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Early Childhood Educational Leaders in Australia: Tensions and Possibilities in Leadership Preparation and Capacity Building

Jane Page and Manjula Waniganayake

Abstract: Contemporary research underscores the importance of educational leadership in building quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) environments and in supporting educators to advance children’s learning. The suite of Australian early childhood policy documents that comprise the National Quality Framework (NQF) reflects the value of effective leadership in promoting learning and development within ECEC settings. Under the NQF, the educational leader role was, for the first time, positioned as a key driver of the continuous professional development of early childhood educators. Despite these policy directives there is inconsistency in the role and job description, clarity of authority in the position and time allocated to the educational leader to enact policy expectations. This paper considers tensions and possibilities in early childhood leadership preparation afforded through both initial teacher education programmes, as well as postgraduate studies and professional development courses. It examines the place of university studies in the preparation of educational leaders by drawing on research based on their employment experiences.

Keywords: Early childhood education and care, educational leadership, leadership preparation

Introduction

Contemporary research attests that educational leadership is key to building quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) programmes and supporting Early Childhood (EC) educators to advance young children’s learning (Ebbeck & Waniganayake 2003; Page & Tayler 2016; Rodd 2006; Sims, Forrest, Semann & Slattery 2014; Siraj & Hallet 2014; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni 2007). Educational leadership evidenced through research has, in turn, influenced Australian national policy on ECEC. Consequently, a focus on educational leadership is now clearly evident in the regulatory and policy documents comprising the
National Quality Framework (NQF) covering ECEC settings in Australia (ACECQA 2011a, 2018; COAG 2009; DEEWR 2009). This paper draws on research that examined the employment experiences of EC educational leaders and the place of university studies in the preparation of these leaders in Australia. We argue the importance of addressing the complexities reported by educational leaders and other educators working in ECEC services in generating new theories and robust models for leadership preparation and capacity building in the EC sector in this country.

The Australian Policy Context

EC educators in Australia work within a policy context that outlines a clear set of expectations regarding educational leadership and its role in advancing teacher effectiveness and child learning outcomes (Page & Tayler 2016). The key national policy documents influencing ECEC settings in Australia today comprise the approved learning frameworks, Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (DEEWR 2009) and My Time, Our Place: Framework for School Aged Care in Australia (DEEWR 2011), the Education and Care Services National Law (Parliament of Victoria 2010), Regulations (MCEECDYA 2011) and the National Quality Standards (ACECQA 2011b and updated in 2017). Collectively, these documents make up the National Quality Framework (NQF). Under the NQF, the educational leader role was, for the first time, mandated and positioned as a key driver of quality assessment and accreditation of ECEC services, and this role included a key emphasis on supporting the continuous professional development of other educators who are co-workers. Since 2012 the owner or the ‘approved provider’ of an ECEC service in Australia has been required to appoint an educational leader to ‘… lead the development and implementation of educational programs in the service’ (MCEECDYA 2011: Part 4.4 Division 1.5.118) and ‘to mentor colleagues in their implementation practices’ (ACECQA 2019b: 143). This also meant that centre owners must ‘… designate, in writing, a suitably qualified and experienced educator, co-ordinator or other individual as educational leader at the service’ (Regulation 118, MCEECDYA 2011: 133) to fulfil these expectations. In addition, under Quality Area Seven of the National Quality Standard revised as Governance and Leadership (ACECQA 2017), the educational leader is expected to establish a positive organisational culture and a productive professional learning community guided by shared values and a shared vision for young children’s learning and development. This involves mentoring and supporting co-workers through processes of self-reflection, ongoing learning and continuous improvement of their educational programmes and practices. From 2009, for the first time, these standards have been applicable across the full range of ECEC services in Australia comprising long day care, kindergarten/preschool, family day care and outside school hours care.
Conceptualisation of the Educational Leader in Australian Policy

The role of the educational leader outlined in the NQF was informed by contemporary research that provided compelling evidence of the importance of early childhood education and more specifically the role of the EC educator in advancing children’s outcomes in prior to school settings (Ackerman & Barnett 2006; Burchinal, Kainz & Cai 2011; Phillipsen, Burchinal, Cryer & Howes 1997; Shonkoff & Phillips 2000). International research further underscored the importance of educational leadership in building quality ECEC environments and supporting educators to effectively advance young children’s learning and development (Sammons et al. 2002; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni 2007; Sylva et al. 2003). This evidence highlighted the positive impact that quality educational leadership had on young children’s learning and development (Siraj & Hallet 2014). It also identified key practices of effective leadership (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni 2007). Key practices included building a collective vision with colleagues, developing shared understandings, meanings and goals regarding teaching and learning, effectively communicating, encouraging reflection, monitoring and assessing of teaching practices, building a team commitment to ongoing professional development, enacting distributed leadership, building a professional learning community and team culture, strengthening parent and community collaborations and partnerships, and striking the balance between leading and managing.

Recent research has further highlighted the range of skills and knowledge(s) required by educational leaders to support colleagues to improve their educational programmes and practices to advance child learning. These findings also include sharing specialised knowledge of theory and research on how children learn, evidence-based practices that advance child, programme planning, coaching and mentoring to deepen colleagues’ pedagogical knowledge and fostering colleagues’ commitment to improve their daily practices with children as well as tracking and monitoring the effectiveness of leadership and teaching on child learning (Colmer, Waniganayake & Field 2015; Couglin & Baird 2013; Fonsén 2013; Page & Tayler 2016; Stamopoulos & Barblett 2018; Waniganayake, Cheeseman, Fenech, Hadley & Shepherd 2012, 2017). The role of an effective educational leader is thus complex and multi-faceted and requires expert knowledge on teaching and learning processes, adult learning, and leading learning.

Challenges and Tensions in Establishing and Enacting the Role of Educational Leader in Australian ECEC Settings

While the introduction of the role of the educational leader can be viewed as a necessary and important change, not surprisingly, transitioning into this new role has proved a complex undertaking for educators in the ECEC sector. Collectively, the NQF policy initiatives presented a new set of accountabilities and expectations of leadership practices in ECEC services throughout Australia (Nuttall, Thomas & Wood 2014). Challenges noted in the Australian EC research literature indicate that the educational leader role presented a
departure from well-established models and practices that were in place in ECEC services prior to the NQF. Nuttall et al. (2014), for example, note that the new emphasis on educational leadership created a shift in how leadership was understood and enacted in ECEC services. Prior to the reforms, leadership had been enacted from administrative and managerial perspectives with no clear focus on children’s pedagogy and adult learning. Shifting the leadership lens to leading for learning was a new and complex emphasis. A further complexity was that the role of educational leader was mandated for a range of services – long day care, kindergarten/preschool, family day care and outside school hours care – that prior to the reform had varying degrees of experience with quality assurance processes and increased expectations as outlined in the NQF. In some of these services the role of educational leader was one of several roles that an EC educator and/or Director was required to enact. (Note, for the ease of reading this paper, we are using the words ‘EC educator’ to embrace all categories of EC staff, including teachers and assistants.) This meant that educational leaders had to build new understandings of the difference between being an effective centre manager and educational leader (Nuttall et al. 2014) at a time in Australia when there was an absence of proven models and understandings of educational leadership developed in conjunction with and for the ECEC sector (Grarock & Morrissey 2013; Nuttall et al. 2014).

An additional challenge was that professional learning and development of educators had previously been outsourced and offered externally (Nuttall et al. 2014), with individual educators participating with EC colleagues from diverse ECEC settings (Hadley, Waniganayake & Shepherd 2015; Waniganayake et al. 2017). Until recently, there were limited options for workshops or any type of specialist EC training focusing on educational leaders. This is symptomatic of the lack of preparedness of the ECEC sector, as a whole, in responding to major policy reforms as noted by the Productivity Commission (2011). The NQF, however, required educational leaders to offer ongoing professional learning within their service at a time when they, alongside their colleagues, were contending with new expectations and accountabilities outlined in the NQS, the EYLF and the Education and Care Services National Law and Regulations (Nuttall et al. 2014; Waniganayake et al. 2017). This was particularly challenging given that educational leaders were not experienced in or prepared for adult learning and were not usually offered professional learning to support this role (Fleet, Soper, Semann & Madden 2015; Nuttall et al. 2014). In addition, diversity of staff qualifications and high rates of turnover in the ECEC sector created further challenges for educational leaders seeking to develop a collective vision and support their colleagues to improve their educational programmes and practices (Nuttall, Thomas & Henderson 2018).

A further complexity facing educational leaders was that service providers were not mandated to provide job descriptions or to allocate time to this role. As a result, the EC sector witnessed inconsistencies as ECEC service management struggled to identify a suitably qualified educator and define the roles and responsibilities of their educational leaders (Fleet et al. 2015; Grarock & Morrissey 2013; Nuttall et al. 2014; Sims, Waniganayake & Hadley
Discussion of adequate pay to reflect the increased responsibilities of the role has not been addressed since the implementation of the reform began (Fleet et al. 2015; Sims & Waniganayake 2015) and continues to be challenging for educators and centre management. The aforementioned gaps and inconsistencies in the supports offered to educational leaders to assist them to enact change were recognised in a review of the NQS by the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) and resulted in a greater emphasis on employers and management being expected to support educational leaders. That is, the NQS now requires that educational leaders are ‘supported’ (ACECQA 2017: Element 7.2.2) and that their ‘roles and responsibilities are clearly defined, and understood, and support effective decision making and operation of the service’ (ACECQA 2017: Element 7.1.3). These changes reflect a growing recognition of the need for improved support mechanisms required to enable educational leaders to implement their role. Researchers also affirm the importance of service owners and managers understanding the empirical basis and motivation behind policy reform in providing adequate, ongoing support to educational leaders to be effective in their role (Fleet et al. 2015; Grarock & Morrissey 2013; Loo & Agbenyega 2015).

Experiences of Educational Leaders in Australian ECEC Settings

In the years following the NQF reforms in Australia, the experiences of EC educational leaders and their colleagues in the field have shed further light on the range of challenges that are experienced in enacting this new role. Research studies undertaken in long day care and kindergarten services in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), New South Wales (NSW), and Victoria (Fleet et al. 2015; Grarock & Morrissey 2013; Nuttall et al. 2014) highlight the personal, relational, and structural barriers that have existed in ECEC services, their impact on the effectiveness of the educational leader’s role and what support structures are required to assist them to perform this role. Grarock and Morrissey (2013), for example, reported the low sense of self-efficacy of kindergarten teachers acting as educational leaders in long day care services in Victoria. While these teachers noted that the formal title of educational leader had built their confidence in enacting change, they also expressed a reluctance to see themselves as leaders (Grarock & Morrissey 2013). This reluctance could perhaps be explained by the fact that they had both experienced success in leading changes in their rooms that aligned with the NQF but at the same time found it difficult to create change with colleagues in other rooms in their centres. This may, in turn, have been connected to the fact that the educational leaders in this study were degree qualified kindergarten teachers funded to provide a preschool programme in long day care services. Kindergarten teachers are under different industrial awards and receive higher salaries and more holidays than their childcare colleagues. The different work conditions for educators employed within the one service can create tension and may also be part of the difficulties experienced by educational leaders in this study.
Nuttall et al. (2014) similarly reported that educational leaders in Victoria felt ambivalent about their role in advancing quality through a process of continuous improvement. They argue that the absence of clear models of what educational leadership looked like in practice at this time resulted in educational leaders defaulting back to more familiar models of managerial leadership. Nuttall et al. (2018) further noted the tendency of educational leaders to initially focus on individual educators rather than on the more difficult task of building the collective capacity of their teams. Fleet et al. (2015), on the other hand, noted that educational leaders in NSW and ACT reported success in their support of colleagues’ implementation of the EYLF and in building a repertoire of teaching skills, practices and approaches to teaching children (Fleet et al. 2015). However, this research was based on methods of self-assessment and educational leaders’ perceptions of their roles as change agents may have been a ‘hopeful’ rather than realistic assessment of practice (Fleet et al.: 34). Researchers also highlighted that success is contingent on the culture of the services including the openness of staff to welcome and work alongside educational leaders.

These studies, nonetheless, highlight the varying degrees of success and resistance Australian educational leaders have experienced in leading change in their services. They, in turn, speak to the importance of providing clear support structures within ECEC services so that educational leaders have sufficient time, space, resources, and expert support to enact their roles and responsibilities with all educators in their services (Fleet et al. 2015; Grarock & Morrissey 2013; Nuttall et al. 2014). These studies also draw attention to the need for tailored, in-depth professional learning that builds educational leaders’ knowledge, skills, and understanding of educational leadership in both a theoretical and practice-based sense (Nuttall et al. 2014; Sims, Waniganayake & Hadley 2018, 2019).

It is imperative that attention is paid to the lived experiences of educational leaders employed in the field and addressing these tensions and complexities in leadership preparation. This involves the examination of both early childhood initial teacher education (ITE) programmes, as well as in postgraduate studies and professional development courses on leadership completed while being employed in the sector and performing these roles. These pathways offer important mechanisms through which EC educators can be supported to navigate the complexities and tensions in the field, build deeper understandings of educational leadership and achieve the high aspirations for quality provisioning to ensure children’s development and learning. These issues are complex and will be explored more fully in the following section.

**Research on Leadership Preparation**

There is some early research undertaken by Australian researchers on EC leadership preparation of pre-service EC student teachers (Diamond 2014) and EC educators and educational leaders seeking professional development and learning to enhance their leadership capabilities (Nuttall et al. 2018; Pilstworth et al. 2017; Stamopoulos 2015;
Waniganayake 2016). These studies represent diverse participants working in ECEC settings in a range of contexts but collectively underline the importance and value of expert mentoring of students in leadership preparation development initiatives at university and when they have transitioned into the ECEC workforce. Diamond (2014), for example, investigated the impact of a 12-week (semester long) leadership and advocacy unit on final year EC student teachers’ perceptions of themselves as leaders at one Australian university. Her study demonstrated that student teachers’ misconceptions about leadership were dispelled and that their self-perceptions of leadership capabilities improved as a result of participating in the unit of study. Targeted and relevant readings on leadership and ‘discussions with peers, site personnel and others’ (p. 19) were noted as contributing to these outcomes. She also attributed these outcomes to the scaffolded expert mentoring of the students’ project work by university academics and EC service staff.

Various studies conducted within Australia have further underscored the positive impact of expert mentoring on EC educators engaged in leadership training and capacity building courses available in the sector. These are typically small-scale studies conducted in different parts of the country that often included a professional partnership between a university and a non-government agency. Research by Stamopoulos (2015) in Western Australia, with 17 educators participating in an action research training programme on leadership, for example, found that their confidence increased as a result of mentoring from the researchers throughout the study. Analysing the personal accounts of educators working in the State of New South Wales, Waniganayake (2016) also reflected on the value of ‘creating a safe space’ enabled by expert mentors where ‘like-minded peers could share ideas, learning, fears and possibilities’ (p. 75). This report documents the leadership journeys of EC educators from six successive cohorts who completed a professional development programme for aspiring leaders based on an inquiry-based practitioner research model sustained over 10-12 months. Research by Nuttall et al. (2018) within a municipality in the State of Victoria also noted the positive impact of researchers using double stimulation techniques in fostering sustainable leadership practices. This study examined the formative interventions in leadership development with newly appointed educational leaders. Their research enabled educational leaders to build new understandings of educational leadership that involved a departure from focusing on individual mentoring and problem solving to building a sense of collective leadership and cohesive capacity within an ECEC service. Likewise, another university-based research partnership with government and ECEC services in Victoria noted the benefits of a one-year professional learning intervention. It consisted of specialised pedagogical training with university staff and external expert coaching support over a sustained period of time for educational leaders to enact their roles more effectively. This research reported that training and external coaching supported educational leaders to confidently and effectively build a process of continuous pedagogical improvement with colleagues, to improve the quality of educator–child interactions and to collectively research their impact on young children’s learning and development (Page & Eadie 2019; Pilsworth et al. 2017).
Possibilities for Growing EC Leadership

The Australian studies above highlight the promise of leadership preparation in counteracting the ambivalence, lack of confidence and influence in the role of the educational leader reported by those employed in this role as outlined above. These studies also highlight the gaps in university based ITE courses targeting EC educators. For example, it is difficult to know if any leadership preparation is built into practicum placements in ITE courses offered by Australian universities as this is not a mandated EC course accreditation requirement. To this end, we turn to Norwegian researchers Hognestad and Bøe (2019), who originally used shadowing methodology in the study of pedagogical leadership in Norwegian ECEC settings. They have recently investigated the impact of shadowing as a teaching and learning method in professional practicums for EC leadership preparation at one Norwegian university.

The conceptualisation of leadership preparation by Hognesad and Bøe (2019) views the ECEC setting as a learning arena where both cognitive and social processes are deployed by the teacher leader, who acts as a role model and mentor preparing student teachers for leadership. Collaborating with teacher leaders in real time and observing their work in everyday situations, they argue, provides student teachers with authentic experiences that capture the scope and scale of regular EC leadership practice and is ‘characterised by a high tempo, complexity and lots of movement’ (p. 22). By enabling student teachers to reflect and question the teacher leaders while shadowing, in turn, allows for the theoretical and practical elements of leadership to be discussed in the moment, including the rationale underpinning observed actions in powerfully relatable ways. Hognestad and Bøe (2019) emphasise the value of this method in dealing with ethical challenges of leadership as ‘privacy and data protection’ issues (p. 26) as they are encountered during the shadowing. They also assert that leadership preparation based on shadowing is not about copying or simply emulating a teacher leader. Instead, they declare:

… if independence and autonomy of thought and action is to be nourished in the student, shadowing must allow for conversations where the practice teacher is not concerned just with her own interpretations of practice, but also with acknowledging the thoughts and interpretations of her shadow, the student. (p. 28)

Hognestad & Bøe’s (2019) model as well as those described earlier are worthy of further consideration as models of leadership preparation to be explored in and for the Australian ECEC sector.

Discussion

Research evidence has effectively drawn attention to the ways in which leadership preparation has been researched and practiced in Australian university settings and the EC sector in this country. There remains, however, a dearth of information on leadership preparation despite the evidence for its need (Rodd 2015; Waniganayake 2015) and gaps in our knowledge of how leadership preparation is enacted in universities and training
institutions across Australia. There has, for example, been no comprehensive appraisal of the models and methods deployed in EC leadership preparation by Australian universities and vocational education agencies. The analysis of leadership course content in postgraduate courses at Australian universities by Waniganayake and Stipanovic (2016) involved an investigation of ACECQA approved ITE courses and represents the only study of this kind. Before being implemented, Australian ITE courses covering children from birth to five years are assessed by ACECQA against six curriculum areas. Of these, the area of ‘EC professional practice’ comprises the sub-themes of ‘educational leadership, management and administration, professional identity and development, advocacy and research’ (ACECQA 2019a: 5). ACECQA’s website indicates that over 100 ITE courses at the Bachelor and Master degree levels have been approved. However, there is no publicly available data to assess the extent to which educational leadership preparation has been embedded in these ITE courses and how student teachers are supported to translate leadership theory into practice during their university studies. Moreover, ACECQA (2019a: 4) guidelines on ITE course approval currently stipulate the number of days of ‘supervised professional experience during qualification’ as being ‘80 days’ for a Bachelor degree and ‘60 days’ for a postgraduate qualification (e.g. typically a two-year Master degree in EC teaching). Although ACECQA also specifies the distribution of these days according to the children’s ages inclusive of birth to 12 years, the actual course content to be covered during professional placements is determined by individual universities. This leads to variation in the ways universities translate research evidence on leadership preparation initiatives into practice and results in an inconsistent approach to EC leader preparation within ITE courses across Australia.

Researchers have also noted the barriers and tensions in building and sustaining leadership preparation in the EC sector. Nuttall et al. (2018), for example, have expressed concern that resources available for the effective mentoring are ‘extremely limited’ in the EC sector (p. 83). Moreover, they note that the level of deep engagement made available through research studies and facilitated by highly skilled researchers experienced in adult education is not realistic in being scaled up in ITE in the EC sector. A national audit of ITE courses available in Australia is however a necessary first step in appraising how universities are preparing EC student teachers for leadership roles.

Additionally, the experiences of educational leaders in Australian ECEC settings raise important questions for early childhood students poised to transition into the workforce who are likely to be appointed as educational leaders (Waniganayake 2014) as well as educators employed in the sector navigating workplace complexities. They are expected to adopt a policy of continuous learning to upgrade and keep abreast of new developments in policy and practice aligned with research-based evidence for children and adult learning. It is thus imperative that EC student teachers are supported and prepared to guide the learning of both young children and adult co-workers before they graduate and as they transition into the sector. Research methodologies employed in leadership preparation studies such as those
outlined in this paper should be explored and adapted to assist EC educators to effectively enact leadership in their services.

Improving the preparation and support available to educational leaders in EC services also relies on creating diverse pathways and innovative models on leadership preparation and continuing development. System enablers such as course accreditation, course evaluations and quality assurance measures can assist in driving leadership improvements across the country. Employer investment is also essential in embedding institutional arrangements that support practitioners to achieve their leadership potential, and thereby impact quality provisioning of EC programmes for children before starting school. Research further highlights the potential of cross sectoral engagement between training institutions and ECEC services especially by offering opportunities for shadowing and mentoring of educational leaders by pre-service teachers when undertaking professional practice placements during their university studies and when transitioning into the EC sector. Developing professional learning communities and networks of practice where educational leaders and professional colleagues in ECEC services can discuss, interrogate and explore leadership tensions, challenges, and possibilities as they emerge is important. These strategies have the potential to generate new knowledge, and theories of educational leadership for the EC sector. This is particularly important as educational leadership is contextual and will be shaped by the vision, core tasks and culture of the local communities in which centres are located (Hujala 2013).

In addition, leadership preparation can be demonstrated through government commitment to working with universities and funding a national longitudinal study to assist in appraising the effectiveness of ITE courses and professional development programmes in EC leadership preparation and capacity building. Models of educational leadership (Page & Tayler 2016; Siraj & Hallet 2014; Stamopoulos & Barblett 2018; Waniganayake et al. 2017) outlining the active ingredients for effective leadership in ECEC settings from research in the sector can be re-tested alongside the experiences and journeys of student teachers as they enter the workforce and teach and lead in diverse early childhood contexts and communities. Study design can also incorporate measures to track the impact of leadership on children’s learning and development in prior to school settings. It is through joint research collaborations of this nature that we can build more nuanced and multifaceted understandings of effective educational leadership for a diverse range of Australian ECEC services.

Conclusion

The research evidence on educational leaders’ experiences of educational leadership highlights both the tensions and possibilities for effectively building quality ECEC services and systems in Australia. Research based publications on leadership enactment in this country highlight the value of expert mentoring and the experiences of leadership in practice during the teaching and learning period. They additionally raise important considerations
regarding the length and sustainability of leadership preparation courses (over 10 or more months). While this research refers to theories of leadership, it remains a challenge to glean information about content covered in leadership preparation courses from the published papers.

Universities are important vehicles through which ongoing leadership preparation and capacity building occurs. Focused and careful preparation in pre-service and postgraduate studies is essential in building a confident and effective EC workforce who can deliver high quality ECEC for young children and their families. In order to achieve this goal, government, researchers, training institutions, educational leaders and other educators working in ECEC services should work together to generate new theories and robust models for developing educational leadership applicable in and for the EC sector. This work will support us as a collective to navigate the complexities and tensions in the field, build deeper understandings of educational leadership and effective leadership practices and achieve high aspirations for quality provisioning to advance young children’s development and learning as outlined in the national reform Agenda for the Australian ECEC sector.

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