Early childhood leadership: Risk and protective factors during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract
COVID-19 has impacted Early Childhood Education (ECE) globally. The cancellation of a final year leadership practicum presented an opportunity to partner with pre-service teachers as co-researchers to investigate the leadership experience of four service directors during COVID-19. A multi-case study design included four focus groups consisting of one early childhood sector leader, final year pre-service teachers and one academic mentor aimed to explore the impacts of COVID-19 on service leadership while identifying the leadership strategies that offered protective mitigation for the risks posed by the pandemic. Leadership challenges included shifting health orders, support for the home learning context and disseminating policy shifts to staff and families, all while maintaining viability, managing anxieties of staff, parents and children, while negotiating lockdowns and service restrictions. Findings spoke to the complexity of the situation for leaders, while spotlighting the protective function of high-quality practice; strong service-based philosophy; and prioritisation of relationships.

Keywords
Effective leadership, COVID-19 impacts, risk and protective factors, Early Childhood Leadership

Introduction
During 2020–2021, the COVID-19 pandemic led to the closure or restricted operations of educational facilities across the globe, affecting more than 1.5 billion students and 63 million teachers worldwide (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2020). The pandemic directly impacted all parts of society, from international leaders to frontline workers (Watkins & Marsick, 2021) and the daily work activities and wellbeing of teachers, Early Childhood Education (ECE) sector leaders, service directors and managers (Pascal et al., 2020; Rogers, 2021). While communities across the globe
experienced periods of lockdown, ECE services, positioned as essential services, continued to deliver early education to children attending centres as well as those staying at home (Thorpe et al., 2020).

Concurrently, COVID-19 restrictions impacted the experience of pre-service teachers in university contexts (Hill, 2021; Mutton, 2020; Rogers, 2021) with rapid transition to online learning (Hill, 2021; Watkins & Marsick, 2021) and the cancellation of pre-service teacher practicum placements (Mutton, 2020; Scull et al., 2020). The cancellation of a final year pre-service teacher education leadership practicum experience at the University of Wollongong in Australia presented an opportunity to partner with pre-service teachers to investigate the risks and challenges experienced by four early childhood service directors during COVID-19 restrictions in the Australian ECE context. The research presented in this paper aimed to explore the experiences and strategies enacted by early childhood sector leaders located in Australian ECE services, and to develop deeper understanding of the protective and risk factors that shaped both effective leadership strategies and service response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Effective leadership in early childhood education

Effective leadership contributes to both the structural and pedagogical strengths of early childhood services (Harrison et al., 2019; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2007; Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2018). Cumming et al., (2020, p.3) identify a leadership focus on the ‘relational aspects of adult work environment’ as crucial for staff wellbeing in early childhood contexts. Indeed, the leadership demands in ECE are multi-faceted and complex (Gibbs, 2020; Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2018). Beyond teaching, leaders in ECE must develop capacities for organising and managing resources and time, managing staff, responding to contextual demands, acting as agents of change and forming relational connections with children, staff, families and communities (Waniganayake et al., 2017). Definitions of effective leadership in ECE contexts are ambiguous, with Gibbs (2020) listing various prevalent conceptions of leadership such as singular positional leadership, contextual leadership, transformational leadership, distributed leadership as well as collective and shared leadership models. Gibbs (2020) proposes leadership be enacted through
good communication, critical reflection, collective vision-building and development of learning communities; suggesting a focus on socially just, morally informed leadership praxis is required to effectively lead others and reform practice. The tensions of the COVID-19 pandemic have created a context in which a focus on effective leadership and socially just crisis management is imperative.

Early childhood education leadership during a pandemic crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic has further added to the already complex early childhood leadership context (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020; Rogers, 2021). ECE leaders in the ‘frontline’ of ECE service delivery (Thorpe et al., 2020) have needed to exercise greater flexibility, contextual innovation and ethically responsive leadership (Rogers, 2021). During the pandemic, ECE leadership teams have faced increased pressures and demands, including the need for frequent and rapid responses to shifting funding models and health guidelines (Rogers, 2021), pressure on staff wellbeing and employment patterns (Thorpe et al., 2020), mitigation of risk and support for staff wellbeing (Eadie et al., 2021), interpreting shifting social distancing guidelines (Atiles et al., 2021; Rogers, 2021) and support for fearful and vulnerable families in home learning contexts, while simultaneously providing ongoing education and care for children of essential workers (Community Early Learning Australia, 2020; Rogers, 2021). While scholars have previously discussed the complexities and demands of ECE leadership (Harrison et al., 2019; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2007; Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2018), the research described in this paper focused specifically on the experience of four ECE leaders in Service Director leadership positions during the COVID-19 pandemic, an under researched area. The exploration of strategies employed by the leaders in this study offers a unique opportunity to explore both risk and protective factors that potentially limit or enhance resilience and identify effective leadership processes for application both during and after crises.

Risk and resilience in early childhood contexts

In ECE contexts, discussions about risk and protective factors generally apply to issues of child protection, workplace, workplace change and more recently educator mental health and wellbeing (Cumming et al., 2020). While typically addressing outcomes for children, risk factors are defined as events or influences that increase the likelihood of negative impacts, whereas protective factors are practices or strategies that enable risks or challenges to be minimised or eliminated (NSW Department of Education, 2019). Few studies have considered the complexities of risk, resilience and protective factors within the context of early childhood leadership, nor applied a risk and resilience framework to the examination of leadership within a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Risk and resilience research during COVID-19

The current research adopted a risk and resilience lens to better understand the factors that facilitated or challenged service leadership and responses to the COVID-19 context. Studies examining risk and resilience during the pandemic have focussed largely on familial risks and resilience strategies. For example, in a study exploring pandemic risks and resilience factors for families, Daks et al., (2020) noted that psychological flexibility and inflexibility were directly related to pandemic resilience and risk, with family flexibility being directly related to the use of constructive coping strategies regarding risk and change. Prime et al., (2020)
explored COVID-19 family risk and resilience factors, finding enhanced wellbeing, resilience, hope, emotional sharing and collaborative problem-solving when support organisations provided clear information and access to resources.

Defining resilience as the capacity to flexibly adjust to stressors or risks in order maintain stable mental health, Chen and Bonano (2020) highlighted how social and individual strategies such as optimism, staying informed, distraction strategies and reducing social isolation promoted resilience in the face of the pandemic. Because the efficacy of resilience strategies varies between individual contexts, risk and protective factors cannot be generalised and are therefore best understood within specific cases (Chen & Bonano, 2020).

This paper positions an examination of leadership risk and protective factors as an effective lens to appreciate the impacts, strengths and constraints of crisis-imposed demands on leaders. While there has been increasing interest in understanding the nexus of risk and protective factors for children and families during the pandemic (Daks et al., 2020; Prime et al., 2020) what this looks like within early educational contexts is yet to be explored. The current study drew on a Community of Learners (CoL) (Kirkby et al., 2019; Recchia & Puig, 2019) approach to explore the pandemic response of ECE sector leaders, and to develop deeper understanding of the protective and risk factors that shaped both effective leadership strategies and service response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

Design

The project was designed in response to COVID-19 restrictions that resulted in a cancelled practicum for a final year student cohort. The study adopted a multiple case study design which involved bringing together service leaders, students and academics to form a Community of Learners (CoL) to explore the impact of COVID-19 on approaches to leadership within the ECE sector. Students were positioned as co-researchers and were involved in the design process, question development, focus groups and preliminary data analysis.

The student-researchers participated in three compulsory research meetings conducted prior to and following each CoL focus group. These sessions supported and scaffold student involvement in the research process and included: (1) initial discussions around the structural and pedagogical underpinnings of ECE leadership; (2) development of interview schedules; (3) unpacking the research process and methodology; (4) determination of discussion points for the second round of CoL focus groups and (5) identification of key themes and learnings.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ECE leadership was examined through the lens of the four exemplary Service Directors. To ensure ethical research practice, this study prioritised voluntary involvement of all participants and complied with the University of Wollongong’s human research ethics policies which are guided by the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research and the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (UOW HREC 2020/231).

Participants

Four focus groups were comprised of up to four early childhood students, one Service Director and an academic mentor from the Early Years degree. Students enrolled in their final practicum subject were invited to participate as co-researchers (n = 14). The academic team (n = 4) mentored students; supporting the facilitation of the focus groups, co-development of questions, student preparation session and two follow-up CoL debrief sessions. All four Service Directors were from high-quality community-based services from the Illawarra–Shoalhaven region in New South Wales, Australia. The Service
Directors were invited from a pool of potential leaders recognised amongst the academic team for their reputations as exemplar leaders and their ongoing commitment to the Early Years pre-service teacher education programme through active involvement in the UOW Professional Partners in Practice student mentor programme. Demographic data for each participating Service Director (and service) is included in Table 1.

### Data collection

Data were drawn from online focus groups across the four CoL sites. Each one-hour CoL focus group discussion examined: (1) approaches to (or shifts in) leadership, management and pedagogical practices in response to COVID-19; (2) factors that challenged or facilitated effective leadership and (3) the perceived impact of COVID-19 on ECE services, leaders, educators, children, families and the community. CoL focus groups were managed by the student-researchers; questions were determined prior to each session (with scaffolded support from the academic mentor), with individual students taking carriage for thematic question groupings. Questions were provided to Service Directors prior to the focus groups, affording time for critical reflection. At the commencement of the second CoL focus groups, the student-researchers shared their reflections and overarching thematic analysis of the first CoL session with each Service Director. This provided a platform for Service Directors to reflect on key messages, expand on their narrative or correct misconceptions. All sessions with Service Directors took place via the Zoom meeting platform and were recorded and transcribed for later analysis. The two follow-up debrief sessions between academic mentors and student-researchers, conducted after each CoL focus group, were also recorded and transcribed, serving as additional artefacts for analysis. It is important to note the focus of the current paper is on the Service Directors and their approach to leadership during COVID-19. An evaluation of the impact on student learning, while important, is beyond the scope of the current paper.

### Data analysis

The research team adopted a systematic approach to analysing the qualitative data following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) guidelines for thematic analysis. Each author engaged in multiple readings of the entire dataset to enhance familiarisation with the data. Following this, the academic research team collaboratively explored initial codes in relation to the themes, formally generating initial codes across the entire dataset. Data were coded semantically, driven by inductive and deductive orientations and aligned with the overarching aims of the research to explore the impact of COVID-19 on approaches to service-based leadership and examine key protective and risk factors associated with Service Director leadership and service adjustment during the pandemic. The content within these organising frameworks was

### Table 1. Director and service demographic information.

| Service Director | Years ECE sector | Years as SD | No. of years current service | Service type | No. of staff | No. of children (licensed) | Age range (years) | NQS Rating |
|------------------|------------------|-------------|-----------------------------|--------------|-------------|--------------------------|------------------|------------|
| SD1              | 28               | 24.5        | 13                          | Preschool    | 19          | 69                       | 3–5              | E          |
| SD2              | 9                | 3           | 5                           | Preschool    | 25          | 50                       | 3–5              | E          |
| SD3              | 30               | 20          | 20                          | Preschool    | 8           | 20                       | 3–5              | E          |
| SD4              | 24               | 19          | 3                           | LDC          | 120         | 216                      | 0–5              | E          |

E = Exceeding.
Table 2. Protective and risk factors impacting effective approaches to leadership in response to the COVID-19 context.

| Key themes                      | Protective factors                                                                 | Risk factors                                                                 |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Practice and Pedagogy           | Strong service philosophy                                                           | Lack of familiarity with online platforms/or Effective online pedagogies     |
|                                 | Child-centred pedagogy                                                             | Mixed messages/inconsistent communication                                    |
|                                 | Commitment to individualised response to children and families                     | Pace of change                                                              |
|                                 | Prioritisation of home-centre connections                                           | Lack of capacity                                                             |
|                                 | Intentional pedagogy and choices                                                  | Child protection                                                            |
|                                 | Continuities and connections to prior practices                                    |                                                                            |
|                                 | Flexibility in approach                                                            | Time consuming practices                                                    |
|                                 | Commitment to critical reflection                                                 | Diversity of approaches                                                     |
|                                 | Opportunities for professional development                                         |                                                                            |
|                                 | Diversity of staff skills and capacity                                             | Staff exhaustion                                                            |
|                                 | Strong connections with families/ communities                                       | Increased familial vulnerabilities                                           |
| Relationships                   | Staff cohesion and collegiality                                                    |                                                                            |
|                                 | Effective communication                                                           | Emotional exhaustion and uncertainty                                         |
|                                 | Sense of trust                                                                     |                                                                            |
|                                 | Emotional connectedness                                                           | Strained staff relationships                                                |
|                                 | Staff responsiveness and flexibility                                              | Stressful interactions                                                      |
|                                 | Continuity of quality relationships                                               |                                                                            |
|                                 | Support for staff wellbeing                                                       | Staff wellbeing                                                             |
|                                 | Strong support networks                                                           |                                                                            |
|                                 | Access to support/resources                                                       |                                                                            |
| Leadership priorities           | Distributed leadership model                                                      | Exhaustion                                                                  |
|                                 | Recognition of staff capacities and challenges                                    | Increased workload                                                          |
|                                 | Effective communication (clarity of information)                                   |                                                                            |
|                                 | Respect                                                                            | Overwhelming sense of responsibility                                         |
|                                 | Transparency and honesty                                                           | Uncertainty and shifting expectations                                        |
|                                 | Decisiveness and responsiveness in decision making                                | Staff panic/wellbeing                                                       |
|                                 | Accessibility                                                                      | Financial pressures                                                         |
|                                 | Access to sector networks                                                          |                                                                            |
|                                 | Modelling resilience                                                              | Shifting policies and procedures                                             |
|                                 | Maintaining health and wellbeing of self                                           | Loss of support network                                                     |

coded inductively (i.e., data codes were derived from semantic interpretations of the data). Data relevant to each code were collated and candidate themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) were generated (i.e., approach to practice and pedagogy, focus on relationship, leadership priorities). The codes were then grouped into higher order candidate themes (e.g., risk and protective factors). Following this, the authors refined and further revised the content themes,
structure and names. The final set of higher order themes and sub-themes are presented in Table 2.

**Trustworthiness**

To enhance the trustworthiness of the data and findings, the multiple case study design allowed for the investigation of similarities and differences between cases (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Sharing key messages and themes with Service Director at the commencement of the second CoL served as a mode of member checking, adding to the reliability and validity of data. Additionally, peer debrief sessions conducted with each of the co-authors and the student-researchers throughout the study supported critical evaluation throughout the data collection, analysis and data interpretation cycles (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

**Results**

Data emerging from the CoL focus groups revealed the complexity of ECE service-based leadership during this pandemic. Data reflected risks posed by the COVID-19 context as well as protective factors that actively supported leadership responses and service adjustment. Within the complexities of this risk and protective framework, Service Directors’ reflections were centred on three key themes: (1) Approach to practice and pedagogy, (2) Relationships and (3) Leadership priorities. Table 2 identifies the range of protective and risk factors positioned within the themes.

The following sections examine the interactive role of risk and protective factors. Protective factors were seen to contribute to the positive climate of the ECE service and ensure maintenance of quality practice despite the shifting COVID-19 landscape. Risk factors captured threats to the quality of the service, to Service Directors’ ability to be effective leaders and to the wellbeing of staff, children and families. The impact of risks was also understood within the presence or absence of protective factors.

**Approach to practice and pedagogy**

All four Service Directors prioritised pedagogical quality and adopted this lens when making decisions and supporting staff. Key protective factors included the importance of a strong service philosophy, ongoing commitment to child-centred pedagogy, prioritisation of support for the home learning environment and a flexible approach to curriculum delivery. The service philosophy, identified as the most significant protective factor, was positioned as the backbone to decision making: ‘We always come back to who we were, what were our philosophical beliefs, our values, how we move forward from there. That influenced everything that we did’ (Service Director 1). During the unpredictable situations arising from the pandemic, Service Directors recognised the service philosophy, along with critical reflection, as foundational frameworks to guide practice. A strong commitment to child-centred pedagogy underpinned many decisions made during this time and was instrumental in ensuring service staff remained flexible, responsive and accountable to children and families; ‘It’s given us more strength as a team to know...we can make those decisions with the best interests of the child at heart’ (Service Director 3).

Ongoing critical reflection further informed practice and pedagogy, with Service Directors reflecting on their intentionality and purposeful choices;

*We felt that we would keep our pedagogy in line with our philosophy and our vision … to provide a safe, warm, authentic, joyful environment for children...That is what we build our pedagogy on as well, so we wanted that to continue even during the time of the pandemic. (Service Director 3)*

Services were impacted by multiple risk factors and the abundance and ambiguity of
information received from multiple sources. Foremost, the risks to effective practice and pedagogy included rapid shifts in the delivery of programmes (from face-to-face to online contexts) and the time consuming nature of such adaptations. This created uncertainty for some educators; ‘I’ve never used this type of technology a lot before but we’ve certainly had to get used to doing this’ (Service Director 1). This lack of familiarity with online platforms also challenged programme rigour and the desire to ensure content remained child-focused and individualised. For one service, the shift in delivery of programmes meant increased utilisation of online platforms; ‘We used the OneDrive platform... we used WebEx as a live platform... and we also ran live group experiences for children’ (Service Director 4). Responsive pedagogical innovations, such as creating take-home packs and recording sessions were time consuming, adding to staff workloads and the need for innovative leadership. A considered approach was required to address concerns around the use of online platforms, including issues of child protection and privacy, which for some services negated the use of synchronous learning experiences; ‘Lots of services really wanted to do Zoom teaching experiences with their children. I refused to do that because I found it to be quite a child protection issue’ (Service Director 2).

Despite factors that may impact the delivery of programmes, all Service Directors indicated they would not compromise the pedagogical values embedded within their philosophy. This demanded staff regularly reflect on pedagogical approaches to maintain quality, and if not, to adapt and develop new approaches.

**Relationships**

Relationships within ECE services are complex, existing among staff teams, children and families, the wider community and across an array of stakeholder groups. The staff teams across the four services were diverse, with one Service Director leading a team of only eight staff, through to one Service Director being responsible for managing four different services, each with individual SDs and staff teams (see Table 1). All Service Directors prioritised staff relationships and were committed to maintaining a professional culture and staff wellbeing. All four services had strong and well-established teams, with Service Directors celebrating the strengths, flexibility and responsiveness of staff; ‘Some of the dispositions I’ve seen come through in my staff, like adaptability, resilience, agility – definitely agility; having to just move so fast and make decisions so quickly’ (Service Director 4). Many were surprised by seeing joy, gratitude and calm within the service when everything elsewhere seemed so chaotic; ‘We felt reassured we had everything in place that we could to protect children and families and to protect the organisation financially as well, so that sense of calmness, I think was really important’ (Service Director 4).

Despite the demands of the ever-changing COVID-19 landscape, all four Service Directors saw growth within staff relationships; ‘It’s like we’ve all been in the trenches together... we’re fighting a war...we’ve got to have each other’s back and each of us have to play a role in those trenches...This is a period of time, it will end’ (Service Director 2). Relationships within the team were reinforced with staff seeking strength from each other; ‘We’re a lot more connected, we have grown so much because we’ve learned from other staff, we’ve worked with lots of different people, we’ve picked up different things’ (Service Director 1). A foundation of respectful relationships was positioned as a key protective factor in supporting staff responses to the COVID-19 crisis.

The establishment of strong relationships with families served as a protective factor in the face of uncertainty. Aligned with the service philosophy, staff prioritised familial connections while recognising the need for flexibility in their support for families;
'Relationships with families, knowing that every family is very different, and being able to put those processes into place that support all families, knowing that everyone’s different and they all have different needs’ (Service Director 1).

Maintaining strong relationships was challenged by the shift to online learning and by health orders restricting physical access to the service. This created a need for effective strategies to counteract limited contact opportunities. One Service Director described this disconnect with families as one of the biggest challenges faced during the pandemic; ‘having to change in regards to welcoming children and families into the service – those relational types of things, not having the children here, connecting remotely with them ... it was really different’ (Service Director 1). Connections with families were therefore more deliberate and intentional than ever before and the Service Directors reported the individualised ways staff maintained virtual connections with families to support a sense of belonging. For one Service Director, this linked directly back to the centre philosophy.

'We wanted to make sure we were providing a high-quality program, relationships being the focus, they are the cornerstone of what we do every day ... we had to stand firm with that. So relationships matter, regular engagement matters, and the continuity of early learning is very, very important. (Service Director 1)

The restricted ability to meet in person and the need to connect remotely presented challenges as well as opportunities amongst staff teams and for staff/family relationships. Interestingly, the prioritisation of staff relationships and wellbeing equipped staff to maintain strong relationships with families.

In a context of rapid change and uncertainty, all Service Directors spoke of the importance of self-awareness along with their heightened sense of responsibility for the protection of children, families and staff. Each Service Director expressed concern about the potential risks to staff health and wellbeing. Increased workloads presented an increase in physical, emotional and mental exhaustion; ‘During COVID, I worked through the holidays... continuing with policies, networking, extra PD, just researching lots of different things... I would say my workload during that time probably doubled because it was a very intense time’ (Service Director 1). The underlying sense of uncertainty posed personal and professional risks regarding staff availability. For example, participants noted the challenge for staff in juggling their personal responsibilities to care for children and family members alongside their work duties; ‘We’ve got a lot of staff off at the moment [absent] for very different reasons... we’re just trying to support each other to keep going’ (Service Director 1).

Service Directors reflected on the significant variability amongst staff with respect to their reactions and responses to COVID-19, their perceived vulnerability, fear and heightened emotions. This added pressure to existing relationships within the team, whilst increasing the need for Service Directors to provide individualised support for team members; ‘Trying to capture every single person’s feelings, emotions and anxieties around this coronavirus and their family life, and their children, and then fears in the community that they’re involve(d) in’ (Service Director 2). It was suggested that these reactions existed because of concern for community transmission of the virus; ‘we also had that health factor as well, are we putting ourselves at risk by being at work?’ (Service Director 1). Service Directors identified the need to be supportive and protective of all staff, while remaining conscious of their own health and wellbeing in order to effectively support others.

**Leadership priorities**

Leadership priorities reflected both structural concepts (i.e., access to networks) and dispositional features (i.e., respect, transparency,
honesty). Many of these priorities were embedded in existing approaches to leadership and served as protective factors during the crisis-response (see Table 2). The Service Directors’ ability to model resilience and dampen potential panic was positioned as crucial for ensuring the safety, security and continued engagement of staff, children and families. One Service Director recognised the need to stifle her own feelings of uncertainty, modelling resilience and flexibility to support staff wellbeing; ‘I had to make sure that I remained as strong as I possibly could and also to tap into the resources to support me. Then…I could support everyone’s mental and physical health as well’ (Service Director 1).

Managerial skills, such as task preparation, organisation, decisiveness, responsiveness and leader accessibility were cited as essential.

At the start of the coronavirus outbreak, we designed a crisis management plan … to have a situational analysis of where we’re at, who is involved, a risk minimisation plan, and who would be affected…it was a five-phase management plan for my staff, my families, the stakeholders to learn which phase we’re at, depending on the intensity of coronavirus. (Service Director 2)

Transparency, honesty and sharing clear and accurate information were recognised as essential to maintaining staff confidence. Leaders’ understanding of individual staff contexts ensured a differentiated approach to support and safe guard staff wellbeing, ensuring staff were able to work within their capacity and adapt to challenges.

It’s about addressing people as individuals, understanding where people are at, …. being able to get the best out of individuals to head towards a common vision, … that transformational leadership style was really important during this time because of that exact reason – that need to treat people very individually. (Service Director 4)

While protective factors supported the crisis-response, several risk factors threatened the quality of the services and the wellbeing of Service Directors, staff, children and families. Despite leadership experience variance among the four Service Directors, they all demonstrated a high level of understanding, competence and confidence as leaders and an overwhelming sense of responsibility to all stakeholders. Each of the Service Directors reflected on the importance of a flexible and reflective leadership lens, needing to be on ‘high alert’, checking for potential risks and ways these could be minimised to reduce the impact on the service. This served as a protective mechanism for children and staff, but presented as a potential risk for the individual Service Directors who experienced a sense of exhaustion.

Service Directors spoke of the multi-layered responsibility of their position, which included making key decisions, protecting staff health, minimising staff panic, managing the budget and financial pressures, retaining employment of staff, along with constantly changing expectations; ‘I was actually not having a work/life balance at all, so I’d come to work exhausted because I’d be doing all the work on the weekends because you had to be on top of it all’ (Service Director 2). One Service Director noted the demands for timely and responsive decision making; ‘I had to make some rash decisions – this wasn’t a “sit down and talk about your feelings” – this was, “All right. We need to do this straight away because this is affecting people’s livelihood and health”’ (Service Director 2).

Financial constraints, both for the service and families, was a sensitive area for the Service Directors. Two Service Directors spoke explicitly about the impact, including the stress and uncertainty it placed upon them. Understandably staff were concerned for their employment. Additionally, increased responsibilities to maintain sufficient staff to greet families, supervise children, deliver virtual programmes and increase cleaning rosters added to staff pressure and presented management complexities. The financial burden in responding to these complexities created additional concern; ‘Funding was a big challenge for us.... The resources to actually implement all
this because obviously you need more people’ (Service Director 1).

**Discussion**

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented many challenges to the early childhood sector. The current study highlights the importance of effective leadership in building resilience and reducing negative COVID-19 impacts within people-centred systems; and contributes to an emerging understanding of leadership effectiveness within crises responses (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020; McLeod & Dulsk, 2021; Rogers, 2021). When reflecting on their experiences and approaches to leadership during the pandemic, the Service Directors identified factors that both enhanced and challenged their effectiveness as leaders, as well as their personal wellbeing and adjustment. Protective factors were positioned as external or internal resources or assets (e.g., service philosophy, strong staff relationships, familial connectedness) that offered service leaders protection against the risk impacts of COVID-19 and were perceived to be associated with overall service adjustment.

Findings reinforced the importance of effective leadership as core to both the structural and pedagogical strengths of the ECE service (Harrison et al., 2019; Gibbs, 2020), and spoke to the importance of a clearly defined and communicated service philosophy that prioritised pedagogical quality and children’s rights. In the hierarchy of prioritisations, the service philosophy functioned as an overarching framework for decision making, providing consistency and clarity at a time of challenge and uncertainty. Identified protective factors embedded within this framework included the need for clear and transparent staff communication, opportunities for collaboration and critical reflection and need for flexible curriculum approaches. The prioritisation of relationships – relationships with children, with families and among staff – was seen as a key protective factor both in ensuring a strong and continuing commitment to relational pedagogical practices as well as staff wellbeing and collaboration. The need to place people at the centre of decision making was seen as central to leadership effectiveness, quality practice and the sustenance of staff. This pattern of prioritisation is consistent with models of effectiveness identified in school-based studies (e.g., McLeod & Dulsk, 2021) and within person-centred workplaces (Rogers, 2021).

While limited to the voices of four Service Directors, findings make important contributions to the pandemic policy landscape, highlighting the complexities of leadership at times of crisis-induced change and the contextual nature of effective leadership (Rogers, 2021; Daks et al., 2020). What was particularly surprising from these findings was the commonalities in Service Director responses and the shared acknowledgement of key protective factors in enhancing the perceived effectiveness of their role. The Service Directors identified shared priorities and affordances for effective practice including a focus on programme management and pedagogical practices (i.e., curriculum planning and implementation), interpersonal relationships (i.e., children, staff and families) and leadership and management (i.e., monitoring of policy, financial management). These leaders sat ‘in the trenches’ with the staff, children and families they were supporting, which afforded them a lens that was responsive to contextualised needs and the ever-changing context.

Consistent with international studies of COVID leadership (Chen & Bonano, 2020; Daks et al., 2020; Prime et al., 2020), these leaders demonstrated strength, optimism and a sense of calm, while continually adapting and shifting their responses in accordance with child, familial and staff needs. Interestingly, this sense of control and the ability to contextualise responses to shifting demands worked both as a protective factor and potential risk. Notably, many of the challenges identified by the Service Directors were positioned as being outside their control (i.e., shifting policies and funding models, increase in familial vulnerabilities, mixed-messages, pace of change) and therefore many of their actions and responses were
focused on reinstating stability, reassurance and control.

All four Service Directors recognised the affective components of their leadership role, acknowledging the foundational role of staff wellbeing. This socially just, morally informed leadership praxis (Gibbs, 2020) was seen as imperative to staff resilience, contribution and capacity. There was intentional and active inclusion of all staff in decision making. The uncertainty around job security, inconsistent health messaging, health fears and constantly shifting social and political landscapes meant the prioritisation of staff wellbeing was concurrently a necessity and an added burden to their leadership roles. The relational complexities of leadership identified in this study were consistent with work by Cumming et al. (2020), Gibbs (2020) and Rogers (2021), reinforcing the need to position employee wellbeing as key priority and protective factor.

What was not captured in this study were the voices of Service Directors who lead services that sit within larger ECE organisations. One identified protective mechanism identified globally (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020; Chen & Bonanno, 2020) and reinforced in the current study, was the ability of leaders to be highly responsive and contextualised in their decision making, actions that may conflict with the overarching governance structures typical of larger organisations. While it is understood that policy and management uniformity is essential to the functioning of such organisations, it may increase the risk of delayed and decontextualised responses. Anecdotally, it appears there was significant variance across the ECE sector in the ways services responded and adjusted to the COVID-19 pandemic. Further research is therefore needed to better understand the key risk and protective factors supporting service-level responses and adjustment.

**Conclusion**

While presenting numerous challenges, COVID-19 has also afforded opportunities for reflection and innovation. It was evident that each of the Service Directors approached their situations with a sense of optimism and hope.

At the core of our values is for children to feel a strong sense of connection, a strong sense of belonging, kindness and a sense of gratitude… we kept that in our mind all the time during COVID. We did a gratitude project with the children … we felt that was something we wanted, not only for the children but the families, to see in this really difficult time there were really amazing things to be grateful for (Service Director 1).

Findings from the current study speak to the psychological flexibility (Daks et al., 2020) and rapidity in which these leaders responded to the COVID crisis, ensuring effective communication, collaboration and organisational resilience. Across each of the services, leadership was characterised by a commitment to quality practice, optimism, effective communication, responsiveness and relational connectedness. While limited in its generalisability, this study highlights important features of effective leadership practice and contributes toward a growing understanding of effective practice frameworks during and beyond times of crisis. More importantly it contributes to an emerging body of national and international findings which identified key protective factors and wellbeing strategies that effectively support the sustenance of staff within people-centre systems. The identification of critical protective factors is important for the facilitation of future intervention programmes and policies.

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