FINNISH EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE LEADERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR ROLE IN SUPPORTING STAFF'S WELL-BEING

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Abstract

It is widely recognized that in early childhood education and care (ECEC) environments, work-related well-being is one of the key elements of job satisfaction and coping at work. The well-being of ECEC professionals strengthens the quality of early childhood education and care and supports children's well-being, development, and learning. ECEC leaders have an important role in boosting their staff's well-being, especially when working in groups with children with special educational needs. The purpose of this study was to investigate Finnish ECEC leaders' perceptions of their role in supporting their staff's well-being. The study involved five ECEC leaders, and data was collected using semi-structured interviews. The findings showed that ECEC leaders brought up different kinds of dimensions concerning their role in supporting staff's well-being: conversation partner, administrative actor, negotiator, pedagogical mentor, supporter of social cohesion, and supporter of expertise. By working according to these roles, ECEC leaders affected to their staff's work-related well-being by decreasing job demands and increasing job resources. This research provides valuable information concerning the ways to support the well-being of ECEC professionals and leaders' role in this crucial element of high-quality early childhood education and care.

Keywords: Early childhood education and care, work-related well-being, leadership in early childhood education and care, job demands-resources model.

1. Introduction

Early childhood professionals' work-related well-being has been a popular research topic in recent years. Despite its popularity, research concerning the role of early childhood education (ECEC) leaders in supporting their staff's well-being has been minor. ECEC leaders have an important role in enhancing their staff's work-related well-being. During the global COVID 19-pandemic, the well-being of ECEC professionals has decreased and supporting it has become more important than ever (Bigras et al., 2012; Crawford et al., 2021). It is recognized that general life well-being affects work-related well-being as well, but in this study the focus is on the work-related well-being of ECEC professionals.

Usually, work-related well-being is understood as a combination of employees' psychological and physiological states (Kuykendall & Tay, 2015) and his/her experiences of the organization's culture (Dagenais-Desmarais & Savoie, 2011). Work-related well-being is constructed of job satisfaction, stress, and work engagement (Cumming & Wong, 2019; Orsila, Luukkaala, Manka, & Nygard, 2011). It has also been suggested that experienced appreciation and meaningfulness of work are significant elements of work-related well-being (Nislin, Paananen, Repo, Sajaniemi, & Sims, 2015). Work-related well-being of early childhood professionals can be understood as "a dynamic state, involving the interaction of individual, relational, work–environmental, and sociocultural–political aspects and contexts" (Cumming & Wong, 2019, p. 276).

Well-being of ECEC professionals is a significant contributor of quality in an ECEC environment. Compromised well-being may have a negative effect on relationships between ECEC professionals and children (Jennings, 2015; Whitaker, Dearth-Wesley, & Gooze, 2015), teaching practices (Sandilos et al., 2015), and children's social-emotional skills (Jeon, Buettner, Snyder, & Nezu, 2014; Zinsser, Christensen, & Torres, 2016).

A high level of work-related well-being reduces absenteeism and employee turnover (Barford & Whelton, 2010; Logan, Cumming, & Wong, 2020). Turnover of ECEC professionals is a global problem (Grant, Jeon, & Buettner, 2019; Heilala et al., 2022), and it is essential to find solutions and ways to solve this regrettable phenomenon. In order to ensure a qualified and motivated workforce, it is important to pay attention to the well-being of ECEC professionals.

Work environment, professional background, and self-efficacy of ECEC professionals have associations to well-being (Jeon, Buettner, & Grant, 2018.) According to research, well-organized and structured work environments have a positive effect to ECEC professionals' well-being (Jeon et al., 2018). It is also known that children's varying support needs such as behavioral problems may increase job stress (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Friedman-Krauss, Raver, Neuspiel, & Kinsel, 2014). Supporting ECEC professionals' well-being is crucial as it is known that long-lasting high stress and low well-being may lead to psychosomatic responses (Ritvanen, Louhevaara, Helin, Väisänen, & Hänninen, 2006), depression (Shen et al., 2014), and other common mental health problems (Harvey et al., 2017).

2. Job demands-resources model

One way to understand work-related well-being is the job demands-resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2014). In the JD-R model, work-related well-being is seen to be constructed from the demands of the workplace and resources that help the worker to manage their work and develop and learn (Bakker & Demerouti, 2014). Demands can include aspects related to physical, psychological, social, or organizational factors (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The demands are not necessarily negative, but prior research has shown that too strict demands can lead to, for instance, job stress, exhaustion, and burnout (Dicke, Stebner, Linninger, Kunter, & Leutner, 2017). Resources are understood as physical, psychological, social, and organizational factors that will help workers to cope with demands and achieve goals and personal development and learning (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). In educational professions, demands can refer to, for instance, work overload, problems related to children's behavior or motivation, or lack of administrative support, whereas resources can include factors such as collegial support, supervision from the leader, common practices and values, and the feeling of doing a meaningful job (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018).

Job demands and job resources have been found to interact with each other. This means that job resources can help to cope with job demands (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018) and thereby decrease the risk for burnout (Bakker, Demerouti, & Euwema, 2005). On the other hand, high job demands and low job resources have a negative effect on well-being and may lead to burnout (Bakker & de Vries, 2021). The mechanisms between the relations can vary based on organizations, job characteristics, work situations, and the characteristics of an individual (Bakker et al., 2005).

3. Methods

The aim of this study was to figure out how Finnish ECEC leaders describe their role in supporting their staff's well-being. The study involved five ECEC leaders, and the data was collected by semi-structured interviews. The leaders worked in middle-sized or large towns in Eastern and Southern Finland, and each of them had two or three ECEC centers to run. This case study is part of a larger data collection project for a doctoral thesis that concentrates on children with special educational needs, and this aspect was on display during these interviews. These particular leaders were selected because the ECEC centers they run participated in the data collection for the doctoral thesis. Each participant was asked for personal consent to participate in this study, and research was approved by the policymakers of the municipalities. Ethical principles were followed in every phase of this study, and the anonymity of the participants was carefully protected.

The duration of the interviews varied between 42–83 minutes, and the total amount of data was 310 minutes. Recordings were transcribed and anonymized carefully. At first all the transcriptions were read multiple times. After forming an overall picture of the data and the content, it was noticed that themes related to staff's work-related well-being emerged in the discourse and reflection of the leaders participating in this study. After this, the data was analyzed with the Atlas.ti-software. In the first phase, all utterances that contained information concerning the aim of this study were coded and named by the content. In the second phase, similar codes were grouped together. In the end there were a total of six code groups.
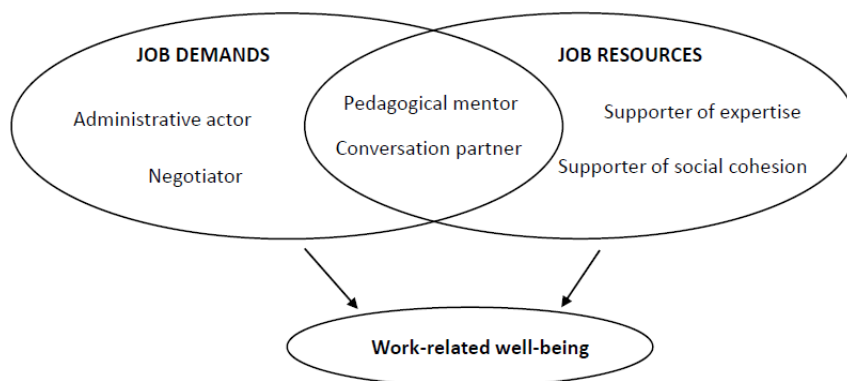
4. Results

The findings of this study show that ECEC leaders' role in supporting their staff's work-related well-being can be perceived through six different roles brought up in the interviews: *conversation partner, administrative actor, negotiator, pedagogical mentor, supporter of social cohesion, and supporter of expertise.*

Being a *conversation partner* included dyadic conversations and solving problematic situations together. Leaders saw their role as a listener and compassionate helper in difficult and burdening situations. The role of *an administrative actor* included recruitment and working as a messenger to policymakers and head of ECEC in municipalities. Finding enough qualified and motivated workforce and substitute workers was described as the responsibility of leaders. Being a messenger emerged if there was a need for more staff or more support services for children who needed special educational support. Leaders worked as *a negotiator* if there was some conflict between team members or between staff and children's parents. In these situations, leaders described their actions as an unbiased actor who helped to find a solution to suit both parties. *Pedagogical mentoring* included pedagogical conversations with one or multiple staff members. The subject of these conversations varied between things related to learning environment, organizing the structure of the day, and providing essential support to children in the group. *Supporter of social cohesion* included organizing mutual social evenings, creating a positive atmosphere, and general encouraging and cheering. *Supporter of expertise* was seen as valuing the staff's professional skills, supporting autonomy, and providing further education for all staff members.

These six roles can be considered more closely through the J-DR model as they can be seen to affect job demands and job resources differently (figure 1). By acting as an administrative actor or negotiator (e.g., by ensuring that there was enough workforce and negotiating in conflict situations), leaders intended to decrease job demands, but it was also not directly aimed at increasing job resources. Pedagogical mentoring and being a conversation partner both decreased job demands and increased job resources. Through these roles leaders aimed to help their staff solve taxing issues, such as children's behavioral problems and problems related to time and workload, and by doing so, they had the possibility of decreasing job demands. At the same time, they also increased job resources by providing collegial support and being a supervisor when needed. Leaders also intended to increase job resources by supporting the expertise and social cohesion of their staff. By supporting expertise, they showed appreciation toward their staff's professionality and skills. To increase the feeling of doing a meaningful job and the overall positive atmosphere, leaders provided positive feedback and intended to support social cohesion in their work community.

Figure 1. Leaders' roles in the J-DR model.

5. Conclusions

To ensure quality ECEC, it is essential to support ECEC professionals' well-being as it is one of the key elements in creating an environment that supports children's learning, development, and well-being. According to the results, the role of ECEC leaders as a supporter of their staff's work-related well-being is multidimensional and variable. Through their variable roles, leaders have the possibility to decrease job demands and increase job resources. However, the model of work-related well-being and its associated factors is not a phenomenon that is so easily described. It must be kept in mind that with job resources workers also have personal resources, such as optimism and resilience, that can buffer

well-being in work (Bakker & de Vries, 2021). Relations between these different dimensions need further and broader investigation.

The size of the data is relatively small and that sets certain limits when interpreting the results. Despite the size of the data, this research provides important information when planning future research topics and when developing ways to enhance ECEC professionals' well-being and high-quality ECEC. Interviews were implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it was not a prevalent theme in leaders' discourse. The reason for this might be that factors related to COVID-19 were not involved in the structure of the interview. Restrictions and the distribution of the virus varied regionally, which might have affected this as well.

Leaders' role in supporting staff's work-related well-being is crucial, and this topic needs further research in order to identify and specify factors related to the big picture. Additionally, it is important to find ways to support and enhance leaders' own well-being. The job characteristics of ECEC leaders are a factor that needs to be considered carefully. Each leader who participated in this study brought up the fact that administrative actions take much time and therefore there might not be enough time left in the day to undertake actions that could increase the job resources of the staff, such as pedagogical mentoring or regular conversations with staff members.

To ensure that ECEC will have a qualified workforce in the future, it is essential to make efforts to boost work-related well-being. By supporting ECEC professionals' work-related well-being right from the start of their career, it is possible to prevent employee turnover and burnouts. It is also important to assure that the overall discussion about ECEC professions and practices is positive and uplifting. Valuing and appreciating ECEC professionals and their work is one of the key elements in boosting their work-related well-being.

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