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‘I’ve never thought of myself as a leader but...’: the Early Years Professional and catalytic leadership

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the leadership role of the ‘new professional,’ in particular those who have obtained or are establishing themselves as Early Years Professionals (EYP). Central to this process is the ability to ‘lead practice’; however, this concept is ill-defined and used loosely within the context of day-to-day routine. This article uses cultural-historical activity theory as a framework in which concepts of leadership are interrogated. Informal interviews and collaborative dialogue are used to articulate the voices of those most closely involved. Prevalent models of leadership which rest on ideas of authority are challenged and a concept of *catalytic leadership* is proposed whereby EYP’s ability to bring about and inspire change is not dependent on a position of power.

RESUME: Cet article analyse le rôle de leadership des «nouveaux professionnels», en particulier ceux qui ont obtenu ou se reconnaissent comme les Early Years Professionnels (EYP). Au centre de ce processus on trouve la capacité de «diriger la pratique professionnelle», mais ce concept est mal défini et utilisé assez librement dans le cadre de la routine quotidienne. Cet article utilise la théorie de l’activité culturelle et historique comme un cadre dans lequel les concepts de leadership sont interrogés. Des entrevues informelles et les dialogues de collaboration sont utilisés pour faire entendre la voix des personnes les plus étroitement impliquées. Les modèles prévalents de leadership qui reposent sur les idées d’autorité sont remis en question et le concept de *leadership catalytique* est proposé selon lequel la capacité du EYP de susciter et d’inspirer le changement ne dépend pas d’une position de pouvoir.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Dieser Aufsatz untersucht die Leitungsrolle von Fachkräften, in diesem Fall insbesondere innerhalb der in England neuen Berufsgruppe der Early Years Professionals (EYP). Von zentraler Bedeutung für diesen Prozess ist die Fähigkeit, Praxis zu leiten, aber dieser Begriff ist weder hinreichend definiert, noch wird er einheitlich benutzt. Der Aufsatz bezieht sich auf “cultural-historical activity theory” als Rahmen, um verschiedene Leitungskonzepte zu untersuchen. Informelle Befragungen und kooperativer Dialog wurden verwendet, um die Stimmen derjenigen, die am stärksten betroffen sind, einzufangen. Gängige Führungsmodelle, die auf Vorstellungen von Autorität beruhen, werden in Frage gestellt. Stattdessen wird ein Konzept der “katalytischen Führung” (*catalytic leadership*) präsentiert. Nach diesem Modell wird die Anregungskompetenz der EYPs, Änderungen in Gang zu bringen und durchzuführen, unabhängig von einer spezifischen Machtposition gesehen.

RESUMEN: Este artículo examina el papel de liderazgo del nuevo profesional en particular aquellos que han obtenido o se establecen como Profesionales de Primera

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Infancia (Early Years Professionals, EYP). Fundamental para este proceso es la capacidad de “llevar la práctica”, sin embargo, este concepto está mal definido y utilizado libremente en el contexto de la rutina diaria. En este trabajo se utiliza la teoría de la actividad cultural-histórica como un marco en el cual los conceptos de liderazgo son interrogados. Entrevistas informales y el diálogo de colaboración se utilizan para articular las voces de los implicados más directamente. El modelo de liderazgo que se apoya en las ideas de la autoridad es cuestionado y un concepto de *liderazgo catalizador* se propone mediante el cual la capacidad de los EYP para lograr e inspirar el cambio no depende de una posición de poder.

Keywords: leadership; leading practice; activity theory; Early Years Professional Status (EYPS); collaborative learning

Introduction and background context

This research came about as a result of a discussion amongst candidates undertaking validation for Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) about expectations of leadership. In England the Children’s Workforce Development Council (CWDC, now part of the Teaching Agency) states that Early Years Professionals (EYPs) will ‘lead practice in the workplace and inspire other practitioners around them’ (CWDC 2010). It became evident that this was an issue of concern for many who equated leadership with ‘being in charge’ yet were not themselves in positions of authority. As assessors we were observing many examples of strong leadership of practice from EYPs who were sometimes insecure in their ‘leadership’ role because of pre-conceptions of what leadership entails. It appeared that the problem was not the practice itself but the meaning which is attributed to it. To move forwards it was necessary to support practitioners and aspiring EYPs to engage in critical reflection through consciously interrogating their own experiences and preconceptions.

Ideas originating within cultural-historical activity theory will be used to conceptualise this discussion and demonstrate how expansive learning can bring about transformation within the very specific cultural arena of early years practice. Activity theory seems a particularly appropriate framework within which to outline these issues as it was first developed in connection with child development and the psychology of play (Engeström and Miettinen 1999). Although the notion of collaborative learning through the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978) is a widespread concept within early years, its use is generally restricted to children’s learning. However it can also be used to frame the process of EYPs coming to a new understanding of the leadership dimension of their role – and indeed the evolution of the role itself – since activity theory provides a theoretical framework which links the individual and the social structure (Engeström 1999). Within this context, the development of the early years sector can be seen as a collective, object-oriented network – the activity system. Alongside the activity system itself, Engeström (2001) identifies four other central principles of activity theory; namely *historicity*, *multivoicedness*, *contradictions* and *expansive learning*.

Historicity is the recognition that all activity systems take shape and are transformed over lengthy periods of time and are therefore deeply embedded in the social, economic and cultural forces of their time and place. In England the role of the EYP is the culmination of a decade of concerted government action intended to ameliorate the legacy of previous neglect and narrow the gap in terms of overall well-being and achievement between children who do well and their peers (Pugh 2010). A strong, empirical

evidence base in respect of both quality (Bertram et al. 2003) and effectiveness (Sylva et al. 2004) underpinned substantial investment and led to a range of initiatives to develop the sector. The Ten Year Strategy for Childcare proposed that ‘all full daycare settings are led by a graduate qualified early years professional’ (HM Treasury 2004, 45), an expectation brought to fruition in the Children’s Workforce Strategy (DfES 2006) and the development in England of an early years pedagogue role, known as Early Years Professional (EYP). If the full impact of extensive investment in the sector is to be realised then skilled, qualified practitioners who can provide effective leadership are essential (Baldock et al. 2009). CWDC and EYPS are English initiatives but there are corresponding moves to develop the children’s workforce in the rest of the United Kingdom (Clark and Waller 2007). The evolving role of the EYP and subsequent professionalisation of the workforce (Nurse 2007; McDowall Clark and Baylis 2010) comes at a time when concepts of leadership appropriate to the sector are still underdeveloped and in need of examination both within the UK and beyond (Oberhuemer 2000). All these factors are accumulated in the local activity of individual EYPs’ role as change agents (CWDC 2010). Activity theory ‘makes it possible to include both historical continuity and local, situated contingency within the analysis’ (Engeström 1999, 9).

Leadership in the early years

The greater emphasis on accountability and the achievement of excellence has drawn attention to the pressing need for skilled and effective leaders (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni 2006). In recent years there has been a growing focus on leadership (e.g. Moyles 2004; Aubrey 2007; Rodd 2006) and debate about the specific aspects of the sector which make early years leadership unique. However, despite recognition that leadership is a key element of quality in early years settings (Muijs et al. 2004) there have been few relevant empirical studies and Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2006) deplore the ‘paucity’ of the evidence base in relation to the specific context of early years provision.

This article is intended in part to make a contribution to addressing that lack, but also to interrogate and challenge misconceptions and assumptions about leadership itself. In most of the literature about leadership ‘[t]he complementary nature of leadership and management is often assumed’ (Dunlop 2008, 4) and so the focus has been on attributes, skills and behaviours deployed by managerial leaders. Whether leadership and management are conflated (for instance Moyles 2004) or recognised as distinct elements (e.g. Rodd 2006), there is an assumption that leadership is conjoined with authority and power. The particular and challenging circumstances of leaders of practice, often charged to bring about change and quality improvement in roles divorced from formal organisational power structures, are largely unexamined and there is little understanding of what leadership within this particular context means. There is a difference between this pedagogic leadership, which Aubrey (2007) describes as ‘bridging research and practice,’ and traditional organisational leadership although within small settings one person may be responsible for both functions. In addition a market-led growth in provision means it is possible for private settings to be owned and managed by those with limited professional and theoretical knowledge or understanding. Pragmatism therefore dictates that graduates eligible to take on EYPS often come from ‘amongst the ranks.’ Multiple points of view, interests and contexts therefore contribute to the *multivoicedness* inherent in this collective activity system

whereby the division of labour creates different positions for participants who carry their own diverse histories (Engeström 2001).

The tensions thrown up by contradictions between their role as leaders of practice and normative constructs of leadership provided a context for reconceptualising leadership. The learning enabled through *expansive cycles* (Engeström 1999) as described here supported collaborative envisioning of leadership of practice, compatible not only with the very diverse nature of early years practice and provision but also with the early years ethos (Dahlberg and Moss 2005).

Ethics and accountability

As an early years educationalist my work is underpinned by certain values from which derive both an ethical stance and methodological approach. This study set out to destabilise ideas and concepts of leadership based on authority in order to empower practitioners; as such it can be described as 'transformational' (Mac Naughton 2003; Mac Naughton and Smith 2005). Fundamental to such an approach is a commitment to engage in dialogue and critical reflection and therefore a need to foster authentic relationships with participants. Authenticity is a contested term but in this context has been understood in Gadamer's (1994) sense of dialogical interdependence whereby we test our values and come to greater understanding of ourselves through communication with others. This is also consistent with a view of the EYPS validation process as one which supports the professional development of practitioners as agents of change rather than one which simply 'rubber stamps' their competency. The primacy of developing a context which is respectful of candidates and engenders positive relationships therefore transcends all other considerations and meant that the research project was consequently conducted within an already established culture of trust, openness and mutual respect.

Mac Naughton (2004, 53) points out that research and any subsequent knowledge and learning can never be a 'value-free cognitive pursuit [but is] always social and always embodies ethics, values and politics' and accomplished within 'a dynamic of power'. The prime purpose of this study was to explore concepts and experiences of leadership for emancipatory purposes, thus to benefit participants, and in the long term, the children and settings with which they work. Therefore it can be identified as meeting ethical guidelines of beneficence, maximising benefits and positive outcomes (BERA 2004). Nevertheless the potential power imbalance between researcher and participants was a key concern. As the programme leader who supports candidates through preparation for EYPS validation it was important to remain alert to inequitable power relations as the balance of power was clearly in my favour. Participants' involvement in the wider EYPS programme could be argued to place a certain amount of pressure on them to consent; therefore ethical engagement was ensured by not only seeking permission and involvement in advance but also checking afterwards if participants were still happy with the data they had supplied being used. These checks were carried out with individuals so that nobody would feel compelled to agree because others in the group had done so, participants being invited to review the data, comment on my interpretation and provide feedback. All findings have been shared with the original participants.

EYPS providers, such as the university within which this research took place, are accountable for the quality of their programme and the development of leadership within practitioners; EYPs are accountable for high quality provision within their settings (CWDC 2010). Both of these agendas are supported by a collaborative, shared

exploration of the nature of leadership within the particular circumstances of the early years context. Thus, although the exploration of leadership served different ends for the participants and myself as researcher, we shared a common purpose and responsibility for critical reflection.

Methodology

The rationale provided above points to a collaborative, participatory research paradigm, one where ‘the...intent is to make sense of (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world’ (Cresswell 2009, 8). Such an interpretivist stance requires particular attention to be paid to systematic data collection (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2000) which was done through complementary techniques of self-report questionnaires, focus groups and follow up interviews all of which acknowledged the EYPs as active participants (Aull Davis 2008).

Short, open ended questionnaires were the first step in enabling participants to begin to identify their own experiences and concerns in connection with leadership. These were followed by focus groups where participants could explore and share ideas and concepts. Although Hennink (2007) suggests that the researcher role is significant with focus groups to maintain continuous discussion and probe for further data, I deliberately refrained from this in order to avoid imposing external meanings and influencing responses. Finally semi-structured, follow-up interviews supplemented and extended the focus group discussions which might otherwise lack depth (Gilbert 2008). Open-ended questions provided a framework to interviews whilst maintaining a flexible and conversational approach which allowed participants freedom to develop individual ideas without being influenced by others’ responses (Aull Davis 2008).

The number of participants involved in this phase of the research numbered 28. They were all graduates with a minimum of three years experience in a wide range of settings including Children’s Centres, private day-care facilities, nursery classes and pre-schools. All but one were female which accords with the usual gender balance within the early years sector; however gender was not a factor taken into consideration within this article (see McDowall Clark and Murray, 2012).

Findings

The most notable feature of the findings from this study was the lack of confidence in their own leadership expressed by many practitioners. The majority of participants were struggling to reconcile their role with their own understanding of what leadership entails; these tensions suggest notable links with ‘impostor syndrome’ (Kets de Vries 2005) and such resonances open up avenues for further exploration in the future. This conflict stemmed primarily from the assumption that leadership is about being in charge and directing others. For instance Lisa, an activities worker in a Children’s Centre, stated:

I can lead from within but do not often get the opportunity to evidence leadership of others. I am confident in my own practice and modelling good practice. I reflect on my own practice openly and encourage others to do so. (questionnaire)

The concept of leading from *within* was something that cropped up frequently in participants' responses; they were very aware of their own lack of authority to direct other practitioners and this prevents Lisa from recognising the leadership inherent in her role. Later in the follow-up interview she began to recognise that it was her *interpretation* of leadership and its mismatch with her practice that was the issue when she conceded:

I am concerned about leadership because I am a 'lone worker' but I know I play an important role in the team. I have good links with teachers, midwives, the Family Support Worker, etc. and lots of conversations through the wider community too ...*perhaps I haven't acknowledged that enough.* (emphasis added)

This demonstrates the necessity of open opportunities for practitioners to explore and reflect on their own role in leading practice. These *expansive learning cycles* (Engestrom 1999) were particularly apparent in the focus groups which enabled the opportunity for collaborative envisioning and reconceptualising the idea of leadership. This is strikingly evident in the following extract from a focus group discussion where practitioners discuss what drives their practice:

Jane: ...must keep reviewing and making sure it's still working.

Sally: you have to think all the time about our practice because the children change and every few months you have to adapt...

Jane: that's what makes you professional.

Sally: ...adapt *and* reflect.

Jane: so leadership is important.

Sue: yes, but not necessarily being in charge to lead.

Gail: mmm, having the confidence to want to make a change.

Sally: ...and the knowledge and experience to bring that forward.

Jane: I've never seen myself as a leader before but now I'm beginning to realise that I *am* a leader!

Such explorations of the *contradictions* and tensions between their own experiences and their ideas about leaders enabled participants to move through their *zone of proximal development* (Vygotsky 1978) to collaborate in reviewing and reconceptualising perceptions of leadership and what a leader does. Concepts emerged and developed throughout the length of the project as participants began to recognise that leadership does not have to take the form of controlling or directing others' actions. In fact leadership that is non-directive was a collective concern and cropped up frequently in participants' responses:

...go softly...

...sensitivity – not pushing but just 'eke' them forward.

...working slowly and carefully to change the mindset – making changes covertly and subtly without challenging existing practices unless absolutely necessary.

Such a concern to support rather than confront and to challenge others' thinking rather than their practice was apparent in EYPs' sensitivity towards others. In this, participants showed recognition of the difficulties of negotiating a role as a leader of practice that neither makes less qualified practitioners feel inadequate and undervalued, nor undermines those who hold positions of authority. For instance, one EYP from a private pre-school group suggested 'For managers it is important for them not to feel criticised. Re-examining the principles we work with and offering practical ideas for improvement is a good basis' (Ellie, interview). EYPS offers opportunities to develop new styles of leadership which are more inclusive and less hierarchical than traditional leadership models (Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee 2002).

One of the key factors of this non-directive style is an approach which builds incrementally rather than by dramatic intervention. Lacking the authority to bring about sweeping transformation, EYPs choose to work as 'change agents' (CWDC 2010) through small steps which they see as the most appropriate response:

small changes can have a big impact on views and ideas and it is often easier and more effective to instigate change in this manner.

I need to drip in slowly. I can't change the world overnight!

...it's more effective to work with the few because when *they* pick up on it, that has more effect – a double-knock-on effect!

Although the EYPs involved in this study were acutely aware of their lack of authority in regard to leadership, the exploration of their role and influence which this research enabled demonstrated that they did in fact exhibit many aspects of effective leadership practice (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni 2006). In particular they were concerned to encourage reflection and build a learning community and team culture with an explicit pedagogy, common purpose and shared goals. In this way they can create an emotional climate which enables people to participate and 'buy into' continuing improvement (Goleman et al. 2002; Hargreaves and Fink 2006). They were deeply committed to their own ongoing, professional development which they used as a basis for collaborative dialogue and modelling good practice. This in turn supported other staff to become more critically reflective. Thus any lack of confidence lay not in what they were doing, which stemmed from deeply held convictions, but in whether their work could be termed *leadership*; their concepts of leadership were very much tied to specific roles and job titles. It seems that the reason EYPs do not recognise their own leadership is because they are basing their ideas on inappropriate concepts which do not fit the circumstances.

Reconceptualising leadership

Although there is much to learn from the models and ideas of leadership being developed within the early years, the underlying assumption that leadership stems from authority means that none of them provide a satisfactory explanatory framework for the situation of leading from within. Customary concepts of leadership involve directing others' actions and Avery (2004) points out that unless it is specifically contextualised, people will tend to 'hold command-and-control as their basic leadership model.' This can create tensions for many early years practitioners who are frequently 'averse to being in a position of dominance' (Rodd 2006, 16). As a social construct leadership is open to reconstruction and reconfiguration, therefore it is essential to

keep exploring the meaning of leadership within the early years to open up and develop new ways of understanding. This research, by enabling EYPs to share perspectives and experiences, helped raise practitioners' awareness of their own and others leadership of practice and the ways in which this can develop and improve quality. Because concepts of leadership are particularly underdeveloped within the context of leading practice, it is necessary to 'unravel' what this means 'thus permitting leadership to be exercised at a more grass roots level' (Rodd 2006, 19). What is needed is a model of leadership in which EYPs can recognise themselves and their own experiences.

The process of exploration and research enabled EYPs to engage in a collective journey through the zone of proximal development of their role and thus experience what Engeström (2001) terms *expansive transformation*. Early concerns that combining the responsibility of facilitator with that of researcher could be inherently ambiguous proved groundless and in practice the roles were more complementary than conflicting. Through this process participants developed new ways of envisaging leadership of practice and reaffirmed their own role in this process. The recognition that change can also come from below is a key feature of activity theory (Engeström 1999, 19).

It is clear that even if not in positions of authority nonetheless an EYP is in a position of *influence*, and it is this influence that is crucial to becoming a change agent and leading practice (Whalley et al. 2005). In this way the EYP can be seen as a *catalyst* within their setting bringing about internal change to create something new. Change comes about through the recognition of new possibilities rather than being enforced from above. This informal, emergent leadership I have termed *catalytic leadership*. The key features of catalytic leadership which distinguishes it from more common concepts of leadership are as follows:

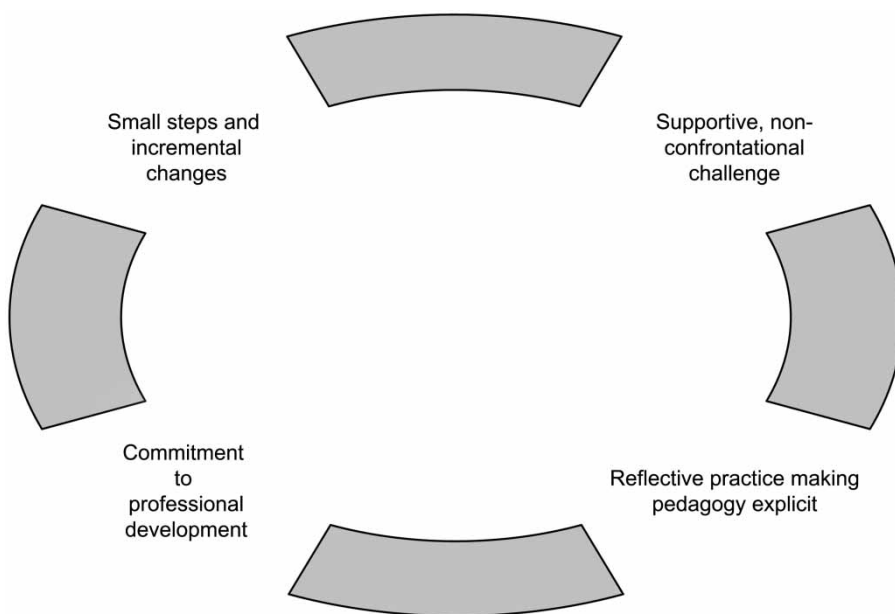


Figure 1. Leading from within as a catalytic agent.

- EYPs' position of influence rather than authority is key to becoming a change agent and leading practice.
- The EYP as a catalyst brings about change through small, incremental steps.
- Change surfaces through the recognition of potentiality rather than being imposed from above.
- Catalytic leadership is a creative and dynamic process rather than a set of attitudes and behaviours.

The creativity inherent within this model of leadership of practice is an important component and one which fits well within the 'moral purpose' and explicit value base of early years settings (Murray 2009). Leadership arises through the interaction between individual strategies and the social and cultural contexts within which they are set. Therefore leadership can be seen as a systematic rather than an individualistic construct; an inclusive and democratic concept promoted by the social environment (Covey 1990). The EYP as a catalyst is fundamental in bringing about quality improvement in early years settings through continual reflection and ongoing improvement. As one participant in this study said, 'We're not there yet...but it's *nice* to not be there yet! I'm always reviewing....'

Recognition of the importance of the early years as the key underlying factor in determining a child's future success is now firmly established (Pugh 2010) and so it is likely that debate about leadership will continue to evolve. The functions and expectations of early years leaders must be broad and flexible enough to allow for the diversity and multiplicity of the field and to take into account the need to establish multiprofessional collaboration. Above all the sector is unique in identifying leaders of practice as distinct from those who lead settings. This is a new role, the expectations of which must be explored and articulated in order to empower those who take it on without a position of authority or power to legitimise their actions. The model of catalytic leadership does this and is particularly appropriate for the early years because the learning journeys of practitioners and of settings themselves can be seen to move in parallel to that of the children to create truly dynamic learning communities and a democratic modelling of lifelong learning.

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