



## how do they manage?

a review of the research on leadership in early childhood

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### ABSTRACT

This article presents the findings from a review of literature on leadership in early childhood (EC). It identifies a paucity of research, despite a high potential for leadership activity in the early childhood field. It concludes that there is a clear need to identify what effective leadership practice is in terms of processes and outcomes within this field. It also concludes that theoretically based studies that allow different models and characteristics to be empirically tested are long overdue. The serious lack of leadership training is also highlighted by the literature review, which means that many early childhood managers could be significantly under-prepared for their role.

KEYWORDS *early childhood, early years, leadership*

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### introduction

Effective leadership is widely accepted as being a key constituent in achieving organizational improvement (OfSTED, 2000). Research findings from diverse countries and different educational contexts have revealed the powerful impact of leadership in securing successful organizational development and change (Van Velzen et al., 1985; Harris et al., 2002). Whatever else is disputed, the contribution of leadership to improving organizational performance and raising achievement remains unequivocal. However, while leadership research in the school sector is burgeoning – driven chiefly by the National College for School Leadership – in sharp contrast the research on leadership in the early

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years is limited. In this article we have attempted to provide a systematic review of research on leadership in early years.

## **methodology**

In this literature review we have endeavoured to interrogate the international research evidence relating to leadership in the early years sector. A wide-ranging search was employed, encompassing electronic databases such as ERIC, BEI and Psyclit as well as a trawl of key journals on leadership and early years. Material was selected only if there was a clear focus on leadership and management in an early years setting. Initially, we decided to select only those studies that provided a full overview of research methodology used and clear evidence of an empirical base for any claims made. However, we had to broaden our search to include studies that did not conform to these criteria due to a lack of studies fulfilling them. We did not limit the material reviewed to studies using any particular research methodology, as we follow a pragmatic approach to methodology, believing in the worth of different (and mixed) methodologies that allow us to explore both breadth and depth (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998). Therefore material from both a qualitative and quantitative perspective is included.

While articles in peer-reviewed journals form a major part of reviewed materials, we felt that there was much of interest to be found in books, professional journals and research reports, and have therefore included materials from these sources as well.

## **research on leadership in the early years**

As noted earlier, research on leadership in the early years sector is limited and dominated by a relatively small number of researchers (Rodd, 1996, 1997, 1999; Bloom, 1997, 2000). Much of the literature on leadership in the early childhood field is anecdotal, and in some cases does not transcend the 'tips for leaders' style. This finding is all the more remarkable given the extensive research literature on leadership that exists in the school sector and increasingly in the FE sector.

In part, this seems to result from a certain hesitance to engage with concepts of leadership among professionals in the early years settings, who view themselves first and foremost as educators and child developers. This has led to a situation in most English-speaking countries where there appears to be a lack of early childhood educators with both early childhood and leadership skills (Bricker, 2000). In one study, for example, managers in early childhood education stated that they found contact with children and parents and the achievement of children the most pleasurable parts of their job as

leaders, while they did not enjoy the management aspects (Bloom, 1992). Studies in Victoria (Australia) similarly found that EC leaders had a narrow view of their role, focusing mainly on direct interaction with children, and were uncomfortable with their management role (Rodd, 1996). As increasingly the traditional roles of early childhood providers, which previously focused on direct care and education, have expanded to include management and leadership responsibilities, this would seem to be a rather anachronistic viewpoint. Increased accountability and financial constraints in the sector, as well as greater competition and frequent changes in government policy that need to be negotiated, all require quite sophisticated leadership and management skills (Hayden, 1997; Rodd, 1997).

There is also a sense in which much of the leadership research in this area is not well informed by theory and research in the broader field of leadership studies. Theorizing, where it happens, is limited and does not connect to key concepts in either educational, public sector or business leadership. Kagan and Hallmark (2001) suggest that this may be because business leadership theories do not work well in EC education, which is a position shared with many educationalists in other sectors. The authors suggest a distinctive collaborative approach to leadership in EC is required.

Interestingly, the literature on EC leadership also does not connect with that on school leadership, where many parallels might be expected. This may be because of sector differences or the complexity of the field of early years education, which is characterized by a greater diversity of organizations and institutions than the school sector. In the UK, early years provision includes: day care centres; playgroups; nurseries; family centres; community nurseries; KS1 and reception classes in schools (Alexander, 1995). Following the recent introduction of a 'National Childcare Strategy' and the setting up of local 'Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships' (EYDCPs), and the establishment of the *Early Excellence Centre* programme and *Sure Start* projects with integrated approaches to early education and care, the picture in England has become considerably more complex and the need for effective leadership even greater. Suffice it to say that these settings often have contrasting philosophies and ideals, as well as different structures, and are driven by different inspection remits. Furthermore, many of the organizations involved are smaller than a school, which once again raises quite different leadership issues.

One interesting distinction between the field of early childhood education and other fields in which leadership has been studied is the extent to which women occupy leadership roles in EC, which contrasts with the business world. This, according to Rodd (1999), is one explanation for the potential aversion to leadership often found in the sector. Rodd suggests that many women have problems identifying with the concept of and need for leadership

in the sector (Rodd, 1999). In addition, it is suggested that the leadership styles used are very different from those used by male leaders. However, the findings of recent studies offer no evidence of gender differences in leadership style (Evetts, 1994; Coleman, 2001).

In summary, early childhood professionals are often engaged in activities that demand leadership skills, such as decision making and goal setting (Rodd, 1997). However, the relative lack of research activity on leadership in the field and by association the absence of leadership development programmes would seem to be a major oversight given the growth and the importance of the EC sector.

### **does leadership in EC matter?**

Early childhood programmes have been found to be crucial to developing the potential and raising the attainment of children, especially those from low SES backgrounds. EC programmes have been found to have both short-term and long-term benefits, such as higher academic achievement, lower levels of grade retention, higher graduation rates and lower levels of delinquency later in life (Stipek and Ogana, 2000).

The quality of the experience in EC programmes is also important. One review highlighted that children who had attended higher quality early childhood centres showed better academic outcomes, more positive student-teacher relationships, better behaviour and better social skills (Stipek and Ogana, 2000). A key element of quality EC provision was identified as leadership (alongside factors such as creating a language-rich environment, sensitive teachers, child-focused communication with the child's home, higher levels of teacher/carer education, smaller child/adult ratios and lower staff turnover) (Stipek and Ogana, 2000). Other studies have similarly found leadership to be a key element of the quality of early childhood programmes (Hayden, 1997; Rodd, 1997).

One study looked at the relationship between organizational climate and job satisfaction. Job satisfaction levels were higher in schools with an open climate, characterized by a sense of belonging, opportunities to interact, autonomy and upward influence (Bloom, 1997). In an Australian study (Hayden, 1997), a high quality work environment was found to be related to lower levels of staff turnover, which in turn related to lower scores of children on childhood development and social and emotional skills scales. These studies tend to point towards the importance of leadership. A number of studies have found that organizational climate is strongly influenced by quality of leadership (Teddlie and Reynolds, 2000), while lower levels of staff turnover have been found to be associated with involvement of staff in decision making (Whelan, 1993).

In a US evaluation of more and less successful 'Head Start' programmes,

competent and stable leadership was found to exert a powerful influence on the effectiveness of programme implementation. Leadership that was committed, competent and respected was one of the main distinguishing factors between the most and least successful programmes. Unsuccessful programmes were characterized by less experienced leadership, leaders who were: less skilful at training and supervising staff; less good at working with schools and the community; and less involved and committed (Ramey et al., 2000). Leaders' experience has been related to centre quality in a number of studies (Philips et al., 1987; Kontos and Fine, 1989), as has the education level of directors (Bloom, 1992).

### **the roles of early childhood leaders**

Much of the existing research in early childhood leadership has focused on the roles of EC leaders. It is clear that leaders in EC have a multiplicity of roles which are context specific (Bloom, 2000). One study (Rodd, 1997) of 79 managers (coordinator, manager or owner of an early childhood centre, head or deputy of a school, or teacher responsible for reception) in early childhood settings in the UK found that they identified the following management or leadership roles as most common to their work:

- managing and supervising staff (34%);
- contact with parents and other professionals (22%);
- staff support and development (16%);
- managing the budget (11%); and
- coordinating role (11%).

Two things are striking about this list: one is the relatively low percentage of activity for each area, and the second is the fact that most of these roles can be described as focusing on maintenance rather than development. In other words, there was more emphasis on management than leadership.

A number of different factors emerged from a collation of 'leadership stories' from participants in the 'Educational Leadership Project', a project designed to further leadership in early childhood centres in New Zealand. Leadership was defined as: having a vision; being able to articulate this vision in practice; strengthening links between the early years centre and the community; developing a community of learners; community advocacy; and giving children leadership (Hatherley and Lee, 2003).

Rodd (1999) describes the main elements of leadership in EC. It is notable that as well as factors such as influencing the behaviour of staff, administering programmes effectively, supervising staff and planning and implementing change, there is a strong emphasis on working with parents and guiding them, which is an emphasis that is particularly important in EC leadership.

Community aspects are also emphasized by Kagan and Hallmark, who suggest that leadership in the early years can take the following forms:

- Community Leadership, which connects early childhood education to the community through informing and constructing links among families, services, resources and the public and private sectors.
- Pedagogical Leadership, forming a bridge between research and practice through disseminating new information and shaping agendas.
- Administrative leadership, which includes financial and personnel management.
- Advocacy leadership, creating a long-term vision of the future of early childhood education. This involves developing a good understanding of the field, legislative processes and the media, as well as being a skilled communicator.
- Conceptual leadership, which conceptualises early childhood leadership within the broader framework of social movements and change (Kagan and Hallmark, 2001).

Kagan and Hallmark (2001) stress that these components may require contrasting styles of leadership, and therefore in many cases different types of leaders, as well as more training in these areas. It is clear that they see a strong political role for leaders in the early childhood sector, and see community leadership as a core competency. Mitchell (1989) goes as far as to claim that to be effective, EC leaders need to focus on the entire family, rather than just the child, as many parents increasingly need support due to problems of poverty and family break-up. Parents need to be involved with their children's education through: the provision of social events; inviting parents into classrooms; offering parent support groups; helping parents to apply for social benefits; helping them arrange child care; and supporting parental child care choices. This means that as well as being well trained in EC and the more traditional aspects of organizational leadership and management, they also need to be strong communicators with parents and be able to liaise with a variety of organizations (Mitchell, 1989).

An important leadership role in EC lies in coordination between the various actors, such as family, school and community, which need to work together (often by creating integrated services) to maximize opportunities for all children. According to one study (Kunesh and Farley, 1993), in order for an integrated services approach to be effective, it needs to involve all actors, be data-driven, and ensure risk-taking, visionary leadership that builds ownership at all levels. Leaders in such an environment will need to be adept at dealing with conflict and coordination. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the multi-agency working of the English *Sure Start* projects. As part of an audit of multi-agency working by Atkinson et al. (2001, 2002) that included a *Sure*

*Start* project as one of a number of case studies, a key factor in the success of such work was found to be effective leadership. Having a person to lead or drive the initiative forward and having a clear focus for multi-agency work, shared aims and shared resources, were considered essential by many of the participants interviewed, with leadership and drive and joint funding being highlighted as particularly important where education, social services and health services were working together.

One study in New Zealand found that managers were typically older and had worked for longer in the organization than other staff (Croll 1993). Another striking finding from this study was the relatively low level of higher education qualifications, less than 3 percent having an MA (in fact, only 28% claimed to have a BA degree). Indeed, the current UK *Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE)* project in Technical Paper 6 (Sylva et al., 1999) presents findings that show a strong relationship between the childcare/education qualifications of the centre manager and the quality of provision in the EPPE settings. This supports recent initiatives to ensure that those who manage and lead early childhood settings should be trained teachers.

## **characteristics of effective EC leaders**

Some research has been carried out into the characteristics of effective leaders in EC, although more typically work in this area consists of purely normative prescriptions that do not refer to empirical studies. There appear to be few case studies of effective EC settings, or quantitative analyses of characteristics set against effectiveness measures. The investigation of effective pedagogy based on intensive case studies in effective early years settings selected from the *EPPE* study (see, for example, Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002) did not consider matters of leadership. These are clearly major weaknesses in the research base in this area.

According to Bloom (2000) EC leaders need to be competent in three key areas:

- knowledge, including group dynamics, organisational theory, child development, and teaching strategies;
- skills, including technical, human and conceptual skills (e.g. budgeting); and
- attitudes, including moral purpose.

Competencies therefore lie as much in specific early childhood factors as in broader management and leadership knowledge and skills.

In interviews of 100 early childhood professionals, the following characteristics were identified as key to being an effective leader in EC:

- being patient, warm and kind;

- being goal-oriented, using planning, assertiveness, vision, and confidence (this was a change over earlier research, where these factors had not been identified);
- having good working relationship with staff, who participate in leadership; and
- being responsive to parents' needs and able to communicate with them.

Interestingly, Rodd (1996) reported that the views of EC professionals had moved towards more mainstream views of leadership compared to earlier studies. However, they did not appear to see roles like research, marketing or communicating with policymakers as part of their role, and did not have any conception of risk taking, change management or the creation of professional networks (Rodd, 1996).

In a study in New Zealand, managers were asked what skills they considered important. The main factors to emerge from this study were: good relationships with staff; a commitment to meeting organizational goals; a commitment to fulfilling the roles of an early childhood professional; acknowledging others' strengths and weaknesses; a desire to extend their professional knowledge; access to clearly defined roles and responsibilities; and responsiveness to the needs of parents. In addition, being visionary, coordinating and motivating, and being able to make decisions were mentioned, although leaders said they did not actually exercise these activities in practice, thus highlighting a discrepancy between the leaders' daily tasks that could be described as largely managerial, and the leadership activities they thought important (Bloom, 1997). The issue of relationships and communication with staff was also highlighted in this study where it was found that managers believed they had provided staff with a great deal of feedback, a feeling that was not reciprocated by staff.

A recent study highlighted the fact that teachers wanted: their managers to listen to them; to provide for the physical, emotional and social needs of the organization; to give them the trust, time, tools and support needed to succeed; have a vision which they stick to; and to share decision making (Carter, 2000).

## **professional development and training**

The lack of leadership development programmes is clearly a key issue in EC. In contrast to their counterparts in primary and secondary schools, directors have had plenty of opportunity in their training to become familiar with issues of child development, assessment, classroom management and curriculum design, but not with management or leadership (Freeman and Brown, 2000).

In one US study, for example, most of the 257 surveyed directors said they



had received no prior training on leadership and management before taking on directorships, and 70 per cent felt ill prepared for the challenges that awaited them (Bloom, 1997). Other US studies have also reported a lack of training (Caruso, 1991). Similarly, many EC leaders in the UK have received very little management training, usually limited to short courses, and in one study described themselves as feeling uncomfortable with the professional development aspects of their role (Rodd, 1997). Other problems encountered were difficulties with interpersonal relationships, administration and decision making. All leaders in this study mentioned lack of leadership training as a problem for them. They felt that training was best provided once they were doing the job, not beforehand. One Australian study found that only 44 per cent of surveyed directors ( $N = 201$ ) had taken any management subjects as part of diploma or degree courses, while 49 per cent had done some INSET training related to leadership and management (which was considered useful by 70 per cent of that group) (Hayden, 1997). Of the total, 20 per cent felt they were not really prepared at all. Directors felt they were least well prepared to deal with administration and financial issues, staffing issues and workload, and felt best prepared for teaching children and dealing with staff issues (Hayden, 1997).

Another study asked experienced directors of early child care centres where they had received their leadership and management training. It was found that they tended to have taken up training in a disparate fashion, latching on to opportunities where they appeared. Most commonly, they had taken part in administration workshops at early childhood conferences, or participated in training events outside the field of early childhood. As in the Rodd (1997) study, directors claimed that they thought training was best delivered once they were already working in the job, and were positive on the benefits of training, seen as not only improving skills but also keeping them excited and challenged. Peer support was seen as crucial to promoting growth and maintaining motivation (Poster and Neugebauer, 1998).

Increasingly this lack of training has been acknowledged as specific training programmes for EC leaders are currently being developed. However, at present, most are small scale and localized and unlike the schools sector there are no national training programmes. Where training is provided, effects appear positive. One model that incorporated accreditation towards a nationally recognized diploma and used a collegial training model resulted in increases in leader knowledge and skills, and improvements in organizational climate (Eisenberg and Rafanello, 1998). Another example given by Mitchell and Serranen (2000), reports on a programme that developed learning communities (in seven school districts) for EC leaders, to help them deepen their understanding of leadership and change management. Consultation and follow-up were provided (Mitchell and Serranen, 2000). Twenty-two leaders

working in Head Start centres were enrolled in a 16-month leadership training programme in the USA, which focused on: leadership styles; organizational theory; legal and fiscal issues; relations with parents and the community; child development; self-knowledge; research; and technology. A pre-post test design was used to evaluate the programme. Analyses showed an improvement in organizational climate, improved teaching quality and an improvement in self-rated knowledge and competence following the training programme (Bloom and Sheerer, 1992). In Rodd's (1996) interviews of EC professionals in Victoria, most felt that leadership training would be useful.

Research in other fields has highlighted that to be most effective, training needs to be tailored to the needs of participants. One way to achieve this is to link training to the career stage of the participants. The National College for School Leadership has identified a five-stage school leadership framework directly linked to career phase ([www.ncsl.org](http://www.ncsl.org)). In terms of EC, Bloom (1997) has similarly identified a three-phase model of career stages – as beginning, competent and 'master' directors. Following the NCSL developmental framework it would seem appropriate that at the beginning level, there should be a dedicated programme focused on the basic elements of leadership and management in EC delivered both on line and 'face to face'. At the competent level more differentiated programmes are needed, similar to those available for aspiring heads and deputy heads in schools. At the master level, programmes based on coaching and mentoring would seem most appropriate with the emphasis on the transfer of knowledge and expertise (Bloom, 1997).

## **discussion**

The main conclusions from this review are first, the paucity of high quality research on leadership in EC. Second, in terms of the research that does exist, it clearly points to the importance of leadership in EC, the complexity of the role, and the need for more specific training and professional development. The British Educational Research Association (BERA) 'Early Years Special Interest Group' also recently noted the paucity of evidence about the relation between adult training, professionalism and children's learning, concluding 'we are still trying to describe the field in its complexities' (2003: 41).

The EC field is complex because of its diversity and scale but also because of the strong advocacy and community roles required for leaders in early childhood. This points towards more collaborative ways of working and leading. Indeed, Osgood and colleagues (Osgood and Sharp, 2000; Osgood and Stone, 2002; Osgood, 2003) have concluded that while early years practitioners are committed to heightening their professionalism, the most appropriate means of realizing this is not through increased entrepreneurial approaches in the state and private sector but rather through collaborative, co-operative and community-

oriented lines. This calls out for more research and development work focused on community leadership in EC, which currently is simply not available.

Clearly, recent theorizing in educational leadership per se has a lot to offer the field of early childhood education. The concept of distributed leadership, with its emphasis on increased capacity through shared leadership (Harris, 2004) is particularly relevant to a field that is diverse, complex and strongly community related. One argument in favour of distributed leadership in early childhood institutions concerns the need to empower those at different levels within the sector, not simply those in senior positions (Rodgers, 2001).

In terms of future research activity, it would seem both important and timely to try and explore what is meant by effective leadership in EC and by association, how leaders could be equipped to be more effective. At present, most studies have not done this, and the characteristics of effective leaders in early childhood therefore require further investigation. Ramey et al. have made some progress in this direction by identifying that effective EC leaders are 'committed, competent and respected' (2000: 43). In contrast, weaker leaders were seen as less skilful at training and supervising staff, less good at working with schools and the community, and less involved and committed. However, further research is needed to identify more precisely what it is that effective EC leaders do and by association what leadership development is required to maximize the effectiveness of all leaders in EC.

The future of EC looks very promising over the next decade. There is a renewed emphasis on pre-school provision and EC programmes which is both encouraging and entirely necessary, if some of the fundamental disadvantages in society are to be successfully addressed. Given the centrality of EC in government policy and its current high profile, it seems almost inconceivable that the leadership practices of those working within EC are not being taken seriously. Furthermore, unlike for those working in the mainstream school sector there are no national training programmes focused either on management or leadership. Taking what research indicates about the relationship between leadership and positive organizational outcomes, this would seem to be a most serious oversight for two reasons. First, because it leaves effective leadership practice to chance and implies that there will inevitably be weak leaders. Second, because it knowingly leaves those in leadership positions unprepared for the significant management and leadership tasks they face on a daily basis. These seem to be two compelling reasons for investing substantially in leadership research and development for EC. All the evidence suggests that this investment is long overdue.

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