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New Directions in Leadership in the Field of Preschool Education

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The importance of preschool education for societies' future has been acknowledged by a vast number of stakeholders, including researchers, policy makers, government organizations, educators and citizens across the world. Multiple research studies (Cohen & Korintus, 2017; Manning, 2017; OECD, 2018; Hunkin, 2019; Burchinal et al., 2021) show that early development of children's intellectual, social and physical abilities has the potential to affect their long-term achievements throughout their school years and into adulthood. Alongside these findings, a commitment to improving and sustaining the quality of preschool education has reached global prominence during the past decade, which, naturally, brought to the surface of international debates the questions of effective leadership in the context of preschool education.

Global interest in the issues of leadership in education has, perhaps, never been greater. Historically, the complexities associated with the notion of leadership in general, have been highlighted multiple times, reflecting the infamous Meindle, Ehrlich and Dukerich's (1985) view of leadership as an 'elusive and enigmatic concept' (p. 78), a standpoint that, over the years, seems to have permeated a vast number of studies in leadership, as the scholars and researchers (Bass, 1985; Bush, 2007; Northouse, 2016; Yukl & Gardner, 2019; Beattie, 2020; Cole & Higgins, 2021) agreed on the opacities and the deficiencies in our contemporary conceptual understanding of the leadership phenomenon. Thus, attempting to define leadership as a concept can in itself become an everlasting discussion, as according to the famous observation by Bass and Stogdill (1990, p. 11), 'there are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept.'

The controversies and complexities associated with the concept of leadership have also permeated the field of educational leadership, and specifically, leadership in the context of preschool educational settings. The British Effective Leadership in the Early Years Sector (ELEYS) study (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006; Siraj-Blatchford & Hallett, 2014) found that successful preschool leaders of settings with excellent educational outcomes for the children developed visions for their organization and focused on 'leading learning', i.e., common learning processes with all people involved in the educational processes (Siraj-Blatchford & Hallett, 2014). Yet, the quality of leadership practices continues to be a widely discussed topic, despite an abundance of research on the subject that has emerged in the recent years from the field of preschool education internationally (Boe & Hognestad, 2017; Able, Talan & Magid, 2018; Douglass, 2019; Shore, Lambert, & Shue, 2020). Despite a seemingly unanimous agreement amongst the stakeholders on the positive impact of effective leadership on the quality of preschool provision and the outcomes for children, there are a few trends that can be identified within the current debates on the subject.

One of the key points of interest in the contemporary debates related to the leadership of preschool provision are associated with the attempts to define key features of effective leadership and an



OMEP Research Update

CHARITY NO. 288955

No. 153 June 2021

increased thirst for evidence that would demonstrate a correlation between effective leadership and improved outcomes for young children. These aspirations have created polarised opinions on the best ways of leading preschool education on a global scale. On one side of the debate, supporters of a pragmatic approach to leadership praxes have been focusing on identifying a range of definitive criteria for effective leadership and associated professional development programmes aimed at supporting the advancement of specific leadership skills (Able, Talan & Magid, 2018; Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2019; Shore, Lambert & Shue, 2020; Ajayi & Adelokun, 2020). These attempts to deconstruct leadership skills and attributes, whilst acknowledging the lack of agreed set of criteria, have been pushing the universal understanding of what effective leadership is towards its strong association with measurable standards and outcomes.

On the other side of the debate are those who maintain a more sceptical view on the possibility of categorizing leadership skills that would serve as a guarantee for ‘creating’ effective leaders in the field of preschool education (Grieshaber & Ryan, 2013; Krieg, Smith, & Davis, 2014; Aubrey, 2019; Fairchild, 2020). These perspectives on leading preschool provision have paved new directions of travel between pragmatic and visionary, scientific and creative, personal and social, adopting along the way less hierarchical theoretical lens, such as postmodernism, feminism, post-colonial theory and posthumanism. More specifically, these new approaches to leadership in preschool education have been seeking to disrupt the traditional discourses related to leadership training programmes, development courses and systems of leadership-related qualifications that are aimed at increasing personal leadership potential through self-reflection, self-evaluation and self-improvement. As pointed out by Gillies (2015), the effect of these targeted programmes and self-improvement activities is that educational leaders become more predictable and institutionalised, while ‘the maverick, the eccentric, the ‘individual’, become side-lined, marginalized, and ineligible’ (p. 53). Indeed, as I note elsewhere (Beattie, 2020), in recent years, the interest in leadership development has become obsessive with leadership as panacea, where educational leaders are seen as both an insurance of organizational success and as a means of control of the chaotic educational terrain. This argument resonates strongly with Foucault’s notion of ‘objectification’ that is concerned with the ways individuals subject themselves to a process of self-regulation through a ‘certain number of operations on their own bodies and semis, thoughts, conduct, and way of being’, ...which imply ‘certain modes of training and modification of individuals, not only in the obvious sense of acquiring certain skills but also in the sense of acquiring certain attitudes’ (Foucault, 1988, p.18). For Foucault, this mode of objectification is concomitant with governmentality and disciplining where the ‘art of government’ is seen as the process of ‘conducting conduct’, whereby conduct means both the power of the state and institution to shape and discipline individuals as well as the power of individuals to shape and conduct themselves and others (Foucault, 1977).

Another key development related to leadership of preschool provision is associated with a shift towards merging administrative leadership with pedagogical leadership. Contemporary research and theorizing on leadership in preschool education have shaped the relation between administrative leadership (or what can be also refer to as ‘management’) and pedagogical leadership, bringing core pedagogical principles and responsibilities into the leadership praxes (Boe & Hognestad, 2017; Klevering & McNae, 2018; Cooper, 2020; Burchinal et al., 2021). Historically, leadership in preschool education has been defined by centralized power as framed by the local contexts. In contrast, contemporary leadership praxes have been, globally, moving away from the hierarchical conceptions of leadership



OMEP Research Update

CHARITY NO. 288955

No. 153 June 2021

towards alternative conceptualization of distributed and relational approaches that blend pedagogical leadership with managerial responsibilities. Research evidence suggests that sufficient enactment of distributed pedagogical leadership in preschool settings is directly linked to a higher commitment to pedagogical leadership, further concluding that implementing a distributed leadership approach that involves pedagogical development and information sharing by all staff aids in aligning of pedagogical thinking with the leadership practice (Heikka et al., 2021). In line with this direction of leadership development, leaders and managers in preschool settings had to adjust their practice to embrace shared pedagogical frameworks locally and, increasingly, internationally, to provide wider opportunities for collaborative work and ongoing pedagogical guidance to all staff. Furthermore, such amalgamation of managerial responsibilities with pedagogical leadership has encouraged thinking about leadership of preschool education not as a 'solo performance by those with the highest hierarchical positions who delegate work from the top down' (Boe & Hognestad, 2017, p. 133), but as a collaborative effort. Hence, even though globally, preschool leaders exercise their leadership within settings that have markedly different institutional purposes, cultures and expectations, the current trends indicate a general shift towards distributive forms of leadership praxes within broader centralized national systems (Male & Palaiologou, 2015; Aubrey, 2019; Strehmel et al., 2019; Gibbs et al., 2020).

Finally, the debates surrounding the concept of leadership in preschool settings are becoming more protuberant due to the influences of neoliberal ideology, as educational leaders struggle to reconcile neoliberal agendas with professional aspirations to bring positive transformations into their leadership practices (Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016; Robson & Martin, 2019; Moss & Roberts-Holmes, 2021). Neoliberalism has brought about dramatic social, cultural, economic, and political changes at local, national and international levels, prompting educational leaders in preschool settings to review and adjust their vision and leadership strategies to meet the demands of new trajectories in politics, economics and research (Strehmel et al., 2019). These new trajectories are forcing educational leaders across the world, and, particularly, in the western world, to engage in neoliberal accountability policies, emphasizing new ways of efficacy and productivity in their preschool settings. Bourassa (2011) explains the impact of neoliberalism on education by presenting it as a de-territorialised rhizomatic knowledge society that disseminates the values of the market into every domain of social existence. In this sense, preschool leaders can be seen as the most suitable channels for circulating the powers of neoliberal ideology, as the educational fabric of the former presents a perfect arena for exhibiting, validating and imposing specific types of knowledge on the youngest citizens of our societies. This is particularly pertinent in the preschool pedagogy, where, traditionally, a focus on supporting children's developing interests and passions, encouraging imagination, critical thought and free play were long-held goals. As pointed out by Strehmel et al. (2019), neoliberal ideology has shifted the original pedagogical focus on externally imposed standards designed to ensure that preschool leaders meet the requirements of key performance indicators in terms of children's measured outcomes. As a consequence, the work of preschool leaders has moved more towards technocratic practices, strongly governed by the principles of neoliberalism with its emphasis on obsessive observing, assessing, and measuring children's performance. As pointed out by Moss and Roberts-Holmes (2021), what has emerged is 'the image of a poor child, deficient and needing to be readied to become, in due course, 'homo economicus' and (a term much in favour today) 'human capital'; the image of the parent as a consumer purchasing care and education in the marketplace; the image of the centre as both a business and a factory, competing in the marketplace and applying technologies to ensure children achieve predefined outcomes; and the worker as a businesswoman and technician' (p. 2). Together, these



OMEP Research Update

CHARITY NO. 288955

No. 153 June 2021

arguments combine to create a convincing case that the role of preschool leaders in response to the pressures of neoliberal agendas has been focused on the calibration of teaching and learning strategies to reflect the technocratic view of young children as a future social investment that is productive, disciplined and market oriented. Once again, Foucault's notions of governmentality and biopolitics gain a firm traction in this context, since for Foucault (1977), this type of governance of educational leaders through the state's disciplining techniques was at the heart of, what he described as, biopolitics, or a 'set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy' (p. 16). In this context, preschool leaders, along with educational leaders across other educational establishments, have become instruments of the contemporary neoliberal project that forces them to focus on driving their colleagues, their settings, and their pedagogical efforts towards the formation of 'labouring bodies' in light of a neoliberal emphasis on productivity, entrepreneurial skills and accountability (Beattie, 2020). In other words, preschool leaders are positioned by the neoliberal agendas into the required parameters (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016) within the educational landscape, where 'the educational goal of expanding the capacity for critical thought and the outer limits of the imagination have given way to the instrumental desert of a mind-deadening audit culture' (Giroux, 2015, p. 120).

To summarize, discourses and practices of leadership in preschool education continue to develop and change globally, creating new lines of inquiry across different national contexts. The global sharing of ideas on preschool leadership is facilitated by the advancement of communication technologies as well as increased international attention to the field of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). These developments are reflected in the growth of worldwide international organizations, such as Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), World Organization for Early Childhood Education (OMEP), Childhood Education International, European Commission, to name just a few, which draw on research that recognizes that quality preschool provision facilitates equality of opportunity amongst young children, contributing to the social justice agendas and improving children's life chances. Within these research dimensions, various leadership discourses that emerge in local contexts are captured in the ongoing and new research studies, enhancing both local and global understanding of preschool leadership. Clarifying the expectations and the purposes of leadership praxes in preschool education creates opportunities for a more fruitful dialogue between the stakeholders, thus, enabling to realize the ultimate aim of preschool leadership: good quality preschool education for every child. As noted by Campbell-Barr and Bogatic (2017), the next step for preschool leaders is, perhaps, about developing a multi-directional and dynamic relationship between the local and global contexts, whilst challenging themselves and their colleagues to think critically about their professional practice in the context of the existing socio-political directions.

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OMEP Research Update

CHARITY NO. 288955

No. 153 June 2021

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OMEP Research Update

CHARITY NO. 288955

No. 153 June 2021

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OMEP Research Update

CHARITY NO. 288955

No. 153 June 2021

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