
'Push-Me' or 'Pull-You'? An Opportunity for Early Childhood Leadership in the Implementation of Queensland's Early Years Curriculum

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ABSTRACT Recent developments in the Queensland early childhood context have seen the phased-in introduction of a full-time Preparatory Year to replace current part-time preschool provision. Surrounding this development has been discussion of the potential role of the play-based *Early Years Curriculum* in shaping the implementation of early primary schooling. This article explores this change to early childhood provision in Queensland and the opportunity it provides for leadership from the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC). Will those from the ECEC field step forward to articulate the value of a play-based curriculum such that it influences the curriculum in the early years of school? Could we see a 'pull-you' of early childhood philosophy rather than a 'push-me' of more formal approaches? This article draws on two research projects to raise questions about the potential for leadership in the new world of Queensland's Preparatory Year. It suggests four key elements, which include knowledge of self, the field and the context, and the challenge that might be considered by those who would advocate early childhood philosophy in primary schools.

Introduction

Current policy reforms in early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Queensland, Australia have led to the phased-in introduction of a full-time Preparatory Year in that state. Statewide implementation of the non-compulsory Preparatory Year has begun in 2007, replacing current part-time preschool provision catering for children in the year prior to compulsory schooling. Concomitant with this change is an adjustment upwards of the starting age for compulsory schooling by six months, bringing Queensland in line with arrangements in other Australian states. In the lead-up to full implementation of the Preparatory Year in Queensland, debate surrounding this reform gained impetus. ECEC stakeholders (parents, teachers, administrators and policy makers) are contributing to an energetic dialogue surrounding the goals of the Preparatory Year, the resources required to support it and the potential benefits it offers young children in Queensland. The divergent and often contradictory views emerging from this debate indicate that the reform initiative represented by the Preparatory Year may yet be vexed by discordant stakeholder values and beliefs. While classroom teachers represented by organisations such as the Queensland Teachers' Union lobby for increased funding, the government defends its stance on effectively reduced teacher-aide hours and classroom space. While some parent groups may believe the Preparatory Year represents an opportunity for an earlier start to formal education, early childhood professionals continue to provide arguments for the retention of approaches that are child-responsive.

In this article, the image of the 'Push-Me-Pull-You' character from the film *Doctor Dolittle* is employed to represent the potentially conflicting views that may characterise the introduction of

the Preparatory Year in Queensland. In the same way that the mythical creature grapples with its own constantly conflicting agendas, those involved with the Preparatory Year initiative are beginning to experience profound tensions around issues of what constitutes best practice in the year prior to compulsory schooling, and what level of funding represents adequate resourcing of such a program. These tensions have the potential to pull stakeholders in a number of directions, resulting in broad and varying interpretations of the new curriculum and subsequent experiences for young children in Queensland. The image of the 'Push-Me-Pull-You' also represents the situating of ECEC stakeholders at a kind of crossroads; a pivotal moment in the history of early childhood delivery in Queensland. In a context that many early childhood researchers suggest is characterised by a 'push-me' of formal curriculum into programs for young children, it could be argued that, alternatively, the introduction of the Preparatory Year offers the opportunity for a 'pull-you' of early childhood philosophy into the early primary curriculum.

This article draws on two research projects undertaken within the Australian early childhood context. One addresses parent views of the Preparatory Year in a non-government school in Queensland, using the qualitative approach of phenomenography (Marton, 1981). Phenomenographic approaches seek to describe variation in the ways that a group of people view an aspect of their social world; the aspect, or phenomenon, in this case being the Preparatory Year. A group of 26 parents of children who had attended a Preparatory Year in a non-government school in outer urban Queensland was chosen for this research. At the time of data collection, research involving government school Preparatory programs was not possible. In-depth, phenomenographic interview data were analysed and several qualitatively different ways of viewing the Preparatory Year emerged.

The second project has examined notions of leadership in the Australian early childhood field (with a focus on the sector providing care and education for the birth-to-five age group). This project was qualitative in nature, and employed symbolic interactionism as a methodological tool and feminist theory to inform data analysis. Data were collected from 26 participants including long-day-care directors, preschool directors, early childhood students, family day-care coordinators, early childhood academics and people working in organisations providing services to ECEC services across New South Wales, Tasmania, Victoria and Queensland. Data were gathered from semi-structured interviews, artefacts and focus groups. Findings indicate a link between an individual's own professional identity and their capacity to enact leadership.

The intersection of these studies represents a forum for the examination of the role of leadership in the promotion of early childhood philosophy as a valid framework for curriculum decision making as Queensland's Preparatory Year curriculum influences practices in primary schools.

Background

Although representing a major reform in ECEC provision, the idea of a Preparatory Year is not novel in Queensland. Between 1930 and 1953 state education authorities provided at least one year of preparatory education before priority was given for the provision of Year 8 and the Preparatory Year was subsequently abolished. State government commitment to the year before compulsory schooling did not again bear fruit until 1972, when state preschools began to open across Queensland. In 2006 approximately three-quarters of state schools across Queensland provided free, part-time preschool education to children in the year they turned five, but demand outweighed supply. Many parents chose to pay for services through crèche and kindergarten branch centres, childcare centres, family day care or preschool settings in non-government schools.

The growing demand for full-time preschool services in Queensland has been highlighted by the rapidly increasing number of parents who are choosing the *full-time* Preparatory Year classes that have been offered by non-government schools for some years (O'Gorman et al, 2004). Responding to this shift to the private sector, Education Queensland (now known as the Department of Education, Training and the Arts) made the following announcement in 2000:

The preparation of Queensland children for formal schooling should be appropriate to the needs of children of that age, flexible in meeting the requirements of families (particularly families in

which all care-givers work) and available, where possible, in the local community. (Education Queensland, 2000, p. 16)

In 2002, statewide educational reform was placed firmly on the table with the *Queensland the Smart State – Education and Training Reforms for the Future* (ETRF) White Paper. This heralded a new era for the state and announced Education Queensland’s goal of ‘changing the education and training systems to ensure that young Queenslanders lead the way, and are not left behind, in a world of rapid and constant change’ (Queensland Government, Department of Education, Training and the Arts, 2002, p. 4). One initiative to emerge from the reforms was the 2003 trial of a full-time Preparatory Year in 39 Queensland schools. By 2006, 121 state and non-government schools were involved in what is termed the ‘phase-in’ of Queensland’s Preparatory Year. Universal provision of a free, non-compulsory Preparatory Year is available in 2007, although it will effectively be offered to a half cohort of children this year to account for the increased starting age.

Crossroads

The provision of a full-time Preparatory Year in all Queensland schools from 2007 is likely to represent a distinct intersection of philosophical beliefs and pedagogical practices as teachers from early childhood and primary school backgrounds interact more frequently than they have in the past. The closer physical location of preparatory classrooms within all primary schools, the full-time nature of the program, and the potential for greater movement of staff between preparatory and primary classrooms will ensure that differing pedagogical approaches may interact more frequently. Philosophical differences between the approaches of many preschool and primary school teachers in the Queensland context have been described in the literature (Sawyer, 2000). Whilst early childhood teachers are often viewed as advocates for developmentally appropriate practice (Woodrow & Brennan, 1999), this approach is not so strongly articulated by those from primary school backgrounds. We can ill afford, however, to make generalisations in this regard. A growing number of teachers in primary schools are adopting child-responsive practices and, on the other hand, recent research has highlighted more frequent use of teacher-directed, whole-group approaches in preschools compared to Preparatory Year classes (Thorpe et al, 2004). Researchers such as Stipek & Byler (1997) have found variation in the goals of early childhood teachers and it would be unwise to assume uniformity in the beliefs and practices of teachers within any context.

As we shall shortly explore, preliminary findings from O’Gorman and associates’ in-progress study investigating parent views of the Preparatory Year in a non-government school shed light on varying beliefs and expectations about the Preparatory Year within one school context and amongst one group of 26 parents. While many of these parents supported more formal, ‘school-like’ approaches in the Preparatory Year curriculum and pedagogy, other parents supported child-initiated approaches that value the experience of play. ‘Early childhood philosophy’ can be partially defined using the position statement provided by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2003). This position describes effective early childhood curriculum in terms of active learning, shared goals, investigations, focused and intentional teaching, and the importance of children’s prior experiences. Further, in describing the activities of children in Queensland’s Preparatory Year classes, the Department of Education, Training and the Arts states that: ‘the Prep curriculum is based on active learning, which includes inquiry, investigation and play’ (Queensland Government, Department of Education, Training and the Arts, 2005a, p. 1).

There is considerable diversity in the definitions available as to what constitutes early childhood philosophy and we are cognisant of the varied interpretations amongst early childhood practitioners. However, for the purpose of this discussion we identify with notions of active learning, child initiation, the use of concrete materials and real-life learning opportunities underpinned by scope for children to exercise choice.

As the flurry of activity surrounding statewide provision of the Preparatory Year increases in intensity, an emergent discussion in early childhood circles is becoming palpable in Queensland. Prophets of doom predict the demise of early childhood philosophy as the protective walls of state preschool education are dismantled block by block, exposing child-centred curricula to the push-down influences of the dominant primary school culture. On the other side of the table, many stakeholders optimistically anticipate that the Preparatory Year will provide opportunities for

educational reform in its truest sense. Further, the proposed *Early Years Curriculum* (Queensland Studies Authority, 2006) might be a vehicle for the 'pull-you' of early childhood philosophy into the early years of school, encouraging child-responsive practices in environments that, in many cases, have previously been seen as formal and teacher-directed. ECEC stakeholders in Queensland stand at the crossroads, and are considering their options and the influences that will shape their choices. Will they surrender to the 'push-me' or facilitate the 'pull-you'? The polarised nature of this debate warrants examination.

The 'Push-Me' Phenomenon

Concerns regarding the 'push-me' or push-down phenomenon have been a feature of ECEC conversations for at least the last two decades, both in the USA (Shepard & Smith, 1988; Walsh, 1989; Graue, 1992; Stipek & Byler, 1997), the United Kingdom (Evans & Fuller, 1998) and, more recently, in Australia (Corrie, 1999; Grieshaber, 2000; Stamopoulos, 2003a). Pressure to adhere to more formalised, skills-based approaches emanates from a number of fronts including parents, school administrators, education authorities and governments (Tayler, 2006). The 'back-to-basics' refrain is echoed in numerous contexts, at policy and grass-roots levels, persuading stakeholders to adopt the view that an *earlier* start to formal education constitutes a *better* start.

In line with this emerging phenomenon, a number of parents in O'Gorman's research study expressed the view that an earlier start to literacy and numeracy learning was preferable. One parent stated: 'I think they get fed up with playing. They've done years of playing at home. They want to start getting into the nitty-gritty.' Another parent said:

we expect that they should, like the alphabet and those sort of things – otherwise I just think it's a wasted year. Because, like I said, they just seem to soak so much up and if they can learn all these basic things for them that early, it's just going to make it so much easier for everything else.

In contrast, other parents in this study expressed concern about the perceived formal approaches being implemented in their child's Preparatory Year classroom. One parent proposed the following:

I mean, I think you could teach a three-year-old to read and write if you wanted to, but we just don't do it because it's not appropriate. They're supposed to be little kids and they're supposed to play and have fun. That's just my opinion.

This parent added:

Just to me it seems a bit like they, I could be wrong in saying this, that they, it feels to me like they want to be different and that they're going to create some kind of super-genius kids by implementing this [more formal curriculum] earlier.

If we assume that the varied responses to the push-down phenomenon expressed by the small group of parents in O'Gorman's in-progress study are shared by parents across Queensland, then this diversity of opinion will be a challenge indeed as the Preparatory Year is introduced across the board in 2007.

At this time it would be judicious for ECEC stakeholders in Queensland to reflect on the experiences of those in Western Australia who have scrutinised the implementation of the Preparatory (known as Pre-primary) Year in that state over the past decade. Forewarning of the challenges that lie ahead may well forearm those who would passionately resist the 'push-me' phenomenon in Queensland. The challenges experienced in Western Australia since the introduction of the Pre-primary Year have been documented in research undertaken by Tayler (2006), Corrie (1999) and Stamopoulos (2003a). Predictably, these articles address themes that are also emerging in the Queensland context as stakeholders prepare for the implementation of the Preparatory Year there. Issues such as provisions for professional development and dealing with partnerships (Tayler, 2006), facilities for Pre-primary classes (Corrie, 1999) and the complexities surrounding Pre-primary/Year One composite classes (Stamopoulos, 2003a) underpinned concerns in Western Australia. Indeed, commentators such as Woodrow & Brennan (1999) have previously described such tensions (particularly in terms of problematic relationships between early childhood

teachers and school administrators) as they emerged during the introduction of the (soon to be superseded) *Preschool Curriculum Guidelines* (Queensland School Curriculum Council, 1998) in Queensland. In Queensland, those who are committed to defending early childhood philosophy against any ‘push-me’ trend have already begun drawing battlelines on similar fronts.

In many cases, Queensland Preparatory Year classes may be staffed by teachers without early childhood qualifications. This is heightening concern about the ‘push-me’ phenomenon and the following statement from the Preparatory Year information website of Queensland’s Department of Education, Training and the Arts in 2005 is worth considering:

State preschool and other qualified and experienced early childhood teachers *will have the opportunity* to teach the Preparatory Year from 2007. With their professional knowledge and expertise, these teachers are ideally placed to deliver the Preparatory Year curriculum. As well, the Government will employ more than 100 new teachers to teach the Preparatory Year in 2007, with early childhood teachers *being given first preference*. (Queensland Government, Department of Education, Training and the Arts, 2005b; emphasis added)

Assertions that teachers with early childhood expertise *will have the opportunity* to teach in Queensland’s Preparatory Year and that early childhood teachers will be *given first preference* may be considered cold comfort indeed to those who are concerned about protecting the implementation of child-centred practices in the year prior to compulsory schooling.

Further, by 2006 the information on this website had changed in its response to the question, ‘Who will teach Prep?’ – as illustrated by the following:

Registered primary school teachers and current state preschool teachers will be teaching Prep. With their professional knowledge and expertise, these teachers are ideally placed to deliver the Prep curriculum. (Queensland Government, Department of Education, Training and the Arts, 2006)

There seems little doubt that many Preparatory Year classrooms in Queensland will be staffed by teachers who do not hold early childhood qualifications and may not necessarily have experience working with young children. Indeed, a portion of those who have recently been given the task of facilitating the delivery of professional development materials to Preparatory Year teachers across the state do not hold early childhood qualifications.

Additionally, with more than one hundred and one teacher schools currently operating across the state and all of them offering a full-time Preparatory Year in 2007, it is likely that the majority of these schools will be staffed by teaching principals who do not have formal early childhood qualifications. Issues surrounding effective and appropriate in-service programs for primary school teachers and small-school administrators will be crucial.

As those who are sympathetic to early childhood philosophy put in place their strategies for resisting the ‘push-me’ phenomenon in Queensland, the voice of optimism may be emerging from the cacophony. Is it possible that the universal introduction of the Preparatory Year and the new *Early Years Curriculum* (Queensland Studies Authority, 2006) might provide a fresh opportunity for early childhood practitioners to articulate their philosophy such that it influences the curriculum in primary schools? What is required for this to come about? What will it take for early childhood philosophy to traverse successfully the dismantled blocks that have formerly provided shelter for preschool practice in Queensland so that appropriate practice is not only defended after the introduction of the Preparatory Year, but actively promoted in the early years of school? After all, the nomenclature of the ‘early years’ curriculum would suggest that we have already been given that opportunity on a platter. If the *early years of school* refer to the Preparatory Year through to the Year Three age group, it is clear that the ‘pull-you’ of early childhood philosophy into primary school programs for six- to eight-year-old children could be a real possibility. We argue that leadership from those who would promote early childhood philosophy will be required to take that opportunity. The following section will explore the interplay of school reform and leadership, and its particular relationship to the ECEC field.

The Leadership Challenge

Leadership is a contentious issue and not easily defined. According to MacBeath, leadership is ‘a term full of ambiguity and has a range of interpretations. It is a “humpty-dumpty” word that can mean “just what we want it to be”’ (MacBeath, 2004, p. 4; citing Humpty Dumpty in *Alice in Wonderland*). Despite the challenges of definition, many authors attest to a correlation between leadership and change (Northcraft & Neale, 1994; Schultz & Schultz, 1998; Lingard et al, 2003), and identify a relationship between the two as central to positive reform (Stamopoulos, 2003b). According to Lingard et al (2003, p. 2), the task of good leadership is, above all, to lead learning by creating and sustaining the conditions which maximise both academic and social learning. Notably, all forms demand action. Stamopoulos (2003a) provides a clear association between the leadership of principals, their knowledge base and aspects of school development within the context of the introduction of the Pre-primary Year in Western Australia. Accordingly, she notes that minimal knowledge or understanding of ‘content and structure of the curriculum for pre-primary education [makes] it difficult [for leaders] to provide educational assistance to teachers’ (p. 200). As mentioned previously, Woodrow & Brennan (1999) have noted discordance in notions of curriculum held by early childhood teachers and school administrators in early childhood reforms in Queensland that occurred in the 1990s. Consequently, the potential emerges for tensions when school leaders are not well versed in the philosophical allegiances espoused by ECEC personnel.

In the context of the introduction of the Preparatory Year in Queensland, any such shortfall may result in similar outcomes to those experienced in Western Australia. It will become critically important for those who espouse early childhood philosophy, administrators and teachers alike, to articulate and justify their beliefs regarding the education of young children in the Preparatory Year. As Stamopoulos (2003a) suggests: ‘Inadequate leadership may have serious implications for program quality, accountability, student learning and staff training’ (p. 200).

Added to this equation is the potential for ECEC personnel to take up a distributed leadership role (Spillane et al, 2001) and articulate the essence of early childhood philosophy within the school context. For the first time in over 50 years, every school in Queensland will be offering a non-compulsory, full-time year prior to Year One; staffed, where possible, with teachers well versed and experienced in early childhood philosophy and pedagogy. Distributed leadership in action could be a feature across the state as the early childhood profession takes up the challenge of positive reform. Will such an opportunity be embraced by ECEC personnel, and what leadership understandings and capacities do those in the ECEC field bring to the leadership table?

Leadership in ECEC

The nature of leadership in the Australian ECEC field has been explored by various researchers (Hayden, 1996; Rodd, 1998; Boyd, 2001; Nupponen, 2001; Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003; Stamopoulos, 2003b). Many studies of leadership occur within specific settings (Waniganayake et al, 2000; Nupponen, 2001), while others take a more expansive view, attempting to elucidate understandings of leadership and its enactment within the field (Hard, 2005a). A complex interplay of issues emerges around professional identity and the culture of the ECEC field, which influences individuals’ capacity to enact leadership.

Research undertaken by Hard (2004, 2005a) highlights a view to leadership in ECEC which may provide insights useful to the emerging leadership opportunity provided by the introduction of a Preparatory Year in Queensland. What emerged from the analysis in this study (Hard, 2005a) were two interrelated categories. The first, *interpreted professional identity*, indicates how individuals’ professional sense of self is influenced by the views of others. For example, participants articulated aspects such as low social kudos and inequitable remuneration (with equally qualified peers in primary settings in some states) as significant factors affecting their sense of professionalism. In discussing the social value afforded ECEC, one participant sensed that others saw her training simply as ‘advanced nappy changing’ and her work as ‘just baby sitting’. Participants interpreted these and other similarly voiced views of the field as negative and doing little to enhance a positive and robust professional identity. The second category, *interpreted leadership capacity*, refers to how individuals interpret their ability to enact leadership. These two categories are interrelated and

what emerges is a relationship between how individuals perceive themselves as professionals and their capacity to lead.

In conjunction with external views, discourses within the ECEC field itself emerged as contributors to how participants interpreted their professional identity and these have a relationship to how individuals interpret their capacity to enact leadership. The culture of ECEC was painted by participants as one that requires a team-based leadership approach, although participants did not specifically define this term. This term may imply leadership enactment consistent with contemporary leadership literature that espouses more dispersed or distributed approaches (Lindsey et al, 2005). It may suggest a valuing of an egalitarian rationale for leadership and subsequent collaborative implementation. For participants in this study, leadership was apparently not the domain of the individual in a positional leadership role but more a shared process. However, despite the apparent positives of this leadership approach, ambiguities and contradictions appear, which suggest other discourses are powerful within the ECEC culture. Some of these aspects will be discussed in the following section.

Not Being the ‘Top Dog’

In Hard’s (2005a) study, participants’ understandings of leadership were couched within a *discourse of niceness*, which demands a certain degree of compliance. There was a clear association between this rationale and the team-based approach to leadership noted earlier. This idiomatic construction of niceness provides the basis for a team-based leadership style. A number of participants viewed this leadership approach as somewhat incongruent with their interpretations of what leadership may require, which can include the need to put oneself forward as distinct from the group. As one participant noted:

What I probably see as the biggest problem for good leadership or effective leadership is that people like if there’s a director of a centre or they’re in a leadership role, they like to be seen as one of the team players or one of the gang and if there are any privileges or anything that stands them out they quickly adjust and pretend they are one of the workers again.

This illustrates the powerful discourse evident to participants in this study. It demands compliance to the group and enacting leadership is an abdication of this position. Some participants went so far as to suggest that non-compliance can result in individuals being marginalised and excluded. What may be happening here is what Duke (1994) refers to in his work on school leadership when he suggests the crab bucket mentality. There is no need to put a lid on the crab bucket because the crabs inherently drag each other back down. Is the nature of the ECEC field such that any leadership style activity beyond the team-based approach is unacceptable? We can ill afford to allow the crab bucket mentality, if it exists in Queensland, to prevail as preparations are made for universal provision of the Preparatory Year, and ECEC professionals are provided with opportunities to influence in a positive way curriculum practices in the early years of primary school.

Other factors specific to the culture of ECEC were made evident by the participants in Hard’s (2005a) study, and included aspects such as physical isolation and management by parent committees. The design and location of many ECEC services separates these services from other educational facilities, and many participants identified this as isolation from leadership opportunities and from support from others. The proposal to situate all Preparatory Year classrooms within primary school campuses in Queensland is likely to counteract the separation factor in this case. Early childhood teachers will, however, need to realign the ways in which they might view their sources of collegial support. Preparatory classrooms will be physically connected to primary schools, more so than preschools have been. Some might view the physical separation that preschools have enjoyed as providing strength and protection for early childhood philosophy over the past three decades. With the inclusion of the Preparatory Year in the primary school environment, those who have been formerly preschool teachers may well discover previously unrecognised allies as new connections are made with primary school staff and broader opportunities to enact leadership open up.

Hard’s (2005a) study also revealed that management committees were both applauded and critiqued by participants. They were seen to provide opportunities for parental involvement but

presented ambiguities in leadership if a director's leadership role was compromised by directives of the committee. The introduction of a Preparatory Year in Queensland may afford new possibilities which diminish the isolation of ECEC personnel, and reduce or extinguish the role of parent management committees. These changes may result in a mix of positive and negative outcomes for the practical implementation of early childhood philosophy in Queensland schools, and practitioners need to be critically aware of the implications for ECEC practice.

So What Is the Game?

If we concur that the introduction of a Preparatory Year in Queensland provides opportunities for greater articulation of ECEC practice and the 'pull-you' of early childhood philosophy into primary schools, what are the rules of the new educational environment? Is the school context similar to that of the ECEC field and how does leadership play out within that context? What leadership understandings and skills do ECEC personnel have in their kitbags that they can apply to this new playing field? These are some of the questions and challenges of the new world and an appreciation of these factors will provide increased potential for leadership success.

For those teachers from the highly feminised field of ECEC, entering the school sector will mean engagement in yet another highly feminised context, and yet one more overtly dominated by male management and leadership (Collard, 2005). Though traditionally heavily feminised, the school sector has been dominated by the notion that men manage and women teach, with men advantaged by patriarchal histories of public leadership (Collard, 2005). The work by Collard (2005) suggests divergent support for gendered leadership behaviours, but does highlight a preference for female leaders in schools to employ more consultative and participatory modes of working with staff than do men. This preference for leadership enactment has resonance with the work by Hard (2005a), who suggests that ECEC personnel identify a preference for team-based leadership in the ECEC workplace. However, the new world of school leadership for ECEC personnel may likely be more dominated by positional leaders rather than a more egalitarian rationale, with leadership enactment less consultative and participatory. In this context, how well versed are ECEC personnel to take a leadership role in articulating their practice?

Awareness of the new context is one element in understanding the challenges of leadership in the new world of school, but so too is an appreciation of the portability of leadership from the ECEC field. While the enactment of leadership in schools may not reside solely with the positional leader (Lingard et al, 2003), the school context is inherently more hierarchical than that of the ECEC field. Increasing discussion of school leadership as 'dispersed' (Lingard et al, 2003) and 'distributed' (Spillane et al, 2001) suggests a less hierarchical culture. Blackmore (1999) suggests that the enactment of leadership by women, particularly if they attempt to change organisational cultures and structures, can result in women being viewed as disruptive. These researchers into school leadership paint a picture of a feminised context still strongly dominated by male managers and influenced by the traditional enactment of leadership. If this is the nature of the school leadership context, then ECEC personnel will require a professional robustness in order to articulate their ECEC values strategically as the new phenomenon of the Preparatory Year becomes present in every Queensland school.

What Are the Rules for the New Game?

The differences between the school leadership context and how leadership is enacted in ECEC present challenges if ECEC personnel are to take the introduction of the Preparatory Year as an opportunity to articulate ECEC philosophy. If emerging notions of distributed and dispersed leadership are increasingly influencing school leadership, then ECEC personnel may, with their team-based style, be well placed to engage. However, being cognisant of the complex nature of school leadership will be the first challenge. Secondly, ECEC personnel will need a clear sense of their own professional identity and what it is they wish to espouse within the school context. As Blackmore suggests, 'we need to ask what we are leading for' (2002, p. 64). Given the lingering hierarchical leadership in the school setting, an individual robustness may be required to enable negotiation of the established structures that give voice to some more readily than others. ECEC

personnel need to ask what capacities they have to enact leadership. Research has indicated that the ECEC field is not well versed in leadership theory and often leadership enactment is a serendipitous activity drawing on multiple influences (Hard, 2005a). Is it possible for those in ECEC to access leadership education in order to support their leadership knowledge and skills more strategically? Additionally, personnel may need to ask themselves if they are ready to encourage debate, be open to new ideas, use a range of strategies and techniques, and support innovation and risk taking (Blackmore, 2002), which, the literature suggests, are key factors in ‘good’ educational leadership.

In Practical Terms

The following points may assist in identifying the factors related to leadership in the new world:

- *Know yourself* (What skills and knowledge do I have, and what is my leadership capacity?). Knowing oneself and forming a robust professional identity were highlighted as significant in the work of Hard (2005a). A clear link is made between an individual’s own professional identity and their capacity to enact leadership. In the Queensland context, this may be a significant ingredient in affording individuals confidence to articulate their philosophy and practice in the school setting.
- *Know your field* (What do I know about leadership in ECEC and can I use it in a school setting?). Knowing the ECEC field may appear the inevitable outcome of being in the field, but research suggests there is a complex interplay of factors affecting how leadership is enacted within ECEC (Hard, 2005a). Some of these enhance a team-based leadership approach and others are dominant invisible discourses (such as the crab bucket mentality), which make troublesome the rhetoric of this egalitarian leadership style (Hard, 2005a).
- *Know your context* (What is the school setting like and how is leadership enacted?). Knowing the context of the new world of school and the leadership traditions, styles and rationales at play will be important if ECEC personnel are to contribute successfully to the positive influence of the new early years curriculum (Queensland Studies Authority, 2006). Being mindful of the gendered nature of schools, the history of male-dominant leadership and the emerging approaches to leadership will provide valuable tools for engagement.
- *Know your challenge* (What do I want to articulate and what do I value?). Knowing clearly what to articulate in this new world is significant. ECEC personnel will need to have an awareness of the values they wish to articulate and a vision of what these can contribute to the new context. Any ambiguity of these elements will provide a potential vulnerability in the face of contestation.

Conclusion

This article has raised a number of issues regarding the opportunities for Queensland’s ECEC professionals to enact leadership as they implement the universal provision of a full-time Preparatory Year across the state in 2007. Like the ‘Push-Me-Pull-You’ creature, ECEC practitioners are finding themselves pushed and pulled in a number of uncertain directions, with many traditional obstacles to movement removed and some new opportunities to enact positive reform opening up. There are contradictory expectations from stakeholders such as parents, with some applauding formal instruction in achieving early academic advantage and others valuing childhood as a time for exploration and play – less constrained by academic expectations. Leadership emerges as a construction that is not easily defined or applied coherently in educational settings (Hard, 2005b). Navigating this new context will be challenging for ECEC personnel, particularly if they encounter discontinuities between their philosophical approach and those of existing school leaders and parents. In order to engage in this leadership opportunity, ECEC personnel can prepare themselves by appraising their own leadership skills and knowledge, understanding their own field and its tensions, and appreciating the new school context and being clear about what they wish to articulate.

In this context, will the ‘Push-Me-Pull-You’ stand at the crossroads, immobilised by its lack of direction, confused by the influence of opposing forces and intimidated by a changing context? Or will it, on the other hand, allow itself to be led by those from within the field who would step

forward, articulate on behalf of early childhood philosophy and young children, and lead it forward to unexplored, uncertain but potentially greener pastures?

We stand still at our peril.

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