

Leading and Managing in the Early Years: A Study of the Impact of a NCSL Programme on Children's Centre Leaders' Perceptions of Leadership and Practice

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Abstract

Research has shown that the quality of early years provisions is directly linked to the quality of leadership and management of early years settings. The extant research also shows that the quality of preschool settings are almost always characterised by strong leadership, where leaders and practitioners share a clear vision of the setting's practices. This paper presents the key findings of a national evaluation of early years leadership across a range of children centres in England. The focus of the study is to explore children's centre leaders' perceptions of leadership, and the impact of their professional qualification – the National Professional Qualification in Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL) – on their professional practice. Introduced by the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services in 2005, the NPQICL was developed to support the professional needs of children's centre leaders, especially in the role they play in meeting the Every Child Matters (2003) outcomes for all young children. The findings reveal that integrated and multi-agency working, reflective learning and practice, as well as professional status and pay, are key factors that can significantly influence the role of children's centre leaders and which in turn has a direct impact on their professional practice.

Keywords

early years, leadership, management, children's centre

Introduction: The Early Years Leadership Context

Research has shown a significant correlation between the quality of provision and the leadership of early years settings (Muijis et al., 2004; Pugh, 2001; Rodd, 2006; Robins and Callan, 2009;

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Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2008). A key study on 'Effective Leadership in the Early Years Sector' (ELEYS), undertaken by Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2008), has provided empirical evidence for the importance of early years leadership and the role of early years leaders. The study reveals that effective preschool settings are almost always characterized by strong leadership with relatively minimal staff turnovers, where leaders and practitioners share a clear vision of the setting's practices, especially in relation to pedagogy and the curriculum (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2008). Developed as an extension of the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) and Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) projects (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002; Sylva et al., 1997, and ongoing:), the ELEYS study explored two key questions: What does the extant literature and research tell us about effective educational leadership in the early years? And what characteristics or patterns of leadership can be identified in the REPEY sample of effective settings? (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2008). The study was essentially qualitative in nature, using semi-structured interviews, focus groups, observations and field notes as its data collection methods. The sample of the study was drawn specifically from the 12 settings previously identified by the EPPE and REPEY projects as being effective and of good quality provision. Importantly, the findings from the ELEYS study showed that effective leadership was a fundamental factor contributing to the quality of early years settings, and this in turn had a significant impact on the overall improvement and achievement of the children's educational outcomes. The study revealed that a trained and skilled leader or manager, with the capacity to reflect upon and engage with changing contexts, capable of communicating and ensuring the vision of the setting, had a direct impact on the overall quality of the setting. As Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2008) assert, 'there is no doubt that effective leadership and appropriate training for the leadership role is an increasingly important element in providing high-quality provision for the early years, especially as we move to larger and sometimes more complex, multi-professional teams of staff'. The early years researcher Rodd (2006) concurs with this assertion that effective leadership is key to maintaining a quality setting, and that '[e]ffective leadership in the early childhood profession is about working towards creating a community and providing a high quality service.'

The burgeoning research in early years leadership as discussed above, is also embedded in a wider policy agenda to reform and professionalize the workforce. The National Professional Development Framework for Leading and Managing Children's Services in England (DCSF, 2008), provides a key policy framework for leaders and managers in ensuring that the services they provide are focused on improving the outcomes for children and families. The framework makes explicit the government's vision and expectations of early years leaders, 'Resilient, well-informed, creative and innovative leaders with the requisite skills, knowledge and experience to ensure the effective delivery of integrated provision for children, young people and families at the local level' (DCSF, 2008). The stress in this statement is not only on effective leadership and the essential attributes expected of those in leadership positions, but the culture of integrated and multi-agency working that is at the heart of leading and managing in the current early years sector.

It is not surprising then, that since 2003 with the previous Labour government, a major policy thrust to realize the Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda has led to the development of 3500 multi-agency Sure Start children's centres, and this has added to the urgency of training early years leaders. The development of Sure Start centres and working within a community of diverse professionals are key to the Labour government's 10-year strategy to improve the services for young children. These initiatives were further supported by the Childcare Act 2006, a pioneering legislation aimed specifically at the early years and childcare sector in England. The legislation purports

to ensure the rights of every child to high quality education and care services, regardless of their background. To put this policy thrust into context, the devolution of educational services in the UK meant that local early years policies and strategies within the UK often vary within each country. The UK is made up of four distinct countries: England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The four states share similarities in terms of their national policy and strategy for childcare and education, but are also distinct in terms of their regional and local approaches to the early years (Ang, 2007). The introduction of Sure Start children's centres with an integrated and multi-agency approach is therefore unique to England. Increasingly however, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have also begun to put emphasis on collaborative working that involves children, parents, practitioners and multi-agencies. In Wales for instance, since 2003, Sure Start initiatives have been integrated with the Children and Youth Partnership fund and the Childcare strategy to form a new collaboration in the form of Cymorth—the Children and Youth Support Fund with the aim of raising the quality of services for disadvantaged children and their families. In Northern Ireland, 32 Sure Start programmes are currently in place, spread across the rural and urban communities. Thus, in many ways, the Sure Start initiatives that developed in England have evolved across the country in response to the needs of the local communities across the UK.

Further to the development of Sure Start children's centres in England, the ECM strategy to improve the overall care and educational outcomes for all children and young people, particularly through working in a multi-agency environment, is to therefore empower early years leaders with the responsibility of building and leading across integrated and collaborative teams, working with different agencies and sectors in health, education and social services (DfES, 2003). The National College for Leadership (NCL) for instance, outlines the link between the national policy agenda and the importance of effective leadership in both the early years and school sectors, stating that '[e]ffective leadership is at the heart of the changes required, and developing leaders to make these changes successfully is at the heart of NCSL's work (NCL, 2009, <http://lmscontent.nslc.org.uk/ECM/index.cfm?n=1038>). In a recent report on *Why It Matters to Leaders* (NCSL, 2009), the NCL states unequivocally that '[l]eading-edge models of leadership are emerging in children's centres ... and more so now than ever before, effective leadership is vital in ensuring that the care and educational needs of all young children are met.

The drive to raise the quality of care and educational provision for young children in England has therefore led to unprecedented emphasis on leadership in the early years. Government spending on early childhood services has notably increased, with an allocated budget of £1.5 billion for childcare and early years since 1997 (HM Treasury, 2002; see also Baldock et al., 2005; Pugh and Duffy 2006). As a consequence, the need for the training of early years practitioners with effective leadership and management skills has become particularly urgent.

The UK government's emphasis on early years leadership has simultaneously led to the development of training programmes and qualifications such as the Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) award and the National Professional Qualification in Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL). Introduced by the Children's Workforce and Development Council (CWDC) in 2007, the EYPS enables graduate practitioners to work towards achieving a training qualification in early years practice. This means that individuals from a range of professional backgrounds from both within and outside the early years sector, with a graduate qualification and relevant experience, are able to gain the professional status of an early years professional (EYP) and achieve the nationally agreed standards for children's centre leaders. At the heart of the EYPS is to create a team of graduate staff and transform the early years workforce, thereby raising the overall standards and achievement of the care and education of young children. The NPQICL was initiated

in 2005 by the then National College for School Leadership (NCSL), now known as the National College (NC) for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services, and is the first national programme targeted at children's centre leaders with the aim of training and cultivating their leadership skills. The programme addresses specifically the professional development needs of those working in an integrated, multi-agency early years environment, and who are at the forefront of leading and managing local Sure Start and children's centre programmes. More recently, a new, bespoke training programme, the directors of children's services (DCS) leadership programme has been established by the National College in collaboration with the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) and the CWDC, to support early years directors in their work as leaders in developing high performance teams in local authorities and children's services (NCL, <http://www.nationalcollege.org.uk/index/professionaldevelopment/dcsleadershipprogramme.htm>).

Significantly, these professional training programmes have been driven by the government's policy agenda to recruit a graduate early years workforce by 2015, and to engender a transformative change in the professionalism of the sector. These initiatives are also coupled with increased public funding for the professional development of the early years workforce, through for instance, the financial allocation of £250 million for a 'Transformation Fund' to help support the training of early years practitioners working in the voluntary and private sectors (DfES, 2009, <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/strategy/deliveringservices/workforcereform/earlyyearsworkforce/earlyyearsworkforce/>; DfES, 2006), and a 'Graduate Leader Fund' of a further £305 million to help upskill the workforce to graduate level. As Robins and Callan (2009) write, 'we are currently experiencing unprecedented levels of funding to raise qualification levels in the non-maintained sector'; thus illustrating the level of government investment and commitment to raise the status and qualifications of the sector, particularly for early years leaders and managers.

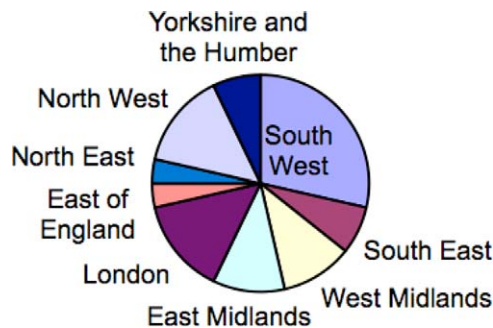
Methodology

Set within the context above, the focus of the study is to explore children's centre leaders' perceptions of leadership, and the impact of the NPQICL training on their practice. Initiated by the NC in 2005, the NPQICL was developed to address the professional needs of early childhood leaders, more specifically children's centre leaders. The programme aims to ensure that all children's centre leaders have a clear sense of the role that they and their team play in improving the ECM outcomes for young children, and narrowing the gaps in achievements between those who are advantaged and those most disadvantaged in society. The focus of the NPQICL is also on equipping child's centre leaders with the necessary leadership competencies in delivering integrated services that is core to their settings' provision. The training sets the standards for the quality of professional practice expected of those leading complex, multi-disciplinary settings, while recognizing the important role that early years leaders play.

As part of the programme, both face-to-face and online learning support have been incorporated to help practitioners carry out research and continuing professional reflection in their practice. The main aims of the programme are to enable early years leaders to share practice, and receive support for delivering their objectives around key leadership responsibilities such as performance and financial management, and delivering the ECM outcomes. The four core modules built into the NPQICL programme include: building the learning community; developing leadership in a research community; developing as a reflective leader; and developing integrated centre leadership. A distinctive aspect of the training is a personal reflective journal which allows participants to reflect upon and locate their own models of practice and perspectives of leadership.

Table 1. Sample population and response rates

| Region | Response rate (%) |
|--------------------------|-------------------|
| South West | 29 |
| South East | 7 |
| West Midlands | 11 |
| East Midlands | 11 |
| London | 14 |
| East of England | 4 |
| North East | 4 |
| North West | 14 |
| Yorkshire and the Humber | 7 |

**Figure 1.** Regional stratification of sample population

The total sample size of the study was 359. The study used a stratified sampling strategy, based on two main categories of stratification. First, in terms of the cohort of participants who graduated from the NPQICL. In this case, it was decided that the first cohort of students who undertook the NPQICL in 2005/6 would be the target population. This was because they had completed the programme more than 2 years prior to the start of the study, and would therefore have a longer length of practice since completion compared to the other cohorts.

The second stratification category was the geographical spread of children's centres, and the third stratum, the context of settings such as rural or urban. To allow for a diversity of participant populations across England, the overall sample included a spread of participants from the North East, Yorkshire and the Humber, North West, West Midlands, East Midlands, East of England, South West, South East and London. The spread of sample population is indicated in Table 1 and illustrated in Figure 1, which reflect the participant representation of each region. The highest number of responses received was from the South West region at 29 per cent, and the lowest number of responses at 4 per cent were from the East of England and the North East. The overall average response rate per region was approximately three participants per region. As Newby (2010) and other social science researchers suggest, the purpose of a sampling strategy would help to ensure a more balanced sample population as opposed to a non-stratified sampling would otherwise allow (Creswell, 2008; Denscombe, 2007). Such a sampling method will ensure that the selection category or stratum desired such as the geographical spread of participants, will also be more accurately represented across the whole sample, thus maintaining to some extent the quality and validity of the study.

The study utilized two main methods of data collection: questionnaires and telephone interviews, and was made up of essentially two phases. The first phase comprised the use of a questionnaire to collect a broad survey of participants' views of their NPQICL training and the impact on their practice. The survey was undertaken electronically, via an email list of 359 participants drawn from the NCSL's database. The email included a cover letter that explained the purpose of the study and requested voluntary participation from individuals, with a dateline of return within 3 weeks.

The second phase of the study consisted of follow-up telephone interviews to gather more in-depth data of individual participants' views of leadership and their experience of the programme. The recruitment of participants for the telephone interviews was based on their consent and questionnaire responses. The aim of this second phase was to focus on key issues that had emerged from participants' responses in the questionnaire and to pursue follow-up questions in order to verify uncertainties or fill in gaps in the data. Subsequently, the data collected from the telephone interviews, together with participants' responses to the questionnaire helped to form a broader picture of participants' perceptions of leadership. The design and scope of the project allowed for a total of 15 follow-up interviews, each lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes. The use of qualitative methods provided participants with the opportunity of narrating their perceptions of leadership in their own ways. The diversity of each interview and participant responses illustrated clearly the complexity of leading and managing children centre settings. This further helped in the interpretation and contextualization of the participants' professional lives and in turn the study as a whole.

Limitations of Study

The overall design and methodology of the study was undertaken with the aim of obtaining optimum results, given the aims and scale of the project. Importantly, the demography of the sample population was a key consideration in the selection of participants to ensure a balanced result. Nevertheless, there were inevitable limitations. For one, the rate of return from the questionnaires were relatively low, at 8 per cent. This was partly due to a percentage of participants whose email addresses were incorrect or undeliverable, and non-responses from some individuals. For another, the final selection of follow up interviews represent only 4 per cent of the overall sample, either because of individuals' non-consent or conversely, where consent was given, the participants were unavailable despite numerous attempts to make contact with them via email and phone. These extenuating factors need to be taken into consideration when analysing and interpreting the findings.

The scope of this study is also consciously limited in the way that it focuses only on children's centre settings. The study does not purport to present a universal account of all early years leaders and its findings cannot be generalized across other preschool services because of the distinct context of children's centres. The impact of the NPQICL leadership programme on the actual improved outcomes for children's centre leaders and their centres, and in turn on the children and families that they serve, is also often complex and difficult to map. However, what this study will hopefully reveal is the implications of leading and managing in the early years, and the possible benefits and significance of the findings for future research.

Ethics

Prior to the start of the project, ethical approval was formally sought from the research ethics committee of the researcher's institution. As part of the process, all documentations and resources

such as participant consent forms and letters, questionnaire and interview schedules, were submitted to the panel for evidencing and addressing any ethical issues that may arise. This ensured that the study complied with the ethical regulations set at institutional level. All aspects of the study were also subject to the consultation and approval of NCSL. Once formal approval was given, letters were sent via email to all participants inviting them to participate in the research. An outline of the study was provided in the email, along with written assurance that participation in the study was strictly voluntary and confidential, that participants could withdraw at any point without obligation or explanation. All participants were also informed of the overall aims of the research, the duration of the follow-up interviews, and how the findings will be used and disseminated. When seeking informed consent, all participants were also guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality.

Findings and Discussion

The findings presented in this article provide pertinent examples of the perceptions held by children's centre leaders towards their leadership and practice. The findings also reveal the views held by early years leaders of the NPQICL and its impact on their leadership. While some view the NPQICL as an opportunity to reflect on their professional practice, others see it more as an opportunity for personal reflection and development. Three key themes emerged. These include:

- (1) Integrated, multi-agency working as a key aspect of leadership.
- (2) Reflective learning and practice as an important leadership approach.
- (3) Status and pay as key external factors influencing leadership.

Integrated and Multi-agency Working

Almost all participants recognized in their questionnaire responses and follow-up interviews that an important aspect of their leadership role lies in the coordination and leading of a range of agencies. These include social services, health, educational authorities, family, school and community. The ability to understand, lead and manage joint initiatives to deliver an integrated service was highlighted as particularly important for effective leadership in a children's centre setting. As Duffy and Marshall (2007) crucially asked in their chapter about integrated multiagency work: 'Can you effectively lead a service if you do not understand it deeply?' Participant LE from the Yorkshire and Humber region reported that 'knowledge of the needs of a multi-agency team' was particularly crucial in her role as leader of a centre as this enabled her to understand and work more efficiently with individuals from different professional backgrounds. She described at length about the importance of having a shared vision when working in a multi-agency team and how this has worked to the benefit of her team, other professionals, as well as the local community:

I suppose that I have been much clearer in understanding my role as a leader. And there is a vision to be had, and that it is important to develop that vision both with the staff and from a multi-agency perspective . . . once we developed our vision as a Centre, our strategy became to integrate ourselves more into the community. Once we found ourselves as a Centre, and developed our vision, we developed, . . . a view that we needed to be much more integrated both with the other professionals and with the wider community in our area . . . [w]e looked at the local information that we had access to and tried to work out where there were additional services that we should be providing. And in actual fact, building on

links with the health visitors and the Sure Start staff as well—thinking what we started out to do, but going back there and thinking, where are we? What should we be doing? What is the guidance telling us and where are the gaps? How can we improve it? And then looking at setting targets for improving things. (Participant LE, Yorkshire and the Humber, children's centre leader)

There is clear evidence among the participants highlighted here, that a central tenet underpinning their work is multi-agency, partnership working and the impact it has on their role as early years leaders. More crucially, as participant LE above reports, it is not just about understanding the service her Centre provides, but understanding the needs of those accessing the service, and the needs of those working in it. Additionally, SS, a centre manager, commented that 'training with professionals outside of education' was key when working in a multi-agency team, while children's centre leader SG from the North East said that being open, listening to other professionals, and having 'the ability to cross boundaries and see beyond your own professional field' are vital aspects of leadership. Participant DL, an area manager in the North West region, whose job remit entails overseeing a group of children's centres, felt strongly that working in a multi-disciplinary environment in 'an integrated working style' is at the heart of early years leadership and is important in driving every aspect of the children's centre that she is currently leading.

Having a person to lead and drive the vision of the children's centre and having a clear focus on multi-agency work, were therefore considered essential by 12 of the 15 participants interviewed. It is evident from the findings that the early years leaders are acutely aware of the multi-disciplinary context and wide range of services that they provide for children and families. However, it is also important to note that beyond this professional knowledge, participants also show critical understanding of the realities of their practice, and that simply having or providing a range of professional expertise does not necessarily equate to integrated working. Rather, working collaboratively and effectively with other professionals requires a higher level of professional sensitivity and commitment, and which can present its particular challenges and difficulties. Seven of the 15 participants interviewed pointed at the challenges they faced working and leading a multi-agency practice. One participant suggested that he found working in a multi-disciplinary team as something of a challenge. He drew attention to the 'different perspectives' and 'different ways of working' with different professionals and how this was a challenge to his own 'personal leadership style' at the centre.

Conversely, participant VT from the South West region, a newly appointed children's centre leader, commented that part of her challenge was 'to be an effective responsive leader within a changing multi-agency environment', and the ability to respond to changes as necessary. For centre manager SG from London, his challenge as a leader was at a more strategic level, in his attempts to work across different educational organizations including a school and local sure start programme: 'preparing for the creation of a new children's centre, bringing together an early years centre, a primary school and the local Sure Start programme'. He describes the experience and challenges he faced in further detail:

We need to know that we each come from different fields, from different cultural professional backgrounds. But actually to be able to work in partnership, you need to open up and listen to other discourses from other professionals, and to be challenged by what they say. But also to be able to create together a common language, we need to listen to one another. That is one of the things I learnt. . . . One example is our Centre, my Assistant Head came from social services. That has been really important in the way we have created the new team. And I think when we first started, we did not always have

the language or the understanding of what the other was saying. We come from such different backgrounds. I think it was this work around listening, and sharing understanding and knowledge of what we were saying. (Participant SG, London, children's centre manager)

For SG, the ability to 'cross professional boundaries' was a crucial challenge in his work as leader of a multi-disciplinary team. While recognizing that one of the strengths of the centre's provision is its multi-disciplinary work, participant SG also acknowledges that it may not always be possible to resolve professional differences that arise and highlights the tension that can exist between individuals working with different professional agendas. According to him, one way of overcoming this tension is the willingness and ability to 'cross professional boundaries', an expression that he often uses to describe his experience of multi-professional working:

On the NPQICL, one area of discussion, of debate at the time was whether people coming from educational backgrounds tended to put the education of the children [first], as their main concern, while people coming from Sure Start programmes, for instance, were always looking at the whole family to start with. And there was almost a tension between them, and a disagreement around that. And in fact that is exactly the type of dilemmas that come from working with people from different backgrounds. I don't think there is a resolution. . . . And I think that if you are heading a multidisciplinary team as the Head of a Children's Centre, which includes people who come from social services, but which also includes people who are child psychologists, . . . the midwives, you need to be able to actually have this ability to cross boundaries, and to see beyond your own professional field. (Participant SG)

The extract above highlights an acute awareness on the part of the participant regarding the difficulties in managing multi-professional partnerships, the impact this can have upon a team, and the importance of emotional intelligence as an attribute in facilitating this process. There is also recognition that the notion of integrated working has evolved over time as a result of changing professional ideologies, and shifting cultural and social attitudes towards education, children and families. However, despite the challenges of working in a multi-agency environment, 22 participant responses from the overall questionnaires and follow-up interviews found that their role as early years leaders was also an empowering one. For example, one participant commented that she was empowered in that she 'gained reassurance of what you do and that empowers you to do the right things'. Children's centre leader BH from the South East found her role as leader empowering in the sense that she has a 'better understanding of my own style of leadership' and was 'growing more confident' as a leader. In turn, she was able to 'empower others' in the team in their own professional development. TJ, a children's centre manager from the South East, commented that it empowered her by making her a better partner in her work with other professionals:

I think that the major difference it [the NPQICL] made was, it made me much better in partnership working. It made me appreciate other people's priorities, and also different approaches other people may have. It is too easy sometimes to conclude that other people won't do something in partnership, it [the NPQICL] made me much more able to be a good partner.

Early years academic Bruce (2006) asserts that early years professionals need to 'take an active role in recognising, assessing, and promoting a sense of empowerment and confident in their professional role' as this is an important part of extending and developing the quality of their practice. It is encouraging therefore to see that some of the participants have highlighted a sense of empowerment and confidence through their practice.

Indeed, the role of the early years leader in recent years has moved beyond the traditional 'leadership' role of merely administering and managing diverse services. In many ways, working in a multi-disciplinary team has contributed to this complexity. Jarvis et al. (2010) suggest that early childhood leaders need to recognize the complexity of their role in bringing together staff from a range of professional, cultural and social backgrounds. Early years leadership demands a mature understanding of children and families, and a sophisticated knowledge and approach to leading a specialist multi-agency practice. To this extent, the findings from the study reveal that participants recognize that early years settings are dynamic organizations that are changing and evolving, and that their leadership role and practice need to be simultaneously adjusted and enhanced in response to these changes. Rodd (1997, 2006) and Moss and Wigfall (2001) have documented in their research on the complexities of working in a multi-agency team, and that factors such as poor communication, weak organizational structure and inappropriate leadership style are common barriers to effective team work. It is important therefore that when working in a multi-agency setting, early years professionals share a common focus in prioritizing the needs of the child at the centre of their practice and work towards a shared vision, that is driven ostensibly by the ECM agenda.

Reflective Learning and Practice

Responses from the questionnaires and follow-up interviews indicate a strong commitment to reflective learning and practice as an important aspect of effective leadership. Bruce (2006) argues that the very process of reflecting enables practitioners to understand how they can have an impact on children's learning and provides them with evidence of their own pedagogical awareness and maturing role in the setting. Similarly, Robins and Callan (2006) contend that settings need 'a system for reflection', which supports individuals and teams in reviewing the way they work, their values and behaviour. This process of reflection will in turn raise self-awareness and drive within the team and encourage 'self-leadership within a community of responsibility'. As part of the training, the NPQICL includes an expectation that participants engage in reflective activities of their own practice, through the use of a personal reflective journal. Six of the fifteen participants interviewed felt that being 'a reflective practitioner' and 'pondering on their practice' were springboards for their professional development and this in turn enhanced their confidence as leaders. CN, a senior co-ordinator responsible for the management of nine children's centres in the West Midlands, highlighted the use of journals as a specific aspect of the course which she found particularly useful, and which she has continued to draw on in her current work with partner agencies:

I found the journaling part of the course really, really useful, and have continued to reflect very often on situations that are difficult, or complex. And I found that gives you quite an insight into how other people behave and how we behave. Yes, so that's been really interesting. And it actually developed relationships quite considerably . . . particularly with the partner agencies that we work with, where there may be some blocks or misunderstandings and reflecting on it does help . . . some [partnerships] are more difficult than others. Some are partnerships that are developing and some are very new. But reflecting on some of these communications that we had in the past and where we need to move forward to, it has helped reflecting and writing about it . . . Part of the relationship with partners was helping them to understand where we all fit together.

Participant JD, from the West Midlands, reported that she has become 'reflective of what is going on, . . . making [her] more aware of [her] responsibilities and therefore a more confident leader'. Children's centre leader SG commented that she reflected on her skills as a leader, on 'what constitutes leadership', and more importantly, 'how to improve [her] practice'. Another participant saw the NPQICL as 'an opportunity to reflect on my leadership style', in particular through her network and conversations with other early years leadership during the course, while participant JD found that reflecting on her practice 'has given me a perspective of myself and my leadership style and a greater confidence to believe in myself as a leader'. For these participants, being a reflective practitioner is an important component of their professional development, and which they have continued to capitalize and embed in all aspects of their everyday practice.

Five participants reported an enhancement in their knowledge and understanding of their leadership role as a result of being more reflective of their work in the setting. For instance, one participant from the North West, the head of centre of an early years and adult learning centre, felt that the NPQICL provided a valuable opportunity for her to reflect on her practice and this has in turn enabled her to develop her role as leader:

It has helped me develop my leadership skills further—I am now more confident in believing in myself as a leader. I have clearly defined my values and beliefs and these have supported my work in the Centre. (Participant MM, North West region, head of centre)

In a similar vein, participant PR, from the North East, commented that being a reflective practitioner has given her a 'better understanding of partnership working' in relation to her role as leader. Children's centre leader TJ felt that being a reflective practitioner has meant she now has a better understanding of multi-professional practice and is more mindful of how she interacts and works with other educational professionals, while children's centre leader BH from the South West was emphatic that the most important aspect of the course was the opportunity to 'critically reflect on and examine my own practice' and this 'encouraged in me the confidence in my own skill and expertise as a leader'. DL, a children and families area manager from the North West region, reported that the NPQICL made her reflect on the role of pedagogy, especially in the context of her own leadership and practice. Importantly, it helped her to build on her understanding of what 'good leadership' entailed and enhanced her confidence as leader:

I think that [the NPQICL] made me really think about what I was doing as a Children's Centre Manager. What was pedagogical leadership? And until the NPQICL I did not know what pedagogy actually was . . . if I did not have a good sense of what good leadership or good practice is in terms of early years, how can I be truly accountable? . . .

I think it [NPQICL] does give you that opportunity to reflect on your practice, be introduced to different theories. I really just enjoyed reading theories in books that actually then described exactly what I was doing. It gives you a confidence that I think isn't there or isn't there from other forums.

For others, their learning, reflective journey was centred more on their personal development, on what they had learnt about themselves since taking the course, and how this has impacted on their personal development. One participant considers the impact in the context of his personal growth: '[I]t has helped [to] develop my leadership (and also) deepened my understanding of myself, my strengths and weakness.' Participant TJ commented on an improvement in her personal

development since taking the course, 'I am more confident and realize what I am good at. I am also more understanding and patient about the need to be prepared to accept other people's priorities.'

In addition, there is also some evidence from the follow-up interviews that reflective learning can lead directly to changes in the participant's leadership and in turn to the setting's culture and style of working. For example, children's centre leader JP, from the South East, remarked that the NPQICL enhanced her understanding of the foundation stage and '[her] awareness of the importance of the early years', thereby making her more accountable in her role as leader, and 'accountable for children's achievement'.

Participant LA reported a change in her leadership style as a result of her reflective journey during the course. She has now adopted a 'more distributed leadership approach' by taking on a more strategic role as a leader, allowing the team at the children's centre more autonomy and involving staff in meaningful decision making. Robins and Callan (2006) describe this disseminated leadership style as 'a "letting go" approach', which empowers and enables staff in taking ownership of their practice and setting, 'For a leader, the ultimate trust is "letting go" of staff, empowering them to grow as practitioners and to support them in gaining ownership of their roles and responsibilities.' Similarly, Rodd (2006) refers to such a disseminated management style as 'transformational leadership' where the leaders' confidence in their practitioners' ability to engage in quality practice supports their individual autonomy and participation in the setting. Three of the managers reported a more democratic and participatory approach in their leadership style in the management of their setting. Participant MM also described a change in her leadership style towards a more distributive approach and a less autocratic way, 'there is lot of delegation of responsibilities' and the impact of this on the setting meant that her team has more autonomy in setting the centre's practices and they are encouraged to assume different operational roles. As head of the centre in the North West, MM asserts that this change in practice is essential to her current practice. By giving her staff more autonomy, it has strengthened their work together as a team and this has in turn enabled her to focus more on developing the strategic, long term plans for the centre:

It enables me to move forward with other projects ... I have a senior team, four or five [staff] are working in different areas, and that meant I can concentrate on different areas for a longer period of time, knowing that somebody else is being responsible for the operational part of [the Centre], keeping it running. And my input is much more on a strategic level.

The responses above show that the professionals working at the Centres have developed ways of dealing with the disparate demands of their role and there are genuine attempts to enact the vision of their Centres which is to deliver better quality services for all children and families in the local community. For these early years leaders, it is evident that being able to reflect on their practice has helped them to construct a new perspective of their leadership role and develop the requisite skills for putting effective leadership into practice. Thus, the findings indicate that while early years leadership entails its issues and challenges, effective leadership driven by reflective and competent practitioners also invariably has its benefits.

Status and Pay

The findings show that perceptions of leadership were affected by a number of external factors, namely the pay, status and professional standing of the wider early years workforce. The

perception shared by the majority of participants was that while the NPQICL was valuable in developing their professional needs, it did little to enhance their professional status and pay in the sector. Only one participant from the West Midlands reported a positive impact of the NPQICL on her role as leader. She felt that the NPQICL had helped to raise her status as a practitioner and educator in the workplace, while another was more ambivalent about the merits of having completed the qualification, although she commented that it was a supportive and worthwhile training programme to undertake 'for managers who start to manage a children's centre'.

Many academics and advocates in the field have long argued that pay and status are perennial issues in the sector that need to be urgently addressed (Muijis et al., 2004; Rodd, 2006). This is particularly the case given the absence of a national regulatory framework of pay scale for the early years workforce, where the salaries of early years professionals, including children's centre leaders and managers, are subject to the market forces of demand and supply in a largely privatized sector. As one participant, WJ, from the South East region commented, 'in terms of pay or recognition at work, [the NPQICL] has not made any difference at all, which is really disappointing' and hoped that 'it will be recognized more in the future'. This was despite the fact that she found the NPQICL to be 'a very good course'. A similar response was recorded in her questionnaire response where she had written 'I am disappointed that this qualification has not made any difference to my professional development . . . it is not recognized at all within the workplace in terms of authority or pay.' Centre manager WJ went to provide an example of why she thought the NPQICL did not make a difference to her status in the sector:

We have just all been put into clusters, and they advertise the Cluster Centres' Manager to manage geographical clusters. The person that got the job said there were six of us that went for it, five had the NPQICL, and one didn't, and the one who didn't got the job.

Along similar lines, participant CS, from the South West region, remarked that the qualification has not 'make a big difference yet' and interestingly, alluded to the disparity in status between the NPQICL and the postgraduate teaching qualification as she felt that the latter has added value, '[there is] still a barrier, divider between teaching qualification and the NPQICL. A teaching qualification has higher value.' As CS, a children's centre manager, answers in response to the question of whether the NPQICL has made a difference to her role and work in the wider sector:

I don't think it has made a big difference yet. I think it is going to take time in education, [before they] seriously recognize this as a real qualification with real meat and bones to it. I think that it will take time because I think there are still certain Heads [of Centres] think that if you are not a teacher then you are not recognized as being valuable in same way in education, there is actually more to education than the teaching qualification. There is a divide. And I still come against that as a barrier sometimes to people who engage with me . . . Being serious respectful that I can make a contribution to the bigger picture simply because I haven't got a teaching qualification . . . Just one step forward, it is possibly to try to keep going and changing the views of educationists, looking at education broadly.

The quotes above suggest that status and pay are central to participants' perception of their leadership role, and for some, are issues that are high on their agenda. Significantly, the implication of these responses is therefore that until a new status quo and pay scale is achieved, raising the qualifications of the early years workforce is in danger of becoming a mere rhetorical exercise. As Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2008: 29) had also surmised from their study, the issue of pay and

status is an ongoing challenge in the sector, 'the question of the amount of funding needed to raise the salaries of staff as they raise their qualification [also] remains problematic'. As the findings from the study here strongly suggest, staff development and training are key to effective leadership, but equally important is the pertinent issue of status and pay of the workforce in the sector as a whole.

Conclusion

To sum-up, the study explored the different viewpoints held by children's centre leaders regarding the notion of leadership and practice. Existing research demonstrates that effective leadership is an essential element for quality early childhood provision and the findings that emerged here exemplify the issues and challenges that some early years leaders currently face in the sector. There are strong indications from the study that leadership development programmes such as those embodied in the NPQICL, can have a strong impact on children's centre leaders, their practice and perceptions of leadership.

On 11 May 2010, a new UK government took to office. National policies and strategies in the early years will no doubt evolve, as early years professionals continue to keep abreast of current developments in the sector. The context of Sure Start children's centres, and therefore the management and leadership of these Centres, may well extend and change. Nevertheless, given the current challenges and complexities of the early years sector, leadership training and development are all the more pertinent for the professional development of early years leaders, in order that they may fulfil their roles effectively, understand the service and those accessing it, and manage the dynamics of change. As the roles required of early years leaders are varied, the majority of participants in the study share a common perception that professional development opportunities are fundamental to their practice, especially training that is supportive and appropriate for their settings. There is therefore a coherent argument for the training of early years leaders, and a sustained commitment towards ongoing professional development.

In addition, the findings show that there is a need to explore beyond the confines of this study, in particular with regards to the complexity of impact and outcomes of leadership training programmes on early years professionals. There is undoubtedly scope for more empirical research on leading and managing in the early years, not least with regards to how the notion of effective leadership can be defined, and its impact on the outcomes for children. The reflections of children's centre leaders gathered here provide a base of valuable qualitative data for future research, which can be built upon by researchers and educators in the sector who are seeking to locate models of leadership currently taking place into effective practice. The true challenge for early years leaders is to understand and evaluate the context in which their service operates, and develop effective strategies for engaging with children and families. It is only through continued rigorous research and evidence-based practice, that strong and effective leadership can have a real impact on the quality of care and educational provision for all young children and their families.

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