

What are the important components  
of successful leadership teams within  
children centres?



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Practitioner-led research 2008-2009

PLR0809/044



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- Social work
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The reports have provided valuable insights into the children and young people's workforce, and the issues and challenges practitioners and service users face when working in an integrated environment. This will help to further inform workforce development throughout England.

This practitioner-led research project builds on the views and experiences of the individual projects and should not be considered the opinions and policies of CWDC.

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# **What are the important components of successful leadership teams within children centres?**

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Debbie Watson for her support

All those who gave their time

The CWDC for funding this practitioner-led research

## **Dedication**

This report is dedicated to the memory of

James Heald – an inspiration

and

Debbie Stiles – a part of our leadership team

We miss you

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## Abstract

This research aimed to explore leadership within children centres and involved looking at the components that make up successful leadership teams with special consideration to working in multi-professional teams.

Interviews with children centre managers, children centre teachers and child care managers were carried out in a cross-section of children centres. The interviews were transcribed and the data collected was analysed. How many interviews did they complete in total and what did the interviews explore?

From this analysis, four recurrent themes were highlighted by the professionals and these were:

- communication
- professional Identity
- pedagogical knowledge
- leadership.

The main implications for practice that the research has highlighted include:

- The need for transparency in relation to the processes and systems of communication, enabling all to listen and feel listened to and for meaning making to occur.
- Reflection is an essential part of practice that should not be considered extravagant.
- Line managers need to share the values and vision of individual centres.
- It is essential for theory and practice to be reflected upon in the creation of a learning community.
- The development of a shared vision that is a basis for all working practice is an essential part of quality provision.

This was a challenging process with many professional and personal obstacles to overcome. Upon reflection, our leadership team has provided support through these challenges and it is to the credit of the team that it has been completed.

## Introduction

This practitioner-led research considers the essential components of successful leadership teams. The research was undertaken by two members of a leadership team within a nursery that provides the day care for a children centre. Within the process of the research, challenges have been faced by this team that are reflected upon alongside the findings.

In the past two years while attending various meetings and in conversations with other practitioners involved in children's centres, we realized that there were many concerns and difficulties being faced. Though we also faced some of these difficulties we felt that there were challenges that we did not have to overcome. We reflected upon this as a leadership team and questioned what we had that made our team work effectively.

## Aims

Within this research we have considered the following aims:

- to explore leadership teams
- to highlight elements of practice that support success within leadership teams
- to reflect upon why these elements support success
- to consider how these elements of practice can be used in multi-professional teams.

In looking to put this research into the context of children centre practice, we first considered definitions of leadership; the DFES (2007) suggested that leaders of children's centres have a responsibility to make a difference for individual families, while working in partnership with other agencies and families themselves. Leaders are charged with the responsibility to provide a vision, direction and leadership in creating successful centres based on collaborative working.

'Leadership is concerned with creating the conditions in which all members of the organization can give their best in a climate of commitment and challenge. Leadership helps an organization to work well.'

(Whitaker 1993: 74 cited in Siraj-Blatchford and Manni 2007: 12)

Rodd (1998) agrees with Whitaker but gives a definition of leadership as not an individual leader, but rather a team working towards a shared goal, influencing and inspiring one another. This idea that the collaborative leadership that is required within children's centres has specific and specialist requirements has been supported by the development of a qualification for leaders of integrated centres (National College for School Leadership (2009)). In connecting different agencies and their organizational cultures, the centre leader has the responsibility to balance the vision and the quality provision with the personal aspect of

leadership, relationships, morale and general wellbeing of centre community members (Rodd 1998; Payne 2000; Anning et al. 2006; Northouse 2007; Siraj-Blatchford and Manni 2007). The MATCh (Multiagency Team Work in Services for Children, 2004 cited in Frost 2005) research found that it was essential for leaders to value and respect the different professions within their teams and to build a culture of respect for diversity. Thus leaders need to be effective in management and leadership of change (Frost 2005).

‘Each individual member brings to the community a sense of professional identity derived from their own working history, knowledge and expertise. These individual histories and knowledge bases contribute to the potential richness and capacity of the community practice.’ (Anning et al. 2006: 61)

For every individual person the forming of an identity is a journey that is undertaken, it is an ‘interplay of personal histories and societal expectations’. The professional and personal journeys taken, shape identities both professional and self (Jenkins 2002 cited in Anning et al. 2006: 61). Hudson (2002 cited in Frost 2005) and Anning et al. (2006) suggest that professional identities can be a barrier to inter-agency working. How practitioners view themselves and their roles and also the status of their profession can obstruct the two-way flow of communication. Abbott et al. (2005 cited in Research in Practice 2009) states that for professionals to successfully be part of inter-agency teams they must first be confident and secure of their own role, and so their professional identity.

‘Inter-professional communications are embedded within multiple relationship contexts and that during every professional interchange personal, professional, institutional and inter-agency factors colour how the messages are relayed and received.’  
(Reder et al. 1999: 65 cited in Nurse 2007: 26)

Communication between agencies is not always a straightforward process. Nurse (2007) agrees with Anning et al. (2006) that how identities are constructed and the training and education of the different professions, have an influence upon the effectiveness of communication. This inter-agency communication is reliant more than ever upon sustained respectful relationships, a meaning making process involving listening and being listened too (Frost 2005).

Frost (2005) and Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007) agree that it is vital for there to be a transparency to the expectations, procedures, and practices of communication within inter-agency teams. This then allows all members of the team to be a part of effective communication. ‘Effective communication is multi-functional and multi-directional’ it is reliant upon knowledge of early childhood development and education, and specific contextualized knowledge of how this works within practice (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni 2007).

There are differing definitions of the term pedagogy. For the purposes of this research the term has been used to describe the learning and development process. The Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002



cited in Paige Smith and Craft 2008) research suggested pedagogy involves all 'instructional techniques and strategies' which encourage learning to take place. They describe the process as an interaction between learner and teacher. Moss (2004 cited in Paige Smith and Craft 2008) add a holistic dimension to pedagogy. He states that learning, care, culture and community experiences are interlinked and of equal importance. Wenger's (1998 cited in Anning et al. 2006) model of communities of practice, where practitioners work and learn together developing relationships and a shared history of learning, through co-participation, shared accountability and common discourses and concepts, could also be considered a holistic model of learning. Whalley (2005 cited in Whalley 2008: 5) states that learning communities recognize the 'inter-relatedness of the children, families, staff and wider community'.

## **Methodology**

Clough and Nutbrown (2002) describe a methodology as the recipe followed within the research piece. In considering such a wide area as leadership teams we needed to use the most efficient and flexible form of data collection. Interviews were decided upon as they allow a broader communication and meaning making than just questionnaires.

We decided to limit the research to children centres in Somerset. At the time of starting the research there were 33 children centres, 21 of these children centres had child care attached to them. As we were primarily based within the child care part of a children centre we decided to narrow our research to just the children centres with child care attached. In all, 13 children centres were interviewed; within nine of these centres more than one member of the leadership team was interviewed. The members of leadership teams we decided to approach for interview were children centre managers, child care managers and children centre teachers. There was a cross-section of centres in rural and urban communities, with both new and established centres interviewed.

Ethical approval to conduct the research was obtained from the locality manager for the area in which we are based. The children centre managers, child care managers and children centre teachers were contacted via email to ask whether they would be willing to participate in the research. A letter detailing the purpose of the research and data confidentiality was attached alongside a copy of the proposed questions (see Appendix 1).

The interviews were devised with an awareness to minimize intrusion on interviewees, their teams and centres. Interviews were held privately and the individual answers were not discussed or shared with other team members by researchers. At the start of each interview permission was obtained to tape record the conversation. An agreement was made between parties that upon a signal recording could be stopped at any point throughout the interview. Interviewees were assured that though the recordings would be transcribed, this would be for

data analysis purposes only and were not to be included directly in the research report.

However, the timeline that was set for the research did not allow enough time for the interviews. Though the interviews themselves were not time-consuming the travelling and documentation were far more so than had originally been thought. On reflecting upon this process it is clear that we had not allocated sufficient time to complete the planned interviews. The pressures of work and the seasonal festivities meant that both ourselves, and those we wished to interview had extremely busy schedules. This, alongside the fact that many of those we wished to interview work part time has meant that we have not interviewed as many individual team members as originally planned. This is particularly evident with the teachers. We tried to counteract the lack of data from those we had not interviewed by asking for their views through filling out the interview questions as a questionnaire but this was not particularly successful as only one teacher felt able to do this.

If we were to repeat this research we would aim to ensure that we interviewed an equally representative group from each professional element of the leadership team. It is clear that by having a greater percentage of any one element of the leadership team that the data may be biased towards that element. It has become evident through the research that we unintentionally excluded potential members of leadership teams within children centres by not including family support coordinators.

## Findings

The transcripts of the interviews were collated and analysed. There were many different compositions of leadership teams. Some centres had both small core leadership teams and larger teams that included the wider children centre community. Out of the members we had highlighted, the majority of leadership teams recognized all three; however there were several occasions when the children centre teacher was not recognized as a part of this team. The following recurrent themes were drawn out from the analysis of the transcripts; elements of these were present in all transcripts.

- communication
- professional identity/understanding
- pedagogic knowledge
- leadership.

There are strong links between these themes and at times the data overlaps more than one theme.

## **Communication**

‘Strong communication role’ (Children centre manager)

Though communication is clearly an important part of all successful teams, the research highlighted issues around communication in a wider sense. From our own very small leadership team we have faced issues ensuring that all three of us are kept informed. Part-time work was a recurrent barrier to this process that was highlighted within the research. One children centre manager stated, ‘the workforce is very fluid with some people only working part time, it is hard to make sure everyone is around for meetings’.

Over the duration of the research our leadership team has changed, with a reallocation of roles. Though we remain the same team of three, changes in roles have meant that further pressure was placed upon us and the ability to meet all communication needs within shorter working weeks and with members being based in settings at times caused conflict. The research encouraged us to reflect as a team on the forms of communication we used and how to best meet the needs of each individual member. It was overwhelmingly recognized within data collected that face to face meetings were the most effective way to communicate.

The data showed that there were at times issues around confidence as Abbott et al. (2005) suggest that to be successful in working with others, professionals must first be confident within their own roles. This could be seen from the interviews where in some cases lack of confidence was evident and appeared to constrain people from communicating/verbalizing their values and beliefs.

## **Professional identity**

This builds upon the consideration within communication of the need for confidence in individual professional identities to support integration into a multi-agency team. Though this research does not intend in any way to represent the child care managers negatively, it was the child care managers who appeared to be less confident within their professional identities. On reflecting upon this we considered the possible link with Mastery and Helplessness learning styles (Dweck 1991 cited in Jarvis 2005). Sylva (1994 cited in Nurse 2007) states that this is not to do with intellect but with how people view themselves and their ability to complete their roles. It could be said that some of the data collected from child care managers was suggestive of a helpless orientated behaviour. For example, when answering a question about roles and perceptions one child care manager said, ‘I just do child care, I’m on my own, there is no leadership’ and another stated when asked of a shared ethos, ‘I’m not clever enough to answer that’. If, as suggested by Anning et al. (2006) the status of the profession has an impact on professional identity, it is not clear whether in this case this is imposed by others or just the view of the child care managers themselves.

Of the centres that were visited and interviewed, in more than one of the centres there were issues arising from child care being provided by private providers. One

child care manager referred to herself and the child care provision as 'just the tenants'. The segregation within this centre was felt by all parties interviewed. Communication between the elements had completely broken down; the child care had become a separate entity that was just in the same building. From both perspectives this was not ideal and though there was a wish for things to improve, there was a resignation that this was just the way it was. There was no evidence of a shared vision that they were working towards.

It is essential for those working within a children centre to be working together, and the evidence collected has shown that this does not appear as simple within the settings with dual management. Whether the child care is provided by a private provider or voluntary group does not seem to affect the outcome, the issues of different perspectives and values remain. Though many children centre managers recognized the pressure of sustainability within child care and we are all too aware of this from our own centre, it was the difference in the underlying values that appeared to be the difficulty. MATCH (2004 cited in Frost 2005) suggested that there should be a 'common basis for practice in core professional values', this being supportive of the development of a participative team that was not dominated by one single profession.

In two children centres, as within our own, there was a wish to develop a skill sharing culture. One of the children centre managers was confident of the centre vision and was reported by the other members interviewed to be an 'inspiration'. Their professional confidence appeared to nurture the team. The recognition that the individual professional elements of children centres are important and valued is in itself a confidence builder. To be able to share the skills of the separate team members will hopefully support professionals developing their professional identity and as Anning et al. (2006) suggests, allow time for reflection in developing new identities as part of a wider team, while at the same time promoting ongoing professional development for the whole team. Within our own centre, which is on a split site, there are excellent family support and child care teams. It is felt that by sharing skills both of these elements can learn from the expertise of the other, leading to a more robust sharing of the vision. The second children centre manager saw their role as a 'foundation of support – empowering others...creating a skills mix between teacher, admin, family support and nursery, developing people'.

There is some evidence within the three professions interviewed that silo working is still manifesting itself. This is not through a lack of belief in working together for the children centre managers, teachers or child care managers but does in some cases appear to be a pressure of line manager requirements. Though we are not suggesting that line managers do not support working together, we wonder if having different line management structures unintentionally promotes this, thus it is questioned that, as in the case of private providers, line managers need to share values and vision with the teams and each other.

## **Pedagogic knowledge**

Two out of three of the professional elements of the leadership teams interviewed naturally had a background within child development. This was not necessarily the case for children centre managers. Sixty per cent of the children centre managers interviewed did come from either a teaching or child care background. Though the evidence gathered does show that this supports the relationships between the leadership team, it is again the shared understanding and vision that truly supports quality practice.

In two of the centres visited where the children centre managers had no child care experience as part of their background there were completely opposing experiences. Within one of these centres the data collected represented a positive leadership team with all the elements having a shared understanding of their roles and those of the other members. More importantly, all the members shared values and vision for the centre. The children centre manager had a clear overview of all that was happening within the centre and had put in place a staffing structure of specialist staff to support each of the areas of practice.

Within the other centre, the child care had become detached; although in the same building, there was no link between these elements of leadership. There was no evidence of a leadership team. The children centre manager was passionate about one element of the centre and this was evident throughout the interview. There was an emotive undercurrent of unhappiness within this centre. In reflecting upon these two centres, although recognizing that each centre and team are individual and should be valued as such, it is clear that though having a child care development background is supportive, it is not essential if systems and strategies are put in place. However, these do need to be built upon a basis of trust.

On reflecting upon pedagogic understanding and its importance within our own team, we have considered the construct of the child. It is this that needs to be unpicked within teams. In our team we have considered this twice within INSET training days. Teams may each have an understanding of pedagogy; however, if each member has a different construct of what a child is, then this understanding cannot be shared. If one person considers the child as a victim then their perception of pedagogy will be different to the person who sees the child as a co-creator of their own learning. For our team it has been a vital component in working towards the provision of a quality learning environment.

The aim for children centres is not just to provide a learning environment for children but to be a learning community. In considering pedagogy as the science of learning and development, it is then clear that for children centres pedagogical knowledge becomes the knowledge of supporting the learning and development of all members of the community, adult and child alike. In this case it would follow that not only does there need to be a shared construct of a child but that of a learner. A high percentage of the children centre managers and teachers recognized in some way the responsibility of creating a learning community, though only two mentioned it directly. 'I want the centre to be vibrant and a learning community'; this children centre manager expanded this to discuss how

the centre would be owned by the community, how they were always looking to become a greater part of the wider community.

‘Establishing and sustaining an environment which challenges and supports children and their families to learn and flourish’.  
(Children centre manager)

One centre, within which we can recognize links with our own vision, the children centre manager referred to the role of ‘raising awareness of pedagogical leadership’. It was, they suggested, part of this development to introduce the theory behind practice and reflect upon this as a team. As a leadership team we have recognized over the past few years of working together the importance of both theory and the chance to reflect. Two parts of our leadership team have links with higher education and we believe that the academic challenge of unpicking theory supports the quality of provision. Time to reflect upon theory and personal practice is an essential element of this process of meaning making. Though the time to reflect as a team is a battle with sustainability, it is a battle that should be fought, as the provision of quality is essential.

## **Leadership**

The majority of those who were interviewed either had or were developing a shared vision, ethos or principles. It may be considered by many that this vision needs to come from the children centre manager; however it would appear that to succeed this needs to be a shared vision.

‘Developing and leading the team to become leaders themselves’.  
(Children centre manager)

Many centres interviewed considered themselves to be in the process of creating this shared vision, principles or ethos and there was often a sense of frustration that this had not gone as quickly or simply as had been planned. In the case of our leadership team we had clear shared principles within the child care but these were separate to the children centre. This year we have had two team days on writing a vision, and this complicated process will be something that needs to be revisited as we believe that principles, mission statements, ethos and visions are not something that should simply be written down somewhere but be a working document that informs the practice at all stages. This did not appear to be the case within some centres where we told that it was ‘written somewhere but don’t ask where’ or ‘goes out in prospectus to new parents’. It is fair to say that for these centres the understanding of vision may not be the same as our own and there did not appear to be a unity between those interviewed within these centres, however there may be a vision that is present within these teams that we did not see within the short times we were with them.

## **Implications for practice**

### **Communication**

- For communication to be successful, relationships need to be recognized as a key factor.
- There needs to be a transparency to the processes and systems of communication, enabling all to listen and feel listened to and for meaning making to occur.

### **Professional identity**

- Reflection is an essential part of practice that should not be considered extravagant.
- Professionals need to have time to reflect upon their journeys and to develop deeper understanding of their roles.
- Building confidence with personal roles should support the development of participative teams within integrated services.

### **Pedagogic knowledge**

- It is essential for theory and practice to be reflected upon in the creation of a learning community.
- A shared construct of the child and learner should be considered as an element of pedagogic understanding.

### **Leadership**

- Children centre managers need to lead their teams, encouraging them to become leaderful.
- The development of a shared vision that is a basis for all working practice is an essential part of quality provision.

### **Line management**

- Line management is an essential element of all the above.
- There needs to be clarity of expectations between line managers, particularly within integrated teams when different elements of the leadership team are line managed by different agencies.
- Line managers need to share the values and vision of individual centres.
- Line managers have the responsibility to support the development of learning communities and the teams that work in them.
  - professional identity should be reflected upon and inter-professional teams developed that value each other with equal status.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, this has been a fascinating process of learning and discovery for ourselves, with the opportunity to reflect upon our own leadership team. Within the time of the research our leadership team suffered the loss of an inspiration on leadership and a close member of our own team. We have faced many challenges and it is without doubt the strength of the team and the shared vision to make a learning community that makes a difference to all members that has enabled this research to continue. There is no doubt that with more time this could have been developed and explored on a deeper level and we hope to continue to reflect and develop our understanding of leadership.



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## **Appendix 1**

### **Supporting questionnaire for research interview**

1. Can you briefly describe your career journey?
2. Can you tell us about your role and how you perceive your role?
3. Can you tell us who makes up your leadership team?
4. Can you expand upon your part in the leadership team?
5. How often on average do you as a leadership team meet?
6. Is this planned or informal?
7. What methods of communication do you use and which do you find most effective?

8. Are there any barriers to your communication?

9. Do you have admin support and does this support your leadership?

10. Is your settings ethos documented and shared?

11. How does your leadership team reflect and plan for the future?

12. Who is your line manager and can you tell us how this links with your leadership team?

13. What is your highest qualification?

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