

A DISCUSSION PAPER

Leadership: an essential ingredient or an optional extra for quality early childhood provision?

Dr Jillian Rodd

Educational Consultant and Chartered Psychologist

Leadership in early years is a complex concept and its role in quality provision has not been well understood by many of those who work in the early years field to date. In my experience, a considerable number of early years practitioners, trainers and academics still tend to regard the development of leadership knowledge and skills as an optional extra to basic and more advanced training rather than an essential and vital component of professional development for quality service provision. Given the challenge and complexity of current multi-disciplinary service provision, early years practitioners need to be well prepared to function as skilled administrators, managers and leaders in order to fulfil their roles and responsibilities effectively. This means that the fundamental importance of leadership must be acknowledged within the profession and incorporated into the initial preparation and continuing development of early years practitioners.

The research that has been undertaken over the past 25 years has confirmed the connection between quality of leadership and quality of early years provision. Yet, in the field, early years practitioners often report that they are unprepared to undertake leadership roles and responsibilities (Rodd 1998; Ebbeck and Waniganayake 2003; Muijs *et al.* 2005). Perhaps because leadership continues to be perceived as an optional extra in relation to pressing curriculum and other demands, there is a paucity of professional training, professional development opportunities and pathways to foster leadership potential in early years practitioners.

In order to extend understanding of the vital role played by leadership in quality provision, a number of factors need to be appreciated. First, the current training of early years teachers and nursery nurses does not prepare them to appreciate and take on leadership roles. Rather, it prepares them to deliver child-centred education and care. While most courses offer a brief examination of leadership, this is not sufficient to prepare adults who can administer and manage diverse services and provide leadership to a multi-disciplinary team. Leadership requires mature understanding of children, families and communities and effective leadership demands

sophisticated understanding, knowledge and skills that are different to those required for the provision of education and care.

Although most early years practitioners have a vision of quality early years provision and practice and are aware of some leadership responsibilities, many of them report that they are unsure about how to translate these into concrete activities. In addition, in order to be effective, leadership must be appropriate to the context in which it is exercised. Much training in leadership is adapted from models of leadership designed for other disciplines and contexts. These models are not necessarily appropriate for practitioners in early years settings. It is important that research is conducted to identify the type of leadership that is appropriate for early years teams and settings and to identify training appropriate for developing the requisite skills for putting leadership into practice.

One of the biggest obstacles to skilled leadership is related to the fact that a significant number of early years practitioners appear to be unaware that their communication and interpersonal skills are fundamental to their leadership style and its effectiveness. When one considers how effective the practical work on Learning to Learn (Lucas *et al.* 2002) has been for helping child and adult learners understand their own learning styles, including how to learn and how to develop a toolkit for learning, it seems that a similar training programme could be designed to help early years practitioners understand leadership and how to develop effective styles of leadership specific to their context. The development of the Effective Leadership and Management Evaluation Scheme (Early Years) led by Moyles and Yates (2004) will shortly be available from Essex County Council but it will be an important tool for helping early years practitioners identify their learning needs and develop action plans for improvement in these areas.

Another consideration in the development of leadership potential is related to choice, that is, whether individuals are intrinsically motivated to voluntarily aspire and choose to assume leadership or whether individuals who don't particularly aspire to become leaders are thrust into leadership positions because others have spotted their potential. It is a fact that not everybody wants to become a formal leader with designated responsibility. However, leadership can be displayed in many ways, both formally and informally and in different circumstances and situations. What is important is that every early years practitioner is encouraged – and aspires – to take the lead in some aspect of their work. This is how individual early years practitioners

contribute to improving the quality of education and care offered to young children and their families.

Despite the seemingly minimal impact that existing research into leadership in the early years has had on practitioners' understanding and the development of specialist training for leadership, it is encouraging to find that qualitative research into various aspects of leadership in early years is being conducted currently in the USA, England and Australia. With the government and other political parties in this country keeping early years high on their agendas and promising expanded early years services for families, the demand for well-trained practitioners will rise. This will increase the need for skilled leaders in early years settings who can inspire in others passion for, and commitment to, meeting the needs of young children and who can help others find meaning and significance in the repetitive, hands-on, day-to-day aspects of their work as much as in the creative, interesting and challenging parts. The research findings may contribute to identifying the type of leadership and associated skills that are effective for the early years context.

The development of the National Professional Qualification in Integrated Centre Leadership is a good start for addressing the needs of leaders within multi-agency early years settings. However, in my opinion, the way forward is to infuse and embed leadership training throughout all aspects, areas and levels of the preparation and continuing development of early years practitioners. The development of leadership potential in early years practitioners must start right at the beginning of their induction into the field and not be relegated as a postscript in the final stage of training or as an optional extra in continuing professional development. Leadership is a vital ingredient in the pursuit of quality in early years service provision. It entails challenge but effective leadership by well-prepared early years practitioners offers tremendous rewards for themselves, children, families, colleagues and the advancement of the profession. The early years field can no longer afford to regard the preparation of its leaders as an optional extra.

It would be interesting and informative to find out what those in early years, including leaders and managers, feel about the current training and all the issues that surround effective leadership and management.

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