CHAPTER

3

Leading professional development and learning in early childhood centres: a social systems perspective

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ABSTRACT

The Australian early childhood policy reforms arising from the National Quality Agenda (NQA) (Council of Australian Governments (COAG), 2008) have raised expectations for improved professional development of educators in early childhood centres. There is however, limited understanding of the role of leadership in professional development and learning. This chapter reports on research that collected data from director focus groups and case studies of two early childhood centres. The analysis adopted a social systems perspective (Layder, 1998) which examined external and internal factors that impact on centre-based staff during professional learning. Findings reveal the influence of external structural factors, internal organisational systems and the interactions and relationships among educators. Conditions that nurture educators' professional learning are created through complex interrelationships between leadership, collaborative professional development and attention to centre organisation. Both agency and structure are implicated.

Keywords: Professional development, learning, leadership, interactions and relationships

ABSTRAKTI

Australialaiset varhaiskasvatuksen asiankirjat lähtien National Quality Agendasta (NQA) (*Council of Australian Governments (COAG), 2008*) ovat nostaneet odotuksia parantaa kasvattajien ammatillista kehittymistä päiväkodeissa. Kuitenkin on vähäinen ymmärrys siitä, mikä on johtajuuden rooli ammatillisessa kehittymisessä ja oppimisessa. Tämä luku raportoi tutkimuksen, jossa aineisto kerättiin johtajilta focus group - ryhmissä ja tapaustutkimuksista päiväkodeissa. Analyysinä käytettiin sosiaalisten systeemien näkökulmaa (Layder, 1998), jossa

tarkasteltiin ulkoisia ja sisäisiä tekijöitä, jotka vaikuttavat päiväkodin henkilöstön ammatilliseen oppimiseen. Tulosten mukaan vaikuttavia tekijöitä ovat ulkoiset rakenteelliset tekijät, sisäiset organisaation systeemit ja vuorovaikutus sekä kasvattajien väliset suhteet. Olosuhteet, mitkä tukevat kasvattajien ammatillista oppimista, luodaan monimuotoisen riippuvuussuhteen kautta, jossa osallisena ovat johtajuus, yhteistoiminnallinen ammatillinen kehittyminen ja huomio päiväkotiin organisaationa. Sekä toimijuus että rakenne ovat tässä mukana.

Keywords: Ammatillinen kehittyminen, oppiminen, johtajuus, vuorovaikutus ja suhteet

ABSTRAKT

De australske barnehagereformene som kommer fra National Quality Agenda (Nqa) (Council of Australian Governments (COAG), 2008) har skapt forventninger om økt faglig utvikling av lærere i barnehagene. Det er imidlertid begrenset forståelse av lederrollen i faglig utvikling og læring. Dette kapitlet formidler forskning fra data innsamlet fra fokusgrupper av styrere og case-studier fra to barnehager. Analysen har et sosialt systemperspektiv (Layder, 1998) som undersøkte eksterne og interne faktorer som påvirker barnehageansatte under faglig læring. Funn viser påvirkning av ytre strukturelle faktorer, interne organisatoriske systemer og samhandling og relasjoner mellom lærere. Betingelser som stimulerer lærernes faglige læring skapes gjennom komplekse sammenhenger mellom ledelse, faglig utvikling i samarbeid og oppmerksomhet mot barnehagens organiseing. Både praksis og struktur er innvolvert.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses a study investigating the relationship between leadership and professional development and learning during curriculum change in early childhood centres. Australia's National Quality Agenda (NQA) will be realised through improvements in practice that enhance children's learning and wellbeing. Yet, we know little about the actual processes that occur within a centre, how educators become motivated to participate in professional learning and how professional learning translates to changes in practice and long-term improvements in early childhood education. Research specifically focused on professional development in early childhood centres is scarce (see Waniganayake et al., 2008 for a study of directors' views about the link between professional development and quality).

The role of leadership in supporting professional learning and educational change is also poorly understood. The implications are that the early childhood reforms have been implemented without understanding the complexity of the work required within centres or the specific leadership requirements needed to support educational change.

THEORETICAL AND CONTEXTUAL ISSUES

Additional challenges for the reforms may be anticipated because of the effects of the market-driven and business oriented conceptualisation of the Australian childcare system (Brennan & Adamson, 2014). Within this paradigm, managerial responses have dominated and encouraged views that change can be achieved through rational and linear processes, and transmission modes of professional development that focus on the educator's skills and knowledge. However, a focus on individual professional development and skills is problematic (Nuttall, 2013) and fails to recognise the complexity of educational change, the nature of professional learning involved in new curriculum initiatives and the interdependent nature of work in early childhood education.

In early childhood centres, educators work in teams involving social groupings of children. Hence an early childhood centre can be understood as an organisation that is a complex social system involving multiple and diverse relationships, between educators and the children and their families, and among the educators. Consequently, a commitment to collaboration is fundamental for achieving quality provision in early childhood centres (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2007).

In interpreting the meanings and application of the theoretical positions embedded with the national *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2009) educators need opportunities to work together. However, internal centre systems influence how educators participate in collaborative learning (Nuttall, 2013). Therefore, this research aims to explore the various social influences that impact on educators during professional development. The approach considers how educators influence each other within the immediate social world of the centre but also considers the impact of the internal centre organisational systems as well as broader external influences.

EDUCATIONAL REFORM

Contemporary depictions of educational reform suggest complex and cumulative processes where changes in practice are dependent on educator professional development and leadership (Muijs, Aubrey, Harris & Briggs, 2004). Professional learning occurs as teachers participate in collaborative professional learning communities (PLCs) (Hord, 2009). An additional complexity for early childhood centres is that improving pedagogy occurs locally with directors working in relative isolation with small teams of educators.

The director's knowledge of early childhood pedagogy (Fasoli, Scrivens & Woodrow, 2007) and their ability to design and lead professional development and learning within their centre is critical.

In the absence of educator learning there can be no genuine growth in practice (Nuttall, 2013). Educational reform necessitates collaborative professional learning (Cherrington & Thornton, 2013) because learning is dependent on shared and collaborative professional dialogue. Constructivist processes are used in a PLC (Hord, 2009) and may include educators working together to understand new theories, participating in critical reflection to examine existing beliefs, considering the impact of their pedagogy on children's learning and formulating alternate practice (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar & Fung, 2007). Learning may not translate as directly observable or discrete changes but rather as subtle and iterative changes as educators "critically connect knowledge, practices and values" (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Peeters, Lazzari & Van Laere, 2011, p. 104).

LEADING EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Educational change involves complex concurrent processes and leading a PLC requires sophisticated leadership to build and sustain trust to nurture educator professional dialogue (Hord, 2009). Studies examining PLCs established during early childhood educational change have proposed that distributed leadership can foster collaborative professional learning (Clarkin-Phillips, 2007; Thornton, 2009). Distributed leadership approaches were found to promote participation, build confidence and value existing knowledge and expertise (ibid.). which in turn encourages professional dialogue among educators.

A SOCIAL SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS

A social systems perspective facilitates examination of leadership as shaped and influenced by contextual factors (Hujala, 2004) including broader social structures, organisational systems and social interactions. Here, leadership is understood as a social phenomenon intrinsically connected with the interactions and relationships within a specific context and situation (Hujala, 2013).

The influences of agency and structure are traditionally recognised as two key constituents of social reality (Giddens, 1979) and arguably studies of leadership need to account for both individual agency and structural factors (Glatter, 2006). Agency refers to human purposiveness (Archer, 1995) and

people's capacity to do things that affect their social relationships (Layder, 1998). Structure refers to broad macro-social conditions or to localised organisational social structures and networks that influence people's actions (see discussion in Sibeon, 2004, p 54). In considering agency and structure, the "*complex interrelationships between individuals, interactions and their social settings and contexts*" can be appreciated (Layder, 2013, p. 114).

Early childhood centres can be viewed as complex social settings, typically hierarchical as well as collaborative (Aubrey, Godfrey & Harris, 2013) where multiple internal and external factors interact to influence educators (Hujala, 2013). Influences are interrelated and interdependent and may be direct or indirect (Nupponen, 2005). Nivala's contextual model of leadership (2002) portrays three social layers: a micro-level of individuals within a centre, a macro-level of external forces and a meso-level representing interactions among people in the setting. Educators' professional practice is influenced through the intersection of these social domains (Hujala, 2013).

The relative influences of social domains may be obscured when leadership is considered only from a perspective of individual agency. However, understanding an early childhood centre as an organisation that is itself a social system existing within a broad or macro structural system (Siraj-Blatchford & Sum, 2013) may offer insights about the influences of various internal and external factors.

Layder's (1998) theory of social domains conceptualises a stratified social world depicting four interrelated social domains. These comprise a 'structural' domain of broad external influences; a 'settings' domain representing organisational structures and systems (a centre); an 'inter-subjective' domain of situated activity or face-to-face interactions among educators and their influence on each other; and a 'subjective' domain of individual meaning derived from lived experience within the social setting. This depiction is compatible with Nivala's contextual model (2002) and provides an analytical framework for this study (see Figure 1.)
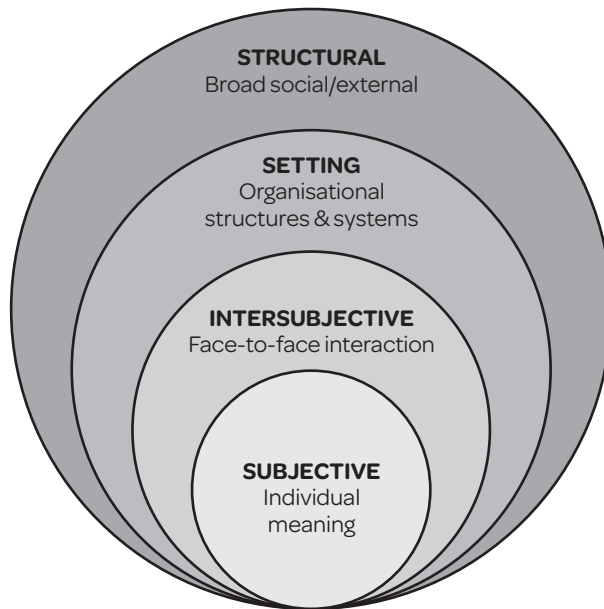
Figure 1. Social domains (adapted from Nivala, 2002 and Layder, 1998)

Structural domain

Structural factors such as economic, political, societal and cultural issues (Nivala, 2002; Sibeon, 2004) can influence educators' attitudes to educational reform and professional learning. Current government requirements including the EYLF, regulations and statutory compliance measures directly affect educators' work. Societal expectations of women's roles in society may influence leadership enactment and may be reflective of women's reticence to assume leadership positions (Rodd, 2013). In Australia, the political and societal devaluation of early childhood education and care is evident with public denigration of early childhood teachers' roles (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2013) and arguments for a rationale of care rather than education (Productivity Commission, 2014). Such views may be associated with historical associations of women with mothering where educators' work is perceived as an innate quality held by women. The result is an undermining of the recognition of the specialised skills and professional knowledge base of early childhood educators (Leeson, Campbell–Barr & Ho, 2012).

Setting domain

The internal structures and systems of an organisation influence its members (Sibeon, 2004). Internal structures in early childhood centres include governance, centre policies, the director's leadership and management, other positional leadership arrangements, staff qualifications and ratios, professional development processes and resources for educators. Further, organisational history, traditions and the 'unspoken organisational rules' (Layder, 1998) can influence educators.

Directors make decisions that directly influence the organisational structures (Press, Sumsion & Wong, 2010) and actively shape the work environment in which professional learning occurs. Through their interactions, the director participates in and influences the inter-subjective world of educator interactions and relationships and the meaning that educators make of their work. The director therefore occupies a unique space within the social world; operating within the inter-subjective domain, subject to the influence of centre structures including governance but also having power to modify organisational systems.

Inter-subjective domain

The inter-subjective social domain depicts face-to-face interactions where educators influence each other individually and collectively (Layder, 1998). Educators work interdependently either encouraging and motivating each other to participate in professional learning and educational change or constraining each other through their attitudes and actions.

Subjective domain

Educators interpret and make sense of their experience. Individuals' subjective meanings are socially constructed, influenced by history and culture and are shaped through interaction with other people within a social context (Creswell, 2003).

METHODOLOGY

This study investigated the relationship between leadership and professional development as early childhood educators participated in professional learning about the EYLF. In exploring this relationship the research sought to explore the following questions:

- How do early childhood directors approach curriculum change?
- What processes and practices are utilised within an early childhood centre to facilitate participation in professional learning about EYLF?
- How can distribution of leadership support professional learning and change?

The methodology utilised an adaptive theory approach (Layder, 1998, 2013) which combined both qualitative and quantitative data resulting in complementary data sets. The analysis from all data sets has been incorporated in this chapter, and included the application of Layder's (1998) theory of social domains.

Data were gathered initially from focus groups made up of early childhood centre directors. Subsequently, two early childhood centres that were participating in ongoing professional development were selected as case study sites. Over an 18 month period, qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted at two separate times with a total of 21 educators. A survey of all centre staff was undertaken to gather multiple perspectives of educators' experiences of professional development and learning.

Qualitative data were managed in a software package, transcribed and analysed using conceptual orienting codes (Layder, 2013). These codes are a key feature of an adaptive approach where preliminary codes are drawn from the extant literature to guide initial analysis. Another key feature of adaptive theory is that data collection, analysis and reflection occur concurrently and earlier stages contribute to shaping subsequent stages (ibid.). Ongoing refinement of codes continued throughout the analysis with an examination of connections and relationships among codes. In this way categories were developed with the aim of identifying core concepts and clusters of supporting codes. Quantitative data from the surveys were collated into Excel spreadsheets, tables and models. This data assisted in deepening understanding of the influences of different social domains and in supporting concepts developed from analysis of qualitative data.

ANALYSIS AND KEY FINDINGS

The four social domains described by Layder (1998) and summarised above provided a helpful theoretical framework for thinking about the data collected in this study. Through considering the influences at various social domains insights about the relative influences of agency and structure can be appreciated in the enactment of early childhood leadership.

External structural influences

Broader external structural issues influenced educators in both positive and negative ways. Across the two case study centres, educators' interpretations of the reforms reflected their director's views. Where the director supported the reforms educators were positive; where the director expressed concerns, educators held mixed views including concern about the additional work load and fear of the changes. In both centres, educators commented that early childhood education was undervalued and perceived as unskilled child minding. Two educators in one centre specifically commented on the impact of public derision about teachers in early childhood as presented in the media (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2013). These educators observed however, that within their centre prompt action had repudiated the negative views and affirmed the value of early education.

Educators' understanding of leadership reflected societal views about women, femininity and female leadership with some participants reluctant to be identified in a formal leader position. Several educators proposed that kindness and concern for staff emotional wellbeing (Beatty, 2007) were desirable director leadership qualities and that the director was responsible for providing supportive environments (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2007). Importantly, in one centre, educators' views were mirrored in the director's explanations about prioritising staff wellbeing. Overall, the analysis revealed that broader structural influences impacted on the centres, educators and the meanings they derived from their work.

Setting influences

Data analysis revealed the director's role as fulfilling functions associated with organisational systems and governance (Press et al., 2010). The directors contributed to shaping the centre structures and systems, and were seen by educators as 'the management'. Directors modified and adapted the internal centre structures making decisions about leadership arrangements, the roles and responsibilities of positional leaders (room leaders), processes and systems for professional development and determining resources to support educators' learning. Simultaneously, directors operated across the setting (centre) domain and the inter-subjective world (see Figure 2).

All of the focus group participants considered that their role as a director encompassed pedagogical leadership (Nupponen, 2005) with primary responsibility for planning professional development and learning of educators (Colmer, Waniganayake & Field, 2014). Directors made decisions about

topics, the extent of individualised professional development, processes for collaborative professional learning, selection of projects and the composition of project groups (ibid.).

However, there were differences in the levels of engagement of the case study centre directors. One director played a key role in promoting professional learning among educators (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2007) by being highly visible in professional development, making personal recommendations of topics to individual educators, fostering individual's interest in new knowledge, giving feedback to individuals and groups, maintaining overview of project work, participating actively in whole-of-centre professional development and guiding educators' learning. Educators were acutely aware of the director's interest in their individual professional development and growth.

These benefits of the director's presence corresponded with school based research that leader involvement and participation in professional development and learning as 'leader, learner, or both' had positive impacts (Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008, p. 663). Data analysis revealed that director presence coincided with cohesion within the educator team, evident in educators' stories of events being consistent (even when relating difficult situations), positive professional relationships among educators and engagement in professional learning (Woodrow, 2012) and greater educator satisfaction with feedback received.

Conversely, the other case study director, although involved in decision-making and overview of professional development had delegated communication and guidance to the assistant director. From the perspectives of the educators she was absent from professional development. Low director presence was associated with less cohesion among educators, diversity of interpretation about situations and lower satisfaction with feedback received.

A director's commitment to professional learning has been found to contribute to strong internal systems (Cherrington & Thornton, 2013) and the development of a 'compelling narrative' for the centre (Horwath & Morrison cited in Press et al., 2010, p. 44). High director presence contributes to collegial interactions which in turn contribute to a shared centre vision (Aubrey et al., 2013), building shared values and beliefs and promoting connectedness and unity (Wong, Sumsion & Press, 2012), all of which are invaluable in shaping the organisational culture within a centre.

In this research, the case study directors distributed leadership to other positional leaders within their centres, who as a collective enjoyed strong

professional relationships with each other. Positional leaders also contributed their knowledge and expertise to other educators (Heikka, Waniganayake & Hujala, 2013). All positional leaders were initially diploma qualified educators but by the second round of interviews, one of the centres had employed an early childhood teacher who was in the leadership group, while the other centre had not allocated a positional leader role to the teacher.

Conditions that promote leadership distribution are complex. For example, the director who had delegated professional development to her assistant director could be interpreted as enacting distributed leadership. However, educators in that centre did not think that any educator could lead professional development. Paradoxically, where the director maintained high presence, educators considered that others within the centre had opportunity to lead. Edwards (2009) adopts the term 'distributed expertise' highlighting that distributed leadership is connected with sharing in knowledge creation. The results suggest that distributing leadership requires more than simply making space for positional leaders to lead.

In each case study centre, educators' attitudes towards government reforms reflected the views of the director, suggesting that educators' attitudes were influenced by the director's interpretation of the impact of external influences on the centre. The findings suggest the influence of the director in shaping meaning and the value of synergy between director and educator perspectives in building a cohesive team. Director presence in everyday professional learning was influential in creating shared understanding and values within the centre.

Inter-subjective influences

The inter-subjective domain where leaders and educators influence each other shapes the collective emotional mood (Beatty, 2007), in turn influencing engagement and motivation. In both centres, collaborative professional learning involved educators in small group work. Analysis of educator survey data revealed that the majority of educators appreciated the value of collaborative professional development and agreed with the notion of supporting each other's professional learning. This pattern reflects what Edwards (2009) refers to as the concept of 'relational agency', which describes an individual's capacity for working purposefully with others.

The composition of project groups is likely to be important for building professional dialogue. Where across-centre projects included positional leaders and educators from different rooms, informal professional conversations were fostered throughout the centre. These conversations contributed to building

professional relationships and enriching professional dialogue and feedback (Urban et al., 2011). Where collaboration was restricted to positional leaders or room groups, there appeared to be fewer opportunities for leadership and professional conversations.

Data analysis highlighted the positive effects of educators' valuing each other professionally and respecting each others' knowledge and contributions. Some participants however, revealed negative attributions towards educators, particularly where there was a perceived lack of commitment. It would be reasonable to assume that valuing each others' contribution can support a sense of cohesion among educators but negative views towards others can erode trust and disrupt professional relationships.

Room leaders utilised inclusive or authoritative styles. Although some room leaders encouraged open professional conversations and valued educator contributions, other room leaders perceived their role as disseminating information to their team and directing change. Authoritative leaders presented themselves as possessing appropriate knowledge and were less inclined to allow others opportunity to contribute and take responsibility. As a result opportunities for the emergence of leadership were reduced. Conversely, inclusive leadership styles can be motivating, encouraging educators individually and collectively and may be essential in distributing leadership (Sharp et al., 2012). Further, inclusive approaches promote professional learning because open professional dialogue is essential for critical reflection. Leadership style therefore, is a factor in building relationships among educators and promoting participative environments (Leeson et al., 2012) which, in turn are conducive to educators being confident in sharing their expertise (Edwards, 2009).

Collectively, in professional dialogue, educators interpret and challenge the 'unwritten rules' of the organisation influencing others' perceptions (Nuttall, 2013). Over time, the collective professional agency of the educators can modify organisational culture and understanding of how organisational life is conducted, thereby influencing the setting (organisational) domain (Layder, 1998).

Subjective influences

The inter-subjective world of a centre comprises the personal and professional relationships among educators and has a vital influence on the centre as an organisation (Woodrow, 2012), influencing the meanings derived from work. In examining the subjective social world it can be seen that the other social domains influence an individual's interpretation of their experience. Factors

that educators reported as providing a sense of satisfaction included being valued and respected for their professional knowledge and judgement (Wong et al., 2012), shared decision-making, professional conversations, opportunities for professional development, collegiality and the value of working with others. It appeared that educators' sense of professional autonomy and their capacity to contribute influenced their sense of professional identity. Several educators recognised their own power to influence others and to institute action indicating the existence of distributive expertise (Press et al., 2010) and the emergence of leadership beyond positional leader roles (Heikka et al., 2013).

Several educators focused on the importance of having power to pursue their own professional interests in their professional development choices. An intriguing finding was that where the director had high presence in professional learning the educators were satisfied that they possessed autonomy in their professional development choices. Yet according to the director their individual choices aligned with government reforms and the centre goals. The value of a synergy created as a result of the director's interpretation of the broader structural domain corresponded with educators in this centre sharing professional goals, enjoying a sense of belonging, and satisfaction with their opportunities for personal and professional growth (Wong et al., 2012).
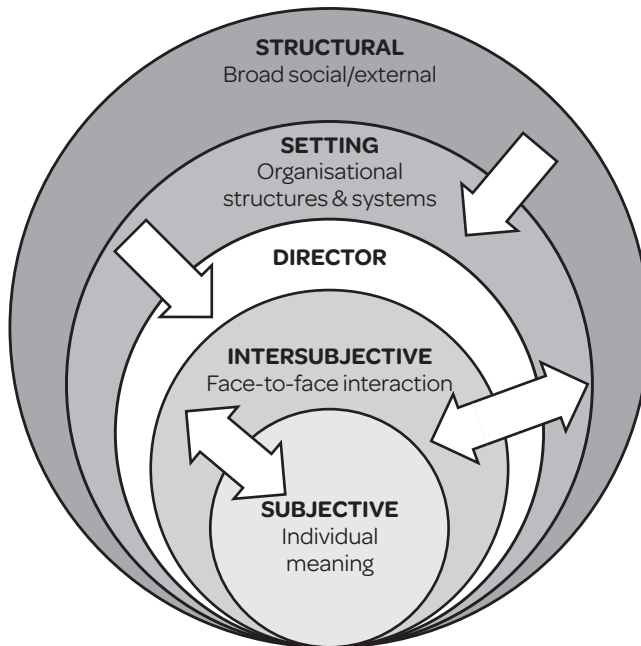

Figure 2. Director influence and depictions of Influences between social domains

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In adopting a systems perspective, this research provides an alternate paradigm for understanding the challenges of leading centre based professional development and learning. Through analysing data from different social domains, the multiple factors that interact in complex ways to influence educators during educational change can be appreciated. Directors can play a powerful role in monitoring and interpreting external structural influences for educators, in shaping centre structures to enable participation in inclusive professional learning processes and through their presence as leader and learner in professional development and learning. In modelling inclusive leadership styles and in facilitating distributed leadership, directors can be influential in building professional relationships among staff. These factors combine to influence the inter-subjective world of educator interactions, relationships and sense of purpose, and ultimately the subjective meaning that educators derive from their work. An educator's sense of professional identity and worth are fostered through professional relationships and feelings of satisfaction thereby influencing whether an educator's agency will be channelled towards achieving organisational goals.

Although some factors can be attributed to individual agency, other factors are connected with broad structural and organisational influences. A centre director occupies a unique position that encompasses both the organisational setting and the inter-subjective domains. A director holds a position of significant influence interpreting and communicating information from different social domains, nurturing professional relationships and making management decisions that shape the environmental conditions for professional learning.

The creation of early childhood organisations that build processes and systems for collaborative professional learning is critical for achieving educational change. Distributing leadership among educators has been associated with professional learning but may be dependent on complex factors that combine to create an environment conducive of collaboration, interdependence and leadership emergence.

Complex challenges exist for policy makers to understand and acknowledge the significant role of collaborative professional learning and how professional dialogue and interactions among educators are integral components of learning in early childhood education reform. The cost implications of resource allocation to support this work require urgent attention.

Furthermore, approaches to leadership learning for centre directors and other internal positional leaders within centres must move beyond traditional professional development that emphasises fragmented leader skills and capabilities to understanding systems and contextual leadership. An inherent component of such an approach relies on an understanding that professional learning within early childhood centres is fundamentally collaborative rather than individualised.

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