

## Leading practice underpinned by research; a practical example

### i. Introduction

Successful leadership is not a clear-cut strategy for success in early years' settings (Rodd, 2011). Based upon decision making, leadership is wholly a balancing act as fundamentally holds an individual accountable and in charge of an early year setting (Lindon, Lindon and Beckley, 2016). It is therefore clear why it is described as a social interaction, as is simply one's ability to interact with others while maintaining motivation, organisation and order (Glanz, 2002). Each individual leadership role comes with different challenges, often complex but equally unique. Although managed alongside external UK legislation, compliance is never guaranteed as each setting will present different "legal, moral and societal expectations" (Palaiologou, 2013. p.211). This report will use a practical example of setting based leadership and teamwork to explore challenges that often arise within early years working environments. It will continually discuss the role of leadership styles to create effective collaboration, and how these can be combined to achieve shared goals and pedagogy. The importance of which, embodied within UK guidance and legislation, is highlighted by O'Sullivan (2009) to be the best way to shape and improve practice in the workforce to create and implement integrative services for all families.

### ii. A Practical Example: Zuo Ren

*Figure 1.*



Zuo Ren House is a hypothetical nursery based in Market Harborough; a small town in south Leicestershire (Figure 1.). Zuo Ren has a total of 28 children at any one time between a pre-school and toddler room, cared for by a team of 8 staff therefore, bettering government ratio guidelines (DfE, 2015). Zuo-Ren originally translates as 'the making of a moral person' (Li, Wong and Tse, 2011). The nursery's principles are based upon Chinese philosophies of early socialisation called 'Confucianism' and 'Guanjiao' dating back from 479BC which is the practise of integrating moral virtues, discipline and care (Xu, 2017). The significance of Confucianism in modern day China is paramount as it can provide an ideological existence for many and exists within moral guidelines and social expectations (Shi, 2019). Xu (2017, p.2) discusses a story based on Confucianism which summarises this choice in pedagogy.

*A little girl's grandpa took her to a set of red traffic lights, he said it was to teach her self-regulation and to obey the traffic rules. She wanted to cross as there was nothing coming and he told her, "If I take you across the road when the light is still red, then those behind us will follow, and could be a troublesome or dangerous situation as the traffic rules will be broken. But, if you wait here with me for the green light, then those behind us will also wait. If we all obey the traffic rules, the rules will work.*

Summarising Zuo Ren's practice, it focuses upon moral development within the heart of the nursery, resulting in outcomes less focused on school readiness but making kind and self-fulfilled children (Davis and Ryder, 2016). The story can also be inputted into leaderships styles emphasising that in order for a setting to be successful staff need to lead by example and need to be supportive and respectful of each other. This focus on morality is embedded in Zuo Ren's mission statement as emphasises how each unique child has the ability to reach their full potential. It is through appreciating these socio-cultural differences we can combine and evolve appropriate pedagogic practices which support and target children's early learning and development. These values are echoed throughout the whole staffing team. Jones and Pound (2008) however argue shared visions may be challenging philosophically if all staff and parents are not fully understanding of the pedagogy. This is particularly relevant in Zuo Ren as uses international influences. This highlights the first concern and possible difficulty in leading practice to consistently support a pedagogy, as if the team are not fully understanding, then the desired mission statement can never be successfully implemented (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002). This simply highlights that without clear shared outcomes individuals could work towards conflicting goals (Rodd, 2013). It is also to be noted that within this pedagogy Chinese Socialization is similar to Froebel as believes children are flowers of the motherland and require adults to provide soil and nutrients for growth to happen (Froebel 1837, cited in Best, 2016). This plant metaphor was fundamental in defining the entire role of the adult in scaffolding learning within Zuo Ren and therefore why these pedagogies were selected.

### iii. Curriculum

The curriculum in the United Kingdom and China share many similarities with Chinese early years' pedagogy often being identified as too formal as uses rote learning styles (Li, 2013). In the same way many in the U.K. many now argue settings are too focused on school readiness (McDowall, 2017) and following the EYFS guidance paperwork (Early Education, 2012) too closely. However, it is the positive similarities such as the moral and holistic stance seen in the overarching principles which is why Zuo Ren works so successful using U.K. legislation (DfE, 2017 p.6). Other areas in the EYFS prime areas that support this; such as 'Managing feelings and behaviour', 'Making positive relationships' and 'Self-Awareness' (Early Education, 2012 p.5). This is important as the main principle within Zuo Ren that children develop their own 'righteous' beliefs and as a result can grow into good people who can contribute to society (Xu, 2017 p.3). This shows the combination of the two Chinese and British environments will create the ideal setting in terms of bringing up a 'moral child' (Xu, 2017).

Zuo Ren opposes such formal learning styles as believes Free Flow (Drake, 2014 p.8) gives children the freedom to develop their own curriculum in their own time. Zuo Ren however, still focuses on the application of smaller formal group work which takes place as a 1:1

activity, planned and tailored by a key person, normally occurring twice a week per child (Lindon, 2010). Li and Wong (2008) argued there are better outcomes in smaller than larger groups for activities and learning. Following Chinese Socialization, the rest of the day is formed around instinctive acquisition and learning in context (Lau, Hui and Ny, 2004). This allows children to practice and role-play skills in a safe friendly environment with a familiar supportive adult and peers, circle time as an example. Zuo Ren wants children to have the desire to learn which is why planning so closely to their interests is so important as a setting (Cooper, 2013).

#### iv. **Staffing Unit and Challenges**

The way Zuo Ren overcomes conflicting goals is through using highly trained staff as the Childcare Act 2016, introduced by the Ofsted Childcare Register (Ofsted, 2018) proposed that a graduate level 6 or above should lead every setting, and by regulation, all managers must be at least level 3 trained with two years' experience as highlighted in the EYFS Statutory Framework (DfE, 2017). Zuo Ren requires all staff to be level 5 or above and two managers who both have a background in Chinese pedagogy; one fluent in Mandarin and the other specialising in Chinese Early Years Sociology, as recognises the importance of having highly qualified practitioners (Ofsted, 2018). This was highlighted in the Researching Effective Pedagogy Report; REPEY (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002), stating quality of care is significantly higher in practitioners who have undertaken specific training or professional development. Despite this, although the impact of having highly trained staff suggests more experience, research suggests this could be irrelevant if the correct leaderships traits are not present (Nutbrown, 2012). This creates the question to whether or not leadership traits are habitual or can be learnt and developed.

LeMay and Ellis (2008) argue leadership can be learned. They elaborate that with a supported action-learning approach regardless of their character or background, individuals can be taught to lead a team effectively. This would be reliant on reflective practice in order to unpick and overcome challenges in the setting as they arise, however according to the (Management Sciences for Health, MSH, 2005) challenge model, this must be supported alongside Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound targets (SMART) in order to be achievable. This is supported by constructivist Vygotsky (1962) as states the Zone of Proximal Development is used to gauge what level of input or support an individual is requiring to succeed in scaffolding learning and make leadership both achievable and stimulating. Supported by behaviourist Watson (1913), who argued behaviours can be learnt and adapted, an idea opposing early theorists such as Freud. Freud conversely believed behaviour is innate from birth, therefore stating leadership cannot be taught. However, this perspective is now outdated as advances in research have found that training can build on individual's traits and existing skills to accommodate new appropriate leadership abilities (Zaccaro, 2007). These Behaviourist theories use knowledge of psychology and neuroscience to try and contextualise why people behave the way they do (Mathieson, 2012). Other examples of these theories include Skinner (Gonzalez-DeHass and Willems, 2013); who believes people respond to systems of rewards and punishments, and Ivan Pavlov who alongside Watson argued that behaviour and therefore leadership can be learnt and developed through repetitive learning cycles (Pavlov, 1927). It however must be noted that

there is not one pre-determined method for leadership and must be suited to the individual, situation and context (Palaiologou, 2013).

Nursery's using International pedagogies can often find it a challenge to find staff with the correct skills, as using a Chinese historical influence opposing Reggio Emilia as an example would require a very different approach and skill set (Thornton and Brunton, 2010). It is important that any applicant to Zuo Ren would be willing to learn and appreciate this pedagogy, therefore could make staffing a nursery of this specification harder. Nutbrown (2012) argues this would also depend on the quality of training and CPD about the pedagogy staff receive once they arrive. This is interesting as current research reveals 'inconsistencies' in the support and teaching staff receive across UK settings, which therefore could result in the pedagogy being lost within practice (Nutbrown, 2012). This however suggests that with good training and education into pedagogies, staffing would be less of a difficulty (Pearson and Rao, 2006). This therefore highlights the importance of finding and supporting individuals with leaderships traits to support the pedagogy within a setting.

#### **v. Zuo-Ren Leadership Styles**

One individual will require multiple characteristic traits and skills in order to be a good leader (Palaiologou, 2013), such as confidence, communication, problem-solving and change management (O'Sullivan, 2009). Muiji *et al.* (2004) argue that these skills are the distinguishing factors between the most and least successful outcomes in settings. This makes the term leadership hard to define as is experienced subjectively (Lindon, 2012). House's (1971) Path-Goal theory argues the quality of leadership is dependent on both a person's characteristics and their given environment. This makes finding a dynamic leader difficult as not every individual has the attributes to fulfil all of these skills to the same high level (Burns, 1978). This is also argued in Fiedler's (1996) situational contingency theory, that labels leadership as either task or relationship orientated, concluding again not one individual can fulfil both all of the time. Although this explains why some people are more effective in some situations than in others (Stacey, 2009). This may impact how staff react to their leader, for example, if task orientated individuals set unrealistic goals then the team could be disheartened if these are too challenging or seem unachievable. In the same way if goals are too easy staff could become unmotivated and show a half-hearted approach (Goleman, 2006).

Fiedler however argues that both orientated individuals could be effective alongside each other which is why Zuo-Ren has two appointed managers using Collaborative Partnership (Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet, 2014). Zuo-Ren believes that two managers is a supportive dynamic response to combine strengths and give opportunities to share expertise. This also ensures that the team experiences multiple leadership styles and is overseen by a wealth of Early Years experience (Goleman, 2000). Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet (2014) also argue collaborative partnership reduces the risk of autocratic leadership as creates a relational platform of collaboration that the team can look up to and model. On the contrary having two leaders could cause different challenges if two individuals struggle with skills such as

communication or working closely alongside each other, as would create inconsistent goals for the rest of the staffing team (Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet, 2014).

Burns (1978) states an individual always has the potential to develop new styles. So to compliment this, transformative leadership will be used within Zuo-Ren as mirrors the moral pedagogy to focus particularly on how leaders inspire and create shared visions to generate enthusiasm, drive and trust (Burns, 1978). Autocratic leadership at times however is needed in some situations when quick decisions need to be made, safeguarding or evacuation procedures as an example (Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet, 2014). This fits with the common misconception that managing and leading roles come with instant command and control. Opposing this, Daniel Goleman's Visionary Leadership (Goleman, 2000) style in the setting in the same way focuses more on shared visions and goals, as each member needs mutual respect, responsibility for success in order to support one another and the children in their care. Rodd (2013) also argues this approach to be the most effective for contemporary organisations. Conclusively, this has also been the most useful style in adopting positive and collaborative teamwork both in internally and externally to the setting (Ang, 2014).

#### **vi. Internal Teamwork**

Zuo-Ren has a policy allowing each team member to have a named role within the setting after Barkham (2018) explored the issues around roles and responsibilities of setting staff. It was found that without role titles team members felt undervalued in their positions and felt unequally treated regarding external factors such as salary and job prospects. Conversely, research shows staff with roles in place, feel valued, have a higher job satisfaction and feel their professional practice is respected (Caruso and Fawcett, 1999). From a leadership perspective, higher staff morale is directly proportional to better working practice, resulting in a happier and more successful setting (Lumsden, 1998). In Zuo Ren this training is provided through reflective practice discussed in weekly team meetings, which turns supervision into a supportive cycle, leaving behind the perception that leadership is a method to scrutinize practice (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002). As highlighted in the Tickell Review of the Early Years Foundation Stage (2011), through doing this the leaders become the head of a support structure rather than authoritative hierarchy.

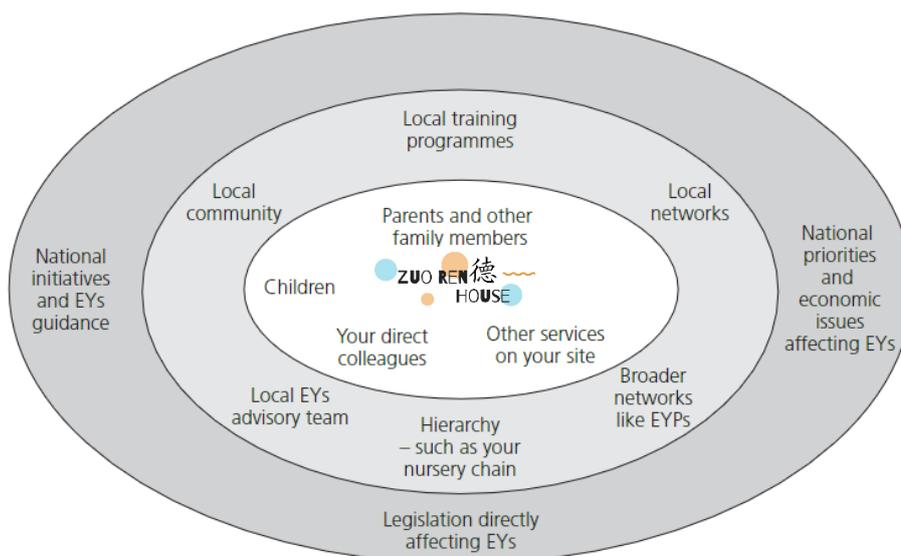
An example of a role in the setting are key persons. Bruce (2015) states a 'one-size-fits-all' approach does not work within curriculum, and according to the Tickell Review (2011) this can be seen to be the same with staff. Also statutory in the EYFS Statutory Framework (DfE, 2017), Zuo Ren has kept the terms as 'key person' as rather than 'key workers', the Chinese Socialisation believe the small change of term implies more of a moral responsibility and loving stance over each individual child rather than a practitioner just fulfilling ratios and lawful requirements (Zeng, 2016). When leading practice this small difference allows staff to have an orientated role which can boost self-esteem as gives responsibility (Ofsted, 2018). This is also another step to reduce levels of formality in the setting and once again reduce this idea of authoritative hierarchies which are often seen in management (Miller and Carter, 2011). Lindon (2012) argues this can be challenging as staff can control their own practice but have minimal control over others, highlighting that people working in the same place do not automatically become a team. In order for this to begin to develop staff members each need to be reliable, consistent, honest and empathetic, as teams only work well when each member is explicitly valued. This is seen in Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, as until a

basic respect is established you cannot achieve self-competence, which is what is needed to support secure professional relationships. These also encourage inclusivity as give opportunity to learn more about each other, the child and their families, and according to our 'guanjiao' pedagogy can be a stepping stone to help begin to understand the individual child and therefore them in support problem solving, self-regulation and independence.

**vii. External Collaboration**

Within the early year's sector working within a team is not only found in the setting but in a wider context involving external institutions, legislation and guidance, all of which must be considered (Palaiologou, 2013). Figure 2. demonstrates the significance of external factors surrounding Zuo-Ren. It consists of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological system which highlights the complexity of social groups and influences upon a singular setting. These include a range from direct colleagues and children's families to government initiatives, legislation and guidance. Zuo-Ren is at the heart of this diagram (Figure. 2) as each of these will directly impact decisions made on a daily basis, from SENCO (DfE, 2014) in our microsystem to Ofsted (2018) and the EYFS (DfE, 2017) in our macro system. In this setting using this model is beneficial, as recognises working with external initiatives is simply collaborative partnership on a wider scale (Goleman, 2006). These external relationships are so important as according to the Childcare Act (2016) with strong partnerships and a child centred approach, children can obtain all of the five desired development outcomes in Every Child Matters (GOV.UK, 2003). Although this is no longer regulation these outcomes are now echoed within the EYFS 'overarching principles' which although mandatory in the United Kingdom, also sit within Zuo Ren's holistic Chinese approach to early years education (DfE, 2017 p.6).

Figure 2.



(Bronfenbrenner, 1979, cited in Lindon, 2012, p. 164, Figure 7.1)

It is also the responsibility of Zuo Ren to work with multi-agency support networks to integrate the best support for all children within the setting (Palaiologou, 2013). An example of this are childcare vouchers as due to the Coalition Government and the Childcare Act (2016), families with pre-school children now have access to 15 hours free childcare. 15 hours is now inclusive to children aged 2 whose families access any form of government support, in the same way that working families with 3-4-year-old children can apply for 30 hours funded childcare. This inclusivity was highlighted in the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education document; EPPE (Sylvia *et al.*, 2004) as stated vouchers give disadvantaged children equal opportunities to access good quality settings to begin to thrive. Through providing access for all to Zuo Ren's provision we are allowing for inclusion, allowing all children the same early year's opportunities. The Ofsted Inspection Handbook (Ofsted, 2018 p.32) states all practitioners need to raise their expectations of what each child can achieve, "including the ablest and the most disadvantaged". Zuo Ren welcomes all children as the setting is inclusive by using a Social Model approach, which encapsulated by the SEND Code of Practice (2014) that requires practitioners to be inclusive, meaning not labelling children and adapting the environment to suit children's individual needs. This is also recognised within the EYFS Statutory Framework (DfE 2017) as states settings will need to have individual arrangements in place to support all children and those with different educational needs. This is made clear in our Inclusion and Equality policies which are given to staff to implement.

#### **viii. Bringing it all Together**

Discussion of teamwork, legislation, external collaboration and individual personality traits is all relevant to leadership in practice because it is the management team's responsibility to have these things in place to best support children's welfare (DCSF, 2008). The overriding aim of this whole nursery design is the child's best interests, provided for not only by leaders but the whole management and staffing team. This is interesting as Moyles (2006) describes a 'Connective Leadership' which is a new integrative model which focuses on working as a child centred collaborative team to get the best results. This links to the support network which Zuo Ren aims to achieve as highlights the importance of sustained shared thinking, where each member of the team acts as an equal facilitator to support learning (Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet, 2014).

#### **ix. Conclusion**

Although being a hypothetical example, Zuo Ren House has been used in this report to highlight how different settings will have different requirements within staffing, management and leadership. This is seen in different pedagogies, which show despite following the same legislation, no two UK settings will be alike in requirements for leadership in practice (Elfer, Selleck and Goldschmied, 2012). This therefore explains why the term leadership is so hard to define. As a result, it is clear that challenges will vary across settings and therefore will require individuals with a wealth of knowledge from different backgrounds for these to be overcome (Lindon, 2010). Despite this, it is evident that whatever the setting, working collaboratively in a team is the more effective way to have a positive working environment

and team (O'Sullivan, 2009). Consequently, it is down to the individual establishment to put into place core values that best represent their own pedagogies, while working alongside multi-agency support mechanisms (Palaiologou, 2013).

## Word Count- 3506

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