



Leadership in Early Childhood Education: New Trends and Possibilities

“Failure to recognize the multiple dimensions of leadership within the various leadership paradigms means leadership is still viewed as something exceptional rather than every day practice. This treatment of educational leadership as something different from what teachers do on a daily basis, I suggest, has deterred many women from assuming more leadership roles as they do not imagine their work as leadership” (Jill Blackmore, 1999, p.6).

Introduction

Educational leadership has been given much attention over the course of the last two decades. Despite a plethora of educational leadership studies at the formal or compulsory school settings, there is an evident scarcity in scholarly literature about educational leadership in the early childhood education domain. The paucity of research on leadership in early childhood contexts is surprising in light of the rise in governmental attention to early childhood programs and changes in early childhood policy in a significant number of western countries including Canada.

A number of early childhood scholars and early childhood associations emphasize that developing a strong sense of leadership identity in early childhood educators is important in the face of the recent political and policy changes that would inevitably impact the early childhood profession and practice (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005; ECEBC, 2007; MacNaughton, 2005; Woodrow, 2008).

Leadership and early childhood educators' professional identity

Research suggests that early childhood practitioners do not readily identify themselves as leaders. In *Leadership in early childhood: The pathway to professionalism*, Jillian Rodd (1994) argues that “members of the early childhood field have been noted for their reluctance to identify with the concept of leadership as part of their professional role” (p.1). This tendency amongst early childhood educators was evident in Rodd’s studies despite the fact that historically early childhood personnel have functioned autonomously and independently from policy and have developed a strong sense of professional and practical wisdom that can be categorised as leadership capacity (Rodd, 1994).

Early childhood professional identity is related to early childhood educators’ attitudes toward leadership in a number of ways. For example, traditional leadership thinking, drawn largely from the business world, along with the tendency to conflate leadership with management and administration (i.e., hierarchical distribution of power, focus on rules and procedures rather than on people), is seen by early childhood practitioners as antithetical to the ethical, collaborative, and relational dimensions of the early childhood profession, and therefore, might be deemed inappropriate for the early childhood field.

Further, due to the historical dichotomy between “care” and “education,” early childhood has been generally excluded from the professional arena of ‘formal’ education and school teachers. In a recent publication the Early Childhood Educators of BC reiterated that, historically early childhood educators have been less visible and less valued than teachers of older children and that this impacts early childhood educators view of themselves as potential leaders (ECEBC, 2007).

A number of initiatives in the international and local early childhood arenas present new possibilities for enacting leadership projects in early childhood contexts. These projects also offer ways to expand and broaden the early childhood professional identity.

Early childhood educators as community leaders: In New Zealand the implementation of a national early childhood curriculum has become the impetus for creating a national early childhood leadership project known as the Educational Leadership Project (ELP). Adopting a stand point of 'distributed' or shared leadership and the 'training the trainers' model of community development, the project facilitators visit ECE sites to provide in-centre support and leadership workshops. The vision that leadership needs to be the responsibility of everyone in the group guides the project which is based on a commitment to educational leadership that involves: staying abreast of the latest research in practice, researching own practice, experimenting with new approaches, and sharing insights with others ([http://www.elp.co.nz/Our Approach.html](http://www.elp.co.nz/Our_Approach.html)). Another significant aspect of this project was developing the practice of writing 'Learning Stories.' Learning Stories, which publicly present children's learning experiences, are seen as having a major role in shifting the early childhood culture with respect to how the local community regards early childhood education (Lee, 2008).

Educators as researchers: In the early childhood programs in the Italian city of Reggio Emilia educators are thought of as researchers who are constantly seeking deeper understanding of the child and the child's learning processes (Rinaldi, 2005). Research is seen as part of everyday teaching practice and the main research tool is pedagogical documentation. Early childhood educators collect data through various methods (i.e., video and audio-taping, written notes, photography, and samples of children's work). When the documentation is shared with the community, teaching and learning processes become visible and subject for *ongoing* inquiry and interpretation amongst teachers, children, and parents. Through this process teachers become articulate and confident in expressing their views and understandings of the ECE values that guide their practice.

Educators as activists: In Australia scholars such as MacNaughton (2005) and Woodrow (2008) focused their action research with early childhood educators on developing skills of critical reflection and analysis as well as developing a clear sense of purpose in their profession. Using tools such as journal writing and 'meaning maps,' early childhood educators investigated, theorized, and critically evaluated the meanings that construct their pedagogical decisions. This knowledge pushed the educators to take initiatives and make changes in their local settings.

Communities of innovation: The Early Childhood Educators of British Columbia (ECEBC) have recently launched a leadership project called: The Leadership Initiative. The ECEBC group concluded that "it was time to examine professional leadership in the field from an individual and societal perspective with the goal of changing the image of ECEs in the community and connecting caring and early learning as essential parts of our work with young children" (ECEBC, 2007).

ECEBC's initiative aims to identify and establish Communities of Leadership Innovation in 10 different geographic locations throughout BC. The communities will be supported to develop and implement leadership strategies based on their unique leadership models. They will also be given resources to increase societal awareness about the importance of early childhood learning as well as the significant role that early childhood educators can play in building communities (ECEBC, 2007).

Conclusions

The projects described above have the potential to contribute to a new conceptualization and enactment of leadership in early childhood education. What these projects have in common is an understanding of leadership that is localized, reflective, and based on relationships. Acts of leadership are related to the daily lives of children, teachers, and parents and are shared (i.e., by means of storytelling) with the local community.

Additionally, early childhood educators gain an opportunity to re-conceptualise their professional identity, articulate and share more clearly their personal and professional beliefs and see themselves as *interpreters* (rather than mere implementers) of curricular frameworks and as *creators* (rather than consumers) of educational knowledge. This new vision for early childhood leadership is reflected in the following statement:

"ECEBC is committed to searching for a model of leadership that is consistent with the 'ECE Way' - collaborative, non-hierarchical and action-oriented; where leadership does not focus on one individual but where all of us are potential leaders; where leaders can act from where they are, prepared to dialogue with others in the field, and confident in the values of the field, in our contribution to the world and in our ability to change it" (ECEBC, 2007).

References and Resources

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New Zealand Educational Leadership Project <http://www.elp.co.nz/>

Early Childhood Educators of BC Leadership Initiative <http://www.ecebc.ca/leadership/leadership.html>

