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Leading for quality improvement: a comparative research agenda in early childhood education in England and Hong Kong

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This paper discusses the changing concepts of leadership in early childhood education (ECE) in England and Hong Kong during a period of significant education reform. We seek to illustrate the interplay between the impact of the policy agenda and the emerging quality leadership perspectives found in the theoretical literature, by first considering the recent education reform context in both England and Hong Kong, before examining the importance of leadership for quality provision given the constraints and drivers of policy expectation. The paper explores transformational, distributed and authentic models of leadership in the ‘New Leadership’ paradigm and uses these constructions to examine the developing problems and opportunities for quality leadership as expected by the current policy reform agenda and understood by the practitioners. In conclusion, we raise questions about the interplay between policy agendas and the development of theoretical models of leadership for ECE in England and Hong Kong.

Introduction

It is apparent that the leadership of early childhood education (ECE) settings is a critical factor in facilitating and developing quality (Pence and Moss 1994, Melhuish 2004, Osgood 2004, Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2006). The leader is regarded as responsible for creating the culture and conditions for quality ECE provision and is accountable to the community and/or the government for their leadership of the quality agenda. A constant stream of national strategies, government initiatives and related policies (Ho et al. 2010), have signalled a move towards a more rigorous

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approach to delivering integrated and high quality ECE services for children and families in many countries, such as the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, China including Hong Kong, Japan and Singapore. However, it appears that assumptions may have been made by policy makers about the relationship between quality and leadership, as there seems to be little agreement or clarity as to what are the dynamics between these two concepts as shaped by policy agendas and as understood by practitioners. In this paper, leadership for quality improvement in ECE in England and Hong Kong is used as an illustrative case for discussion. A number of different countries could have been selected as illustrative cases. However, the comparative similarities in the history of policy developments between England and Hong Kong, alongside their more recent focus on developing quality and leadership, albeit in differing ways, helps to generate discussion. Aiming at identifying issues for future comparative studies, we will be looking at some fundamental questions regarding leadership and its inter-relationship with quality ECE provision in both administrations.

In the following sections, we explore the various policy drivers that shape what a leader might be and do. We then offer a critical examination of the theoretical models in the ‘New leadership’ paradigm that are currently being proposed as well as engaging in a debate on the link between quality and leadership and whether a model of effective leadership can ever be created that will ensure quality ECE.

For clarification, our reference to quality refers to the quality frameworks designed by governments in both England and Hong Kong, although we are troubled by the preference for measurable outcomes over the many, non-measurable factors that may also indicate a worthwhile experience for young children and their families. Thus, we acknowledge the complexity of seeking a clear, agreed definition of quality (see Ho et al. (2010) for discussion concerning quality in ECE).

**Policy development in relationship to leadership**

Both England and Hong Kong offer state entitlements to parents to access ECE. In England, parents are now able to access a free early years education place for 15 hours a week, for 38 weeks a year for their three- and four-year-olds. The new Coalition Government in the UK (Conservative/Liberal Democrat, elected in May 2010) has signalled their plans to legislate for early years education to be extended to all two-year-olds living in disadvantaged areas (HM Treasury 2010). In Hong Kong, the government implemented the education voucher scheme in 2006, whereby parents of children at 3–6 years-old are entitled for fee assistance in form of an education voucher. Within the funding of ECE places in both England and Hong Kong, there is a quest for quality as a target for policy development which has been increasing in intensity in the recent years (Ho et al. 2010). In response, both England and Hong Kong have witnessed a number of developments that have had implications for both the quality and the leadership of ECE provision, including new curriculum guidelines and upgrading teacher qualifications. In addition, Hong Kong
has implemented a quality assurance mechanism and made moves to harmonize pre-primary education services, whilst in England there have been moves towards integrating education and care and a greater emphasis on the use of quality assurance mechanisms (see Ho et al. 2010). For both England and Hong Kong, these policy developments have rapidly taken place in the last decade and have posed new demands on pre-school principals, managers, head teachers and ‘leaders’.

Prior to the last decade of rapid policy developments, both England and Hong Kong had witnessed a relative calmness in ECE policy. Only minimal support in the areas of legislation, finance, inspections, teacher training and curriculum was provided for pre-schools in either administration, pre-school education being what Opper (1992) described as the ‘Cinderella’ of the education system. The minimal intervention approach adopted by both England and Hong Kong led to ECE provision evolving via a mixed market approach resulting in a dominance of private and voluntary sector providers, which is still evident in the supply of ECE today. In England, the Coalition Government look set to continue this focus on the mixed market to deliver the free early years education entitlement (HM Treasury 2010: 34). In particular, the Coalition has signalled their support for capacity building in the voluntary and community sector, as a part of their wider ‘Big Society’ agenda. In England, 58% of three-year-olds attended ECE in the private and voluntary sector, 37% in the maintained sector and 4% in independent schools (Department for Children, Schools and Families [DCSF] 2009). The figures alter for four-year-olds where 78% attended ECE in the maintained sector. This is largely accounted for by the number of schools that have started to offer places to four-year-olds, but are still not willing to offer places to three-year-olds.

In Hong Kong, all pre-school provision is privately run and relies on school fees as the major source of funding for operation. Though ECE is not compulsory in Hong Kong (the same as in England), about 90% of children aged 3–6 years old attend pre-schools for the purpose of custodial care and preparation for primary education (Census and Statistics Department 2006). The implications of this mixed market in the case of leadership are that ECE settings are left with a variety of leadership structures. Settings can operate under a head teacher or principal who has responsibility for a school or nursery school, a cooperative structure, voluntary management committee or a private management board. Each of these structures will have different implications for the leadership of ECE. Further, the mixed market is underpinned by the principles of school choice and market forces. Thus, leaders are responding to the demands of policy makers and parents; and leading quality becomes about meeting their demands rather than ensuring a good and worthwhile experience for children.

Whilst those who are leading ECE settings may be operating in a variety of structures, they all share a similar history in the discursive production of who is a member of the ECE workforce. The attributes of a member of the ECE workforce were largely entwined with concepts of mothering. Generally, some aspects of maternal duties, such as feeding and hygiene, which are recognized as the domain of families, are part of
the responsibilities of ECE institutions. For this reason, pre-school teaching has been viewed as an extension of mothering in both England and Hong Kong. However, the maternal base to ECE has been widely criticized, largely because it is not seen as sufficient to ensure quality practice. For both England and Hong Kong, quality of ECE was and is central to the policy reforms. Part of the rapid policy developments in developing ECE in both administrations has been centred on the quality of the provision (particularly in relation to staff qualifications). However, the drivers behind these changes vary. In Hong Kong, due to the rapid decrease of the birth rate in the mid-1990s, the public view on the function of ECE institutions began to shift from child rearing to developmental nurturing (Ho 2008). During the 1990s, dissatisfaction with the quality of ECE provision was broadly shaped by the criticisms that the education services provided by pre-schools no longer satisfied parental expectations on developmental nurturing. The public perceived that the roots of poor quality pre-school services were explained purely by minimal and inappropriate professional training and a lack of effective leadership. In England, the evidence-based policy making rhetoric of the former Labour Government has led to a focus on ‘what works’ (Ball 2008) in terms of improving the quality of ECE provision. The findings of studies such as the effective provision of pre-school education study (Sylva et al. 2004) have dominated debates around the need to up-skill and professionalize the workforce. Given the established link between quality ECE and an improvement in child outcomes, highly qualified staff and effective leadership are assumed to be central to ensuring good quality provision—being a mother is no longer regarded as sufficient qualification to work in ECE.

The criticisms of the quality of pre-school provision have given an impetus in both England and Hong Kong Governments to prioritize ECE reform on the policy agenda. The central focus of the reforms is to raise service standards and increase accountability. In Hong Kong, the 1997 Policy Address stipulated that pre-school principals must have advanced training at higher diploma level, viewed as an initial move to address the problems of ineffective leadership in ECE provision. In 2000, the introduction of a quality assurance mechanism to monitor the service quality of pre-schools signifies the role of the Local Government shifting from lassiez faire to legitimated control (Ho 2007). Following this, upgrading the professional qualification to one-year pre-service training at certificate level in 2003, then requiring all teachers to obtain the two-year higher diploma and principals to receive the bachelor degree by 2012 are evidence of the Hong Kong Government’s commitment to building up the principals’ and teachers’ capacity for fundamental, internal change at school level.

In England, a first step in the drive to improve quality was to consolidate the qualifications on offer, whilst also responding to their relative low level (Cameron et al. 2001, Owen 2002, Bennett 2003, Miller 2008, Osgood 2011). However, policy developments have focused on professionalization in ECE primarily in terms of increasing qualification levels and as a result various measures have been introduced to this end, e.g. to
ensure that there is a graduate leader in all full day care settings by 2015. Funding has been made available to support the training agenda, such as the Transformation Fund and the Graduate Leader Fund, both of which are particularly targeted at the creation of early years professionals (EYPs) (DCSF 2007). However, the agreement to professionalize the workforce did not come with an agreed definition of what is a professional. The focus on training has resulted in questions about how those with significant experience of working with children will relate to the agenda (Miller 2008), whether the drive for qualifications could restrict entrants to the workforce (Moss 2000) and if the new roles are being implemented too quickly, with too little input from those working in the sector (Osgood 2006, 2011, McGillivray 2008, 2011, Miller 2008). The imposition of training is considered to be evidence of Central Government imposing tighter controls and demanding higher quality on a predominantly private and voluntary sector market (Rao and Li 2009). However, under the Coalition Government, the role of leaders in ECE looks uncertain, with the potential subsequent loosening of some of these controls. The Children’s Workforce Development Council (CWDC), the organization responsible for the professionalization agenda across the children’s workforce, has now been subsumed into the Department of Education. Children’s Centres (one of the many types of providers offering ECE in England) no longer have to hire someone with both qualified teacher and EYP status. Rather, the Department for Education has signalled a move towards giving (all) professionals more autonomy. One aspect of which is to allow Children’s Centres to use their professional judgment to determine the appropriate level of graduate support needed in their early years setting. Whilst previous initiatives have been to consolidate the variation in who leads ECE settings, there is a question as to whether we will now see more fragmentation developing.

However, whilst there has been an explosion in policy interest in establishing the qualification levels of those working in ECE, there has not been the same priority given to understanding and developing effective models of leadership. A strong leadership identity and heritage would seem essential at this point in time as increased government attention, the pressures towards globalization and ‘the growing hold of “neo-liberal agendas” leading to corporatization’ (Woodrow and Busch 2008: 84) insists that ECE leaders are clear sighted and visionary and make a stand for the communities they serve. Early discussions about ECE leadership in England initially centred on the substantial portfolio of evidence and theory of educational leadership. Models of educational leadership, whilst moving towards collaborative styles of working were more typically characterized as minimizing collegiate behaviour in favour of a more top-down approach (Harris 2001). A shift in thinking occurred in 2004, when early years specific training was provided that began to explore people-centred models of leadership rather than those that were regarded as bureaucratic and/or hierarchical (Dunlop 2008, Whalley 2011). This shift in emphasis has created an international debate on the best leadership models for ECE. However, we can see that there is still a significant tension between the recognition of the need for visionary leaders and the day-to-day
demand for more bureaucratic, business models of leadership that enables the essential managerial decisions to be made that balance the books and achieve identified outcomes (Dunlop 2005). Such tensions inhibit the development of credible ECE leadership models and create a complex paradox that is difficult for new leaders to surmount. The development of effective leadership models is now entering a period of the unknown as ECE practitioners wait to see what will happen under the Coalition Government. There are questions around whether different leadership styles will evolve under different graduate professionals and between different sectors, as well as questions as to who will be the advocates of ECE professionals now that CWDC has lost its Non-Departmental Public Body status.

In Hong Kong, although pre-schools have relatively simple management structures, it has usually been administered in a bureaucratic style. Leadership has long been exercised in a form of centralized and top-down practice. Before 1997, the majority of pre-school teachers entered the profession with 11 years of basic education and without prior professional training. Most of their so-called ‘training’ was done on the job while working as class teachers. They were trained in a form of apprenticeship (Ho 2006: 307). This appears to be deeply rooted in the mindsets of pre-school teachers who seldom play a role in initiating and leading changes. Instead, they tend to define their role and responsibilities as being limited to teaching and strictly implement the decisions of the school management. In its turn, school management tends to tailor its curriculum design in favour of parental preferences with a strong market orientation (Opper 1992, Li 2006). The professional training policies after 1997 have given momentum to the processes of quality improvement in pre-schools focused on the bottom-up change led by teachers. The teachers’ desire for professional autonomy in curriculum and pedagogical decisions potentially has created tensions in the relationship with school management. The Hong Kong Government introduced the education voucher scheme tightly coupling with the new curriculum policy and quality school review framework in 2006. The education voucher scheme further promotes school choice and competition in ECE which have been already shaped by market forces. The new quality review policy represents an important change in the role of teachers, who are now expected to be actively involved in a ‘bottom-up approach’ to enhancing the service quality. These three policy agendas can be understood as a shifting focus of public and political attention in ECE highlighting a flow of new ideologies imported from western developed countries, such as UK, USA, Canada and Australia. A bureaucratic, centralized style of leadership is now criticized for not being able to adequately meet and tackle the complexity of educational problems. The Hong Kong Government advocates a change in principals’ leadership style from a bureaucratic, centralized to a more collaborative, participative style. In order to obtain the funding for school operation under the education voucher scheme, school principals are required to meet the new policy objectives on improving leadership practice. Effective leadership is now defined in Hong Kong as quality oriented, effective and efficient, responsive, participatory, transparent,
equitable and inclusive (Education and Manpower Bureau 2000). However, there are questions around the relevance of quality leadership for the various school stakeholders as the quality criteria can vary depending on an individual's values and interests in a particular cultural context. This is evidenced in a study of effective leadership in Hong Kong preschools. The study indicated a paradox of power in leadership which was characterized by the tension between the dichotomy of centralization and decentralization in the change process. The relationship between the school principal and various school stakeholders incorporated a concept of harmony in collectivist culture that functioned as a powerful tool for releasing the tension embedded in shared decision-making (Ho forthcoming). The study also revealed that perspectives on quality criteria are mediated, filtered and shaped by cultural context. As educational models are culture-bound, the western ideologies of leadership must be critically examined if they are to be successfully transferred to other cultural contexts.

**The new leadership paradigm**

In recent years, there has been a search for models of leadership that promote the importance of relationships (Rodd 2006, Walker et al. 2007, Santer and Cookson 2009, West-Burnham 2009) and are more transformational in nature. Using Hall’s (1996) findings to support her theorizing of leadership, Rodd (2006) argues for a female style of leadership in early childhood that was highlighted as power for rather than power over. It emphasizes building relationships and empowering others for individual growth and group development. It also creates an organizational culture characterized by trust, openness, collaboration and involvement. The models that would seem to fit these requirements best for leadership of ECE are relatively new, forming a ‘New Leadership’ paradigm (Northouse 2010). They include transformational leadership (Bass 1985, Bass and Avolio 1993), distributed leadership (Harris 2004, 2007, Spillane 2005) and authentic leadership (Terry 1993, Begley 2001, Avolio and Gardner 2005). These three models of leadership are strikingly similar as they all concentrate on the importance of relationship with considerable investment in emotional literacy and the personal development of the staff team. The degree to which they differ is the differing emphasis they place on key aspects of leadership such as the sharing of leadership tasks and duties.

Transformational leadership (developed through research conducted by Burns (1978) into political leaders in the USA) was the first iteration of a model of leadership that emphasizes the importance of emotional literacy and personal development and has been significant in shaping leadership practice (Bolman and Deal 1997). Extending the work of Burns, Bass (1985) explored that a transformational leader is required to identify the emotions, values, ethics and goals of the individuals involved in the work, and, using that knowledge, to encourage their followers to take control and responsibility, thereby accomplishing far more than they might otherwise. Transformational leadership is therefore closely linked to
enhancing the autonomy and professional freedom of followers, to improve personal development and the realization of an individual's full potential. Transformational leadership is regarded as effective in a variety of different situations, promoting a shared philosophy in moral dimensions to work and creating a culture of putting aside self-interests for the good of others; the organization or the community (Northouse 2010). However, Northouse (2010), in his review of leadership models warns that there is a risk that transformational leadership might be abused with followers being encouraged to adopt a vision that may not be right or appropriate. Such criticism is particularly concerning given the lack of clarity over whether the vision is developed by the leader, the management committee, the community or policy makers in both the England and Hong Kong context.

In the complex, multi-professional world of ECE, it is not hard to see why distributed leadership has been embraced (Spillane 2005, National College 2006). Earley and Weindling’s (2004) synthesis of research has demonstrated that it is flexible, negotiable and adaptable. Whilst Aubrey’s (2007) empirical work has demonstrated that distributed leadership allows for effective collaboration, interaction and interdependence as well as the development of powerful and sustainable learning communities. Distributed leadership (Gronn 2002) emphasizes the sharing of leadership responsibilities by many individuals within the organization, often at different levels and in different positions, using strengths and availability rather than hierarchical position, thus enhancing the personal development of staff members. However, reviews of literature on distributed leadership have strongly criticized it as a fashionable trend lacking conceptual clarity (Harris 2007, Hartley 2007) and for being too flexible to be taken seriously as a substantial model of leadership. Aubrey (2007) also finds that an egalitarian distributed leadership framework would be of limited use in a crisis situation where a more assertive style of leadership would be called for. Furthermore, it would appear that the cuts in social spending and the fragmentation concerns raised earlier in an English context, may lead to an emphasis on a superficial understanding of distributed leadership that sees an opportunity for one leader to be responsible for many settings leaving poorly positioned staff to manage the best they can without proper training, support or systems rather than the development of an effective collaborative model. As discussed earlier, the Hong Kong Government put forward the agenda on decentralizing leadership through the introduction of new curriculum policy and quality school review framework in 2006. This leads to a potential shift in the role of teachers from top-down centralized leadership to bottom-up decentralized leadership. However, the existing perspectives of local policy makers on distributed leadership might fail to recognize the complexity of distributed leadership that is driven by educational reform policies and shaped by hierarchical, top-down leadership styles in local ECE contexts.

Authentic leadership takes its inspiration from the work of Goleman (1998) amongst others. Reviews of authentic leadership have found that it is relatively new and therefore still in development (Northouse 2010) and defined as ‘leadership from within’ (Avolio and Gardner 2005). It focuses
on the authenticity of the leader rather than on issues of followership, emphasizing an ethic of care in practice. Champy (2009) in his case study of the Authentic tea Company, finds that authentic leadership relies upon an internalized moral perspective that requires self-awareness and relational transparency, all of which enables a leader to be immune to the pressures of the role by giving them the facility of being true to themselves. Thus, as Avolio and Gardner (2005) raise in their review, authentic leaders are deeply aware of themselves and how they lead as well as having an excellent awareness of their staff and responsibilities, placing a clear emphasis on achieving an emotionally literate environment. Northouse’s (2010) review adds that a model of authentic leadership offers the potential for a leadership that can be trusted through the explicit expectation of a high moral value led approach to work. Hoffman’s empirical work (2008) finds that authentic leaders care about their staff and are able to articulate their ethic of care through the structures and processes they put in place. They work hard at developing enduring relationships and may not be as charismatic as their transformational counterparts (Avolio and Gardner 2005). Authentic leadership has therefore become attractive to those concerned that other models do not effectively support leaders as they attempt to guide their settings and communities through tough, ever changing times (Hofman 2008). However, this may be the model that causes the most concern to management structures, external quality assurance bodies and policy makers as it suggests the potential for behaviour that may be viewed as maverick and therefore dangerous. Given the deeply controversial cuts in ECE spending in England, maverick leaders are least likely to be encouraged although are probably best placed to withstand the pressure of guiding a setting through the changes to come. Earlier discussion on the market-driven nature of ECE in Hong Kong raises questions on the relevance of a model of authentic leadership in local pre-schools. A study conducted by Ho (2008) indicated that the pre-schools in Hong Kong were caught between professional values on learning through play and parental preferences on academic learning. Under these circumstances, pre-schools have to put much more efforts into sharpening their competitive edge to attract parents in the education market place. It is a big challenge for pre-school principals to act as an authentic leader to maintain a good balance between professionalism and parental choice.

Any one of the theories mentioned above may be regarded as a useful framework for leadership in ECE in England or Hong Kong. However, how far a leader is able to fully articulate these principles will be dictated by external drivers such as social policy, market forces, management structures such as management committees and/or quality assurance bodies. We should note that all three of the leadership models explored above are western in origin and we express concern that Asian models of leadership are not as well known or debated at international level in the era of globalization. Currently, the global trend has set up a new focus for deliberation on the cultural dimensions of school leadership. The leadership phenomenon can be understood in terms of some assumptions related to societal culture. For example, Hofstede et al. (2010) suggest that collectivism vs.
individualism, masculinity vs. femininity, uncertainty avoidance and power distance are useful cultural dimensions when discussing the effectiveness of the leadership models across cultures. Key issues in leading for quality improvement will be discussed in the following section which attempts to pave the way for comparative studies of quality in early years settings and contribute to the broader discussion on the influences of western ideologies on Asian school systems and leadership practices.

Issues in leading for quality improvement

It is apparent that leading an ECE setting, in England and Hong Kong, has become increasingly complex during a period of education reform (Earley and Weindling 2004, Dunlop 2008, Jones and Pound 2008, Ho et al. 2010). Whichever theoretical model of leadership in the new paradigm is used, it appears there are common themes emerging from research into what constitutes effective leadership in an ECE context (Leeson 2010) as well as developing problems for the leadership for quality as manifested in the changing policy context in both England and Hong Kong. Under these circumstances, the interplay between the impact of the policy agenda and the emerging leadership found in the theoretical literature mentioned earlier should be examined in detail. In the following, we identify some common issues in ECE in both England and Hong Kong.

A substantial body of literature indicates the existence of a shared philosophy between leaders, followers and the community (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni 2006, Whalley 2006, Jones and Pound 2008). In transformational leadership, the idea of a shared philosophy of what is important to the community and how that is going to be articulated in practice enables community empowerment and engagement and facilitates creative, responsive service provision that is culturally sensitive and highly contextual. A shared philosophy in transformational leadership is attractive to policy makers in England and Hong Kong as we engage in discussions concerning the involvement of communities/school stakeholders in the running of settings, their direction and ethos, but we ask how free are leaders to represent the views and needs of their communities/school stakeholders? Furthermore, in England, what pressures will leaders be under in the coming months, to espouse a specified vision of services as spending cuts bite? Those settings that have management committees overseeing the work of leaders may also set limits and restrict the development of vision and shared philosophy that is child/family/community centred (Woodrow 2011). Similarly, in Hong Kong, what pressures will leaders be under in the introduction of education voucher scheme in 2006 through which parental choice and market forces have been promoted as means for regulating the quality of ECE provision.

Distributed leadership recognizes the importance of followership, emphasizing the power distribution in a non-hierarchical structure (Bloom 2000, Nivala and Hujala 2002, West-Burnham 2009), that a leader can
only lead if they have people behind them who are actively involved in the decision-making processes of the organization (Haslam and Platow 2001). Ideas about followership do not appear to be articulated in the policy surrounding leadership of ECE. However, a recent serious case review (Plymouth Safeguarding Children Board 2010) into the actions of Vanessa George, (a nursery nurse in a voluntary pre-school in England, who was found guilty of child abuse) highlights the urgent need for effective mechanisms that enable leadership to be challenged and for all staff to share responsibility for the development of organizational culture. Again, in line with the principles of followership, of valuing relationships and connections, effective ECE leaders are regarded as those who enable others to do parts of the task, to have a shared ownership in developing both the vision and the path (Moyles 2006, Siraj-Blatchford and Manni 2006, Aubrey 2007, Jones and Pound 2008). Indeed, writers such as Ancena et al. (2007) would argue that leaders should not be encouraged to know it all, that being ‘incomplete’ is a strength, not a weakness, a concept that is not as clearly articulated through the literature on business leadership. As mentioned earlier, in Hong Kong, the distributed leadership model has been identified as a solution for school improvement. It is based on the assumption that redistributing influence and power in schools can encourage teachers to actively participate in decision-making process. However, as educational models are culture-bound, the model of distributed leadership which was developed in the West must be critically reviewed to generate locality-specific knowledge and practice for a particular sociocultural context (e.g. Tikly et al. 2003). Under different circumstances, what is an increasingly popular mode of working in England is the leadership of several settings being held by one person, to save costs in times of austerity through an economy of scale. Such schemes require a distribution of tasks as one leader cannot possibly do everything in every setting, but raises concerns regarding the maintenance of a strong vision and ethos, good quality care and meaningful followership as well as questions about the effective training and support for staff left to run individual settings without the day to day presence of the leader.

Recent studies have shown that the existence of an ethic of care (Osgood 2004, Curtis and Burton 2009) within authentic leadership promotes an environment in which the experience of care is regarded as important for human beings to flourish (Williams 2001) and placed at the heart of the organization (Sevenhuijsen 2000). It should be debated whether this would ever be a key aim of governments whose central concern would seem to be to meet the demands of working parents and commercial markets. An ethic of care has been found to sit uneasily with the commercial need to be viable and sustainable, but there is potential for a care and business ethos to be combined (Campbell-Barr 2009). Research by Osgood (2004) calls for the value of an ethic of care being recognized as an essential aspect of ECE provision. In order to achieve this, mechanisms must be put in place that encourage an environment of genuine, reciprocal care between staff, children and families which enhances social cohesion and the development of personal resilience (Elfer and Dearlney 2007). In line with a concept of an ethic of care, leadership that focuses
on the quality of relationships; that expresses interest and value in the everyday connections between people is regarded as offering the highest quality for ECE. Again, it is unclear whether this is similarly important to policy makers who seem to have concentrated on increasing the professionalization of staff possibly at the expense of their closeness and their ability to articulate the care for the children and families they work with (Elfer and Dearnley 2007, McGivillray 2011).

**Conclusion**

The main difficulties for leaders of early years provision in either England or Hong Kong is the lack of theoretical models keeping pace with the requirements of educational reform policy and/or local settings as well as the absence of a clear link between models of leadership and assurance of quality. Business models of leadership that rely upon the identification of specific, predetermined or desired traits or styles (Neugebauer 1985) are now regarded as having limited usefulness in leading ECE, where work is seen as more person-centred, focusing on the quality of interpersonal relationships rather than goal-orientated (Dunlop 2008) behaviour which is focused on the product rather than the process. As stated earlier, it had been assumed that the ‘New leadership’ paradigm would be a useful source of theoretical model of leadership for the ECE sector with its strong orientation to achieving a more person-centred style, transformational in nature. However, the increased managerialism that has been required by leaders with an emphasis on measurable outcomes that do not necessarily encompass well being or community cohesion has rendered these models less attractive for settings. Nevertheless, they remain compelling for policy makers as they offer the potential for nationally driven, global measures of quality assurance. The changes in the ECE landscape that are being discussed and developed by the Coalition Government in England and the Local Government in Hong Kong may put further pressure on the development of effective models of leadership.

We would argue that leadership happens within a cultural context and therefore an overarching, favoured model of leadership is probably impossible or even undesirable to apply (Fleer 2003, Tobin 2005). Thus, whilst England and Hong Kong share many similarities in their drive to ensure quality ECE and effective leadership, offering the potential for cross-cultural learning, we have to acknowledge that there is a need to develop models of leadership that are culturally sensitive. Diversity and responsiveness to local needs, expectations and cultural identity should always be the imperative (Tikly et al. 2003, Hallinger et al. 2005, Walker and Kwan 2010). Leaders should be regarded as firmly situated within their local context and the concepts of quality and leadership that are used should reflect local values and not be imposed from a central point in a belief that ‘one size fits all’. Thus, leaders take on a variety of roles that are context specific and approved, even expected by local communities (Mujis et al. 2004). Our argument highlights the substantial tension that exists between policy drivers and quality as defined by policy makers and consumers on
the one hand and the development of models of ECE leadership on the
other. It could be argued that models of leadership are meaningless or
even pointless if they do not reflect the policy drivers of the administration
in which they operate as it is the policy makers who define the quality stan-
dards they expect leaders to demonstrate through their work (Macpherson
2009). However, we would argue that this is erroneous as we have seen
the development of unique models of ECE leadership that are bottom-up,
grounded in the needs of communities and the strengths and vision and
authenticity of committed ECE leaders from a variety of professional
backgrounds and perspectives (Whalley 2006). Thus, if we accept that set-
tings are unique, formed and identified within their communities, there is
a need to investigate this tension further and critically explore the inter-
relationship between policy, quality and leadership.

Notes
1. We define ECE settings as those providing education and care for children of a pre-school age
(2–5 in England and 3–6 in Hong Kong): nurseries, kindergartens, pre-schools and children’s
centres.
2. We are using the generic term of leader throughout this paper, whilst acknowledging the many
different terms that are used for the person in charge of an ECE setting.

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