

## WOULD THE LEADERS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE PLEASE STEP FORWARD?

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### ABSTRACT

The field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) has evolved over the past century and this in itself is testimony to leadership of some form. Despite considerable research into leadership in many contexts, until recently there has been limited investigation into leadership within and for the ECEC field in Australia. This paper reports on a research project conducted with a range of ECEC personnel investigating their understanding of the notion of leadership and how they see it being enacted in the birth to five field. It discusses a theoretical interpretation of a broad range of issues identified by participants informed by symbolic interactionism and viewed through the lens of feminist theory.

**Keywords:** Leadership, Early Childhood Education and Care, Symbolic interactionism, feminist theory.

### INTRODUCTION

Leadership continues to be a contentious topic with an array of opinions and theories informing peoples' understanding of what constitutes effective leadership. Many definitions exist as to what stands for leadership, and this question has been extensively explored over the last century, particularly in the area of business and management. It is such a nebulous topic that Conger and Toegel observe, the nature of leadership may be such that for "the foreseeable future, there will be no moment where researchers will be able to say that we have a complete and shared understanding of leadership (2002, p. 178). Consequently, it appears that a somewhat partial, fluid and mosaic understanding is likely to be achievable at any one time in history. Traditionally, management and leadership have been viewed somewhat separately. Management generally has been described as relating to consistency, order and processes that are predictable. (Sarros & Butchatsky, 1996). Alternatively, leadership is seen to be more difficult to define and of a somewhat grander nature. A more definite separation of these terms is made by Day, Harris and Hadfield, Tolley and Bereford (2000), who claim that leadership is about liberation, while management is more about control. Certainly, in contemporary society, leadership and management are frequently intertwined, with most management positions involving some leadership opportunity, and leadership positions demanding some attention to order, consistency and predictable processes. In ECEC there is considerable intertwining of management and leadership activities and in part this blurs understandings of what is leadership and how it is enacted. A discussion of leadership literature has been reported elsewhere (Hard, 2001; Hard, 2004).

The question of what constitutes leadership is becoming increasingly evident within the ECEC field. Until recently much of the attention to leadership in ECEC was attributed to Rodd (1994, 1996, 1998). Rodd's work suggested that those in the field of early childhood

have an aversion to embracing leadership and that this lack of leadership activity has related to a limited political voice and a low social profile for early childhood education and care (1994, 1996, 1998). In more recent times Australian work in the area of early childhood leadership has been context or issue related (Boardman, 2003; Boyd, 2001; Geoghegan, Petriwskyj, Bower & Geoghegan, 2003; Stamopoulos, 2003; Waniganayake et al., 2000). Carter and Curtis (1998) provide a framework for leadership that includes a balance between managing and overseeing, coaching and mentoring and the notion of building and supporting the community. Recently Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2003) produced a text aimed at the development of ECEC personnel as leaders. Here we see exploration of the construct of leadership within the ECEC field at an international level, discussion of leadership theory, recognition of constraints to leadership and practical means to enact leadership. It would seem that attention to leadership in ECEC is emerging as new foci for the field with increasing research exploring this notion from various perspectives.

## DISCUSSION

The aim of this research project is to explore how personnel understand and enact leadership within the ECEC field. In order to achieve this the conceptual framework draws upon the interpretivist tradition and utilises symbolic interactionism as the means to understand how individuals give meaning to their situations through interactions with others. Symbolic interactionism serves as a methodological tool to inform the process of data analysis and enables the researcher to explore how individuals give meaning to their situations through their interactions with others (Blumer, 1969). In this framework, "individuals structure their external world by their perceptions and interpretations of what they conceive that world to be" (Benzies & Allen, 2001, p. 543). Reflexivity is pivotal this process and involves the way individuals interpret the actions of the world, and how they then organise their actions based on that individual interpretation (Jesser, 1975). Social interaction involves individuals "directing, checking, bending, and transforming their lines of action in the light of what they encounter in the actions of others" (Blumer, 1969, p. 53). Hence, Balzacq observes, "the purpose of symbolic interactionism in terms of theory and practice, is to give an account of the impact of meaningful interactions in the construction of society" (2002, p. 487). Consequently, symbolic interactionism can highlight how ECEC personnel interpret their understandings of leadership through their interactions with others.

Feminist theory is utilised as a theoretical lens through which to view the data. The field of ECEC is traditionally a field where there is an overrepresentation of women. This may influence the ways leadership is enacted both within and for the field. Feminist theory and some limited leadership theory has explored how leadership has been historically and culturally associated with men (Sinclair, 1998). Hence, Blackmore (1989) proposes that feminist theory offers the possibility to "question what is not included in a discourse as much as what is, and what has been reinterpreted in a manner which displaces women's interests" (p. 98). Further, she suggests that this questioning can frequently begin from the "dissonance between personal experience, commonsense knowledge and theory" (1989, p. 98). Consequently, I have drawn upon the work of Blackmore (1993, 1999) given her interplay of leadership, education and feminist theory. The following quote encapsulates this perspective.

Leadership, as a masculine activity, as I have argued, has been traditionally associated in liberal, capitalist democracies with 'so-called' male traits of aggression, individualism, and competition. Any display of the 'feminine'

qualities of emotionality, caring or sharing are perceived, therefore as weakness in managers in a technocratic and hierarchically organised workplace, and strengths in teachers of young children (Blackmore, 1989). Hence during the 1970s the significance of socio-psychological theories of women's incapacity to lead, their 'fear of success' and 'lack of aspiration'. These notions of female inadequacies, such as lack of self-esteem and career motivation, have to some extent become used unproblematically to 'explain' the under representation of women in educational administration (Blackmore, 1993, p. 42).

This definition of the context of leadership by Blackmore (1993) serves as an underpinning to the theoretical framework of this study. It illustrates the dominance of certain conceptions of leadership that have marginalised other ways of understanding and enacting leadership. Inherently this hegemony of leadership has devalued many of the characteristics associated with teachers and particularly those working in ECEC. As a consequence, this theoretical perspective helps to illustrate how leadership is potentially ill defined, problematic and alienating for many in the ECEC field. The following discussion draws upon symbolic interactionism informed by feminist theory to make sense of the data, to understand the emerging issues, and to conceptualise themes and discuss some early findings.

### **Data collection**

The key research question in this study is how do ECEC personnel understand and enact leadership. There were two phases of data collection. The first phase involved participants drawn from two arenas: participants (mostly academics from various states in Australia) at an annual, national ECEC conference, and practitioners in the field of ECEC. The practitioners consisted of preschool teachers, long day care directors, early childhood students, family day care providers (and coordinators) and those working in organisations aligned with ECEC but not involved in the direct provision of services to children. In total, 26 interviews were undertaken. Participants were involved in a semi-structured interview, usually of an hour's duration, which was conducted in a location of the participant's choice. The second phase of the data collection involved two focus group discussions. These were with early childhood students and with preschool teachers. Due to difficulties in gaining participants from family day care to attend a focus group, attendance at two family day care playgroups was also part of the second stage of the data collection process. Participants were also asked what artefacts they used to inform their understandings of leadership. These responses revealed a diverse range of sources from ECEC literature to material related to Buddhism.

### **Analysis**

In reading through the transcripts, coding issues emerging from the data, and being mindful of feminist theory, I have become increasingly aware (embedded within symbolic interactionism) of the emergence of three overarching categories of influence (see figure 1). These categories are fluid and emerging and are thus consistent with how symbolic interactionism views the individual. Individuals are active from birth and society is deemed as both fluid and emerging rather than dominating or determining (Denzin, 1992). In this vein, symbolic interactionism assists in elucidating how ECEC individuals actively interpret situations in terms of their constructions of *professional identity*, their access to and use of *knowledge* and their sense of *agency* in understanding and enacting leadership. It is these three categories that emerge as significant in ECEC understandings of leadership and how they are manifested in the enactment of leadership.

There are parallels between symbolic interactionism and feminist theory in terms of the notion of 'self' and the role of discourse in influencing individuals. Blumer (1969) considers that reflexive processes can yield and constitute a self. Similarly, Blackmore (1999), in reference to identity formation, considers discourses in society are not determinative of a "unitary self" but contributory in terms of agency, reflexivity and contradiction. Consequently, "individuals can feel both powerful and powerless in different discursive spaces" (1999, p. 17). This suggests that individuals reflexively constitute their identities or their sense of self within, and perhaps influenced by, the context in which they operate but very much by a process of self-interaction (Blumer, 1969). This also has resonance in terms of the category of agency since the reflexivity referred to in both symbolic interactionism and feminist theory involves the individual as active in interpreting their circumstances. In the case of ECEC, individuals' sense of agency is reflected in their interpreted ability to undertake leadership both within the ECEC field and for the field. This suggests an interplay of the three categories of identity, knowledge and agency where the interpreted sense of identity is influenced by the individual's interpretation of knowledge and made evident in their sense of agency to undertake leadership.

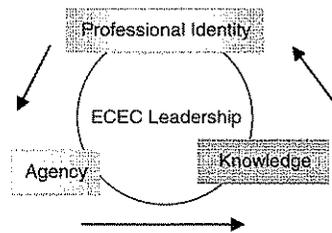


FIGURE 1: INFLUENCES ON LEADERSHIP

### Professional Identity

In terms of the data, it appears the notion of professional identity is an important underpinning to participants' sense of agency to lead. Professional identity incorporates a range of issues that emerged from the transcripts such as status, culture of conformity and gender. In many cases, the participants referred to aspects of their professional lives that involved uncertainty with their status, salary and respect within the community. This is not a new finding within the ECEC field having been identified by others such as Stonehouse (1994) who related the value society affords children and childhood as directly linked to the social status of the field. Hayden (1996) clearly links government support for children's services with entrenched views of care and education as inherently being the role of the mother. This abdication of the so-called natural order is linked to what Blackmore (1993) called the 'cult of domesticity' where the work of women was naturally based within the home and subsequently had little value outside of that context. Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2003) reaffirm these issues and discuss the interpretation of the ECEC field as the 'pink ghetto'. These aspects of identity emerged so frequently and with such passion by participants in this study that they appear to underpin and inform both understandings and the enactment of leadership by ECEC professionals. For example, all participant groups and all participants bar one mentioned the issue of the status of the field. This issue involves how others perceive the ECEC field. The frequency of their noting illustrates that those in the field interpret these perceptions in order to make meaning of their own identity as professionals. Here symbolic interactionism helps to illustrate that it is the influence of the "generalised other" (Balzacq, 2002, p. 474) that is impacting on how ECEC professionals make meaning of their own professional identity. This has resonance with what Caldwell

refers to as "seeing ourselves not as we were but as a reflection of the way the general public saw us" (2003, p. ix). Inherently the interpretation of a professional identity based on the views of others predisposes one to varied and changing external influences and limits one's own agency to act in proactive ways that are often required in effective leadership.

Participants made numerous references to the status of the ECEC field. For example, Heidi a preschool teacher felt that while families valued ECEC services this was not matched by funding to support services. Jodie a preschool teacher recounted her training where others asked her if she was doing "*advanced nappy changing?*" Reflexively Jodie considers that little has changed and that "*we [still] seem to be at the bottom of the chain*". Similar sentiments were expressed by Daryl an EC student who considered it important that the value of EC and the qualifications deserve more recognition since he finds that "*some people do consider it just baby-sitting*". One family day care coordinator highlighted the issue of recognition, status and value when she provided the following story.

*My daughter, years ago, went and looked after a child after school each night. The mother was a school teacher, an educated person and when they went away she looked after the dog each night and they paid her more to feed the dog ...what is this telling us?"*

The social perception of the ECEC field is demonstrated in various ways and participants in this study interpret this as low status, limited funding, with rhetoric of value not matched by funding. This interpretation impacts heavily on how ECEC personnel construct their own professional identity and this in turn impacts on how they interpret their desire to undertake leadership for the field.

In many ways the aspects of culture, conformity and gender are entwined. The culture I refer to, is the culture of the ECEC field and in many cases this involves aspects of conformity and gender. Participants highlighted the need for a non-hierarchical but team-based leadership approach in ECEC. Laura, an early childhood student, explains the tension between this approach and that used in other contexts when she states: "*In early childhood I don't think we think like that...but we want to be seen as the coordinator of the team a little bit more than the powerful one that makes all the ultimate decisions*". According to one preschool teacher "*you don't have to be the top dog*". This egalitarian approach even extended to the rationales for taking up leadership roles where ECEC personnel should not have their own agenda. In terms of credibility an ECEC leader should, according to Georgina a preschool teacher, be prepared to do everything that everyone else is asked to do. Here we see that leadership is perceived as team-based, not driven by individual agendas and requiring a high degree of field credibility. For Annabel (an academic) many of these aspects were problematic when she stated.

*What I probably see as the biggest problem for good leadership or effective leadership is that people like if there's a director of a centre or they're in a leadership role, they like to be seen as one of the team players or one of the gang and if there are any privileges or anything that stands them out separately they quickly adjust and pretend they are one of the workers again.*

Here we see that leadership in ECEC requires conformity to a dominant discourse in order to be appropriate. Annabel elaborated, linking this egalitarian discourse with niceness. "*There's niceness there indirectly, directly it's there and in a way you're swayed into being you know*

*nice, nice, nice. I reckon it's at odds with us as a profession".* Consequently, we can see that there are many tensions in how leadership is understood and enacted in ECEC. Aspects of culture, field credibility and gender impact upon how those in the field understand and enact leadership to be manifested.

The identification of this aspect of professional identity is not intended to imply that all ECEC personnel take up a particular identity. In contrast, it identifies the diverse, problematic and problematised nature of how ECEC personnel view their role within their field (Larbaletstier, 1998, p. 157). It identifies the struggle that participants engage in as they interpret who they are as ECEC professionals and how they are influenced by the views, values and expectations of people both within and outside their field. This knowing of oneself has a relationship to how individuals understand and enact leadership.

This notion of identity is one that has been part of feminist discussion and debate. Second wave feminist theory promoted an all-inclusive feminism and ignored differences among and between women (Larbaletstier, 1998). Such a perception was said to be dominated by white middle-class elitism that marginalised many women (Larbaletstier, 1998). For feminists, the notions of identity and difference are problematic (Jindy Pettman, 1998). Group identity can result in discrimination and gender specific violence. Jindy Pettman (1998) considers that defensive, revivalist and aggressive identity politics describes women as possessions in ways that threaten women's subjecthood. This is problematic in that women get enmeshed in identity politics as symbols of difference, as markers of the community boundary, as reproducers, and as cultural transmitters of the group. For a number of feminist authors, taking difference seriously is important (Jindy Pettman, 1998; Larbaletstier, 1998) According to Jindy Pettman this challenges feminists "to recognise and work with difference while resisting masculinist and exclusivist identity politics that use difference to trap women within or outside the boundary lines" (1998, p. 336). With these cautioned understandings of women and identity, symbolic interactionism can help to illustrate the interactive nature of women in various contexts choosing to adopt or reject socially constructed and reinforced issues of identity. For example, Cox (1996, p. 170) refers to the work of de Beauvoir (1949) in her discussion of how women construct their identities as wives, mothers, and their relationships with men. She asserts that women view themselves mainly through the eyes of others...and it is the criteria of others which establishes to what we aspire and value. Here we could be forgiven for viewing the women as being positioned without any active involvement on her part. In contrast, symbolic interactionism asserts the individual as an active agent in their individual construction of identity, as they interact and interpret their circumstances with others. Consequently, identity is influenced by the views of others as suggested by Cox (1996), but only through the active interpretation of the individual who determines to what extent they will be influenced and how they will react as a result. In this study, social attitudes and values are interpreted by individuals in ECEC and relate to the construction of their professional identity and subsequently leadership understandings and enactment.

### **Knowledge**

The concept of knowledge emerges from the data as significant and reflects a number of issues identified by the participants such as their understandings of leadership, training, qualifications, access to knowledge, and knowledge as a requirement for leaders. Participants related this to both how they understood and how they enacted leadership. It also encompasses specific aspects of training, qualifications, the ability to articulate and understandings of leadership theory. This category involves the notion of content and

substance and not what one participant Angie calls "fluffy" stuff that she considers has been the mainstay of ECEC discourse in the past. One participant emphasised the importance of this concept when she stated *"if you don't have a depth of knowledge you're a good practitioner but you don't know why it is you do that stuff. So I think that the practitioners need to understand with some depth why it is they do what they do, not just what it is that they do"*. Consequently, knowledge is more than tacit, needing to be explicit to the practitioner in order to be able to articulate this to others.

Participants demonstrated a range of understandings associated with leadership. These reflected characteristics, behaviours, attitudes and in some cases literature. In the main these understandings were informed by general social attitudes, popular literature related to leadership and in relation to the ECEC field the works of Rodd - however this reference was only to the title not any content. There was general recognition amongst participants that their knowledge of leadership was not developed during their undergraduate education. Many felt ill prepared for the range and degree of leadership responsibility they were subsequently required to undertake. According to Chantelle who works for an organisation associated with ECEC her undergraduate training had not *"even prepared her to work with other staff and that surprise, surprise...everyone is going to have to do it"*. There is limited access to material to support and develop ECEC leaders, which takes account of the specific context of the field. For example, there are tensions in terms of training and qualifications in a field where many valued staff have little or no training. In appreciating their contribution does the field inherently devalue further education?

Participants noted a lack of structural and practical supports for undertaking further education. They considered that these reduce the capability of people to move between service types due to the loss of increments and a subsequent perpetuation of a narrow field. One participant noted the lack of professional recognition associated with further study stating that on occasion she had *"left off some of my qualifications because it may have been a disadvantage"*. Reflexively she laments that *"this sort of thing wouldn't happen in other professions where people are encouraged to do other things and get promoted for it"*. Poignantly, Chantelle recounted her engagement with postgraduate study. She explained how her brother completed a Masters degree funded and supported by his local government employer, while she needed to initiate and fully fund her own. The concept of knowledge reaches to the heart of where qualifications sit within a field that includes many unqualified staff and what qualifications actually contribute to the ECEC field. It relates to how ECEC personnel understand leadership in terms of theory and practice. It allows attention to be paid to the tacit knowledge valued within the ECEC field, and what relationship this has to credibility to lead. It raises questions about how pre-service education programs prepare graduates for leadership within and for their field.

The concept of knowledge is also part of feminist discourse and draws attention to issues of power and privilege (Yates, 1998). Feminism has made the notion of what stands for knowledge as problematic in terms of *"which people, which issues, and which ways of knowing are seen as important (Yates, 1998, p. 74)?"* In terms of this study, the identification of a category 'knowledge', allows attention to be paid to the value of early childhood work, the access afforded staff to leadership knowledge and experience and to open discussion about the nature of knowledge within the field that has hitherto been taboo. It allows discussion of what counts as credible in ECEC and who owns such credibility. Knowledge emerges as a major factor in achieving what participants identify as entrée to leadership.

### Agency

The third conception emerging from the data relates to what I have defined as agency (see figure 1) and as a category incorporates many uncertainties expressed by participants. This notion of agency relates to uncertain understandings of leadership that become troublesome between contexts when women step outside traditional gender roles/boundaries. Participants felt a tension between leadership in ECEC and beyond in other contexts, and this uncertainty diminishes confidence to enact leadership beyond the service level and in some cases, impacts on leadership for the field. Participants strongly highlighted a team-based approach to leadership within the ECEC field but a lack of confidence in this approach beyond the field. Is this about isolation and insulation? The paucity of knowledge in terms of leadership theory and clarity in terms of articulating what it is that is done in ECEC contributes to limited confidence in active leadership. This is supported by earlier work by Boyd (2001) who linked professional confidence with the ability to articulate and justify early childhood philosophy. Confidence about how to be a leader in ECEC and beyond appears inherently tied to a sense of identity, which I am suggesting remains contentious.

The notion of agency appears to be linked to images of what a leader is in ECEC, which relates back to the notion of professional identity. The most frequently mentioned issue for participants in this study was the absence of mentors and models within and beyond the field. This suggests a number of things, but strongly indicates a desire to identify with or relate to others as leaders. Mentors and models potentially afford aspiring leaders a means to interpret leadership and their own ability to lead. Such a finding has strong resonance with Sinclair (1998), who, in a study on women in leadership, found that all her interview participants volunteered the importance of female role models. "These role models show it can be done, that women can have influence on the world" (Sinclair, 1998, p. 85). Such identification relates to a sense of confidence that leadership in ECEC is possible and provides an image of how it can be manifested. How do ECEC personnel undertake leadership with a sense of confidence when their interpretations of identity are heavily influenced by external views of the value of women and women's work and the conduct of women as carers and nurturers are not high status activities?

Symbolic interactionism helps to elucidate how some practitioners interpret their notions of leadership with confidence and others feel less well empowered. It helps to illustrate how one practitioner near retirement now has the confidence to speak up no longer concerned about the need to conform to expectations within and beyond the field. She demonstrates this when she states "*...it's often now older women because they're people like me where we're at a point where we are saying, I don't care now. I'm going to say it because this is important and whether people like it or not I'm going to say it...*" This participant clearly relates her ability to speak out to confidence—not only confidence to speak outside of the field but also within it. This illustrates the complexity of issues surrounding the notion of agency entwined with perceptions within the field about what is acceptable and credible and who can speak for the field.

### CONCLUSION

The three categories of professional identity, knowledge and agency have emerged from the data and illustrate the diverse and multi-layered aspects to leadership in ECEC. They afford feminist theory foci on the data with the view to achieving greater understanding of issues for women in this highly feminised field. They determine the aspects of the data that

conceptualization via symbolic interactionism helps to illuminate, generating the interpretative understandings that individuals make of leadership in ECEC. In summary, the conceptualisation of ECEC leadership in this way provides the stimulus for the reconsideration of how the issue of leadership in ECEC is understood. In the current climate of interest in ECEC leadership, these data add further depth to understandings of leadership and the potential to address the factors that inhibit or restrain leadership activity. This provides a potential framework to assist in the development of ECEC personnel with robust professional identities, a sound knowledge base and a strong sense of their individual and group agency to lead within and for the ECEC field.

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