

Article brief

Co-constructed leadership in early childhood education

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Abstract

Early childhood education contexts are complex and diverse and thus require leadership approaches that connect with the values and beliefs of that field. Currently, the research on leadership in early childhood education is limited and it would benefit from research into innovative approaches employed in very different but comparable locations. This article presents findings from a cross-case analysis exploring the role of leadership in two early childhood education settings: a university laboratory school in the United States of America and a public school in Australia. Drawing on cultural models theory, we argue that co-constructing leadership in context is a useful alternative to traditional hierarchical approaches to leadership. Each site's co-construction of leadership provided an opportunity for leadership to be developed organically and to be shared amongst the community of learners. The findings demonstrate how co-constructed leadership promotes a democratic environment for all members of a learning community.

Article Summary

Why existing leadership models don't work in early childhood education

In early childhood education (ECE) settings, site leaders are often positioned in a role of authority and are tasked with meeting external accountability requirements that draw on notions of 'school readiness' and 'standardized practice' (p. 2). Existing models of leadership in education are borrowed from the business world and perpetuate corporate discourses that value outcomes and efficiency (p. 4). Such models do not reflect the complexities of ECE contexts and perspectives (p. 1), nor do they align with ECE values, such as relationships, collaboration, family engagement and diversity (p. 16). 'These tensions have led researchers to call for the development of conceptions of leadership that are suited to early childhood education' (p. 2).

After considering several existing models of leadership (transformational, transformative, distributed and pedagogical), the researchers argue that, because ECE contexts are diverse and complex, ‘one size does *not* fit all’ (p. 7). They propose the concept of ‘co-constructed leadership’ as an alternative to borrowed leadership models.

This article draws from two larger studies conducted in the USA and Australia which investigated pedagogical innovation and change in ECE contexts (p. 7). Using a case study approach, the research focused on Melissa (pseudonym), the director of an ECE setting in the USA, and Allan (pseudonym), the principal of a primary school in Australia, to explore how they each co-constructed leadership with the children, families and teachers at their sites.

What informs leader’s professional identities?

Cultural Models Theory (CMT) (Holland et al., 1998) was used as a framework for understanding the leadership identities and practices at these two very different sites. According to CMT, educational settings are social and cultural spaces or ‘figured worlds’ that are continuously evolving as individuals enter and move between them (p. 3). In the figured world of education, dominant discourses position leaders in a hierarchical power relationship with their communities (p. 3). However, according to CMT, human agency enables figured worlds to be re-imagined. Using a CMT lens, the researchers made visible the personal histories, identities and acts of improvisation that helped Melissa and Allan disrupt conventional hierarchical models of leadership and bring about meaningful change in their learning communities (p. 16).

The primary research question was:

- How do participant leaders describe their approaches to leadership that contrast with borrowed models? (p. 2)

Data were collected through a one-hour interview and a one hour ‘walk and talk’ with each leader at their site.

Melissa’s and Allan’s personal histories and critical events in their lives shaped their practices as site leaders. For Melissa, exposure to anti-bias multicultural education during her teaching degree, and the experience of adopting children from overseas, influenced her commitment to social justice. Allan, who identifies as Aboriginal, shared how his personal history as a student and teacher informed his strong sense of social justice in education (p. 11).

During the data collection, Melissa and Allan shared several examples that were indicative of their leadership practices and their orientation towards their school communities. For instance, they both spoke of the importance of valuing the ‘funds of knowledge’ (Moll et al., 1992) of children, staff and families (p. 12), and of positioning themselves as pedagogical learners. Both Melissa and Allan engaged with children as active agents with views and knowledge on matters that impacted their own lives (p. 13). Both leaders co-constructed leadership in collaboration with the children, families and staff – all of whom were considered valuable, agentic and knowledgeable members of their learning communities. ‘Their examples of leading reflected nonhierarchical approaches that were connected to the shared pedagogical beliefs and practices within the site as a whole school endeavor’ (p. 10).

Principles of co-constructed leadership

Synthesising the findings from both sites, the researchers identified several underlying principles of co-constructed leadership for social justice:

- Funds of knowledge
- Equitable access to education
- Belonging and inclusion
- Leader as pedagogical learner
- Democracy
- Reciprocity
- The significance of context. (from p. 19)

Drawing on these two case studies, the researchers propose a model of co-constructed leadership that is enacted at the intersection of *listening*, *dialogue* and *agency*. The researchers stress that each early childhood context is unique. Co-constructed leadership brings together the multiple perspectives of multiple members in the learning community to respond to the complexities of each site.

Key take-aways for educational practice

- Models of leadership borrowed from the business world do not reflect or respond to the complexities and values of early childhood education.

- Co-constructed leadership, which brings together the perspectives of children, families and staff in early learning communities, offers an alternative to hierarchical leadership models.
- Co-constructed leadership reflects and responds to the complexity of each unique context; it is therefore not a rigid model.
- Several principles underlie co-constructed leadership for social justice: Funds of knowledge, equitable access to education, belonging and inclusion, leader as pedagogical learner, democracy, reciprocity, the significance of context.
- Co-constructed leadership is enacted at the intersection of listening, dialogue and agency.

Further reading

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