What makes work – work? Motivation and the role of the leader in Children's Centres.

"Children's Centres make a significant and considerable difference to the lives of children and families…..in spite of a challenging landscape, the best leaders are able to promote innovation, collaboration and trust within the sector and with families" (Sharp et al 2012)

There is much research about key leadership traits and core behaviours of leaders, even extending to the context of a children's centre, however little will outline what this looks like in practice. The often detailed theory will give generalised pointers and subjects to explore but fails to completely delve into the strategies that really make an impact on frontline service delivery, from the opinions of those workers on the ground level – delivering these life changing services. The following research will attempt to answer this question by asking staff at all levels of children's centre work, what leadership experiences and strategies have had the biggest impact on their levels of motivation, career progression and working practices. In a time of austerity, economic cuts and risks to all publically funded services – there has never been a more poignant time to examine how we can best use our leadership 'time' to create the most positive impact on the staff who are at the frontline, so that they can change the future of our society through the delivery of high quality children centre services.

This research project was undertaken as part of a one year dissertation module between October 2013 – July 2014, which was the final year of a master's degree in Early Years Leadership, accredited by Birmingham City University (BCU) and studied at The Centre for Research and Early Childhood (CREC). This research was set within the South West of England, using a national policy and perspective of England and Wales; no comparisons will be drawn of settings further afield, however some literature referred to may be based within the international field of Early Years research. Findings are shared here.

Confidence of leaders was identified by interviewee 4

Interviewee 4 was quick to point out that confidence was important to them, how someone handles themselves, how they talk and how they are not intimidated by challenging situations was a point particularly emphasised. Some interviewees stating that not having emotional awareness made leaders vulnerable to exploitation and intimidation from their

teams, other interviewees were quick to state that 'a big ego' put them off the desire to listen and follow their leaders. Brown (2010) emphasises this point perfectly by outlining it is self-awareness and security of self that aids a leader to maintain balance within them and therefore promote this in others, in times of stress, insecurity and in the face of the unknown. Mason (2013) suggested that this relationship with them, for a leader should be an on-going process, one where they reflect honestly about their own performance and make adjustments to leadership style based upon their staff team and feedback.

Leadership is not a position but influence - interviewee 9

This duel edged sword identifies that leaders do undoubtable set a tone, agenda and emotional climate due to their position alone, something I have often reflected in my journal by identifying and element of 'false respect' given to individuals in certain positions within and organisation or company. However leadership qualities are present at all levels of business due to the presence of influence being a driving factor in the relationship between follower and leader. Interviewee 3 stated that she often looked to her peers to know what to do, how to act and they drove each other on. Interviewee 9 describes an absent leader, one who showed more interest in office chores, who was frequently absent. This led not only to resentment but negative attitudes and people taking her place in her absence (appendix 4). Sinek (2009) identified that often it was the followers themselves who needed the leaders, not leaders who needed the followers, he extended this thinking by outlining that the need to follow is intrinsic to the follower and did not always respect hierarchical position or power but influence within a team. Sinek (2009) additionally stated that in the lack of any leadership, leaders would rise through the ranks, irrespective of pay, job title or rank but influenced only by their inner desire to create order, to assist and to empower.

Leadership is not tidy, it won't fit into a policy and it needs to diversify – Interviewee 6

Within the planning stages of this dissertation, much thought was given to what discoveries could or maybe uncovered and found, entering into it within the context and interest areas, it was undoubtable that emotions would play a high part for many employees and research participants. The proportion of which I found this to be true and the stories that participants had to tell, the way they spoke in detail and with fondness of their memorable leaders,

managers and mentors was unprecedented in the planning stages of the assignment. While predictions were made about feelings being high on the agenda, the original thought was present that the study would conclude with a set of actions that could be applied to any team. This was true when examining negative behaviours, Interviewee 3 stated that 'the leader going off sick caused instability, stress within the team and no one really knowing what to do', Interviewee 9 highlighted that a previous manager 'was just too rigid – constantly citing a policy or checking guidelines – I just needed what I needed – it didn't fit with policy' or Interviewee 6 who stated 'they were never there when I was working – I never saw them – we were just pushed out like cattle to do the job'. Palaiologou (2012) highlights this point succinctly when she outlines that leaders must be flexible within their approach to enable teams working on the ground to make mistakes, to trial ideas and to solve their own problems, extending upon this she states that leaders are actually second rate practitioner and it is on the ground floor that workers that hold much of the golden knowledge that can practically and effectively find solutions to the issues that prevent quality they encounter every day. It's precisely this level of engagement that theorists and researchers conclude will ensure teams are emotionally involved and engaged in the tasks they are completing and not just going through the motions. Something that Robertson and Cooper (2011) reinforced by stating that work can make you sick or work can make you thrive, exactly which depends on your own happiness within the unique environment, positivity from a leader, they outline, will only ever breed positivity, as humans we reflect the behaviours of others and mirror behaviours of those around us, none more they suggest than the leaders in which we place our trust, take our lead and expect to show us the way (Robertson and Cooper 2011).

'Memorable leaders go above and beyond the call of duty' Interviewee 1

The above point was characterised within the action research by a few specific traits. Interviewee 2 stated that one of their most memorable bosses was 'incompetent but hilarious – as a leader he was chaotic but and really knew his onions about the subject he was teaching, I wanted to be him – so would listen to whatever he said' (see appendix 4). A point of view also summarised by interviewee 1 who wanted their ideal leader to be 'Crazy

and think outside of the box!'. While this may leave some leaders recoiling in horror and attempting to draught a policy, briefing paper or guidelines on crazy best practice, theory would also suggest this to be true. Templer (2005) reinforces the idea of being brave and bold in your leadership style, he actually states that you should be wacky and bold and suggest that the best ideas in life have often started as visions, dreams or things that were classified as risky. This also leads to memorable leadership, reinforcing the emotional side of leadership approaches again as explored in the points above.

Seddon (2005) centralised his ideal key leadership component around the leader having different approaches, stating that there is a need for leaders to lead with uniqueness for the new competitive and ever developing business world. He extended upon this by stating leaders must not being weak and similar in traits and approaches, as they have been in the past. This can lead to be categorised as brave, bold and different as leaders may do exactly as interviewee 8 states 'I want someone to listen to my ideas, to value them and be brave enough to try them!'. This was again reinforced by Interviewee 7 who stated that a leader in the past had 'restricted me – just wanted me to do the job – I lost my interest'.

Aubrey (2010) states leadership styles now have to be ever changing, dynamic, mouldable and flexible for the challenging and developing early years landscape. If they are so different to the leadership ideas, strategies and behaviours needed and applied in the past – it's very unsurprising that many will see them as brave, bold and crazy skills and behaviours. In addition to being brave, bold and taking risks the other essential element to this behaviour is the acceptance that an employee comes with a package of additional responsibilities, passions and demands from their life outside of work, Therefore if a good leader is interested, values and asks an employee about other non-work related things this is equally, and if not more important to the employee than other leadership qualities or strategies. Interviewee 7 states that one of her best leaders 'allowed me to do the things I loved both in and out of work, encouraging me to further education about non work subjects, they invested in me, made me succeed'.

Conclusion

Robson (2011) states that there are three main reasons for research, to explore, to describe and to explain any given subject area. During the process of this dissertation I had the

privilege of being able to undertake all three elements. There is a strong field of thought that cites research and the process of investigating a subject, as a selfish and self-absorbent task, which allows an individual to become engrossed in an area of personal quest and passion. During this personal and often intrinsically driven journey, a person or a group of people become intertwined with their chosen subject area, the can often result in it becoming impossible to see where the subject area ends and their own learning or interest start. Many believe that in order to take research to its highest level, you have to completely integrate with the journey and subject area. Bunsell (2014) proposes that the only way to accurately analyse an area of research is to become entwined with the culture, so that finding have depth, understanding and are based on not what you think, but what you hear, feel and see. She extends this by identifying that it is the cultural group members that hold the answers and therefore interviews needs to be conducted on a solid understanding and trust relationship.

I can empathise with this point, while the process of this research project was challenging, fraught with time scales, personal demands and challenges to my own intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and factors – the journey I have taken, learning, knowledge and skills I have gained are without failure something I will never forget. The people I met, conversations and quotes I heard, was part of and facilitated will stay with me my whole career. Impacting on my ideas not only when I was in the moment of research and discovery – but beyond into my later discussions with my peers and other leaders. It's an often well used phrase but the journey of the last year, of which this project has been a huge part – has literally changed my life and my ideas as a leader. Something that Bunsell (2014) calls loosing you in the research process, allowing yourself to become so immersed that it's impossible to tell where the researcher ends and the subject begins. I had to adapt and change my approach, something which Robson (2011) calls flexibility within research. I changed jobs, extended deadlines, changed my own working arrangements and commitments to continue to undertake and complete the journey which was started nearly two years before. While my research journey placed extra stress on the situation, pleasure was gained from immersing myself in my area of passion or as Bertram (2012) so beautifully states is an important factor to return to your oasis to keep your passion alive. While this process often frustrated and posed barriers to my work, home and student careers and balance, evoking emotions that I

had not expected, Northedge (2002) suggest this is often the case and should be expected with emotional subjects that you care about, he states it's not what happens but how you plan to overcome these that is of the upmost importance.

The main barrier encountered was lack of time, career progression meant that I began a new and very demanding job, limiting my time, energies and the space within my brain and thought patterns to cope with anything else. This led to an extension on my hand in date by a whole year. While the emotions and disappointment of having to postpone were challenging, as the subject area kept me motivated, I was enabled and driven to resume as soon as possible to conclude the journey I had started. While giving up on the process was of course an option, the desire to conclude effectively spurred me on. Phelps et al (2007) research must be methodical and well planned but flexible enough to adapt to the changing needs of the researcher, management of time is essential they state to effective research activities of any kind.

The main conclusion of the project – that over 50% of what we do as leaders is about how we make our employees feel, has shaped the way I communicate, the value I place on time and relationships within staff teams, beyond the setting and with community partners and the emphasis I place on how outstanding leadership teams must keep time, emotions and relationships at their core focus. It's interesting to me in today's current economic climate, how children's centres can do this and even if indeed this is the factor that results in 'outstanding leadership of children's centres'. Children's centres, like all publically funded services face a relentless task of balancing demand and access to funding, life within any public sector has never been so demanding, challenging or pressurised. Reflection time within my role and the primary importance of emotions as a part of leadership, will never again be understated in the path of my career. This journey has strengthened my ideas about relationships, emotions and eco-systems.

While I have discovered what the employees themselves value in their leaders, I am yet to measure outstanding leadership against anyone else's yardstick, I wonder if there may be a disparity between what the employees see as outstanding leadership and what governing and external assessing bodies, such as Ofsted might expect to see. Thus now identifies the next exploration for my next selfish and self-absorbent quest. Which may well be titled

‘What makes work – work, motivation and the role of the outstanding leader in children’s centres’.

Many lifelong researchers find exactly as I have concluded, answering one line of enquiry in research or looking at one topic of study – will often lead you onto another and invariably – the conclusion from this investigation may open a whole new set of questions, queries or interest in your mind. When you start asking questions, you often find you ask why – much more frequently. Claxton (2007) would define this as lifelong learning, the drive to discover, to delve, to continue an enquiry path – not because you must or its part of compulsory schooling but because you want to – you simply must know a solution or set of answers.

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