

Reflecting on the Pressures, Pitfalls and Possibilities for Examining Leadership in Early Childhood within a Cross-National Research Collaboration

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Abstract

This chapter examines some key features of current research into leadership in early childhood, with particular focus on factors that affect cross-national collaborations. It identifies a number of potential pitfalls in and pressures of cross-national research collaborations, with particular reference to the International Leadership Research Forum and proposes possible pathways for guiding and scaffolding rigorous inter-country research partnerships within the global early childhood community.

Tiivistelmä

Tässä kappaleessa tarkastellaan ajankohtaisen varhaiskasvatuksen johtamisen tutkimuksen pääpiirteitä, painottaen erityisesti tekijöitä, jotka vaikuttavat kansainväliseen yhteistyöhön. Artikkeliki pyrki tunnistamaan kansainväliseen tutkimukseen liittyviä mahdollisia vaaroja ja yhteistyöhön liittyviä paineita, liittyen erityisesti the International Leadership Research Forum:in toimintaan. Artikkelissa esitetään mahdollisia polkuja ohjaamaan ja rakennustelineiksi tiiviimmän maiden välisen tutkimusyhteistyön aikaansaamiseksi maailmanlaajuisessa varhaiskasvatuksen yhteisössä.

Introduction

Early childhood today has evolved as and functions within a global community where local, national and international aspects have become of increasing interest to researchers and writers. The dissemination of novel and transformed knowledge, ideas, values, approaches, strategies and practice around the world is feeding a small but growing appetite for examining and comparing the contexts and experiences of early childhood in other countries. Today, it is rare for government departments and other bodies to make key decisions concerning developments in and changes to policy and practice in early childhood without reference to the state of play in other related and comparable countries.

As the world's nations increasingly come together to collaborate on political, economic and social issues, so do those educators, practitioners, researchers and writers who are concerned about and with raising quality in early childhood. The descriptive narratives about early childhood practice in various countries that were published in past professional literature are no longer sufficient or acceptable. The global early childhood community today has recognised the importance of and integrated the ability to understand, contribute to and conduct research as a key professional function of its leaders and educators.

Consequently, researchers and experts now are expected to adopt a more rigorous approach to describing, comparing and explaining early childhood practice within and across different countries. Although they pose specific problems and challenges, cross-national research collaborations offer opportunities for researchers to analyse and illuminate specific features (such as leadership in early childhood) within their country from the inside and compare them with those of other countries (Gomez & Kuronen, 2011). Such collaborations help to broaden researchers' horizons, develop greater international and cultural sensitivity and encourage them to think differently about their own national context.

In line with the recent and expanding interdependence between nations, a very small number of researchers in early childhood have established collaborative research endeavours that aim to understand and compare features of early childhood thinking and practice across various countries. One such collaborative venture is the International Leadership Research Forum (ILRF), auspiced by Prof Eeva Hujala, University of Tampere

Finland, in which early childhood researchers and experts from a range of countries, as diverse as Australia, Azerbaijan, England, Norway, Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and Taiwan, were invited to become part of a community specifically focused on researching leadership in early childhood. At this point in the collaboration, each researcher or group of researchers is investigating leadership in early childhood in their own national context and then sharing their findings within the forum. To date, cross-national research findings are presented more as individual case studies. None of the research is strictly comparative and coordinated joint projects have yet to be initiated.

Understanding leadership in early childhood contexts

Research evidence in many countries has shown that effective leadership consistently is associated with quality early childhood service provision as well as innovative, responsive change in the sector (Dunlop, 2008). It is the driving force behind improving quality service provision, raising standards and achievements, enhancing professionalism and increasing accountability. Effective leadership raises the bar in the pursuit of excellence in early childhood services.

However, leadership remains an enigma; it is not a concept that is clearly defined and confidently grasped within and across the global early childhood sector (Rodd, 2013). At present, there is no commonly accepted and prevailing definition of leadership in early childhood. In addition, the traditional view of leadership being invested in and enacted by one person, termed positional leadership, has been replaced by a more contemporary viewpoint where effective leadership is seen as distributed across a range of individuals and teams. Consequently, in early childhood services, leadership is a subtle phenomenon that is embedded in social relationships and experience, service structure and context. It enactment can be difficult, even impossible, to pinpoint and observe. In some situations, effective leadership is displayed through action while in other situations, effective leadership is enacted by standing back, saying or doing nothing. Effective leaders possess the insight and ability to perceive both the explicit and obvious and implicit and underlying demands and needs of a situation requiring leadership, and match or adapt their leadership style in ways that engage and empower

others to respond and contribute to positive outcomes for young children and families, early childhood educators and services and the early childhood sector.

Although experienced and recognised leaders of early childhood services appreciate that leadership has many facets and functions, for example, expert, facilitator, teacher, encourager, supporter, rescuer, empowerer and helper, they report that they find it difficult to identify, unpick, articulate and illuminate its complexities in practical enactment. Leadership does not lie in a checklist of qualities and skills. Effective leadership in early childhood services is holistic, dynamic and creates its own synergy, where interaction between the varying elements produces a greater result than would the sum of its individual parts. This also contributes to the challenge of defining and researching leadership in early childhood.

Leadership in early childhood services is deeply embedded in values (both personal and professional), knowledge, understanding, experience and context. It is multi-dimensional, multi-layered, complex and yet holistic in practice. It is conducted in challenging contexts, where staff, families and local communities may have complex and varying needs and expectations.

In addition, leadership is a phenomenon that is greatly influenced by country-specific characteristics, factors and issues. Researchers influenced by Western values, for example, from Australia, North America, Scandinavia, and Western Europe have conducted much of the contemporary research into leadership in early childhood. However, it is very unlikely that findings from these studies can be generalised to other countries and regions (Hartog, House, Hanges, & Ruiz-Quintanilla, 1999) because not all countries share the same assumptions about the values, motivations and practice that contribute to effective leadership.

The practice of leadership is an area ripe for investigation, particularly where findings are linked to leadership capacity and succession building. However, variations in research practice between countries may act as impediments to the conduct, reliability and validity of cross-national research investigations. Goodnow (National Research Council, 2008, 14) defines practice as “... routine ways of doing things we come to think of as normal or natural, which we seldom think about or question, that we often find uncomfortable to change, and that may need to be changed before any shift in concepts or attitudes can occur”. It is essential for researchers to understand that practice taken for granted in one context, be it practice

in the fields of leadership or research, may require explicit attention in other national contexts. Any cross-national research collaboration needs to question, scrutinize and check for commonalities and variations in research practice because these are likely to affect the degree to which findings are comparable and able to be generalised.

The elements that are thought to contribute to the practice of leadership may be dissimilar in western-centric countries and be very different again in countries and regions in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Central and South America. In addition, the terminology and descriptors used to denote effective leadership are likely to be interpreted and personified differently in different countries and regions. Therefore, in the context of any one country, capturing the essence of leadership in practice and communicating it to others, both within your own country and from different regions and countries can be demanding.

Despite these challenges and the complexities of leadership as a focus of research endeavour, and given that research into leadership in early childhood continues to attract interest from a small number of researchers, cross-national research collaboration is an opportunity to create synergy, where engaging more researchers who interact and contribute to advancing the theory and practice of leadership in country-specific and cross-national contexts may produce greater understanding about and advancement in theory and practice of leadership in early childhood than would be possible by the efforts of individuals working alone.

The nature of cross-national research collaboration

The ILRF collaboration is described more appropriately as cross-national, rather than international, which implies worldwide participation. Cross-national research is an approach to analysing an event or process that is manifested within a country and comparing it to the way that event or process is manifested across different countries. A forum such as the ILRF is deemed to be cross-national when individuals or teams from two or more countries aim to explore particular issues or phenomena, such as leadership, in order to compare their manifestation in different socio-cultural contexts (Hantrais, 1995).

Cross-national research partnerships can bridge and transcend national boundaries by comparing and contrasting what is learned from research in a particular country with what is known in other countries. It can be explicitly comparative where nations are the object of the research, with a case study focus on understanding each particular country, for example what it is like in Norway, Azerbaijan, Finland or Taiwan in terms of leadership enactment in early childhood services. Here, the focus is on understanding each individual country and how leadership is manifested within it. Alternatively, a nation may be the context for the primary focus on leadership in early childhood in order to establish the generality of findings and interpretations about how early childhood services operate and leadership is practiced cross-nationally. Here, leadership in early childhood is the primary focus with the various countries providing the contexts for the research.

Finding out ‘what happens’ or ‘what it is like’ in other countries is the essence of cross-national research (Baistow, 2000). In today’s globalised world, nations or countries are populated by people from disparate cultural groups, heritages, backgrounds and regions. Political changes continue to re-draw national boundaries in some continents, thereby forming arbitrarily created nations by bringing together groups of people who may have little natural or historical affiliation. Therefore, considerable intra-country variation is likely to exist in some nations. Countries that are characterised by large intra-country variability make valid cross-national comparison more difficult and therefore are not appropriate for inclusion in comparative cross-national studies, although as individual case studies, they may be informative.

Such issues mean that, in cross-national as well as cross-cultural research, representative samples that truly typify the whole population are very difficult to access. Therefore, research findings may not accurately portray a country’s population because certain groups may be excluded or the views of people in certain regions may not be indicative of those of the entire country. The same limitation is applicable in relation to true representation in research in early childhood generally and leadership specifically. However, cross-national research collaborations can be valuable analytical tools for testing the generalisability and validity of findings and interpretations derived from single nation studies, which may be influenced by and related to particular historical or socio-political circumstances.

Cross-national research collaborations also have the potential to contribute to the generation, development and testing of theory.

The ILRF offers participants opportunities to share, become familiar with and build on cross-national research interests, activities and findings, thereby making a significant contribution to understanding leadership in the global early childhood community by extending knowledge about and practice in this essential aspect of quality service provision. Such a collaborative endeavor can help build research interest and capacity, highlight issues, identify commonalities, similarities and differences, seek solutions, inform policies and expand the existing sense of community within the early childhood sector. However, such a research endeavor is not without its own problems and challenges.

Pressures

While the intentions of cross-national research collaborations are laudable, there are numerous difficulties to overcome and issues that need to be considered when embarking on such an undertaking. The selection of the core team, partners or collaborators is of utmost importance. Ideally, partners should be selected on the basis of their research interests, knowledge and expertise (Oliver, 2010). However, often more pragmatic considerations influence selection, such as professional interests, geographical proximity, cultural and language affinity, existing professional relationships and funding availability.

Evidence also points to the fact that countries with smaller populations and those with small emerging research communities are more likely to be interested in collaborative work (Kamalski, 2009), especially where collaboration offers access to more experienced partners and opportunities to work with recognised experts in the field. She argues that the nature of contemporary research questions often benefits from collaboration with researchers across national boundaries. In addition, geographical limitations and national policies drive some countries to pursue more internationalisation than others.

Kamalski (2009) contends that the size and resources of a country impact on the frequency with which local researchers will seek cross-national collaborators. For example, when research collaboration in 49 countries

was ranked in terms of output of collaborative articles, Hong Kong ranked 6th, Norway 9th, Finland 20th, UK 27th and Australia 28th. Switzerland was ranked first, Chile 2nd, with USA was ranked 42nd and China 49th. This may explain why research collaborations such as the ILRF attract researchers from smaller countries or those with smaller research communities. In addition, researchers from smaller countries are likely to have been educated abroad, offering them greater opportunity for making professional contacts and becoming a member of international networks. The small numbers of researchers interested in leadership in early childhood may also be a factor that incentivises cross-national collaboration. Being a member of a larger network offers access to multiple perspectives, skills, support, motivation and other resources.

It is also thought that teams with diverse and heterogenous backgrounds tend to find more significant findings than teams with more similar and homogenous backgrounds (Chatman & Flynn, 2001). Homogeneity in background can increase the likelihood of groupthink, the tendency towards conformity in thinking, in which the core skills that underpin inquiry and research such as creativity, information processing and problem solving can be stifled. Cross-national research collaborations offer pathways for researchers that value diversity of thinking and perspectives, and encourage imagination, experimentation, risk taking and innovation in approaches to research design and processes.

Some key considerations for selecting partners who may make a significant contribution to cross-national research collaborations include national diversity, disciplinary diversity, differences in research approaches, different approaches to hierarchy, authority and teamwork, and different stages of development in contributors' research expertise and careers.

Each of these considerations has pros and cons. For example, the greater the national diversity, the greater the breadth of data. However, the greater the national diversity, the more difficult the issue of equivalence becomes. It becomes more difficult to ensure that partners from different countries understand a concept such as leadership and its relationship to other early childhood concepts equally. Equivalence in conceptualisation and theoretical understanding, research design and data analysis needs to be addressed and thoroughly scrutinised.

The issue of conceptual equivalence is a core pressure for cross-national research collaborations, especially given the predominance of qualitative

and narrative methodologies in data collection. For the ILRF, conceptual equivalence refers to the extent to which the concept of leadership has the same meaning in different countries. That is, are the researchers studying leadership as the exact same phenomenon in different national contexts or are they studying quite different phenomena that are termed leadership in their country? Leadership as a focus of investigation must be appropriately translated and understood by all partners. Because qualitative methodologies are dependent upon mutual understanding and consistent interpretation of terminology, it is essential that conceptual equivalence be highlighted as a key concern. Research terminology, descriptors and questions need to be expressed in an equivalent manner and style in all relevant languages. Similarly, method equivalence refers to the extent to which all of the participating countries perceive and measure leadership in the same way. Equivalence in concepts and methods is a fundamental pre-requisite for ensuring comparability of findings.

Disciplinary diversity brings both advantages and disadvantages. Where researchers come from different disciplines, for example, sociology, psychology, law, economics or political science, they bring different values, approaches, language, understandings and biases. An advantage is that such collaborations bring a wealth of resources to and offer multiple perspectives on the research focus. However, success depends on considerable mutual respect and open communication among partners. Trust, power and ownership can become sources of conflict. In establishing cross-national research collaborations, it is essential to clarify disciplinary frames, foci and contributions as well as ethical values underpinning research design.

Different disciplines also bring disparate philosophies, approaches, strategies and tools for undertaking research which can lead to a wealth of data and perspectives but which also may make analyses, interpretations and comparisons problematic.

Different approaches to hierarchy, authority and teamwork can create challenges for collective and inclusive engagement in research design, methodological issues and data analyses. In some countries, people are socialised to be more acquiescent and defer to hierarchy and authority. In some countries, free and assertive expression of personal opinion and views is encouraged and tolerated. Such differences can be found in the personal characteristics of both researchers and sample participants. In a cross-national research collaboration, it is essential that researchers who may be

less assertive and confident, or more deferential to authority, are encouraged to engage as an equal member of the research team.

Problems related to competition, especially between academic researchers vying for promotion and/or tenure, can act as impediments to cross-national research collaborations, particularly where researchers are more interested in personal gain and recognition than cooperating in pursuit of the research group's substantive agenda and broader goals. Early transparent and shared agreement regarding the issue of intellectual property (that is, who owns data, findings and ensuing publications, individual researcher or the cross-national research team) is essential to genuine cooperation and successful collaboration for groups such as the ILRF.

Successful research collaborations are grounded in cooperation. Cooperation can be encouraged through the identification of common ground, establishing trust by sharing accurate information and findings, highlighting the value of learning from the experience of others and forging linkages, facilitating informal and formal networking and building research-focused learning communities.

All good research in early childhood complies with the self-moderated ethical expectations and standards about conduct set by the profession in many countries. In relation to research, the key considerations are not harming any participant physically or psychologically, participation on the basis of informed consent, the use of appropriate language to ensure participants' comprehension and confidentiality. However, early childhood educators in some countries have yet to adopt a professional code of ethics. In addition, early childhood educators from different countries and cultures may have different views about what is considered right and proper in relation to research. Ethical standards and expectations can be context-specific. For example, issues such as data and identity protection, participants' legal and moral rights, and discrimination on the basis of age, gender and disability are high priorities for research design in western countries. Unfortunately, such issues may not be given the same weight and attention by researchers in countries where the rights of individuals do not take priority over other concerns. In Australia and England, for example, if a respondent chooses not to answer a specific question, no particular interpretation is placed upon that decision and right. In countries where unconditional respect for authority is the norm and the rights of individuals carry little weight, refusal

to answer a question may not be a decision that is an option or taken lightly because it could result in negative and serious repercussions for respondents.

The ILRF, as a cross-national research collaboration that endorses the accepted ethical principles and standards agreed by the early childhood professional community in western countries, could be faced with a variety of ethical dilemmas arising from the way in which some research projects are designed and conducted. Therefore, it is important to highlight and discuss the range of ethical considerations that are pertinent to decisions about methodology prior to project implementation and data collection.

Pitfalls

Being a partner in a cross-national research collaboration such as the ILRF can be exciting and motivating. However, it can also make the work more complicated and difficult. It is important not to gloss over inherent pitfalls and difficulties that may go unnoticed until something goes wrong.

All countries develop their own culture that is made up of specific values, assumptions, expectations, roles, styles, approaches, jargon and systems. Most people, including researchers, possess very little real understanding about the nature of others' culture and its influence on professional thinking, communication and interpersonal relationships. Culture creates significant traditions and differences in the way people approach life and work, including research. Anderson and Stennack (2010) suggested that there are fundamental national differences in the way in which nations organise, support and undertake research. For example, in some countries, researchers have considerable freedom. In other countries, researchers work under considerable surveillance, regulation and restriction. A country's government may exert significant control over research agendas, organisation and finances, thereby making cross-national collaboration more difficult. The amount of funding available and the time that can be devoted to collaborative ventures also vary considerably from country to country.

Language can be a major pitfall to inclusive cross-national research collaborations. Language is not only a vehicle for articulating concepts but is the medium for framing, conveying and reflecting about values, thoughts, ideas, ideology, institutions and practices. Language is an obvious source of

miscommunication and misunderstanding (Anderson, 2011) but can also be used to assert power over others. Although English is a dominant language in the world of research, it is essential that English (or linguistic affinity) not be used to dominate and deter others from contributing. Overcoming language barriers is the first step towards ensuring comparability in cross-national research collaborations (Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik & Harkness, 2005). In the same way, it is essential that researchers from developed countries with Western perspectives avoid imposing their values, theories and methodologies on other partners. Inclusive research collaborations value, accept and respect the views of those from other, particularly developing, countries (Barnett & Stevenson, 2011).

The organisation of a collaborative venture such as the ILRF can bring about its own difficulties. Researchers from different countries work under distinct hierarchies, communication networks, decision-making structures and management protocols making collaborative teamwork, which is the norm in some countries, a challenge for some. The coordination and management of diverse collaborations require sensitivity, good understanding about contributing partners and their countries' values, traditions, contexts and systems, acceptance, respect, trust, open and clear communication, negotiation and conflict resolution skills.

A notable feature of cross-national research is that attention must be paid to methodological as well as theoretical issues (Baistow, 2000), specifically to issues of measurement, reliability and validity. Within the area of methodology, numerous pitfalls may be encountered, especially if any comparability is to be conducted. Without a common and clear definition of leadership, including related terminology, descriptors and concepts, it is difficult to establish agreed upon goals and objectives, which in turn makes reliable and valid evaluation hard to design and conduct. Much research, even so-called comparative research, does not allow direct comparison because of methodological differences in design, data collection and analysis. Harmonisation and equivalence in methods, concepts, samples, indices and interpretations must be established if valid comparisons are to be made.

Pitfalls in data collection can include differences in national literacy rates and levels with a lot of research conducted with more literate and educated members. Where literacy rates and levels are higher, there is a bigger pool of potential participants to sample. In countries with poor literacy rates and levels, data collection instruments and strategies that would be unacceptable

in other countries may have to be employed. In some countries participants are familiar with hypothetical questions and situations; whereas in other countries, questions might need to be contextualised, that is, based on and relate to actual and concrete experience. In some countries, suspicion about researcher intention and confidentiality issues may influence how extensive, accurate and honest the information provided by participants is.

To move research forward and beyond being descriptive case studies, researchers in cross-national collaborations need to be aware of and address any problems that may arise. Though the pitfalls may be many, cross-national research collaborations can offer opportunities to learn from the different cultural and intellectual orientations and approaches and develop deeper understanding of issues that are central to the investigation.

Possibilities

Although cross-national research collaborations need to address numerous pressures and pitfalls, they open a range of opportunities and offer significant advantages. With regard to the ILRF, cross-national research collaboration opens up opportunities for:

- accessing new information and understanding about aspects of leadership in early childhood in and across a range of countries
- organising research contributions around a common focus and interest
- working with and mentoring researchers from a range of disciplines and backgrounds and with varying levels of expertise
- developing common research methodologies for accessing, recording, analysing, interpreting and constructing data concerning aspects of leadership in early childhood
- identifying local and national conceptualisations, issues, problems, needs and resources in relation to leadership
- gaining a deeper understanding of other countries generally and early childhood specifically
- identifying and disseminating good practice in research methodology
- informed critique, provocation and advocacy for leadership in early childhood

- developing aims and strategies for short, medium and long term socio-political change in early childhood service provision in collaborating countries
- building research interest and capacity while addressing leadership issues
- improving research in early childhood generally.

The ILRF, as a cross-national research collaboration, can build and extend a network of researchers and experts on leadership in early childhood, thereby ensuring that future research is current, flexible, creative and methodologically rigorous. Although cross-national research collaborations are considerably easier with the availability of modern information and communication technology, cheaper telecommunications and air travel (Anderson, 2011), to be successful they also require:

- sensitive identification and selection of a range of partners from the global early childhood community to avoid creating or exacerbating divisions
- long-term commitment to the project, in terms of research personnel and funding
- active and collective engagement in research partnerships
- respect for multiple perspectives including those of individual countries and disciplines
- visionary leadership by a competent coordinator.

Conclusion

At present, the ILRF is in its infancy and concerned with providing a platform for cross-national sharing about and dissemination of research findings related to aspects of leadership in early childhood. However, it has the potential to build on its network of researchers, draw on its multi-disciplinary expertise and develop integrated cross-national research studies that advance scholarly knowledge and offer insight into the intricacies of leadership practice in early childhood services. In addition, there is scope for exploring and addressing some of the methodological challenges in cross-national research.

If the ILRF is to develop into a genuine cross-national collaboration, three questions need to be addressed.

- What are the key research areas that are of interest or have emerged regarding leadership in early childhood?
- How do the collaborators' research interests and existing projects connect to a common focus, direction or agenda?
- How can individual and potential joint research projects be organised, coordinated and managed to move the ILRF forward?

The challenge for the ILRF as a cross-national research collaboration is to create a sustainable scaffold for research into leadership in early childhood that offers some scope for comparability and learning but that also permits research to be meaningful in the collaborators' local and national contexts.

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