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Being and Becoming Early Childhood Leaders: Reflections on Leadership Studies in Early Childhood Education and the Future Leadership Research Agenda

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ABSTRACT: In Australia, educational leadership studies emerged as a core area of study within early childhood bachelor degree courses during the 1990s. This inclusion was supported by findings from newly emerging research on leadership involving early childhood educators. A handful of Australian and Finnish scholars joined researchers based in the USA to actively research leadership focusing on the early childhood sector. In this paper, reflections on what has been achieved over the past two decades in promoting leadership studies in the early childhood sector is analysed as a starting point to evaluate learning and stimulate further discussion on additional work necessary in preparing future leaders. This analysis will be based on exploring key assumptions about distributed leadership models being favoured by policy planners and practitioners. In identifying gaps in our knowledge base, possibilities for further research are presented by drawing on developments in Australia and elsewhere as appropriate.

Keywords: early childhood leadership, leadership research, leadership preparation.

Theorising leadership in early childhood

Leadership is a word used all around the world. Its abstract nature has however meant that there is no single universal definition or agreement on what leadership is and how it can be assessed and understood. Researching leadership is also challenging because it is difficult to identify, quantify or observe, and as Rodd (2013) declares, sometimes,

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"effective leadership is enacted by standing back, saying or doing nothing." (p. 233). Nevertheless, leadership is often identified as a key element in delivering high quality early childhood programs (Hujala, Waniganayake & Rodd, 2013). In effect, conceptualisations of leadership are best understood when nuanced within the local contexts of enactment.

Writing about leadership within early childhood settings in Australia, Waniganayake, Cheeseman, Fennech, Hadley and Shepherd (2012, p.11) have suggested that when exploring leadership one must take into account the person (the leader), the position (authority to make decisions) and the place (the organisational setting). Which of these three elements are emphasised or prioritised within the daily practice of early childhood leadership is however, highly variable and context specific. This view is encapsulated in the definition of early childhood leadership presented by Nivala (1999 cited in Hujala, 2013, p. 53) as "a socially constructed, situational and interpretive phenomenon." These Finnish early childhood scholars are pioneer researchers who recognised the importance of context in researching leadership. Their contextual leadership model integrates the structural components of early childhood organisations by drawing attention to the vision, mission, core tasks and responsibilities of early childhood leaders.

This article aims to present critical reflections about the importance of preparing early childhood educators for leadership enactment. Given the increasing complexity of challenges encountered by today's early childhood educators in the frontline of service delivery, it is imperative that those in leadership roles are well prepared in order to respond effectively to support the education and wellbeing of children and families in their communities. Adopting a contextual approach, pathways to being and becoming leaders in Early Childhood Education (ECE) are examined against a backdrop of developments in Australia and other countries as appropriate.

Changing profile of the early childhood educator

Globally, there is no consensus or clarity on what is expected of ECE graduates at the time of graduation from a three or four year bachelor degree. The Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) is responsible for the accreditation of course content in this country. The pay and conditions of employing ECE graduates are linked to industrial awards but this system is fragmented due to the involvement of a mix of trade unions with inadequate national coordination. The limited recognition of masters degrees within the current awards is a particular concern as there is no formal approval of the value of undertaking postgraduate studies reflected in the pay scales, leaving it to employers to validate staff achievements through advanced studies. Overall, the absence of a national professional registration system for ECE graduates has also meant that there is no systematic way of assessing the employment expectations of these graduates. In effect, there has been limited movement in addressing issues of public visibility and validation, career pathways linked to formal studies, as well as

professional registration and licensure, as identified particularly in terms of leadership development nearly two decades ago (Waniganayake, 1998).

The roles and responsibilities of ECE graduates working in childcare centres have varied overtime. About thirty years ago, being a teacher of young children was clearly defined as an autonomous role carried out by an ECE graduate who was responsible for designing and delivering an education program for pre-schoolers. In contrast, the contemporary profiles of ECE graduates incorporate education and care responsibilities more explicitly and cover a wider age range of children birth to five years. Government policy, through the *National Quality Standard* (ACECQA, 2012) and its predecessor, the *Quality Improvement and Accreditation System* (QIAS) in 1993, has reinforced this open profile since the 1990s. The emphasis on working in partnership with families and the wider community and the inclusion of service management and leadership responsibilities (ACECQA, 2012) reflects the expanding roles of ECE graduates, requiring engagement with a wide range of stakeholders. The once clearly defined teacher responsibilities focusing exclusively on the education of young children, has therefore widened in scope with increasing demands from parents, government and other professionals working in different ways with children in early childhood settings.

As reflected in Figure 1, traditionally, in Australia, those graduating with an ECE Diploma or Degree, found employment in a preschool or kindergarten working with children between three to five years age. Since the 1980s however, with the large scale expansion of childcare centres employment opportunities for early childhood graduates emerged in settings catering for children from birth to five years. Traditional preschools or kindergartens offered half-day educational programs, and are closed during school holidays. In contrast, childcare centres are open for longer hours, often from 7am to 6pm and remain open for at least 48 weeks of the year in order to obtain government funding.

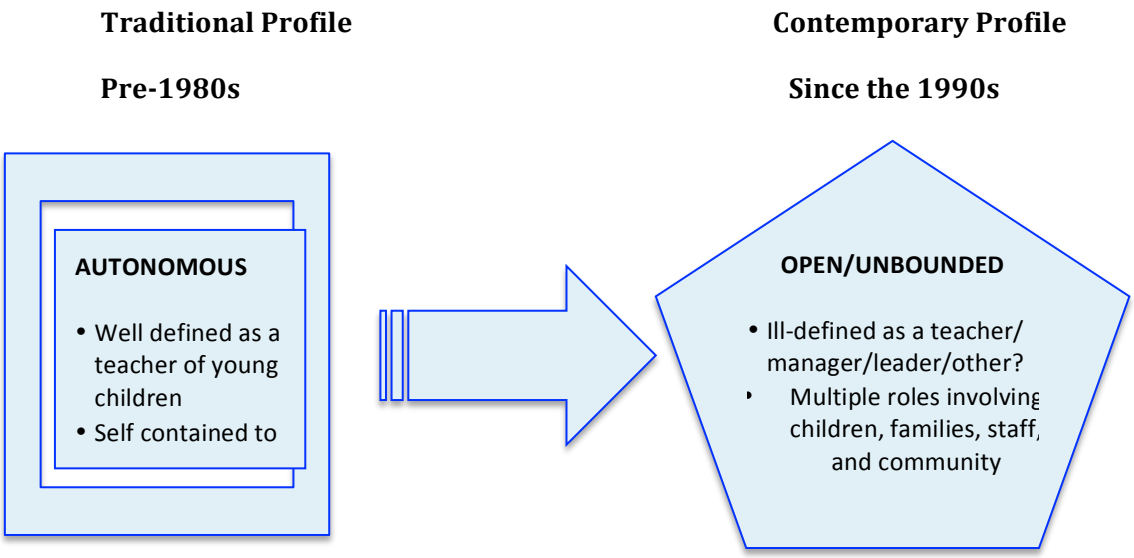


FIGURE 1 Changing profile of ECE graduates

Research conducted during the 1990s on exploring workplace responsibilities of early childhood educators is limited. Initial leadership studies conducted by those such as Hayden (1997), Rodd (1998), and Waniganayake, Morda and Kapsalakis (2000) suggested that soon after graduation with little or no work experience in the sector, but as the highest qualified person, ECE graduates were frequently expected to jump into the role of a centre director/manager. Reflecting on these studies now it becomes apparent that unenviable demands were placed on new and inexperienced graduates in managing and leading as a childcare centre director. This situation was exacerbated further for teaching directors of small centres where the director's responsibilities included regular classroom work with children. Importantly, research by Rosier and Lloyd-Smith (1996, p. i) revealed that "low pay and low status relative to high level of responsibility inherent in the job" contributed significantly to staff dissatisfaction and high turnover rates (cited in Waniganayake, 1998, p.111). This pattern was also reflected in other countries such as the USA, where Jorde-Bloom (1994) reported on concerns on expecting teacher education graduates to take on broader responsibilities without adequate preparation for leading and managing centres.

Almost two decades later, the assessment of workplace demands on early childhood graduates I made in 1998 still stands:

> For many child care centre directors in Australia, the responsibilities they shoulder as the 'chief executive officer' of a small business enterprise are not reflected in their job descriptions, wages nor conditions of employment. Observing similar trends in Europe, those such as Oberhuemer and Ulich (1997) as well as Abbott and Pugh (1998) call for a review of early childhood training which takes into account contemporary realities of wider societal, economic and political contexts which require early childhood professionals to have skills far

> beyond working with young children in small isolated settings.
>
> (Waniganayake, 1998, p. 117)

The nationalization of early childhood policy reforms in Australia during 2007-2013, has also placed increasing demands on centre directors (Productivity Commission, 2011). Their role today includes not only providing pedagogical leadership in supporting the implementation of the national curriculum known as the *Early Years Learning Framework* (DEEWR, 2009), but also satisfying compliance with legal responsibilities and managing the centre as a viable business. Whilst in school education it is well understood that small schools "are not miniature versions of large schools" (Mohr, 2000 cited in Dinham et al, 2011, p. 149) this is not yet fully appreciated in the early childhood sector. Accordingly, it is not surprising that a pattern of accidental managers in leadership positions which emerged in the 1990s, continues in practice today. The challenge remains, how to grow early childhood leaders who can perform diverse and complex functions and do it well, and how to produce sufficient numbers of leadership capable graduates, quickly. The sense of urgency was captured in the Productivity Commission's Report (2011) which was cognizant of the flow on effects of the national reforms requiring both a review of existing qualifications and the need for "a substantial volume of training to be delivered in a short time frame" (p. xxxiv).

School leadership research shows that effectiveness of leadership can be assessed against student learning outcomes and indeed, high stakes testing of school performance highlights the key role school principals play in student achievement (Dinham et al, 2011; Marsh, Waniganayake, & De Nobile, 2013). Within ECE, there is no longitudinal research on measuring the impact of leadership on children's learning other than linking it with broader service quality as reflected in research by Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2008).

The *Early Childhood Development Workforce Research Report* prepared by the Productivity Commission (2011) informed the Australian government's strategic directions in supporting the development of its *Early Years Workforce Strategy* (DEEWR, 2012). Since the change of government in 2013, the status of this strategy in driving future directions is unclear. Nevertheless, under the *National Quality Framework* (ACECQA, 2011) 'an educational leader' is defined as someone who "is suitably qualified and experienced … to lead the development and implementation of the education program (curriculum) in the service" (p.85). Nupponen (2006, p.92) refers to leader behaviour being important in "empowering staff and motivating them to have more responsibility in their decision-making." Likewise, Fennech (2013) argues that the identification of an educational leader position through national policy standards is a step in the right direction. Obviously, centre directors can play a key role in attracting and retaining staff. The high levels of casualization of the early childhood workforce and the shortage of well qualified staff however presents challenges in terms of building teams, promoting innovation and achieving consistency in practice within a centre.

In Australia, until recently, the availability of professional development courses targeting leadership responsibilities in the early childhood sector has been sparse and inadequate. Some key stakeholder organisations have noted this by way of stating that "there is no systematic mentoring and leadership programs to provide genuine professional support to staff." (KPV, 2011, sub. 72, p.7, as cited by Fennech, 2013). A cumulative body of research-based evidence has however strengthened the global call for the systematic provisioning of continuous professional development and support (PD&S) for early childhood educators (OECD, 2006; 2012). Exploration of connectivities between quality outcomes for children and staff PD&S, provided the focus for a national research study involving childcare centre directors/managers in Australia (Waniganayake et al, 2008). In identifying leadership and management as an area of high priority for professional development, the participants in this study also indicated a strong preference for customised sessions delivered to all staff at their own centres as being more beneficial than participating in one-off external sessions attended by some (but not all) staff on an ad hoc basis. These findings are being reinforced through recent research by Colmer (2013) who has found that distributed leadership flourishes through collective engagement in professional development linked with practitioner inquiry projects conducted within early childhood centres.

In analysing leadership within the USA contexts, Kagan and Bowman (1997) were among the first to clarify the importance of developing leadership theories that are relevant and meaningful to early childhood audiences. Although others have reinforced this view over time (eg. Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003; Rodd, 1998; 2006; 2013), to date, the level of theorizing continues to lag behind other sectors, especially in comparison to school leadership. In seeking an explanation, many would agree with Mujis et al (2004) that the diversity of organisational settings exacerbates the complexities of advancing theoretical explanations within ECE. They also refer to the relatively small organizational size, as well as the predominance of women in management/leadership positions within early childhood centres. Their assessment that a gender-based argument may not be fully supported by referring to the work by head-teachers in UK schools, however, requires further investigation – especially from a cross-cultural perspective, based on research in a wider sample of countries.

Preparation of early childhood leaders

Inclusion of leadership and management units in ECE bachelor degree programs in Australia can be traced back to the 1990s. This trend parallel the expansion of childcare centres and the growing interest in quality assurance, entrepreneurship and corporate involvement in early childhood service provision (Brennan, 1998; Sumsion, 2007). Focus on centre administration in the 1970s, shifted to business management during the 1980s, which in turn merged into leadership in the 1990s (Waniganayake et al, 2012). Throughout this period, ECE bachelor degrees retained their primary focus on teacher preparation and attention on leadership development was at best ad hoc and limited to

raising awareness of potential challenges instead of an adequate preparation for a vigorous role in leading an early childhood organisation.

Much has been written about early childhood teachers' reluctance to embrace leadership roles (Dunlop, 2008; Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003; Hayden, 1997; Mujis, Aubrey, Harris & Briggs, 2004; Rodd, 2006). Mujis et al (2004, p.161) were also struck by participants' emphasis on "maintenance" or management roles in contrast to "development" or leadership tasks. Confusion between centre management issues concerned with day-to-day functions often meant a limited focus on long-term strategic planning, involving an emphasis on organisational development through a shared vision and mission that require leadership (Waniganayake et al, 2012). Much of the 1990s research in essence, reflects a focus on management rather than leadership responsibilities.

There is now substantive research evidence to show that high quality early childhood service provision is built upon having a well-qualified workforce (Adamson, 2008; OECD, 2006; 2012). Formal qualifications in ECE can also make a difference in supporting leadership decision-making. Wagner (2008) however believes that teachers, unlike any other professionals such as architects, engineers, doctors or lawyers, have not been adequately prepared to analyse and solve every day routine problems encountered during their professional practice. Instead, teachers have been regulated to be responsive and compliant to external steering, reinforced through working in isolation within organizational settings that validate individual teacher performance. The changing nature of early childhood organizational contexts however, reflects the importance of collaboration and teamwork and, demands a reconceptualization of workforce responsibilities. Innovation also demands taking risks, and making use of opportunities to learn from both successes and failures. Likewise, instead of simply being reactive consumers of knowledge, leadership means becoming knowledge producers who can design variable strategies to deal with the ambiguities and complexities of today's society.

Teachers in Finland have professional autonomy and accept responsibility for their decision-making. These are characteristics that Hargreaves and Shirley (2011) also found in high performing school systems in other countries such as Singapore and Canada. Sahlberg (2013, p.37) writes "Teachers in Finland enjoy what they do", and job satisfaction is connected with the absence of external control and monitoring that can restrict professional freedom in everyday practice. Accordingly, Sahlberg (2013, p.40) declares that "Professional leadership will only flourish among teachers if they have the autonomy to influence what and how they teach and to determine how well their students are performing."

In Australia, there is no mandated leadership preparation for either school principals or early childhood centre directors. In Singapore, those aspiring to become early childhood principals or centre directors are expected to have completed an early childhood leadership diploma in addition to a teaching diploma. Accumulating research evidence

from studies conducted in the UK and New Zealand may have also influenced the recognition and support for leadership development for early childhood practitioners by these Governments. For instance, in the 'Educational Leadership Project' conducted in New Zealand, Hatherley and Lee (2003) report on leaders having a vision and building stronger links with local neighbourhood communities, reflecting a change towards taking leadership roles beyond the confines of one's own organizational setting.

The early childhood leadership research agenda

As noted by those such as Rodd (2013) and Waniganayake et al (2012), about three decades ago, a handful of Australian and Finnish scholars joined researchers based in the USA to actively research leadership focusing on the early childhood sector. Previously, in reflecting on this initial body of scholarly endeavour, Mujis et al (2004) contend that findings from these early studies on leadership in ECE can assist in explaining the limited nature of research growth in this sector. This explanation also suggests that it is easy to understand how and why that time and again, researchers (such as, Jorde-Bloom, 1992; 1994; Hayden, 1997; Rodd, 1996; 1998; 2006; Waniganayake, Nienhuys, Kapsalakis, & Morda, 1998) found that participants expressed reluctance in embracing leadership roles expected of them as centre directors, highlighting a preference to work directly with children and families. It appears that a mix of factors including the lack of personal interest or self confidence in imagining themselves as leaders, or an awareness of the complexities of modern leadership enactment with little or no financial remuneration can drive people away from taking on leadership roles or positions.

In part, the above pattern in resisting leadership enactment by university qualified ECE graduates may also be a reflection of the fact that these graduates came through teacher education courses where leadership content was somewhat limited in quantity and quality. Even today, formal training of early childhood leaders is not mandatory in most OECD countries. Where national standards exists, as in the case of the *Leadership Capabilities Framework* developed by Early Childhood Australia (2013), its application is voluntary, making it difficult to know the extent to which these frameworks are being used in guiding every day practice or informing policy development within centres.

On the other hand, since 2007, the *Early Years Professional Status (EYPS)* established a national standard in England, and its application has been wide ranging, with a government funded professional development program implemented throughout the country. Its usefulness as a postgraduate qualification has also been systematically evaluated (Teacher Agency, 2012), and has since been revised as the *Teachers' Standards (Early Years);* and its continuation as a national policy framework augurs well in terms of adopting a planned approach to growing future leaders. Likewise, the merger of teaching and leadership development under a single agency, the National College for Teaching and Leadership (http://www.education.gov.uk/nationalcollege) also reflects the inextricable connectivity between teaching and leading in early childhood centres.

Independent research findings such as the study by John (2008) shows the importance of active engagement in mentoring as a way of developing and sustaining leadership capabilities which can, in turn, contribute new understandings on leader preparation.

Research on educational leadership has rarely included the voice of the learners in the settings. In early childhood leadership research conducted in Australia, there are no publications that incorporate children's perceptions of adults demonstrating leadership. One study, conducted by Morda (2012) was aimed at investigating the development of children's leadership capabilities within an early learning centre in Melbourne. It did not however seek to explore children's perceptions of leadership being enacted by the adults at their centre. Given the power of role modelling, it would be interesting to ask children about what they have learnt about leadership from the adults in their lives – both within their family contexts as well as from staff at the early childhood centres.

When conducting research in early childhood settings, one must be cognisant of the influence leaders can have on everyone present – children and adults. Indeed by evoking Reggio Emilia's philosophy, in delivering her keynote address at the Unpacking Conference in Sydney recently, Giamminuti (2014) reminded everyone of the centrality of children in early childhood research: "a simple, liberating thought came to our aid, namely that things about children and for children are only learned from children" (Malaguzzi, 1998, p. 51). This potential of new perspectives emerging through the eyes of the children offers exciting possibilities for future research in early childhood leadership. Creating a holistic and inclusive research culture with child researchers can also enable the expansion of research methodologies to study educational leadership in ways that has not been tested to date.

Of necessity, it is prudent to remember that endeavours involving children in particular take time to establish trusting relationships. When dealing with an abstract phenomenon such as educational leadership, it is also wise to consider the vista of techniques and tools used in pedagogical documentation in early childhood settings to get closer to the participants. This approach offers possibilities in capturing children's perspectives of leadership both "frozen in time (through photographs, drawings and descriptions) and continuing to unfold over time (enabling the revisiting and reconceptualising of experience under construction)" (Fleet, Patterson & Robertson, 2013, p. 3). As a dynamic process without an end point as such, leadership enactment also reflects a "pedagogy of possibility", and pedagogical documentation affords harnessing both unexpected and routine exchanges amongst children and adults (Fleet, Patterson & Robertson, 2013, p. 5). These types of methodologies may also assist in exploring organizational cultures within early childhood settings as places that promote or inhibit leadership functioning. In keeping with the importance of deepening our understanding about the relational nature of leadership enactment, the continuing absence of research focusing on gender, sexuality and cultural dimensions of early childhood staff also require urgent investigation.

Application of distributed leadership

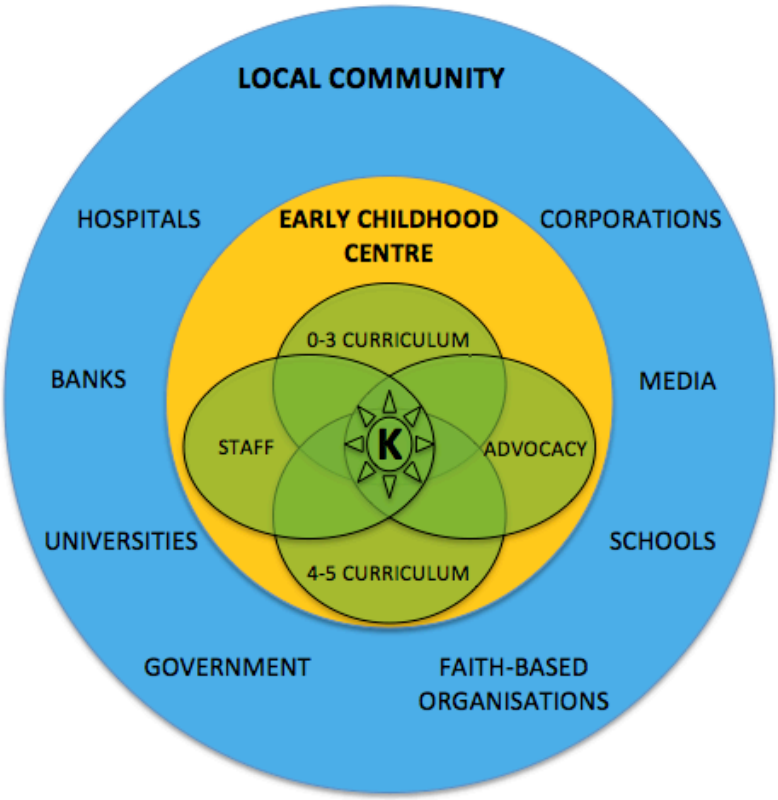
The theory of distributed leadership applicable in early childhood settings, as conceptualised by me in 2000, was centred on placing specialist knowledge at the heart of organisational culture (see Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003, p. 34). This approach to early childhood leadership was founded on a platform of valuing the collective intelligence created through the amalgamation of expertise that individual educators bring to the organization. Moreover, distributed leadership is often perceived as relational (Duigan, 2006; Spillane & Coldren, 2011), and aims to capture the multiple spheres of influence reflected in the structures and contexts of each early childhood setting (Waniganayake et al, 2012). This perspective is elucidated further by Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007, p. 20) as follows:

> 'Distributed', 'participative', 'facilitative' or 'collaborative' models of leadership call for a shift away from the traditional vision of leader as one key individual towards a more collective vision, one where the responsibility for leadership rests within various formal and informal leaders.

The actual stakeholders participating in a distributed way within any given early childhood setting however, will of course vary and the dynamics of leadership power sharing is specific to each context.

More recently, Shonkoff (2014) has proposed a model of distributed leadership that incorporates the macro contexts of early childhood environments, bringing together early childhood educators with stakeholders community wide and including researchers, policy makers and investors. In his model, Shonkoff emphasized the importance of adopting a long-term strategic approach in translating inspiration into concrete goals and plans developed collaboratively and specific to each community. The development of alliances through networking is one of the anticipated outcomes of Shonkoff's approach to strategic planning in promoting play-based learning during early childhood.

By incorporating both the micro perspective located within an early childhood centre, and the macro perspective of the environment beyond the centre, a new model of distributed leadership has been conceptualized as indicated in Figure 2. In this conceptualization also, the centrality of knowledge sharing has been retained, as various stakeholders bring with them their specialist knowledge and skills, and demonstrate leadership in the application of their expertise in shared projects that benefit children and families in their community. In effect, centres are perceived as the hub or the nucleus that drive child centred action within a community. What is now different in this conceptualization is the boundaries of interactions have been widened and the nature of interactions between stakeholders will also involve learning across disciplines as reflected in the professional backgrounds and workplace orientations of the diverse stakeholders involved in each community.



K = KNOWLEDGE: that is shared and made explicit
Leadership is distributed across multiple spheres of activity

FIGURE 2 Distributed leadership in early Childhood reconceptualised

Dinham et al (2011, p. 145), contend that transformation cannot be achieved through responding to centralized control or by acting alone. Instead, by allocating appropriate resources, including sufficient personnel, "to energise and sustain" networks, schools in the UK and Australia have been successful in pooling expertise and seeking solutions to problems together in comprehensive ways. Accordingly, by conceptualising "leadership as capital formation" Dinham et al have reframed the preparation and professional development of school leaders as intellectual, social, spiritual and financial capital (pp. 145-147). This framework represents another form of distributed leadership, as it is also reliant on collective wisdom and collaboration and this can be applied to ECE contexts as well. Accordingly, it is proposed that interactions between stakeholders as represented in Figure 2, reflects this type of shared learning with the anticipation of achieving a shared vision and action plan on whatever the community plans to do in upholding "the best interests of children" (Article 3, UNICEF, 1989).

Overall, distributed leadership may be perceived as being either too easy or too difficult to implement, and tensions arise because there is insufficient attention placed on the communications necessary to bring about effective collaboration. According to Hirsh-Pasek (2014) the five essential 21st century skills required by all professionals consist of 'collaboration, communication, content, critical thinking and confidence'. In redressing the gaps in early childhood teacher preparation identified earlier, this list could be expanded also by adding 'creative problem solving' skills, essential in transferring theory into practice (Wagner, 2014). Although Wagner (2007) has endorsed the use of case studies in learning about problem solving, it is argued that authentic experiential learning/teaching opportunities encountered during professional placements in early childhood settings can strengthen the development of essential 21st century skills in more meaningful ways. An important challenge is finding better ways of accommodating these skills in leadership preparation within future teacher education courses and this requires further investigation and close scrutiny of evolving ECE course design and development.

In Finland, a "Masters degree is the basic academic requirement for permanent employment in a school." (Sahlberg, 2013, p. 38) The extent to which this is a mandated requirement of those teaching in early childhood centres is difficult to know. Admission into teacher education courses is also strictly controlled to ensure quality at the point of entry and "it is difficult to become a teacher in Finland without a high level of general knowledge, good social skills and clear moral purpose" (Sahlberg, 2013, p. 38). Accordingly, it means having more than a single unit/module on leadership and adopting an integrated approach where professional placements focus on both teaching and leading responsibilities. This may in effect require a clear demarcation between bachelor degrees focusing on teacher preparation and masters degrees emphasising leadership development. Importantly, participation in continuous professional development and learning is essential for all regardless of whether they are performing teaching and/or leadership functions.

Challenges of enacting distributed leadership

Torrance (2013) writes eloquently about the popularity of distributed leadership in school contexts as evidenced in education policy in the UK. As noted earlier, publications of empirical studies written in English and located within early childhood settings investigating distributed leadership in practice are rare. Drawing on her study of Scottish primary schools, Torrance challenges five generally held assumptions about the practice of distributed leadership. In this paper, by considering its application within early childhood settings each assumption is briefly critiqued further as follows:

- *Assumption 1: "that every staff member is able to lead"* (Torrance, 2013, p. 362). In her research, Torrance (2013, p.363) found evidence to the contrary suggesting that it was in essence "unrealistic to conceive that all teachers can engage in leadership roles consistently" due to factors such as personality, competence and confidence. There is anecdotal evidence which suggests that some directors subscribe to the view that 'we're

all leaders' at our centre. As noted previously, however, research in early childhood leadership confirms that lack of formal preparation on leadership can hinder its enactment. Given the high proportion of staff without at least a bachelor degree in ECE, it is also difficult to support the notion that anyone can be a centre leader.

- *Assumption 2: "that every staff member wishes to lead"* (Torrance, 2013, p. 363). As in the case of other school leadership scholars, findings by Torrance (2013) also reflected a pattern of resistance amongst staff in her study in embracing leadership roles. This type of culture of leadership aversion has also permeated the highly feminised early childhood sector (see Aubrey, 2011; Rodd, 2013; Waniganayake et al 2012).

- *Assumption 3: "that the leadership role of staff is legitimised simply by the head teacher's endorsement"* (Torrance 2013, p. 364). In reality, findings from the study by Torrance(2013) indicated that peer approval or endorsement of leadership capacity made a difference in terms of successful implementation of leadership. Tensions arose when support staff performed leadership roles especially as teacher leadership was assumed as based on expertise in teaching. Absence of adequate research literature which explores staff dynamics and staffing arrangements at centres both horizontally and vertically, makes it difficult to assess the relevance of this assumption to the early childhood sector.

- *Assumption 4: "that a distributed perspective occurs naturally"* (Torrance, 2013, p. 364). It was clear from the leadership narratives of the head teachers participating in Torrance' study (2013) that it took time and planning to organise the distribution of leadership in purposeful ways. Whilst staff in early childhood settings often worked in small teams, the legitimation of positional power to centre directors in particular, goes against the natural flow of distributing leadership to others.

- *Assumption 5: "that a distributed perspective is unproblematic"* (Torrance, 2013, p. 365). There were a number of tension points identified by Torrance (2013) ranging between teacher identity, autonomy and control and a lack of a shared definition of leadership and management. These tensions can also be found within early childhood settings and the extent to which factors such as the gender, ethnicity, age, and religion as well as the number of staff, their qualifications and experience in the sector can have an impact on distributing leadership in both school and early childhood settings require further investigation.

This analysis makes it clear that enactment of distributed leadership requires dialogue, planning and policy systems as well as strategies to monitor its progress. This understanding is reinforced by emerging findings from research conducted by both Colmer (2013) and Heikka (2014) who have argued for greater recognition of teacher leadership particularly in relation to leading pedagogy, a core function of early childhood centres. In keeping with the expanding role of early childhood educators, the proposed model in this paper goes beyond pedagogical leadership within early childhood settings to exploring new opportunities for distributed leadership in connecting with the wider community.

It is a mistake to ignore the contextual nature of distributed leadership enactment as differing social, political, historical and cultural forces at play within each community

can shape the programs available at each setting. Importantly, the interactions between these diverse factors and stakeholders create complexities which leaders must be cognisant about in the application of discipline specific knowledge when articulating strategic plans. Accordingly, it behoves leaders to seek ways of establishing a shared understanding before implementing any changes in policy or practice.

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