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Building Leadership Capacity in Early Childhood Pre-Service Teachers

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Abstract: Building leadership capacity has emerged as a key concern within the early childhood profession in Australia as the sector responds to recent national reforms focusing on raising standards and improving quality provision of services. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the discussion around these reforms and to make a case for changes needed in tertiary training to provide opportunities to build early childhood leadership capacity in school settings. Eight experienced early childhood teachers enrolled in a post graduate leadership unit participated in a small scale, exploratory study. Data were drawn from the participants' research plans, reflective journals and a post unit survey. The findings indicated that the participants found it difficult to perceive themselves as leading families and community. Two key challenges emerged; the importance of developing home/school partnerships and difficulties with infrastructure. In order to prepare teachers for the changing early childhood environment, teacher educators need to consider course renewal.

Introduction

Building leadership capacity within the early childhood profession has emerged as a key concern as the profession responds to changing socio-political, educational and contextual demands. The release of documents such as the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2011), Australian National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (DEEWR, 2010a), the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009a) and the National Quality Standard (DEEWR, 2010b) have specified new directives which reconceptualise pedagogy and practice and which provide both opportunities and challenges for early childhood professionals to strengthen their leadership capacity and ability to support families and communities.

The move in Western Australia (WA) to provide integrated care and education services for young children and their families on school sites adds to the need to build and sustain the leadership capacity of early childhood teachers (Department for Communities, 2009). Therefore there is a growing expectation for school-based early childhood educators to go beyond their current classroom practice to partner with families and communities, and to facilitate and lead decision making in relation to integrated service delivery that will support children's learning. A growing challenge for the early childhood sector in WA is the scarcity of early childhood professionals who hold both knowledge of leadership and knowledge of the discipline (early childhood learning and development) along with the skills to apply these in practice (Bricker, cited in, Muijs, Aubrey, Harris & Briggs, 2004). The changes in the early childhood landscape necessitate a reconceptualisation of the leadership model to one of a multi-disciplinary team approach which negates the notion of 'silos of practice' (Nolan,

Cartmel & Macfarlane, 2012). In addition, a new understanding of the concept of leadership which recognises that leadership is not only positional and equated with 'being in charge' (Clark, 2012, p. 192) is important. Such leaders would recognise that they need to evolve and therefore need to adjust their practice and respond to changing early childhood contexts and policies.

Aubrey, Godfrey & Harris (2013, p. 8) suggest "the need to take account of complex and diverse demands being made on early childhood leaders within and outside their work environment is a priority". As a result of sector changes in WA policy and practice, leadership in the early years of schooling will require working in professional learning communities where strong relationships are nurtured and knowledge is shared. These relationships can be fostered through strategies that develop a culture of collaboration and commitment to purpose and vision that embraces community partnerships. A further element of complexity for early childhood teachers is the lack of clarity around appropriate descriptions of roles and responsibilities in relation to leadership and a dearth of literature that adequately describes leadership capabilities. Added to this, are the hierarchical lines of accountability that act as a constraint for early childhood teachers in school settings.

The fragmented nature of early childhood settings, the diverse qualifications that exist across the workforce, and the complexities of leadership within family and community settings result in additional challenges which universities need to address in their undergraduate and post-graduate studies (Ortlipp, Arthur & Woodrow, 2011). These challenges raise important questions about the content and processes of university training of early childhood educators to assume leadership roles within the field. Mistry & Sood (2012) cite insufficient training as a primary reason for the reluctance of early childhood professionals to adopt leadership roles. This is consistent with Thornton's (2010) belief that it is highly unlikely that early childhood professionals will have received formal preparation as part of their undergraduate studies to take on a leadership role. This identified lack of leadership training will most likely result in early childhood teachers being under-prepared to take on a leadership role unless universities reconceptualise and review the content currently provided in many courses. WA is not alone in facing these challenges. For example, the Effective Leadership in the Early Years Sector (ELEYS) Study also identifies training of leaders, the quality and type of training, and the reluctance to take on a leadership role as priority issues (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006).

The purpose of this position paper is to make a case for changes needed in tertiary training to build early childhood leadership capacity. We do this by drawing on data from a small scale exploratory study and discussion of the findings in relation to implications for teacher education.

Exploratory Study

Eight experienced early childhood teachers, working full-time in urban WA schools, participated in the research. These teachers were aspiring to leadership positions and enrolled in a post graduate leadership unit of study. Participants were asked to identify a priority area within their work with families and communities and develop an action research project to explore leadership issues around that area. The data were drawn from the participants' action research projects, reflective journals and a post unit survey. This small scale project enabled us to explore early childhood teachers' perceptions of leadership and their capacity to lead change and build family and community partnerships.

The following research questions guided the data collection and analysis:

1. In light of the national reforms, how do early childhood teachers perceive their leadership role?

2. What challenges do early childhood teachers identify in developing family and community links?

The research was conducted through a qualitative approach. A content analysis of the action research projects, together with the reflective journals was carried out to identify consistent patterns and relationships between categories and themes. As per Miles & Huberman (1994), data were reduced by coding which is “the transitional process between data collection and more extensive data analysis” (Saldana, 2009, p. 4). Each unit of data was assigned its own unique code until repetition was evident at which point codes were clustered to identify themes, priorities and issues. This process was guided by the research questions. The purpose of the analysis was to identify early childhood teachers’ perceptions of, and challenges in leadership roles. The research was conducted with appropriate ethical approval granted through university processes. Students enrolled in an post-graduate, early childhood unit of study were invited to participate. Care was taken to ensure that participants understood that involvement in the research project would in no way influence their final assessment grade. The projects and surveys were de-identified before data analysis to protect anonymity of the participants.

Perceptions of leadership

Findings from our study identified three key aspects of leadership: the importance of developing leadership skills; a sound knowledge base of early childhood; and fostering the presence of effective interpersonal skills. Consistent with the literature (Mistry & Sood, 2012), our findings indicated that although early childhood educators acknowledged the importance of leadership skills, their perceptions of leadership were not yet at a sophisticated level.

I feel that my leadership skills are just developing – previously I may have been a leader in the school without knowing what I was doing. (P6)

I feel that I still need to learn to listen better and see the whole picture. (P4)

As a younger staff member it means I need to be respectful of others’ life experience and knowledge – I still have a lot to learn about a lot of things.

(P6)

Evidence from the data indicated that participants found it difficult to conceptualise their view of leadership to include working with families and service providers within the wider community as well as working with children at the classroom level. However, the participants’ responses did reflect recognition of the importance of working with school colleagues. To this end, having skills to work in teams in order to build a culture of reflection and improvement was seen as a priority by the participants.

I have a very democratic leadership style and nurture positive relationships with staff, children and stakeholders. I believe in collaborative, open communication and enlist support and cooperation from others. (P7)

Early childhood teachers must be willing to share info about their leadership and practice. (P4)

The data showed that participants were able to identify key components of leadership: the ability to monitor, implement and assess changes in policies, practices and procedures to support children and families. However there was no evidence in their action research projects that they were able to apply these components to their practice.

In spite of the national reforms calling for early childhood leaders to take on advocacy and community roles, the data provided no evidence that participants felt able to do so. These added responsibilities will require early childhood educators to lead in more collaborative and innovative ways so as to assist families in supporting their children’s learning. Therefore, our study highlights the need for the re-imagining of leadership which

promotes partnerships with children and families and is consistent with findings from Burgess and Fleet (2009). Clearly, additional research is needed that focuses on community leadership in the early childhood field, which according to Muijs, Aubrey, Harris & Briggs (2004) is simply not available.

Central to the post-graduate unit content was the exploration of the dual nature of early childhood leadership, that is, knowledge of leadership and knowledge of the discipline (Stamopoulos, 2012). Reference to only one component; the knowledge of early childhood was present in the data. This was evidenced by the participants' focus on practitioner rather than leader focused knowledge. For example, they cited appropriate early childhood qualifications, "specialised knowledge and experience" (P4) as being important capabilities for leadership. They also mentioned a need for deep understanding of child development, awareness of resources and community services and the ability to build connections between staff, families and the school community. However, when asked to elaborate on how to build connections they were unable to articulate effective leadership strategies.

Interpersonal skills and abilities were identified by participants as key aspects of effective leadership. Communication and collaboration with staff and families were noted as a high priority. In particular, leading staff to reflect on current practice and the ability to initiate change within the workplace were highlighted. The participants indicated that when working with families, leaders need to develop and maintain respectful relationships, make families feel valued and engage in discussion around relevant issues.

I have built a positive relationship with staff, parents and children in preprimary through informal visits and playground. I feel respected by staff and therefore becoming confident to make suggestions or offer assistance.
(P2)

Participants described important personal qualities of leaders as empathy, trustworthiness, and approachability. However in spite of recognising the importance of, and naming these factors they were unable to articulate strategies for how they could actually build relationships beyond school settings.

Challenges

Two key challenges for early childhood educators emerged from the data; the importance of developing home/school partnerships and difficulties with infrastructure. During the course of the unit of study participants frequently referred to the difficulty in trying to create home/school partnerships. Engaging with parents beyond the typical 'classroom helper' level was seen as a challenge that went beyond their current practical experience and roles and responsibilities within the traditional school structure. The "lack of time" (P5) and the "high expectations of parents create tension when you cannot meet their needs" (P3) were stated as impediments to building relationships with parents. This challenge is compounded by a lack of both human and financial resources: "...not having adequate resources including human, financial and materials to effectively cater for student needs impedes our ability to connect with families" (P7).

Likewise, the challenge of building appropriate relationships and communication channels to encourage parents to engage with the school was seen as a leadership priority. This relationship building proved even more difficult in instances where stakeholders held different cultural beliefs, traditions and levels of English proficiency. In addition, parents with diverse cultural understandings of how schools work resulted in a reluctance to respond to school initiatives. Diversity could be due to different cultural backgrounds and challenges of language as well as different views on education philosophy and approaches. For example,

Different values and reasons for choosing Steiner education – teachers and parents often have different reasons for searching for alternative education

systems. When passionate people come with different intentions it has the potential to create miscommunication between teacher and parent and create a barrier in building positive links. (P6)

Therefore, participants identified the need for guidance in building skills to facilitate stronger links with families and communities.

A second key challenge identified by participants centred around school infrastructure: in particular, a lack of opportunity and support to assume leadership roles and responsibilities. The participants reported that in their experience school leadership positions were primarily held by educators with upper school not early childhood classroom experience. As a consequence, early childhood teachers have not tended to hold leadership positions and have been more classroom focused, albeit recognising the importance of connecting with families. This orientation has influenced the degree to which the early childhood teachers considered themselves able to build and demonstrate leadership capacity, participate in decision making and respond to current sector reforms.

Discussion

The findings drawn from our small scale exploratory study clearly indicated early childhood teachers found it difficult to perceive themselves as leaders in their field although they were able to describe some roles and responsibilities of leaders. There was a lack of deep understanding and confidence in initiating partnerships with families and communities. While participants could articulate the importance of the concept of leadership and the need to develop leadership skills there was a notable lack of practical strategies that could be applied in family and community settings. This demonstrates there is work to be done in building infrastructure between school, family and community. What is evident from the literature is that there has been little movement or improvement in the last 10 years in the development of leadership capacity for those early childhood educators in school settings (Muijs, Aubrey, Harris & Briggs, 2004).

The work of early childhood leaders has become more complex and challenging with expanded responsibilities as a result of, for example, expanded services on WA school sites. Transitioning from a focus on classroom practice, to one of pedagogy plus families and communities is another complex layer which requires knowledge, skills and support. The responsibility which comes from the new way of thinking about service provision in school settings requires improved training and preparation for developing leadership capacity. Becoming a leader is not an automatic process and schools are no longer viewed as uni-dimensional institutions therefore reconceptualising schools as changing multi-agency environments (Ang, 2012) and understanding leadership as a complex construct should be situated in pre service training and professional development.

VanderVen (1999) differentiates between administration (program and curriculum design and implementation, personnel administration) and leadership (developing a vision, advancing knowledge base, identifying goals). To this end university teacher education courses have a role in clearly articulating and describing roles and responsibilities in relation to both administration and leadership. University courses need to take the responsibility of shaping and developing an early childhood professional identity that encompasses the knowledge, skills and processes required for a multi-dimensional role which allows for leadership of practice (VanderVen, 1999) in complex settings. Such courses should prepare effective leaders to cross professional boundaries in order to develop, manage and lead the delivery of integrated services: practices which are embedded in a socio-cultural theory which is more consistent with contemporary early childhood philosophy and approaches and is centred on interactions and relationships with families and communities.

In the current context, an issue with university undergraduate courses is that they are curriculum heavy and focus on pedagogical content knowledge to the exclusion of the development of broader theoretical and conceptual understandings of leadership and the influence of socio-cultural context. Potential graduates need to be aware their role is not only classroom specific but involves working with families and the wider community. Therefore courses need to provide opportunities for graduates to build confidence in order to assume leadership roles. One way of doing this is to provide more practicum in community based placements working with community based agencies.

Prospective graduates generally spend considerable time in workplace learning in classroom contexts where they carry out daily teaching duties but rarely are they engaged in situations that require the demonstration of leadership skills. Dunlop (2008, p. 7) reports that “there is a serious lack of leadership training for early childhood leaders...it is likely that many are significantly under-prepared for this role”. In light of the literature acknowledging a lack of leadership training, interestingly, the National Professional Standards for Teachers: Graduate Level (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011) do not address knowledge and skills in relation to leadership. Nevertheless, it would seem pertinent that graduates leave university with some degree of leadership training.

Conclusion

University course renewal needs to acknowledge the changing landscape in early childhood school settings in Australia and WA and make adjustments accordingly. Key to redesign is the broadening of the concept of leadership from one defined by positional power and authority to one in which beginning teachers view leadership as integral to their professional responsibilities. Secondly, university early childhood students need to have course experiences which introduce them to the multi-disciplinary nature of the role and provides experience and skills to work with colleagues, parents, and professionals as well as with children. Courses need to reflect the broader focus for early childhood: classroom, school and community and the integration of services.

The data from our small scale exploratory study have led us to rethink current knowledge, practices and processes when redesigning early childhood undergraduate programs to meet the challenges of the current reform agenda in Western Australia. Areas for consideration include:

- Re-structure courses to reflect the multi-disciplinary nature of the changing early childhood landscape (eg work across faculties);
- Broaden skill development relevant to working with adults in multi-disciplinary teams: collaboration, communication, negotiation, conflict resolution;
- Re-define concepts of leadership eg situational leadership or contextual literacy that are reflective of context, children, families and community;
- Promote understanding of community services and strategies for accessing and integrating services;
- Review the nature of workplace experience;
- Focus on families and the socio-cultural factors that impact on families and communities;
- Encourage and facilitate partnerships with parents and the community to ensure positive learning outcomes for children; and
- Embed a research culture and commitment to ongoing professional learning.

Whilst this has been a small scale study, it has provided an opportunity for reflection on course design and delivery and has given clarity to actions that teacher educators could consider in developing courses to better prepare pre-service teachers for working with

families and communities in school settings. In addition, it provides a catalyst for thinking about professional learning for university staff which may include a cross-faculty approach.

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