

Leadership Careers in Early Childhood: Finding Your Way through Chaos and Serendipity into Strategic Planning

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Abstract

Leadership is now well established as a key determinant of quality early childhood education. Whilst there is widespread agreement that leader preparation is essential, there is much debate about the appropriate ways to grow and nurture EC leaders. Stories of eight accomplished educators in Australia illustrate how mentoring and further study mediated through diverse experiences can shape EC career trajectories that progress through chaos and serendipity. The challenges encountered by these educators reflect sector specific and societal barriers to leadership growth, and these are nuanced within the context of current EC workforce policy reform in Australia. The chapter concludes by highlighting agency, structured support and strategic planning when developing EC leadership capabilities.

Tiivistelmä

Johtajuuden on osoitettu olevan varhaiskasvatuksen laadun kannalta ratkaiseva tekijä. Samaan aikaan, kun johtajien valmennuksen tarpeellisuudesta vallitsee yksimielisyys, keskustelua käydään siitä, miten varhaiskasvatuksen johtajia tarkoituksenmukaisimmin valmennetaan. Yhdeksän australialaisen kouluttajan tarinat kuvaavat sitä, miten mentorointi ja jatko-opinnot monimuotoisen kokemuksen myötä muovaavat varhaiskasvatuksen urakehitystä paljolti kaaoksen ja satunnaisuuden kautta. Näiden kouluttajien kohtaamat haasteet heijastelevat sektorille tyypillisiä, yhteiskunnallisiakin esteitä johtajuuteen kasvun kannalta, ja ne heijastelevat Australiassa toteutettavia varhaiskasvatuksen työvoimaa koskevien linjausten uudistuksia. Artikkelissa päädytään

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korostamaan toimijuutta, ohjattua tukea ja strategista suunnittelua varhaiskasvatuksen johtajuuden kyvykkyiden keskeisinä elementteinä.

Introduction

There is now emerging recognition that the professional preparation of leaders is essential because of the diversity and increasing sophistication of the early childhood (EC) sector (Aubrey, Godfrey, & Harris, 2013; Rodd, 2013; Waniganayake, Cheeseman, Fenech, Hadley, & Shepherd, 2012). Career development is not an event that happens when someone resigns or loses their job. Building a career is an ongoing process, often described as a journey one travels throughout life. Career planning may be stimulated by various factors, such as looking for a job and encouragement of a powerful mentor or experiences of variable quality may provoke you to consider your career directions. That is, career opportunities can emerge through haphazard or serendipitous pathways. To be effective, however, today's EC leaders require high order thinking capabilities aligned with a substantive body of specialist knowledge that is renewed continuously. This means that aspiring leaders must adopt a long-term strategic view in planning their careers in the EC sector.

Within schools, the presence of professionally qualified leaders is a key contributor to student learning outcomes (Bush, 2008; Marsh, Waniganayake, & De Nobile, 2013) and a similar trend is emerging in the delivery of quality early childhood education (Bush, 2013; OECD, 2011; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2007). Global trends reflect the increasing professionalization of the EC sector, with more staff with university-based qualifications being employed as educational leaders (Adams, 2005; Oberhuemer, Schreyer, & Newman, 2010; SCSEEC, 2012). Importantly, “the absence of linear predictable career pathways that can systematically foster early childhood leadership in the sector” (Waniganayake et al., 2012, 232) demands that better attention is paid to career planning by EC practitioners, employers, policy makers and researchers. Given the socially constructed nature of professional identity it is essential to explore how leadership emerges within EC organisations and in the wider community.

Career advancement may involve reflection, planning, monitoring and assessment of your professional growth over time. Enactment of leadership

roles and responsibilities require a thorough grounding in appropriate skills and knowledge as well as the presence of dispositions that may emerge with maturity and experience. Previous EC leadership research show clearly that most educators have stumbled into leadership roles, with limited planning and not by purposefully seeking advancement as a leader (Rodd, 2006; Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2004). The continuation of this pattern of a chaotic trajectory into leadership, suggests that there is a need for critical appraisal of career development in the EC sector. In Australia, both governments and employers are now recognising the necessity of having skilled educational leaders to support the delivery of quality EC programs (SCSEC, 2012). There is however little or no systematic research into career development within the EC sector.

This chapter draws on an investigation of career stories of eight women who have been employed as EC educators in Australia. The aim here is to use their stories “as a mode of exploration” (Sinclair, 2009, 267). The visual maps presented here make it easy to see the uneven career pathways each educator had travelled. This exploration is contextualised within the EC policy landscape in Australia that has seen the introduction of significant reforms during the past four years in particular.

Background context

In November 2009, the election of Prime Minister Rudd saw the launching of major EC policy reforms in Australia. Among the significant achievements of this government was the establishment of national policy on EC curriculum and quality assurance, respectively identified as the *Early Years Learning Framework* (ADEEWR, 2009) and the *National Quality Framework* (ACECQA, 2011). It was clear that the implementation of these policies required well qualified EC educators (Productivity Commission, 2011). As a consequence, government policy now demands that as a minimum, “from 1 January 2014, educators in early childhood education and care centres will be required to have, or to be working towards, a diploma level qualification or Certificate III” (ACECQA, 2011). These requirements reinforce the government’s acknowledgement of the specialist knowledge base of EC, and the necessity of employing qualified educators who can deliver sound outcomes for children through quality EC programs.

The Australian Government's interest in investing in the early years workforce has been influenced by a variety of factors. These include the demand for EC services with the presence of an estimated four million children aged between birth to five years, reflecting an all time high participation rate (ADEEWR, 2009). Moreover, countries such as the UK, Canada and the USA have for sometime, embraced EC workforce planning as a necessary strategic intervention. The impact of Australia's poor performance in global benchmarking studies in EC (UNICEF, 2008; Watson, 2012) cannot be underestimated. For instance, "at the top of the rankings, Finland, requires a minimum of a bachelor degree for preschool teachers; many attain a masters degree" (Watson, 2012, 25). In contrast, Australia has set a certificate level as the minimum qualification and about one quarter of preschool (25.8%) and child care centre staff (21.7%) do not have any EC qualifications (ADEEWR, 2009).

There is however no denying that the development of a well educated workforce is a necessity in delivering quality EC programs (Aubrey et al., 2013; Rodd, 2013; Waniganayake et al., 2012; Watson, 2012). Importantly, it is also as Ryan, Whitebook, Kipnis and Sakai (2011, np) noted, "the most common strategy used by policy makers to ensure a robust return on their investment in preschool regardless of auspice (Barnett, 2003; Bogard, Traylor, & Takanishi, 2008; Kagan, Kauerz, & Tarrant, 2008; Whitebook, 2003)." Accordingly, it is pleasing to note that the current Australian government has funded several major workforce initiatives aimed at training and retaining EC personnel (SCSEEC, 2012). These include the funding of

- Staff without formal EC qualifications to complete a relevant vocational education and training qualification;
- EC teachers working in high needs areas to reduce their debts incurred when undertaking higher education studies; and
- EC staff working in rural and remote areas, including Indigenous communities, to access appropriate training.

These initiatives may be regarded as supportive measures that can up-skill a marginalised sector, though their full impact remains to be seen. For instance, it seems that major workforce policy reforms institutionalised in the UK during the past decade, have been stifled by entrenched structural impediments (McGillivray, 2011) and "the inherent classed, gendered, 'raced' assumptions on which constructions of 'professionalism' in EC

come into existence.” (Osgood, 2009, 734). Likewise, the outcomes of the impending elections in Australia in September 2013 may stall the EC policy reform agenda. By emphasising the importance of leadership careers this chapter is aimed at creating spaces for shared conversations, thinking and debating ideas that can advance a deeper level of engagement in EC leadership in particular, and workforce matters in general.

Practitioner voices – real stories of career development

By way of illustrating the various facets of career development in the EC sector, learnings from the real-life stories of eight educators are presented next. These stories emerged during a leadership forum that involved getting together with these educators throughout 2012, and where they willingly shared their leadership experiences with each other. A survey, containing both open and closed questions, was completed at the start of the forum. It was aimed at capturing participants’ perceptions and experiences of leadership in the sector, and yielded both quantitative and qualitative data as presented in this chapter. The visual maps, which were drawn by each educator during one of the forum meetings, enhanced the discussion and analysis of career experiences. Having agreed to allow the use of these data in this book, once drafted, the chapter was sent to the participants for verification and feedback. These comments in turn, were used in refining the final copy of this chapter. Pseudonyms were used to preserve participants’ privacy.

Table 1 presents some background qualifications and employment details of each educator. As can be seen, almost all the participants held a senior management role within their organisation. Those who held the position of a centre director (n=4) did not typically perform regular classroom work though they may participate in working with children in an ad hoc capacity when required. Those who had a combined role in directing and teaching, had regular responsibilities for a particular group of children at their centre. Others, such as Helen, who identified as an Assistant director, and Gail, who identified her role as an educational leader at her centre, had shared responsibilities in teaching and administration. When examining the length of employment in the sector, apart from Candy, everyone had worked in the EC sector for more than 10 years. Other available data showed that

two participants (Candy and Ellen) had international work experience, with one being employed in Colombia and the other in the USA.

Table 1. Background characteristics of practitioners

Participant	Current Position	Highest EC Qualification	Other qualifications	Experience in Sector (years)
Anne	Teacher Director	Bachelor Degree	Bachelor of Arts; Certificate 4	16–20
Benita	Director	Bachelor Degree	Studying for Early Childhood Masters	11–15
Candy	Director	Masters Degree	EC Bachelor degree	5–10
Demi	Director	Bachelor Degree	EC Diploma; Certificate 4; Studying for Graduate Diploma in Psychology	25+
Ellen	Director	PhD	Early Childhood Bachelor degree	11–15
Fiona	Teacher Director	Bachelor Degree	2 x EC Diplomas; studying for Bachelor in Fine Arts	16–20
Gail	Teacher/Educational leader	Bachelor Degree	EC Diploma, Certificate in Horticulture	21–25
Helen	Assistant Director	Bachelor Degree	EC Diploma	25+

In drawing the maps, participants struggled to depict their career pathways as an upwardly mobile trajectory. The maps by Demi, Helen and Fiona, and to a lesser extent Benita, do show upward movement, but this reflects passage of time rather than advancements in their careers. Demi and Helen, who had each worked for more than 25 years, approached the task differently – one used two pages with lots of details and the other managed to summarise the essentials into one page. Each participant did not specify every EC job they had held over time. Most had however worked in 5 or more organisations. At least two had worked in more than 10 positions, and these ranged from baby-sitting as a teenager to gradually advancing their careers from being an assistant to a director. Others identified working in different service types such as Ellen, who had worked in After School Care, school based EC and privately owned centres; whilst Benita, Gail and Helen noted working as an assistant/ teacher/ consultant involving private and/or community based

EC organisations. Looking at the maps it is however not always possible to comment on seniority or rates of pay afforded in each position, over time. For instance, Fiona began work as a family day care provider, and it would have yielded the lowest rate of pay. It is however, not possible to comment if she perceived her previous role of being a room leader higher or lower in status to her subsequent role as a preschool teacher. Collection of more specific individual data such as these, require 1:1 conversations that fell outside the scope of this study.

When analysing the career pathways maps it was also possible to see that each educator had undergone at least one or more challenging experience that impacted heavily on their employment situations. In some instances, life changing experiences such as immigration to Australia or the birth of a child meant there was a break in employment and others referred to personal crisis points or being burnt out through working in the sector. One participant identified the resignation of a centre director, and another being involved in a conflict with a new director, as impacting their career advancement. Those who were parents (n=5) noted that the needs of their own children, at times influenced their employment circumstances. Each described their changing circumstances in different ways:

- Anne: “Very negative director – I quit” and “Large corporation-disillusioned and searching.”
- Benita: The retirement of the director and then plunging into an “unknown abyss.”
- Demi: “Conflict with manager of children’s services” and “Conflict with new director – alienated by staff.”
- Helen: “Burn out” arising through the constantly expanding role within a large organisation, and involving a lot of travelling.
- Fiona: Change of location from the city to country seeking “a lifestyle change.”

Participants’ maps and comments reflect the personal, relational and local nature of career development and the organisational and societal barriers that impacted their decision-making along the way. Thus, when policy reform is proclaimed at a national level, due consideration of local implementation and personal impact cannot be ignored, especially when assessing needs and allocating resources (McGillivray, 2011).

Importantly, this group of EC practitioners represented well-qualified educators, as everyone had completed an early childhood bachelor degree. Two participants (Candy and Ellen), had also achieved a Masters degree and another (Benita), was currently enrolled in a Masters degree. One participant, Ellen, had achieved a PhD and opted to continue working as a practitioner rather than seeking employment as an academic researcher. Each participant valued the importance of obtaining formal EC qualifications in becoming a leader in the sector. When asked to comment specifically about the extent to which their degree had prepared them for performing leadership roles, the majority of participants were ambiguous. Comments made by four participants clearly indicated that their initial training had not prepared them for working as leaders:

- Anne: “This was not a core aspect of my training in the BEd in 1994 from xxx.”
- Benita: “Don’t remember doing much about leadership – was not inspired to look at being a leader whilst at university.”
- Gail: “Trained at xxx – I believe where and when you trained has a major impact.”
- Helen: “More hands on experience and growing with it. I graduated 30 years ago; leadership was not really taught then.”

These findings resonate with patterns found in earlier research by those such as Hayden (1997) and Rodd (1997). These comments also mirror historical developments on how leadership study has been built into EC teacher education bachelor degrees.

Participants who had completed their bachelor degrees more recently noted the importance of on-the-job training in developing appropriate expertise in growing as EC leaders:

- Demi: “Minimal focus on leadership during degree. Mostly learnt whilst at work.”
- Candy: “It is something that is not addressed (in the degree) since it’s hard to teach it through theory without practice.”
- Fiona: “Without mentoring I would have struggled straight out of uni. XXX course was a broad introduction and gave me most skills but nothing can replace hands on management and leadership experiences. I hit the ground running!”

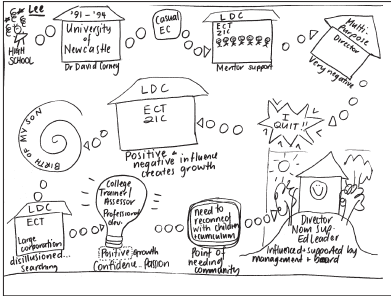
- Ellen: “You cannot be prepared until you start working and meeting the unique needs in the community at that time.”

These comments echo findings of Aubrey et al. (2013) who report on the “pragmatic nature of leadership” (p. 24) as described by those who participated in their study in the UK. This meant that understandings about leadership was localised to a particular EC setting and reflected a “tacit leadership knowledge that had not been explicitly taught and usually was not even verbalised ” (Aubrey et al., 2013, 25). These matters raise questions about if, how, when and how much leadership knowledge should be cramped into an initial teacher education degree.

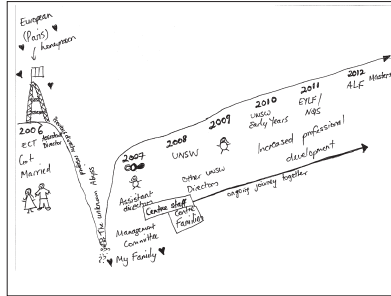
The extent to which an initial EC degree can provide a professional preparation for a neophyte teacher as well as a leader, is highly questionable. Importantly, EC bachelor degrees must provide an induction to the profession, including an orientation to career pathways within the sector. It is also proposed that these discussions include consideration of leadership possibilities and that leadership roles are aligned with postgraduate qualifications as suggested by Rodd (2013, 260).

The majority of educators in this study indicated being inspired by mentors and roles models. Five participants identified university academics and seven named practitioners, who worked either in the same organisation or near by, as being their mentors or role models. These were typically senior colleagues working with junior or novice educators, and this type of mentoring was not defined as ‘an official’ or formal role and was aligned with crisis management. As Candy explained: “It was common for us to be rescued by our mentors. We didn’t usually ask for them to mentor us. They come to save us!” In hindsight, all participants agreed that they have come to realise the power of continuous mentoring as reflected in Ellen’s comments: “I think a lot of the pitfalls could have been avoided with a mentor. Having a ‘plan’ could guide me rather than just taking something on blindly. I would love to have that strategic component.”

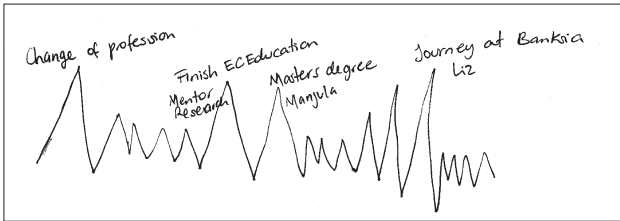
Participants in the current study noted the diversity of organisations and roles/positions that they had held over time. It is however difficult to identify a linear pattern of career progression that enhanced their leadership growth systematically from one job to the next. Some changes in employment had been influenced through challenging circumstances. The extent to which these disruptions can however be perceived as transformative is difficult to



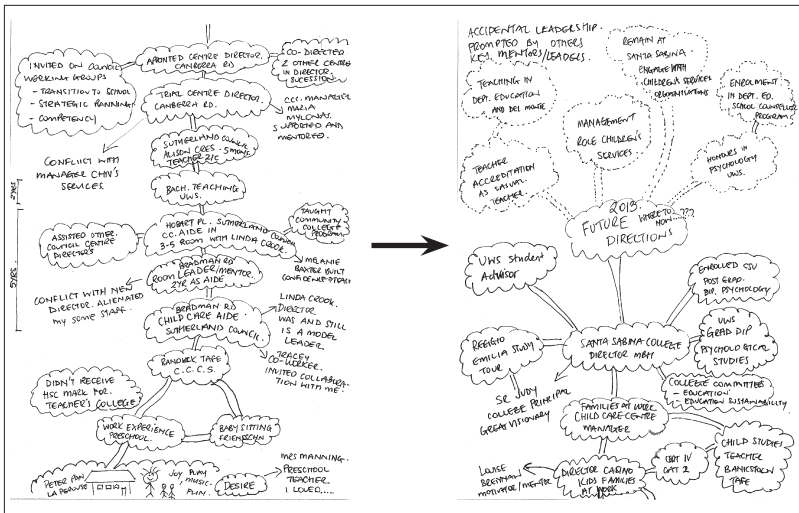
Participant 1 – Anne



Participant 2 – Benita



Participant 3 – Candy



Participant 4 – Demi

assess, especially as most participants described these difficult encounters as ‘just needing to survive’ or ‘get by’. This inherently unpredictable nature of career development fit with what Block (2005) described as “the messiness of life” where there is an “underlying order in what otherwise appears to be random” (p. 196). According to Block, given the complexities, chaos and non-linear dynamics of career development, one must adopt a holistic approach when exploring career developments over time.

There was no evidence of any participant actively seeking to advance their careers in a particular direction. None had seen a careers counsellor for academic advice or career planning guidance. It was also difficult to see exactly how they were going to make use of postgraduate qualifications in long-term career planning because of the limited recognition afforded to those with masters or doctoral qualifications within EC centres. This view is captured in Ellen’s comments, as she declared, “No one who works at my service would achieve at this level because they see no benefit in it (postgraduate studies). They have plenty of potential, but without this being recognised as valuable to society or being compensated for the achievement, it is viewed as frivolous and wasteful.” Another participant, Demi, described her circumstances as “accidental leadership prompted by others – key mentors” and this could be easily applied to all participants in this study. This suggests that in the case of the eight educators in this study, leadership growth had emerged largely as a mix of chaos and serendipity.

Implications for policy makers and researchers

The career trajectories of the eight educators denote authentic stories of passion, perseverance and commitment as key drivers that have sustained their work in the sector. Their narratives also reflect the increasing professionalisation of the EC sector in Australia and serve to highlight three important aspects about the growth of EC leadership:

- a) leadership understandings emerge through diverse experiences and employment roles,
- b) increasing recognition of the benefits of mentoring by EC peers,
- c) achievement of formal university qualifications, with little or no guarantees in obtaining financial remuneration to match.

Using these findings, it is possible to conceptualise leadership career development as comprising three key processes: experiential learning, mentoring, and achievement of professional qualifications (see Figure 2).

Each of these processes may be described as follows:

- **EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING:** Learning by observing, reflecting and demonstrating leadership skills and strategies in diverse contexts.
- **MENTORING:** Working with a mentor to support, guide and nurture leadership potential.
- **ACHIEVING QUALIFICATIONS:** completion of university-based qualifications focusing on EC leadership.

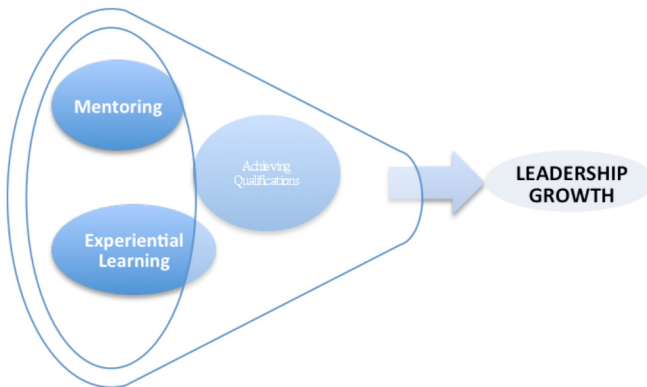


Figure 2. Leadership growth – three key processes

Based on their UK study, Whalley, Chandler, Reid, Thorpe and Everitt (2008) have suggested, leadership can be developed in sustainable ways through the establishment of a pedagogy of participation with the assistance of tutors and mentors. Colmer (2008) supports this view in analysing the use of distributed leadership practices effectively to create a dynamic culture of learning within her organisation. These two examples highlight the potential for leadership growth within collective contexts, across a country and within an individual organisation, respectively. This pattern is illustrated in the career pathways of the participants in this chapter. Clearly, learning through experience, mentoring, and further study, presents opportunities

for leadership growth. There is overlap and collision between these processes and the relative importance of each process for an individual's career development will vary. Ideally, these processes are best considered as being continuous over time. Importantly, the capacity to create and communicate one's leadership approach is built through interactions with others. Put simply, it is through conversations with others that one can experiment and refine the articulation of one's leadership philosophy.

Within Australia, under the *National Quality Framework* (ACECQA, 2011), mentoring and achieving formal qualifications are now legislatively legitimised. There is also an explicit statement about the government's interest in career development in the sector identified in the *Early Years Workforce Strategy* (SCSEEC, 2012, 8):

Building a career pathway is a key step in raising the professionalism of the EC workforce. Clearly articulating the opportunities available for educators through updating and increasing qualifications will offer clear goals and reward professionalism, ultimately improving the quality of education and care of children.

In reality, as noted by Whalley et al. (2008), to achieve these objectives, there must be adequate structural support, including financial resources, to enable educators to find time to engage in collaborative learning, both within their organisations, and elsewhere, and not be limited by geography. The magnitude of this reality was reflected in Fiona's feedback: "my concern is that 'if' there are short comings in rural services that limit growth in these three important areas, then there will also be limitations on the ability of rural services to produce Early Childhood leaders."

For the first time the Australian government has established a national workforce strategy offering much hope and optimism for the EC sector. It is of grave concern however, that the Government has side-stepped the issues of remuneration by declaring these matters fall "outside the scope of the strategy, as they are for employers and employees to negotiate." (SCSEEC, 2012, 6). Paradoxically, government policies recognise the importance of professional qualifications and the creation of a relational milieu within an organisation as a primary leadership responsibility. The same government can run away from the complexities of achieving structural harmony, especially when a significant attitudinal shift is required in terms of improving pay and conditions in the EC sector.

Serendipity is the gift of discovery, where by accident, coincidence or chance, one can find work as an educational leader with a specific title and job description. Planning involves reflection, projection, preparation and the execution of plans in an orderly manner. In reality, as reflected in the stories of the participants in this study, many EC leaders have travelled through chaos and not through systematic planning or a linear pathway that was upwardly mobile, to get to where they are today. Being strategic implies that one has taken steps to carefully calculate and consider the strategies that are being implemented to maximise the benefits, goals being targeted or outcomes desired. By considering areas of specialisation, Waniganayake et al. (2012) provoke educators to reflect on their interests, talents and passions by taking charge of charting their own careers as leaders.

This model presented in this chapter integrates individual and collective learning approaches to leadership preparation. It emphasises the interdependence of an individual's agency, structured support and strategic planning in pursuing a career as an EC leader. Bloch (2005) conceptualised career development as “a complex adaptive entity” (p. 195) and emphasised the importance of examining “transition points” when change happens and the “understanding the power of small changes” (p. 204). Given the sparse landscape of theorising EC leadership growth and career development, examination of contemporary EC leadership preparation courses is essential. Within this context, incorporating support systems to induct novice educators, retain accomplished leaders and establish succession planning strategies are three aspects that require policy and research attention (Waniganayake et al., 2012).

In Australia, the number of staff employed in EC settings is increasing and the calls for pedagogical leadership are intensifying. The stories included here depicted eight accomplished leaders who developed leadership capabilities in ad hoc ways, driven by a desire to make a difference for young children. Their stories also reflect the importance of having targeted professional development to facilitate leadership growth of both novice and experienced educators. This means “more experienced and less experienced directors receive content relevant to their particular level of expertise.” (Ryan et al., 2011, np). Broader considerations such as paying attention to the gendered nature of EC work and “building a linguistically and culturally diverse leadership” (Ryan et al., 2011, np) particularly in multi-ethnic societies such as Australia, are also important.

Understanding that career planning is influential in developing as an EC leader is now beginning to emerge. Adopting a planned approach means developing a personal philosophy of leadership based on an appropriate knowledge base and skills so that the leader can articulate a vision in everyday practice. The challenge to this generation of EC educators is to grapple with their understandings of leadership and adopt strategic directions in advancing their careers as leaders. Systemic provision of well resourced opportunities for leadership learning can fortify individual efforts to chart their own professional development. That is, the growth of EC leaders is both an individual and collective responsibility within the sector. The availability of leadership mentoring, experiential learning in diverse settings and postgraduate qualifications leading to adequate remuneration in pay, offer attractive possibilities for aspiring leaders. If this chapter contributes by provoking further dialogue on leadership workforce planning, it would have achieved its aim.

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