Inside Out: Exercising leadership in the field of early childhood education and care.

Dr Louise Hard

Abstract

This paper explores the stories of two leaders in the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC). Using symbolic interactionism and specifically the notion of human ‘freedom’ (Charon, 2007), the discussion illustrates the experiences and challenges of these leaders highlighting their sense of self as a defining factor in their leadership resilience. One participant has had an extensive career as an advocate but has encountered many challenges in enacting advocacy leadership. The second participant is early in her career and her story illustrates attitudes and structures that are negatively impacting her leadership aspirations. Findings indicate that leadership skill development, mentoring, acknowledgement and opportunities are often sought outside of the ECEC field in order to sustain leaders and support their successful enactment of leadership within the field. Without systemic support, individual tenacity emerges as a key factor in leadership sustainability.

Keywords: Leadership, early childhood, symbolic interactionism

Introduction

Leadership is an extensively explored concept in many domains. According to Sinclair (2007) while there is extensive research and literature in the area of leadership, she questions whether we are getting any better at doing leadership. In terms of leadership and gender, Collard and Reynolds (2005) propose that we have moved beyond essentialist theories which radically simplified the complexity of gender, social, cultural and political factors which impact leadership enactment. In addition these authors suggest that the individual histories and experiences of leaders make a contribution to how they lead (Collard & Reynolds, 2005). In some respects leadership research has cycled back to the early trait theories indicating a relationship between the personality, values and disposition of the individual leader as strongly influential on leadership action. However, this alignment is not a comfortable fit and should not be, since trait theories of the past highlighted models of leadership which were often dominating and focused entirely on one person as leader. In contrast, some contemporary discussions of leadership highlight values, personal evolution, ego-less leadership and creating enabling work environments (Sinclair, 2007; Wheatley, 2005). The focus for leaders in this context is one of introspection with the view to building leadership capacity and opportunity for others.
In the field of ECEC, leadership has come under increasing scrutiny and policy developments in Australia and abroad have drawn attention to the need for leadership skills (Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development, 2008), management of change (Colmer, 2008) and curriculum renewal (Lee, 2008). This paper provides an overview of current leadership literature in the ECEC field and then focuses attention on two leaders. Using symbolic interactionism to inform analysis, the paper explores how these leaders identify and navigate the challenges they perceive to effective leadership enactment in ECEC in Australia.

**Leadership in early childhood education and care**

At the national level the Australia federal government is focusing considerable attention on early childhood. In 2009 the Early Years Learning Framework was launched and in 2010 the state of Victoria released the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework. The COAG reform agenda (endorsed December 2009) is further evidence of the political attention afforded issues of standards, qualifications and a quality rating framework. Perhaps these developments are the culmination of many years of lobbying by professional organisations, individual early childhood professionals and parent and community groups. Or possibly these developments are the outcome of a general community increase in awareness of the early years as an important period of development. Alternatively, one could assert that the attention is associated with intentions to improve economic capital through early investment. Whatever the rationale, the time is ripe for ECEC personnel to engage, articulate and enact leadership. How well prepared are ECEC personnel (working in the diverse range of services) to generate changes appropriate to children, staff and families? What will authentic leadership look like and how will it be sustained?

Australian leadership literature in ECEC has been informed heavily by the work of Rodd (2006) and Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2003) who have noted the challenges to enacting leadership in ECEC. Others have explored the preparation of pre-service early childhood educators for leadership (Woodrow & Busch, 2008) and the in-service development of leadership capacity (Whalley, et al., 2008). Aubrey’s 2007 publication *Leading and managing in the early years* is a response to the changing ECEC context in England and the move to integrated services. This emerging context requires ECEC leaders to be skilled as they lead multi-disciplinary teams to achieve high-quality early education and care. In New Zealand, Lee has explored leadership development from the perspective of building organisational culture, relationships and community and wove these elements into the strands of Te Whāriki ‘...to empower the
leadership within teaching communities’ (Lee, 2008, p. 104). Other leadership work suggests that the highly feminised ECEC field is a complex culture that demands compliance which can limit leadership aspirations (Hard, 2006). Consequently, the leadership work in ECEC is increasingly drawing attention to the need to develop leadership approaches that are attuned to the contextual specificities of the field.

Framework for this study

Leadership involves relational work which is interpretative and nuanced. According to Wheatley, leaders help us to understand ourselves differently by the way they lead. They trust humanness, welcome surprises, are curious, delight in inventiveness, nurture and connect people (Wheatley, 2005, p. 30). If we ascribe to even part of this picture we appreciate leadership as a richly qualitative exercise. In such a context I chose to use symbolic interactionism as an underpinning framework to this study in order to come to understand how individuals understand and exercise leadership. This affords value to human interactions and the interpretation people make of their experiences. According to Prus (1996) symbolic interaction ‘may be envisioned as the study of the ways in which people make sense of their life-situations and the ways in which they go about their activities, in conjunction with others, on a day-to-day basis’ (p. 10). This approach recognises that people attach diverse meanings to objects, events and circumstances and they achieve mutuality of experience through symbolic interchange using language which reflects a communal or intersubjective base (Prus, 1996, p. 12). In this study this means consideration of the experiences of two leaders, how they interpret their symbolic engagements with others (usually through language as the symbol) and how this impacts their leadership experiences and aspirations. As a sociological social psychology, symbolic interactionism draws attention to the active nature of individuals as they mindfully negotiate their interactions with others and define situations accordingly (Charon, 2007). Given the fluid and inter-relational demands of leadership work, this perspective provides a framework for examining how these two leaders navigate their leadership enactment, take account of others and make choices to respond. Particularly important is the symbolic interactionist view that humans are thinking beings defining their situations according to ongoing social interaction.

Given that individuals are active agents, I have made use of Charon’s (2007) notion of freedom to explore the way two participants enact their leadership. While not ever entirely free, individuals are active and self determining and their behaviours are not purely prescribed by others or dominant social forces. Hence Charon’s conceptualisation of freedom includes the following notions.
1. Making choices and deciding what our thoughts and actions might be.

2. One has a self which is socialised and allows one to take control of the forces around through self awareness, self judgement, self communication, self concept and identity.

3. The actor does not simply respond to the environment but understands it and can act on it in creative ways.

4. The actor is constantly defining and redefining themselves, others and the environment in order to use it rather than be used by it (Charon, p. 190 & 191).

In this study, the participants are interpreting their experiences and aspirations for leadership and demonstrate themselves to be active agents in this process. They contemplate their circumstances and the behaviours of others in order to define their course of action.

Method

The aim of this qualitative research project was to explore in-depth, the experience of two leaders in the field of early childhood with a view to highlighting the enablers and inhibitors to leadership enactment. Both participants made unsolicited approaches to me indicating their desire to tell their stories of leadership. After some negotiation, each agreed to be involved in the project, to review transcripts and to be informed of any publication preparations. Ethical consent was achieved and lengthy interviews were undertaken and audio recorded. Both participants were actively involved in reviewing article drafts to ensure the accuracy of their contributions.

Data were analysed through multiple readings of the transcripts to extract emerging themes. Aside from gathering contextual information and details regarding leadership preparation, the questions were designed to explore participants’ aspirations for leadership, identification of challenges and successes they have encountered in their enactment of leadership and to elicit comments on leadership in the ECEC field. Analysis includes two dimensions. The first makes use of symbolic interactionism to explore the way these participants interpret their notions of leadership. With consideration of Charon’s notion of freedom it emerges that these participants demonstrate choice and reflection and actively engage in and with their environment. The second dimension of analysis examines the emerging themes around issues related to leadership in ECEC as perceived and articulated by the participants. These emerging
themes were coded and there is discussion of their relationship to existing leadership literature and relevance for the ECEC field.

One participant is an early childhood professional who has worked in ECEC for a considerable time. Her focus has been on a particular area of early childhood education and she has built and shared her expertise on the national and international stage. She describes a strong ‘ethical drive’ that has underpinned her leadership actions which she sees as advocacy in preference to leadership enactment.

For the sake of this paper this participant in named as Natasha. Participant two is Sally (also a pseudonym) who is an early childhood graduate. Having considered a career in law Sally’s pragmatic nature led her to seek a professional qualification and after positive engagements with young children she decided on an early childhood degree. Sally has a passion for policy work and she joined a political party which afforded her many training opportunities. Sally has been involved in leadership through committee work for professional organisations, employment as an early childhood educator, an honours degree and partial completion of a PhD. At the time of interview she was working outside the early childhood field and this is affording her opportunities to build skills she would not learn in ECEC but ones she hopes to bring back to the early childhood field in time.

Neither participant would necessarily describe themselves as a leader; neither holds a formal positional leadership role. However, in identifying these two women and their experiences as leaders I have drawn on the definition made by Preskill and Brookfield (2009).

Leadership is not necessarily a function of a hierarchy or bureaucracy; nor does a single person in a position of authority have to exercise it. It is rather, a relational and collective process in which collaboration and shared understandings are deemed axiomatic to getting things done (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009, p. 4).

Both participants clearly articulate a desire to get things done. They are not bound by an institution or even necessarily an organisation and they both demonstrate an enthusiasm to pursue their vision for change in ECEC. It is their passion to effect change and their commitment to this process that defines them as leaders for the purpose of this study.

Findings

Participants’ perception of leadership roles

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Natasha’s exercise of leadership has been both challenging and rewarding. She articulates her work as being driven by a desire to improve circumstances for children and the profession. Her knowledge and ability to apply her expertise to the ECEC field has afforded her opportunity to work abroad and find reward in collaborations with others. In many respects these are significant measures of success although Natasha is cognisant of the challenges she encounters in this work. For Natasha, the key issues around leadership are the experience of professional marginalisation, limited mentoring, adversarial climate, limited debate and discussion in the field and inadequate administrative skill development. She views part of her role as keeping others accountable and this desire underpins her advocacy.

Sally is a young woman who has worked in and outside of the ECEC field. She has aspirations for leadership in the area of early childhood policy development. She is actively developing her skills, knowledge base and connections. Sally acknowledges that her involvement in politics has shaped her view of the skills required for advocacy and afforded her mentoring. Much of the strategic action she has taken is outside the ECEC field and she is mindful of this specific choice. At present she is employed in a field other than ECEC. Sally expressed frustration with the limited preparation and skill development for leadership in ECEC, the conservative nature of many ECEC personnel, limited mentoring and debate and the internal and external political environments. While her enactment of leadership has been non-positional, her understanding of leadership is expansive and involves collaboration. She made the following comments about what she perceives leadership to entail.

_I wouldn’t think about leadership in early childhood as something hierarchical or something that comes from the top down. If we were trying to cultivate leadership in early childhood we would probably come at it from a less egotistical and more human approach, that’s just part of the nature of our field I think. So if you’re able to go out and you’re about to have a vision for change but you’re able to articulate it in a sensible manner that speaks to people you’re dealing with and then being able to activate them to be passionate about that idea as well. I think that’s a key component of leadership._

_The power and the passion: exercising leadership in ECEC._

Both participants find the exercise of leadership in ECEC challenging. They are deeply committed to ECEC and demonstrate Charon’s notion of freedom to make choices. They are self-aware and self-judgemental about their capacities and they do make choices which they enact (both in and outside of the field).
Early in her career Natasha experienced some professional marginalisation which took her by surprise. She was called to account for some work she had done and this required her to articulate her work to others. In doing so she was to find what she describes as ‘...very well intentioned people but it irritated me that the willingness to debate was not apparent’. Natasha responded to this frustration by writing her own publication in an area which she perceived to be a particular need for the ECEC field. While this experience was professionally rewarding in many respects, Natasha received a positive response at grass-roots level, but not administrative levels. She had anticipated that she would receive some thanks for the publication (which was all she wanted) but this was not forthcoming and she remains bewildered by the reaction. In fact, the response was so unexpected that she states, ‘...by this stage I was being ostracised by everyone... and it was a very, very nasty climate’. Natasha is self-reflective about this experience but still troubled by the reason for the reaction she received. She reflexively wonders if it was her naivety, her persistence or academic snobbery by others which triggered their response. She articulates this in the following statement.

_I’m not popular with administrators at all and I don’t know quite why. But can I say yes I’ve been a bit angry with them because I’ve looked for leadership and it hasn’t been there. Do you know the other girls feel that the tall poppy syndrome has been the thing; there’s been a certain jealousy about it. Goodness—why would they want to be jealous of me?_

Further she reflects on her own actions and proposes that her approach may have been problematic for others.

_If you rock the boat, which I have quite unconsciously, I rocked the boat and that wasn’t something I intended to do. I saw it as rallying the team which I thought was needed. If you rock the boat, you’re ostracised and I think that’s maybe what’s happened to me... I don’t know._

Natasha acknowledges that she has lobbied hard but that her advocacy has perhaps been misinterpreted.

_Do you know the thing is if there’s a talk I’ve stood up. I know my talks have been very popular—people turn up in droves. And yes I’ve taken it because I saw that as part of the advocacy, but I think it’s definitely been interpreted as Natasha has an ego. Because I am outgoing and that sort of thing they think oh that girl is over confident when in point of fact I’m not. I’m_
Natasha is interpreting the response of her professional group as non-supportive to the extent that she experienced marginalisation. The behaviours by the group (not described here to protect the participant’s identity) could be related to the exercise of horizontal violence as explored in earlier ECEC leadership work (Hard, 2006). Was Natasha demonstrating leadership behaviours that were not congruent with the culture of the professional group? Was the group culture homogeneous to the extent that individual leadership as demonstrated by Natasha threatened the edification of the dominant regime? Or did the publication and its success highlight the inefficiencies of the leadership within this professional group? Were there other issues not evident in Natasha’s interpretation? Given the considerable time since this experience, and the possible multiple interpretations, what the rationale actually was, will probably remain unclear. Natasha’s interpretation of these experiences has impacted her career and her overt enactment of leadership. In some respects, while retaining her drive, she has become mindful of the potential negative interpretations of her actions by others.

Sally has had experiences in the ECEC field which have tempered her enthusiasm for her own leadership enactment. Early in her career Sally’s interest in politics fuelled her desire to have her peers engage in advocacy for ECEC. Sally found this fell on deaf ears and she commented that ‘I found a lot of the girls in my course tended to be… I don’t want to sound judgemental but they were quite conservative’. She reflected on the contrast between her own public schooling and her student cohort which appeared, in the main, to be graduates of the private school sector. In itself Sally does not see this as problematic but the apparent limited interest in advocacy for children is troublesome to her. She identifies few ECEC people who are ‘...interested enough and passionate about policy and government and communicating to the government in effective ways that are actually going to get them what they need’. She sees her PhD and her passion for this as they vehicles which are now driving her.

Sally reflected further on her experiences as a student and in particular her placements in the field. She noted that in a field with many women ‘I experienced a little bit more bitchiness...just passive aggressive really’. She experienced a placement where the assistant in the pre-school would tell her she didn’t like what she had planned and would pack up the activity. This person would sit with her arms crossed and not get involved in Sally’s planned experiences. Sally is cognisant of the power relations in this experience and felt constrained to respond particularly when the director excused the co-worker’s
behaviour. Sally thought deeply about this experience as she sought to understand the rationale for the co-workers actions. She stated, ‘I think she’s a bit bitter about that or something and she just had a hard time dealing with new people coming in to the Centre and stuffin up the routine’.

My fourth year placement was the longest I think, that was six weeks and that was awful. That was at a preschool and it was a very structured preschool which was very different from what we were trying to do (from a university perspective) and the assistant had a great deal of difficulty dealing with students and she was not interested in helping me or aiding me and I would set up the room for the day and say look you know Misha could you go and help the children on this task today? And she would come to me and say I don't like what they're doing, I don't want to do it and would pack the activity up and that's just kind of really difficult when you're trying to you know...you're a fourth year student and you're figuring it all out.

Sally took up a role on a professional body however this did not prove to be a vehicle for her to exercise her capacity to lead. She did not perceive it provided real opportunities to use her skills and that some of the members were less than supportive. For example, the constant use of acronyms by the committee worked to exclude new members. Sally commented that people tended to continue in their self assigned roles leaving little room for her to use her skills. Sally reflected on this experience and the possibility of doing something like this again when she states the following.

Why would I put myself into a situation where I'm going feel uncomfortable and for what purpose you know other than to say I've been on the [...] which can look good on your CV but when you know in yourself that you're not actually doing anything?

Sally is mindful of her challenges and reflexively asks ‘You know it sounds like I've got all these problems. Is it me?’ Ultimately she conceded (although had no clear reason why) that her skills in the area of policy and government were not viewed as useful by this particular group. ‘I feel like I’m kind of going, hey guys what can I do, how can I help? I have all this interest in policy and government and people either aren't interested or try and shut you down and I just don't understand what that's about, you know’.

Limited debate and discussion

Natasha considers that leadership involves a range of dispositions, actions and approaches including a culture for debate and discussion. She articulates this when she states the following.
Real leadership is learning to put yourself to the side. You must believe in what you are doing. But you must have a framework that is open and listening and not judgemental. I believe a good leader is a person who listens, absorbs, keeps an eye on the bigger picture...there has to be a personal commitment to what you believe professionally. You need to know your shortcomings and be tough in your own responses to what you do and invite people to provide feedback on your thoughts and actions...you must promote leadership and skills in other people. When you know your information is solid you’ve got to speak up and I believe you have an ethical responsibility to do so. Don’t stay in the field if you’re going to and constantly complain—I think we’ve got to grow up as a profession.

Natasha reflected on her career and noted an absence of debate. In reference to one experience she states the following.

...the thing about it was that the level of debate was missing. I remember trying to say that childcare was here whether we wanted it or not. They were not dealing with it...and I found their level of intellectual debate (including academia) from an early childhood development point of view abysmal.

For Natasha the need for respectful discussion and debate within ECEC is significant if leadership is to be successful.

**Absence of career structure**

On a number of occasions Sally noted that the ECEC field lacked a structure that supports career building. She recognised that she would have ‘...difficulty finding a way or place to continue to grow...’and that for her it would be challenging.

So that was about 4th year when I started to become a bit frustrated by some of the lack of interest and ambition and I think that’s a big issue in early childhood. There’s lack of career structure and we don’t attract people to the field who are interested in building careers because there is none. There’s no structure.

This perceived absence of career structure relates to Sally’s leadership aspirations and preparation for leadership roles. ‘...the lack of obvious leadership opportunities...you often just get knocked into the leadership position whether you are actually interested in being the leader or not’. For Sally, realising
her leadership aspirations will be challenging without a career structure and the associated supports such as skill development and mentoring.

*I thought I would struggle with career structure, understanding where I am going and having appropriate mentorship...so I thought that maybe it would be better if I go into a different area...and build up a whole bunch of skills and then be able to bring them back if that’s what I choose to do...

**Support structures: Limited mentoring and skill development**

Natasha reiterated on occasions that she ‘didn’t set out to be a model. I set out to get a subject moving...’ and in this she has experienced a sense of professional isolation. She commented that a mentor may have been beneficial in guiding and building her administrative and legal skills. She reflects that such mentoring may have assisted her skills in negotiation when she states the following.

*You know I was absolutely out of my depth....and I was aware of it, very aware of it and really wanting a mentor. So can I say I compromised my advocacy, my delivery of that document, by my lack of ancillary skills of negotiation,... I was looking for a mentor desperately and there has never been a mentor in the early childhood field for my work.*

Looking back now Natasha also notes that during her career teachers in the field were looking to her to be their mentor ‘...the teachers were screaming for support and they saw me as a support agent but I think in many ways I was ill-equipped to be this support agent’. Natasha has sought support and collaboration from various professional organisations.

*I’ve looked for leadership and it hasn’t been there...I had a lot of respect for a lot of these people and the sad thing is I’ve lost a lot of respect for a lot of these people, because they didn’t provide the leadership that was needed by the field and for the field and if they saw me as a threat they weren’t leaders were they?*

Natasha articulates a desire for systemic support when she suggests the following.

*I think we must have a network of support within our field and backing up. I hope what has happened to me will never happen to another early childhood professional. I thought I was in a field that had leadership, it hasn’t. It hasn’t had the right leadership I think. I believe there have been some pretty battered leaders who have tried to help me...I think that for every good leader...*
there are twenty who are not.

Natasha is mindful of the consequences of others’ interpretations of her actions but she remains an active and critically reflective advocate.

Seeking skill development and opportunity outside ECEC

Sally perceives a need to build her skills and acquire mentoring to support her professional development. In the following quote she refers to her current boss and his commitment to her professional development.

He really works on mentoring his staff. I think mentoring is just huge and I've really struggled with that in early childhood and I just find it insanely bizarre that...I got mentored better in the [...party and the [...]party is the [...]party, and it's vicious and it's brutal and it's horrible,... aspects of it. But I got better mentorship in there than I have in early childhood which is supposed to be about little children and nice things, you know or that’s what people perceive it to be.

Sally has identified and exercised her freedom and moved outside of ECEC although she expresses an eagerness to return to the field and apply her skills.

I thought about all I know about early childhood and about leadership and mentoring and the experiences I've had and I thought about the opportunity in the company I'm in now to continue working with my boss who has mentored me and supported me and encouraged me in many ways. I think the skills that I'm going to learn are skills I would never learn in early childhood but I can bring back to early childhood.

And she elaborates further.

I am still doing policy work, although for different reasons, for a different area and building up skills. Then I'll be able to bring them back if that’s what I choose to do rather than rely on the early childhood industry or area or sector to be able to provide me with those skills and those opportunities. So I'll kind of go off and be a self-made woman and come back rather than expecting my own field to be able to offer me the things that I would like, the opportunities I would like. So in 10 to 15 years I really hope to be doing something in early childhood.

Discussion
Inside-out: Challenges to supporting leadership in the ECEC field.

Authors in the field of ECEC make a clear link between the leadership and the quality of outcomes for children, staff and families. Rodd states that ‘in the quest for increasing quality in service provision for young children and families and for recognition as professionals with unique expertise who are different yet equal to professionals in other fields many early childhood practitioners consider leadership to be the key element’ (2006, p. 1). According to Ebbeck and Waniganake the leadership role of ECEC personnel is particularly crucial if services are to survive and provide high quality programs (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003, p. xv). How then are personnel supported to aspire to and exercise leadership? The aspects highlighted here for particular attention include the need for robust debate to allow personnel to build knowledge through informed and respectful discussion, career structures to support aspirations, mentoring, leadership knowledge and skill development.

The stories of these participants shed light on aspects which have supported or constrained their leadership enactment. Natasha perceives the enactment of her leadership to have been strangely received by some of her ECEC colleagues. Despite this she remains committed to highlighting what concerns her in ECEC. In terms of Charon’s notion of freedom Natasha encounters the limitations that accompany working outside the norm. Sally is clearly interested in policy development and openly aspires to make a leading contribution to this area of ECEC in the future. However, she recognises limitations within ECEC to support her skill development and provide mentoring. In doing so she chooses to move outside the ECEC field to ascertain what she needs to build her leadership capacity. Both participants demonstrate Charon’s notion of freedom in the sense that they are constantly defining and redefining themselves, others and their environment. They are active agents but this is not without its difficulties and consequences.

Both participants recognise that their leadership skills require development. This is recognised by authors such as Muijis, Aubrey, Harris and Briggs, who states that ‘...the lack of leadership development programmes is clearly a key issue in EC’ (Muijs, 2004, p. 164). Whalley, et al, (2006) in their work to develop ‘leaderful’ teams in England note the need to support and sustain ECEC leaders in their complex role. However, both Natasha and Sally have not found the affirmation, support and mentoring they need within their field of ECEC and have actively sought these aspects in other domains. Both Natasha and Sally’s experiences are not dissimilar to those documented in Sumsion’s 2002 paper where she explores the experiences of Sarah’s entry and exit from the ECEC field. Like Sarah, Sally and Natasha seek
‘professional connectedness’ (Sumsion, 2002, p. 18) and its absence fuels an isolation, rather than sustaining their leadership enactment or aspiration.

Sally and Natasha express a desire for increased access to a mentor in ECEC. This is identified by many authors as a request by ECEC professionals (Aubrey, 2007; Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003; Rodd, 2006) although what this entails is not always clear. Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2003) illustrate how the notion of mentoring can become ubiquitous and in a sense meaningless. Being a mentor may be difficult for many in ECEC if it requires recognition and expression of one’s experience and capacity. For Natasha and Sally the desire for mentoring includes the notion of a guide in effective leadership strategies, interacting with a more experienced person and perhaps a model of leadership. How can the ECEC field identify and provide sufficient mentors or will there need to be a redefinition of what people are seeking from a mentor in order to address these needs in alternative ways? It may be more suitable to have group mentoring relationships which avoid the notion of the expert and build group skills and sustainability.

For Sally it was frustrating to see her peers have such a lack of enthusiasm to undertake advocacy. Avoidance of leadership or hesitancy by ECEC personnel to engage in concepts of leadership has been noted by Aubrey (2007 p. 160) who suggests that many ECEC personnel prefer to see themselves as educators and child developers in preference to leaders. This may in fact be due to the interpretation of what leadership is by ECEC personnel. Aubrey suggests leadership definitions could be broadened to embrace a more distributed model allowing for a more shared and potentially collaborative leadership approach. However, distribution of leadership is not simple and Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2005) express some doubts about distributed leadership in early childhood settings where staff is often young, under qualified and lacking experience (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2007). In such a context it may therefore be irresponsible for the manager to delegate too much responsibility without conditions such as capacity building, change management for sustained improvement and the existence of collegial relations between all potential participants. Consequently leadership will be both an individual and collective responsibility and if this is embraced by the ECEC field there is potential for personnel to view it as a desirable and responsible professional behaviour.

Conclusion

This small sample provides rich data indicating that leadership enactment in ECEC is complex and challenging. The way participants interpret the field of ECEC indicates strong cultural norms which can
impact upon their individual aspirations to enact leadership. For one participant her advocacy motivation has resulted in a career long struggle to pursue her area of expertise while navigating the complexities she perceives in her own field. For the other participant her aspirations for leadership have taken her outside the ECEC field where she hopes to secure mentoring and skill development which she may use on her return to ECEC. While analysis indicates particular challenges that can emerge in the ECEC field, it is also evident that leadership enactment is possible in spite of the identified impediments. Individuals do require a robust sense of self, including resilience and tenacity to navigate the challenges and deal with the responses of others. If professionals in the field and pre-service teachers are aware of such issues and strategies for success they may have enhanced ability to build their individual leadership capacity and in turn build leadership capacity in others.

Postscript

As the article preparation process drew to a close Sally contacted me saying she now has no intention of returning to early childhood or finishing her PhD. She said I was so miserable and lonely, and now I have mentorship, leadership opportunities and a whole team of people working towards a common good. I work long hours, travel a lot and argue with my colleagues – but we’re one big team working on one big mission and the collegiality is outstanding. I am not fighting a battle on my own, I don’t deal with passive aggression on a daily basis and my ideas and input is valued. There reaches a point where you have to stop the martyr act. Why would I push on in an environment that I found so corrosive and debilitating?

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