A Critical Examination of Effective Leadership in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

In this conceptual article, the issues and insights in leadership are examined in the context of ECE settings. This is a unique field with a predominantly female workforce, and the issue of making a distinction between leadership and management needs to be considered. It is important to develop an understanding of the concept of leadership and identifying the potential challenges in defining the concept in this sector. Relevant literature thus provides theoretical, practical and research-informed evidence to explore the issues in leadership models and effective approaches to support children's learning. This article paid close attention to two key models: distributed leadership and pedagogical leadership. Further discussion regarding these two models addresses the key characteristics and factors that are essential for effective leadership in the settings in England. Despite the challenges faced when applied these two modules to contexts, positive notions of effective leadership are analysed as sharing, collaboration, knowledge exchange, and reflective learning. This article argues that an integrated practice of distributed pedagogical leadership appears to be a useful approach for enacting effective leadership in practice.

Keywords: *early childhood education; leadership models; leadership in education; distributed pedagogical leadership*

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Introduction

In previous studies, leadership has been categorised as a behaviour within organisations (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988). Leadership is defined by Cohen (1990) as the 'art of influencing others to their maximum performance to accomplish any task, objective or project' (p. 9). More recently, some researchers (Hallet & Roberts-Holmes, 2010; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2007) have begun to investigate the influence of leadership on early childhood education (ECE). The concept of leadership is expected to play a key role in developing, maintaining and enhancing services for young children. Specifically, effective leadership is known to positively impact the quality of ECE programmes and optimise children's development (Gibson et al., 2020; Fosen et al., 2022). In addition to an update of Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework (DCSF, 2021), the position of ECE within the British policy is shifted from an optional extra to now a crucial and integral part of a child's education. As a result of the government's commitment to compulsory education for young children (DCSF, 2008), there has been increased discussions concerning effective leadership in ECE in England (Palaiologou & Male, 2018). Notably, researchers (Moyles, 2006; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2007) focused on what leadership practices are can contribute to building effective educational programmes and practices. They demonstrated a range of positive results in relation to the practices of leadership. Thus, this article aims to explore a range of perspectives from the research literature that would be of potential impact on educators and researchers' work with young children. As indicated by Muijs et al. (2004), the concept of effective leadership as it relates to processes and outcomes in the ECE must be understood. To evaluate effective leadership, this article examines what effective leadership means in terms of models and characteristics that have been identified in the context of early years education.

Understanding the Concept of Leadership

The nature of leadership has been examined from multiple lenses and researched with different purposes in mind. In some earlier studies, leadership was primarily understood as a leader's personal capacity. For example, Rodd (2013) suggested that a leader can articulate desirable expectations and influence the beliefs and behaviour of others to achieve a goal. In recent years, the concept of leadership has been considered in an organisation or a team. For example, there appears to be some agreement that leadership refers to a process of improving programme quality in a team or setting (Sims, Forrest, Semann & Slattery, 2015). Moreover, Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet (2014) pointed out that the concept of leadership has evolved through a learning process that is shared and distributed. Although there are multiple perspectives on the elements of successful leadership practices in school (Muijs et al., 2004), this in turn raises questions and considerations regarding leadership in ECE. It is necessary to consider the contextual situations associated with the challenges in defining leadership within the context of early years.

Historically, a notion of masculinity lends to the stereotype of a dominating masculine presence within leadership (Blackmore & Sachs, 2007). Within the context of ECE, there has been a major issue of gender imbalance in professionals and practitioners. According to Siraj-

Blatchford and Hallet (2014), on average, 98% of the early education workforce is female. This unique phenomenon has caused an increased attention to women in educational leadership in the last two decades (Rodd, 2013). For example, Palaiologou and Male (2018) argued that female leaders tend to maintain their advantages in emotion management. However, the ambiguous meanings of leadership seem to be embedded within the uniqueness of gender in this sector. The main barriers of stereotypes and critical perspectives in the feminist paradigm still need to be addressed in ECE. Palaiologou and Male (2018) suggested that the leadership characteristics should be reconstructed by taking into consideration culture and history.

Leadership is sometimes used interchangeably with management in schools (Burnes, 2004). It seems that the role of leader and manager is often undertaken by the same individual. Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet (2014) found that understanding the difference between leadership and management helps early education staff to reflect on their roles. Rodd (2013) categorised the role of managers in relation to the maintenance of day-to-day tasks and suggested that they may lack opportunities for developing personal potential. In contrast, leaders focus more on empowering and developing others (Rodd, 2013). The role of leaders is about stimulating learning and planning for continuing development. Furthermore, Male and Nicholson (2016) found that the formal leader can be considered as a person who influences the competences, behaviours and attributes of others. Despite the concept of leadership is constructed by multi-dimensional elements, there is a strong need for effective leaders to apply in the early childhood field. The next section considers the research around educational leadership and discusses the key characteristics of leadership.

Practice of early childhood leadership

According to Rodd (2013), increased research on ECE has been conducted to examine the effectiveness of leadership. Several research projects have made contributions to the theories and practices of leadership in early years education. Moyles (2006) devised the Effective Leadership and Management System (ELMS) as a tool to evaluate the leadership practices of early childhood teachers and practitioners. The author claimed that this evaluation tool interconnects four parts: leadership qualities, management skills, professional skills and attributes and personal characteristics and attitudes. Early years heads can make use of the ELMS for self and peer evaluation according to specific skills and qualities in each of these branches. It is a social democratic approach with an emphasis on shared values to influence staff within the setting (Moyles, 2006). This originally indicated that the shared values require communication skills to engage with staff and parents, but this seemed to personify the values. However, Moyles (2006) found that early years practitioners have limited political voices and tend to be situated as lower-status workers. Other studies on early childhood leadership (Muijs et al., 2004; Rodd, 2013) demonstrated that many early years professionals show little awareness of their leadership role in early childhood practices.

Similarly, the Research Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) study was developed to investigate the effects of pre-school provision and leadership practice in 141 settings in England (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). By conducting in-depth case studies, Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) found that the managers with higher qualifications appeared to develop

higher quality early childhood programmes. The qualifications of the manager of the early years programme could have a positive relationship with children's progress. However, the major weakness of this study was the inadequacy of the context in which the school leaders built and maintained their effective leadership (Southworth, 2004). Although support for early years practitioners (EYPs) is meant to achieve high quality of provision in this sector, Palaiologou and Male (2018) indicated that a large portion of EYPs were underqualified and poorly paid. To offer a better quality of learning in early childhood settings, it seems that higher standards and status on early years leaders are needed.

Inspired by the REPEY study, there is an increased interest in researching effective leadership in the early years sector (Hallet & Roberts-Holmes, 2010; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2007). By interviewing early childhood leaders, Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) found that those who occupy this role are expected to make a significant contribution to organisational performance improvement and goal achievement, both for the school and the children's outcomes. Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007) highlighted a distributed way of making curriculum decisions and working with staff which could contribute to effective leadership in early childhood. This version of leadership departs from its traditional key role towards a more collective and collaborative role, where leadership responsibilities are spread amongst individuals. According to Muijs et al. (2004), distributed leadership also promotes a shared understanding that empowers staff at different positions within the early years settings. Distributed leadership promotes delegation and collaboration amongst practitioners and can increase the practical effectiveness of leadership (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2007). However, this study would have been more convincing if researchers had addressed more detailed processes of enacting distributed leadership. This article will go on to provide more examples in later sections.

Researchers have advocated participation in leadership training to improve the provision and quality of leadership programmes and courses in this sector (Rodd, 2013; Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011). Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007) investigated effective practices in early years leadership. They identified that professional development plays a vital role in promoting the qualifications of staff. Some academics (Male & Palaiologou, 2012; Fonsen et al., 2022) have pointed out that 'pedagogical leadership' appears to be concerned with professional knowledge and reflective competencies. The literature indicates the relevance of examining the effectiveness of leadership. This is especially clear in the case of a reflection on a graduate leadership training course reported by a pedagogical leader (Siraj-Blatchford & Hallet, 2014). This participant shows a development of her knowledge and understanding through shared communication and interactive activities with others (Siraj-Blatchford & Hallet, 2014). Thus, distributed and pedagogical leadership have been identified as two models of effective leadership (Heikka & Hujala, 2013; Murray & Clark, 2013; Male & Palaiologou, 2018). However, some characteristics within leadership models appear to overlap to some extent. The following section discusses key leadership models that constitute effective practices in some childcare settings.

Examination key models

So far, educational research studies have demonstrated some processes and outcomes of leadership practice with relatively high effectiveness. According to Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet (2014), effective early childhood leaders have shown key models and characteristics such as: 1) distributed pedagogy: collaborative and shared, and 2) pedagogical leadership: professional knowledge and reflective learning.

Distributed leadership

Distributed leadership emerged in the early 1990s. It has been used to understand the operation of leadership between the individuals who work in a complex organisation (Gronn, 2002). This form of leadership has been developed primarily in educational research and currently applied in ECE. Rodd (2013), one of the key academics in early years leadership, suggests that distributed leadership is based on a collective identity with interdependent collaboration and the concept of shared values between stakeholders. Heikka and Hujala (2013) proposed that interdependence between formal and informal leaders in enacting leadership is a key component to implementing distributed leadership. Such interdependence plays an important role in helping leaders and practitioners achieve their common aims (Heikka et al., 2021). As mentioned previously, the traditional role of the leader as a single and determined person may not have been applied to distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2007). Effective leadership may support the interdependent early years practitioners' inclusion in collaborative work with ECE. It is evident in the case of the REPEY project (Siraj-Blatchford, et al., 2002), which demonstrated the common goal of providing training programmes and staff meetings to promote access to professional development for all staff. Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet (2014) claimed that these examples demonstrate a culture of collaboration which could facilitate positive and interdependent relationships in the sector. Although evidence of the interdependent collaboration between other stakeholders is scarce, this practice of distributed leadership is consistent with some suggested characteristics that contribute to effective leadership (Rodd, 2013; Spillane et al., 2004).

Nevertheless, Woods (2004) argued that some forms of distributed leadership may demonstrate indistinct boundaries between control and autonomy. Traditional notions of leadership have appeared frequently in the studies investigating the thoughts of leaders in terms of hierarchy and authority (Heikka & Hujala, 2013). It was illustrated by Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) that a school policy was developed by all staff as a result of the commitment between the head teacher and members of her staff. Moreover, Sims et al. (2015) explained that the effectiveness of distributed leadership tends to be affected by a 'justice lens' through 'in-depth discussion' and 'ongoing reflection' (p. 152). Although developing the meaning of leadership tends to have benefits for early childhood stakeholders, it is important to consider contextual practices and policies for adopting and applying any particular ideas around leadership. As suggested by Rodd (2013), distributed leadership has evolved from different contexts to the early childhood sector. It tends to be understood and acted out in a flexible way to address the needs of the situation.

With regard to the collective identity of distributed leadership, a shared notion of leadership can be considered an essential characteristic. Several research projects have

demonstrated an evolving, shared version of distributed leadership in the early years sector (Siraji-Blatchford & Manni, 2007; Siraj-Blatchford, et al., 2002). In the case of a consultation about a policy development that involved children and families, Siraj-Blatchford, et al.(2002) found that the shared knowledge and understanding amongst all staff members may have improved the school's effectiveness. The head teacher reported that she has consequently developed an in-depth understanding of the policy and processes to ensure their implementation (Siraj-Blatchford, et al., 2002). According to Heikka (2014), such a shared vision of leadership could be promoted when all staff members actively engaged in planning and discussing the strategies related to teaching. Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet (2014) have viewed distributed leadership and shared leadership as one integrated model of leadership. However, Rodd (2013) argued that distributed leadership is different from shared leadership because the former tends to provide spaces for each individual to spread her thoughts. In contrast, shared leadership can be authorised by a leader to make certain decisions (Rodd, 2013). Thus, a shared awareness within distributed leadership in this sector is likely to be developed mutually. As suggested by Spillane et al. (2004), interaction in distributed leadership consists of shared instruction, norms of collaboration and collective responsibility that 'create incentives and opportunities for teachers to improve their practice' (p. 3).

Further, Rodd (2013) states that effective early childhood leaders act with management skills and a focus on the future. For instance, Spillane et al. (2004) mentioned the mutual agreement between leaders and teachers on the instructional agenda that will operate in the next school year. This seems to be a visionary practice of leadership. As suggested by Boe and Hognestad (2017), a strong sense of teaching and planning from a directional perspective has been demonstrated. A distributed agenda is enacted through interaction and collaboration. Nevertheless, there are debates on the application of distributed leadership in early years settings due to the different capabilities of each practitioner (Hard & Jonsdottir, 2013; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2007). Indeed, a number of researchers have examined teacher-leaders by using a hybrid framework that connects distributed leadership and pedagogical leadership (Boe & Hognestad, 2017; Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011). Wood (2010) suggested that early years practitioners need to consider developing pedagogical approaches to provide strong support for children's learning in England. Although Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet (2014) also advocated for an integrated leadership model within pedagogies, further discussion on the effect of pedagogical leadership in ECE may be useful.

Pedagogical leadership

To understand pedagogical leadership, this section begins to consider what is meant by pedagogy and pedagogical leadership in education and care. Initially, the term 'pedagogy' has been adopted from the childcare and wider educational contexts in most European countries (Petrie, 2005). For example, Petrie (2005) identified that the notion of pedagogy can be used to identify the childcare professionals, also called 'pedagogues', who are trained to work directly with children and youth in a range of services and settings. Some educators (Cameron & Moss, 2011; Kyriacou, 2015) suggested that the definition of pedagogy, with a close relation to social pedagogy, is a useful approach that can be adopted by practitioners to facilitate their theoretical and practical knowledge of childcare. Although debates on the definitions of pedagogy have

arisen amongst researchers (Male & Palaiologou, 2015; Stephens, 2009), Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet (2014) suggested that pedagogy is 'a holistic approach to supporting children's overall development' (p. 110). This is similar to the work of Male and Palaiologou (2013, 2015, 2018), who saw pedagogy as a comprehensive concept that provides opportunities for learners, teachers, families and the wider community to co-construct knowledge. Pedagogical leaders are equally responsible to the local community and to the larger education system.

Muijs et al. (2004) described the model of pedagogical leadership as a method of 'forming a bridge between research and practice' by 'disseminating new information and shaping agendas' (p. 162). Considering the specific context of ECE in England, Boe and Hognestad (2017) claim that leadership is rooted in its own environment. However, other researchers have suggested that the concept of leadership needs to be reframed into 'pedagogical praxis' (Male & Palaiologou, 2018). In this community, Male and Palaiologou indicated that 'pedagogical praxis' involves a comprehensive interplay between knowledge and theory associated with actions. As stated by Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet (2014), 'pedagogical leadership as a bridge between research and practice is a specific leadership practice at the centre of schools, settings and centres' (p. 113). Male and Palaiologou (2018) emphasised that the understanding of leadership is still developing in ECE in England. Through the compulsory curriculum of EYFS, pedagogical leadership integrated service provision not only in early years settings but also in children's centres. Consequently, this model is likely to affect the quality of teaching and learning for improving children's development and educational outcomes. Thus, it is likely to contribute to our understanding of the complex knowledge and ideas that are key challenges in this field.

In the early years sector, the focus of leadership in teaching and learning points more in the direction of learning (Male & Nicholson, 2016). The model of pedagogical leadership seems to be a 'learning-centred' approach which tends to spread professional knowledge to a range of stakeholders within schools, settings, families and the wider organisation (Muijs et al., 2004). Male & Palaiologou (2012) extended learner-centered leadership to a collective notion of leadership practice. They explained that formal leaders who directly engage in student learning are more likely to promote student achievement than indirectly. Their further research study (Male & Palaiologou, 2016) demonstrated that pedagogical leaders can promote effective action. This is evident in a number of studies. For example, Sims et al. (2015) illustrated that knowledge is one of the key factors since participants believed their capacity to 'create and share knowledge' and be 'knowledgeable' were relatively important (3rd out of 15). This is supported by Moyles (2006), who suggested that to articulate teaching pedagogies, practitioners need to increase the opportunities and times in which they actively engage in their daily activities and events. Developing graduate pedagogical leadership could have been more useful in improving the standards of the workforce within the curriculum. Lloyd and Hallet (2010) pointed out that the low status of a high qualification level has developed amongst the early years practitioners in England. However, Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet (2014) suggested that graduate leadership training programmes tend to strengthen the professional knowledge and experience of early years practitioners. There is the possibility that such pedagogical leadership can be beneficial to both mainstream and non-mainstream settings in England. Thus, pedagogical leadership would be more effective in encouraging higher education in teaching and learning.

According to Male and Nicholson (2016), the model of pedagogical leadership tends to provide opportunities to build relationships that include each individual in the early years education. Palaiologou and Male (2018) argued that this understanding of pedagogy appears to be 'the direct relationship between the teacher and learner' (p. 29). Interactions between the childcare stakeholders play a vital role in developing and enhancing overall service quality. Sims et al. (2015) claimed that the purpose of pedagogical leadership is to support staff members and pedagogical leaders in building their relationships. In their research on investigating the early childhood leaders' understandings of leadership, Sims et al. (2015) found that the most important characteristic that has been demonstrated by their participants was the 'ability to be proactive'. 'Professional confidence' was ranked in second place and 'empowering' was the third most important characteristic of an effective leader. Fonsen et al. (2022) demonstrated that effective leadership has contributed to a consistent improvement in motivated staff. Thus, these positive feelings and attitudes tend to be considered important factors in effective leadership. In the same line, Kyriacou (2009) and Petrie et al. (2009) also suggest that social pedagogy enables practitioners to build trust relationships with children and their families.

Pedagogical leadership is a cutting-edge understanding of effective leadership in the 21st century. However, according to Male and Palaiologou (2015), the current general notion of pedagogical leadership is only focused on supporting teaching and learning. This notion can be problematic and ambiguous when it is used to understand the term pedagogy and leadership. Further explanation related to pedagogical leadership in the context of ECE is required. It is unfortunate that only a few rigorous research studies have been examined the concept of pedagogical leadership within ECE (Heikka & Waniganay, 2011). As a result, Heikka and Waniganay (2011) stated that 'it has inhibited the coherent development of the concept in a meaningful way' (p. 499). In addition, Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007) claimed that according to some pedagogical principles in middle-class families, there are less interventions from teachers and more positive support from parents for their children to learn at home, which leads to greater development in children. It seems that effective teaching and parental support contribute to an effective home learning environment. This finding could be attributed to the role of collaboration with parents as discussed previously within distributed leadership. There is a definite need to re-consider distributed leadership within pedagogical leadership (Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011; Sims et al., 2015). The next section evaluates a possible way to reform and integrate leadership models in order to examine effective leadership in ECE.

Distributed pedagogical leadership

So far, perspectives on distributed and pedagogical leadership seem to offer important frameworks to examine effective leadership in ECE (Boe & Hognestad, 2017; Heikka, 2014; Heikka et al., 2016; Heikka et al., 2018). According to Heikka et al. (2021), these models allow access to the pedagogical leadership enacted in municipal organisations. In their study, Heikka and Waniganayake (2011) argued that a solo module of leadership is not likely to be effective in practice. Rather, they demonstrate that drawing on pedagogical leadership from a distributed perspective contributes to the development of an adequate understanding of effective educational leadership. Heikka and colleagues indicated that the distributed pedagogical leadership would be 'more suitable for describing the leadership roles of teachers' (Heikka et al., 2021, p. 3). Sims et

al. (2015) indicated that pedagogical leadership has been allocated to Australian early years professionals. It reflects a 'mutual influence process' (p. 153). As mentioned previously, Boe and Hognestad (2017) have advocated for a concept of hybrid leadership. Thus far, this article argues that effective leadership is not dependent upon a single characteristic of leadership. It would be more convincing to examine the important factors within the model of distributed pedagogical leadership. The following sections suggest four factors that play an important role in effective leadership in ECE. These are synthesised from the distributed pedagogical leadership framework, which includes shared awareness, emotional competence, collaboration skills and communication skills. Figure 1 shows the connections among all these leadership models and the specific elements in the distributed pedagogical leadership. This following section will discuss how these factors could contribute to the effectiveness of ECE.
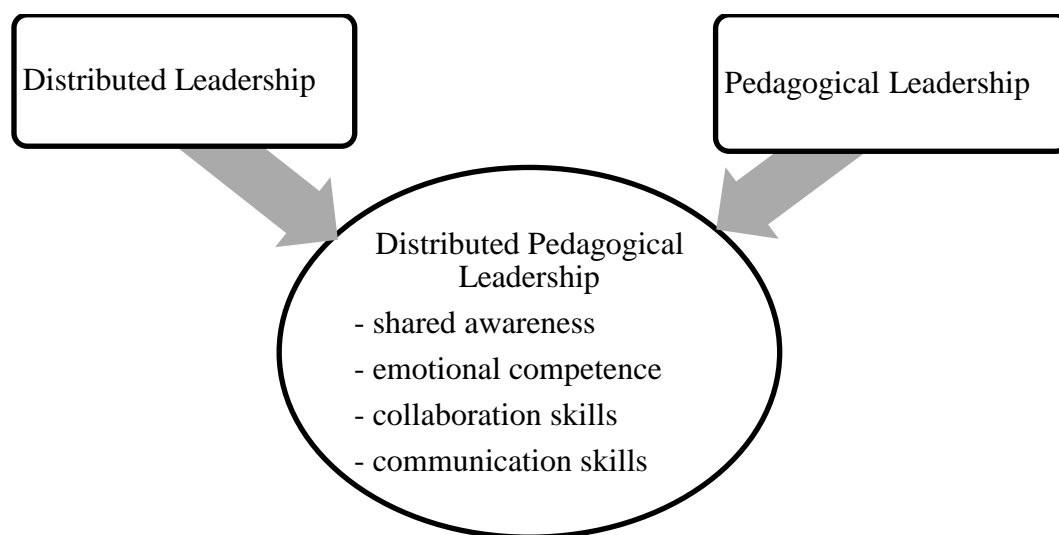
Figure 1. *Conceptual framework of distributed pedagogical leadership*

One essential factor is building an awareness of sharing, and in particular, sharing authority and responsibility when practising effective leadership. Rodd (2013) claimed that effective leadership is empowering because it allows for a sharing of authority. The shared responsibility has shown strong effectiveness in the model of distributed leadership. For example, a similar notion of sharing between stakeholders is shown in the context of early childhood settings in Portugal (Sousa & Oxley, 2019). By using observations, interviews and documentary analysis, this study demonstrated that democratic practices of leadership are associated with other principles and elements of distributed leadership, such as sharing and cooperation. Such democracy is interconnected with social and political forces in Portugal, and these are different from the national conditions in England. Researchers attempted to explain the democratic approach under distributed leadership (Muijs et al., 2004; Spillane et al., 2004; Woods, 2004) and have considered enacting such a national ideology in England to develop a sense of democracy in school. Rodd (2013) indicates that leadership in early years sectors is still 'discussed infrequently'. Therefore, understanding leadership could be an essential factor for further improvement. It is evident that the model of distributed leadership is associated with

pedagogical leadership (Sims et al., 2004), but solo distributed leadership is not completely democratised. Furthermore, according to Male and Palaiologou (2017), both head teachers are found to display pedagogical leadership that seeks alternative perspectives on a sound understanding of professional knowledge of ECE. This is also evident in the case of distributed pedagogical leadership, which has been indicated as the promotion of professional knowledge and understanding in practice within this sector.

Another significant aspect of effective leadership is a positive attitude, which provokes trust and confident emotions. Undertaking the effective leadership evaluation system, Molyes (2006) pointed out that leaders who have sufficient confidence in their own knowledge are likely to evaluate their levels of effectiveness. Emotional competence within distributed pedagogical leadership consists of incentive motivation and competition motivation. Distributed pedagogical leadership provided opportunities for promoting the promoting the practitioners' ambitions and motivations (Siraji-Blatchford & Hallet, 2014). In addition, the purpose of collaboration is closely related to building trust in relationships. According to Male and Palaiologou (2017), good internal relationships between all school members are demonstrated in the practice of effective leadership. Furthermore, increased passion is evident in those who exhibit effective integrated leadership that demonstrates a deep-seated passion for the children, school, and community in which they work (Moyles, 2006). Siraji-Blatchford & Hallet (2014) described this as 'emotional intelligence' and highlighted its importance in effective leadership. Early years practitioners who can manage their positive feelings are likely to develop their knowledge and skills.

By developing a shared awareness and positive emotion, collaboration is an additional important factor that emerged from distributed pedagogical leadership. Collaboration skills can be practised both inside and outside early childhood settings. Inside collaboration includes teamwork (Rodd, 2013) and staff selection skills (Langston & Smith, 2003). In terms of the context beyond the early childhood settings, parental involvement is considered one of the key collaboration skills (Boe & Hognestad, 2017). Based on a collaborative relationship, communication skills have been highlighted as one of the most common factors in enacting effective leadership. Rodd (2013) demonstrated that distributed pedagogical leadership is likely to increase the effectiveness of communication. One of the key beneficial outcomes from leadership training is the reinforcement of communication and skills. As a result of reciprocal communications, the early years leaders and followers are likely to better reflect on their capabilities by recognising their strengths and challenges, as well as what they can do to build on their strengths and improve their leadership respectively. Researchers (Heikka et al., 2021; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2012) indicated that reflective practices contribute to make leadership processes and outcomes more explicit for each professional. Thus, it is recommended to develop the competence of a team on communication skills through reflective practices. This might be useful for taking into account in ECE teacher development in future.

Conclusion

This article has introduced key concepts of leadership to show how it has been practised in the context of ECE. Traditional notions of leadership appear to be in conflict with the pedagogy

and ethos of ECE. The complex context within this context led to the absence of a mutual, clear definition of leadership or pedagogy. Different perceptions and understandings of effective leadership have been proposed to define the concept. With theoretical, practical and research-informed perspectives, this article demonstrates that effective leadership appears to be enacted based on a distributed pedagogical framework. This is an integrated leadership module emerged from distributed leadership and pedagogical leadership. This article is argued that distributed pedagogical leadership appears to make more positive impacts on ECE professionals, teachers and practitioners. By examining the results of research projects on effective leadership from the early childhood practitioners' perspective (Heikka et al., 2021; Male & Palaiologou, 2017), the notions of sharing, collaboration, knowledge exchange, and reflective learning appear throughout the framework as contributing factors in practices.

The factor of collaboration is one of the main characteristics within effective leadership. It requires collaborative skills with multiple stakeholders, which are enacted through interactions between staff, team, and children's families and communities. The decisions and behaviours of early childhood leaders are likely to impact on many relevant people including staff, children, and their families. To examine effective leadership in ECE, this article suggests that further work is required to determine a more distinct understanding of leadership in ECE. It is possible to learn from previous research studies that were conducted on a global map and reconstruct them within the English context. To enact more effective and professional leadership in this sector, schools, organisations, and local authorities would pay more attention to effective leadership to improve the qualifications of the workforce. More research is recommended to investigate how far the distributed pedagogical leadership could improve professional knowledge and democratic practice. By building and sustaining a positive relationship amongst these stakeholders, this work suggests all members of staff can share, cooperate, and reflect upon their own learning and experience to identify their valuable leadership journeys.

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