

Effective Leadership in Early Childhood Settings

Effective leadership within early childhood education and care settings (ECEC) has been widely perceived as a key component in successfully improving its organizational and structural functions (Aubrey, Godfrey and Harris, 2012). In a time of continual policy reform to ensure quality improvement in services, competent leadership can help to stabilize and support those who are impacted by change. Indeed, research suggests that leadership within such settings has influence over the process of change (Rodd, 2015), revealing the important role that early childhood leaders can play in the progressive development of ECEC settings. Yet, due to their diverse nature in character, quality, and effectiveness, defining leadership can remain problematic within early years (Moyles, 2006).

To explore what effective leadership in early years settings means, the viewpoint taken will focus upon how professionals frame leadership and the influence this has upon quality of the ECEC sector. This is not the only way that effective leadership can be analysed, however the parameters of this assignment restrict the breadth that can be explored. A Goffmanesque 'frame analysis' lens will be adopted to support this. Whilst a frame analytical approach has not been widely used in early childhood research, it has been a sociological theory applied to leadership in wider organisational structures. Drawing back to Maslow's hierarchy of need (Maslow, 1943) it is essential to have an understanding of human motivation as a means of ensuring that the needs of both professionals and children are met. It is in this context that research has demonstrated that effective early years leaders should have a continuous working knowledge of what motivates children and staff in ECEC (Moyles, 2006). Goffman's frame analysis theory (Goffman, 1976) seeks to understand this human motivation arguing that people's actions lie in connection to the social situations they are a part of. These situations elicit meaning for each individual as a result of socially learned frameworks. Most importantly for Goffman, we actively project ourselves into defining the situations we are in through the use of primary frames: culturally determined definitions of reality that support people in making sense of events and objects. These primary frames thus raise questions regarding the unconscious or unspoken bias that can inform perceptions of leadership in both policy and practice. It is through this framework that this essay aims to explore the importance of effective leaders needing to be aware of and utilizing different leadership frames within the ECEC sector.

Consequential to the challenges of defining leadership, different styles or 'frames' of leadership have been developed by various authors and researchers. These are not always in opposition to one another but stand as different perspectives and value systems relative to their contexts and time of their introduction. Each frame is underpinned by dissimilar implicit assumptions and generates a different discussion. One primary frame attached to leadership is the view that it is inherently business-like, with leaders adopting managerial roles. For Goffman, (1976), 'keys' are established from the primary framework. In the case of managerial leadership, keys that are dependent on this view either perceive it to be a trait that individuals are born with (Rodd, 2013; Northouse, 2012) or that the qualities held by leaders can be learned and is a skills-based concept (Rodd, 2013).

However, for some a situational approach is more favourable as it explores how situations can influence leadership acts where leadership is conditional to the nature and interplay between the designated task, the situation and context, and its followers (Rodd, 2013). Each situation is viewed and inevitably treated as distinct with effective leaders recognising and performing the most appropriate leadership style necessary to the associated circumstances. Situational leadership is flexible and adaptable (Northouse, 2012), lying on a continuum where the level of directive behaviour is relative to the level of supportive behaviour displayed by the leader (Blanchard, 1985).

Transformational leadership, as an additional primary framework, focuses upon how leaders have the ability to inspire people with a collective vision for wanting to make the world a better place (Bass, 1990). Enlisted within this frame is a strong moral element, fostering an emotional attachment between followers and leaders that contributes towards the greater good of all individuals involved (Avolio and Yammarino, 2013). For Morgeson, DeRue and Karam, (2010), a key of transformational leadership is distributed leadership. It involves different members within a team stepping forward when situations warrant the need of the skill set of that individual. Thus, the leadership within such groups is distributed amongst individuals.

Whilst the above dominant frames provide ample explorations of effective leadership, the frame an individual adopts when looking at and understanding leadership will remain dependent on the social contexts and early personal experiences they have undergone. Moreover, these early experiences support the ways in which we expect certain situations to be understood, and is described by Tannen, (1979) as

'the power of expectations'. In the case of leadership, the more familiar an individual is with a leadership frame, the easier it will be for them to act within it.

For Goffman, (1976), many individuals take specific actions in relation to the cultural standards that are established within an activity, alongside the social role that is built as a result of such activity. It is within this line of argument that Goffman states that institutions have an integral part to play in framing activity, within which they hold bearing over the possible ways individuals may frame a situation. Framing within an ECEC setting, for example, will not be entirely negotiable due to hegemonic power from policies and educational practices which involves specific rules and codes of conduct. Despite this, the most popular leadership frame found within early childhood is distributed leadership. Leadership is often framed in this manner within early years as it appears to mirror the diverse and complex nature of ECEC settings through its requirement for high levels of aptitude for flexibility and varied forms of expertise.

The Effective Leadership in Early Years Sector research project (ELEYS) has demonstrated how distributed leadership has the aptitude for promoting shared responsibilities and developing a collective vision (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2007). Moreover, it provides a possibility for settings to achieve greater organizational cohesion through the operational features of administration, management and leadership obligations across a single conceptual framework (Waniganayake, 2000). The advantages of adopting a style in this manner is that leaders develop greater skills which helps to inspire and manage change. A whole setting approach is much more conducive to developing the desired shared vision with time and space given for each individual to develop their skills as an effective leader and in their day to day practice (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2007). Whilst distributed leadership has been shown to be one of the most popular frames to adopt within the ECEC sector, for Aubrey, Godfrey and Harris, (2012) it is found unlikely that this singular style of leadership would be successful within the diverse and ever-changing nature of ECEC settings. As an alternative, it is recommended that practitioners should remain aware of other leadership styles and instead place focus upon 'quality leadership' as a vital ingredient in the pursuit of quality provision within ECEC settings (Rodd, 2015).

The style of leadership and its effectiveness in ECEC settings is particularly significant in light of this push for quality within the public sector. Quality, as a term embraced within this sector, is a subjective and value-based concept that holds the possibility for multiple perspectives or understandings to be developed in relation to its definition (Dahlberg, Pence and Moss, 1999). An example of this is within

Cottle and Alexander's, (2012) study into the perspectives of early years practitioners within the context of quality. It was found that no precise definition of quality was established within their data, with interpretations of the term appearing to be linked to the context of the setting and the practitioners social and professional experiences. Indeed, the idea of quality in this sense mirrors the premise of Goffman's frame analysis in so far as viewing the concept of quality as a result of social relations between practitioners. Thus, quality through a Goffmanesque lens is a dialogic and negotiated process between all those involved. The influence that this has on practices within ECEC settings is that quality can become a term that is adapted and modified dependent on the overall desired outcomes for the setting and the socio-cultural experiences of the individuals involved.

However, with the push for increasing quality in educational policies focusing on target-setting; Ofsted results; and assessment outcomes, quality within such policies appears to be reduced down to quantitative traits that allows for it to be used as a universal tool for measurement. This view from government can inflict the ways in which ECEC settings view quality, resulting in them not only neglecting other frameworks of leadership, but also ways of framing quality.

When we partake in framing activity, we are essentially asserting that our interpretations of the situation we are in should be taken as true over other possible interpretations of the same situation. Within the ECEC sector it is clear that not all practitioners will hold the same frame as others, often proving to be problematic. The meaning of the activity can be ambiguous, but also what framework of understanding to apply, and once adopted, to continue to apply. It can be the case that those with a greater hierarchical status, such as headteachers or lead practitioners, will override the frames of others and insist on the type of frame adopted within that setting. In this scenario a managerial leadership frame may prevail over a distributed leadership style or frame. For Goffman, (1976) this can consequentially result in frame ambiguities and these have to be resolved for fear of the individual being forced to remain in uncertainty about the nature of the phenomena around him. Thus, the role of an effective leader within these settings would be required to recognize individual practitioners' preferences for framing leadership as a way of reducing the extent to which frame ambiguity occurs.

As a strategy for recognising individual practitioners' preferences for differing frameworks, effective leaders within academia are further encouraged to reframe. For Bolman and Gallos, (2010) the process of reframing assists in shifting personal perspectives as a way of viewing the same situation in a multitude

of ways and through different lenses. It is often found that as new leaders emerge within settings, they often miss significant elements when decoding situations, heightening the risk of errors in framing. Linking this to Goffman's view, the error may not merely be in relation to the individuals incorrect perception of a frame, but also how 'misframing' propagates wrongly oriented behaviours. For reframing to be successful, it is required to be led by a strong commitment for development (Bolman and Gallos, 2010) and within ECEC settings is evidenced through strong drive for achieving quality services. For Vedder-Weiss *et al.*, (2018), it was viewed as imperative that effective leaders develop an awareness and understanding of framing, and indeed reframing, and recognize the related socio-economic challenges. This was achieved through continuously guiding practitioners to formulate productive framing conducive to the setting and modelling such frameworks; practitioners collaboratively focusing on identifying the frames that are evident within their settings; and analysing the productivity of the frames in achieving the desired outcomes for quality provision. Additionally, leaders who are emotionally intelligent help to inspire and provoke passion and enthusiasm within ECEC settings, keeping staff motivated and committed (Hallet, 2013). Emotional intelligence constitutes self-control, social conscience, and relationship management (Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee, 2013). As a skill it involves being aware of one's own emotions and having control over them; being able to perceive and recognise others' emotions, relating them with one's own; and building meaningful relationships with others (Petrovici, 2014). It is this emotional intelligence that helps us to recognise and understand multiple frameworks within an ECEC setting to facilitate more productive pedagogical discussions.

Furthering Goffman's view that we frame our experiences in accordance with expectations, experiences and social encounters, reflective practice can be perceived as one way in which effective leaders can facilitate practitioners' awareness of different frames of which to view leadership. Reflection is a hermeneutical process through which we can create dialogue within the self or in relationship with others (Moss, 2008), assisting in exposing practitioners to new perspectives. The premise of reflective practice is that it formulates how professionals, who hold a variety of socio-cultural experiences and different expectations, make meaning through shared practices with others, in turn influencing the leadership style that may be adopted within specific ECEC settings. Within reflective talk, discussions regarding leadership responsibilities have been found to be concerned with quality improvement; the management of human resources; pedagogical leadership; and daily management (Heikka, 2013). It is these reflective discussions that allow early years practitioners to think critically and reflectively, actively challenging hegemonic practices and values to reassess if they are conducive to the progress and development of children,

demonstrating their ability to reframe. Indeed, reflective practice is not only imperative to effective leadership but also in ensuring children's needs are met and the overall quality of provision (Dryden *et al.*, 2005). Effective leaders are therefore reflective practitioners who assist their co-workers by modelling practice and behaviours and being reflective in their own practices (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2007).

What is more, within an educational system whereby learners and practitioners frequently come from distinctly different positions, there lies the need for them to find a foundation upon which to build successful relationships that supports reflective talk (Papatheodorou and Moyles, 2009). Thus, relational pedagogy, as a dialogic dimension, requires practitioners to re-examine their attitudes, allowing them to better understand other practitioners' viewpoints and frameworks for which to view leadership. There has been further emphasis within policy directives, including Every Child Matters (DfES, 2003), that suggest that quality within ECEC settings is best found in the interactions between settings, practitioners, children, and their families, therefore indicating that relational pedagogy and quality are interdependent. Unless practitioners and effective leaders engage in the processes of forming dialogic relations, their practice is at heightened risk of becoming ill-informed and theoretically dangerous (Papatheodorou and Moyles, 2009). Through a Goffmanesque lens, practitioners can become aware of disparate frameworks through the adoption of relational pedagogy where dialogue supports the renegotiation of personal narratives and social power. Therefore, when early childhood practitioners encourage reflective practice and partake in relational pedagogy, further demonstrating what Bolman and Gallos, (2010) and Goffman, (1976) determine as 'reframing', this may result in a greater awareness of the multitude of frameworks associated with effective leadership in ECEC settings.

To conclude, by using Goffman's 'frame analysis' as a lens for which to address the concept of effective leadership in ECEC settings, we can see that it is vital that practitioners who are taking on a leadership role take into account the multiple frames that may come into play within the working team. Using these differing perspectives allows us to approach the situation from the view that is most appropriate in reaching the desired outcomes and enhances the notion of quality and the effective running of early years settings. Whilst Goffman's theory essentially critiques the singular use of distributed leadership, it highlights the importance of understanding that other frameworks of leadership, such as the managerial, business-like framework, may too add to the quality of ECEC provision. To do this, practitioners should adopt, and develop their skills in emotional intelligence, reframing, reflective practice and relational pedagogy as outlined above. Indeed, the way to achieve a well-organised and well-resourced ECEC setting

is inspired by Goffman's claim to recurrently ask "what is going on here": in essence "what is the most effective leadership frame required for this situation?"

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