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Reframing leadership as a participative pedagogy: the working theories of early years professionals

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Traditional notions of leadership are at odds with the pedagogy and ethos of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), prompting increasing international concern to develop new understandings which are better suited and create greater leadership capacity. The introduction of the Early Years Professional (EYP) in England, as a leader of practice without association with an organisational position, gave impetus to the idea of pedagogic leadership. This paper draws on two qualitative studies to examine the working theories of EYPs in leading practice to discover how they interpret and apply their professional purpose. An interpretive approach was adopted to develop patterns of meaning from practitioner stories which show an emerging notion of leadership founded on ‘passionate care’ to improve the education and well-being of young children. Such leadership can be exercised regardless of positional role as it does not operate through authority but from moral purpose and it seeks to release agency for change with others by building trusting relationships. This provides scope to reconceptualise leadership in ECEC as a participative pedagogy which could generate greater leadership capital if embedded into professional development.

Keywords: pedagogic leadership; Early Years Professionals; leading practice

Introduction

The quest to develop models of leadership which suit Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and engage greater practitioner participation is a concern not only for England (Nutbrown 2012) but also for Australia (Waniganayake 2002), Finland (Hujala 2004; Heikka and Waniganayake 2011) and many other countries. Government policies and reports are aiming to increase capacity by including leadership in workforce development and quality standards (DfES 2006; DCSF 2008; acecqa 2010; Nutbrown 2012) but they tend to lack clarity about forms of leadership or the relationship between pedagogic and organisational leadership. Prevailing notions of leadership tend to conflate leadership with management and, consequently, with hierarchy and authority (Avery 2004) and this is reinforced by investment and training in leadership which is mainly directed towards developing individuals in organisational lead roles (Day 2001), such as the National Professional Qualifications for school Head teachers and Children’s Centre Leaders in England. The National Professional Qualification in Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL) combines pedagogic and organisational leadership in the role of the

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Children's Centre leader, whereas the Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) is not attached to a role and relates purely to pedagogic leadership with no direct association with management. From September 2013, Early Years Professionals will be replaced by Early Years Teachers (DfE 2013) but if the remit to raise the quality of provision remains, then pedagogical leadership will still be fundamental and a necessary part of their training. The concept of pedagogic leadership, however, is not uniformly understood in England or internationally. Heikka and Waniganayake (2011) found varied interpretations and applications in early childhood literature and research, where pedagogic leadership referred to an appointed role as a child care centre leader or to a function of teachers in relation to the curriculum or to a style of leadership generally. There is consequently some confusion and disunity about what constitutes leadership in ECEC, what it requires and where it is located (Hujala 2004). Although more attention has been paid to early childhood leadership in recent years, Rodd suggests that it 'continues to be an enigma to many early childhood practitioners' (2006, 5). This may explain why practitioners either do not aspire to leadership or do not recognise what they do as leadership.

The Nutbrown Review (2012) acknowledges a need to develop greater leadership capacity in England, suggesting that 'all early years practitioners should aspire to be leaders, of practice if not of settings, and all should be capable of demonstrating some pedagogical leadership regardless of qualification level' (Nutbrown 2012, 55). This implies some inherent leadership potential within all early childhood professionals as well as the coexistence of pedagogic and organisational leadership and a relationship between them. The Review, however, neither examines this link nor indicates how it can be utilised to provide interpretations of leadership which are more meaningful to the sector. To facilitate broader understanding and engagement, leadership needs to be seen as professionally relevant to all early childhood practitioners. Heikka and Waniganayake (2011) move us closer to that position by considering pedagogic leadership as concerned not only with children's learning but also with capacity building in the profession and with pursuing the educational values of the community and wider society. This enables a formulation of leadership derived from professional ethos and purpose, applicable to any role or function, managerial or otherwise, making leadership part of professional responsibility. Professional development can support this idea by breaking down traditional associations of leadership with power, authority and hierarchy and exploring ways in which pedagogy can be formulated as a leadership concept integral to professionalism.

The Nutbrown Review is a lost opportunity for generating dialogue about what might be common across early childhood professionalism and the nature of leadership implicit within it. Nevertheless, the introduction of the Early Years Professional Status, in England, did create a chance for the sector to think differently about who might engage in leadership and how it might be enacted (McDowall Clark and Baylis 2011). This government initiative aimed to raise the quality of provision and reduce disadvantage by creating a graduate practitioner status within the workforce to lead practice (DfES 2006). Early Years Professionals (EYPs) are assessed against national standards to be a 'leader of practice' (DCSF 2008) working with the 0–5 age range, primarily but not exclusively in non-school settings such as day care and children's centres. EYPs may work in various types of ECEC settings in any role as there is no invested authority or positional level attached to the status. They are expected to achieve high-quality provision through modelling skills in practice and

by supporting or mentoring other practitioners (Mathers et al. 2011). EYPS, therefore, has been essentially based on a concept of non-hierarchical leadership which has broad application across the professional community and which could provide a means to challenge traditional notions of leadership and create a shared understanding in the sector based on professionalism and pedagogy. Whilst the Nutbrown Review's recommendation of the term 'teacher' to replace 'professional' is intended to increase the status and recognition of graduate staff, it remains to be seen how the changing nomenclature might affect graduate leadership in practice.

Government-commissioned research in the early stages of EYPS was based almost exclusively on EYPs who had prior management positions (Mathers et al. 2011; Ranns, Newmark, Rahim, and Penfold 2011) because they were the main early completers of EYPS. These reports found that EYPs who were managers got more directly involved in practice after gaining EYPS (Ranns et al. 2011) but still believed the status required the authority of a formally recognised managerial or hierarchical position if change was to be effected (Mathers et al. 2011). Whilst it is not clear whether this authority was sought in order to exert power over others or to have greater credibility in pursuing improvement, it nevertheless shows the strength of embedded traditional notions of leadership associated with hierarchy, power and authority. One conclusion and recommendation of the final report (Mathers et al. 2011) was, therefore, that positional authority was needed for EYPs to act as a catalyst for change. This outcome needs to be considered with caution and balanced against other research where EYPs and other practitioners exercise leadership and agency for change without the authority of a managerial position. A contrasting perspective is presented in this paper from research with EYPs where the majority (80%) did not hold managerial positions. Data from general practitioners in the International Leadership Project in Australia has also led Waniganayake (2002, 118) to suggest that 'anyone in early childhood can be a leader, not necessarily those in a position of power and/or authority'.

Reconceptualising leadership

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, researchers in educational leadership have called for new conceptual frameworks to better suit educational purpose and provide more sustainable models for the future (Sergiovanni 2001; Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond 2001; Lambert 2002; Harris 2008). Lambert (2003, 423) suggests this means that we must 'depart from the familiar' and radically rethink, if we are to achieve this. Historically, there has been a tendency to rely on business or school-based understandings of leadership, which have limited application for ECEC, and on educational leadership research and literature, which has focused on positional leaders, largely school head-teachers. This limits the search for understanding to the examination of personality, skills, actions or behaviour of the nominated lead person and reinforces the notion that leaders are an elite group of people with certain characteristics or behaviour; this potentially alienates others who do not see themselves reflected in the required set of leader skills. The notion of distributed leadership in the school sector (Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond 2001, 2004; Harris 2008) has been one attempt to broaden leadership participation but research examples still tend to focus on those in schools who have hierarchical or nominated lead roles in curriculum development rather than on the general practitioner population.

A different concept of leadership is needed for ECEC to encourage practitioner involvement and to foster engagement. The pedagogy, purpose and professionalism of ECEC is based on participative ideology (Oberhuemer 2005), seeking co-construction of learning through active involvement, dialogue and shared knowledge. It seeks to empower and release personal agency and is concerned with building relationships with parents, professionals and the wider community. The perceived reluctance of practitioners to adopt positions of authority to engage in leadership (Rodd 2006) is possibly due, therefore, to the apparent contradiction between ECEC ideology and traditional notions of leadership. Some would argue that it is also attributable to female characteristics; for example, Valerie Hall (1996) suggests that women prefer enabling rather than authoritarian leadership, in other words power for a purpose rather than power over individuals. This may be significant given that ECEC still comprises a largely female workforce. However, it could also be considered more in keeping with the relational ethos and ethic of ECEC and therefore integral to its nature rather than due to gender characteristics (McDowall Clark and Murray 2012). An open concept of leadership which encourages participation and empowers all, regardless of position, is therefore more likely to suit the team and community orientation of the educational purpose and practice of ECEC.

Although ECEC is provided in very varied settings and structures, the age range of the children requires high ratios of staff, which inevitably involves teams of staff working together. Child-minding may be a case where a practitioner works in a solitary situation; nevertheless, the nature of the work still involves professional collaboration with others. ECEC requires the involvement and cooperation of different professionals and agencies, to cater for the whole needs of the child and family, so building effective working relationships is paramount. These multi-professional relationships need to be shaped and based on something other than authority because they may not be connected in the same organisation or hierarchy and this poses challenges for exercising leadership in traditional ways. In children's centres, for example, not only the nominated leaders but all practitioners work in multi-professional teams where expertise needs to be shared and leadership has to be exercised collectively to suit the situation. So, when leadership is understood as reciprocal and purposeful learning in a community (Sergiovanni 1998; Lambert 2003) it becomes everyone's right and responsibility to engage in it (Lambert 2002). In this respect, leadership can be grounded in the common professional motivation 'to make a difference' and work for the well-being and education of young children and their families.

Heikka and Waniganayake (2011) suggest that further research on pedagogic leadership is needed within ECEC to allow the concept to develop in a meaningful way. Constructing forms of leadership which suit the sector is important because our understanding of leadership has a significant effect on behaviour and expectations (Sergiovanni 2001) and influences how people participate (Lambert 2002). If we aim for greater leadership participation amongst practitioners, it is necessary to recognise the part they can play in shaping its form and understanding. This means recognising leadership as 'a situational, socially constructed and interpretative phenomenon' (Hujala and Puroila 1998, 8), where meaningful and relevant interpretations can be formulated within the profession, based on its essential character and purpose, and which also complements the multi-professional context in which ECEC operates. This research paper demonstrates this process in action through the working theories of EYPs.

Project context and methodology

This paper draws on findings from three participant groups in two qualitative research projects aiming to discover the working theories of aspiring and recently qualified Early Years Professionals in leading practice.

The sample

The first pathways into EYPS focused on experienced graduate practitioners but in 2008 the first undergraduate pathway was piloted, offering an initial route to the status. This paper draws on data from a project which interviewed that pilot group through their initial training (Group A; $n = 10$) and followed up five of these (the first completers) after two years in practice (Group B); plus data from individuals who undertook the graduate practitioner routes (Group C, $n = 6$), interviewed two years after qualifying. The undergraduate route lasted 18 months, as part of the BA (Hons) Early Childhood degree, and included placements across a range of settings and age groups from birth to five. The graduate practitioner route was in-service and the training lasted 3–6 months, depending on experience across the same age range. All but two participants (in Group C) were female. Three participants held supervisory or management positions (one newly promoted in Group B and two in Group C, all female). Each group included participants who were engaged in a range of ECEC settings, i.e. Children's Centres, schools and day care settings, with a wide range of organisational sizes and structures. The participants were volunteers recruited by researchers employed by the training organisation who were neither current tutors of the participants nor in a position to influence the outcome of their training programme or employment, thus reducing issues of power or perceived coercion.

Project aims and method

The project aims were:

- (1) to investigate the motivation of aspiring, current and experienced practitioners in leading practice;
- (2) to discover how they were interpreting and applying their professional purpose as an EYP in leading practice.

Ontological assumptions implicit in these projects were founded on a belief in individual and social agency in constructing reality: that we are active interpreters of our own experience and seek to make meaning for ourselves. From this perspective the phenomenon of EYPS can be examined through the voices of those experiencing and interpreting their own professional purpose. The challenge for researchers in using other people's explanations and interpretations is how to do this in a valid and ethical manner, so the data analysis approach aimed to ensure respondents' language and meaning was considered in context to remain true to their intention. Harrits (2011) suggests that researchers and respondents can generate knowledge which is useful to both by working collaboratively and thereby adding validity. This goes beyond the ethical principle of doing no harm to seek a more constructive ethical stance which generates mutual benefit. It could be argued that the interpretive

approach (Radnor 2001; Creswell 2009) enables participants and researchers to do this through a reflective research process which, in this case, contributes to the formation of social understanding of leadership. To guard against unethical misinterpretation, however, feedback on the researchers' interpretation was obtained from a sample of participants. Semi-structured interviews were employed on the longitudinal project following undergraduate candidates on their training pathway with a follow-up two years later with the same interview questions (Groups A & B). Narrative interviews were employed for the single response event with experienced practitioners (Group C) to give freedom to respondents to talk about issues significant to them and to elicit stories which demonstrated their view of leading practice. Interviews were transcribed and significant issues identified and placed into themes, using meta-analysis to provide a further layer of examination and self-reflexivity to ensure integrity of interpretation (Prasad and Prasad 2002).

Findings

Despite variations between the sample groups in experience, gender, role, training pathway, as well as the time in practice since qualifying, the most significant features in the data were the consistency and correlation between all three groups regarding their motivation and the model of leadership they were pursuing. All participants, however, were trained by the same provider, so it is possible that the culture of the training provider had a particular impact that influenced a common approach which lasted over two years post-qualifying. This is unlikely, particularly as the training staff varied on the different pathways; nevertheless further research with EYPs not trained by the same provider could yield useful data for comparison. Another explanation for the commonality is that a shared interpretation of EYPS developed from the features contained in policy documentation and this can be noticed particularly in the ideas of the EYP as a role model. Yet, this argument is weakened by the remarkable lack of reference to official EYPS standards in the responses. Such references to official policy would be expected if external norms were shaping their leadership or considered necessary to validate it.

An emerging model of leadership

The research findings indicate that working theories of leading practice amongst these EYP participants stemmed from the strength of their professional purpose. They drew on similar principles in exercising leadership which owe more to early childhood ethos, values and pedagogy than to position or authority. All participants saw EYP leadership as collaborative and community orientated. Whilst some participants in Group A (40%) began with a concern about demonstrating leadership in a non-authoritative position as a student, they moved away from this traditional view over the course of their training so that, on completion, only one person found it difficult to define leading practice in a non-managerial position. Group A formulated a model of an EYP who was:

A leader not necessarily a manager, working for the whole nursery and all the staff.

Not necessarily in charge but leading in a more hands-on way, from the middle, bringing staff along not just telling them what to do.

Taking a bottom-up sort of approach, suggesting and developing ideas, like a catalyst for the setting rather than saying look we are going to do this!

For Groups B and C, with more experience of exercising leadership in practice as an EYP, the model became far less focused on an individual lead person and more inclusive, as a way of working together with a common purpose. Most participants did not hold a position of authority but the three who were managers or supervisors did not consider authoritative leadership a model they wished to employ or the most effective strategy to overcome resistance to change. Instead, they based their leadership on constructing shared understanding and learning. The essence of leadership was not located in a position:

Leadership does not depend on a position but on our shared focus on quality for children. (B)

You can't take a position as an agent of change as all-knowing – it doesn't work. There is still room for a huge amount of personal growth in a non-authoritative leadership position. (C)

Andrews (2009) suggests that effecting change, whether prompted by external forces or internal professional drive, is more likely to be sustained by leading from the middle than by charismatic 'up front' leadership. It involves enabling and supporting others so that the team will be able to 'maintain and support its own integrity' in the unpredictable and changing environment of ECEC (Andrews 2009, 47). This creates the capacity for leadership which does not rely on hierarchical position and which is exerted through subtle influence and modelling. This leadership model works in an inclusive and participatory manner, based on respectful and trusting relationships, drawing people in, empowering broader agency and the exercise of leadership in community.

The model of leadership emerging in the responses is discussed under the following three themes, illustrated by quotations which provide a representative sample from a range of participants, demonstrating the commonality of language and correlation of ideas between the groups.

Leadership values and passionate care

Without exception, the participants in each group expressed a strong commitment underpinned by clear values which motivated and sustained their sense of professional mission. This motivation was present prior to qualifying (Group A) and remained undimmed after two years in practice (Groups B & C):

I'm passionate about giving children the best possible start. (A)

It's important to get things right for the children. (B)

You need to have an emotional drive; a professional love for young children. (C)

It's definitely passion, the reason why you do it in the first place and why you want to empower others. (C)

The findings of this research add to the body of evidence (Moyle 2001; Rodd 2006; Taggart 2011) demonstrating a fundamental value base at the heart of ECEC professionalism, amongst practitioners at all levels. Frequently described as 'passion' or 'emotional drive', there is a motivating force which comes from commitment to the moral purpose of ECEC and the responsibility for the ethic of care. McDowall Clark and Murray (2012, 46) have called this '*passionate care*' (emphasis added) which, for these EYPs, underpins their leadership and personal agency to work in the interests of children and families and has become part of their professional identity.

EYPs are guided by a common morality, putting the children's needs first: at the heart of what they do (A)

Wanting to make a difference is part of being an EYP. (B)

It's about making a difference to children's lives: You've got to believe you can make a difference. (C)

Such passionate care does not lie purely in the affective domain. It is not a particularly feminine trait based on a domestic concept of care (Taggart 2011) but rather a professional zeal which sustains perseverance in the face of obstacles.

Respondents found that being passionate and caring deeply could cause difficulties. Each group experienced resistance to change and challenges in exercising agency which led them to adopt an approach of demonstrating the achievability of proposed changes and the benefits they could bring for children through their own practice, through modelling, 'subtle influence' and 'quiet' leadership:

When practitioners have worked there for so many years and are set in their ways: you have to show how a new idea can work in your own practice. (A)

It can be difficult when you feel so passionate – you have to control your emotions and be sensitive to others, listen to their concerns and worries and not aggressively confront. (B)

It's about going softly and considering why people might not want to cooperate and what their needs are. I employ strategies to have a subtle influence. I make small suggestions, help others to think in different ways and stay positive. It can rebound on you but you have to keep on trying. (B)

Thus *passionate care* can aid perseverance to sustain agency for change:

When something doesn't sit right and you know you have to do something about it. (C)

This led a male practitioner to seek an incremental approach to changing practice which allowed him to consider the culture and context of the setting. He did not lose sight of his goal but was prepared to take it slowly and modify his approach for longer term success. The strategy of influencing change through taking small steps, modelling practice and drawing others in was identified by Groups B and C as promoting agency in others over the longer term.

If you adopt an approach yourself and staff see the children respond well then it is more likely to be adopted. We will get agreement to try it, give it time and then get together to evaluate it. By listening to staff concerns and involving them more and more, now they come up with the ideas and we follow them through together. (B)

In this way, personal agency becomes ‘catalytic’ and brings about a broader change which feeds into the shared professional and organisational mission of early childhood provision, to make a difference to children’s lives (McDowall Clark and Murray 2012).

Developing trusting relationships, agency and involvement

The working theories evident in this data saw leadership enacted through trusting relationships in which openness, respect and valuing others were central components. Day et al. (2009) consider that an articulated set of values, focusing on individual and social well-being, is essential for effective leadership. Building relationships for greater leadership participation requires trust so that practitioners can challenge practice and take risks without fear of reprisal or reprimand. Working in trusting relationships was considered particularly important in facing controversial or difficult issues:

It’s about finding a balance, negotiating disagreements, not neglecting other people or their ideas, understanding and involving others in decisions or problems affecting them. (A)

It is important to keep up a dialogue. (B)

It’s very important to have a whole team understanding which requires transparency and you have to gain trust too. The relationships you form with others are fundamental if you’re taking on issues that otherwise will be avoided or ignored. (C)

Common understanding emerged that leadership requires broad involvement and the research participants were working with a participative view of leadership which respects the strengths that everyone can contribute to the overall pedagogic and organisational purpose:

It’s not about any one person at all! You need others to take responsibility – so it works with you and without you. (A)

In the early days I thought I could fix everything but now I know I have to draw people in. (B)

It’s not just about making relationships with parents myself [as deputy manager]; we are all making relationships all the time. So by working together we can be so much more effective. (C)

This may require the person in a nominated lead role to take a back seat and exercise humility but it also relieves the burden of expectation on the superhero:

You may be wrong sometimes so it’s not about having the perfect answer. You need to know your limits and not be afraid to step back, ask for help, support. You have to

involve others and that can give them a sense of responsibility. So it must be about sharing the journey. (C)

Leadership means letting go of ownership to enable everyone to play their part. (C)

Participants drew on early childhood pedagogic principles of scaffolding, co-constructing and enabling to inform their approach to leading practice. Three said that they consciously applied pedagogic principles to leadership and others made implicit reference to this in comments about their use of strategies to draw people in, such as modelling, dialogue, and building trusting relationships to engage, support and enable others.

Practising leadership in community

The EYP respondents in this research were applying a concept of leadership which empowered and valued others in working towards practice improvement, seeing greater potential strength and impact in working collectively:

We want to work collaboratively and have the whole place as a community. (A)

A setting shouldn't stand still. We need to ask how we can do things better and search for improvements constantly. (B)

By working together on a bigger scale we can be so much more effective. (C)

The social and relational nature of leadership featured strongly in responses, positioning leadership within teamwork and community and applying methods which foster learning in social context. For example:

When I started talking to the school [Children's Centre practitioner], I could see they had lost touch with the community and their expectations of the children were too high. This gave us the opportunity to talk about what school readiness is – is it the children or the school that needs to be ready? The school was concerned with practical things and we were concerned with emotional readiness, so we kept up a dialogue, created more links, and school staff came to the Children's Centre to see what the children can do and how they are progressing. (B)

Working through dialogue to create areas of common understanding typified the strategies employed by EYPs when they encountered different perspectives or competing agendas. Rodd (2006, 33) suggests that early childhood leadership takes place in a 'climate of reciprocal relationships'. This idea of mutuality in leadership is particularly significant for the range of multi-agency situations which occur at all levels, where practitioners from different disciplines need to work together and where there may be disparity in positional relationships or no direct line management relationship. If we move towards seeing leadership as social practice in order to reflect the essential nature of ECEC, then theories which take a societal perspective of learning could offer useful models. Engeström's (2000) cycle of expansive learning, for example, invites multiple voices to be heard by engaging different professional or community members in the process of identifying common issues and possible solutions. Such an approach towards collective, more participative

leadership needs to be located in multi-professional, community groups or networks. There are practical difficulties in adopting this approach but the reward is likely to be the creation of shared responsibility for leadership.

Conclusion

If we are to extend leadership capital in early childhood, new formulations of leadership are required which suit the nature of the sector and invite broader participation and engagement than traditional notions of the hierarchical leader. Working theories of leadership emerging from this study suggest that there is scope for building a new paradigm based on the ‘passionate care’ of early childhood practitioners who attribute their motivation and professionalism to a desire to improve the education and well-being of children and their families (Moyle 2001; Osgood 2010; Murray in press). The caring purpose that is central to ECEC professionalism underpins leadership motivation and drives the identification and achievement of necessary changes but it also offers a basis for ethical and participative leadership practice (Rodd 2006; Murray 2009). For Bennis (2007, 3) ‘leadership is always, in some sense, a matter of values’ and, together with moral purpose, this offers a common mission at the heart of the profession which gives meaning and opportunity for greater participation in leadership. Active dialogue is required in the sector to break down embedded notions and co-construct a form of leadership which can be enacted through reciprocal relationships and participative pedagogy.

The introduction of EYPS in England provided an opportunity to develop a more inclusive and participative leadership perspective. It is important that this potential is not lost in the light of government intentions to end the status in favour of an Early Years Teacher (DfE 2013), placing the issue of most appropriate training, graduate leadership and specific professional roles once again in flux. It is, therefore, more pertinent than ever to develop a concept and model of broad-based engagement in leadership within the whole ECEC community rather than accept political decisions to identify a specific source of leadership through determining the workforce structure. Locating leadership in a politically designated role not only risks leadership taking on a policy-compliant and performative character but also reinforces the dependency culture created when leadership is seen as residing only in nominated individuals. Government-commissioned reports agree on the need for continuing investment in the ECEC workforce (Mathers et al. 2011; Tickell 2011; Nutbrown 2012) and this could provide opportunities to build on the general professionalisation of ECEC by integrating a more expansive notion of participative leadership within professional development.

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