

# Leadership in early childhood education: The case for pedagogical praxis

by

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## Abstract

In this conceptual paper we examine the context of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in England and the underpinning pre-dominant ideologies to explore how these impact on the framing of leadership. The English context entails several contradictions (antinomies) at ontological, epistemological and axiological levels and is heavily influenced by an ideological struggle concerning the value of play within the sector as opposed to a climate of child performativity. Moreover, the predominately female workforce (a factor itself) has faced relentless changes in terms of qualifications and curriculum reforms in the recent years. With the introduction of the graduate leader qualification [Early Years Teacher Status (EYT)] a vast body of research has been seeking to conceptualise what leadership means for ECEC. In this paper we argue that these attempts are helpful and contribute to this discourse of leadership, but we need to think of it not only abstractly, but practically as well. Thus, we conclude, our (re)conceptualisation of leadership should locate it as pedagogical praxis after evaluating the inherent deep dispositions of leaders in conjunction with their history, surrounding culture and subjective perspectives/realities.

**Key Words:** pedagogy, praxis, leadership, early childhood education and care, pedagogical leadership

## Introduction

The field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in England can be described as a confusion of intent, with proposed leadership constructs and behaviours relevant to that context similarly afflicted (Cohen et al, 2018). Moreover, dominant ideologies are shaping the conceptualisation of what should constitute leadership in the field (Murray and Clark 2013). It is our intention in this paper to unravel this confusion and make the case for leadership to be pedagogical praxis. We will argue that instead of seeking leadership approaches from existing theoretical framings of leadership, in ECEC we should acknowledge its peculiarities and seek a continual interplay between theory, actions and practice in "one unified process" (Gadamer 1979, 275): praxis.

Building on the Aristotelian ideas of praxis, Freire's (1972) notion of acting dialogically, Carr and Kemmis' (1986) critical approach to theory and practice for educational

reform, Furman's (2012) social justice leadership and Grundy's (1987) discussion on knowledge and human interests it has been suggested:

*The focus on praxis is thus not simply about everyday practicalities, professional development, competencies, skills or outcomes, but about deeper concepts, reflexivity, processes, actions and interactions whilst being deeply cogniscent of environments of power and values. Praxeology leads not to the singularity and comparative hierarchy of 'best' practice model, but promotes Joy Goodman's (2001) notion of 'wise practice', that is, a selection of professional responses which are considered, flexible and chosen as appropriate to context (Pascal and Bertram, 2012, p. 481).*

Our arguments presented here claim that this notion of praxis will allow for successful engagement by practitioners in the quest to provide effective learning environments for pre-school children in England and maybe [to be adopted](#) elsewhere.

### **The *antinomies* of English early childhood education and care (ECEC)**

In this section we aim to address some key issues in the ECEC in England. We characterise these issues as antinomies – a term that refers to situations that are risen due to contradictory ideologies, laws or actions. As in England ECEC is still a split between childcare and education and there are still a number of patchy services either under the umbrella of care or education, a situation which creates a contradiction (antinomy) between care and education in early childhood and “*positions early childhood professional practice in contrast to the managerial and technocratic language that dominates the discourse on early childhood education and care*” (Urban, 2014: 128).

To start with, the first antinomy rises from a mixed economy of state-maintained, state-funded and privately owned and maintained practice or as they are known, ‘settings’ in ECEC in England (Cohen et al 2018). This is partly because in England there is no requirement for the compulsory education of children under the age of five years and, consequently, no coordinated state provision for those who do participate. There is strong evidence of government commitment to ensuring effective education and care is available, however, which was initially manifested through the introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in 2008 (DCSF, 2007, 2008) and has been supported financially from central funding, but this commitment falls short of providing

state-maintained settings. The outcome is that the mandatory curriculum and standards of care contained within the succeeding iterations of EYFS (DfE 2014a and b, 2017) have been delivered through a range of providers which stretches from young children being educated at home to formal, designated practices. Outside of the home these have included single person child-minding services, nurseries, kindergartens (many of which are privately owned and operate on a profit-making basis) and pre-school provision in independent and state-maintained primary schools. Currently the government has announced that there is a “*15 hour entitlement for the most disadvantaged two-year-olds, 15 hour entitlement for parents of three- and four-year-olds (the universal entitlement); and 30 hour entitlement for working parents of three- and four-year-olds (the extended entitlement)*” (DfE 2018a, p. 4).

At a basic minimum, therefore, all pre-school children can receive education and care outside of the home, but in many instances the cost of such provision exceeds the amount provided by central government (Fullfact, 2017). In other words, within ECEC provision a market economy exists which is a major consideration for leaders of settings within the sector (Ang 2014).

This leads to another antinomy which is related to the structure of the pre-school provision in England which is far from coherent, a situation which gives rise to how the sector is accountable (e.g. Nutbrown 2012, 2013, 2018, , Osgood et al, 2017, ). This requirement is a joint responsibility which involves several agencies, but is one which operates as closely as possible to a failproof system following some unfortunate and notorious cases of child welfare in recent years where the systems in place failed to protect these children [e.g. Victoria Climbié (House of Commons, 2003) and Baby Peter (Lord Laming Report, 2009)]. This brings into question the ethics of care that are core in ECEC (Yelland, 1988, Tronto 1993 and 1995) where:

*“[T]he central values of the ethics of care, responsibility and communication lead to a commitment to deal with differences, not only between individuals and social groups, but also within the self [...] has the capacity to deal with diversity and alterity, with the fact that subjects are different and in this sense both “strange” and “knowable” to each other” (Sevenhuijsen, 1998, p. 60).*

Subsequently instead of government promoting “*ethics as creative practice, requiring the making of contextualised ethical decisions, rather than following universal rules or codes*” (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005, p. 73), the outcome of such cases is that the quality of ECEC is monitored by agencies working under guidance from Ofsted, the national school inspection service. In terms of accountability for young children, ECEC is responsible for educational goals with the care and health of young children being the responsibility of social services and health authorities. The EYFS is central to the way in which such provision is run and provides the key focus of attention for each setting, each of which are required to implement a mandatory curriculum and standards of care. At government level there is an intent “*to move decisively away from the idea that teaching young children is somehow less important or inferior to teaching school age children*” (National College for Teaching and Leadership 2013, p. 6), but nevertheless there is still a dichotomy in staffs’ status, pay, qualifications between private and maintained sectors that implement the EYFS (Barron, 2016, p. 327). Longitudinal studies (e.g. Sylva et al 2004; Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002) have demonstrated, however, that high quality of early childhood services and provision is related to “*strong leadership*” (Roberts-Holmes 2013, pp. 340-1), concluding that “*settings which gained a graduate leader with EYPS [Early Years Professional Status- a graduate qualification now replaced by EYT] made significant improvements in quality for pre-school children, as compared with settings which did not. The evidence also suggests that EYPS provided ‘added value’ over and above gaining a graduate.*” (Mathers et al. 2011, p. 2).

Further complicating the increasing pressures for accountability, based on measures of children in a context of increasing managerialism, is the neoliberal emphasis on standardised outcomes and outputs (Goldstein, et. al, 2018, Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017; Palaiologou 2017; Osgood, et al, 2017, Nicholson and Palaiologou 2016, Lloyd, 2015, Ang, 2012). Top down imposed standards appear to be the ‘official’ approach of quality, characterised by an objective reality that can be measured, evaluated, assured and inspected (Moss 2016). At policy level the governments in England have focused on “*performance indicators chosen for ease of measurement and control rather than because they measure quality of performance accurately*” (O’Neil, 2002, p.54).

There appears to be a replacement of what Ball (2003) calls a governing knowledge where reporting what we do, rather than what we actually do, matters. In essence this is an epistemological reduction. This is in contrast to the work of Lubeck (1991) who proposed we question the ‘*what*’ and ‘*why*’ of doing certain things and *whose* interests these actions served “*to begin to fill in what is missing and what could be*” (p. 168).

Currently, in ECEC, the government seemingly seeks to create a universal linear developmental line which promotes certain truths about children’s development and learning. The recent publication of the new early learning goals, that children need to meet when attending ECEC, to be piloted in September 2018 (DfE 2018b), includes the proposal to use a baseline assessment test of children at the ages between 4-5 in Reception Year so the schools can compare and measure the progress children have subsequently by the end of Key Stage 2 (at 11 years of age), but seems to leave no space for the child to be a child, instead creating the performer child where outcomes, goals and outputs are observable and measurable.

*It assumes that children need to progress to the next stage of development, from maybe ‘lesser child’ to ‘better child’. The terms ‘development’, ‘developmental goals’ or ‘learning goals’ invoke a sense that children are not yet developed (whole/holistic) and thus need developing (‘improving’), or that there is an existing, pre-determined place at which a child may arrive (presumably school). (Palaiologou, 2016, pp. 217-218).*

Earlier Moss, et al., (2000), in critiquing ECEC in England, argued that “*the process* [of “new managerialism”] *includes the internalisation by early childhood workers of standards, targets and appropriate practice [...] the ‘quality standards’ are not externally applied, but also come to ‘govern the soul’ of practitioners*” (108). Since then the ‘new era of managerialism’ in ECEC has become a continual feature in communities of practice that are driven by learning goals and performativity, thus ignoring the emotional labour (term coined by Sachs and Blackmore, 1998, and extended by Moyles, 2001 and 2006) undertaken and the work characterised by the ethics of care (Chalke 2013), leaving ECEC “*to remain grounded in a fixed body of developmental knowledge, honouring one culture, one history, one set of values and one concept of childhood*” (Yelland and Bentley, 2018, p.11).

Osgood et al (2017) argue that the “terrors of performativity” to which Ball alludes are felt by practitioners as the rate and place of policy reform in the ECEC intensified. We conclude that the increased demands for the demonstration of competence meant that professional judgment was subordinated to the requirements of performativity, meaning what is produced may be viewed as cynical compliance with the demands of performativity demanded by the current policy context (the EYFS). This creates an antinomy :

*One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a program constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding. (Freire, 1972, p. 93)*

Until this point we have focused on policy antinomies that “*is grounded in a fixed body of developmental knowledge*” and “*fails to respect*” the ECEC community of practice which, we suggest, represents an external ontological antinomy. Within the field of ECEC, however, there are axiological antinomies that are key factors framing leadership decision-making and behaviour within pre-school settings in England.

Firstly, the pressure exerted by government policy level seems to be to prepare young children for their entry to compulsory education in the year they reach five years of age, typically manifested as school, frequently making this the most important focus for practitioners. There are many possible reasons for this, the most important of which are economic i.e. pay scales, who gets the job, who is promoted, who obtains funding and who is in charge. This places the sector within the same performativity criteria (i.e. standards, outcomes, outputs and goals) as those faced by those who work in compulsory education. This has led to an ideological struggle within ECEC to demonstrate that play, play-based learning, playful learning and play-based pedagogy are valued. Campaigning for the value of play is central to ECEC communities of practice within the sector as they seek to legitimise their role as educators (i.e., BERA ECE SIG, 2003; Wood, 2014). Practitioners within ECEC settings are subject to a nationalised curriculum (EYFS) that must be implemented, however, and this exerts pressure for conformance to standardised teaching at the expense of play.

Secondly, a predominately female workforce has affected the status of the qualifications, created an ideology that women do things differently and influenced the expectations for leadership behaviour. The ECEC workforce consistently features low level qualifications and pay (Osgood, et al., 2017), yet the demands contained within government policies anticipate skilful leaders and highly qualified professional staff.

This situation may be creating ontological insecurities among practitioners as seeking to establish their professional identity when working with young children, leading Chalke (2013) to suggest:

*It is important to seek to capture and promote aspects of a ground-upwards professionalism such as: the pedagogical approach that allows recognition of work with the child, as well as with their parent and carers; the recognition of the mindful requirements of an ethic of care; and the importance of reflexivity for professional practice” (Chalke 2013: 219).*

To conclude, in a policy environment based on neoliberal managerialism, the field of ECEC in England presents several antinomies and complexities. Those working in the sector, typically a low paid and under qualified female workforce, thus are often required to fulfil more than one function, to be accountable, show curriculum fidelity, demonstrate data driven ‘quality’ and make sure that children will be ready for formal school at the age of five years in contrast to developing children’s capability as learners through play-based pedagogy. All these have led to increasing confusion regarding their profile, role and identity.

### **The oxymora of developing leaders within the sector**

The EYFS was preceded by the introduction of new specialist qualification in 2006 (the Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) that was expected to increase the standards of people working in the sector, with the ultimate intention “*to deliver the Early Years Foundation Stage for children from birth to age five and provide pedagogical leadership in early years settings*” (DfE, 2017, p.14). The EYPS was a degree level programme with the award being based on the ability of the practitioner to successfully engage with and apply theory to practice. This qualification was intended to be perceived as equivalent to qualified teacher status (QTS) that already existed for those working in primary and secondary education. EYPs were thus seen as ‘graduate

leaders' with the expectation that they would enhance pedagogy in the field, with an overarching government intention to ensure in time there would be at least one in every setting. This provided a seemingly clear signal as to the type of leader that was to be developed and to supersede the "*vagueness and haziness of what is meant by leadership in early childhood*" (Rodd, 2006: 4-5). Further investment in training and development saw the replacement of EYPS in 2013 by the new qualification of Early Years Teacher (EYT), which was to be available both as an undergraduate and postgraduate degree.

These qualifications did not address the key leadership challenge of the sector, however, which is to identify the point of accountability which normally "*falls on the leader/manager of the early childhood setting, despite the fact so many others also have a leadership role*" (Male and Nicholson, 2016, p 315). That statement is a recognition that formal leaders, those with the power to sanction others, have a wealth of responsibility that stretches beyond the leadership of pedagogy within the setting and includes a duty of care. There has been a substantial increase in the body of knowledge during the last decade which has examined the peculiarities and complexities of leadership of ECEC in England (e.g. Lloyd, and Hallett, 2010, Ang 2012; Rodd 2012; Davis 2014; Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2016,). Such work led Murray and MacDowell Clark (2013. p. 293) to call for "*new conceptual frameworks to better suit the educational purpose [of ECEC] and provide more sustainable models for the future*".

There has also been substantial debate and multiple claims that leadership in the sector is different from other educational contexts and there is a need to theorise leadership in ECEC and avoid the temptation to "*import mindscapes and models, concepts and definitions*", but rather to invent them as "*you can't borrow the character, you have to create it*" (Sergiovanni, 1992: 214). Thus, it is argued, models that evolved from other occupations, such as 'distributed' and 'transformational' leadership, cannot be adopted simply as the demands of the role "*concerns relational leadership, groups of people collaboratively working together to complete tasks and goals rather than being the work of one leader*" (Siraj-Blatchford and Hallett, 2014: 17). The revised EYFS of 2012 highlighted the centrality of those leading early childhood settings having to work within a framework of legislation and other support agencies to

“reconcile the expertise and efforts of all other adults engaged in the support of pre-school children” (Male and Nicholson, 2016: 317).

The conclusion to draw is that whilst the knowledge base of leadership in early childhood and care in England is still developing, practical and applicable solutions to specific contexts are required – the concept of ‘knowing in action’ (Schön, 1983). The challenge, suggest Aubrey, Godfrey and Harris (2012, p. 27), is now based *“in formalizing the leadership knowledge that practitioners believe, imagine and reflect upon that, while legitimate, must also be warranted with solid evidence provided to justify the new knowledge claims being made”*.

Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007) had earlier drawn the conclusion that the focus of leadership in the sector should be on children’s learning, a conclusion which moves beyond merely providing care and preparing young children for school. They argue for “a contextual literacy” which have the children’s learning outcomes at the centre and propose to think of leadership in ECEC as leadership for learning.

### **(Re)framing leadership in early childhood education and care**

As shown above, since the introduction of the graduate leader in ECEC in England, research showed an increasing interest in leadership in the field. The trend was to examine approaches to leadership that existed in other forms of education and attempted to apply them in ECEC. A consensus among research was that as ECEC is different in nature from other forms of education it was necessary to rethink leadership as well. We endorse this view to reframe leadership in ECEC, especially in the light of some of the antinomies we addressed earlier. The ‘contextual literacy’ of ECEC is shaped by the ambiguous ideology of play, the female dominance of the workforce, the emotional nature of the labour and the ethics of care.

Thus, some turned to feminism paradigms in their quest for reframing leadership as the emotionality, partiality, contextual specificity was attributed in leadership by women (Sachs and Blackmore, 1998, Moyles. 2001). Others entertained the idea of distributed leadership as a democratic approach to leadership (Muijs, et al., 2004 Spillane and Diamond, 2004), whereas others encouraged us to reframe leadership under the lens of participative pedagogy (Murray and MacDowall, 2013) or

praxeological terms (Pascal and Bertram 2012). Finally, some research made a strong case to think leadership in its context and frame leadership with pedagogical lenses (Heikka and Waniganayake 2011; Male and Palaiologou, 2012).

Although such attempts are laudable and have opened the public debate on what constitutes leadership in ECEC, we argue that they either examine leadership at an axiomatic level (*what theory is the best fit?*), or an ontological level (*what actions are the best fit?*) or epistemological level (*what lessons have been learned?*). Moreover, reflecting on Gadotti (1996) who caution us that “*in pedagogy the practice is the horizon, the aim of the theory. Therefore the educationalist lives the instigating dialectic between his or her daily life – the lived school and the projected school – which attempts to inspire a new school*” (p. 7), we propose to rethink the “horizon of practice”, “the aims of theory” and the context in leadership. We argue here that leadership is not only based on actions and reflections. If we approach leadership in that sense, it lives a sense of, using Freire’s concept, ‘unfinishedness’.

### **(Re)conceptualise leadership: Leadership as Pedagogical praxis**

Building on all these attempts to reframe leadership in ECEC, and based on our previous work (Palaiologou and Male 2015 & 2017; Palaiologou and Male, 2016; Feldges, Male, Palaiologou and Burwood, 2015) we argue in Aristotelian terms that, leadership embodies *techne* (craftsmanship) as it is “*an ethical and moral craft that draws from conceptual and abstract knowledge [...][engages in ongoing critical reflective inquiry*” (Black Murtadha 2007, p. 10) and *phronesis* (practical wisdom) as it requires to “*make[s] a wise and prudent practical judgment about how to act in **this situation***” (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p. 190, original emphasis). Moreover, it is about *poiesis* (making action/s to allow “*moving back to forth in a critical way between reflecting and acting on the world*” (Brown, 2004, p. 96). Thus, in the ecology of a community (contextualised situation), leadership seeks an equilibrium between *sophia* (theory), *phronesis* and *episteme* (practical wisdom and knowledge which is constructed through critical reflective inquiry (Freire, 1972). We have been stimulated to think of leadership as pedagogical praxis not “*at an abstract level without detailed analysis of **what leadership as praxis** actually means and entails*” (Furman, 2012, p. 203, original emphasis), but as a balanced interplay of all the Aristotelian concepts: knowledge (*episteme*), theory (*sophia*), practical wisdom (*phronesis*), craftsmanship

(techne) and the taking of action(s) (poiesis) in “*one unified process*” (Gadamer 1979, p. 275).

This led us to bring together the terms ‘pedagogy’ and ‘leadership’ in the light of the above understanding of leadership. Pedagogical leadership in the twenty-first century, we argued, extends the principle of ‘leadership for learning’ beyond the classroom to embrace the community (Male and Palaiologou, 2012, 2015 & 2017; Palaiologou and Male, 2016). This contrasted with earlier definitions which perceived pedagogy to be the direct relationship between teacher and learner (e.g. Sergiovanni, 1992; Heikka and Waniganayake, 2011) which, in turn, seemingly provided the motive for the introduction of EYPS to lead learning in early childhood settings. Our construct of pedagogical leadership, however, sees the formal leader of educational institutions taking on a much wider role in the quest to create ‘*one unified process*’ of all learning opportunities. Thus, in this paper we locate leadership as pedagogical praxis in ECEC, arguing that as it is a complex sector, the concept offers opportunities to “formalise the leadership knowledge” as it:

*involves the continual, dynamic interaction among knowledge acquisition, deep reflection, and action at two levels - the intrapersonal and the extrapersonal - with the purpose of transformation and liberation. At the intrapersonal level, praxis involves self-knowledge, critical self-reflection, and acting to transform oneself as a leader for social justice. At the extrapersonal level, praxis involves knowing and understanding systemic social justice issues, reflecting on these issues, and taking action to address them.”* (Furman 2012: 203).

In portraying ECEC, Yelland and Bentley (2018, p. 2) suggest:

*The lives we lead are complex; as early childhood educators, there is a pressing need to make sense of these complexities and their implications for the lives and educational experiences of young children.*

In that sense, we seek to locate leadership as pedagogical praxis, in the Aristotelian term of praxis, and subsequently identify it as ‘pedagogical leadership’. In rethinking leadership as pedagogical praxis we do not seek for prior knowledge of the right ways of doing things, but seek instead to examine the active conditions in any given environment (*hexis*).

When conceptualising leadership in ECEC as pedagogical praxis, emphasis and examination should be given to in-depth understanding of the environment (*hexis*) that

impact upon ECEC such as its historicity, culture and subjective perspective/realities of the antinomies and oxymora evident within the sector. This requires the exercising of judgment, practical wisdom, common sense or prudence where “*the phenomena modelled are social, and thus answer back in ways natural phenomena do not*” (Flybjerg, 2006, p. 39). Such an approach seeks polyphony and engages in “*theorising the foundational concepts of leadership and pedagogy*” (Heikka and Waniganayake, 2001, p. 499).

Thus, we contend that the axiomatic elements of praxis are episteme (knowledge), sophia (theory), phronesis (practical wisdom), techne (craftmanship), and poiesis (the taking of action/s) are key features when leadership is examined in ECEC and should shape the environment (hexis) when we attempt to understand the essence of leadership in the neoliberal managerialist nature of ECEC in England. Such an examination will lead to epistemological constructs that might lead to home grown constructions of leadership in ECEC where “*action[s] works with theory*” (Foster, 1986, p. 189), instead of borrowing leadership framings from other levels of education. More experimental work is needed in this regard, however, but from our work so far, the concept of praxis can guide the development of epistemological constructions of leadership in ECEC and maybe find:

*The purpose of a theoretical discipline [in this case: pedagogical leadership] is the pursuit of truth through contemplation; its telos [=the end of purpose] is the attainment of knowledge for its own sake. The purpose of the productive sciences is to make something; their telos is the production of some artefact. The practical disciplines are those sciences which deal with ethical and political life; their telos is practical wisdom and knowledge. (Carr & Kemmis 1986: 32)*

### **Conclusions: Pedagogical leadership as *telos***

To conclude, it has been argued here that pedagogical leadership in ECEC should not be viewed only as action[s] working with theory, but an interplay of several contextually related factors (hexis) in any given situation. Thus, we propose viewing leadership as pedagogical praxis. The community of ECEC practice is in need of defending its values in the light of policy reforms in England and are under ontological pressure as the divide between ECEC and formal schooling is still present. Thus, we argue we should understand and construct knowledge to represent the relationship between care and knowledge under the name of education, whilst paying attention to

the living ecology of the community of practice, instead of ignoring all the antinomies and oxymora that lead to borrowing leadership models from outside the field of ECEC. Praxis offers us the lenses to examine where the pressures on accountability, marketisation, datafication and readiness for school can allow us to “*describe, transform, arouse emotions, investigate, evoke, impress [...] do good*” (Demetrio, 1996, p. 155) and develop “*education for use*” (Lindeman 1944, p. 103).

In that sense, we will conclude that pedagogical leadership is rooted in the specific context and pays attention to its own environment through engaging with the historicity, culture and subjective perspectives/realities contexts that are involved. Thus, the community in ECEC (researchers and practitioners) should seek its own end purpose (telos) rather than trying to bridge theory (sophia) from disparate and different communities.

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