

**Affordances and Constraints Facing 'Educational Leaders' in
Australian Early Childhood Education Centres**

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"Getting Beyond the Zone of Proximal Development: Further Possibilities for Strengthening Early
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Introduction

Recent policy developments in early childhood education in Australia focus on improving the quality of early childhood education (ECE), particularly for those at greatest risk of school failure. Such improvements, however, are largely dependent on enhancing the quality of the ECE workforce. In line with this imperative, a key strategy within the *National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and School Aged Care* [NQF] (Council of Australian Governments 2009a) has been to mandate the role of 'Educational Leader' in every early childhood centre or service. The purpose of the study described in this paper was to identify institutional and other practices that afford or constrain the development of this form of leadership in ECE in Australia.

The Educational Leader [EL], as conceived within the NQF, has substantial responsibility for leading the implementation of the ECE curriculum framework for Australia, *Belonging, Being and Becoming* (Council of Australian Governments, 2009b) in their centre or service. Such leadership dictates that the EL will, *ergo*, lead the development of pedagogy within their centre or service. This form of leadership, sometimes known as 'pedagogical leadership', is comprised of a distinctive set of knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to strengthen practice changes amongst teaching teams, in order to improve service quality. However, an obvious and major challenge in the implementation of the EL role across Australia's ECE sector is that most qualified educators in ECE have considerable knowledge of how to foster children's learning and development and how to work with families, but almost no understanding of principles of *adult* development. Yet it is the development of adults that is central to the EL role.

Previous research into leadership development in ECE has suggested that a range of in-centre and outside-centre factors act to afford and constrain the work of centre leaders. For example, Whalley (2011) identified the in-centre factor that Directors tend to have a confident grasp of administrative and managerial aspects of leadership but not of the professional development aspects of leadership. The focus of this paper is on findings from the present study related to these affordances and constraints, and the data presented here is mainly from the initial needs-analysis interviews with the participants and the early part of the study.

The study

Data in this paper are drawn from a larger research and development project focused on the pedagogical leadership of a group of early childhood centre and service Directors (nine from centres and two from home-based care services) in Melbourne, Australia. The study had Human Research Ethics approval from both the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Victoria, Australia) and the Australian Catholic University Human Research Ethics Committee.

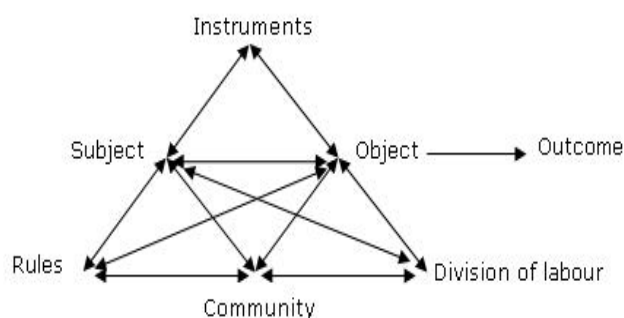
Data were generated through individual audiotaped interviews with the participants at roughly two-month intervals across a twelve month period. The resulting transcripts were then returned to participants for checking prior to analysis. Analysis of the transcripts was iterative and was undertaken by the researcher and an experienced research colleague who was not involved in the study. Analysis began deductively, employing *a priori* constructs including 'leadership', 'pedagogy', 'curriculum', and 'teamwork'. Second order (inductive) analysis was conducted by identifying new or unexpected constructs that appeared as patterns in the data. Careful attention was paid to issues of qualitative validity, including credibility, transferability and dependability through strategies such as clarifying and confirming emergent constructs with the participants at successive workshops.

In addition to the interviews, group development workshops with the participants were facilitated by the researcher between each cycle of interviews, focused content related to early childhood curriculum and pedagogy and strategies for effective pedagogical leadership. Field notes were made by a research assistant during each workshop. These workshops also provided the opportunity for the participants to contribute to ongoing analysis of their (de-identified) interview data, not only increasing the validity of ongoing findings but contributing new insights and confirming major themes. Before preparation of papers arising from the study, the participants received clean copies of all their transcripts and were invited to remove any material they did not wish to see included in the final data set.

Conceptual framework

The study – both in its professional development methodology with the participants, and in its design and data analysis – was informed by ‘third-generation’ cultural-historical activity theory (Engeström 1987, 1993), which views systems of human activity (e.g. a child care centre) as a single unit of analysis. Relationships between key aspects of the system – typically referred to as rules, tools (instruments), divisions of labour, (collective) subject, object, and community – are understood as being multiply-mediated by each other (see Figure 1). These features, and the ways in which they mediate each other, are rarely spontaneous; instead, they are culturally determined and evolve over time.

Central to the work of systems is the wide range of objects (tasks) that the subjects are collectively working upon in order to meet their desired outcomes. Outcomes are typically broad (e.g. children’s learning and development), whereas objects are more focused (e.g. assessment of children’s learning). The relationships between elements of the system are also highly dynamic. For example, a tool (e.g. an assessment template) can become an object for a time (i.e. the group works on the task of adapting the assessment tool for a time, after which it becomes resolved as a tool).



(Figure 1: Third-generation activity system; adapted from Engeström, 1987)

Change is evident in systems of activity when adaptation of key characteristics occurs (as in the example of the re-modelled assessment template provided above). Again, such adaptation is rarely spontaneous but occurs in response to contradictions experienced within the system (e.g. the template tool does not meet the group’s object of assessing the learning of children with special needs, so specific adaptations need to be worked on). Contradictions arise when elements of the system are in tension with one another (e.g. one rule contradicts another; a rule contradicts a division of labour; a tool is in contradiction with the system’s object). Such contradictions can remain below the level of collective consciousness, experienced as frustrations or tensions that unaddressed, and which may become firmly sedimented over time. New members of the system (e.g. a new educator in the centre) may voice such contradictions but be told, ‘That’s just the way

we've always done things around here'. Alternatively, contradictions can be actively identified and worked on by the subjects in the system (e.g. when a staffing roster – a *tool* – does not meet the centre's object of safely supervising children throughout the day so it is adapted to resolve this tension, thereby resolving a contradiction between an *object* and the *division of labour*). In this way, the desire to achieve specific objects provides the motive force for adaptation of existing features of the system's culture. A cultural-historical activity theory analysis, therefore, understands labour processes within workplaces as not just the carrying out important tasks but the contribution to new ways of achieving those tasks.

Within the project, the participants learned to 'map' their centre or service's systems of activity in relation to particular objects (tasks) and to identify contradictions that they believed were hindering the achievement of those objects. In other words, the participants were challenged to internalise the 'third generation activity system' model itself as a new conceptual tool to assist them in achieving their object of fostering pedagogical change. This is an example of Vygotsky's notion of 'double stimulation', whereby whereby "the subject [the EL] is put in a structured situation where a problem exists [the first stimulus] ... and the subject is provided with active guidance towards the construction of a new means to the end of a solution to the problem [via a second stimulus]" (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991, in Engeström, 2007, p. 364), with the 'triangle' model as the second stimulus.

Early in the project, the participants were invited to list as many contradictions as they could identify within their centre or service, and most were able to provide multiple examples. It is important to note that this does not mean there were 'problems' in their workplaces. All systems of activity contain contradictions and these provide key starting points for changes within systems. Contradictions are therefore generative, provided they are brought to consciousness and actively worked upon. The other benefit of asking the participants to identify contradictions was that they were able to clearly articulate features of their workplaces, and the relationships between those features, that afforded or constrained the enactment of their leadership.

Findings and Discussion

Three main themes are touched on here: teamwork, 'difficult' staff, and responsibility for professional learning. Analysis of the data identified 'teamwork' as an early and important affordance for the participants, in that they believed that the existence of a harmonious team allowed them to exert effective leadership:

My team are quite a tight team. They seem to be quite happy. They seem to be able to communicate with each other with concerns. They are quite capable of doing that.

I've got the right people in the right jobs now and supporting them individually and as teams, because I've got my big team and then I've got my room teams, so I want them working efficiently together as well. That's working well, in my opinion the right people.

This idea was confirmed by those who felt they did *not* have an effective team:

I think [a major challenge] would be bringing your team together and really working together as a team because what we would see as working as a team and successfully working as a team isn't always going to be the same thing as other people see...

I feel I'm still getting to know this team. They're all very, very different people. I'm still getting to know what makes them tick. They're very passionate about their job, but I'd like to see them work a bit more together and I don't feel I'm getting to know them as well as I could.

These comments suggest, especially for those who see teamwork as a challenge, that 'working as a team' is a desirable *object* within their centre or service system. However, these comments can also be interpreted as suggesting that the participants see teamwork as a *pre-requisite* for development, rather than as a *consequence* of development or something that constitutes an *ongoing* task. In this sense, the achievement of 'teamwork' acts as not as an affordance a constraint. This is because consistently effective teamwork is extremely difficult to achieve in early childhood services due to a wide range of factors, not least the capacity for individual staff members to influence relationships within the team.

Critical incidents related to resistant or 'difficult' staff members who disrupted ideals of teamwork were reported by some of the participants as a major constraint on their capacity to lead pedagogical and curricular change:

For me one particular barrier stands out and it's around a strong personality. I've worked with her as a colleague ... so I was co-worker. It's quite complex ... her drive or her mood even actually affects the rest of the team. It's almost like there's a filtering down. I perceive some people are too scared to say the wrong thing to her and so what she says goes. She's a very strong personality. I'm not scared to tell her if I don't agree. She's very, very strong in her opinions and her ways and often I think, wow.

I have a sense that there are a few key leaders at the centre who ... there are a couple of educators who are quite influential ... [one is] a very difficult person to manage ... very, very challenging.

There are, definitely, [people who can work together respectfully] but then one of the people; the person that I would've thought would've been the one that we can really sort of bring with us on the journey, who would then flow it down to the other's staff is the one that I'm ... yeah, which made it a little bit hard.

'Difficult' colleagues are a challenge in any workplace but particularly in the human service professions where so much of the work depends on positive and productive relationships, particularly around vulnerable clients. An activity-theoretical interpretation suggests that the participants view certain staff as *objects* (i.e. tasks to be 'worked on' and resolved) rather than a member one person amongst a collective subject. For the participants, this view of their team members was exacerbated by highly individualised technologies of 'performance management', whereby educators are 'developed' one-at-a-time rather than as part of whole-centre change. In a sector characterised by high staff turnover, such an individualised approach is likely to be highly constraining for changes of practice.

A third area that many of the participants saw as constraining their educational leadership was their concern that they did not have sufficient knowledge about the new early childhood curriculum framework to guide their teams with confidence:

So I feel like its constant learning at the moment. I'm in the middle of these massive changes and I'm very quickly trying to just keep up with it all.

Yes and I think because you think that you should know all the answers, when the educators come and ask you about something about the Early Learning Framework, you think you should have all the answers and when you don't, that's when I'm getting really stressed out about it. That I don't want them to think that I'm not knowledgeable ...

I suppose that's what I find hard is though, that my knowledge of everything that's happening and evolving, I don't feel as up to the standard where I can pass on that knowledge down to my peers in a concrete way, the right way, the right information... I

suppose just a stronger sense of what is actually happening and I want to be able to answer their questions. I know we all have to sometimes say, 'I'll get back to you about that', but I want to make sure that I have it concrete and understand things now.

I mean it was great going [to outside workshops] because, yes, as you said they give you all that knowledge, that content and they're saying that there's no right or wrong way to do this. That's fine, okay, I get that and you're looking at the Framework, but yeah you need to take that and actually bring that back to the group and work with them.

These comments are predicated on the idea that it is the educational leaders' role to be the 'knower' who gleans insights from external professional development opportunities then brings these back to their centre or service, where they are then expected to 'transfer' their new learning to their colleagues in unproblematic ways. This means that the participants felt a heavy responsibility for the professional learning of *all* the educators.

Analysis of data later in the project show that, as the participants applied the activity theory tool over time, they learned to focus their development efforts on their centres as cultural systems, rather than on individual staff. This not only afforded more distributed notions of professional learning but more expansive notions of educational leadership as in the following example:

One Director was feeling frustrated that educators in her centre were not using the Early Years Learning Framework [EYLF] in the way it was intended. The Co-ordinator had gone to several professional development sessions about the EYLF and had tried to pass her new knowledge on to educators but was disappointed by their lack of motivation to engage with the document. At a staff meeting during the project, an educator raised an issue about one of the centre routines. Rather than providing a ready-made answer, as she would have done in the past, the Director asked the group to imagine what the routine would look like if it was working well [the object]. She also asked the educator who raised the issue to take some time before the next meeting to look through the EYLF [the tool] and report back to the next staff meeting about what it had to say about routines. The Director also invited the other educators to think about why the routine wasn't working [contradictions] and to come to the next meeting with suggestions for new ways of thinking about the routine rules] or ways of organising how the routine was carried out [their division of labour]. In discussion during the subsequent interview, the Director was able to not only clearly delineate her use of the model (by talking about contradictions, rules, tools, etc.) but report on her own sense of release

from the pressure to come up with instant answers to problems of practice (which she would then be blamed for if her suggested solutions didn't work).

Conclusion

The three factors identified here as affording and constraining the educational leadership of these Directors – teamwork, challenging individuals, and responsibility for professional learning – are hardly surprising; each has already been thoroughly canvassed in research related to workplaces across a wide range of professions. The significance of this study, however, is two-fold. First is its focus on leadership for pedagogical purposes in ECE. There is a dearth of studies related to leadership for better teaching in ECE, compared to school settings where there is an extensive research literature related to all aspects of leadership. The second contribution of this study and, more importantly in the context of this Roundtable, is the opportunity to test the usefulness of a cultural-historical activity theory in understanding child care services as systems of human activity.

Key texts in educational leadership in ECE (e.g. Rodd 2006) emphasize (rightly) the interpersonal aspects of leadership, but do not go as far as proposing conceptual frameworks for whole-centre or whole-service development. Instead, they retain an emphasis on individual subject and their responsibility for their own development, albeit in dialogue with their Director or employer. Findings arising from the analysis within this project apply generally to understanding the labour process of work in ECE, and more specifically to the ways in which leaders in ECE can understand development as a collective rather than individual pursuit in educators' work. Calls for distributed forms of leadership in ECE remain idealistic unless educators have access to the conceptual tools that enable them to enact leadership as one member of a collective subject. The 'double stimulation' approach described in this study is one such tool. Educational leaders who learn to see their centre as a collective, historically aggregating, and culturally mediated workplace come to understand that they are working with *collective* zones of proximal development, and that the choice of objects in the subject-object dialectic will depend on the motives both individuals and the collective bring to their work. Data from this study suggest that this frees educational leaders from a model of leadership predicated on the neoliberal fetishizing of individual 'performance' so that they are able to see their colleagues – and families and children – as collaborators in achieving valued outcomes.

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