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Leadership in Chilean early childhood education during the pandemic: experiences and meanings

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Abstract

The COVID-19 health emergency that began in 2019 continues, to this day, to affect a large percentage of the world population. In order to deter its progress, countries have generated various health protocol strategies, including the readjustment of their educational systems. Thus, face-to-face learning was replaced with online classes, and teaching staff were tasked with generating the adjustments necessary to provide continuity to learning processes – at least, to the extent to which their contexts allowed them to. The complexity of this task has called for leaders whose practices, in tandem with all members of the educational community, may invigorate the pedagogical, management and communicational processes involved, as this ever-evolving context demands. This article presents the construction of meanings and leadership practices of 5 leaders in early child educational centers in Chile during the years 2020 and 2021. We worked under a comprehensive-interpretive paradigm, a qualitative approach, and a grounded theory situated design. Our data collection instrument were narrative interviews. We studied the data through content analysis and using the software ATLAS.ti 9.0. The findings here presented highlight the importance of leadership practices in educational work and show some characteristics of early childhood education, a level of education at which leadership processes are located and tend towards care, the distribution of tasks, and trust.

Keywords

Leadership – Early childhood education – Pandemic – Public policy.

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Background and problem

According to UNESCO (2020), around 191 countries, 60 million teachers and 1,5 trillion students of all levels have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic as a result of prolonged closures of educational establishments. Chile is no exception.

During the first semester of 2020, the educational community was thrown into disarray, as it had no experience handling a sanitary emergency of these proportions (FARFÁN; MAZONI, 2021). The absence of clear guidelines regarding when and how the educational process would be resumed meant that, for the first time, operations in educational centers had to be carried out through a series of extraordinary measures (VALENZUELA; YÁÑEZ; KUZMANIC, 2020).

The Chilean educational context is one of deep socio-economic segregation (UNESCO, 2020), and pre-existing inequalities only worsened during the pandemic. This is specifically reflected in wide gaps among students' use of ICT, and availability of computational inputs and internet. Against all odds, teachers transformed their homes into improvised classrooms, generated routes for the shipping of materials and food, and scheduled one-on-one time with students and their families for support. Teachers' extensive workdays became the backbone of the educational system in Chile (FARFÁN; MAZONI, 2021).

The pandemic has put a spotlight on the importance of leadership in education. Although leadership has long been a special interest of the scientific community when it comes to the Chilean educational system (MANRIQUEZ; REYES, 2022), this socio-sanitary emergency has placed a particular focus on the leadership practices of principals – a key factor in the offering of a comprehensive and fair educational response. Principals have had to confront new social and educational contexts in utter uncertainty, modifying their leadership practices: they have learned to lead from a distance and through digital media, to take care of the emotional health of the different educational agents, and to intensify relations with families and teachers (BOLÍVAR *et al.*, 2022).

In a survey conducted by Farfán and Mazoni (2021), Chile appears as one of the nations with the highest proportion of teachers who perceive or feel that their mental health has been considerably affected since the pandemic started. This is of particular relevance for early childhood educators, given the high emotional burden that their work regularly entails. It is crucial to consider that 98% of professionals in the area of early childhood education are women, because the overlap between their paid jobs and unpaid domestic labor translates into a work overload (GIBSON, 2015). The effects of this overload can be seen in their educational practices, in the children's learning process, in family bonding, and in their leadership practices, among others. Emotional aspects such as trust, otherness, and the caring for relations between members of an educational community are the cornerstone of the process of improving on this (CARRASCO; BARRAZA, 2020).

The present study seeks to understand the experiences and leadership practices deployed by early childhood educators who worked as principals of educational centers for early childhood during the pandemic. To the extent of our knowledge, studies that account for meanings, experiences and leadership practices in early childhood education during the pandemic – a highly complex context – are scarce.

Conceptual framework

Early childhood education during the pandemic

Early childhood education corresponds to the first educational level in Chile. It seeks to favor the integral development of children from their birth to their entry to elementary education (SUBSECRETARÍA DE LA EDUCACIÓN PARVULARIA, 2018). To do this, it manages systematic and relevant pedagogical processes, which must consider diversity, citizenship, and a human rights approach in close link with families, who are understood as the child's first or primary educational agent. Within this context, early childhood education exists under a series of regulations.

However, the pandemic brought a period of disruption to the norm. The teaching practice of pedagogical teams working with at-risk communities (areas of high vulnerability) was especially affected by families and teachers' unequal development of digital skills (LLORENS-VARGAS; ALARCÓN-CASTRO; BRAÑES-ALARCON, 2021; FERNÁNDEZ; MORENO; GUERRA, 2020; MURILLO; DUK, 2020; RODICIO-GARCÍA et al., 2020). In addition, early childhood educators had to adapt their face-to-face pedagogical practices to the requirements and limitations of a remote medium, which poses a particularly difficult challenge considering that learning experiences at this level require face-to-face interaction in order to establish the loving bond that supports learning (YÁÑEZ, 2019).

The Chilean government developed actions to support teachers during this time: workshops for pedagogical and emotional containment, training programs for remote education (SUBSECRETARÍA DE LA EDUCACIÓN PARVULARIA, 2021a), and a repository with infographics, videos, and specific documents for early childhood education, plus accompaniments for principals and management teams (SUBSECRETARÍA DE LA EDUCACIÓN PARVULARIA, 2021b). It is worth noting that these actions of support coexist with the government's sanitary measures, which, among other aspects, determined the implementation of lockdown periods and reopening processes at the local level. This implies there has been irregularity in the functioning of educational centers.

Leadership in early childhood education

The practice of leadership in early childhood education is "a holistic process that stretches beyond those who assume administrative functions, to include personnel and indirectly fathers, mothers and all those who have influence on the implementation of early education practices" (HUJALA; ESKELINEN, 2013, p. 214). It is characterized by a great sense of vocation or passion for the care, development and learning of children, a concept that Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet (2014) call "care leadership". This notion is related to the ethics of care, which implies the development of a relationship based on concern and care towards children and families. Leadership practices at this level are also characterized by a balance between care, well-being and learning, an approach to pedagogical intentionality in everyday activities and a high concern about the context in which the educational center and its community networks are located (COLMER; WANIGANAYAKE; FIELD,

2014; Waniganayake, 2014; Strehmel, 2016). It is important to note the most leaders in early childhood education are women (Siraj-Blatchford; Hallet, 2014), which implies there will be a specific way in which leadership practices are developed.

International experience confirms that leadership in early childhood education is based on the constructions of learning situated in contexts, which are used by principals to positively influence teachers (Hairon, 2017; He; Ho, 2017; Luyten; Bazo, 2019). At this educational level, leadership includes the distribution of tasks in work teams, the potentiation of informal leadership within organizations in congruence with the level of involvement presented by the one who leads (Du Plessis; Eberlein, 2018).

Opazo *et al.*, (2022) have shown that, in Chile, early childhood educational centers mainly develop a pedagogical type of leadership. These are practices implemented in workspaces that are limited by an excess of administrative work and all its natural emergencies. Early childhood educational centers appear to be spaces with rather soft hierarchies, where the principals have incipient professional development opportunities and have extensive handling of soft skills that facilitate their proximity to families and work teams. Among the principals' tasks we find accompaniment practices, resolution of emerging problems, and focalization or targeting in the learning process and the fulfilment of goals (Gutiérrez; Roa, 2022).

Recently, the Secretaría de Educación Parvularia⁴ (2021b) has begun distribution of the framework for good direction and leadership in early childhood education, a document that aims to consolidate the managerial role in early childhood institutions, enhancing its importance in the road to quality education.

Methodological design

This research follows a qualitative orientation and an interpretive and cross-sectional paradigm. It seeks to understand the realities of five principals of early childhood education centers who systematically participated in PLCs (Professional Learning Communities⁵) of the Metropolitan Region and Valparaíso for four years, and analyze the meanings involved in their leadership practices. This research seeks to place social actors in their context, and rescue their interpretations and experiences, from a contextualized point of view (Flores, 2009). It constitutes a case study, as it responds to a unique context, and requires we take a real approach to the phenomenon under investigation (Jiménez; Comet, 2016).

We chose grounded theory as our method because it allows for the construction of an analytical framework for a phenomenon that relates to a particular situation (Luquéz de Camacho, 2016). The sample selection was made through intentional sampling. This means participants were considered according to their potential to help refine or expand the concepts and theories already developed (Rodríguez; Gil; García, 1996).

Inclusion criteria for the sample selection were early childhood educators who currently work as principals of non-for-profit early childhood education centers, who have

4- The Undersecretary of Early Childhood Education

5- Or Comunidades Profesionales de Aprendizaje, CPA, in Spanish

worked as such for at least 2 years, in sectors of high social vulnerability, and that had been active participants within a PLC for at least three years. This last criterion is relevant since these spaces would imply a strengthening of the educator's leadership practices that is interesting to research within contexts of high uncertainty, such as pandemic.

The study includes five principals of early childhood education centers in the Metropolitan Region and Valparaíso aged between 27 and 52, averaging 39 years of age. Four of them work in centers attended by children aged three months to four years, while one works at a center with children up to two years of age. The principals work with pedagogical teams of 18 members on average. On average, they have been performing coordination work in those centers for 21 years.

Table 1- Participant characteristics

Name (pseudonym)	Age	Region / Professional learning community	Level Educational	Technical-pedagogical team
Tamara	52	R Metropolitana	Early education 0-4 ages	2 educators, 11 pedagogical assistants, 2 cleaning staff, 1 administrative staff.
Karla	42	R Metropolitana	Early education 0-4 ages	4 educators, 15 pedagogical assistants, 2 cleaning staff, 1 administrative staff, 4 cafeteria staff.
Damaris	28	Valparaíso	Early education 0-4 ages	5 educators, 11 pedagogical assistants, 1 administrative staff, 4 cafeteria staff, 2 cleaning staff
Valeria	51	Valparaíso	Early education 0-2 ages	1 educator, 6 pedagogical assistants, 1 cleaning staff
María	35	Valparaíso	Early education 0-4 ages	2 educators, 12 pedagogical assistants, 1 administrative staff, 3 cafeteria staff, 2 cleaning staff

Source: Own elaboration / Data from the author's own research.

As an ethical measure, each participant signed an informed consent that guarantees the anonymity and confidentiality of the information they entrusted us with. It was explicitly explained to them that they were allowed to abandon the study at any time, in congruence with the ethical principles of respect for autonomy, justice, beneficence and non-maleficence.

The participants were interviewed twice during the second semester of 2020. These interviews intended to create instances where the participants could reflect on their experiences, in line with our study's narrative approach. Narrative interviews allow for participants' reconstruction of the subjective processes that they experience throughout a period of time. Emerging from the participant's narrations we see the meanings of the experiences they accrued in a given context. This implies, on their part, the declaration of a historical construction that unveils aspects of their identity, processes of change and personal projections (MUYLEAERT *et al.*, 2014). This all contributes especially towards research

objectives that point to subjective elements, such as leadership practices and tensions associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. The interviews' questions sought to explore the experiences and leadership practices implemented by principals when they faced the health emergency and provided educational services to children in early education.

The analysis of the data collected in the interviews was carried out according to procedures proposed by Corbin and Strauss (1990) in their grounded theory. With the interview transcriptions as a starting point, we created codes and later generated categories according to commonly arising aspects and their significance, as described by the participants. Finally, central categories and categorical nuclei were generated that allowed us to organize the experiences related to leadership and the pandemic. Drawing from the constant comparison method, we organized and analyzed the data through open, axial and selective coding processes (Flores, 2009) using ATLAS.ti version 9.0. In order to guarantee internal validity and reliability (Flores, 2009), triangulation of data and researchers was carried out. In four 3-hour-long sessions, we coded and categorized data inductively. The last session was oriented to the establishment of agreements among the researchers regarding the categorical nuclei. Certain categories were addressed through the theoretical corpus developed in this research according to the approaches of Cherrington and Thornton (2015), Gohier *et al.*, (2002) and Salazar and Sánchez (2018).

Results

Our research results stem from an open coding process. Emerging meanings relevant to the conformation of leadership were sorted according to their implications within leadership practices during pandemic. To do this, we accounted for the main internal and external contextual factors (explained below) evidenced by the principals. In each of these aspects we found at a first level, both facilitators that allowed development and/or learning, and obstacles that hindered and/or stopped their progress.

We will understand contextual factors as a set of elements present during the sanitary emergency that exerted influence on the leadership practices that the principals developed for the operation of public early childhood education centers. They have been identified and described by the participating educators as obstacles that arose during the pandemic and that have significantly worn them down. The following quote illustrates this.

Nothing is as normal anymore, the conditions we're operating under are insufficient, we're dealing with unattended mental [health] issues [...] and this all [generates] a level of uncertainty [...], because, we may have policies and guidelines, but at the end of the day, our correct functioning depends on real people in the educational centers. (María).

One such contextual factor is the *government's handling of the pandemic*, which encompasses the responses, orientations, strategies and tools created and delivered by state institutions during the pandemic in an attempt to decrease the amount of infections and slow down the spread of the virus.

The above factor includes the factor *public policies*, to be understood as the COVID-19 related guidelines delivered by Chilean institutions for health, educational and security. The participants perceive that the rules delineated in these public policies do make sense in certain contexts, but can “sometimes [be] inappropriate, excessive, [or] unfair” in others (Damaris). In the same way, the center principals describe that COVID-19 related restrictions generate tension: “[they are] so dictatorial in making us feel that others are your enemy” (Tamara). We also found these educators to perceive inconsistencies by part of public institutions: “[they give us] permits to go to the mall or the supermarket, but we’re not allowed to go to a public park or square, you can’t go anywhere” (Tamara).

In a similar vein, they seemed to question the role of the educational authorities – the acts of support and protocols they have issued are perceived as scarcely effective, since they allow the operation of educational centers under questionable conditions that seem to ignore sanitary concerns: “they put fifteen children in a room that should only hold three. Why? Because [the kids] need to go to school so that their moms can go to work” (Valeria). Participants seem to feel public authorities have low credibility and point towards a tendency to make educators invisible: “the authorities, the Ministry of Education, have no appreciation of what the work of an educator at the early childhood level is [...] the State does not see the sacrifice that early childhood educators make” (Tamara).

Fear mongering arises as an external contextual factor associated to mass media’s dissemination of misinformation regarding the pandemic. Its influence is perceived as negative, since it transmits and sows fear in society, underlining a characterization of COVID-19 as an enemy. Tamara said, “this fear mongering lowers our defences and makes us bitter, makes families want to just ignore the problem altogether” (Tamara). This seems to give rise to the following reflection: “I don’t know if we’re making the best decisions. We just end up being misinformed by formal media and all it does is scare us” (Tamara).

Another external contextual factor identified by the participants was *home confinement and re-openings*, referring to the measure dictated by public authorities during the sanitary emergency according to which the populations of specific geographical areas were told to stay home, and so-called non-essential commercial establishments were forced to shut down for weeks or months at a time.

Specifically, regarding the mandatory *home confinement* periods, the participating center principals identified a lack of concern for the biopsychosocial needs of early childhood – in practical terms, an invisibilization of them: “spaces of freedom and recreation for children have been made scarce, and this government (...), does not see it” (Valeria).

Another external contextual factor identified by the participants are the *dynamics that emerged within families* during periods of home confinement. Participants perceive that these were not prosperous for the learning process: “imagine [the children] in their homes – small houses with few positive stimuli, family members working away at their jobs, [...] busy dealing with lunch” (Karla). The principals identified as one of the main problems of the reopening periods a duplicity of roles that they have assumed: “once school is back on, we get this problem of ‘doubleness’: you’re at school, but your mind is

also [concerned with] home, and that happened to all of us” (María). This had an impact on their personal perception of the process of resuming their jobs, since they do not feel they are “in a position to comply with what is required at work” (María); “this all makes you reassess if you really are able to keep going” (Karla).

Participants also identified what we will describe as *internal factors*. Among them, institutional orientations, institutional support, and tensions within teams were described as hindering, while accompaniment and transfer of learning are identified as facilitators.

Institutional orientations are perceived as ambiguous and nor very responsive to the context. The following quote illustrates a perception of certain legal and contractual aspects and of a certain weakness or absence of regulation:

Institutionally, there is no definition for ‘remote work’. Nothing is formal, everything just stems from personal will. There are no established work schedules, there is nothing. That’s why last year was super hard, because so much was demanded of us, and on top of that, a lot of it was on a volunteer basis (Damaris).

“That’s why in 2020 only the center principals and educators worked. So, the workload was too much” (Tamara).

This institutional ambiguity seems to result in the obfuscation of the operation of the technical-pedagogical teams: because of this lack of institutional contractual regulation, roles and tasks became harder to delineate and fulfil. Damaris said, “you cannot force the team to go back to work, you have to ask them if they want to or not” (Damaris). She adds:

A law came out [...] about life insurance [...] all workers with children under the age of eighteen can ask to work from home. So then, you communicate this to the team and say “Alright, you can all do it, you just need to send an application and your employer will answer depending on whether or not remote work is appropriate for your position [...] but you keep thinking, well, what do we do here? Most people here are face-to-face, and working in person [...] is crucial, for everybody from me, the principal, to the cleaning personnel. So, I’m exhausted with that. (Damaris).

The participating principals also mentioned demands regarding what they identify as a constant *lack of resources*, “starting by the fact that [the institute that funds the center] does not provide the necessary conditions for home-office work” (Damaris). They described that institutionally delivered measures did not respond to the requirements made by the technical-pedagogical teams: “the educators⁶ are asking for a better quality of face masks; and it’s not that they’re highly demanding or unreasonable people! They have their own families, their lives are hard!” (Maria). Another need expressed by the principals is to do with the absence of technological inputs,

Many of the educators do not have – and it happens to be those who have the greatest workload today – they do not have adequate spaces to carry out their work in [...] as I was telling you, we don’t have a single resource, I mean, only I have an Internet modem, and I have a cell phone

6- In Chile, educators for young children are colloquially called ‘aunties’ (‘tías’ in Spanish).

that the center gave me, and that's it [...] also we don't get paid Zoom accounts, so every forty minutes our sessions end, and this is stagnating the processes (Damaris).

On the other hand, the participating principals also mention *online workshops or talks*. These were online instances for conversation, valued by the principals as a way of elaborating on their thoughts, emotions, and experiences. However, they seem to consider that these instances have not been enough. "There's been very few. And it's been, I don't know, mid-afternoon Zoom meetings, for emotional containment, but it has only happened like three times, so it hasn't been a constant thing" (Damaris). This need has not been addressed at the institutional level. (Damaris)

Regarding *tensions within teams*, the second internal factor that center principals identified as hindering, they describe various situations that complicated the interactions and relationships between principals, educators and teaching assistants, making the communication and educational processes difficult. First, there is a perception of abandonment by the institution in charge of the center since the pandemic began: "as workers [I feel that] [...] our employer is not visualizing [our situation] [...] in terms of our well-being" (Damaris). Participant shared, "Several of us got COVID. I knew this, and I reported it because [I knew] they offered emotional containment ... I don't know, I never found out what they did [...] for the aunts" (Tamara), and "The center is not very concerned with what the team feels or what the educators feel, because they're in an office planning all this, sending you 'Hey, for today you have to do this', but they're not here, they're not here in the center carrying this emotional burden" (Tamara).

A second point of tension between the principals and the institution in charge of the center arose from the participants' interviews: due to the lack of legal regulation for remote work, part of the teams simply removed themselves from the pedagogical work. This contrasts with the commitment, self-sufficiency and proactive organization that the center principals showed in response to the sanitary emergency's requirements. That is why the participant educators demand the same level of commitment on the part of the teams, pointing out that: "It does not seem so fair that it's just us principals, I would like the entire team to be on board" (Damaris).

A third identified point of tension is a perceived loss of autonomy in decision making during the pandemic. Take for example the following quote: "In the beginning, us principals had a bit more autonomy, we could make some important decisions within the education center" (Tamara).

From a pedagogical standpoint, participants seem to consider that top-down imposed solutions are less than appropriate:

Making us develop a year-long plan when we don't know what next month'll be like... so what am I planning for then, it's all just an obligation I'm fulfilling. How am I supposed to plan for December? I don't know if we'll be in confinement then [...] 'fill this report', 'fill this report', 'do this', 'do that': control, control, control, control all day long... it's us who know what's really going on every day at the center." (Tamara).

In regards to the administrative aspects of their roles, the center principals also seem to perceive they are under an obligation to become subordinate to their employers when taking decisions for their educational center – even if the specific needs and contexts of each center are so particular, they may not be fully comprehended by the superiors in question. This is illustrated, for example, in the following quote:

If I have to suspend class one day I have to ask [my employer] first, if I have to do whatever, I have to [my employer] first. I feel that as center principal I should be able to make those calls. There's a reason why I'm here, after all; I have certain competencies. (Tamara).

One internal factor that participants described as a facilitator or enhancer of their work was actions of accompaniment, referring to the processes of orientation and/or guide for the development of coping/adaptation mechanisms that the institute in charge of the centers extended during the pandemic – for example, the strategic measures that rolled at the start of the reopening period. The participant principals expressed that health protocols are in place as a means of protecting others and themselves. María says, “it's for protection, because we have to be socially responsible, but also responsible with our own life.” Specifically, during reopening periods, the principals were tasked with communicating protocols to the rest of the educational community:

[...] protocols are passed on to the people who come to this center. We have to be telling families how and when to use the mask according to protocol. Every day when we come to the center, we scan a QR code, [...] and we fill a daily survey that asks if you have cough, if you have a fever... It's like a traceability protocol that they sent from the institute that funds the center. If someone has Covid-19 we do the traceability. (Tamara).

Yet another internal factor that emerged was principals' technical tasks. For example, work-team meetings and conversations led by the principals actually benefited from periods of home confinement. Tamara says, “I finally had the time to create capsules and videos, and I open an Instagram account with interactive video content,” while Tamara shared, “we have many spaces for technical work; more so now that we're in confinement and we're at home and, so to speak, we have more time to do it, given the new disposition and organization of our schedules” (Damaris).

One last point to discuss is the transfer of learnings from the PLC in which they participated until the start of the pandemic over to the sanitary emergency of COVID-19. Participants seem to have perceived how resolution of conflict, and pedagogical and management difficulties, has been made easier thanks to these learnings. For example, Valeria said: “instances for training and sharing within the community were just as important as (...) our wellbeing. So, in that sense, during the pandemic, it was fundamental for us to be ok, wherever we were” (Valeria).

Participants expressed that actions of support were crucial during the pandemic:

[...] outside of any work-related instances, we also had a support network that is still active to this day. We also use it to share links and say, like, hey I'm gonna call [principal's name] about this, I have some questions she might be able to clear up. (Damaris).

Another learning that the principals transferred from the PLC was *leadership practices*. These practices shone for their transversality. Operation at the centers resemble peer collaboration networks. For example, Damaris said, "any pedagogically relevant decisions, I don't take alone. I consult with the educators, because they know the classroom, they're a part of this, and they can take impactful decisions". As professionals who are leaders within the field of early childhood education, during the sanitary crisis, the participants took on the ethical and professional responsibility of, as María put it, "continuing to give children an education, because they need it." She also added, "but it's still a struggle to do so; and that's a challenge, as a leader."

Another learning that was transferred from the PLC had to do with the management of processes of *educational innovation* led by the center principals and the educational teams. Even though the institute did send some pedagogical resources for work during the crisis, the teams at the centers kept working in a collaborative and innovative way to generate their own resources.

Yes, some things are working fine, [...], but there's always room for improvement, we can always make things better. You should always try to innovate, to figure things out. I don't hold the absolute truth. But I'm always like, 'Girls, let's brainstorm ideas, let's see what we can do,' because that also helps us, and it helps us create more resources, the community helped me a lot in that. (Damaris).

The principals perceive the importance of their work, and they have prioritized sending learning experiences and pedagogical support to families. Damaris said, "We have been trying to incorporate strategies so that the children can keep making progress in their learning, besides sending a series of pedagogical resources that the institute [that funds the center] has created for this purpose", The tools and resources they developed to favor learning processes in the children focus on the creation of "explanatory videos" (Tamara).

Finally, the participants' interviews unveil *learnings achieved during the pandemic*. Some of these learnings are *work-related*. For example, Damaris shared that "[the pandemic] kind of shook up the ways we work with children," which she expressed that she viewed as an opportunity for improvement. On the same topic, Tamara commented, "[...] this has been an advantage of the pandemic, it's helping us develop certain strategies further. It might also help me strengthen the mediating skills that the girls have, because we've had the time to reflect that we didn't have before".

Similarly, the principals consider they have gained *personal learnings* from their own reflections on the experiences they have lived through during the sanitary crisis. For example, Tamara shared, "the pandemic has taught me so many positive things, that it has made me question many aspects of the world and about us as human beings [...]" The

first life lessons for me has been to take it one day at a time.” The participants also value having had the chance to, as Damaris puts it, “exchange meaningful encounters, points of view, and personal beliefs with others.” Maria shared, “I try to make it all work out, to give the team reassurance and motivation [...]. As principal, I know so many people depend on me. I have to give it my best”.

Discussion and conclusions

This study sheds light on a series of tensions associated to the experiences and leadership practices of the participating educators, who, as principals of early childhood educational centers, exercised roles of leadership in a context of high uncertainty and emotional tension (the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic).

One finding is that participating principals developed social valuations loaded with discomfort, impotence and permanent ambiguity, triggered by their systematic exposition to the media’s constant updates on the state and spread of the pandemic. The principals described the media’s coverage of the pandemic as fear mongering and alluded to a general negative impact and disinformation as a result of it. These valuations align with the findings of Mejía et al., (2020) who concluded that feelings of fear in the population are generated mainly by social networks and television., and with Ribot, Chang and González (2020) conclusions that people’s constant exposure to news covering *catastrophic* situations generates feelings of victimization, tension and anguish that promote discomfort and social vulnerability. Our participants seemed to perceive that the fear mongering perpetuated by the media during 2020 and 2021 obfuscated social functioning, hindering people’s ability to become informed and take conscientious decisions that would make for a better handling of the pandemic and thus contribute to the decrease in COVID-19 cases. We wish to highlight that people who fulfil leadership roles, as the participating principals do, exert a relevant influence on their work teams, and therefore, their feelings of discomfort, impotence and ambiguity can easily transmit to them.

Regarding *mobility regulations*, our participants’ main concern seemed to be for the children’s wellbeing – they highlighted that their needs were being disregarded, and pointed towards the children’s home environments, and towards the state’s prioritization of an economic plan over an educational plan during the crisis. In line with this, Correa et al., (2021) state that the higher labor demands and extended work hours required by schools during the pandemic have obfuscated the fulfilment of the assigned work. In addition, the teaching and learning processes that have been implemented since the start of the pandemic require that teachers and parents develop adaptability (BELMAR-ROJAS; FUENTES-GONZÁLEZ; JIMÉNEZ-CRUCES, 2021).

The preceding is connected with their perception of the process of *resuming their work* during the pandemic. The duplicity of roles principals were forced to assume once schools and early childhood educational centers resumed activities remotely, and the extraordinary conditions they are under are not contemplated under Covid state policies. This created permanent tensions and questions regarding their ability to adapt to pandemic.

Indeed, this context has created a set of new responsibilities that exceed the scope of what is pedagogical, and with it, a labor overload for educators. A study indicates that

63% of Chilean teachers are working more or much more than before and in less favorable conditions (ELIGE EDUCAR, 2020). Another aspect linked to the above are institutional orientations. The ambiguity arising from the absence of an institutional or legal definition of remote work generates important questions in the participating educational leaders. The unclear delimitation of work schedules, the criteria of voluntariness applied to task delegation, and the blurring and mixing of roles within the institution, all heavily impacted the meanings constructed and the type of leadership exerted by the participants. The tensions identified in this study point towards a lack of communication between these interlocutors, their perception of having been abandoned by the state and their discontent regarding the intensification of institutional control over their work.

Another consequence of the pandemic had to do with a lack of economic and pedagogical resources, as well as with educator's skills in the use of ICT as a pedagogical tool. These are imperative needs for the principals, who feel they have not been taken into consideration in educational public policy during the pandemic. eCanales-Reyes (2021) and Ortega and Oyanedel (2020) agree in criticizing the role the state assumed in the educational sector. The meagre delivery of ICT tools, training programs, and support for educational teams has not improved already poor labor conditions, and has only exacerbated contextual, social, cultural and political differences, ranging from connectivity issues to their negative incidence in the quality of educational service.

The Chilean education system's macrostructure does not incorporate ICT as a priority pedagogical tool. Farfán and Mazoni (2021) highlight the government's omission regarding the provision of proper equipment and internet connection to more vulnerable social groups. Our participants mentioned they did not have even the most basic types of software necessary for remote education. In Chile, unequal access to technology and low digital literacy in the educational community tensioned the daily experience of educators and the learning processes developed during confinement (AGOSTINI; WILLINGTON, 2012; LEÓN-ACEITÓN *et al.*, 2019).

Participants of this study also mentioned an increasing external pressure and loss of their autonomy. This seemed to increase the chances that educator leaders were assigned more administrative tasks, which can in turn result in a harsher work division. This complex hybrid role affected the leadership processes that the participants could execute. Pardo and Woodrow (2014) indicate that this can generate perceptions of permanent discomfort and feelings of vulnerability and insecurity. Leadership practices are dynamic – their context is the social and temporal space that allows for their construction (STONE-JOHNSON; WEINER, 2020). Any and all factors within this scenario make difficult the development of leadership practices within an institution.

A last aspect to we wish to highlight refers to the vision of the leadership of care, characteristic of early childhood education. This includes attending the other, generating a bond and demolishing hierarchical barriers, aspects that have been difficult to implement during the pandemic, and which are also tensioned by the pressures perceived by the directors from the institutions in charge of the educational centers. It is essential to address this, and it should be a central axis of the leadership practices of the directors, since the well-being of their team is essential for the learning of children and the bond

they establish with families, both things that, without a doubt, require an enormous effort after the consequences the pandemic had in this area (EADUE et al., 2021).

This study's results confirm the need for further research into issues central to education, such as the emotional wear of educators and its effects on their tasks; the distancing between institutional management and the educational response that teachers in the front lines offer in concrete situations, the incidence of leadership practices on the work environment and on the educational response emerging from professional relations, the relevance of educators continuous training, especially on all matters regarding pedagogical innovation, family-school relations in contexts of social exclusion and trespassing of rights. All of the above are matters related to educational segregation and exclusion, quality of teaching and contextualized educational response.

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