

Distributed Leadership: A framework for enhancing quality in early learning programs

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Introduction

An array of factors influences a child's first three years of life. Children's development is shaped by their experiences related to their housing and community, parental income and education levels, and access to resources (Clinton, 2017). From an ecological systems framework, the way a child interacts with the environment influences the person they become. As the founding psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner explained, each layer of a child's environment is interconnected and must be taken into account when attempting to understand a child's experiences (Sheridan, 2009). Bronfenbrenner presented five different systems that influence a child, from their immediate environment to larger systematic changes they may experience over time; each system plays an important part (Sheridan, 2009). For example, on a micro level a child will immediately be impacted by the reciprocal interactions they experience at preschool. On a macro level, as that child becomes a part of the preschool community, the culture within the school and the curriculum will also impact their growth.

In all parts of the ecological system children cultivate relationships with many different people both inside and outside of their homes, all of which impact development. Specifically, healthy development may be interrupted if children do not experience positive relationships with the key people in their lives (Clinton, 2013). In a Canadian context, these key people are likely to include a secondary caregiver since a majority (73.5%) of mothers with children under the age of five are employed in the workforce (Savigny, 2017). Similarly, most American children spend time with a secondary caregiver, as 65.1% of American mothers are employed in the workforce (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). This trend can also be recognized globally if we consider that 76.6% of Swedish mothers and 79% of Portuguese mothers are employed in the workforce in some form (Savigny, 2017).

For some children, the amount of time spent in care increases as parents balance demanding careers, commute inordinate distances, or are required to work shifts to meet employers' needs for 24-hour coverage. Consequently, secondary caregivers are left with a considerable amount of influence over a child's growth. The degree to which a child is either positively or negatively impacted by the time spent with a secondary caregiver is related to the level of quality that caregiver provides (Friendly, Doherty & Beach, 2006). Thus, awareness of the benefits of high quality early learning programs for children and their families is on the rise and the evidence is clear: quality counts (Friendly et al., 2006). With each passing year, policy makers, researchers, and the public recognize the importance of investing in and ensuring that all children have access to strong, positive programs when they are away from their primary caregivers. However, quality in early education in Canada is not a uniform concept and therefore varies greatly from program to program. Although every program may strive to reach their perception of high quality, numerous factors influence their ability to do so, with one of the largest influences being leadership. With a direct link between quality and

leadership (Douglas, 2017; MacDonald, 2016; Rodd, 2015; Wise & Wright, 2012), we must continue to increase our understanding of leadership in early education and, in particular, models that may be implemented to support the development of high quality programs for all children.

The article presents a conceptual argument for a distributed leadership, which early educational leaders can apply in order to increase the quality of their program. Distributed leadership can impact quality in three ways. First, through distributed leadership, organizational problems can be effectively and efficiently addressed. Second, distributed leadership involves all stakeholders at different levels directly in daily organizational processes, leading to increased alignment, placing a vision for high quality within grasp. Third, educators are empowered in their daily work leading to reduced turnover and increased motivation and engagement, resulting in a team of educators that are better prepared to offer a high quality program. Though this article supports a distributed leadership model for increasing quality in early years settings, it concludes with recognizing specific limitations and challenges. This article is written from the perspective of a Registered Early Childhood Educator (RECE) that currently holds a pedagogical leadership role in Ontario, Canada.

1 Leadership in Early Childhood Education

With a few hundred definitions of leadership throughout the literature (Northouse, 2016), there is no shortage of available explanations of what it means to be a leader. In early education, a leader is someone who influences others towards a shared vision (Rodd, 2015). The following section delves deeper into what the literature tells us about early educational leaders, specifically examining the increasing emphasis on early childhood education (ECE) leadership. Additionally, the history and institutional practice of separating care from education and how this separation influences ECE leadership are explored.

Literature on ECE leadership has been growing steadily in Canada and globally over the last decade, and strong leadership is required to continue the development of literature and strengthen the profession as a whole (Rubin, 2013). Increasing evidence indicates the need to address the gaps in literature (O’Gorman & Hard, 2013) and to understand ECE leadership separate from the education and business literature, with which it is often grouped (Lindon et al., 2016; Wise & Wright, 2012). According to Wise and Wright (2012), this gap includes a lack of a common definition specific to the early years sector, a research focus on child-teacher dynamic rather than the whole system, and practice-based over theoretical literature. Specifically, with women dominating leadership in ECE settings, the authors draw attention to the need for research that understands how women relate to and experience ECE leadership. Within a Canadian context, ECE leadership is characterized by a distinct organizational structure, history, and training. As Harwood and Tukonic (2016) indicated with a 200-year history of ECE in Canada, our current landscape is undoubtedly multilayered. Over a century ago, Ontario incorporated kindergarten (a now full-day program that children are eligible for as early as three years and eight months of age in the fall of the academic year) into its public education system and children under the age of 3 years and eight months remained part of a market-based care system (Harwood & Tukonic, 2016). In this market-based system, families pay high fees for the limited spaces available (Friendly, 2015) and often times for questionable quality. Programs, as Dora and Choi (2008) explained, are left to ensure they continuously ‘sharpen their competitive edge’ to attract and maintain enrolment and keep parents informed as consumers.

Second, being segregated to the care system has widespread implications on the ECE sector and in particular on the leadership. Placing ECE under the care (rather than education) umbrella suggests that young children simply require care while parents work and that their formal learning and education will begin when they enter Kindergarten (Moss, 2017). Being under the care umbrella further perpetuates the notion that early childhood educators and leaders do not require the same training, pay, status or working conditions as their teacher and principal counterparts. In Canada an early educator can expect to earn half as much as a kindergarten teacher (Harwood & Tokonic, 2016), a statistic that is recognized globally as well. Press, Wong For example, Press, Wong and Gibson (2016) report that in Australia early childhood educators experience poor pay and working conditions. From Moss's perspective (2017), "Conceptualising services in terms of care is a recipe for low quality employment and low valued work" (p. 18). If society continues to hold an image of ECE as a service, providing first and foremost care, educators and leaders will increasingly face challenges in terms of viewing themselves as more than caregivers and as the 'brain builders' that they actually are (Clinton, 2017). These views are further diversified by the complex roles that some leaders navigate each day, such as simultaneously working as a classroom educator and organizational leader (Harwood & Tokonic, 2016).

Moreover, the separation between education and care means leaders are prepared and supported differently for their roles. In Ontario, ECE leaders can transition from a teaching role to a leadership role through a rather simple process (Wise & Wright, 2012). Once in these roles ECE leaders have limited and varying degrees of support available to them (Larkin, 1999). With some leaders having insufficient support available, they may resort to traditional, hierarchical models of leadership as a means of managing workload and navigating unclear terrain. Though a hierarchical structure is not considered an effective form of leadership in ECE (Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011), numerous ECE organizations operate with a clear power structure based on formal leadership positions held by supervisors (Colmer, Waniganayake & Field, 2014). With the landscape of ECE in Ontario undergoing large-scale modernization and increasing accountability measures from funding partners and policy makers, many ECE leaders are underprepared for their roles (Stamopoulos, 2012) and thus organizational matters, like the concept of quality care, present as large and complex to navigate.

2 Quality in Early Childhood Education

With no universal definition of quality (Friendly et al., 2006) and the concept perplexing many (Dahlberg et al., 2007; Rentzou, 2017), each child, parent, educator, and leader will have a different understanding and set of beliefs related to quality. According to Friendly et al. (2006), "Ideas about quality in early learning and child care vary depending on the values, beliefs and cultural/social context and needs of the individual or group making the judgment" (p.5). Therefore, the level of quality child care programs believe they are offering can vary based on their image of the child (how they believe children learn and what they believe children are capable of) and from community to community (Friendly et al., 2006). Another way of deconstructing quality is by characterizing it as structural or dynamic (process oriented). The structural features are related to regulations and more static in nature, for instance, the classroom size and ratios. Process quality, is often more difficult to define and directly observe but is related to children's actual daily experiences in early education (Rentzou, 2017). For example, the relationships children develop with peers and teachers influence their well-being and development.

However, in order to advance research on quality, it is suggested we move beyond seeing quality as either a subjective or objective concept (Sheridan, 2009), to a new way of thinking about how we define quality. One way to move forward, as outlined by Sheridan (2009), is the construction of pedagogical quality, which begins with the children themselves identifying the foundation of any developed definition. Pedagogical quality aims at understanding children's perspectives of quality and the learning opportunities they are provided with that support optimal preschool growth (Sheridan, 2009). Pedagogical quality makes room for children's voices to be heard in relation to what makes them feel safe, cared for, connected and strong. As the direct link to children, how teachers make children's voices and ideas understood is pivotal for the understanding of quality.

Despite concept fluidity, several researchers have identified what they believe to be global indicators of high quality. For example, a Canadian resource, *Finding quality child care: A guide for parents* (2016), identifies elements of quality related to children's well-being as including health and safety, a well-maintained environment, responsive staff, varied learning opportunities, positive interactions, engaged families, and respect for children with a wide range of backgrounds. Similarly, Friendly et al. (2006) acknowledged that, "Clearly, while there is no single universal definition of quality ELCC, there are some values so critical to the well-being of children that they are universally perceived to be the foundation of any definition of quality" (p.6). Values that influence the definition of quality will stem from a person's social-cultural values as well as the economic and political environment in which the preschool is situated (Rentzou, 2017). These same values will also influence the monitoring and measurement of quality within a program, a process that is also multifaceted.

To sum up, though there is no universal definition of quality, the concept is closely connected to a child's well-being. Regardless of the way leaders understand quality as they attempt to balance their intricate roles, exploring the concept of quality can be overwhelming or low on the priority list. However, leaders do not have to explore or understand the concept in isolation.

3 Distributed Leadership and Quality

ECE leaders are required to navigate unique roles that are specific to their programs, communities, the educators they work with, and the families they serve. Though there may be parallels to other ECE settings, with no universal child care system in Canada or the United States, each leadership role is truly individual. The reality of this individualisation, in combination with demanding responsibilities, means that organizational outcomes cannot be independently addressed (Jones & Pound, 2008; Rodd, 2015). Moreover, examining issues of greater complexity such as what quality means, how to measure it, and how to assure it (Dahlberg et al., 2007) requires insight beyond an individual. With many ECE leaders relying on hierarchical leadership models of practice (Colmer et al., 2014), limited time in ECE settings (MacDonald, 2016), and a lack of resources for change (Rodd, 2015), adopting an alternative leadership approach is challenging and intimidating.

What is meant by distributed leadership? As Lumby (2013) explained, distributed leadership is on the forefront for researchers and leaders and how it is understood depends on the contextual setting within which it is being used (Spillane, 2005). However, within the emerging ECE leadership literature, an understanding of distributed leadership is only beginning to unfold (Heikka & Hujala, 2013). To some scholars, distributed leadership crosses paths with shared leadership (Halttunen, 2016); for others, distributed leadership breaks new ground as it is related to the interactions between stakeholders and the institution

(Spillane, 2005). According to Harris (2005), “Distributed leadership in theoretical terms means multiple sources of guidance and direction, following the contours of expertise in an organization, made coherent through a common culture” (p.81). Distributed leadership can also be viewed as a framework that involves many individuals, in formal and informal leadership positions, and the ways in which these individuals interact with each organizational layer and situation. When leadership is distributed you can imagine it as being stretched over leaders and followers and their interactions (Spillane, Harris, Jones & Mertz, 2015).

Common principles of the distributed leadership style that scholars (Halttunen, 2016; Harris, 2013) agree on are the empowerment of others, a focus on the interactions between people and situations, a redistribution of power, the development of trust, deep levels of reflection, and building on the knowledge of multiple organizational members.

For the purpose of this article, distributed leadership means educators pooling their knowledge and skillsets as a valuable resource for enhancing the quality within a child care program.

Why consider distributed leadership? Several leadership models encourage the active participation of others, such as transformational, team, and servant leadership (Northouse, 2016). Within the context of this paper distributed leadership is considered most appropriate for the ECE sector for two main reasons. First, distributed leadership aligns well with the nature of the ECE profession based on the interdependence between people within an ECE environment and the centrality of relationships (Colmer et al., 2014). As leaders support educators with varying levels of change related to pedagogy and their everyday work, using what Lindon, Lindon, and Beckley (2016) identify as *The Heart Approach* to change, is seemingly most appropriate. *The Heart Approach* to change is characterized by the development of relationships, focused attention on values and beliefs, and placing importance on the social and emotional aspects in combination with the use of rewards, connection to others, and referent power (power gained through respect). This approach is most appropriate given the fact that the field of early childhood education continues to be heavily dominated by women. With less than 2% of employees being men, it is critical that the differences in leadership styles between men and women are recognized. Women’s leadership styles are often more nurturing and collective, with an emphasis on relationships (Wise & Wright, 2012). So, using *The Heart Approach* to lead aligns with the emphasis that distributed leadership places on connecting with others, and the power in acknowledging the work of many (Spillane et al., 2015) individuals regardless of their organizational title.

Second, with limited investment of Canadian federal funds, educators are faced with a lack of resources (Friendly, 2015), leading to numerous roadblocks to change or organizational improvement. Limited resources include: a lack of time, knowledge, materials, and other capital required to progress change. Distributed leadership does not negate the challenges that arise from limited resources; however, it does build on the most valuable and available resource in each setting, the educators themselves. Utilizing the knowledge base and skillsets of many educators can lead to organizational improvement in a variety of ways. Distributed leadership does not necessarily mean every educator undertakes leadership activity (Harris, 2013), but rather those with potential or interest are provided with leadership opportunities at different levels. Distributed leadership opportunities, as described by Robinson (2008), can be a task process related to the necessary organizational responsibilities or an influence process, in which you are changing the way others act or think. For example, in an ECE setting, a task process would involve learning how to give parent tours and register new families in to the

program. On the other hand, an influential process would involve attending a professional development opportunity related to new curriculum and then delivering a smaller workshop to share learning with colleagues.

Regardless of whether individuals have process or influential leadership opportunities, building on the skillsets of several educators rather than one formal leader is one way to meet sector demands for strong leadership and progress in the 21st century (Rubin, 2013).

How does distributed leadership impact quality? As noted earlier, with clear evidence that quality is linked to the leadership in ECE programs (Wise & Wright, 2012; MacDonald, 2016; Rodd, 2015), in order to increase levels of quality, a highly effective leadership model is needed. With parents in consumer roles globally, including Canada (Friendly, 2015), the United States (McLean, 2014), Hong Kong (Ho, 2008) and the United Kingdom (McLean, 2014), ECE settings are driven by market demands and thus vary greatly. With such variance, the leadership model applied must be adaptable and fluid in order to meet the demands of each setting. From a distributed leadership perspective, Harris and DeFlaminis (2016) suggest avoiding a standardized prescription and instead considering how the specific conditions within an organization may align with a distributed approach, connecting it seamlessly with most ECE settings. The subsequent section of this article outlines how distributed leadership supports increasing levels of program quality in three main ways: addressing organizational problems collaboratively, building alignment for greater educator participation, and empowering others for improvement.

4 Distributed Leadership and Organizational Problems

In order to meet changes in family structure and social conditions that have been unfolding in Canada for some time (Rubin, 2013), early education in Ontario has recently been making significant large-scale progression with legislation and initiatives. With the Ontario Government releasing a pedagogical document to guide early learning practitioners and leaders in 2014 entitled *How Does Learning Happen?*, as well as the Federal Government producing the Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework in 2017, it is evident that policy makers and researchers are focused on early learning. However, there are still vast challenges with the current early years landscape in Canada for families, children, and educators. These challenges are related to systemic effects of a market-based child care system, poor working conditions and low wages.

Families continue to suffer as a result of a market-based system and encounter vast challenges with the affordability and accessibility of child care (Friendly, 2015). With only enough child care spaces for 24.1% of Canadian children under the age of five and annual fees exceeding that of undergraduate tuition in some regions (Savigny, 2017), the current system is far from suitable for most families. Moreover, many early educators in Ontario continue to experience poor working conditions, wages, benefits, and opportunities for growth (AECEO, 2017) all of which influence quality (Friendly, 2015). Consequently, leadership is needed sector-wide to raise the profile of the profession for families, programs, and educators (Lindon et al., 2016). This growing responsibility results in a need for leaders who are highly skilled and have the necessary knowledge and attitudes to navigate the complex ECE sector (Jones & Pound, 2008).

Second, educators in early learning settings are often faced with a lack of resources related to materials for programing and environment arrangement, funding for professional development, and planning time. Whether the challenge faced by leaders and educators is a

systematic problem, a mid-level organizational issue, or a small daily operational setback, the programme quality can be impacted. As leaders in ECE settings are continuously faced with little time to complete all of the necessary tasks they encounter each day (MacDonald, 2016), making room for others to experience leadership responsibility can serve as a tool for managing the unique and demanding role as an ECE leader. However, it is important to note that adopting a distributed leadership model is not entirely about workload but also about democracy and structural changes (Kangas, Venninen & Ojala, 2016). Building on the individual expertise and knowledge available by different informal and formal leaders is one way to address structural challenges that negatively impact quality, in a manner that allows for different ideas and values to be expressed. A collective culture that encourages and considers the input from educators can generate practical, creative solutions. In early education, Chandler (2016) defines collaboration as “creating relationships in which influence is mutually shared” (p.104). Though this may sound simplistic, collaboration can be harder to implement and therefore requires practice (Harris, 2013) and should begin on a small-scale (Chandler, 2016). In order to ensure the improvement of quality, as a culture of collaboration begins to take shape, it is critical that organizational alignment exists.

5 Distributed Leadership and Organizational Alignment

With no clear guide for implementing distributed leadership (Harris & Defamini, 2016), ECE leaders can advance and adopt a distributed approach that is most appropriate for their specific settings. This flexibility means that the levels and ways in which others become involved in leadership can change over time to most appropriately meet the program and community’s beliefs about quality. For the purpose of this article, alignment can be described as “... turning towards the system and embracing the system’s needs” (Ehrich, Harris, Klenowski, Smeed & Spina, 2015, p. 201). Preschools that align have educators that work independently and collectively to meet daily tasks and reach organizational goals and needs.

As a distributed model makes space for the involvement of others, increased organizational alignment will unfold in three main ways. First, with educators working collaboratively to develop an authentic vision, there is an increased focus on moving in the same direction. Second, as the formal leader creates space for others to share their insight and ideas, a deeper understanding of what each educator values, their experiences, and background will surface. Third, through a distributed leadership approach power dynamics can shift (Harris, 2013), creating new power relations for educators.

First, using a distributed leadership approach to build a program’s vision means including the voices of knowledgeable educators in the creation of the vision. Although time consuming, this bottom-up approach can align employees and the organization (Cawsey, Deszca & Ingols, 2016). In order for a program to offer high quality, educators must have a clear understanding of their purpose and why their work each day matters.

Second, awareness around the views and history that each educator brings in to the program is vital to understanding his or her views on quality. With quality being a value-based concept and highly subjective (Dahlberg et al., 2007), it is critical that an organization’s culture encourages the representation of more than one voice through open channels of communication. Additionally, with policies infiltrating ECE settings, it is crucial for both informal and formal leaders to understand a policy’s purpose, history, and value; specifically, aiming to understand and communicate how these various policies support the organization’s vision for high quality and individual educators understanding of quality.

Third, before distributed leadership can authentically unfold, formal leaders must reflect on the different ways they hold power within the organization (Lindon et al., 2016). As power begins to be distributed among educators on different levels, there are new opportunities for growth. For example, when learning is restricted to those in formal leadership positions, educators can be left with little understanding of the operational side of ECE. Moreover, they can feel apprehensive about taking professional risks related to quality, like implementing a new way of documenting children's work or learning about a different curriculum model. As power shifts and educators gain a better understanding of the whole system's needs, vulnerability towards risk taking can be reduced and alignment grows to empowerment (Kotter, 2001).

6 Distributed Leadership and Organizational Empowerment

Aside from a distributed model supporting leaders as they navigate an array of challenges and focus on obtaining organizational alignment, distributed leadership also supports the empowerment of others. Empowering educators has three main benefits that will ultimately lead to higher program quality. First, as educators feel empowered, retention problems are reduced; second, with empowerment comes motivation for participation in continuous learning; and third, empowered educators are engaged educators.

First, just as children require a sense of belonging in our classrooms in order to have the opportunity to reach their full potential (Robinson, 2017), teachers must also be provided with an environment in which they feel they belong. Educators are an important piece of the quality picture and this is largely related to the relationships they develop with children and families (Press et al., 2015; Dora & Choi, 2008). These relationships may be hard to build if children are constantly experiencing educator turnover, a struggle for most programs across Canada, the United States (MacDonald, 2016), and Australia (Press et al., 2015). Turning to a slightly different context, in a recent study by Taylor, Beck, Lahey, and Froyd (2017) female faculty members in an institution for higher education participated in a program specifically designed to improve work climate, professional success, and recruitment and retention rates. Findings were clear, as faculty were empowered through program participation and felt their voice was valued and heard, they were more satisfied in their current roles and showed less intention of leaving (Taylor et al., 2017). Though the setting differs, generalizing this literature to the ECE sector allows for the inference to be made; as empowerment levels increase, educator turnover decreases, and quality rises.

Second, a leader that ensures employees' voices are heard and their thoughts are considered will have a motivated team (Bolman & Deal, 2008). As program supervisors move towards distributed leadership, educators are empowered in their daily work, resulting in heightened levels of motivation, ownership, and organizational knowledge. Specifically, as leaders allow for the involvement of others in leadership tasks, educators can experience increased levels of motivation for continued professional growth (MacDonald, 2016). Ongoing professional development is a critical element of high quality programs, as educators are working from a mindset of continued improvement of personal and professional self. In order to move towards a culture that motivates and empowers educators, there must be a foundational relationship between leaders and followers, with communication at the base (Stamopoulos, 2012). To support this relationship, leaders must invest time in getting to know each educator as well as understand the experiences and strengths each educator brings to the organization (MacDonald, 2016).

Third, empowered educators are engaged educators and engaged educators are more invested in the development of the program they deliver, the relationships they develop with families, and their interactions with children – all indicators of quality. Through distributed leadership, leaders build on the strengths of others and therefore educators are provided with increased opportunities to become engaged in organizational life. Educators must be empowered to handle some of the inevitable daily challenges that arise (MacDonald, 2016) and believe that their leaders view them as capable. Moreover, as educators are empowered, engagement levels with parents increase as demonstrated through research by Chung and Kim (2018) that linked teachers' psychological empowerment to higher levels of teacher-parent partnerships.

Empowering others through the distribution of leadership opportunities takes careful consideration and thorough effort, though if done effectively can have worthwhile benefits (Harris, 2013). As educators are empowered, their confidence grows, which results in greater commitment to the program, increased motivation for professional development, and heightened engagement, all of which positively impact a program's quality.

7 Challenges with Distributed Leadership

This article has presented distributed leadership as a model for increasing quality in ECE settings. However, as with any leadership model, there are notable limitations (Harris, 2016). The following section focuses on three main challenges: first, a lack of time; second, unclear definitions of the terms distributed leadership and quality; and third, professional challenges within the sector. For each challenge outlined a *response for action* is presented.

First, in most ECE settings, the formal leader has control over how much time out of program educators are provided with (Colmer et al., 2014). The lack of time out of program and the power that the formal leader holds in allotting time means it can be challenging for others to engage in leadership activities. In order for distributed leadership to evolve, dialogue and consultation (Rodd, 2015) are necessary and, therefore, time is needed for educators and leaders to gather in a safe space to reflect and share collectively. Moreover, the program model will influence the amount of time educators have out of program. For example, a non-profit program that offers solely before and afterschool care for kindergarten students (3.8 to six years of age) would have larger opportunities for time outside of program. In comparison, a full-day infant program in a for-profit child care that relies exclusively on parent fees to operate, would face different limitations. Time outside of program requires access to limited resources such as educator coverage and funding to subsidize professional development.

Response for action: There is clearly no straightforward solution when it comes to time. Each day, early educators balance laborious tasks such as toileting, with deeper pedagogical work like the documentation of children's learning and thus carving out extra time in the day can seem nearly impossible. Having a set time for meetings with a well-constructed agenda will ensure that the commodity of time is respected (Chandler, 2016). Another simple, but not always considered way for educators to gain time outside of the classroom is to have the formal leader spend time in the classroom. In some early learning settings I have visited as a consultant, I have observed leaders working in the classroom, creating found blocks of time for educators to work on leadership related tasks. Distributed leadership is not solely about adjusting workload, but about democracy and structural changes (Kangas et al., 2015) that will be necessary for most ECE organizations in order to find the time they require.

Second, as noted, the term quality is difficult to define given the “...subjective and evaluative nature of the word” (Robinson, 2017, p. 53). With the term often used lightly within ECE settings and research (Dahlberg et al., 2007) or in relation to policies and legislation (Robinson, 2017), educators receive widespread and varying messages about quality. Therefore, even within the same ECE setting there can be differences in educators’ perceptions of quality. Additionally, defining distributed leadership still involves some level of vagueness and the consideration of the different forms it may take (Halttunen, 2016). Adding to the perplexity is the way the term is sometimes used interchangeably with shared, team, or democratic leadership (Halttunen, 2016). With educators already struggling with viewing themselves beyond the classroom walls and capable of leadership responsibility (O’Gorman & Hard, 2013), encouraging a new sense of self for educators is an additional layer to distributed leadership. This additional layer requires educators to be supported through the exploration of difficult-to-define concepts.

Response for action: For some, ambiguity can create anxiety and thus formal leaders must try to reduce levels of stress when it comes to creating an understanding related to concepts such as distributed leadership and quality. Drawing back to pedagogical quality, educators can be encouraged to build on their strengths as the narrators of young children’s learning and experiences. In taking responsibility as narrators of pedagogical quality, educators are tasked with going beyond simply a recording of events from a child’s perspective. Through this experience as narrator, as Berger (2015) alludes to, educators are making way for new forms of understanding and ultimately experiencing the growth of a leadership identity.

A third challenge with distributing leadership in ECE settings is supporting the change required in mindset as educators transition in to leadership roles. As noted above, with previous research indicating that oftentimes educators are hesitant to identify or do not recognize themselves as leaders (Halttunen, 2016), progressing from a more traditional, hierarchical leadership structure where roles are more clearly defined for educators (Dora, Mossung & Yue, 2016) may challenge professional identities. However, as Halfon and Langford (2015) suggest, “The critical role that staff in early childhood programs play in providing high quality education and care is now acknowledged” (p.139); this means that educators’ views of their own capabilities and confidence levels, as a member of the ECE organization, must be considered. With the ECE sector being plagued by poor wages (AECEO, 2017), educators may hold little interest for investing themselves beyond what they think their role is as an educator.

Response for action: The first step to combatting this third challenge is to know the organizational culture and team. Often there is failure with change simply due to a lack of environmental understanding and change is driven forward regardless of this lack of understanding (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Beginning to support educators in identifying as leaders can start small and may involve encouraging staff to take on some process-oriented tasks like chairing a staff meeting or managing a monthly newsletter and then build up to an influential role like mentoring others (Chandler, 2016). As educators are empowered to take on new leadership responsibilities and engage in increased professional development opportunities, they are likely to experience a shift in their senses of self. For example, educators can be encouraged to participate in wider leadership opportunities such advocacy campaigns like AECEO’s Professional Pay & Decent Work campaign, which aims at bringing awareness surrounding the importance of educators work and their worth to light (AECEO, 2017). Furthermore, changing the view of what it means to be a 21st century ECE through governing bodies such as Ontario’s College of Early Educators (CECE) is necessary to

advance an educators' role. For example, the CECE states in their Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice document that each educator regardless of title or position is a leader (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2007). Finally, bearing in mind that distributed leadership is not about simply off-loading work but about a restructure of responsibility means that educators engaging in leadership should not experience an increase of daily work but rather a shift in how they interact with their daily tasks.

As outlined, distributed leadership as a recommended model is not without flaws, and the intent of this article is not to suggest it is the sole way to lead in the early years. However, if invested in appropriately, distributed leadership can be an effective and efficient way to increase a program's quality regardless of location, access to resources, or the population being served.

8 Concluding Thoughts

Though this article has focused primarily on early childhood education in a Canadian context, distributed leadership transfers globally where leaders are attempting to provide high quality programs within a market-based system. For example, in Hong Kong where 95% of children attend a private preschool program (Dora & Choi, 2008) or in the United States where 71% of programs in 2007 were for-profit (McLean, 2014).

Despite our current market-based landscape, progress has been made in recognizing the importance of investing in the early years. Continued research is needed to advance the profession, specifically around how to support leaders in this unique sector. As this article suggests, a transformation towards a more distributed leadership model is required to enhance the quality of the programs that serve our youngest members of society. Enhancing quality cannot be overlooked, as it is fundamental on an economic and child development level (Robinson, 2017) and begins with the leadership model at play. According to MacDonald (2016), "The ever-increasing focus on consistently improving the quality of early childhood programs creates the need for passionate leaders who bring positive energy into all facets of their work" (p. 72). This article has outlined how distributed leadership can be used to positively impact quality as organizational challenges are navigated, alignment is increased, and employees are empowered.

Finally, continued study related to how early childhood leaders guide organizational change is recommended on a practical and theoretical level. With change being an inevitable part of increasing quality, leaders and educators must be prepared to navigate it with confidence and positivity (Rodd, 2015) on both a small (reflecting on practice) and large (new initiatives and policies) scale. Ongoing research and empirical evidence around additional leadership approaches that can support programs with the development of high quality is critical to ensuring all children have the opportunity to reach their full potential and their right to high quality early education.

Appendix A: List of terms

Alignment: Educators working independently or collaboratively towards the program's needs to make work happen and reach organizational goals

Distributed Leadership: The collaboration of several educators' knowledge and skillsets as a valuable resource for enhancing the quality within a child care program

Early Childhood Education: An early learning program, licensed or unlicensed by a governing body, where young children are taught from birth up to the age of six

Early Childhood Education (ECE) Leadership: "...a set of processes that are employed intentionally in order to influence practitioners and relevant others to commit to and work to achieve shared goals" (Rodd, 2015, p. 31)

Quality: Ensuring the best possible learning conditions are created and sustained for the well-being of all children. Developed based on the social-cultural, economic, and political setting in which the early learning program resides

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