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HOW IS LEADERSHIP UNDERSTOOD IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE?

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ABSTRACT

Leadership is a contentious issue and one that has attracted considerable attention in the business world and in society in general. As individuals we appraise the performances of politicians, consider the credibility of corporations on the basis of their leadership behaviour and attribute the success or failure of organisations to the effectiveness of their leaders. In the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) there is less overt attention paid to the notion of leadership. The evolution of the field over the past century is testimony to some form of leadership but what form that takes today is unclear. This paper seeks to provide an overview of literature related to leadership both broadly and in ECEC. Areas for research are identified.

Keywords: Leadership, ECEC, understanding and enacting leadership.

INTRODUCTION

The notion of leadership is much debated in the popular media and in more traditional management literature and a clear and stable definition and model remains fluid and somewhat contentious (Northcraft & Neale, 1994). Despite the widespread work into leadership, there has until recently been limited research into the notion of leadership in the field of ECEC (Rodd, 1998). As a young and inexperienced early childhood educator I encountered various frustrations in terms of mentoring and leadership of the ECEC field. These circumstances remain evident as I teach preservice early childhood educators and in my observations of the field in this new millenium. Some recent work by Nupponen (2001); Geoghegan, Petriwskyj, Bower and Geoghegan, (2003) illustrates some interest in exploring leadership in settings catering for children aged birth to five. This paper discusses the literature in relation to how individuals in the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) understand the notion of leadership and how they see it enacted. It identifies a number of research questions that require investigation in ECEC.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definitions of what constitutes leadership and numerous leadership styles are plentiful, yet despite over fifty years of ongoing work in this area, we still know very little about leadership (Sergiovanni, 1992). The identification of one-leadership approach to suit all circumstances is

problematic (Sarros & Butchatsky, 1996). Defining leadership involves a variety of concepts such as individual traits, influence over other people, role relationships, situational characteristics and the notion of the follower (Northcraft & Neale, 1994; Schultz & Schultz, 1998). Other factors involved include ideas such as meeting people's needs, mobilizing power, negotiating agreements and becoming political (Sergiovanni, 1990). The essence of the term seems to revolve around the concept of creating positive change in organisations. How leadership is understood and enacted in early childhood contexts and by ECEC professionals and students remains ill defined.

Evolving notions of leadership

Three significant schools of thought dominate understandings of leadership. These are: the influence of individual traits (Sarros & Butchatsky, 1996; Black & Porter, 2000), the behaviour of leaders (Northcraft & Neale, 1994; Black & Porter, 2000), and the context of leadership (Fiedler, 1967; Schultz & Schultz, 1998). However, it seems that leadership is more of an interplay of these aspects dependant upon the needs of the organisation (Sarros & Butchatsky, 1996; Black & Porter, 2000). The fluid and evolving nature of leadership demands that it is best examined with attention to the context (Fiedler, 1967). For this reason understanding how individuals in ECEC perceive this notion is pertinent to developing programs that meet their particular needs.

Historically

Early in the twentieth century, leadership was based around the notion of increasing worker productivity. The leader viewed the worker as purely an extension of the machine that they operated. This view is termed scientific management, and was designed to direct workers who were viewed as unable to direct themselves effectively (Schultz & Schultz, 1998; Black & Porter, 2000). In contrast, the human relations approach which, by the very term, indicates an alternative view of the worker and of the relationship that exists between the two parties (ie. the leader and the worker). This view sees the worker as inherently seeking "inner satisfaction and fulfillment from their work" (Schultz & Schultz, 1998: 205).

Leadership can be discussed in terms of being a formal or an informal leader. The formal leader is one who is in an appointed leadership position (positional leadership) (Northcraft & Neale, 1994; Black & Porter, 2000). The informal leader is one who demonstrates leadership qualities such as the use of relevant skills and commitment to achieve group goals, and high visibility via discussion and contributions from a non-defined leadership position (Northcraft & Neale, 1994). This is where managers may take opportunities to exercise leadership and in education and care settings it may be the individual teacher not the director. The notion of more than positional leaders being able to lead is supported by Blackmore (1999) who views the usual conceptions of leadership as problematic since they involve top down images of leadership or strategic management. In contrast, she sees educational leadership in particular as "worked on from the bottom up" (p. 2). The distinction between formal and informal leadership is an important one in that it illustrates the potential for there to be more than one leader in an organisation and also that leadership is not purely positional (Hard, 2001). This suggests that leadership is a possibility for many in the field of early care and education, be it as formal or informal leaders.

Leadership traits

Early leadership approaches tended to focus on the traits of individuals in order to determine their suitability for leadership roles. This approach has influenced social perceptions of what constitutes an effective leader as well as creating the image of the leader as predetermined by personal characteristics (Sarros & Butchatsky, 1996; Black & Porter, 2000). This approach views certain individuals as leaders by virtue of their personal characteristics however, this work has more recently been viewed as somewhat limited and antiquated (Northcraft & Neale, 1994) and confined to research on men (Black & Porter, 2000). Somers Hill and Ragland consider that social perceptions about leadership have not progressed far from "assuming that the tallest man [sic] would naturally be the best leader" (Somers Hill & Ragland, 1995: 9). What the search for specific leadership traits has elucidated is a relationship between certain characteristics and whom it is believed could be a leader. Perceptions of leaders as requiring predetermined characteristics, such as those outlined above, could deter potential candidates who perceive they do not have such traits.

Leadership in context

Another perspective determining effective leadership is the influence of the situation or context. The leader needs to determine the procedure to best suit the circumstance to achieve the most effective decision (Black & Porter, 2000). This leader is dependent upon the context, the response of the subordinates and the particular circumstance requiring attention. It suggests flexibility of leadership behaviour from autocratic to participative (Fiedler, 1967), in response to variables of the situation (Black & Porter, 2000). For example, working with staff and families may require a certain style of participative leadership somewhat different to that necessary for effective advocacy for the early childhood education and care field in a political arena.

The maleness of leadership

The nature of the corporate workplace and the relatively recent involvement of women in that sphere of employment have meant that traditional concepts of leadership have been defined in male terms (Somers Hill & Ragland, 1995). Such a definition has implications for how women perceive leadership. In many ways, the very language of management is masculine and the concept is culturally and historically associated with men (Cox 1996; Wajcman 1999). There are multiple implications for females seeking leadership roles, if leadership is perceived and enacted as a male construct (Somers Hill & Ragland, 1995). It seems that playing the game according to predominately male rules can leave women marginalised to differently constructed ways of being a leader and can also create restrictions for other women. The stoic, sport orientated, hard working, heroic image of the leader is part of a model of leadership that is authoritarian, competitive and independent (Wajcman, 1999). With leadership traditionally defined in male terms, the option of adopting leadership roles may be less than appealing for some women and, particularly, women in a predominately female field such as ECEC (Hard, 2001).

However, congregation of women into a paradigm of leadership that involves the "ethic of care", or what is more commonly referred to as "soft leadership", is problematic (Somers Hill & Ragland, 1995; Wajcman, 1999). It universalises the category of women and is strategically dangerous for the feminist position (Blackmore, 1999). It reinforces the idea that men and women are irreconcilably different rather than the concept that gender is fluid. As Blackmore

(1999) states, "In the process of its popularization, however, the logic of the 'women's ways of leading' discourse treats women as a homogeneous group without differences in race/class/gender or in beliefs" (Blackmore, 1999: 57). Such a polarization serves to reproduce gender stereotypes rather than direct attention to the discrimination present in organisations that make the adoption of leadership roles problematic for women (Wajcman, 1999). The dominant male leadership approach also may be excluding males who do not fit the accepted model of the male leader. Thus, defining leadership purely according to gender is problematic (Cox, 1996). It seems that caution needs be exercised in the unquestioning embrace of a feminised leadership style, since the adoption of such an approach may be popular today (Grant, 1997), but rejected outright tomorrow if such a style were to become obsolete (Hard, 2001).

Is more ECEC leadership necessary?

The development of the field of ECEC over the past century is testimony to the presence of some form of leadership. Appreciating the historical aspects of the field does not suggest that further understanding and development of leadership is not warranted, particularly given the evolving nature of the leadership discourse in the wider community and in the literature. The need for leadership in ECEC is in essence two-fold. On one hand, it revolves around the notion of advocacy for children and childhood (Jensen & Hannibal, 2000). On the other, it relates to factors that contribute to the wellbeing of the field (Kagan, 1999). Unlike the corporate world, the necessity for effective leadership in ECEC is not directly related to increased productivity and financial outcomes, although some in the private childcare industry may disagree. Outcomes are usually driven by the desire to achieve improved circumstances for children, families and staff.

Low activity equals low profile

Limited leadership, or the absence of it, is linked to limited political power and a low social profile and, in turn, limited and vulnerable funding. Rodd (1998) links the reluctance to become political to the field retaining a low social profile. She also maintains that the lack of political advocacy contributes to a weak power base. This is somewhat similar to what Stonehouse (1994) suggests in her notion of the need for specific leadership from and for the field, in order to influence and direct change. Understanding the factors that motivate or mitigate against the adoption of leadership roles or behaviours by ECEC professionals could help to clarify what aspects work as incentives and how these could be more actively nurtured in order to achieve improved outcomes for children, families and staff.

Leadership training

The lack of specific training for leadership roles has left the field less than well equipped for the higher order leadership activities such as advocacy and mentoring (Lam, 2000). While ECEC practitioners are trained to develop programs for children, they have little or no training for working as a leader of a team of adults (Kagan & Bowman, 1997; Rodd, 1998). This lack of training means that the field is not well versed in the means available for effective advocacy. Thus, effective advocacy becomes more a matter of chance than good management. This lack of preparation means that most directors are not prepared for the complexity of their role and lack the training and other types of assistance available in other industries (Hayden 1996). It seems that those in the field responsible for leadership, are not well trained in contemporary leadership theory, and thus less than well equipped to advance the field (Rodd, 1998). Increased awareness

of the evolving nature of leadership and the multiple ways of leading through specific training, may illustrate more appealing models for potential candidates in ECEC and increase the confidence to undertake leadership roles and behaviours.

Who is leading the field?

A call to leadership is necessary in order to guide changes in the field rather than "having to adjust to changes that we have not initiated" (Stonehouse, 1994: 9). This indicates that the field would be better served by having its own leaders in preference to leadership and direction emanating from other areas and disciplines such as psychology. Unlike other professions in which the members play a role in initiating and influencing changes (eg. the medical profession), the ECEC field is frequently the recipient of leadership from other education levels and sectors of bureaucracy (Stonehouse, 1994). A call to leadership can be made in terms of the influence leaders can have on the quality of early childhood experiences (Taba, Castel, Vermeer, Hanchett, Flores & Caufield, 1999). Nupponen (2001) and Jorde-Bloom (1992) support the concept that leadership is essential since it is "the director who sets the tone and the climate of concern that is the hallmark of a quality program" (p. 580). Effective leadership at the service level can thus affect the quality of the care and education for the children.

Factors that have inhibited the development of leadership in ECEC

There is an inherent reticence by those in ECEC towards leadership (Rodd, 1998; Taba et al., 1999). This is, in part, due to the characteristics required to nurture children, which are somewhat incongruent to those required for advocacy leadership such as risk taking behaviours (Grieshaber, 2001). Espinosa (1997) recognises the nurturing attributes and emotional sensitivity in relationships (valued by those in early care and education) and maintains that these qualities contribute to a desire for harmony rather than to "subject oneself to the rigours and hardships of leadership" (Espinosa, 1997: 101). This construction implies that leadership is in fact hard and undesirable. To move beyond this, Espinosa (1997) proposes that all members of the field need to be prepared to accept the challenges and responsibility of leadership. This is a concept congruent with informal and distributed leadership, indicating that more than positional leaders can lead and how the context can afford this opportunity (Crowther, 1996). In this way, the very nature and qualities required of the early childhood professional may be the factors that are inhibiting leadership aspirations and resulting in a paucity of leaders. The qualities mentioned by Espinosa (1997) and Grieshaber (2001) such as being nurturing, caring and supportive might be incongruent with those required by traditional leadership models. The limitation in leadership may then be the result of an antiquated perception of what a leader is and how to lead rather than incongruence between ECEC and effective leadership. If leadership were to be considered in terms of more democratic and collaborative models, then ECEC personnel may be more positive about adopting leadership activities.

Attitudes of those in the field

The attitudes of those in the field of ECEC may contribute to perpetuating the limited social status of care and education, and this is another issue that could be addressed by effective leadership. The behaviour of some practitioners actually compounds a poor view of the field (Stonehouse, 1994). Hayden (1996) refers to research with graduating early childhood students of whom not one of them said that they would use a childcare centre for the care of their young baby. This indicates that those about to work in the field do not perceive the situation as a

desirable one for their own child. Stonehouse (1994) adds another perception when she states that ECEC has a "smugness" about it and a tendency to expect others to know and understand the value of what it does. The field sees little justification for articulating its role to others and, in turn, this implies a passive acceptance of its value by the wider community. This reluctance, or lack of ability by practitioners to articulate effectively what they do, limits the prestige, power and status of the field. There is a need to ascertain what training (if any) practitioners have in order to feel comfortable articulating their practice and what leadership (if any) is nurturing this confidence. Work by Boyd (2001) illustrates the need for increased professional development opportunities and undergraduate training to improve leadership skills. This is particularly necessary in the areas of boosting professional confidence and in the articulation and justification of early childhood philosophy (Boyd, 2001). Increasing understanding of issues related to leadership and training could possibly lead to a better match between leadership needs and leadership practices.

Care and education...uneasy bedfellows

The genesis of care and education were based in somewhat different rationales and this dichotomy has remained more evident in some areas of Australia than others. The remaining separation of care and education in many cases does little to enhance the social perception of a united field (Rodd, 1998). According to Stonehouse (1994), the lack of resolution of this dichotomy is a debilitating factor for the profession at all levels. Stonehouse maintains that this division weakens the unity of the field and suggests that alternatively the field should seek to focus on the commonality of issues that can promote unification rather than division (Stonehouse, 1994). Even more significant are the claims that these divisions have resulted in deflecting attention away from the real issues facing the field and in contrast serve to maintain the status quo rather than to effect a change in policy or funding (Hayden, 1996).

The inequity of financial remuneration

As an issue, financial remuneration requires attention for two distinct reasons. In the first case, the ongoing inequity of financial remuneration deserves attention for effective leaders to be retained (Jorde-Bloom, 1988; Stonehouse, 1994; Hayden, 1996; Kagan & Bowman, 1997). It is difficult to attract trained people to leadership roles when there is an inconsistency between the level of responsibility and the pay. Ironically, without leaders of a high caliber, there is limited potential to increase pay levels for other staff. The second problem with financial remuneration is the poor pay and the subsequent high rate of staff turnover, which is a significant disadvantage to the conditions for children (Hayden, 1996). The discrepancy between pay levels for graduates with a Bachelor of Education (EC) raises an additional aspect worthy of consideration. This pay discrepancy may explain the choice of primary teaching over teaching in services catering for children aged birth to five years.

Emerging issues for the field

The nature of the early childhood field is being challenged with the corporatisation of a number of services across the country. The emergence of public companies in the area of child-care challenges the traditional philanthropic foundations of the field. The new breed of companies such as ABC Learning Centres and Child Care Centres Australia are worth millions of dollars and have investors with considerable political clout and vast business connections (Leyden & Greenblat, 2002; Milburn, 2002). Services with such backing and such large networks of centres

could potentially offer increased kudos to a field traditionally undervalued and underpaid. Alternatively they may herald "the crèche equivalent of retail chain stores" (Milburn, 2002). This changed playing field suggests a need for leadership attention by the field in order to be informed and active in the discourse of change.

CONCLUSION

The literature suggests that there are aspects to the notion of leadership in ECEC that remain ill defined and appear inconsistent with traditional leadership models. For example the nurturing aspects of an ECEC job are in contrast to the autocratic, definitive and powerful notions of leadership promulgated in wider society. Given this, what implications does this have for leadership both within and for the field of ECEC? Research could investigate current notions of leadership as it is understood and enacted by individuals in the field of ECEC. For instance it is important for research in this area to explore:

- How is leadership currently being enacted at a service, local, regional and national level?
- What issues in the field of early childhood education and care do you think currently require leadership?
- Are there particular characteristics of effective leadership?
- Are there aspects of the ECEC field do you think encourage the adoption or the rejection of leadership behaviours?
- What literature and or materials influence your notions of leadership?

Research into how the concept of leadership is perceived and enacted has the potential to ignite discussion of leadership within the ECEC field. Such conversations may lead to more overt understandings of what constitutes leadership and the development of strategies to refine and develop leadership both within and for the ECEC field.

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