



CHAPTER  
1

## Thinking and Learning about Leadership in Early Childhood – An orientation

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Leadership in early childhood is a hot topic, particularly given the complex agendas for reform in policy and practice occurring in many countries. Today, early childhood professionals everywhere are expected to address and implement a range of policy changes, government initiatives and professional expectations. Competent leadership of such challenges is acknowledged as fundamental and integral to improving the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) staffing and provision. This research monograph offers a multi-national, contextualised perspective on the research foci of established and esteemed early childhood researchers and practitioners from Australia, Finland and Norway. The aim of this chapter is twofold: firstly, it provides an orientation to thinking and learning about leadership in early childhood through research including an explanation of the intended readership and assumed knowledge; and secondly, it explains how this book came about, and guides the readers about the coverage and organisation of the book.

When referring to the ECEC workforce in this book, we are essentially concerned with those who are employed within these settings, which are identified in various ways in Australia, Finland and Norway. Likewise, when referring to the person-in-charge of a preschool or a childcare centre there is a plethora of job titles, such as the Director, Manager, Coordinator or Educational Leader. The inherent diversity in relation to ECEC qualifications also adds another layer of complexity in understanding the enactment of EC leadership within each country. For example, within Australia, graduates with a three or four year early childhood teaching Diploma or Degree, are typically

identified as teachers in Australia and they may hold the job title of a team leader or room leader, and be responsible for a small group of staff working in a particular room with a specific age group of two to three year olds, or three to five year olds. Sometimes, the word 'educator' is used to refer to anyone with some type of ECEC qualification ranging between a Certificate III in Children's Services, a Diploma or a Degree. Other titles such as Area Manager or Cluster Manager denote the growing trend towards coordinating groups of ECEC centres and/or services under a single management structure or an organisation that owns and manages ten or more centres.

Moreover, descriptions about the role of educational leaders may or may not be linked to legislation and attracts variable attention in terms of its status and importance in quality provision of ECEC. For instance, in Australia, there are key job titles such as the Approved Provider who has a regulatory responsibility for strategic overview of the setting, and the Nominated Supervisor – who is typically the centre Director with day to day management responsibilities with delegated powers of the Approved Provider. These ascribed roles comprise responsibilities enshrined in law that are linked with a system of fines that apply when there is a breach or non-compliance. Though perceived as an important/high status job, the new role of the Educational Leader in Australia, which came into effect in 2012, is embedded within legislation but lacks clarity in form and function.

The role of the educational leader has raised numerous questions, highlighting the complexities of contemporary ECEC landscape in Australia, Finland and Norway. Some compelling issues and questions surround the remit of ECEC leadership, such as the following:

- ◆ If the educational leader embraces only the role of pedagogista, who will then be responsible for the setting management and administration to keep it running as a viable business unit or entity?
- ◆ If an educational leader is not required to hold a teaching or ECEC qualification how is this role philosophically and intellectually driven?
- ◆ Is it essential for an ECEC teacher to hold business qualifications and management expertise to drive a setting strategically?
- ◆ Alternatively can someone who is not an ECEC teacher perform the business or entrepreneurial tasks and ensure the philosophical foundations of the setting remain firmly rooted in early childhood education?
- ◆ By holding the position of centre director, can that person be more senior in rank to the Educational Leader, who has ECEC teacher qualifications?

- ◆ To what extent do we want ECEC leaders to focus on change management to reduce burnout and ensure the longevity of staff?
- ◆ Can educational leadership remain a significant role in ECEC centres without a policy focus on the ECEC workforce?

Such questions reflect the leadership tension between job expectations, required qualifications, experience and expertise amongst those employed within ECEC settings in Australia today. By stimulating thinking and learning about educational leadership across countries, we want to facilitate the search for potential solutions for the future.

Learning and knowledge construction are emphasised in ECEC policy and translating this into everyday practice is the responsibility of local leaders. Whilst governments can set goals and limits of national policy, in all three countries centre directors have much freedom and flexibility in identifying appropriate strategies and resources in establishing quality learning environments within their communities. Each of the studies from Finland also calls for role clarity in aligning the core tasks of ECEC centres and leadership responsibilities. Another common concern is the increasing workloads of educational leaders due to the increasing numbers of centres and staff that educational leaders are expected to oversee. This responsibility would fall on Area Managers or Cluster leaders in Australia and reflect increasing caseloads for supervision as well as support. Much is also expected of teacher leaders working within centres as reflected in the research conducted in Finland and Norway. The Finnish research also offers innovative insights on daily practice achieved through joint leadership enactment.

Both Finnish and Norwegian researchers refer to the role of various non-ECEC stakeholders such as municipal authorities, and local politicians as being able to influence the work of ECEC settings and staff. Likewise, other structural and systemic conditions that impact on leadership work are also explored in a variety of ways in the research studies included in this monograph. Of particular interest is the focus on *Annual Plans* created by EC centres in Norway and Finland and they are similar to the *Quality Improvement Plan* (QIP) developed by ECEC centres in Australia. As yet, there is little or no research investigating the effectiveness or influence of these documents in driving quality improvement within centres in any of these countries. Further research on the role of non-ECEC stakeholders and the content of key annual plans across the three countries could enhance future leadership practice and policy.

## INTENDED READERSHIP AND ASSUMED KNOWLEDGE

This Research Monograph offers early childhood professionals from diverse countries, cultures and contexts access to different perspectives, theories, methodologies, viewpoints and experiences about 'state of the art' issues, challenges and approaches to developing, implementing and supporting authentic and competent leadership that are expected from early childhood professionals in many countries. As the title suggests, as editors, we hope that capturing the research in print will enable the authors' *learnings* to be shared and disseminated more broadly, and thereby inspire more early childhood professionals to think, learn about and extend their interest, knowledge, understanding and expertise in leadership of early childhood provision. Some readers may even be inspired to instigate research into aspects of leadership that are professionally and/or personally intriguing.

While the content is of interest to any member of the early childhood, educational research and policy development communities, it will resonate strongly with early childhood professionals, researchers and policy makers who have broader understanding about and experience in leadership and its enactment within the diversity of early childhood contexts. In addition, this resource illustrates the distinctive capacity of the early childhood research community to influence the broader world of leadership and has the potential to stimulate, provoke and extend interest, debate, understanding and expertise in early childhood leadership.

Language differences create considerable barriers for many early childhood professionals around the world who wish to access the diversity of contemporary professional literature available. For those who of us are not multilingual, it is difficult if not impossible to access the growing body of international literature that is published in languages other than English. In today's global early childhood community, it is essential that language barriers do not act as impediments to those early childhood researchers and practitioners who wish to draw upon international experiences as a means of developing their professional knowledge and expertise. While many European, Asian and other nationals are fluent in English, a valuable feature of this publication is that it gives English-only readers access to Norwegian and Finnish thinking, research and contemporary approaches to developments in early childhood leadership that otherwise might be inaccessible. Importantly, it includes concrete examples of how leadership is conceptualised and enacted in two Scandinavian countries whose early educational systems are highly regarded in the early childhood and wider educational communities.

## HOW THE BOOK CAME ABOUT

This innovative Research Monograph presents a collection of original scholarly research studies covering various aspects of leadership in early childhood policy and provision in Australia, Finland and Norway and reflects the growing internationalisation of the early childhood profession. The collection of research studies is written by some of the most respected researchers and practitioners in the early childhood education and care field, and contributes to growing knowledge and understanding about leadership in early childhood provision. It opens the door for early childhood professionals everywhere to learn about cutting-edge research practice and findings from three national contexts that are relevant to improving the quality early childhood provision and its leadership. This publication as a professional resource is a strong voice for and sends out clear messages about the importance of strengthening theory and practice for improving the quality of leadership in early childhood provision.

The contributors from each of the three countries include university academics who are responsible for the preparation of early childhood teachers, educators and leaders, as well as experienced early childhood professionals who are recognised as leaders in their own right and whose research is part of their doctoral studies. Most of the studies included in this Research Monograph were presented in December 2013 at a symposium entitled 'Leadership Perspectives from Near and Far – Australia, Norway and Finland', which was co-hosted by Macquarie University and Community Child Care Co-operative (NSW) in Sydney, Australia.

Some chapters comprise primary research conducted as doctoral candidates. Each of these chapters was peer reviewed and were revised by the authors, based on the feedback. The currency and quality of the research presented, as well as the interest that the findings generated among the symposium delegates in Sydney, pointed to the value of making this research more accessible to other members of the worldwide early childhood community. Consequently, this Research Monograph is the second such resource sponsored (and published) through Community Child Care Co-operative (NSW).

## HOW THE BOOK IS ORGANISED

The seventeen chapters of this book are organised into three sections, each of which showcases the current research foci of the contributors from different national contexts – Australia, Finland and Norway. At the beginning of each section, an overview commentary introduces readers to the context and the state of play in the early childhood provision of that particular country. In addition, a reflective commentary that examines the impact and relevance of that country's research in relation to what is happening in the early childhood community in their countries is presented.

The translation of chapter abstracts into the national language of each country, English, Norwegian and Finnish illustrates an essential value of this publication, in that it honours diversity and the collaborative nature of this venture. The final chapter provides a broad analysis of and closing thoughts about key themes and issues that emerge from the research findings. The inclusion of such comparative multi-national reflections is a key feature of this resource that can promote deeper understanding about approaches and issues that impact upon leadership in early childhood provisions. Finally, a comprehensive index allows readers to easily locate topics within chapters relevant to their particular interests.

Section 1 presenting the Australian research begins with an exploration of role of and factors that impact on the leadership of professional development in early childhood centres from a social systems perspective. This is followed by an examination of the role of mentoring in professional development as a leadership and quality improvement strategy, in particular, beliefs and practices of early childhood educators that might influence developments in future policy and practice. This section concludes with a compelling argument for developing learning-centred leadership and advocates for the need to establish closer connections between early childhood and school education.

Section 2 focusing on research from Finland is introduced with a systematic and comprehensive meta-analysis that offers a summary of Finnish research studies about early childhood leadership, pinpointing key concepts, paradigms and possibilities for improving early childhood leadership. This overview highlights the current shift from positional to distributive leadership in the Finnish early childhood education context, which is examined from theoretical, pedagogical and practical perspectives. Joint leadership, a new leadership model for early childhood education centres and a shift from the distributed leadership approach, is illustrated through an innovative case study.

The section concludes with an examination about how best to prepare the next generation of and support current early childhood leaders. The need for leadership training at different stages of early childhood professionals' work careers as well as additional opportunities for in-service training is underlined by the findings.

Section 3 covering the research from Norway begins with an examination of the role and impact of national government agencies and bodies on the leadership of learning in early childhood education settings, with reference to organisational and managerial approaches. This discussion leads into an exploration of the impact of the New Public Management approach in reforming the early childhood sector, and explores the way in which this approach influences how early childhood directors perform their leadership role. The impact of structural factors is further examined through an investigation of the interplay between early childhood directors' leadership and their perceptions about the expectations of external stakeholders. The importance of structural issues is underlined in the examination of the way in which early childhood directors interpret and address the Norwegian government's current mission to transform early childhood education centres into learning organisations and highlights the need for more visible links between policy, leadership and learning. This section concludes with an exploration of the interaction between professional knowledge, situated practice, structural conditions and staff composition on the leadership of site-based knowledge development in Norway's early childhood education centres.

The epilogue, provides an overview of this interesting collection of international research studies about diverse aspects of leadership in early childhood identifies key themes and emerging issues, and offers reflections about evolving trends, and poses areas for further research into leadership in early childhood.

