





Challenges for Palestinian early childhood directors in a time of change



Authors:

Somaya Sayma¹ 
 Sami Adwan² 
 Marit Boe³ 
 Karin Hognestad³ 

Affiliations:

¹Department of Education Management, Faculty of Education, Islamic University, Gaza, State of Palestine

²Department of Teaching Leadership, Faculty of Education, Hebron University-Hebron, Hebron, State of Palestine

³Department of Educational Science, Faculty of Humanities, Sports, and Educational Science, University of South-Eastern Norway, Notodden, Norway

Corresponding author:

Karin Hognestad,
 karin.hognestad@usn.no

Dates:

Received: 14 June 2021
 Accepted: 19 July 2022
 Published: 26 Oct. 2022

How to cite this article:

Sayma, S., Adwan, S., Boe, M. & Hognestad, K., 2022, 'Challenges for Palestinian early childhood directors in a time of change' *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 12(1), a1039. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v12i1.1039>

Copyright:

© 2022. The Authors.
 Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Background: Current research suggests that there is a serious need to improve the quality and equity of early childhood education (ECE) services to children. The focus of the Palestinian Ministry of Education is on developing ECE. This plan is in a state of continual progress and development.

Aim: The aim of this paper is to discuss the context for leadership in Palestinian ECE in a time of change and as Palestine reforms and develops its ECE system. Specifically, the study sets out to investigate what key leadership challenges are being experienced by Palestinian early childhood directors.

Setting: This paper presents the findings of a study examining the challenges that Palestinian ECE directors face in the performance of their jobs in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The data were collected during the summer of 2020.

Methods: An open-ended questionnaire was used to collect data from a purposeful sample of 166 ECE directors, both government and private, by way of Google survey techniques and through face-to-face structured interviews with 10 directors. Descriptive qualitative research method was used in the study.

Results: The findings revealed challenges related to finance, parents, higher administration, educators, physical environment, social/cultural matters, children and, finally, politics and economics.

Conclusion: This study concludes with major recommendations in respect of the following: developing qualification programmes for ECE directors at the pre-service and in-service levels and building new ECE centres that are suitable for children. Finally, it is important that Palestinian children have the right to a safe and secure life and that they have free and safe access to education without threat, harassment or violation of any kind.

Keywords: early childhood education; leadership; challenges; directors; Palestinian.

Introduction

It has been established knowledge that early childhood education (ECE) is important for children's play and holistic development as the first step in the chain of lifelong learning (Janta, Van Belle & Stewart 2016; Melhuish et al. 2015). Globally, rapid change as a consequence of expanding the ECE service provision and implementing policies and structures for improving access, quality and equity has created substantial leadership challenges in ECE (Strehmel et al. 2019).

As the significance of ECE is recognised globally, the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) has developed a national policy, articulated in the Strategic Sector Plan 2017–2022 (Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education 2017), which acknowledges children's international right to early childhood development and the role of ECE centres in the development of ECE. To improve ECE in Palestine, the MoEHE (p. 162) has identified goals, targets and suggestions that would address several needs related to improving ECE in Palestine in respect of promoting accountability, results-based leadership, governance and management. In addition, the policy emphasises the expectations of the ECE director's leadership: planning according to scientific principles, supervision and follow-up of human resource and other matters, professional development and improving children's learning and relationships/communication (Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education 2017). Although leadership work is evolving rapidly, there is not yet a finalised and approved job description for directors of ECE in Palestine. However, recent research shows that Palestine ECE directors take on leadership responsibilities from a wide range of areas and functions that are necessary to develop the organisation effectively (Adwan et al. in press).

This study discusses the context for leadership in Palestinian ECE in a time of change and as Palestine reforms and develops its ECE system. Specifically, the study sets out to investigate the key leadership challenges that Palestinian ECE directors face within the complex environment of professional relationships, policy and practice. The study covers all types of pre-schools and kindergartens, which are in total 2017 centres (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics [PCBS], 2019), located in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in Palestine. Henceforth early childhood education will be referred to by the commonly used abbreviation 'ECE'. In acknowledgement of the fact that global trends affect ECE and policy and give rise to new and/or changing expectations, tasks and responsibilities as these relate to Palestinian ECE directors, the purpose of the study is to gain deeper insight into leadership challenges from the ECE director's point of view in a time of change.

Given the growing expectations and responsibilities of today's Palestinian ECE directors in the frontline of service delivery, where they are leading in different settings according to their abilities, resources and priorities, the authors are not familiar with the complexity of the challenges that they encounter in their everyday leadership. Additionally, the lack of leadership studies of Palestine in a time with new reforms, expectations and development in its ECE systems of change indicates a need to answer the following question: What are the leadership challenges that Palestinian ECE directors face in a time of change?

In investigating the leadership challenges experienced by Palestinian ECE directors, the key leadership challenges identified are discussed in relation to international leadership research and the critical role that ECE directors have in supporting children's development and well-being. To this end, the conceptual model developed by Douglass (2019:24) has been used as a theoretical framework. Following the presentation of this model, the methodology and methods underlying the study are accounted for; the authors provide the results and present the conclusions and recommendations for practice and policy as regards higher education for ECE teachers.

Palestine and the development of ECE policies

The situation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority is one of the most difficult protracted and intractable conflicts in the world. In 1948, the state of Israel was established. It happened through warfare and at the expense of the Palestinian population who lived in the area before. In the 1967 war, Israel occupied the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, which was subsequently annexed by Israel. The war brought about a second exodus of Palestinians, estimated at half a million (United Nations 2022). Many Palestinians have lived under Israeli occupation since 1967 – an occupation that is increasingly referred to as apartheid (United Nations Association of Norway 2022). The central question in the conflict is who has the most right to

control and live in the area. Because of the occupation, Palestinians have lost their lands and access to their resources and independence. Palestine's have become refugees outside of Palestine and internally displaced, their lands captured, confiscated and stolen daily. Palestinian cities and homes destroyed. Even though the Palestinian territories are occupied by Israel, Palestine has been established as a separate state and recognised as such by 136 countries, as well as by the UN General Assembly (United Nations 2022). Nevertheless, the Palestinians continued to be under Israeli occupation which limited in their freedom of movement, subject imprisonment, assassination and continuous daily aggression of Israeli military and settlers on them, their lands and infrastructures. These actions created unsafe conditions for Palestinian to exercise their daily life normally and peacefully including running education for their children at all levels including kindergartens. According to the Oslo Accord signed in 1993 by Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the 1967 Palestinian Occupied Territories (POT) were divided into three areas: A, B and C. The 1995 Oslo II accord divided the 1967 POT into three areas: area A is about 18% of the area came under Palestinian administrative and security control, while area B is about 22% of the area, which is under Palestinian administrative control but which shares security control with Israel, and, finally, area C is about 60% of the area and continued to be under Israeli administrative and security control (BTSELEM 2019b; Passia n.d.; Wikipedia 2022). Also, on the basis of the protocol signed in 1997 by the two aforementioned parties, the Protocol Concerning the Redeployment in Hebron, also referred to as the Hebron Protocol or the Hebron Agreement, the city was divided into two areas: H1 and H2. In January 1997, Israel and the PLO signed the Hebron Agreement. H1, representing around 80% of the city with around 166 000 Palestinian inhabitants, was handed over to the Palestinian Authority and came under its control in terms of both security and administration. H2, around 20% of the city in which around 33 000–35 000 Palestinian lives and around 500 Israeli settlers in five Jewish settlements, located mainly in the old town and around Abraham Mosque, remained under Israeli Military control (BTSELEM 2019b; Mapping the Apartheid n.d.; Ocha 2019).

Lately, ECE in Palestine is increasingly being developed and organised. It has become a priority of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education and appears in the Strategic Plan 2017–2022 (Ministry of Education and Higher Education 2017:55). ECE centres (both governmental and private) are defined as learning spaces that aim to provide an appropriate environment in which children's personalities can physically, mentally and socially grow and allow them to prepare for basic school. Emphasis is placed on opportunities to develop children's personalities through play and other activities such as drawing, picnicking, telling stories and reciting poems that are appropriate to their age and environment. ECE is not fully considered as part of the formal education system. Attendance at ECE centres is offered to children aged 3 years and 7 months prior to the commencement of

compulsory education at basic school (at the age of 6 years). The 2-year early education stage is not compulsory, but the new Law of Education (Law 8, year 2017) stipulates that 1 year of early education (KG2, sometimes called Grade 0) is compulsory. ECE for Palestinian children is mainly under private supervision, through private Christian schools, charitable societies, non-profit organizations (NGOs) and private individuals.

The ministry has decided to expand preschool education opportunities by increasing the number of classrooms in governmental schools and rehabilitating their staff in accordance with an early childhood development strategy that targets the development of a preschool curriculum and an increase in the number of licensed ECE centres that meet health, safety and professional standards. To achieve this target, the ministry is endeavouring to open preliminary classrooms in marginalised areas, urge the private sector to invest more in ECE, encourage private preschools to accept children with disabilities, encourage international and local organisations to participate in the maintenance of governmental preschools, open private institutions and support institutions that are active in the early childhood sector. Moreover, the ministry will raise the awareness of Palestinian families and the local community of the importance of ECE and enrolling their children with special needs in preschools. Finally, it wishes to implement in-depth studies on the government's experience of opening preschool classrooms in governmental schools.

To achieve its future target, the ministry plan states that (target 4.2) 'by 2030, to ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood care and pre-school education' (Ministry of Education and Higher Education 2017), each public school will include pre-school education (ECE), which is in line with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals 2030. Currently, there are 2017 ECE centres in Palestine (i.e. West Bank and Gaza Strip), attended by 148 253 children in 2018 and 2019 (PCBS 2019). It is not yet known, however, whether the percentage of children enrolled in ECE has met the target for 2020 and 2021 as, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, there are no updated statistics available by which this can be verified. Nevertheless, the ministry hopes to meet the targets of the Dakar Framework for Action (70%) in the near future.

Directors' qualifications

Those in the position of director have either worked as a teacher in a centre for a number of years and may have attended several professional workshops or else they have a university degree in education in general or perhaps in another discipline. Regardless, the majority of those working in ECE (teachers and leaders) have no formal qualifications specifically related to ECE. This may be connected to the scarcity of ECE teacher education programmes for teachers and directors. ECE teachers have been prepared and trained by local and international NGOs instead. They may have a BA in general education or in elementary education

specifically. As early as 2005, Al-Ghusain (2005) clearly stated that:

[K]indergartens leaders were not educationally qualified, nor they were qualified in any fields that are related to their kindergarten work so their relationship with kindergartens teachers was professionally at the minimal level. (p. 18)

The ministry intends to enhance and develop the qualifications of women teachers working in preschools, developing their qualification standards and developing further training for supervisors and teachers. This is thus an area of positive change. Diploma programmes were introduced at UNRWA College and Bethlehem University which later on, in 1995, became a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education programme. Recently, in 2018, Hebron University started a diploma programme to prepare graduates to work in ECE; the university has now been granted accreditation to start a BA degree in ECE in the autumn of 2021. Furthermore, Hebron University and the Islamic University in Gaza submitted a proposal for accreditation for a new MA degree in ECE to the Palestinian Accreditation and Quality Assurance Committee (AQAC). These programmes are intended to qualify staff (teachers and directors) to work in ECE in general while also including courses on administrative and educative leadership.

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework for this study was developed by Douglass (2019) and is based on the findings of an international literature review that includes three broad dimensions of leadership. The first dimension – *the functions, roles and structures of leadership in ECE settings* – includes both administrative and pedagogical leadership. Whereas administrative leadership refers to the management of operations, finance and strategic functions, pedagogical leadership is the leadership needed to support teaching and learning, which includes supporting staff development, creating a trusting relationship among staff and structuring the work environment (Douglass 2019:12). Moreover, within the functions, roles and structures of leadership, there is power within the leadership structures as well as tensions between hierarchic and distributed ECE leadership structures.

The second dimension – *factors that may support or hinder leadership and its effectiveness* – includes leadership preparation, recruitment of leaders and workplace support. It also includes the political, economic, social and cultural context of leadership (Douglass 2019:16).

The third and last dimension is the *working conditions and professional development experience of staff in ECE settings*, which includes how leaders contribute to positive working conditions, including organisational climate, workplace culture and support for professional development (Douglass 2019:19). Collectively, the three leadership dimensions create a useful framework for this study when investigating and discussing the leadership challenges of Palestinian ECE directors.

Methodology

Study design

This study is a part of larger research project focusing on pedagogical leadership as part of the Norwegian Partnership Programme for Global Academic Cooperation (NORDPART) project Developing Teacher Education in Pedagogy for Early Childhood Education and Early Elementary School in Palestine and Norway. In the course of researching director-level pedagogical leadership, data were collected by way of a questionnaire with closed-ended and open-ended questions after its validity was tested by seven experts (referee validity) and its reliability was tested using Cronbach's alpha (0.94). In this paper, the data used from the open-ended questions were collected from 166 directors, who were asked to name the three to five most serious challenges they face in the performance of their job. The 369 responses were summarised and grouped into eight areas. The questionnaire was administered in July 2020 as a Google survey. At the same time, qualitative data were collected from 10 directors working in West Bank and Gaza Strip ECE by way of face-to-face structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009). The interviews focused on what the directors identified as the challenges they face in carrying out their job. For this empirical data, content analyses were used (Krippendorff 2012) and the data were organised into six categories. Together this represents the empirical data for this article.

Participants

The population of the study consisted of all 2017 ECE directors in Palestine located in the West Bank and Gaza Strip; these directors were working at ECE centres (private schools, charitable societies or private persons) supervised by the government or the private sector. The directors were all women, as only females are ECE directors (or educators) in Palestine. Male teachers have not been allowed to work in ECE centres. The directors and educators were officially aware of the study and encouraged to respond to the Google survey as well as to make other colleagues aware of the Google survey and encourage them to respond to it. A sample of 166 (8%) ECE directors responded to the survey, 118 (71%) from the West Bank and 48 (29%) from the Gaza Strip. Ninety-eight (59%) worked only as directors, while 68 (41%) worked simultaneously as directors and educators. According to their experience, 41% have less than 5 years of experience as directors and 37% have more than 10. There is huge variety in the educational level of the sample, as shown in Table 1. However, only 145 (87%) of the directors responded to the open-ended questions.

TABLE 1: Educational level.

Degree	Number	%
High school/diploma	11	7
BA	101	61
BA and diploma	38	23
MA	14	8
Only workshops without any degree	2	1
Total	166	100

Source: Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), 2019

Ethical consideration

All research ethics procedures were followed (Zukauskas, Vveinhardt & Andriukaitiene 2018) in respect of protecting the identity of the respondents. The collected data that was used was fully anonymised. The research protocol explaining the nature of the study, the expected role of the respondents, their rights and how the interview would be documented/recorded was discussed (before the interview took place) with each of the 10 directors who were interviewed. Moreover, they were asked to sign the consent form to indicate that they willingly agreed to participate in the interview. All of the respondents signed the Ethical Statement and the participation consent form before the interview took place. The research protocol explaining the nature of the study, the expected role of the respondents, their rights and how the questionnaire would be documented was discussed within the research team.

Results

Firstly, the authors present the results from the open-ended questions, followed by the responses of the 10 directors interviewed in the structured face-to-face interviews (five from the West Bank and five from the Gaza Strip).

Of the total 166 directors in the sample, 145 (87%) answered the open-ended questions. Eight areas of challenge in director leadership were identified and are presented in Table 2. The three areas that the directors found most challenging are (1) financial challenges, (2) challenges related to collaboration

TABLE 2: Frequency and percentage of leadership challenges that directors face, as stated by themselves in 369 responses to the open-ended questions in rank order from high to low.

Number	Challenge areas	F	%
1	Financial challenges: low salaries, low available budget and support for ECE	71	19.24
2	Challenges related to parents: weak communication with parents, weak parent interest in ECE, ignorance of parent and lack of understanding of the ECE stage and poor economic situation of parents (unable to pay fees)	68	18.43
3	Higher administration (government/society/individuals) challenges: not fully satisfied of the importance of ECE, unequal distribution of support, ECE being ignored in peripheral areas, interference in employment, lack of incentives, lack of development programmes, absence of unified government supervision and policy, violation of the rights of staff, strong autocratic administration and, finally, financial profit valued over educational goals	55	14.91
4	Challenges related to teachers: teachers not staying in their job for long, poor qualifications, teacher boredom, no assistance or educational guidance for teachers, traditional style of teachers, teachers not accepting director's authority	54	14.63
5	Challenges related to the physical environment of the centre: physically small classrooms, unsafe environment for children, lack of games and other necessary material, small internal yards and lack of facilities needed for children with disabilities	36	9.75
6	Social and cultural challenges: poor societal understanding of the characteristics/nature of early childhood, societal interference that is at odds with teaching methods and dealing with children, lack of societal support, large number of children and dominance of profit-making	29	7.86
7	Challenges related to children: large numbers of children in classrooms, children not attending regularly/absenteeism and child behavioural problems	28	7.59
8	Political and economic challenges: unstable political situation and low economic status in general	28	7.59
	Total	369	100

ECE, early childhood education.

with parents and (3) challenges related to higher administration. The following areas of challenge were also identified: (4) challenges related to teachers, (5) challenges related to the physical environment, (6) social and cultural challenges, (7) challenges related to children and (8) political and economic challenges.

In the structured face-to-face interviews with 10 directors, some of the areas of challenge were described in more detail. These six challenges related to financial issues, academic and cultural organisations in local society, the Palestinian Ministry of Education, teachers, ECE owners and the curriculum.

Challenges connected with finance

Directors consider the serious lack of finance to be one of the most important challenges facing all ECE centres, especially individually owned ones, as these ECE centres do not have the same support as socially and charity-owned centres. Financial challenges lead to many problems for the children, such as scarcity of resources and equipment, poor safety, instability of staff in their jobs, low levels of professional attainment among teachers' and scarcity of services/activities such as outdoor education, visits and recreation.

Challenges connected to academic and cultural organisations in local society

There is a dearth of field studies related to ECE at the BA and MA levels in Palestinian universities. Only a diploma degree is available and only in a limited number of BA programmes in colleges, which is insufficient to prepare teacher directors and supervisors for ECE. Moreover, directors suffer from a lack of logistical and technical support from the Palestinian educational system and a lack of support for ECE from local cultural and civic organisations.

Challenges connected with the Palestinian Ministry of Education

The directors referred to many challenges related to the Palestinian Ministry of Education: the ministry does not provide the support needed for ECE centres, and it neither fully nor directly supervises them (it does not offer sufficient logistical or financial support for ECE). This may be a result of the low budget available to the ministry, which is used mainly to support schooling. Consequently, the ministry has left financial support of ECE to the private sector – that is, individuals and religious and/or social organisations – which has resulted in the following challenges:

- The absence of a unified policy for working in and developing ECE, as multiple supervisory authorities are working independently of each other, without coordination either among themselves or with the ministry.
- No enforcement of the compulsory law on the ECE stage and ECE still not officially being considered part of the general education system.
- Insufficient follow-up by the ministry on supervision of ECE and this supervision focusing on and being limited to exclusively logistical rather than educational issues.

- The ministry's low level of interest in improving the working conditions of ECE staff (directors and teachers).
- Weak control of ECE administrative and educational work as the result of an insufficient number of ECE supervisors, most of whom lack proper qualifications and experience.
- The gap between ways of teaching in ECE and in the first grades of primary schools.
- Easy licensure of some ECE centres without the latter satisfying all requirements and conditions, resulting in weak outcomes.

Challenges connected to teachers

The directors indicated many challenges related to teachers, such as teachers having weak technical and administrative skills as a result of the lack of specialised training programmes at the college and university level. Even the available programmes are not at the required level, as they are mainly theoretical and focus on knowledge rather than skills and competence. Also, it is hard for teachers to develop professionally in service because they do not have the desire or motivation to do so, they are paid low salaries, there are no incentives available for them and they are overwhelmed by their job. Furthermore, the in-service training programmes that are available do not fulfil their purpose because much of the available training is theoretical and repetitive and does not offer new things nor is it related to or based on the real needs of the teachers or the modern development of ECE.

Challenges connected with owners of ECE centres

Directors of ECE centres precisely follow the policies of the owners, whether these are individuals or civil or religious organisations. The directors of privately owned ECE centres cannot take decisions on even small matters. Moreover, they face real challenges in terms of multiple supervising authorities and different terms of reference and ideological orientations in respect of how to deal with and educate children, as well as the personal preferences of owners who are influenced by political and/or religious orientations/ideologies.

Challenges connected to the ECE curriculum

The directors explained that the Ministry of Education has prepared a unified curriculum for ECE and that ECE centres are meant to follow this, but most ECE centres still use their own curricula, leading to a lack of coherence among the various curricula. These curricula focus mainly on the intellectual (learning/information) side and not on the children's personality as a whole; they are concerned with information achievement and neglect the bases for developing the personality of the child and developing their social values and behaviour.

Discussion: Leadership challenges in a time of change

On the basis of the data collected as a whole, the results will be discussed according to the three broad dimensions of

leadership comprising the conceptual framework developed by Douglass (2019): factors that may support or hinder leadership and its effectiveness; functions, roles and structures of leadership in ECE settings and working conditions and professional development experiences for staff in ECE settings.

Factors that may support or hinder leadership and its effectiveness

The directors in Palestine have faced many challenges related to factors that may support or hinder leadership and its effectiveness. These include both internal factors and external factors.

Financial factors

Internal factors include overall financial challenges, low levels of available budget and financial support for ECE centres and the low salary levels of all staff. The directors consider the serious lack of finance to be one of the most significant challenges facing the sector, particularly with regard to individually owned centres, as they do not have the same support as centres owned by social and charitable organisations. Financial challenges lead to the children facing many problems, such as scarcity of resources and equipment, lack of safe conditions, staff job instability, low level of professional attainment among teachers and scarcity of services and activities such as outdoor education, visits and recreation. Challenges related to the physical environment of the centres include physically small classrooms, lack of games and other necessary material, small internal yards and lack of facilities needed for children with disabilities. Other research from the Middle East has also found a number of challenges related to finance in ECE. The study by Al'utaibi (2011) in Kuwait has identified difficulties related to buildings, furniture and equipment. Ziad (n.d.) has identified challenges in Libya related to buildings with insufficient dining places or chairs suitable for children, where rooms are not suitable for or attractive to children and centres are without gardens. Furthermore, ECE centres suffer from a lack of games and material as the authorities do not fulfil the needs of ECE.

In general, when the world's ECE systems are partially or fully funded as public institutions, government funding allocations will both support and constrain ECE leaders in the performance of their role. ECE also seems to lose out when competing for finance against other obligations in Europe. Lunneblad and Garvis (2017) conducted a small study of Swedish ECE leaders who reported that their budgets constrained their efforts to ensure programme quality because they had to increase group size and hire less-qualified staff than they felt appropriate. Also in Norway, directors reported that if the budget was increased, they would prioritise to reduce the number of children in groups or increase the number of teachers (Gjerustad, Hjetland Næss & Vibeke 2019).

Social and cultural challenges

The demands on ECE leaders to respond and adapt quickly and effectively to changing policies, needs and challenges

while simultaneously supporting their staff to do the same are highlighted by Rodd (2019). The interest in ECE education has increased over the last decade, and directors in Palestine are both socially and culturally challenged in their leadership work. They face poor societal understanding, including understanding on the part of parents of the characteristics and nature of ECE, and interference from society in teaching methods and in dealing with children that is to the detriment of education. The study by Ziad (n.d.) has also identified challenges in Libya related to parents who not want to cooperate with teachers. Although the development and organisation of ECE centres have increased and become a priority of the MoEHE, there may be a gap between policies and social and cultural beliefs as directors report a lack of societal support for ECE. There seem to be challenges in connection with to academic and cultural organisations in local society. ECE directors in Palestine have found that profit-making is dominant, which leads to, among other things, large numbers of children in classes in ECE and lower quality, and thus weak societal understanding, including on the part of parents. Cultural challenges lead to unstable classes, with absenteeism and children not attending regularly. In connection with ECE directors being responsible and accountable for ensuring compliance with government policies, plans and frameworks, Rodd (2019:294) emphasises the demand on leaders' 'ability to communicate, translate, consult, integrate and coordinate mandated regulations at the local level, in order to facilitate shared meaning and understanding and subsequent acceptance and adherence'. This is a serious challenge for leaders to deal with in their job when they have to prioritise their time and balance it between different challenges (Douglass 2019). Al-Ahmari (2017) shows that ECE directors in Saudi Arabia are leading ECE centres according to the reality of the respective ECE centre and the available resources, and that they themselves adhere to the laws and directions imposed by higher administration and the authority of directors. The studies indicate a number of challenges regarding leadership, such as less desire to develop and change and a lack of leadership skills among ECE directors.

Curriculum challenges

There are also challenges connected to the ECE curriculum. The directors stated that the Ministry of Education had prepared a unified curriculum for ECE and that centres are supposed to follow it. However, most centres are still using their own curricula, leading to a lack of coherence among the various curricula. These curricula focus mainly on the intellectual (learning/information) side and not on the children's personality as a whole; they are concerned with information achievement and neglect the bases for developing the personality of the child and developing their social values and behaviour. Especially where vulnerable children with special needs are concerned, as well as teachers facing children with various behavioural problems, there is a need for a more specialised and holistic curriculum. These challenges connected to the ECE curriculum and directors are also connected to social and cultural negligence and/or

ignorance in respect of the importance of ECE. As stated in the introduction, there is no longer any doubt as to whether ECE is beneficial for children's cognitive, social and personal development or whether it lays an essential foundation for successful lifelong learning, social integration and equality (Janta et al. 2016; Melhuish et al. 2015). United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) states that children from poor families are the least likely to attend ECE programmes. For children who *do* have access, poorly trained teachers, overcrowded and unstimulating environments and unsuitable curricula diminish the quality of their experiences (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund 2019). Research also shows that children are not only advantaged by attending an ECE centre, but that high-quality ECE is associated with subsequent educational and social success and with economic development, stability and welfare in the region. Failure to provide quality ECE limits children's futures by denying them the opportunity to reach their full potential (Janta et al. 2016; Melhuish et al. 2015). This knowledge underscores the seriousness of directors saying that it is too easy for the administration to license some ECE centres despite they being clearly not meeting all requirements and conditions. This contributes to the poor reputation of the ECE sector and the challenges that directors face in their work.

Leadership challenges in conflict areas

Furthermore, with regard to directors reporting that they are worried about not having a safe environment for all children in ECE, this needs be discussed in relation to external and political factors. However, not all Palestinian directors face the same challenges and at the same level at all times. The authors have observed that ECE centres in areas C and H2 face much harsher challenges as a consequence of political and security conditions which cumulatively pose a serious physical threat to the safety of ECE staff and children, to the ECE physical environment and to the stability in their daily educational programmes and in the attendance of children. The PCBS (2019) has stated in its report that 'Palestinian children and especially those who live in area C are subjected to the violation of Israeli Armies and Jewish Settlers on daily bases'. Such a very serious matter has also been reported from Afounah (2014). According to the Oslo Accord signed in 1993 by Israel and the PLO, the 1967 POT were divided into three areas: A, B and C. The 1995 Oslo II accord divided the 1967 POT into three areas: area A is about 18% of the area came under Palestinian administrative and security control, while area B is about 22% of the area, which is under Palestinian administrative control but which shares security control with Israel, and, finally, area C is about 60% of the area and continued to be under Israeli administrative and security control (BTSELEM 2019b; Passia n.d.).

Also, on the basis of the protocol signed in 1997 by the two aforementioned parties, the Protocol Concerning the Redeployment in Hebron, also referred to as the Hebron Protocol or the Hebron Agreement, the city was divided into two areas: H1 and H2. In January 1997, Israel and the PLO

signed the Hebron Agreement. H1, representing around 80% of the city with around 166000 Palestinian inhabitants, was handed over to the Palestinian Authority and came under its control in terms of both security and administration. H2, around 20% of the city in which round 33000–35000 Palestinian lives and around 500 Israeli settlers in five Jewish settlements, located mainly in the old town and around Abraham Mosque, remained under Israeli Military control (BTSELEM 2019a; Mapping the Apartheid n.d.; Ocha 2019).

Schools and ECE, especially in areas C and H2, were functioning under extreme political and security conditions:

It is our collective duty to protect every child on the journey to school and at school and to ensure that they can access the quality education, which is the right of every child, everywhere. Not only is it a right, but children's access to quality and safe education is central to achieving a more peaceful future. (UNICEF 2017)

said Genevieve Boutin, UNICEF Special Representative in the State of Palestine.

Directors in these ECE centres face unique challenges such as these in addition to the other challenges that other directors face. Their major concerns and priorities are how to protect their children and teachers and keep them safe in the streets and at the ECE centres. It is difficult for these centres to implement their daily educational programmes in a normal and systematic way or to be able to fully support the children, teachers and staff psychologically, emotionally and physically.

Functions, roles and structures of leadership in ECE settings

Challenges in this category include not only those related to administrative and pedagogical leadership but also as clearly shown in the results, roles and structures related to power in the leadership structures.

Challenges in power relations in leadership structures

In the open-ended interview, challenges related to higher administration and the government were the third biggest challenge the directors faced. This is in line with Douglass (2019), who has indicated the challenges that ECE leaders face internationally in their role, such as low status, the complexity of their role and competing demands on their time. In Palestine, the ECE directors reported strong autocratic administration and challenges connected with owners. The directors found it problematic to be directly challenged regarding their autonomy when they found that they must precisely follow the policies of the owners, be these individuals or civil or religious organisations. The directors reported challenges in respect of owners in the conduct of central professional tasks when the owners have demanded that they value financial profit over education goals. The results of this study show that the directors of ECE centres owned by societal organisations reported that they could not take decisions even in small matters. Also, they faced real

challenges because of multiple supervising authorities and differing terms of reference and ideological orientations in respect of how to deal with and educate children, as a result of the personal preferences of owners who are influenced by their political and/or religious orientation/ideology. Baroud (2002), in his thesis, investigated the problems faced by ECE centres under the supervision of the Islamic Society prevailed in Gaza Strip from the perspective of the people in charge of these ECE centres. The thesis identified significant challenges related to teaching aids and the administration of the ECE centres. When the directors report challenges in respect of teachers not accepting the authority of the directors, the directors are challenged from every chain in the distributed leadership arrangement. Likewise, Al-shtiehi (2016) found only a low level of support available to ECE leaders and that hierarchical administrative styles often prevent ECE directors from taking part in decision-making. Mahdi (2017) argues that ECE centres should be the financial and administrative responsibility of the Ministry of Education because of the many serious challenges identified in their study, such as the lack of a unified policy for work in ECE in Palestinian areas, ECE being under different supervision entities and the lack of efficient administrative and technical functions. The study proposes a strategy that stresses the importance of ministry supervision of ECE so as to set out clear criteria and conditions for staff and the ECE centre to be part of the general education system. To deal with leadership complexity in ECE, distributed forms of leadership are encouraged to support the achievement of organisational goals, advance curriculum reforms and enhance organisational change and pedagogical development (Heikka & Hujala 2013; Heikka & Suhonen 2019). Specific factors in the successful implementation of distributed leadership are emphasised, such as professionals within both the municipality and the centre having a shared vision and strategies for pedagogical improvement.

Administrative leadership challenges

As regards administrative leadership, the directors reported challenges related to higher administration. They reported frustration over the higher level of administration ignoring ECE centres in peripheral areas and the lack of incentives for ECE centres in these areas. In the face-to-face interviews, this was also developed to include thoughts about the many challenges related to the Palestinian Ministry of Education and the directors experience of the ministry not providing necessary support to ECE in general. The ECE centres were not offered sufficient logistical or financial support. Internationally as well, financial resources have been found to be key sources of job stress for ECE directors (OECD 2019). In Palestine, this may result from the low level of budget resources available and which are used mainly to support schooling. Consequently, the ministry has left financial support of ECE to the private sector – to individuals and/or religious and/or social organisations – which results in financial challenges.

Challenges in leading professional development

ECE directors in Palestine have many responsibilities related to ECE teachers. In Palestine, pedagogical leadership

includes defining staff job responsibilities and following up on staff and their professional development (Adwan et al., in press). Moreover, internationally, central pedagogical leadership tasks for directors include supporting teaching and learning, which includes supporting staff development, creating a trusting relationship among staff and structuring the work environment. Thus, in Norway, directors spend most of their pedagogical leadership on making sure that all teachers feel responsible for the children's development, well-being and learning and on observing cooperation and communication between employees and children (Gjerustad, Bergene & Lynnebakke 2021). Several studies (see Douglass 2019) have shown how the leadership of directors has an impact on the workplace climate and contributes to an organisational climate of learning and improvement. While acknowledging the importance of pedagogical leadership, there are also pitfalls, and directors report huge challenges related to staff leadership. Firstly, there is a shortage of staff, and directors also face challenges in terms of interference in the employment process and in not fully or directly supervising staff. Ziad (n.d.) has also identified challenges in Libya related to a shortage of teachers, providing education guidance teachers who are not specialised in ECE, a lack of clear and defined programmes and no training for teachers on how to deal with children.

Challenges within leadership structures include power in leadership structures and tensions between hierarchic and distributed ECE leadership structures where supervisors play, or should play, an important role in pedagogical leadership. However, this distribution of supervision seems to fail. The directors report that there is an unfair distribution of support and a lack of development programmes. There is no unified governmental supervision and directors find that policy contributes to the violation of the rights of ECE staff. Ministry follow-up and supervision of ECE are insufficient, and supervision focuses on and is limited to exclusively logistical rather than educational issues. When different supervising authorities are working independently of each other and without coordination among themselves or with the ministry, this lack of a single unified policy on working with and developing ECE leads to challenge in the director's leadership role. Likewise, Sims, Waniganayake and Hadley (2017) have found that directors experience challenges in their role between relational tasks such as mentoring and supporting staff and their role ensuring compliance with policy regulatory standards. Directors in Palestine find that the control over administrative and educational work in the centres is too weak; this is because there are insufficient ECE supervisors available, most of whom lack proper qualifications and sufficient experience.

Working conditions and professional development experiences for staff in ECE settings

As discussed above, directors deal with both political and economic challenges in their work. The political situation is neither stable nor quiet, and ECE suffers from its low

economic status in general. As regards this third dimension, the article will discuss challenges related to conditions for leaders to contribute to positive working conditions, including organisational climate, workplace culture and support for professional development. At the same time, findings from leadership in ECE in countries on five continents indicate that ECE leaders must be highly knowledgeable about and skilled in leading the complex mix of interwoven administrative and pedagogical aspects of ECE (Strehmel et al. 2019).

This may not be the most frequent challenge, but challenges related to teachers and the working climate, situated in the middle of Table 2, are serious. Directors find that teachers do not stay in the job for a long time and have weak qualifications. This seems to lead to a traditional style of teachers and thus the teachers' boredom.

Where there is no assistance or educational guidance for teachers, the directors described challenges related to the teachers having weak technical and administrative skills. The directors argued that this is the case because there is a lack of specialised training programmes at the college and university level, and even the programmes that are available are not at the required level as they are mainly theoretical and focus on knowledge rather than skills and competence. It is difficult to develop teachers professionally in service because they do not have the desire or the motivation to do so. Teachers are paid low salaries, there are no incentives available for them and they are overwhelmed by their job. Moreover, the in-service training programmes that are available do not fulfil their purpose because much of the available training is theoretical and repetitive and does not offer new things nor is it related to or based on the real needs of the teachers or the modern development of ECE. The lack of support to ECE results in there not being sufficient fields of studies available that are related to ECE at the BA and MA levels in Palestinian universities. Only a diploma degree is available and in a limited number of BA programmes in colleges, which is insufficient to prepare directors and supervisors for ECE. In addition, directors suffer from a lack of logistical and technical support from the Palestinian educational system and from cultural and civic organisations.

Researchers have through local studies identified similar challenges for ECE professionals in the Palestinian ECE sector. These commonly include a lack of legislation supporting ECE, a lack of specially trained ECE teachers, low salaries and low status of the profession, few professional development opportunities, poor educational supervision, a limited financial budget for ECE and an inadequate physical educational environment (Al'utaibi 2011; Awad 2014; Khaless 2015). ECE directors are expected to carry out their jobs in conditions such as these.

Conclusion and recommendations

The findings of the study provide information about the challenges that ECE directors in Palestine face in the

performance of their jobs. While some of these challenges are similar to challenges that ECE directors face in other countries, other challenges are connected to the specific Palestinian context. The challenges are connected to factors that may support or hinder leadership and its effectiveness, such as financial challenges. These challenges are, sadly, well known to ECE directors in various forms all around the world. Other, more specific, challenges are predominantly connected to cultural factors such as a low level of trust from parents, a lack of comprehensiveness in the curriculum and social and political factors connected to leading ECE in conflict areas. Furthermore, the directors struggle with power relations, as this relates to both owners and teachers, and this leads to challenges in respect of pedagogical leadership and professional development in the sector. Within these situations and despite these challenges, directors continue to carry out their job the best they can. The authors argue that the quality of their jobs would be improved if these challenges were dealt with and minimised. Palestine is still in the process of state-building and is witnessing positive ongoing change and development in ECE. Even as ECE directors lack proper, systematic and comprehensive educational supervision, the authors are witnessing an interest in developing and preparing programmes at the diploma, BA and MA levels for ECE staff.

Based on the results of the study, the authors conclude with the following major recommendations for policy, practice and higher education. For policy, the recommendations are to unify the educational philosophy of ECE at the national level and thus finalise the national ECE curriculum and guidelines. Furthermore, it is necessary to ensure that all ECE centres are officially and properly licensed while also making it illegal and punishable by law to operate an ECE centre without a licence. It is essential to make it illegal to underpay ECE directors and staff and deprive them of benefits such as retirement, health insurance and yearly salary increases. The recommendations for practice are to build new ECE centres or improve the current ones so that the buildings are suitable for all children, to include making them accessible for handicapped children. Furthermore, in view of the outlined challenges, it is essential to look for qualifications and experience when hiring new ECE directors. It is the responsibility of all leaders to ensure that the philosophy of ECE is well understood by officials, ECE staff, parents and the community at large. And last but not least, the recommendations for higher education include creating qualification programmes specifically for ECE directors and educators at the pre-service (BA and MA) and in-service (workshops, professional training) levels; ensuring that the philosophy of these training programmes is in line with the philosophy of ECE; ensuring that the curriculum emphasises cooperation within the profession and its support of the growth of children's personality as a whole in a holistic and comprehensive manner and encouraging field research and studies that focus on the development of ECE practices, challenges and leadership styles.

It is important that Palestinian children be able to exercise their right to have a safe and secure life and to have free access to their education without any threat, harassment or violation

of any sort. Furthermore, in the future, Palestinian directors must live with the tension between what is desirable and what is possible and achieve what is possible as they attempt to realise what is desirable, for leadership is the art of possible.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

All authors have contributed equally in the work of the article.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as the authors have no permission for sharing from the early childhood directors studied.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

References

- Afdwan, S., Sayma, S., Bøe, M. & Hognestad, K., in press, 'Leadership responsibilities of early childhood Directors in Palestine from Directors' viewpoint', in I.J. Heikka, M.R. Modise, N.C. Phatudi, M. Boe & F. Elina (eds.), *Global perspectives of leadership in early childhood education and care*, Helsinki University Press.
- Afounah, S., 2014, 'The teaching reality in Palestinian schools after the establishment of Palestinian Authority: Critical analysis', *An-Najah University Journal for Studies (Human Sciences)* 25(2), 265–292.
- Al-Ahmari, H., 2017, 'The role of educational leadership in the kindergarten stage between reality and development proposals', *The Arab Journal of Educational and Human Sciences Studies and Research* 8, 66–134.
- Al-Ghusain, A.D., 2005, 'Improving the training of kindergarten teachers in Gaza Governorates in the light of the experiences of few advanced countries', MA thesis, Ein Shams University/AI Aqsa University, Gaza Strip.
- Al-Shtiehi, E., 2016, 'Administrative empowerment of educational leaders in kindergartens and its relationship to the practice of knowledge management', *Journal of the Association of Arab Universities for Education and Psychology* 14(3), 42–102.
- Al'utaibi, M., 2011, 'The difficulties that kindergartens administration face in Kuwait and their influence on the principals' and teachers' efficiency', MA thesis, University of Middle East (MEU).
- Awad, I., 2014, 'The status of kindergartens in Gaza governorates and its development means in light of current requirements', unpublished MA thesis, Al-Azhar University, Gaza.
- Baroud, M., 2002, 'The technical and administrative problems in the Islamic society kindergartens and means of resolving them from the perspective of people in charge', MA thesis, Islamic University in Gaza.
- BTSELEM, 2019a, *Hebron city center*, viewed 02 January 2021, from <https://www.btselem.org/hebron>.
- BTSELEM, 2019b, *Planning policy in the West Bank*, viewed 09 September 2022, from https://www.btselem.org/planning_and_building seen.
- Douglass, A., 2019, *Leadership for quality early childhood education and care*, OECD Education Working Papers (211), viewed 11 September 2022, from <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/content/paper/6e563bae-en>.
- Gjerustad, C., Bergene, A.C. & Lynnebakke, B., 2021, *Faglig utvikling, samarbeid, mestring og ledelse i norske barnehager. Andre dybderapport med norske resultater fra den internasjonale barnehageundersøkelsen TALIS Starting Strong [Professional development, collaboration, mastery and management in Norwegian kindergartens. Second in-depth report with Norwegian results from the international kindergarten survey TALIS Starting Strong]*, Oslo, viewed 09 September 2022, from <https://nifu.brage.unit.no/nifu-xmlui/handle/11250/2733774>.
- Gjerustad, C., Hjetland Næss, H. & Vibeke, O., 2019, *TALIS starting strong survey: Første hovedfunn Kortrapport med oppsummering fra OECDs første internasjonale undersøkelse av ansatte og styrere i barnehagene [TALIS Starting Strong Survey: First main findings Short report with summary from the OECD's first international survey of employees and directors in kindergartens]*, viewed 09 September 2022, from https://www.udir.no/contentassets/b92dd897201d43acb0f4de820f39b75a/talis3s_kortrapport_oktober_2019.pdf.
- Heikka, J. & Hujala, E., 2013, 'Early childhood leadership through the lens of distributed leadership', *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 21(4), 568–580. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2013.845444>
- Heikka, J. & Suhonen, K., 2019, 'Distributed pedagogical leadership functions in Early Childhood Education settings in Finland', *Southeast Asia Early Childhood Journal* 8(2), 43–56. <https://doi.org/10.37134/saecj.vol8.no2.4.2019>
- Janta, B., Van Belle, J. & Stewart, K., 2016, *Quality and impact of centre-based early childhood education and care*, viewed 09 September 2022, from <http://ecccicare.org/resources/publications/>.
- Khales, B.M., 2015, 'Reflection through story – Strengthening Palestinian early childhood education', in L.R. Kroll & D.R. Meier (eds.), *Educational change in international early childhood contexts*, pp. 174–188, Routledge – Taylor & Francis Group, New York, NY.
- Krippendorff, K., 2012, *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology*, 3rd edn., Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Kvale, S. & Brinkmann, S., 2009, *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*, Sage, Los Angeles, CA.
- Lunneblad, J. & Garvis, S., 2017, 'A study of Swedish preschool directors' perspectives on leadership and organization', *Early Child Development & Care* 189(6), 938–945. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2017.1354855>
- Mapping the Apartheid, n.d., *Glossary*, viewed 09 September 2022, from <https://www.hebronapartheid.org/index.php?glossary=area-H1-H2> January.
- Mahdi, L., 2017, 'A proposed strategy for the generalization of kindergartens in the light of contemporary trends in the southern governorates of Palestine', MA thesis, Faculty of Education - Al-Azhar University, Palestine.
- Melhuish, E., Ereky-Stevens, K., Petrogiannis, K., Ariescu, A., Penderi, E., Rentzou, K. et al., 2015, *A review of research on the effects of early childhood education and care (ECEC) upon child development*, Utrecht University, viewed 09 September 2022, from http://ecec-care.org/fileadmin/careproject/Publications/reports/new_version_CARE_WP4_D4_1_Review_on_the_effects_of_ECEC.pdf.
- Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2017, *The monitoring and evaluation system for the education sector strategic plan ESSP 2017–2022*, Ramallah, viewed from www.moehe.gov.com.
- Ocha OPT, 2019, *The humanitarian situation in H2 area of Hebron City*, viewed from https://www.ochaopt.org/sites/default/files/h2_spotlight_april_2019.pdf.
- OECD, 2019, *Providing quality early childhood education and care: Results from the starting strong survey 2018, TALIS*, Paris, viewed 09 September 2022, from <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/content/publication/301005d1-en>.
- Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), 2019, *Guide to Palestinian Statistics A - Z*, viewed 09 September 2022, from http://pcbs.gov.ps/site/lang_en/507/default.aspx.
- Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2017, *Education sector strategic plan, 2017–2022*, viewed 09 September 2021, from http://www.lacs.ps/documents>Show.aspx?ATT_ID=34117.
- Passia, n.d., *Area C*, viewed 02 January 2021, from <http://www.passia.org/maps/view/75>.
- Rodd, J., 2019, 'Epilog', in P. Strehmel, J. Heikka, E. Hujala, J. Rodd & M. Waniganayake (eds.), *Leadership in early education in times of change*, pp. 291–297, Verlag Barbara Budrich, Berlin.
- Sims, M., Waniganayake, M. & Hadley, D.F., 2017, 'Educational leadership: An evolving role in Australian early childhood settings', *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 46(6), 960–979. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143217714254>
- Strehmel, P., Heikka, J., Hujala, E., Rodd, J.G. & Waniganayake, M., 2019, *Leadership in early education in times of change*, Barbara Budrich Publishers, Hamburg.
- UNICEF, 2017, *Right of Education for 1 Million Palestinian Children at Risk*, viewed 13 September 2022, from <https://www.unicef.org/sop/press-releases/right-education-1-million-palestinian-children-risk>.
- United Nations, 2022, *The question of Palestine*, viewed 10 July 2022, from <https://www.un.org/unispal/history/>.
- United Nations Association of Norway, 2022, *Palestine*, viewed 10 July 2022, from <https://www.fn.no/Konflikter/palestina>.
- United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, 2019, *Early childhood education: Every child deserves access to quality early childhood education*, viewed from <https://www.unicef.org/education/early-childhood-education>.
- Wikipedia, 2022, *West Bank areas in the Oslo II Accord*, viewed 09 September 2022, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West_Bank_Areas_in_the_Oslo_II_Accord.
- Ziad, A., n.d., 'Difficulties kindergarten educators face in Zliten', *Journal of Elasmari University* 13(27), 123–158.
- Zukauskas, P., Vveinhardt, J. & Andriukaitiene, R., 2018, 'Research ethics', in P. Zukauskas, J. Vveinhardt & R. Andriukaitiene (eds.), *Management culture and corporate social responsibility*, IntechOpen, Rijeka.