



CHAPTER
5

Exposing and exploring the potential for greater connections between early childhood and school education

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ABSTRACT

The concepts of 'learning' and 'leadership' are central themes in early childhood and school education research. Indeed, when describing the task of improving student learning, concepts such as Leadership for Learning or Learning-centred Leadership, often conflate meaning and create confusion. Likewise, the connections between the two sectors are also not obvious and not well understood. Research that may have the potential for influence beyond its local or own organisational context can be thwarted by artificial or imposed structures. In seeking to explore how better connectivities can be established between early childhood or prior to school organisations and school settings, three areas that emerged from a study by Marsh (2015) conducted in New South Wales independent schools are presented. Each area is scrutinised for its capacity to support learning in the early childhood sector. By using key findings from Marsh, this chapter aims to provoke thinking and discussion about the importance of establishing rich connections between early childhood and school education.

Keywords: Leadership for learning, early childhood, schools, Australia

ABSTRAKTI

Käsitteet oppiminen ja johtajuus ovat keskeisiä teemoja varhaiskasvatuksen ja koulun tutkimuksessa. Kun kuvataan sitä, kuinka lisätään oppilaan oppimista, käsitteet kuten oppimisen johtaminen tai oppimiseen keskittyvä johtajuus usein yhdistetään ja aiheutetaan sekaannusta. Samoin näiden kahden asian yhteys ei ole aina ilmeinen ja ymmärretty. Tutkimus, jonka voisi olla mahdollista vaikuttaa laajemmin kuin paikallisesti tai oman organisaation kontekstissa, voidaan estää keinotekoisilla rakenteilla. Etsittäessä sitä, kuinka tutkia sitä, miten paremmin

yhdistää varhaiskasvatus ja koulu esitellään tässä luvussa kolme aluetta Marshin (2014) tutkimuksen perusteella. Tutkimus tehtiin New South Walesin alueella. Jokaisen alueen mahdollisuus tukea oppimista varhaiskasvatuksessa tutkitaan tarkoin. Käyttämällä Marshin päätuloksia, tämän luvun tavoitteena on edistää ajattelua ja keskustelua varhaiskasvatuksen ja koulun rikkaista yhteyksistä ja niiden tärkeydestä.

Keywords: Oppimisen johtaminen, varhaiskasvatus, koulu

ABSTRAKT

Begrepe "læring" og "ledelse" er sentrale tema i forskning om barnehage og skole. Men når oppgaven med å forbedre elevenes læring beskrives, får begreper som ledelse for læring eller læring sentrert ledelse, ofte en sammenblandet mening og skaper forvirring. Likeledes er heller ikke forbindelsene mellom de to sektorene innlysende og godt forstått. Forskning som kan ha potensiale for innflytelse utover sin egen organisatoriske sammenheng kan bli forhindret av kunstige eller pålagt strukturer. I arbeidet med å utforske hvordan det kan etableres bedre forbindelser mellom barnehage eller førskole og skole, presenteres tre områder. Områdene fremkommer fra en studie av Marsh (2014) gjennomført i uavhengige skoler i New South Wales. Hvert område er undersøkt for sin evne til å støtte læring i barnehagesektoren. Ved å bruke sentrale funn fra Marsh, har dette kapitlet som mål å medvirke til tenkning og diskusjon om betydningen av å etablere gode forbindelser mellom barnehage og skole.



INTRODUCTION

A plethora of contemporary research explores the influence of school leadership on student learning, focusing in particular on the considerable potential for positive leadership models and practices to be readily translated into improved educational outcomes for students (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008; Robinson, 2011). Studies highlight the need for school leadership to be further investigated and defined variously as instructional (Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008), distributed (Crawford, 2012), or transformational (Day et al., 2010); to name just a few of the recent contributions to literature. Scholars seeking to progress understanding of the influence of leadership in school contexts have also identified it to be a learning centred (Dimmock, 2012) or a student centred process (Robinson, 2011); and as a process that is characterised and driven by an overarching moral purpose (Bezzina, 2012; Fullan, 2011).

Although these and other descriptions of leadership may vary in substance, their potential application is not necessarily confined to school education. Leadership that improves learning cuts across all ages and sectors of education. Yet, the traditional structural separations between early childhood settings and school classrooms means the importance of educational leadership

in the early childhood years has been largely overlooked, as has the relationship between leadership and educational outcomes for students as they transition from one system to the next. This pattern may have also arisen because as the participants in the study by Campbell-Evans, Stamopolous & Maloney (2014) reported, typically, “school leadership positions were primarily held by educators with upper school not early childhood classroom experience” (p. 46). In Australia, there is a growing trend towards extending Bachelor degrees in early childhood to cover the education of children aged birth to 12 years. This expansion affords early childhood teacher graduates, exciting possibilities to step out of the classroom and seek leadership roles that require broader community engagement, as educational leaders working seamlessly between early childhood and primary school contexts.

In commenting on school leadership research, Dinham (2007) observed that studies often prioritised the voices of school leaders and school principals. It is therefore potentially not unreasonable, given school leadership research can be situated in contexts that range from early childhood to the final year of schooling, to question the extent to which early childhood teachers are underrepresented in promotion or senior leadership positions in schools.

STUDYING LEADERSHIP THAT IMPROVES LEARNING

In a study on school leadership, Marsh (2014) exposed the importance of establishing a holistic concept of learning and leadership to foster a shared understanding of both its application and importance within school communities. Marsh examined the extent to which scholarly research connects with the day-to-day realities faced by school-based practitioners. The findings suggest that a useful, transferrable model promoting seamless connections between early childhood education and schools can enable a smoother and more effective learning pathway from birth to 18 years.

School leadership research encompasses a wide range of stages from school-based preschools, at about four years of age, to the final year of schooling, at approximately 18 years. The early childhood sector by contrast, is relatively small and more disparate. However, its importance in setting the foundations for lifelong learning, and its critical role in supporting educational outcomes across the school years, is well established (Britto et al., 2013; OECD, 2006; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Likewise, there is considerable scope for promoting community wide connections that can help break down the artificial barriers between these educational stages that appear to exist solely for the administrative convenience of policy makers.

Marsh (2014) also found that at times, the terms used by researchers to define key leadership concepts were not well used or understood by those at the coal face of school education. This may not be surprising considering the complex nature of school leadership (Crum & Sherman, 2008) and the often chaotic context in which school leadership operates (Bush, 2008; Odhiambo & Hii, 2012). Seeking to apply the finding of school leadership studies in early childhood settings may then, seem even more challenging, given that the early years are typically deemed outside the context of formal education.

In seeking to make stronger connections between school leadership and the core business of improving student learning, the study by Marsh (2014) conceptualised 'Leadership that Improves Learning' (LIL) as an intentional and collaborative process. Here, "school communities cultivate their collective capacity through establishing an organisational culture where trusting relationships are developed, meaning and purpose are collectively shared and, a holistic understanding of learning is pursued, supported, evaluated and improved" (Marsh, 2014, p. 68).

This study featured a mixed methods design. It began with 293 staff from seven independent or private schools in the State of New South Wales completing an online survey on school leadership. As a follow up, 28 participants who self nominated through the online survey participated in individual interviews. These interviews were conducted with seven participants in four schools comprising a mix of the school principal, four classroom based teachers and two teachers with middle management positions responsible for overseeing either curriculum or student wellbeing matters.

In this chapter, data collected through both the open-ended survey questions and the individual interviews have been incorporated to illustrate the points being raised. This data has not been utilised in previously published papers.

DATA ANALYSIS AND KEY FINDINGS

This chapter focuses on three key findings that revealed positive leadership practices that enhanced student learning and that have similar potential to resonate across the early childhood sector:

1. establishing a school wide 'shared language for learning and leadership',
2. establishing 'effective teams', and
3. a leader's 'presence'.

Each of these findings is discussed next.

1. ESTABLISHING A SCHOOL WIDE 'SHARED LANGUAGE FOR LEARNING AND LEADERSHIP'

The notion of a shared language for learning and leadership was defined “as a school-wide activity that enables subject content to be mapped both vertically and horizontally, teachers from different subject areas or year groups to discuss teaching and learning issues and, prevailing leadership ideas within the school community to be explored and collectively understood” (Marsh, Waniganayake & De Nobile, 2013b, p. 396). When established, this concept can support schools to foster a collective sense of shared meaning and purpose; a key element of successful school leadership (Harris, 2004; Leithwood, 2004).

Much has previously been written on the power of a shared language in supporting organisational change (Kegan & Lahey, 2001), influencing how we think and relate with others (Starr, 2011) and, in improving student learning (Little, 1982; Marzano & Waters, 2009). Studies have demonstrated the benefits of a common teaching framework and a coherent, well sequenced programme of instruction and assessment for creating shared meaning within school communities and in supporting improvements to student learning (Crowther, Andrews & Conway, 2013; Little, 1982; Newmann, Smith, Allensworth & Bryk, 2001). Moreover, given the ambiguity that surrounds the concept of leadership (Avery, 2004; Harris, 2009), scholars have also argued for the necessity to establish a shared language for this construct (Alper, Williams & Hyerle, 2012; Avery, 2004; Dimmock, 2012) to progress discussions coherently within an organisational context.

Participants in the study recognised the potential benefits of establishing a shared language for learning and leadership. However, their responses generally indicated that the various elements of this concept were quite undeveloped in each school as demonstrated in these examples:

This presents as a weakness in most schools. I know it has come up in other schools I have been at...They might do Egypt in the primary school but then they might do it again in the secondary school. (Senior Manager, Banksia)

One coordinator will just ignore it, another coordinator will say 'no, you've got to be here on time you're letting everyone else down by not coming out' so if you've got different coordinators with different expectations for their staff, it sort of happens at every tier. (Teacher, Coolabah)

I think there's probably a feeling that they're the ones supposed to be doing it (leadership), they're the ones paid to do it, so let them do it, I guess. (Teacher, Waratah)

These and other similar comments illustrated the lack of connection and poor communication between different sections within each of the research sites.

The power of a shared language for learning and leadership was recognised particularly by the school principals. Indeed the principal from Acacia highlighted a cogent view of developing a meta-language for learning. This principal advocated for a language that “can be readily used to talk about learning by teachers to student, by student to student, by teacher to parent and so on” (Principal, Acacia). Importantly, this principal noted that the shared language needed to be free from educational jargon so that an inclusive language that was accessible by all members of the school community was developed to engage in rich conversations about improving student learning.

2. ESTABLISHING ‘EFFECTIVE TEAMS’

Participants throughout the study also identified that rich conversations about learning were most likely to occur in their subject or year group team. In discussing teams, the study sought to understand participants’ perspectives on the value and effectiveness of either their subject area or year group team. Effective teams were “led and enhanced by authoritative leaders who support individual and team learning by providing learning and leadership opportunities and honest feedback so that individuals are held accountable for their contribution to improving the team and student learning” (Marsh, Waniganayake & Gibson, 2014, p. 483).

Taylor, Hallam, Charlton and Wall (2014) reported that effective teams, characterised by well-established norms that support collaboration, are a critical component of successful professional learning communities. Further, these authors drew attention to the important role played by principals in “establishing the cultural, structural, and procedural conditions needed for successful team collaboration” (Taylor et al., p. 28). In studying distributed leadership, Dinham (2009) observed that there were greater opportunities for forms of distributed leadership to emerge in contexts where teams were well supported. Elsewhere, teacher teams have been recognised for their utility in supporting effective professional development (Vernon-Dotson & Floyd, 2012).

In exploring the notion of effective teams, Marsh (2015) found that participants frequently shared rich conversations about their teaching practice with members of their team. They also believed that when teams were working effectively in high trust environments, student learning benefitted. Participants did note however, that there was limited training for how to

establish effective teams, limited time and collaborative spaces available for teams to meet and, that most teams were isolated both geographically and professionally. The following comments seek to capture some key themes as expressed by participants:

As a teacher if you are happy in a particular faculty, that I think filters down to the students...I think we fortunately have a good working relationship where we share resources and we help each other out. (Teacher, Acacia)

If that person's happy and feels supported and feels valued as a faculty and staff member then that shows up in the way they deal with kids and relate to kids and therefore that has a major impact of what's going on in the classroom...I've always believed that fostering a faculty that's a team, we're absolutely there working for each other sees very tangible benefits to your HSC kids. (Middle Manager, Banksia)

You need trust for starters, you need to trust first of all your faculty leader and your other colleagues that if the risk doesn't work they're going to go 'ok, why didn't it work, let's have a look at it, let's see why it didn't work, why you think it didn't work' rather than 'see, I told you, it didn't work'. (Teacher, Coolabah)

I think if you have a harmonious faculty where relationships are good then you're going to have those conversations. Conversations like 'gosh I thought this was going to be a great lesson and it just didn't work out for me' and the other person says 'well what happened'. (Senior Manager, Waratah)

These comments highlight key characteristics of working in teams namely: sharing of ideas and resources, supporting other team members and, the presence of trusting relationships. One teacher from Coolabah in describing their team comments that "We're in and out of each other's classes all the time. It's very, very collegial. It's a great team". Here, strong collegiality is connected with the idea of a 'great team' as reflected in Wang's (2014) study. This research draws our attention to a great team in a school where "emotional bonds, mutual trust and an inclusive school culture" (Wang, p. 15) is cultivated.

Although many comments did highlight the positive nature of teams, the independent and isolated nature of various teams did present. One teacher from Banksia notes that "I feel like there's a type of 'them and us' mentality between grades in a weird way". A teacher at Coolabah also noted this lack of interaction. When discussing the extent to which teams interacted in cross curriculum initiatives, the teacher commented, "I think the fact that when you asked me about across curriculum stuff I said 'well there's nothing'. I didn't realise it was quite as, the boundaries were quite as significant as that...

they are isolated”. The lack of interaction between different teams exposed the limited connectivity that presented within each school.

3. A LEADER’S ‘PRESENCE’

It is possible that the notion of a leader’s ‘presence’ may be perceived to be at odds with the overarching understanding of leadership as a collective (Duignan & Cannon, 2011) or collaborative activity (Kramer & Crespy, 2011). The narrow focus on the presence of a single leader may also appear to reinforce the traditional and now outdated notion of the solo ‘hero’ leader (Bush & Glover, 2012; Crawford, 2012). However, in defining presence simply as “an overarching personal quality possessed by leaders who invest and are skillful in building trusting and supportive relationships” (Marsh, Waniganayake & De Nobile, 2013a, p. 24) the findings from the study by Marsh (2015) highlighted that the leader’s presence reinforced the importance of leadership as a relational activity. This perception sits well within contemporary conceptualisations of leadership, now well documented within empirical studies carried out in school contexts, such as those by Dimmock (2012) and Odhiambo and Hii (2012).

Through well-developed interpersonal skills, sharing appropriate personal anecdotes, taking an interest in the lives of staff members and, by simply being seen on an everyday basis during the school day, the study found that a leader’s presence enhanced individual teacher agency (Marsh et al., 2013a). Rather than reinforcing an unhelpful hierarchical model of leadership, the notion of a leader’s presence was therefore found to enable acts of leadership that were not limited to those in formal positions. In this way, a leader’s presence was found to foster trusting and respectful relationships, key qualities for supporting more distributed forms of leadership (Bush & Glover, 2012; Dimmock, 2012) and, facilitate improved learning outcomes in schools (Robinson, 2011; Tschannen-Moran, 2009). Some examples of comments made by the participants included:

He would solve issues before they became issues just by talking to people and being seen about. He was always about. (Teacher, Coolabah)

...the principal pops in and sees things and encourages us to go and do the same so, yes definitely that has helped the staff to mingle more...It’s invaluable. (Teacher, Waratah)

This above comment made by the teacher at Waratah demonstrates that the principal’s actions encouraged more collaboration amongst the staff; a practice that prior to the arrival of this new principal was rare. Whilst these

comments do refer to the physical component of presence, a teacher from Acacia captured another dimension in stating that “the principal lacks charisma, has no “presence”, avoids personal interaction with staff”. Here the link with the idea of charisma reinforces, as discussed above, the multifaceted nature of a leader’s presence.

Other descriptions of presence note a sensitivity to the needs of others (Starratt, 2004) and, an authenticity that “can bring out the very best in ourselves as well as in others” (Duignan, 2012, p. 147). In this way, the notion of presence is a concept that is far richer than a leader’s simple act of being physically in attendance within a school. Duignan describes further that “[b]eing fully present with others can give us a deeper appreciation that there is a purpose and meaning to life beyond the narrow confines of the self” (p. 148). Here, presence is evident in those whose identity is not wrapped up in ego and self-promotion. Moreover, presence radiates when mentally and physically present leaders act with a resolute moral purpose to invest in the welfare of others. In this way, a leader’s presence was understood as an enduring human quality that builds trusting relationships throughout the school community.

The three findings emerged as critically important elements in cultivating ‘Leadership that Improves Learning’. However, it was evident that structural divisions in each of the schools thwarted the extent to which these three elements could flourish. For example: “we’re a Preschool to a Year 12 school, a lot of the focus in the curriculum development, the learning development has a really, and the meetings that go on with that whole school have a very much 7–12, if not 10–12 focus” (Middle Manager, Acacia). Indeed, this and other comments reflected a ‘silo’ approach where participants noted the limited interaction between the different ages and stages of schooling and a tendency to focus conversations and priorities more around the final years of schooling.

The study by Marsh (2015) exposed the potential for greater connections between early childhood settings and schools. Both institutions are inextricably linked in educational purpose. However, at the coalface, at times, they appear to be worlds apart. We now explore how each of the three findings presented may provoke thinking and discussion on how connections between school-based research and early childhood practice can be achieved.

MAKING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN EARLY CHILDHOOD AND SCHOOL EDUCATION

The findings presented in this chapter highlighted three leadership practices arising from school-based research that can support the development of richer connections between early childhood settings and schools. In acknowledging the ‘moral purpose’ of leadership, it is beholden on all those involved in both early childhood and school education, to acknowledge what Duignan (2012) eloquently refers to as

a collective ethic of responsibility for leadership that relies less on one person or position – the principal or the principalship – and engage more productively with a range of expertise and talent from different areas and levels within and outside the school. (p. 3)

The adoption of a system-wide leadership approach has also been recommended by early childhood scholars such as Heikka, Waniganayake and Hujala (2012) as well as Kagan (2014) who emphasised ‘systems thinking and acting’ in her keynote address at the Early Childhood Australia’s national conference in Melbourne in 2014. Kagan added that this work involved engagement with parents and the wider community to develop locally relevant strategic plans of benefit to all children and families.

Governments around the world are now investing in early years education, reflective of the recognition of “early childhood as (is) a period of uncontested importance to lifelong development” (Britto, Engle & Super, 2013, xi). What this means in everyday practice has not yet been sufficiently explored empirically, particularly in relation to leading learning across the spectrum of birth to 18 years. This chapter seeks to explore and expose possible ways by which leadership might better engender learning as a life-long endeavour. Although life-long learning extends well into adulthood, our interest is in the growth of a child through early childhood to adulthood at the culmination of the formal school years. Specifically, our focus is on the potential benefits of enhancing connections between prior to school settings and formal education delivered through primary and secondary schools. Why is this important or even necessary? It can be shown that findings about the benefits of establishing a shared language for learning and leadership within schools, is applicable within early childhood settings as well.

Developing partnerships with parents and family members is a traditional focus in early childhood settings. Reinforced by the national policy on early childhood (ACECQA, 2011), it is now well recognised that building

relationships with families can benefit children's development and learning (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2010; De Gioia, 2013; Hadley, 2014). This can be particularly relevant for children from immigrant and refugee backgrounds in overcoming social isolation in their adopted homeland. Alluding to the power imbalance of parent–teacher partnerships, De Gioia (2013) for instance, declared that despite their eagerness to connect with schools, immigrant and refugee mothers “felt disempowered by language and understanding of Australian-centric school practices.” (p. 85). This finding also reinforces the importance of establishing a common language within and across the different sectors of education as being particularly critical in terms of dismantling inequities experienced in accessing education in this country.

The study by Marsh (2015) also identified that leadership enactment is not dependent on those in formal leadership positions or limited to any one section of a community. Likewise in early childhood settings, there is recognition of educational leadership being distributed beyond the positional roles of those such as centre directors (Colmer, Waniganayake & Field, 2014) and including others such as municipal council staff managing early childhood settings in local communities (Heikka, 2013). These emerging studies highlight the interdependence amongst stakeholders and the recognition of distributed leadership enactment within early childhood organisations with relatively small number of staff such as childcare centres and preschools.

Typically, those who occupy senior leadership and management positions within an organisation have the authority to influence local decision-making, and the remit of their power will vary according contextual factors. In this instance, the extent to which positional leaders can impact the development of building connections between schools and early childhood organisations presents as an important starting point for further research. The findings by Campbell-Evans et al. (2014) also highlight the importance of learning to collaborate with school colleagues. They noted that early childhood staff saw it as a priority to develop “skills to work in teams in order to build a culture of reflection and improvement” (p. 44).

It is clear that future investigations can appraise and harness the benefits of collaboration between and across early childhood and school staff who work with the same children and families in our communities. The concept of ‘presence’ as described and applied to school leaders by Marsh (2015) is relatively under studied within early childhood contexts. However, the importance of the relational nature of leadership is well understood by early childhood scholars (see Aubrey, 2011; Hujala, Waniganayake & Rodd, 2013).

Given the importance of building trusting relationships in delivering high quality programs for children, the extent to which the qualities of school leaders who are considered ‘present’ as identified by Marsh (2015) is applicable within early childhood settings invites further exploration.

CONCLUSION

The process of creating shared meaning is a critical task of leadership and is a key step in supporting reciprocity. As noted earlier in this chapter, we are also reminded of the sense of collective responsibility that Duignan (2012) refers to in his leadership writing. Accordingly, it is this collective sense of engagement that we also want to encourage in inviting everyone to come to the table to begin the conversation to build seamless connections between teaching and learning that occurs within early childhood and school classrooms.

Within the context of the all-pervasive influence of technology, learning today is widely recognised as ever present and as a life-long phenomenon (Cheng, 2008). Whilst formal education structures predominantly group students together based on age, the processes of learning is not restricted to these convenient organisational arrangements located in schools and early childhood settings. Equally, leadership that improves learning is a phenomenon that is not limited to the confines of any particular sector. The central message of this chapter has been to expose and explore the potential for making connections between early childhood and school education. In making connections, it is recognised that learning and leadership cannot be contained within educational structures and, more work is needed to bridge this false divide.

By building closer connections between early childhood and school education, relationships and collaboration with children, parents, staff and the community at large can be enhanced. These community connections built through strategic alliances can in turn, auger well in achieving better outcomes for everyone concerned with the long-term future of all children and their families in our community.



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