



QUALITY AND LEADERSHIP

in the Early Years

Research, Theory and Practice

VERITY CAMPBELL-BARR
and CAROLINE LEESON



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QUALITY AND LEADERSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

To want quality early years services that are effectively led appears common sense for any society that wants children to have good quality experiences. It is perhaps unsurprising then that there is such an interest in quality and leadership in the early years. Given that quality and leadership are so important to early years services, you would think that they would be easily understood, yet quality and leadership are two words that are frequently used but rarely defined. **Supranational organisations** (see Glossary for words in bold) such as the European Union talk about the importance of quality early years services – in fact, they have priorities in regard to improving the quality of early years provision, but a definition of quality is much harder to come by. Equally, when looking at leadership, there is a great deal of commentary as to the desirability of effective leadership to lead high quality settings with some indication of how that leadership might be articulated. However, a clear definition of what leadership looks like and what leaders do, is currently unavailable, meaning that there is often an understanding of what poor leadership is, but not of what good leadership looks like. The difficulty in forming an understanding of both quality and leadership in the early years is something that we will explore in detail in the coming chapters, but we also want to explore the interrelationship between quality and leadership. It has always come as a surprise to us that there is little that explores this relationship. We are aware that often leadership is seen as a feature of quality early years provision, but what this actually means theoretically or practically is not explored. In some ways, there is something of a chicken-and-egg debate – do you need good

leaders to achieve good quality or does good quality create good leadership? But in considering this conundrum, we can begin to see the complexities that lie ahead in exploring these two terms. Not only is it about exploring what quality and leadership are, but it is also about what 'good' means.

In this book, we aim to explore the meanings and understandings of quality and leadership that are present in early years services. We consider how both quality and leadership are complex, multifaceted and contested terms, but we view this as presenting early years practice with opportunities. We hope that in exploring quality and leadership and the ways in which both terms have been conceptualised from a range of different perspectives, you will be able to find a meaning that is right for you and your practice. We view both quality and leadership as fluid and dynamic terms – the understanding that you create today may well be different from that which you create next week, next month or next year. This is because we believe that quality and leadership are relative terms – most specifically, they relate to the context that they are in, so (as we will explore in Chapters 1 and 3) whilst there is a global interest in these terms, this does not mean that there is a global definition – far from it.

In the book, we are influenced by **post-structuralism**, whereby we believe that it is important to consider what and who is shaping understandings of quality and leadership, and that settings should be jointly constructing a shared understanding from within settings of quality and leadership. Some of the critiques that we present in this book are based on a view that, all too often, understandings of quality and leadership are not constructed in collaboration with early years practitioners. Indeed, frequently early years practitioners can be objectified in the process to formulate an understanding of quality and leadership. The result is that often there are technocratic definitions, intended to guide practice but frequently feeling restrictive in the advice that they offer. For this reason, we draw on post-structuralist perspectives as we feel these are helpful in enabling us to break down the structures that objectify us. They allow us to see that there is no one definition of quality or leadership and that there are multiple ways of leading quality early years provision. To this end, the book is intended to support you in developing *your* understanding of quality and how you would like to lead this. This is where social constructionism also influences us, as we believe that understandings of quality and leadership should be constructed to reflect your social context, so that they become terms that are meaningful for you and your early years practice. As we lead you through the chapters, we will be asking you to reflect on what you have learnt so that you can formulate your own opinions.

Our Parameters

In this book, we will refer to early years provision as representing those services for children that are not yet of compulsory school age. Our own context is that we are based in England, and thus our understanding of early years provision is those services for children from birth to 5 years of age.

We have chosen this age range because school is compulsory from age 5 in England, and because the curriculum we have in England – the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) – applies to children from birth to 5 years of age. However, we are aware that in other contexts, the understanding of early years services regarding when children are of compulsory school age is different.

In defining early years services as those which deliver the EYFS, we are aware that this in itself is problematic. In looking more closely at those who deliver the EYFS, we can see that there are a range of different providers: day nurseries, pre-schools, children's centres, childminders and so on. Those who deliver the EYFS come from a range of contexts, both in regard to the leadership and management of their settings and the type of services that are on offer. First, considering the leadership and management of settings, those delivering the EYFS can come from the private, voluntary, independent (PVI) and maintained sectors. Even looking within these sectors, there are subtle differences – for example, in the maintained sector there are nursery schools (standalone EYFS providers) and schools that have reception classes or reception units. In fact, most 4-year-olds in England are in school and here the leadership model may not be one sufficiently focused on the early years and its strong emphasis on caring, positive relationships. Equally, in the private sector, there are differences in the size and scale of settings, both in regard to how many children are being catered for and whether the setting is part of a large global chain or a small local one. Just in looking at this wide range, we can see that quality and leadership are going to mean different things to different providers, but we think this is important. Our primary interest in this book is with the PVI sector – currently the largest sector and the one that has been the focus of much of the recent policy development on the leadership of quality early years provision. This policy focus has been based on deficit assumptions that regard the PVI sector as most likely to be lacking in leadership skills, to have poorly qualified staff, the least favourable buildings and structure, and therefore requiring the most remedial action in terms of development, inspection and monitoring in order to support the development of quality. Throughout the book, we take a critical approach

to this deficit model, not just in wanting to appreciate the exciting and innovative early years practice that exists, but also in looking to deconstruct the deficit model and its aims and purpose when developing the quality and leadership of early years settings. Quality and leadership should always be relevant to the context that they are in and it is our belief that a one-size-fits-all mentality that tends to underpin policy development in this area is unhelpful to the variety of settings and the very different communities that they serve. As we go through the different chapters, we will talk about early years services generically, but, where needed, we will highlight the differences between the services that are on offer. We draw heavily on our knowledge and understanding of the English context, but we also consider international research on quality and leadership in order to highlight different approaches and ways of thinking. Considering international perspectives can aid the development of an understanding of quality and leadership, but we stress throughout the book that looking at international perspectives and considering examples is about facilitating the development of *your* understanding of quality and leadership, not an attempt to privilege one model over another.

The Book

We begin by outlining the global interest in quality early years services. We look at who are the stakeholders that have an interest in early years services and how they contribute to understandings of the benefits of quality early years services in relation to child outcomes. We consider how the interest in early years services impacts on understandings of quality, including considering how the outcomes that are assessed within early years practice influence how quality is defined. We draw on modernist approaches to highlight how often quality has been framed by what can be measured, but question the desirability of such approaches. We look at how a preoccupation with measurement is part of a global framework that looks to demonstrate the effectiveness of early years provision, and we suggest that such a framework is dominated by human capital perspectives and normative expectations around child development (where there is a focus on the cognitive development of children as a linear progression). In looking to demonstrate the effectiveness of early years provision in relation to cognitive development, a series of discursive truths have emerged that demonstrate not only how the purpose of early years provision has been constructed, but also understandings of quality. As such, these

definitions become a set of standards to be achieved because they are associated with the desired outcomes rather than something to be questioned or challenged.

In Chapter 2, we develop our discussion around the development of discursive truths by looking to question understandings of quality. Discursive truths present a particular way of thinking and speaking about early years services. Building on our discussions in Chapter 1, we consider how stakeholders, such as policy makers, look to influence the way in which early years services are understood – creating particular ways of speaking about the early years. However, through drawing on research evidence from practitioners, parents and children, we consider in Chapter 2 how there are many different ways to understand early years services, with varying influences on these understandings. We emphasise in Chapter 2 the importance of considering subjective, value-based and culture-bound understandings of quality and their role in creating quality early years environments that are meaningful to the context. In acknowledging the subjective, we also recognise the importance of reflecting on what and who has shaped understandings of quality early years provision and begin to consider how teams can work together to formulate their own understandings. We consider post-structuralist perspectives due to the role that they play in deconstructing preconceived ideas of quality early years services and in asking questions as to who and what has shaped understandings of quality.

In Chapter 3, we turn our attention to leadership. We consider the historic development of early years provision from the informal, village playgroup run by a committee of parents (usually mothers) and the occasional state-run nursery, often attached to a school and administered by the head teacher, to the current landscape that we outlined above, with many stakeholders providing many different settings. Consequently, a lively **discourse** as to how settings might be led shows a shifting theoretical vista moving from theories espoused by the business community, through those developed by a large literature of school leadership towards a unique set of understandings of leadership that firmly belong in the early years sector. In doing so, we recognise the highly feminised concept of early years work, workers and leaders, and debate its significance and influence on the development of models of leadership that place relationships at the centre of leadership activities and offer early years leaders the guidance they need towards the leadership they espouse. We also discuss the recent move towards models of entrepreneurial leadership assisted by the drive towards doing more for less in straitened economic circumstances and a

government preference for business models of leadership with ‘super-hero’ charismatic individuals at the helm. Thus, a thorough examination of leadership styles and models from both national and international perspectives will be an integral aspect of this chapter as we seek to identify the various leadership discourses that have developed, and debate their helpfulness or otherwise to the provision of quality services for children and their families.

In Chapter 4, we consider in more depth the challenges that are present for leaders of early years settings in relation to research evidence. Over the last ten years, we have seen considerable development, not only in the affirmation of what should constitute effective models of early years leadership, but also in the provision of services for young children and their families and the expectations on those services (Nutbrown, 2012). All early years workers (not just leaders) are positioned as essential to the successful delivery of early years provision and regarded as central characters within policy delivery (Osgood, 2012). As a consequence of this increased focus on the practice of early years leaders and workers, there has been considerable research into what are the most effective models of leadership. In this chapter, we build on what we have discussed in Chapter 3 to consider the implications of models of leadership on the day-to-day roles and responsibilities of leaders, the many hats that they are required to wear and the many **accountabilities** that they hold, as well as debating the consequences of a lack of distinction between ‘leadership’ and ‘management’ and the balance of these often opposing roles within the workplace (McDowall Clark and Murray, 2012). Thus, we explore the impact of current frameworks for accountability, inspection and self-evaluation on the role of the leader and on the identification of effective models of leadership. We also consider the interplay between the focus on up-skilling the workforce and the role of qualifications in developing leadership skills. A further topic for debate will be the concerns raised in research studies about the increased commodification, identity and performance of emotional labour within emotionally intensive environments (Madrid and Dunn-Kenney, 2010).

Having considered understandings of quality and leadership and the evidence that is available for both, we draw things together by thinking about leading quality in a practical way. In Chapter 5, we present four case studies to explore the understanding and articulation of leadership and of developing quality provision in different settings. The case studies have been written in conjunction with early years providers who have a range of working environments and perspectives, and who all have valuable experiences and insights that they have kindly shared with us and