders implemented strengths-based leadership during uncertain times. For some participants in this study, this led to greater confidence in their ability to lead, which continues to shape their leadership practices.

While center directors in this study noted they gained confidence in their leadership skills through adaptive leadership, they also spoke to the unavoidable burnout they and their teachers experienced. Participants noted how they sought support from other directors who were experiencing the same challenges as they were. This strategy illustrates the notion of "communal coping" which happens when multiple people experiencing the same stress or issue come together to "act upon it and build shared resolve" (Afifi et al, 2020, p. 425). Through this relationship, people feel joint ownership of the stressor, can communicate about it, and create a shared action to address it (Nagasawa, 2022).

Implication for Practice

Adaptive leadership is not well known in the ECEC field, but was certainly practiced during the Pandemic. While research on adaptive leadership in ECEC is lacking, studies have been published on its use in primary and secondary school settings (Bagwell, 2020; Haron et al., 2022; Linsky & Lawrence, 2011). These studies spotlight how school principals who use adaptive leadership build resilience in their school staff, lead adaptively, and distribute leadership responsibilities to use the expertise and creativity of others. The same skills can be used by childcare center directors during times of crisis or change. Institutes of higher education, local, and state ECEC organizations should consider offering training and resources on adaptive leadership and strengths-based leadership to directors to ensure they are better equipped when the inevitable next crisis or emergency occurs.

Furthermore, we recognize the critical issue of burnout in the field and this was a prominent issue for participants in this study. Participants relied on communal coping as a way to handle challenges they were facing during the pandemic. For example, participants created professional partnerships with each other and with families while also connecting on social media with a broader audience. While participants in this study organized themselves informally, we recommend that local or state agencies offer formal avenues for communal coping to happen for center directors under their purview. Not only does this provide a sense of security among professionals, but it also creates a place where they can learn from one another about how to solve the issue at hand. Communal coping has been researched as a tool to mitigate burnout and stress for early childhood through secondary teachers and professionals (see Barajas-Gonzalez, 2021; Craw & Bevan, 2022; Nagasawa & Tarrant, 2020; King et al., 2023; Rodriguez et al., 2018). These studies explored the use of communal coping with teachers who experienced natural disasters,

discrimination, COVID-19, and burnout. This strategy is inexpensive and shown to create safe spaces where people who experience the same challenge or hardship can connect, strategize to navigate or overcome the challenge, and address their trauma.

Trauma-Informed Care and Leadership

Participants in this study discussed their role in providing trauma-informed care for the children and families. Additionally, participants had to use leadership strategies grounded in trauma-informed care, like acknowledging and caring for teachers' mental health and well-being as well as their own. It is critical that center directors be equipped to provide trauma-informed care and leadership no matter the situation. Our findings are similar to Petriwskyj's (2013) study exploring early childhood educators' and directors' reflections on natural disasters. Both study's participants spoke of the need for community resources, supporting child and family trauma, and the need for mental health services. In King et al.'s (2023) study, researchers aimed to address the trauma teachers faced during Pandemic by launching an intervention to promote resiliency and create a network of trauma-informed education professionals. Their intervention was developed to enhance trauma-informed professionals and to address the indirect trauma and secondary traumatic stress they experienced being in a "helping profession" (King et al., 2023). Participants in the current study described the need for similar interventions in the future.

Implication for Practice

Building on the National Association for the Education of Young Children's Power to the Profession *Unifying Framework for the Early Childhood Education Profession* (2020), we recommend institutes of higher education, professional development providers, and government agencies support and empower directors to be prepared to support children and families regardless of the circumstances. We further argue that explicit trauma-informed training and support be included by these entities to ensure leaders provide trauma-informed care and practices for children, families, and their staff. Lastly, we recommend center directors receive support and training on local emergencies they may experience in their geographical location. For example, the participants in our study live in a state prone to hurricanes. Local ECEC agencies and governments need to provide specific training related to local emergencies and subsequent trauma their community may experience.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the current study's findings. A primary concern is associated with the use of a convenience sampling method, where participants were volunteers from various ECEC programs. Consequently, the characteristics of the participants in this study may not accurately reflect the broader population. Given the convenience sampling method, our participants were more experienced directors, meaning they possibly were more equipped to deal with emergency situations during COVID-19 than more novice directors might have been. Moreover, the respondents were drawn from a state-wide population, and given the small sample size and inherent bias in convenience sampling, generalizing findings from our sample to the broader population being studied becomes challenging. Another limitation pertains to the representation of gender and ethnicity among participants. Although the gender and ethnicity of participants align with the demographics of the ECEC workforce, it is important to acknowledge the absence of representation for other gender and ethnic groups (males and others) in this study. Future studies should aim to address these limitations by employing larger sample sizes and diverse sampling methods. Furthermore, research exploring EC leaders' perceptions, needs, and perspectives on job-related challenges and barriers to implementing quality leadership would provide valuable insights for shaping the direction of leadership development in the field.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic presented many challenges for center directors. Participants in this study were required to adjust their leadership skills and strategies to maintain their centers, support their staff, and meet the needs of the children and families they serve. They experienced delays in communication

from the State and navigated difficult financial circumstances that sometimes led to terminating their teachers and staff or having to close their centers indefinitely. The challenges participants in this study faced are not unique and represent challenges experienced by ECEC professionals and other education professionals worldwide. Directors should be commended for their flexibility, innovation, and resiliency to keep their centers functioning. While the pandemic has ended, lessons were learned that will be useful to professionals when other catastrophic events occur in the future, whether globally, nationally, or locally. By reflecting on and listening to directors, we can determine the support needed to navigate future complex challenges.

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