The ‘dark side’ of leadership in early childhood education

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Abstract
It could be suggested that persistent workforce problems in the early childhood (EC) field in Australia – such as job satisfaction and turnover may be related to ineffective leadership practices, low pay and lack of professional acknowledgement. In this article we report on a small qualitative study completed in 2017, investigating 12 educators’ experiences of what could be described as ‘dark side’ leadership practices. Purposeful sampling was used to select educators who had expressed dissatisfaction with leaders on a Facebook forum for early childhood educators. Findings revealed all of Oplatka’s elements of ‘dark side’ leadership practices and ideologies at work, with the addition of two new types of ‘dark side’ leadership practices – ‘acts of courage’ and ‘meat in the sandwich’. The evidence these data provide of regulatory breaches, discrimination and bullying highlight the critical need for action by employers, regulatory authorities and unions to better support educators and their leaders in their work environments.

Keywords
Job Satisfaction, Dark-side, autonomy, courage, neo-liberal, power, leadership

Introduction
The purpose of this paper is to report on a small qualitative study that explored ways that early childhood educators’ dissatisfaction with leadership was connected with their overall job satisfaction. In early childhood education, the terms ‘leadership’ and ‘management’ are often used interchangeably according to the context in which the leader is situated. The most agreed-upon definition of a leader is a person who inspires a group of people to achieve a common goal (Sinek, 2009; Waniganayake, Cheeseman, Fenech, Hadley, & Shepherd, 2012). By this understanding, leadership necessitates a professional and ethical responsibility to colleagues.
within the workplace. It therefore also implies that leaders have a pivotal role in building trusting, ethical, safe and sustainable workplace environments (Sinek, 2014; Waniganayake et al., 2012). Accordingly, Sinek (2009, p. 442) declares that ‘Leading is not the same as being the leader. Being the leader means that others willingly follow you—not because they have to, not because they are paid to, but because they want to.’

Whilst Waniganayake et al.’s definition suggests that leadership is more about the actions of an individual than their work role, in key early childhood policy documents a leader is understood as the approved provider of the service, or in their absence, a nominated supervisor who has day-to-day management of the service (ACECQA, 2011). It is this role-based understanding of leaders and leadership that is the focus of this paper.

Job satisfaction has long been considered a key indicator of employees’ work-related well-being. Job satisfaction is broadly understood as the beliefs and feelings that people have towards their job, including their sense of achievement, how well it suits their values, and how well-rewarded they feel for their efforts in terms of intrinsic motivation as well as financial compensation (Aziri, 2011). Associations have been consistently shown between early childhood (EC) educators’ job satisfaction and having autonomy in their work – including the ability to use professional skills and make sound pedagogical decisions (Hur, Jeon & Buettner, 2015). However, in one recent Australian study, researchers found that a vast majority of participating EC educators faced challenges such as feeling undervalued, underpaid and overburdened with paperwork (Irvine, Thorpe, McDonald, Lunn, & Sumson, 2016). In another Australian study, Jones, Hadley, and Johnstone (2016) found many EC educators were satisfied with the profession – just not their current workplace. Jones et al. reported that educators were more satisfied in work environments with higher staff to child ratios, and might actively seek out these types of work environments. These studies illustrate some of the complex reasons for educators’ job satisfaction, and dissatisfaction.

However, the impact of relationships with leaders on educators’ job satisfaction and turnover has not been widely explored in Australian or international research literature (Whitebook & Ryan, 2011). Of the literature that has considered these relationships, there is some empirical evidence suggesting that problematic relationships with leaders are frequently among EC educators’ reasons for job dissatisfaction, and may require greater investigation (Cumming, 2017).

Indications of problematic relationships between educators and leaders within unsafe work environments – particularly relating to unequal power relations – are evident in discussions of horizontal violence (Hard, 2006; Waniganayake, et al. 2012) and persistent structural tensions (Nuttall, 2016). Horizontal violence is psychological harassment that can directly impact upon EC educators’ self-esteem and autonomy (Hard, 2006). Hard suggests that horizontal violence in EC settings – defined as bullying, unwarranted criticism coupled with indifference and withholding information (not necessarily from leaders) – promotes a culture of ‘low professional status’ (p. 44) concealed under the guise of professional ‘niceness’. Waniganayake et al. (2012) suggest that a culture of horizontal violence is widespread in work environments with unequal power relationships (such as early childhood education) and is exemplified by misuse of power by EC educators and leaders.

Nuttall (2016) explains that persistent structural tensions relate to the day-to-day practices in each workplace and, importantly, the ‘cultural rules’ EC educators adopt to achieve the service’s long-term vision. Nuttall suggests that such tensions may arise through misalignments between workplace customs and conventions and resources available for EC educators to achieve day-to-day tasks. For
example, guidelines governing the number of observations and amount of data collected about each child per term may not match the amount of planning time an EC educator has been allocated to complete this task. Tensions may therefore arise from misalignments of structures – such as the overarching governance systems for reaching quality outcomes – and/or in combination with the leadership practices used to achieve compliance with the systems.

With over 46% of all EC services in Australia for-profit1 or privately owned (ACECQA, 2016) researchers have also expressed concerns for some years about the negative effects for children and families of managerialist approaches to ECE (Brennan & Oloman, 2009). While a profit motive might be considered normal in the business context, it is considered a less appropriate aim in the ECEC sector because it can position children as commodities (Osgood, 2006) and educators as human capital. For example, managerialist approaches in ECEC can result in leaders adhering to technical practices such as minimum standards around educator to child ratios, in order to minimise costs (such as educators’ wages) in order to maximise profit (Brennan & Oloman, 2009). Little is known, however, about how these sorts of practices by leaders affect educators’ job satisfaction.

The purpose of this study was to investigate problematic leadership practices and examine their effects on EC educators’ job satisfaction. The study also sought to highlight EC educators’ experiences of unequal power relationships, and to identify the impacts of persistent structural tensions (Nuttall, 2016). Before beginning the discussion of the study, we outline Oplatka’s (2016) ‘dark side’ leadership framework that was used to guide data generation and analysis in the study.

‘Dark side’ leadership practices

Oplatka’s (2016) ‘dark side’ leadership framework emerged from his research concerning ‘responsible leadership’ within primary school settings in Israel. The ‘dark side’ conceptual framework arose from business literature that identified problematic individual leadership characteristics of ego-centric narcissism, emotionally unawareness and self-centred decision-making. Oplatka also included two elements drawn from critiques of neo-liberal ideals (those privileging the free operation of economic markets). These elements were leaders having a narrow view of education and a business-like view of children (Oplatka, 2016). Each of these elements conceptualised by Oplatka is explained below.

Egocentric-narcissistic – leaders appear outwardly arrogant and may use manipulation to attain and maintain power. Emotional unawareness – linked to a leaders’ inability to regulate emotional output and connect emotionally with the people in their team. Self-centred decision making – occurs when leadership decisions are based on maintaining or building the appointed leaders’ self-image rather than meeting the needs of the service.

Oplatka (2016) also suggested that neo-liberal ideals were informing leadership practices in his study via: narrow views of education – highlighted by an overreliance on accountability procedures within the workplace; and business-like view of children – accentuated by leadership that views children as legitimate commodities to be involved in processes of profit-making.

Research process

The research question that guided this qualitative study was: How is long day care educators’ dissatisfaction with leadership connected with their overall job satisfaction? Exploring ‘dark side’ leadership practices meant exploring the participants’ unique individual experiences to illuminate the phenomenon of dissatisfaction relating to problematic leadership. Oplatka’s (2016) conceptual framework of problematic leadership within educational settings was used to illuminate ‘dark side’ leadership practices. The research
design used to gain multiple perspectives and meanings is described in the following sections that also outline the data collection process (focus group, interview and document analysis), data analysis procedures and the findings.

**Ethical considerations**

The Faculty of Arts and Education Human Research Ethics Committee at Charles Sturt University approved the research proposal. One ethical concern in this study was that participation might crystallise participants’ discontent into a decision to change workplaces or leave the field altogether. This could contribute to ongoing turnover problems (estimated by Irvine et al. 2016 to be around 20% p.a.). However, it might also be considered an ethical response to support educators to leave settings where they were suffering the ill-effects of ‘dark side’ leadership practices by validating their experiences. The benefits of making visible educators’ experiences of ‘dark side’ leadership practices were therefore considered to outweigh these potential risks.

An additional concern was the possible ‘trigger’ effect of asking participants about (often) difficult experiences. To mediate this risk, participants were approached only after having already described difficult experiences in an online forum. Other ethical considerations concerned maintaining privacy and confidentiality of participants as they participated in the online focus groups. Accordingly, each participant was assigned a pseudonym that did not sound like or connect to the participant’s actual name. This pseudonym was used during the online focus groups, analysis, and in the subsequent findings and discussion (including this article).

**Participants**

Although using a biased sample of participants could potentially place limits on conclusions (Flick, 2015), in this case, using a purposeful sample was necessary to answer the particular research question concerning experiences of problematic leadership (Bryman, 2012; Flick, 2015). Potential participants were approached from a Facebook forum called *EYLF/NQF Ideas & Discussion forum*, which has around 74,000 members. Potential participants were approached for the study based on their expression of dissatisfaction with leadership, and for the relevant and rich information in their original posts in the forum. In total, seven EC educators participated in the focus group, and an additional five (who were unable to or preferred not to participate in the focus group) were interviewed.

Participants identified themselves as certificate III, diploma or degree qualified. One participant had a bachelor’s degree, five were diploma qualified and six certificate III qualified. All participants were currently working or had worked in EC education and were not nominated supervisors, appointed directors, managers or service owners. Participants were female, with eight no longer working at the EC service where they had reported ‘dark side’ leadership practices caused dissatisfaction – therefore perceptions were based on past experiences. Participants disclosed the ownership structure of their work environment (for-profit or not-for-profit) when questioned about ratios and the impact to their working day. Follow-up questions around organisational structures revealed that all of the participants had experience with for-profit services within their working career. Across all data sources, 10 participants had experienced ‘dark side’ leadership in for-profit services.

**Methods**

Research concerning EC educators’ job satisfaction has been mainly conducted using standardised tools such as the *Early Childhood Job Satisfaction Survey* (Jorde Bloom, 2016) and *Teacher Stress Inventory* (Fimian, 1988). Researchers using these instruments have noted the need for more qualitative enquiry to contextualise data from these tools, as they do not always produce conclusive results of the
direction of association of some variables (Kusma, Groneberg, Nienhaus, & Mache, 2012). These suggestions informed the data collection methods used in the current study.

**Online focus group**

There is a growing trend in the use of virtual focus groups on Facebook as a way of recruiting participants and observing phenomena within a naturalistic online setting (Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2015). An online focus group with seven participants was conducted on Facebook over a two-week period, during which participant comments were open for discussion with each other and the researcher. An opening question was posted online each day, and participants responded asynchronously – an advantage of online focus groups (Lijadi and van Schalkwyk, 2015), especially when aiming to work with a population in different timezones across Australia.

A focus group approach was also used to allow for deviations within the question order in response to participants’ contributions, and to probe further to elicit more detail (Flick, 2015). The opening question aimed to establish a general overview of dissatisfaction levels, such as: ‘Can you describe your working relationship with the leader in your workplace?’ In an attempt to mitigate a bias towards only asking about experiences of problematic leadership, positive questions were also asked – such as ‘What type of leaders you like to work with?’ Follow-up questions were sometimes asked to elicit further details, such as ‘Can you describe what has a negative impact on your day-to-day work?’ The effectiveness of the online focus group approach was demonstrated (for example) through the extensive discussion and probes concerning educator to child ratios, which proved to be one of the most significant themes in the findings.

**Interviews**

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted asynchronously on Facebook Messenger with five participants. The use of online interviews allowed participants to log in anytime, anywhere, and was also used for participants who were reluctant to participate in an online focus group. The online interviews also allowed scope for challenging participant comments based on the direction and tone of dissatisfaction. For example, one participant’s main area of discussion concerned bullying by a leader, so questions included: ‘Can you give example of the “abuse” from the leader?’ This was followed up with: ‘You mentioned that the leader in the old workplace had “favourites”, how did that impact on your work?’ Using the online interview approach therefore also enabled exploration of sensitive questions (such as these) in a more confidential way than the online focus group format would have allowed.

**Data analysis**

Data from the focus group, online interviews and document analysis were coded and categorised according to Oplatka’s (2016) ‘dark side’ leadership elements, comprising: egocentric-narcissism, emotional unawareness and self-centred decision-making, coupled with the neo-liberal ideals of a narrow view of education and a business-like view of children. Data that was not already represented by Oplatka’s elements formed two new elements of ‘dark side’ leadership called ‘meat in the sandwich’ and ‘acts of courage’. These are discussed in detail below.

**Findings and discussion**

The findings from this study illustrate EC educators’ substantial awareness of power struggles and ethical dilemmas concerning ‘dark side’ leadership practices. Evidence of the lived experiences of increased regulatory burdens is also coupled with that of inappropriate educator to child ratios in many workplaces. The findings indicate that the pre-existing
elements of Oplatka’s framework (2016) were evident in the EC educators’ accounts, along with the two emerging themes. Table 1 is a visual representation of the findings of the study encapsulating Oplatka’s (2016) elements and subthemes, along with the two new themes. The discussion of findings that follows is also structured according to these elements. For the purposes of brevity, the leadership characteristics – egocentric-narcissism, emotional unawareness and self-centred decision making – are discussed together as ‘dark side’ leadership practices. Similarly, the elements of business-like view of children and narrow view of education have been combined and retitled, ‘businesslike practices’. All participant names are pseudonyms.

**Business-like practices**

The most frequently reported area of dissatisfaction by participants concerned leaders regularly enacting neo-liberal ideologies. In particular, these related to problematic interpretation of regulations for minimum child to educator ratios. Within the online focus group and individual interviews, 11 of the 12 participants identified legal and ethical dilemmas concerning ratios, and 10 of the 12 participants identified that these had occurred at for-profit services. Dissatisfaction reported at for-profit services ranged from being ‘more about making money than providing high-quality care’ (Rose, focus group), to statements indicating that business-like practices and the perceived wishes of ‘shareholders’ (business owners) were prioritised over the EC educators’ (as ‘stakeholders’). Participant Helen noted, for example: ‘the leader [owner of the business] does not support the staff if they think they will upset the parents and lose business’ (Helen, interview). Rose reported that educators at her service: ‘challenged management [about] not being paid for after-hours meetings and they got told “food is provided so that is enough”’. Examples of business-like practices by leaders also included: educators not being replaced in rooms when they took their scheduled breaks (Helen, Wendy, interviews); unilateral leadership decision making (Wendy, interview) and including the leader...
in the educator to child ratio while they were working in the office (Rose, focus group).

Online focus group discussions also revealed participants’ awareness of regulatory requirements regarding ratios, and their frustration when leaders’ seemed to interpret ‘under the roof’ or ‘across the service’ ratios regulations from a business-like perspective. Regulations state that educators can only be included in the ratios when they are working ‘directly with the children’ (ACECQA, 2014). However, participant Rose’s leader had interpreted the regulations to mean that she could undertake managerial tasks in the office and still be within ratios. Wendy (interview) reported that educators at her service were pressured to accept their leader’s interpretation of ‘across the service ratios’ without proper consultation around safety of the children and stress levels of educators:

‘Across the service’ ratios are used. [The ratios] create an atmosphere of havoc and guilt like if you are one child over e.g. three staff to nine children, you feel bad like you shouldn’t have [those children] even if it’s unsettled in the rooms. We find it hard to supervise and support the children in their play, which creates stress and anxiety.

A document analysis revealed that ratios may be calculated across the service rather than on a room by room basis and additional EC educators are required to meet ratios during pertinent times in the day (ACECQA, 2014). However, participants felt despondent that leaders privileged cost-cutting over practices that would be in the interests of children and educators.

Further clarification revealed that minimum requirements of the National Law (2011) recommend that ratios should be measured in terms of ‘adequate supervision’ (p. 76). According to The Guide to the National Quality Standards (ACECQA, 2011) ‘adequate supervision’ is fundamental for the health, safety and well-being of young children. As the data above suggests, this idea is (perhaps) naively premised on the idea that business owners (approved providers) will always act in the children’s best interest.

Participants also identified incorrect remuneration in the workplace as an example of the privileging of business-like practices – for example, in relation to not paying overtime and pay levels commensurate with their experience and qualifications:

A diploma qualified staff member who is very capable of running the room when I am not there has not been paid in this role as she should be ...educators not being acknowledged for their qualifications and few entitlements, making it more likely to let standards drop. (Yasmin, focus group)

When it comes time for accreditation new toys were bought, extra staff were put on, staff worked overtime for free to make sure everything is up to scratch, [then] management blame you for the [poor] rating they receive. (Helen, interview)

Experiences such as Yasmin’s and Helen’s generated feelings of resentment between the participants and their workplace leaders. These were exacerbated by structural tensions between ambiguous legal requirements and lack of attention to rights of educators.

From the participants’ reports presented so far, it might seem that business-like practices were confined to leaders in for-profit services, however, this was not the case. During the focus group discussion, seven of the eight participants discussed business-like leadership practices in not-for-profit services. Shirley – who had worked as an EC educator for 17 years and identified examples of council-run services that enacted business-like practices – commented that from her perspective ‘At the end of the day it’s 100 per cent the leadership that is in place’ rather than the service type itself that meant business-like practices might be enacted.

Data from both focus group and interview discussions also suggested participants’ awareness of the need for business owners to balance
profit with workplace sustainability. Their dissatisfaction stemmed from their perception of an imbalance favouring business-like approaches. This issue was highlighted by the successful leadership practices within a for-profit service where the balance of workplace sustainability and profits was more evenly matched. For example, participant Xanthia (focus group) indicated that the ethical dilemmas of working in for-profit organisations (also experienced by seven of the eight participants in the focus group) could be overcome by ethical leadership. Xanthia said: ‘I’m sure making money is also an aim and you can’t blame the owner for that, but we never feel like a number either, so she has the balance right.’ Xanthia had observed that ethical considerations could be balanced with profit in order to sustain the longevity of the business whilst also attending to the emotional well-being of the educators (as Wanginayake et al., 2012 also advocate is possible).

Findings from the study indicate that leaders demonstrated narrow views of education by using the authority attendant to their title to exert power over rather than share power with educators (Waniganayake et al., 2012). As one educator recalled: ‘She [area manager] will often come around and tell us to change the way the room is run because it doesn’t match her centre vision [not the vision that staff at the centre had]’ (Wendy, interview). Similarly, when responding to questions in the focus group about how participants’ services made programming decisions, Rhonda said: ‘everywhere I have worked it is decided upon by management that at least two observations are completed a month. It feels unfair not to be able to have a say.’ These examples demonstrate ways that leaders imposed ‘power over’ educators by controlling day-to-day practices through unilateral decision making.

Leadership control of day-to-day practices and unilateral decision-making could be due to the burdens of meeting quality standards and the subsequent public display of a service’s quality rating, as mandated by regulatory and compliance regimes. However, as focus group and interview examples show in the following section, misalignments of structures, resources, workplace cultures (Nuttall, 2016) and leadership practices all seem to be implicated in the persistent tensions in the work of EC educators.

‘Dark side’ leadership practices

According to Oplatka (2016), ‘dark side’ leaders’ practices may be emotionally unaware, self-centred, narcissist or ego-centric. Findings from the study illuminated not only leaders’ self-centred and emotional unawareness, but also their use of narcissistic elements such as emotional blackmail, and bullying – as in this experience, shared by Sandy:

Literacy is not my strong point. I find spelling and grammar hard and my manager would always put me down. I was never allowed to change or implement ideas or programme. My work or effort was never good enough I spent two whole days doing my programme. I gave it to my manager to look over and she basically highlighted everything she didn’t like...she highlighted every idea. When I asked her what I needed to do to change, she said (in a negative tone) ‘don’t worry I will fXXXing do it myself’. (Sandy, focus group)

Emotional blackmail was also evident in Rose’s comment that: ‘Every time I call in sick my director makes me feel really guilty (never enough staff!) – so unless one of my kids or myself are dying I am going to work’ (Rose, focus group). These examples show how leaders can mobilise the authority of their position to impose ‘cultural rules’ (Nuttall, 2016) for doing things that are difficult to challenge. Practices such as these had resulted in high levels of reported stress, and ultimately for some participants, workplace turnover (staying in the industry but at a different service).

Self-centred and narcissistic characteristics were also evident when leaders attempted to
preserve an image of authority or integrity at any cost:

During the assessment and rating visit I was talking to the assessor and my manager was in the office. The assessor was asking questions in Quality Area 7 – so, talking about whether the company pays for staff training etc. They never did, we paid for everything. My manager screamed from the office saying, ‘that’s a lie we pay for all the staff to do training’ and said ‘I have receipts Sandy, I paid last week don’t say we don’t’ . . . I got blamed we didn’t get [the] exceeding [rating]. (Sandy, interview)

Oleanna was marginalised as her leader appeared to react to her greater rapport with staff:

I had a good rapport with the staff and the director didn’t and it lead to the director harassing and bullying me. I got sworn at, I got spoken to like a lesser person than herself, I got excluded from conversations. As assistant director my duties got cancelled with no warning and she locked cupboards in the office that I had always had access to. I was devastated after the bullying . . . three staff members left weeks after I left. (Oleanna, focus group)

Perhaps more troubling, both Sandy and Oleanna’s experiences illustrate horizontal violence – bullying enacted from a place of power in EC workplaces (Hard, 2006). As these cases suggest, bullying and lying, and a lack of support within the work environment, can have impacts on educators’ well-being, job satisfaction and length of tenure in their workplace (Sinek, 2014).

In the following excerpt, Wilma reported ‘dark side’ leadership practices that left her feeling ‘unappreciated’ and unable grow professionally within her role:

there was clearly a lack of appreciation of each educator, their personal philosophy and teaching styles. I felt unsupported, disrespected and unappreciated. Little scope for individuality, an ever-evolving philosophy, or advocacy for children. I also feel the style of leadership is very much based on authority, leaving little opportunity for individual centres to grow and develop as a community, or depending on the strengths and needs of its staff, children and families. (Wilma, focus group)

The lack of opportunity to use professional skills, knowledge and philosophy were deeply dispiriting for Wilma. The above excerpt also demonstrated how the leader used authority or power over, rather than power with by failing to recognise the unique strengths of the EC educators (Wanginayake et al., 2012). Data such as this suggests that perhaps it is not only lack of community recognition (Irvine et al., 2016), but also lack of recognition by leaders in educators’ own workplaces that contributes to educators’ job dissatisfaction (Sinek, 2014).

Across the three ‘dark side’ leadership elements – emotional unawareness, narcissism and self-centred decision-making – a shared theme is the absence of collective practices. Nuttall (2016) suggests that collective practices enable a shift from the individual EC educator striving for best practice within an EC setting towards a collective group identifying and reshaping ‘cultural rules’. ‘Dark side’ leadership practices appear to effectively eliminate the possibility for these kinds of collective practices to develop and sustain educators and their colleagues’ well-being and longevity in the workforce.

**Meat in the sandwich**

The first of two new ‘dark side’ themes that emerged from the study’s data concerns leaders being the ‘meat in the sandwich’:

If my director wasn’t ‘sandwiched’ and had to save money on absolutely EVERYTHING from staff to resources and food, the quality practices would be more likely to be implemented. (Rose, focus group)
I really like my director, she is an easy-going, friendly person. We have often had problems with child to staff ratios, often staff complain about this to her but she tells us that she is told to do this by the owner of the business and is unable to stand up for herself and the staff. I feel my director needs to have been given more power to make decisions and be able to help and support the staff with their needs. (Helen, interview)

Rose and Helen worked in for-profit workplaces that were owned by approved providers, but who had appointed a leader to follow their vision and business plan. As these data excerpts suggest, this structure can position leaders to become the ‘meat in the sandwich’ as they are pressured from ‘above’ (e.g. by owners or organisations) and from ‘below’ (e.g. by EC educators). This situation is depicted in Figure 1.

Despite participants’ many difficult experiences with ‘dark side’ leadership practices, educators were nevertheless sensitive to the way the divested authority and management structure of ECEC services could impact upon workplace leaders. Examples such as the following show that the management structures of for-profit services need not automatically lead to ‘dark side’ leadership practices. For example, participant Xanthia reported a straightforward leadership model in the for-profit service at which she worked. There, the approved provider was the owner and day-to-day leader of the service. Xanthia explained that her leader had made an effort to move away from the business-like for-profit model towards a service that valued educators:

The director (leader) answers to no one so the chain of communication is much simpler. If we want or need something we tell her and we generally get it – resource speaking. She understands that educators are the backbone of the centre. (Xanthia, focus group)

**Acts of courage**

Ten of the 12 participants reported that despite the challenge of ‘dark side’ leadership practices, they questioned and challenged leadership decisions. Examples of EC educator’s capacity to advocate thus generated a new category titled ‘acts of courage’. Yasmin, a room leader at her service, discussed feelings of frustration that culminated with defying leadership control and the over-reliance on ways things have always been done:

We are expected to run everything by our leader – who really doesn’t like change and goes by the old saying ‘why change something that isn’t broke?’… Sometimes we just do it and not tell her and when she finds out we can show her how well it has worked and put it back on her as to why she won’t let it happen. (Yasmin, focus group)

In this case, the leaders’ unwillingness to change resulted in the EC educators engaging in subversion of the customs and conventions within the workplace, to enact change themselves. For others, acting on their principles was a given:

I’m very comfortable addressing concerns at my workplace. I’ve always been brought up that if you silently sit back and let negative things happen then you are giving your consent for it to continue. (Xanthia, focus group)
In the study, acts of courage reported by participants were frequently led by experienced and/or more highly qualified EC educators – such as with Yasmin and Xanthia, who were both room leaders. Acting courageously in the face of ‘dark side’ leadership practices could rely on EC educators having the confidence and/or evidence-based knowledge to draw upon in pursuing higher quality practices in the face of opposition. As also noted by Fenech and Sumson (2007), recognising their frustrations, unwillingness to be complicit and having confidence all assisted these educators to mitigate high levels of control and structural tensions within their workplaces.

Limitations

While this study generated new insights into educators’ experiences of ‘dark side’ leadership practices, it also had limitations. For example, social desirability bias (Bryman, 2012) – participants’ tendency to focus narrowly on details pertaining to the study topic – may have resulted in an overemphasis on negative and ineffective leadership practices. Given that the recruitment of participants through purposive sampling was based on their discussion of difficult situations involving leaders, their accounts could be considered biased (Bryman, 2012).

However, as data reported in the findings illustrates, participants also shared positive examples of leadership, and demonstrated empathy for leaders despite their own difficult experiences. Findings could also be considered limited by focusing on the possible consequences of ineffective leadership to educator well-being and job satisfaction. A complementary approach would explore seek leaders’ own perspectives on and motivations for ineffective practices, or positive implications of effective leadership practices. Finally, while the current study was small in scale, the experiences of the 12 participants are far from isolated. The Facebook forum pages from which participants were recruited are replete with examples similar to those recorded in the study, suggesting that the scale of ‘dark side’ leadership practices is widespread.

Conclusion

Using Oplatka’s (2016) ‘dark side’ framework helped to make visible some of the effects of unequal power relationships on EC educators’ job satisfaction. The findings from this study illuminate a number of troubling experiences that show some of the ways that structural tensions within the workplace seem to contribute to job dissatisfaction, and in some cases, to turnover. The examples shared by participants of coercion, emotional blackmail and horizontal violence clearly show not only the ‘dark side’ leadership practices within the sector, but the ‘dark side’ of conditions of EC educators’ work – that have been rarely documented.

As noted, six of the seven focus group participants and all five interviewees indicated that structural tensions and power imbalances seemed to be magnified in (though not exclusive to) for-profit workplaces. In particular, a profit motive seemed to interfere with adherence to educator to child ratios, and to children and educators’ rights to accurate interpretation of industrial laws. Regardless of ownership type, however, the repeated infringement of regulations relating to pay and conditions indicates a pressing need for closer monitoring of business practices within services.

In addition (and while not the focus of the study), the ‘dark side’ conditions experienced by EC leaders themselves were also highlighted by the findings. Participants’ recognition of their leaders as the ‘meat in the sandwich’ is matched by research evidence that the pressures of pedagogical documentation, and educator complacency can make leaders’ positions even more difficult (Irvine et al., 2016). As Irvine et al. (2016) also suggest, the sector requires greater unity between employers and employees, along with acknowledgement and action
by regulatory bodies. Findings from this study make visible these often hidden experiences, and prompt new directions for future work (by researchers, policymakers, regulators and approved providers) towards a better-supported and more stable workforce. For example, one remedy for the experiences recounted in the study, could be targeted professional development for leaders concerning the effects of ‘dark side’ leadership practices. While some of the behaviours of EC leaders might be ascribed to personality (according to Oplatka in relation to school teachers), the structural tensions that persist in the work of EC educators suggest that attention must also be given to the conditions in which situations such as ‘dark side’ leadership practices have been able to develop, and continue to play out. In particular, investigation is required into approved providers’ compliance with the industrial and regulatory systems that govern the work of EC educators.

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Notes
1. For-profit EC services are operated to generate profits that are distributed to owners and shareholders. In not-for-profit EC services all income received is spent on providing the service (Australian Government, 2015).
2. Approved services undertake regular quality assessments measured against the seven National Quality standards and the National Regulations. Regulatory authorities rate services as significant improvement, working towards, meeting standards, exceeding standards or excellent. Ratings are available to families to assist in making informed choices about choosing a service (ACECQA, 2011).

References


