

Leadership in early childhood education and care: Facing the challenges and embracing new possibilities.

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Abstract

In the highly feminised field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) research indicates discord with traditional leadership models and rationales (Aubrey, 2007, Ebbeck and Waniganayake, 2003, Rodd, 2006) The cultural expectation of ‘niceness’ is often considered incongruent with interpretations of leadership, resulting in limited leadership enactment. ECEC personnel express a resolve to achieve improved outcomes for children, staff and families However, low social kudos and remuneration contribute to limitations in professional identity. These conditions can fester, and become negative behaviours in the ECEC field which make leadership enactment problematic (Hard, 2006). This paper discusses leadership in ECEC and suggests that consideration of alternative leadership conceptualisations such as Sinclair’s (2007) ideas of less-ego in leadership and Wheatley’s (2005) ideas of organisations as living systems may open new conversations about leadership in ECEC. These perspectives also offer a mirror to some of the dilemmas and challenges of the ECEC workplace. Alternative approaches to leadership as discussed in this paper open up new possibilities of understanding and enacting leadership which may be liberating for ECEC personnel and make a more comfortable fit with the relational and care aspects of ECEC work.

Introduction

Leadership is a frequently investigated and much discussed topic. The copious literature and extensive research, combined with social and media representations of leaders, illustrate the enormity of attention paid to this concept. It seems that leadership is in high demand (Fullan, 2001, Harris, 2008) and explorations of what makes for effective leadership continue. According to Sample the concept of leadership is ‘elusive and tricky’ in that it is Hard to define to everyone’s satisfaction but rather people know it when they see it (2004, p. 1). MacBeath (2004) suggests leadership is a term full of ambiguity with a range of interpretations. Sinclair demonstrates uncertainty about the term when she refers to the ubiquitous nature of leadership and the fact that all are being encouraged to show leadership with little evidence we are in fact getting better at it (2007). This paper explores the concept of leadership in the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) with particular attention to the Australian context. It suggests that understandings of leadership in this field are complex and aspects of the workplace culture can have a mitigating impact on aspirations for leadership. The context of the ECEC field will be provided illustrating a highly feminised workforce involved in the traditionally feminised activities of care and education. Research and literature in the ECEC field highlight a desire by ECEC personnel for collaborative and relational style leadership approaches in preference to traditional, hierarchical models. This paper will propose alternative leadership approaches that may provide opportunities for reconceptualising the notion and enactment of leadership in ECEC. These approaches define leadership in terms that may be congruent with the collaborative and relational work undertaken by ECEC staff and pave the way for new conversations about leadership in ECEC. Additionally, these leadership alternatives may serve as a useful lens through which to examine existing ECEC workplace practices.

The context of ECEC

The field of ECEC is highly feminised with nearly the total workforce constituted by women (Bennett and Tayler, 2006). There is a strong history of care, based on philanthropic roots which date back to the last decade of the nineteenth century. Particular to Australia, this heritage 'was firmly based in the tradition of women's charitable work' with the intent of reforming working class family life and improving living conditions of the poor (Brennan, 1998 p. 13). Much of this early work in Australia was undertaken by upper and middle class women, and this heritage endured well into the 1970s, when changes to higher education funding supported students from broader social classes to participate in undergraduate early childhood teacher education programs. Internationally, the rationales for early care and education provision vary but include the influence of the German educator Froebel whose work around the provision of environments for children inspired the kindergarten movement (Brennan, 1998). In the 2006 OECD Starting Strong 2 report (in which eight countries participated) the changing patterns of women's workforce participation were highlighted as a key political factor influencing ECEC service provision. However, the authors noted that real equity amongst genders will require that domestic work and child care responsibilities not be confined to the responsibility of women alone. These authors identified five reasons why countries invest in ECEC services. These were 1) The rise in the service economy and influx of women into salaried employment, 2) Reconciling work and family responsibilities in a manner more equitable for women, 3) Demographic challenges: falling fertility and continuing immigration, 4) Acting against child poverty and educational disadvantage, and 5) Early childhood education and care as a public good (2006, p.20-37). It is interesting to note that, of the eight OECD countries involved, both the United States and Mexico have child poverty rates in excess of 20%, indicating that early childhood attention to poverty is a real issue for these nations. The field is generally considered to include a range of services including care and education provision in formal, out of home, situations as well as family based day care. Changing social and political contexts such as the increasing numbers of women in the workforce since the 1970s have seen a burgeoning of early care and education provision and transformed traditional child-rearing practices (Bennett and Tayler, 2006). According to Kamerman (in the UNESCO global history of ECEC) there 'are significant regional and country variations but strong similarities cross-nationally as well, especially with regards to a dominant ECEC paradigm' (2006, p. 2). There is an interaction between behaviours at the family level, political processes, institutional structures and labour markets as well as national differences, all of which influence the various services and characteristics of child care provision (Fine, 2007). Understanding these processes involves attention to the political developments within countries.

Developments in English speaking countries have reflected market forces rather than state or familial demands. Fine's comprehensive account of international variations highlights the Scandinavian countries where policy has been 'used to pursue gender and social equity while also promoting high levels of labour-market participation' achieved mainly through high levels of tax (Fine, 2007 p.165). Within this context, child care involving education is considered a right for children and a focus has been on the democratic and civic character of these ECEC services as well as family input to their operation (Fine, 2007). The Icelandic ECEC context is built on the philanthropic tradition but draws little from Froebel's work, preferring to build on the the English nursery school. Unlike Australia, which continues to grapple with discussions about care and education as disparate services, Iceland combined care and education services formally into Playschools in 1991, and this became the first level of schooling in 1994 (although not compulsory or free) (Einarsdottir, 2006). In developing

countries there is increasing demand on ECEC programs based on evidence of enhanced school performance, economic growth and, poverty reduction, and because women are moving out of unpaid family work into wage employment (Kammerman, 2006). Internationally there are various services, including private, corporate and community based, providing care and education experiences for children in this birth to five age range. School starting ages vary across countries and technically early childhood is defined as the period, birth to age eight years of age. There is a wide range of variously qualified staff, from four year degree trained to personnel with no formal qualification (there are very limited numbers of higher degree qualified staff working in the field). Many personnel identify themselves as early childhood professionals less by their work context than by their philosophical beliefs about how young children learn.

In Australia, ECEC services are often geographically isolated, which is particularly the case for pre-schools and kindergartens. Because of differences between the states, government policy development and funding are multi-layered and complex (Bennett and Talyer, 2006). These factors impact on staff and children and are inhibitors to coordination, provision and equity of access. Because early childhood personnel are, in the main, based in centres, this is where their leadership opportunities are focused. There are very limited chances to formally build leadership capacity or enact positional leadership beyond the individual centre level unless people move into academia, or into non-government organisations supporting or complementing ECEC services. This paper is constructed at a place and time when the corporatisation of the childcare sector in Australia is in decay and the federal government is instigating a national agenda to address the provision of early childhood services. It focuses on services in the birth to age five sector with particular attention to the Australian context through the use of data from an Australian study.

The nature of day to day work in the ECEC field involves the care and education of young children, interactions with their families and engagement with communities. In a recent article parents rated nurturing as the most important feature of child care provision (da Silva and Wise, 2006, p. 12). This is relational work that requires understanding people and their needs, and working collaboratively to achieve positive outcomes. Woodrow and Busch define the traditional image of the early childhood professional as ‘caring capable women in the service of the nation through their labour, self-sacrifice, in the happy garden of untroubled childhood’ although they caution that this facetious description is not the reality of working in contemporary ECEC contexts (2008, p. 89). While the reality is more complex and far less romanticised, it continues to demand attention to the care and nurturance of young children. These aspects of the daily work are traditionally associated with women and their unpaid labour in the home. Much feminist literature draws attention to the social and power limitations attached to such work (Gilligan, 1982). For example, Ruddick (1980) suggests a notion of maternal thinking that both women and men can express in working and caring for others. This thinking involves ambiguities of innovation versus permanence, disclosure and responsiveness over clarity and certainty but Ruddick suggests it has not yet been deemed worthy of respect (Ruddick, 1980). The work of Gilligan (1982) around the notion of care and Noddings’ further elaborations (cited in Houston, 1989), draw attention to women’s ethic of care as service to others but highlight that women’s caring has been invisible and devalued (Blake and Mouton, 1985, Houston, 1989). Perhaps, as Acker claims, ‘caring and nurturing, unless a source of profit, are not important, in spite of rhetoric to the contrary and that caring work is devalued ‘so are those who primarily do that work’ (2004, p. 27). Fletcher suggests that what happens to the often feminine behaviours, which are relational and the ‘softer side’

of organisational activity, is that they ‘get disappeared’ (2001, p. 3). While not diminishing the value of these behaviours herself, Fletcher draws attention to the deeply held gender assumptions about workers, their behaviour and successful organisations to illustrate the masculinist logic of effective operations. She suggests the value of the relational work is often inherent in organisational success yet gender dynamics ‘disappear’ its worth.

The limited value afforded the work of care translates to the ECEC context. The relational and care work involved in ECEC does not attract the value and social kudos attributed to other more masculinely defined organisational activities. In some respects the desire by Woodrow and Busch (2008) to highlight the alternative work realities of ECEC personnel could be a means to illuminate the ECEC work aspects that traditionally attract greater social value (management, advocacy etc). Rather I would suggest that attention be drawn to the nature of the care and relational work highlighting its value to quality early childhood service provision. Recently, a child care professional recounted to me an experience she had in leaving her workplace for the day. As she prepared to leave one of the two year old children in her care, who was waiting to be collected, was distressed at her leaving and reached for her hand. She recounted her desire to remain with the child and her reflections on this experience indicate the reciprocal engagement involved in this relational work. According to this professional, her work involves friendship, trust, care and relationships with the children she works with and this is truly a mutually reinforcing engagement. Her involvement in the joy, wonder and delight of children’s lives is something she is cognisant of and sees as a part of the richness of life (personal communication, Barnes, Oct, 2009). Increased awareness of the discourses that seek to diminish or ‘disappear’ this work should be part of the conversations of ECEC personnel, as should increased confidence to afford value to these rich human activities as part of the daily reality of ECEC work.

Gendered constructions of leadership

Traditional models of leadership have been highly gendered and research work has begun to unpack the way this has been seen as natural to leadership. Acker suggests that the history of colonisation has promoted a particular kind of man situated within gendered social relations and practices, captured by the concept of ‘masculinities’ (2004, p. 28). These hegemonic masculinities are the form most desired and admired in leaders, and have a history in conquests, virility, violence and domination. In the corporate world this heritage takes form in a ‘hyper-masculinity that is aggressive, ruthless, competitive and adversarial’ (Acker, 2004, p. 29). Sinclair’s (1998) work in the corporate world suggests traditional leadership understandings have excluded much of the population. This is because the dominant male notion of leadership perpetuates stereotypic images that have prevented a real opportunity to ‘grapple with the dark origins of our hunger for leaders’ (Sinclair, 1998, p. viii). Archetypes of corporate leadership have emerged from embedded cultural stories and icons and these ‘archetypes are emblems of masculinity—rites of passage, in the language of combat and sport, in-jokes and assertions and demonstrations of sexual and physical prowess’ (Sinclair, 1998, p. 32), and such cultural norms can cloud any objective assessment of leadership potential. Collinson and Hearn (2003) claim that gendered assumptions about leadership were still prevalent in the 1990s, evidenced in terms such as ‘penetrating markets’ (p. 202), sexist jokes used as icebreakers and the extensive use of sporting metaphors to rationalise managerial decisions. Feminist literature draws attention to the interplay of gender, power and work (Fletcher, 2001) as well as notions of leadership (Blackmore, 1999, Blackmore and Kenway, 1993, Blackmore and Lingard, 1995, Collinson and Hearn, 2003, Eveline, 2004, Sachs and Blackmore, 1998) and make problematic the male valuing of rationality over

emotions. Such rationality is reflective of the dominant masculinist form of leadership and can marginalise other approaches to leadership (Dillabough, 1999). The gendered nature of leadership has come into sharper focus due to the fact that women have only relatively recently been part of the corporate world (Collinson and Hearn, 2003, Somers Hill and Ragland, 1995). The pervasive nature of heroic, masculinist and idealised forms of leadership (such as the individual traits of leaders) (Lingard, Hayes, Mills and Christie, 2003) has engendered the dominance of male perspectives and a male agenda (Tanton, 1994). In such a workplace, competition, aggression, and self interest are held in high regard (Cox, 1996, Meyerson and Fletcher, 2000). This is important since dominant leadership images have the potential to influence how women perceive leadership because the language of management is masculine and the concept is culturally and historically associated with men (Cox, 1996, Wajcman, 1999). Discussion of emotions in management or the relationship between motherhood and management are frequently viewed with scepticism (Belenky, Clinchy, Golberger and Tarule, 1986, Eveline, 2004, Sachs and Blackmore, 1998, Sinclair, 2004). In this context, individual achievement is valued and familial, social and community roles (often the responsibility of women) are diminished.

Research indicates that women are rated as more effective leaders in circumstances where cooperation is needed while men were rated as more effective when direction and control of subordinates was required (Meyerson and Fletcher, 2000). Many women have developed a leadership style that involves promoting interactions with colleagues, encouraging employee participation, and sharing information and power. A focus is on energising colleagues and enhancing their sense of self-worth as well ‘holding teams together’ (Meyerson and Fletcher, 2000, p. 130). Eveline (2004), in her work exploring leadership in universities, conceptualises a new type of leadership, that being ‘companionate leadership’ (p. 35). This leadership emerges from collaborative networks that involve the notion of self-management and relational work. Ironically, others may not consider this leadership since it is mainly invisible, thus receiving limited recognition. As Eveline (2004) states, ‘it has gendered associations with the domesticated capacities expected of women’ (p. 35 & 36) and consequently receives limited kudos. Eveline (2004) considers it is an attempt ‘to move to a post-heroic understanding of leadership’ (p. 36). This construction further elaborates on relational style leadership since Eveline’s concept may often be non-positional and involve self-management. These approaches are in sharp contrast to traditional masculinist notions of leadership and women face multiple challenges when they enter leadership roles.

The notion of gender and leadership does not define a clear dichotomy between the sexes, however—often there appears to be preferences in leadership behaviours. Sinclair (1998) suggests that many women become ‘bi-gendered’ as they alter their behaviours and tactics dependent on the context. Sinclair (2004) indicates a social expectation that leadership requires characteristics and behaviours not often associated or attributed to women. As Sinclair (2004) states,

In the Australian case, the archetype is of the lone frontier settler who is stoic but resolute in the face of hardship. Such an image renders improbable a garrulous, emotionally expressive or more collectively orientated leader—women and many migrants from more group-based societies instantly struggle to earn respect in this context. (p. 9)

This is an important interpretation for this paper as it defines a traditional masculinist notion of leadership apparently difficult for ECEC personnel to ascribe to. Sinclair provides a poignant account of her failure to adhere to such an archetype, and the incongruence between women and leadership, when her male students said ‘she reminded me of my mother’ and

‘she was like a kindergarten teacher’ (2004, p. 9). Consequently, they dismissed her as a real leadership model. The specific reference to a kindergarten teacher (an ECEC professional) articulates the perceived incompatibility of the leadership archetype to people in this field (by those outside of it). Cranston and Ehrich (2007) comment on what they view as the Australian interpretation of leadership. They consider Australians to be highly sceptical, requiring leaders to demonstrate humbleness and be without rank, rancour or pretension. In fact they suggest Australians are inherently mistrustful of those who seek out leadership positions (particularly politicians). This cultural discourse may have some influence on the interpretations of leadership made by Australian early childhood personnel.

Leadership in ECEC

Leadership research and writing has burgeoned recently in the field of early childhood education and care (Aubrey, 2007, Ebbeck and Waniganayake, 2003, Rodd, 2006, Whalley, Chandler, John, Reid, Thorpe and Everitt, 2007, Woodrow and Busch, 2008). These works present various aspects of leadership, including the practice of leadership in ECEC settings, preparation of preservice teachers for leadership roles and professional development programs for existing leaders. Work by Hard (2006) and Woodrow and Busch (2008) indicate that ECEC personnel find discord with traditional notions of leadership. According to Woodrow and Busch (2008), the constructions of leadership illustrated by their participants worked against the potential for collaborative and reciprocal relationships within early childhood settings. Hard (2008), in a study exploring how leadership is understood and enacted in the field of ECEC, notes that the traditional models of leadership (which have been heroic and masculinist), and often of a top-down approach (Limerick, Cranston and Knight, 1998), have been less than appealing to potential ECEC leaders. This qualitative study involved 26 participants and focus groups with a view to understanding what is meant by the term ‘leadership’ and how participants see this activity played out in their field. Participants were from various areas of the Australian ECEC workforce including child care, preschool, family day care, students, academics and personnel from complementary organisations. Data and findings from this study will be used in the remainder of this paper to suggest that a complex interplay of factors impact on leadership understandings and enactment in the ECEC field.

Literature indicates some reticence by practitioners to enact leadership or see themselves as leaders in the field of ECEC (Rodd, 1998, Taba, Castle, Vermeer, Hanchett, Flores and Caufield, 1999, Woodrow and Busch, 2008). This may be the result of a number of factors which will frame the following discussion. The field of ECEC requires personnel to engage in the nurture and care of children as discussed in previous sections of this paper. These behaviours may seem contrary to the characteristics required for advocacy leadership, such as risk taking behaviours (Grieshaber and Cannella, 2001). Espinosa and Bowman (1997) recognise the nurturing attributes and emotional sensitivity in relationships (valued by those in ECEC) and maintain that these qualities contribute to a desire for harmony rather than subjecting ‘oneself to the rigors and hardships of leadership’ (p. 101). The desire for harmony may also be problematic in that this includes an avoidance of rigorous debate and discussion which are important elements in a healthy workplace. It is possible that the qualities mentioned by Espinosa and Bowman (1997) and Grieshaber and Cannella (2001) such as being nurturing, caring and supportive are perceived as almost contrary to those required by traditional, masculinist, heroic leadership models. This perceived dichotomy of what a leader is (both positionally and informally) and how to lead may be inhibiting leadership aspirations. It may result in the paucity of ECEC people who see themselves as

leaders and are willing to engage and articulate as leaders. Perhaps if leadership involved democratic and collaborative models as part of ECEC leadership discussions, undergraduate preparation and in-service education, then ECEC personnel may feel more positive about engaging in leadership.

Acceptable rationales for leadership

Participants' understandings of leadership in Hard's study (2008) indicate that undertaking leadership activity in ECEC requires a certain egalitarian rationale. When discussing leaders at a prominent level, participants noted that leadership should be underpinned by certain values. Jodie (a preschool teacher) identified two people who demonstrate such leadership. One is a woman in a senior government department who is vocal but also someone Jodie admires. For Jodie there is a tension with the fact that this person is outspoken because she feels that often those that are vocal do not represent the views of others 'because they are not collaborative' (Hard, 2008, p. 103). However, this person does have Jodie's respect because 'she seems to me to have walked that line of being vocal but she still cares about her profession, she's not just there to beat her drum' (Hard, 2008, p. 103). Another participant reiterated this rationale for leadership based on egalitarian values, in her description of a male leader in a regional area. This person was a leader since he is 'very strong, very good, very dedicated and devoted. I don't believe that he has an agenda of any sort except for the promotion of early childhood services' (Hard, 2008, p. 103). However, there are tensions which run alongside this egalitarian rationale. One participant identifies a need to 'blow our own trumpet more' but apparently only within a rationale that is based on the collective ECEC good (Hard, 2008, p. 103). Similarly, Blackmore and Sachs (2001) provide an example of women's inability to articulate their worth when one of their participants said 'women are not very good at blowing their own trumpets' (p. 57). Again from Hard's study, one participant claimed a leader in ECEC needs to be someone 'that doesn't have their own agenda' and who does not seek achievement for themselves (2008, p. 103). A senior academic explained that people are prepared to advocate motivated by a desire to go beyond themselves to consider the needs of others (with resonance to servant leadership discussed later in this paper). For her, this leadership behaviour is not based on what individual leaders can get out of the activity for themselves, and enacting leadership for any other reason than the good of the field is not desirable. This creates a tension around leadership as practitioners navigate egalitarian values within dominant traditional constructs of leadership because they perceive there are limited alternative leadership approaches.

A highly feminised field

In the ECEC field there is an acute awareness of a discourse that many describe as 'niceness' and this was the case with participants in Hard's (2008) study. This notion of 'niceness' was first articulated by Stonehouse (1994) when she explored the image of the ECEC professional and the status of the field (Stonehouse, 1994). 'Niceness' was not defined by participants in Hard's, (2008) study but it may have roots in Ruddick's concept of 'maternal thinking' (1980, p 348) involving care and service to others. There may also be connections to Gilligan's conceptualisation of women's 'ethic of care', based in women's moral orientation of care and responsibility 'which stems from a self intrinsically related to other people' (Gilligan, 1982, Larrabee, 1993, p. 4). While the source of this concept of 'niceness' in ECEC is not clear, there appears to be some perceived conflict between the notion of 'niceness' and the interpretation and understanding of what leadership requires. In Hard's (2008) study one participant described an array of characteristics, including imagination,

drive, vision (but without personal agenda), appreciation of social justice, encouraging others, not being afraid of speaking up and a preparedness to accept criticism, as elements of leadership. In unpacking this definition, the participant discusses her perception of those within the ECEC field and reflects that nice ladies are attracted to the field and they like to ‘work from within, push from behind and not draw a lot of attention to themselves’, and often follow one another (Hard, 2008, p. 104). The director of a long day care centre considered that a leader needed to be brave, resilient and passionate, and to have a belief in what they are doing. Having a vision, and the ability to plan and keep on track, were also required of the effective leader. However, these characteristics were demanding for what Jo terms the ‘nice women looking after babies and children’ who have little or no training for leadership and are in a field with low status (Hard, 2008, p.104).

The notion of ‘niceness’ appears to encompass more than a need for a particular leadership style. It implies a compliance that has expression in Amy’s suggestion that conformity to a dominant discourse limits the field as a profession. ‘There’s niceness there indirectly, directly it’s there and in a way you’re swayed into being you know nice, nice, nice. I reckon it’s at odds with us as a profession’ (Hard, 2008, p.105). Amy considers this is related to the field being highly feminised and also how those in the field perceive themselves. ‘I don’t think that we are very good at putting ourselves forward and being competent’. For this participant leadership ‘is just something that people see as containing too much ego’ (Hard, 2008, p. 105). This interpretation has relevance to the later discussion in this paper of Sinclair’s ego-less leadership. Ironically, (within a context dominated by notions of ‘niceness’), there is intolerance of debate and difference which can pervert into negative behaviours. For example, Amy describes as ‘running off to a room and saying ‘she said this and she said that and I disagree with that and really we’ve got to get over that and work together’. Amy suggests that the implications of this are that difference is important if leadership is to grow, and that leadership should not all look the same. Consequently, Amy defies many of the participants’ views of the perceived benefits of an egalitarian-based leadership approach, since it promotes conformity rather than difference when a robust sense of self or ‘highly developed person’ is more pertinent to leadership (Hard, 2008, p. 106). As discussed earlier, a desire for harmony (Espinosa and Bowman, 1997) may inhibit dialogue and debate and promote conformity and compliance rather than aspirations for leadership.

Team-based leadership: You don’t have to be the top dog...

Understandings about leadership in the ECEC context frequently include reference to the notion of a team-based leadership approach. It appears that being a leader in ECEC is not about being the boss. This was expressed by many participants (Hard, 2008) and suggests that leadership in ECEC is not about behaving in ways traditionally associated with positional leadership. Participants across all groups interpreted the role of the ECEC leader as non-hierarchical and that being part of the team (whatever that entailed) was paramount. This tension was reiterated by many participants, who identified aspects of leadership beyond the ECEC field as different to leadership within the field. Lucy explains this when she states,

In early childhood I don’t think we think like that—not so much and I think that we don’t want to be seen as it, but we want to be seen as the coordinator of the team a little bit more than the powerful one that makes all the ultimate decisions (Hard, 2008, p. 108).

This conceptualisation of leadership in ECEC was reiterated by a preschool teacher who suggested a leader needs to have a vision and be able to communicate it, but that you ‘don’t have to be the top dog’ (Hard, 2008, p. 108). For Jodie, a preschool teacher, her role as a leader is one in which you would not want to be too overtly seen as the person in charge in case it ‘puts them [her staff] off’ (Hard, 2008, p. 108). This interpretation has resonance with Sinclair’s (1998) work, which suggests that many women are ‘loath to describe themselves as leaders’ (p. 94).

If the ECEC context is one where a discourse of ‘niceness’ prevails, complemented by an expectation of non-hierarchical leadership, alternative styles of leadership to that in the heroic, masculinist paradigm are useful. Team-based leadership reflects many of the values underpinning ECEC teaching and presents a coherent means to lead and manage at the service level. However, this has the effect of demanding that a positional leader be a team player as well as take final responsibility. The egalitarian foundations may be laudable but, without strategic team goals and vision, the effectiveness of the group will remain limited (Hersey, 2001). Increased understanding of what formal team-based leadership involves may offer more effective collaborative outcomes if applied in ECEC.

Competing discourses

The complex interpretations of leadership by ECEC personnel in the Hard (2008) study are compounded by a layer of contradiction. While a culture of ‘niceness’ is evident, rationales for leadership are articulated with an egalitarian basis (and team based leadership) voiced as a means to enact leadership, participants note activities which contradict this discourse. Many participants noted a strong expectation for conformity to particular behaviours by other ECEC personnel. These participants also noted behaviours (demonstrated by some personnel) which marginalised others who did not behave in the ways expected by the group. This workplace behaviour has resonance with the concept of horizontal violence which has its roots in the nursing profession and relates to ‘overt and covert non physical hostility, such as criticism, sabotage, undermining, infighting, scapegoating and bickering’ (Duffy, 1995, p. 16). Chantelle, a worker in a support organisation, who provided evidence that horizontal violence did have some relevance to ECEC. She referred to state organisations where people do a lot of ‘watching the person next to you to make sure they’re not getting too up themselves you know’ (Hard, 2006, p. 45). Another participant discussed workers in ECEC, suggesting, ‘if someone is getting a little too confident um there is this *you get back in your box* because that’s not your position, that’s not your role’ facetiously adding ‘we can’t have that happening’ (Hard, 2006, p. 45). Trudy considers that, in the field, there is limited praise for good work. ‘Something else we don’t do well is praise each other’. Through these reflective comments, Trudy continues to explore the nature of the ECEC context suggesting that many people in the field are easily ‘knocked down’. She raises the issue of competition between staff when she states ‘We don’t like to think someone’s out there and doing really well and that we might actually support that’. ‘You couldn’t have someone who’s better than someone else—who gathers praise, or—you know there is a sense of control’. It’s a bit scary if that means we can’t go ahead as leaders’. ‘I don’t think there are structures that allow us to think that there is someone who is the grand poobar of early childhood’ (Hard, 2008, p. 121). These behaviours appear in contrast to the nurturing and care work required in the ECEC field and perhaps demand some internal reflection by ECEC personnel to align the work with children and families with similar approaches to inter-staff relationships. Are these data reflecting a workplace culture which excludes non-like-minded individuals, including men? If so, ECEC may have created a culture of homogeneity which requires critical evaluation if

it is to serve diverse child/family needs and enjoy healthy inter-staff relationships and creative leadership.

It is possible that the horizontal violence (as acknowledged by many participants in Hard's study) demonstrates a frustration felt by ECEC personnel when they are required to conform to a discourse of 'niceness' and its constraining expectations. According to those investigating horizontal violence, oppressed groups who lack power, may attack one another to express their frustration and anger against the situation in which they find themselves (Randle, 2003, p. 399). These apparently competing discourses ('niceness' and horizontal violence) may be related to the field being under valued and poorly remunerated which contributes to a low level of professional esteem and a limited professional identity (Hard, 2008). Possibly individuals with a professional identity such as this are vulnerable to behaving in ways that diminish others and assert themselves through behaviours such as horizontal violence. Randle (2003) suggests that self-esteem is a major predictor of behaviour and perhaps in the ECEC field the interpretation of low social value and remuneration may contribute to poor self-esteem. Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio propose that identity is 'the effect of a network of relations which give material form and stability to an artefact' and is the result of heterogenous engineering of material and discursive practices (2004, p. 407). This involves the situation of practices and what these authors call the 'sliding between different symbolic spaces'. Perhaps ECEC personnel slip and slide between the discourse of niceness and horizontal violence as they negotiate what they perceive as non-feminised leadership behaviours (individualised/positional leadership activity) and the culture of niceness (care/nurturing in the collective). If so, the complexity of this negotiation may have the effect of deterring aspiring leaders, since they risk ineffective performance of either, or marginalisation of their leadership aspirations.

More meaningful leadership models

This paper has argued that traditional masculinist leadership models involving hierarchical systems, prediction and control (Fletcher, 2001) are of limited appeal to the ECEC field. The challenge of negotiating leadership in this field is exacerbated by limited, explicit understanding of approaches beyond the traditional image. The interpretations of team-based leadership and a culture of 'niceness', make for a complex leadership environment, particularly when aspects of horizontal violence are exercised to marginalise personnel who do not conform. These elements provide a situation that requires alternative ways of thinking about leadership that can be discussed and exercised in the ECEC field. In the remainder of this paper the concepts and contributions of servant leadership, distributed leadership, and the work of Sinclair (2007) and Wheatley (2005) will be discussed. These works suggest a more holistic and humanistic approach to leadership and are potentially more aligned with the relational and care work of ECEC professionals and their expressed desire to work collaboratively (XXX, 2008). Wheatley and Sinclair may also offer a lens through which ECEC personnel can examine their own behaviours as leaders.

The concept of servant leadership was coined by Greenleaf in his 1970 essay *The Servant as Leader* (Greenleaf, 1977) and is underpinned by the notion that leaders are in fact in the service of others. 'True leadership emerges from those whose primary motivation is a desire to help others' (Spears, 1995b, p. 3). Greenleaf was desirous of a new model of leadership which included service to others, a holistic approach to work, shared decision making and a sense of community. In a 1995 publication on leadership (Spears, 1995) a variety of authors explored how and why the concept of servant leadership has been influential to their thinking.

In doing so, Senge (1995) confirms how the ideas of creating, participation, and our sense of self are meaningful to him in the construction of servant leadership. Servant leadership proffers diminished focus on the individual and their one-way work, with the followers preferring a continual process of 'mutual interest' which takes forms in things such as a shared vision. The key focus of this approach is the attention to the development of the person and our capacity to examine and change ourselves. For ECEC personnel, this conceptualisation of leadership offers possibilities to inform thinking and working in leaderful ways both positionally and informally. The focus on mutual interest suggests greater collaborative possibilities, shared direction setting and community. The move from a focus on self interest to the interests of others is congruent with the nurturing and care aspects of the daily work of ECEC personnel. However, I have always resisted the incorporation of this definition of leadership to the ECEC field simply because the term itself seems to exacerbate the already 'disappeared' work of women and particularly those in ECEC (Fletcher, 2001). If women are already so involved in the care and service of others, the term 'servant leadership' will serve to reinforce this mentality and allow others, external to the field, to continue this gendered expectation.

The distributed leadership perspective is also a revisioning of leadership that is conceptually consistent with many of the understandings espoused by participants in the Hard, 2008 study. This perspective is important in that it has both a conceptual framework and the potential to be a diagnostic tool (Spillane and Diamond, 2007)). This approach moves beyond the positional leader to 'constellations of leaders' and thus the work of multiple leaders (Spillane and Diamond, 2007, p. 8). Distributed leadership has taken hold in the school sector and in many respects been seen as the solution to leadership challenges, particularly in recognising that one positional leader (the principal) does not have all the capacities to lead alone (Spillane and Diamond, 2007). For the ECEC field, the distribution of leadership or the collective enactment of leadership would have appeal, particularly if it helps revision conventional or dominant views of leadership (Harris, 2008). However, authors caution against its adoption as a panacea indicating that its diagnostic implementation can end up being everything and nothing at the same time (Spillane and Diamond, 2007). Some interpretations of this perspective that I have encountered include the view that positional leaders are almost redundant and that all organisational personnel have leadership potential and capacity and Spillane and Diamond (2007) note this in their critique. I suggest it is even more problematic and the belief that all can engage in leadership negates, or at least diminishes, leadership as an activity that requires specific knowledge or skill. Given the substantial body of work on leadership to date, are we to just assume that it is something everyone can and should engage in? For ECEC personnel, collaborative approaches to leadership are laudable, and the work by Colmer (2008), in an early childhood setting, provides testimony to the effectiveness of distributive approaches in ECEC settings. However, without a real shift in power and resources (to enable distribution of leadership to be achieved in practical terms) or attention to leadership skill development, individuals or teams to which the leadership is distributed can remain ineffective.

Wheatley links leadership with interconnectedness, creativity and thinking beyond the individual (Wheatley, 2005). She challenges readers to embrace the spiritual dimension of their lives and work, and acknowledge the emotional elements. 'It is one of the great ironies of our age that we created organisations to constrain our problematic human natures, and now the only thing that can save these organisations is a full appreciation of the expansive capacities of us humans' (2005, p. 21). She proposes organisations where the leaders create

opportunities for people to work together ‘developing relationships from a shared sense of purpose, exchanging and creating information, learning constantly, paying attention to the results of our efforts, coadapting, coevolving, developing wisdoms as we learn’ (p. 27). Wheatley sees leaders as people who nurture people and connect them to each other. ‘They trust that we can create wisely and well, that we seek the best interests of our organisation and our community, that we want to bring more good into the world’ (p. 30). These images of leadership are in contrast to those defined in traditional leadership models. They present a view of leadership that embraces the human spirit and understands the connectedness between people as central to effective work. For ECEC personnel, Wheatley’s work contains possibilities to harness the egalitarian rationale of the field and tap into the desires people have to improve circumstances for children, families and staff. This approach would also demand ECEC personnel engage in self-reflection, address issues such as horizontal violence and create new work place cultures.

Wheatley describes an environment of work driven by a mechanistic view of production and human contribution that is entirely outcome focused. She calls this the ‘old story’ and highlights its negative effects on one another. ‘When we conceive of ourselves as machines, we give up most of what is essential to being human. We created ourselves devoid of spirit, will, passion, compassion, emotions, even intelligence’ (p. 19). It appears we try to organise away the complexities of human life, and in doing so people can be viewed as machines able to be controlled and to perform efficiently and predictably. I see this view of our working organisations as reflective of the traditional leadership models and devoid of the ethic of care and associated humanness pertinent to the ECEC field. In contrast, Wheatley proposes the following.

I would like to characterize the new story as a tale of life. Setting aside our machine glasses, we can observe a world that exhibits life’s ebullient creativity and life’s great need for other life. We observe a world where creative self expression and embracing systems of relationships are the organizing energies, where there is no such thing as an independent individual, and no need for a leader to take on as much responsibility for us as we’ve demanded in the past (2005, p. 22).

Wheatley challenges notions of organisations in a way that demands attention to the humanness of our endeavours and offers the following view of leadership.

But people need a great deal from their leaders. They need information, access to one another, resources, trust, and follow-through. Leaders are necessary to foster experimentation, to help create connections across the organization, to feed the system with information from multiple sources—all while helping everyone stay clear on what we agreed we wanted to accomplish and who we wanted to be (Wheatley, 2005, p. 70).

This conceptualisation of leadership is not easily applied and would require ECEC personnel to create workplace cultures to support the creativity and self-expression that was not evident in Hard’s (2008) study. To truly support experimentation and interpersonal connections ECEC leaders will need to move beyond a desire for harmony and create respectful workplace cultures that foster creative, divergent thinking.

Sinclair’s recent publication, *Leadership for the disillusioned: Moving beyond myths and heroes to leading that liberates* (Sinclair, 2007) highlights the role of the body in leadership in contrast to previous constructions which she considers focused on it as solely a brain

activity. 'Body' can mean a physical presence, changes to physical activities and expectations, and 'an appetite to experiment with bodily conventions' (p. 109). She challenges leaders to embrace well-being, do things that are not about knowledge, careers or material values and she teaches yoga to others to promote time for oneself. Hence, the implication is that leadership is a whole body activity involving the physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual elements. For ECEC personnel, this type of discussion opens doors to see leadership in very different ways to traditional models and possibly in ways that are more congruent with the 'ethic of care' (Gilligan, 1982). According to Tronto (1993) care has four elements namely care about, taking care of, care giving and care receiving (Tronto, cited in Woodrow and Busch, 2008). In this view, Sinclair's work suggests possibilities for care which is not part of traditional leadership constructions.

Sinclair discusses the notion of less ego in leadership and embraces Eastern thinking to suggest alternatives. She proposes moving away from the ego. The practice of 'letting go of the self more—of not endlessly striving towards an improved self—seems to be the opposite of the confidence-boosting or assertiveness that is sometimes preached in managerial literature' (p. 174). She considers attempts to control others problematic, and suggests that affording others priority can mean leadership will be far less ego driven and allow freedom for ourselves as well as for others. Sinclair suggests that we should invest less time 'looking in the mirror, in seeing ourselves interminably reflected in others' opinions' (p. 176). This letting go of the self and the personal narrative has the potential to 'allow oneself to be with others without looking for gratitude, or for the self to be reflected heroically through the eyes of others' (p. 177). This implies leaders need to have a sound and balanced sense of themselves with a healthy but not dominating ego.

Sinclair's link between effective leadership and Eastern thinking has resonance with a participant in Hard's (2008) study who noted influences such as Buddhism. According to this participant, you have to be a highly developed person to be able to have all the skills of a good leader, 'and Buddhist literature defines a highly developed person' (Hard, 2008, p. 111). Clearly, for this ECEC practitioner, Sinclair's work suggests ways of conceiving of leadership and enacting it which are more congruent with her philosophies. Sinclair encourages the development of a wider and more critically informed appreciation of the formation of identity so that leaders may be more meaningfully able to navigate identity pressures. For ECEC personnel this could suggest a deconstruction of the existing images of leadership and a potential to create new identities for ECEC leaders. This may involve what Sinclair terms as 'hybrid, visibly mixed identities' (p. 139). These are images not typical of the mainstream society but difficult for leaders to assume, given the strong social expectations of leadership. Sinclair suggests that these 'hybrid identities' are particularly challenging for women who 'are locked into particular identities, such as nurturer and peacemaker', and goes on to say 'and then it becomes difficult for them to repudiate or act outside such identities without censure' (p. 140). Such a view is closely related to the notion of ethic of care as articulated by Woodrow and Busch (2008) and the associated desires and expectations which make hybridising as carer and leader challenging. Sinclair encourages leaders to evaluate the processes by which identities are assumed for them and to 'repudiate some identities or to cultivate unexpected ones' (p. 140). These are challenging ideas and may be confronting for ECEC personnel. Adoption of such a leadership approach may further position EC leaders as outside the dominant leadership paradigm and, while perhaps desirable, it could exacerbate the limited social and political kudos enjoyed by the field. Adoption of

Sinclair's ideas will require awareness of the potential for further marginalisation if ECEC personnel cannot articulate and defend this alternative leadership style.

What can ECEC learn from these new perspectives?

Concepts of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977), distributed leadership (Spillane and Diamond, 2007), and the work of Wheatley (2005) and Sinclair (2007) step outside the traditional leadership literature and explore alternatives. For ECEC personnel, grappling with traditional models of leadership that do not appear to sit comfortably with their work context, these new ways of considering leadership offer some liberation. None of these authors proffer solutions, recipes or specific models, which is so frequently the case with self-help leadership style literature. In particular, Sinclair (2007) and Wheatley (2005) question existing constructions and make problematic many of the taken-for-granted foundations upon which leadership has been built. Wheatley's (2005) view of mechanistic organisations devoid of humanness makes a clear case for re-engaging with the complexities of human lives. This approach is in preference to the human sterilisation of the workplace. Consideration of these leadership concepts is not achieved in the short term and they are not implemented without personal change in leaders. This will require the fostering of new, robust ECEC workplaces that can promote dynamic debate, support creativity and difference and articulate the value of this leadership approach—in effect an inclusive, healthy work community. Sinclair challenges us to consider the preoccupation with self and identity as a misguided illusion.

The bundle of thoughts and emotions that we often perceive to be our identity is a manifestation of ego, and not in fact our true nature. Rather, by cultivating an understanding of connection with others and the world—seeing the self as a porous part of the world—we allow a sense of self that is not continually needing to be preserved and defended. Identity work is not an end in itself, merely to secure the self, but a vehicle through which to better understand one's power, actions, vulnerabilities and possibilities (Sinclair, 2007, p. 143).

Sinclair's approach suggests a letting go of expectations for control and a fuller appreciation of the humanness of leaders. Such an understanding invites complexity and messiness, as does the work of Wheatley. It suggests less desire for control (of self or others) and appreciation of the human nature of work and (consequently) of leadership. For ECEC personnel this discussion will not provide answers but can initiate broader conversations about leadership within contexts where working with children, families and staff is the day to day. The unconstrained humanness of children and the emotional links with families and their lives demands leadership beyond the models readily offered in traditional literature. The alternate leadership ideas discussed in this paper encourage a celebration of humanness and complexity in order to liberate people to find satisfaction and connection. This requires leadership from people untangling their own desire to 'be someone' (Sinclair, 2007, p. 143) and consequently, providing space for others to be themselves.

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