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**Educational leadership: an evolving role in Australian early
childhood settings**

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| Abstract: | In Australia, early childhood educational leaders (ECEL) emerged as part of a major policy reform agenda that began in 2009. ECEs are tasked with the responsibility of implementing policy, and mentoring other educators in their centres to meet the policy definitions of good quality. There is currently a lack of data addressing those in ECEL roles, their responsibilities, their qualifications and the expectations held of them. The paper presents the results of a survey of 164 ECEs from across Australia aimed at understanding who are the ECEL participants, what sense they make of their ECEL role and how they use their sense-making as street-level bureaucrats to shape their performance in this role. In answering these questions we identified sense-making and street-level bureaucratisation around relationship work and explored the tensions between compliance and resistance in sense-making and street-level bureaucracy action. |

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Educational leadership in Australian EC settings

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4 policy reform agenda that began in 2009. ECEs are tasked with the responsibility of implementing
5 policy, and mentoring other educators in their service to meet the policy definitions of good quality.
6 In order to achieve this, ECEs first have to make sense of the practices identified in the legislation,
7 policy and curriculum documents before they can then model, assist and insist on compliance from
8 their colleagues at their centres. There is currently a lack of data addressing those in ECEL roles, their
9 responsibilities, their qualifications and the expectations held of them; role descriptions are
10 developed locally and there is no state or national consensus of what these might contain. Lines of
11 authority are also unclear and these factors all combine to make it difficult for ECEs to understand
12 and fulfil the expectations held of them. The relative newness of the ECEL position, and the complex
13 political and professional environments in which these roles are being enacted, all contribute to
14 uncertainty and confusion. In this study, we set out to explore what sense ECEs make of the policy
15 requirements, their understandings of their roles and responsibilities including their understandings
16 of their work with other educators within their centres. Our aim is to contribute to ongoing
17 clarification and evolution of the ECEL's role in Australia by presenting findings from a national
18 study. Sharing these findings with those working in EC contexts outside of Australia can enhance
19 understanding of the contextual complexities of ECEL and assist to reshape future policy reform.

Educational leadership

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27 Leadership can take a variety of forms and in recent literature it has been positioned as instructional
28 (for example Salo et al., 2015), pedagogical (for example Male and Palaiologou, 2012), leadership for
29 learning (as identified in Bush, 2014) and an activity that conflicts with the need for management
30 (Mertkan, 2014). What emerges from this plethora of work is that leadership is complex, and there is
31 growing agreement that one person cannot do it all (Kangas et al., 2016). In the early childhood
32 sector there is an additional complication, the reality that early childhood leaders lack the profile
33 and status of school leaders (Coleman et al., 2016). Given the importance of contextual influences
34 on leadership and the acknowledgement that leadership in early childhood impacts substantially on
35 children's outcomes (Male and Palaiologou, 2012) exploring how leadership operates in different
36 early childhood sectors internationally supports the construction of a shared understanding of
37 essential elements, their influence and effectiveness across contexts. With this aim, the current
38 paper examines the Australian context by sharing the findings of a national survey that set out to
39 capture the experiences of early childhood educational leaders (ECEs) in this country.

Contextualizing early childhood educational leadership in Australia

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46 In the Australian early childhood sector the role of educational leader (ECEL) emerged as part of a
47 very large process of policy reform that began in 2009 (Sims et al., 2015). Arising from this was the
48 *National Quality Framework* (NQF - Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority,
49 2011b), the *National Quality Standard* (NQS - Australian Children's Education and Care Quality
50 Authority, 2011c) and a curriculum document, the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF -
51 Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). Early childhood
52 organizations are required to participate in a quality assurance process which gives rise to a rating of
53 their performance, and this information is freely available for public access and is supposedly useful
54 for parents in choosing an EC service for their child.
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Sanctions are in place if organisations do not meet the required standards and the ultimate sanction is the forced closure of a non-compliant center. The role of the ECEL was developed to oversee the “the development and implementation of the educational program (or curriculum) in the service” and the person in this role must “be able to guide other educators in their planning and reflection, and mentor colleagues in their implementation practices” (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2011a). ECEs are tasked with ensuring that their organizations do not experience the ultimate sanction but instead do well in achieving a high rating during the accreditation process. It is important to note here that these Australian reforms positioned the role of ECEL as separate from that of service manager/staff line manager. In this sense the development of the role of ECEL was clearly influenced by the idea of distributive leadership, an approach to leadership particularly popular in school education because of its demonstrated positive impact on student learning outcomes (Karadağ et al., 2015).

Implementation of these reforms was incremental and in many cases organisations did not appoint ECEs until around 2012 (Fenech, 2013). However, despite the vast literature relating to distributive leadership, the lack of guidelines and the minimal reference to the ECEL role in policy (the statements quoted above are the only policy guidance provided), it is becoming evident now, 5 years later, that ECEs remain somewhat confused as to their role (Fleet et al., 2015, Sims and Waniganayake, 2015, Waniganayake and Sims, in press). It is important to emphasise for an international audience that there is currently a lack of data addressing those in ECEL roles, their responsibilities, their qualifications and the expectations held of them; role descriptions are developed locally and there is no state or national consensus of what these might contain. Lines of authority are also unclear and these factors all combine to make it difficult for ECEs to understand and fulfil the expectations held of them (Rouse and Spradbury, 2016). Anecdotal evidence suggests that smaller centres often combine the role of ECEL and service manager/co-ordinator/director, creating further confusion in attempts to identify the elements of the ECEL role.

Enacting early childhood leadership in Australia in a neoliberal context

Further complicating the enactment of the ECEL role in Australia is the reality that this work is being performed in a context of increasing managerialism where the neoliberal emphasis on top down compliance checking focuses the ECEs' attention on what they need to do to obtain and keep their centre's accreditation (Sims and Waniganayake, 2015). There is a growing literature questioning the efficacy of this neoliberal approach as it is applied in education (for example Giroux, 2015, Furedi, 2017), particularly given the overarching impact of neoliberalism has been to side-line critical thinking and focus instead on learning pre-approved, standardised material (Giroux, 2015). Furedi (2017) claims that neoliberalism assumes that “citizens cannot exercise independent judgement” so governments and private institutions “are entitled to manage and influence the behaviours of individuals in order to ensure that they make the ‘right’ choices” (p. 14). Ultimately this has resulted in the loss of personal freedom and it is now evident that freedom of expression is considered less important than the need to protect people from feelings of discomfort or emotional pain generated through hearing ideas they don't like or with which they don't agree. This is identified as the most significant risk to democracy ever experienced in modern times (Giroux, 2015) and according to Chomsky (2016), responsible for the disappearance of democracy across Europe and possibly more recently in the USA. In Australia, this neoliberal climate is evident in the early childhood policy reforms which emphasise compliance to pre-determined standards of quality. ECEs, who are

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themselves products of the neoliberalist culture, are placed in a role where they are told they are responsible for monitoring compliance to the policy regime, and in doing so, are perpetuating the very neoliberal regime that produced the unthinking citizens of Furendi, Giroux and Chomsky's concerns.

Enacting early childhood leadership in a context of growing professionalism internationally

Another level of complication impacting on the role of ECEs is the growing desire internationally for the early childhood sector to become professionalised (Sims and Pedey, 2015, Sims and Tausere-Tiko, 2016, Skattebol et al., 2016, Chalke, 2013, Cooke and Lawton, 2008). Professionalisation requires members of the in-group to have discretion in their decision-making in order to determine for themselves what they will accept as best practice (Evans, 2010). In other words, leadership goes hand-in-hand with the expectation of discretionary decision-making authority. In the EC arena, discretionary power is necessary as the situations in which ECEs have to practice are complex and best practice cannot be pre-determined in a one-size-fits-all approach (Lipsky, 2010).

Enacting leadership at the intersection of neoliberalism and professionalism

The professional requirement for discretionary decision-making powers is in conflict with the neoliberal requirement for increasing top-down control and compliance with pre-determined quality indicators designed to control professional practice. Evans (2011) for example, argues that the ability of professionals to exercise discretion in their decision-making may counter this neoliberal pressure for compliance but this ability is limited by the professionals' feelings of self efficacy and competence. In Australian early childhood centres, where ECEs are occupying positions characterised by uncertainty with little or no authority, emerging research (for example Rouse and Spradbury, 2016) suggests that it is likely that their professional confidence is somewhat impaired and, we argue, this increases the risk that they will focus on compliance.

In summary, the early childhood sector policy documents and accompanying legislation driving EC sector reforms in Australia identify best practice, and appropriate performance of this defined best practice leads to service accreditation. ECEs are tasked with the responsibility of implementing this practice, and mentoring other educators in their service to do so too. In order to achieve this, ECEs first have to make sense of the practices identified in the legislation, policy and curriculum documents before they can then model, assist and insist on compliance from their colleagues at their centres. The relative newness of the ECE position, and the complex political and professional environments in which these roles are being enacted, all contribute to uncertainty and confusion. In our research, we set out to explore what sense ECEs make of the policy requirements, their understandings of their responsibilities in performing best practice, and their understandings of their work with other educators to enhance their performance of best practice. Our aim is to contribute to ongoing clarification and evolution of the role in the Australian context and create an opportunity for sharing with those working in ECE contexts outside of Australia in order to enhance understanding of the contextual complexities of ECE.

Research approach

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This is a mixed methods study using a pragmatist epistemology/ontology following the approach of Feilzer (2010). In order to explore the understandings ECEs have of their roles we use two theoretical frames of analysis: Lipsky's (1980, Lipsky, 2010) concept of 'street-level bureaucracy' and the concept of 'sense making' proposed by Weick and colleagues (1979, Weick, 2012, Weick et al., 2005). The implementation of early childhood policy reforms, designed to improve the quality of early childhood organizations across Australia, depend on various groups interpreting the policy and enacting it; a process of sense-making. Sense-making is an ongoing process so that ECEs simultaneously interpret policy to shape their understanding of their roles and responsibilities, act upon the sense they have made, then re-interpret and re-act. This process of making sense of their roles and responsibilities (ie develop their understanding) depends in part on their own beliefs (Henneberg et al., 2010), on the ways in which they have previously operated in the workplace (Coleman et al., 2010, Gong and Janssen, 2012) and being able to link or bundle what they have done before with what they think they are required to do under the new policy regime (Kostka and Hobbs, 2012). ECEs thus draw meaning from policy according to what is relevant for their contexts and their own practice. In turn, they use that sense-making to shape the way they work with other educators in their mentoring role and in the way they seek to shape staff' performance into compliance with the policy. In this sense they are working as street-level bureaucrats as defined by Lipsky (1980) who argues that public policy:

is actually made in the crowded offices and daily encounters of street-level workers...the decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures, effectively become the public policies they carry out (p. xii)

As street-level bureaucrats, ECEs make sense of the policy reforms and then use this to shape the compliance performance of the educators with whom they work. Thus, using these two frames, this study set out to address the following research questions:

1. who are the ECEs?
2. what sense do they make of their leadership role?
3. how do they use their sense-making as street-level bureaucrats to shape their performance in this role?

Participants and methods

During 2015-2016, we recruited 164 early childhood educators who were employed as ECEs. Participants came from around Australia (from 107 different postcodes we identified 61 from NSW, 38 from Victoria, 12 from Queensland, 4 from Western Australia and 2 from Tasmania, the remainder were not provided) and were recruited via a range of online strategies:

1. Email: Members of our research reference group circulated a recruitment email around their professional networks
2. E-newsletter: We placed a call for volunteers in a weekly e-newsletter released by a key national early childhood organisation
3. Webpage: We placed a call for volunteers on the webpages of a key information-sharing children's organisation and a large, corporate provider of early childhood programs.

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There is no national database of ECEs and we understand anecdotally (in the lack of any other form of information), that whilst many EC services have officially appointed an existing staff into the mandated ECEL role, not all of those services have provided an official job description. Not all those appointed into the role are given time release to perform the functions of the role and there is no official mandate requiring them to do so. Thus, we have specifically asked the first research question in order to describe the participants in the study. We have chosen to refer to the participants as 'our ECEs' to make it clear that we do not claim these participants are representative of all Australian ECEs or even any subgroup of Australian ECEs.

Potential volunteers were given the link to a website where full disclosure information was available and with informed consent, they proceeded to answer an online survey. In addition to collecting standard demographic data, we asked participants to use rating scales and provide open-ended text answers. The survey was developed specifically for this study. Readers interested in the survey may seek a copy from the authors.

Analyses

Descriptive statistics were calculated for qualitative variables and cross-tabulations performed. Tests of significance used depended on the format of the variables (nominal or interval scaling). These were Somers' d for ordinal x ordinal comparisons, and Uncertainty Coefficient for nominal x nominal, and nominal x ordinal comparisons (relevant statistics are reported for each analysis below). All quantitative analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 21.

We also used a process of constant comparison as initially described by Glaser (1965) to analyse the qualitative data from the open-ended questions. This involved reading and re-reading the texts, identifying themes, using quotes to delineate the boundaries between themes and using quotes to exemplify themes.

Ethical issues

The study was approved by the base University Human Research Ethics Committee which follows the nationally mandated NHMRC Ethical Guidelines (National Health & Medical Research Council et al., 2007 [updated 2015]). We had no direct contact with participants who were free to choose to participate or not as they wished. The survey was anonymous. We relied on participants' self-identification of their position as ECEs. Although we asked for formal job descriptions very few of these were provided (more recent anecdotal experience indicates that a number of ECEs do not yet have formal job descriptions). The survey was structured so that participants could choose not to answer certain questions, they could exit and return later or exit without completing. Because of this flexibility the numbers completing each question are identified in the analyses below. Participants could receive the results of the study by emailing a member of the research team separate from the survey.

Limitations

Recruitment was based on self-identification and it is evident from the data that some participants were not working directly with children in an ECEL role; we can only assume that these participants felt they had sufficient authority to present their views on this role. Due to the absence of a national

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database of ECEs there is no way to determine if those included in our study in any way reflect a representative sample or the diversity of ECEs in Australia.

Results

The following sections address each of the research questions in turn.

Who are the educational leaders?

Most of our leaders worked in child care centres, in family day care (provided within the educator's family home) or in preschool/pre-primary/prep or kindergarten. Note, that in Australia, terms can differ between states and territories, and the latter refers to the organizations attended by children in the years before compulsory schooling starts at 6 years of age. For ease of reference in this paper, we use the term 'early childhood settings' when referring to all the different types of services being offered through the diverse organisations listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Early Childhood Educational leaders' place of employment

| Type of early childhood settings | N | % |
|--|-----|-------|
| Child care / early learning centre | 65 | 42 |
| Preschool / pre-primary / prep or kindergarten | 46 | 30 |
| Family day care | 11 | 7 |
| Occasional care | 0 | 0 |
| Child and Family Centre | 1 | 0.6 |
| Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service | 1 | 0.6 |
| Outside School Hours Care | 4 | 2.6 |
| Combination of any of the above organizations | 9 | 5.8 |
| Advisory or support roles | 7 | 4.5 |
| Government or regulatory roles | 4 | 3 |
| Tertiary education roles | 2 | 1.3 |
| Other | 5 | 3.2 |
| TOTAL | 154 | 100.6 |

Given we had requested participants to self-identify (based on the definition given in the legislation), place of employment gave us the opportunity to examine the participants and determine how many were working directly with children. We note that the self-inclusion of those in advisory, support, regulatory and tertiary education roles (albeit small – 18 individuals or 11.7% of the sample) suggests that the definition of who is an ECE is still unclear, and continues to encompass those who appear to be performing roles other than those involved in working directly with children. Nearly half the participants (ie, N= 65, 42%) were employed in a child care centre catering for children from birth to five years, and open five days of the week for at least 48 weeks of the year. The second biggest cluster of participants (ie, N=46, 30%) were located in preschools attended typically by children three to five years age. If funded by governments, these are usually closed for ten weeks of the year following the same timetable of primary schools. The majority of the early childhood settings were non-profit (N=122, 80.5%). Approximately two thirds (N=99, 65%) of our leaders had worked in sectors other than early childhood at some point in their careers, and of these 32% (N=49) had positive experiences of working with a leader in these settings.

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ECEs were more likely to be female (N=158, 97.6%) and had worked in early childhood for at least 10 years although a very small number (N=2) were placed in leadership positions in the first year of their employment in early childhood settings. We found no relationship between the type of qualification and the length of time people had worked in early childhood, the length of time they had worked as an ECEL, their previous early childhood experience (ie experience mainly working face to face with children, experience mainly in management or a mixture of these two), nor if they had functioned as an ECEL informally before they were formally appointed. This was somewhat surprising as anecdotally there is a perception that university qualified graduates walk into leadership roles as ECEs and/or centre directors and are preferred in these roles over those with Diploma qualifications. This is not the case with our participants.

As can be seen in Table 2, with increasing experience, face-to-face contact with children decreased. The majority of our leaders had worked face to face with children in the past either in mainly face-to-face positions, or in positions where they mixed face-to-face experience with management. However, some had minimal face to face experience and came into the ECEL role with mainly management experience. This is interesting as the ECEL role is about improving the quality of face-to-face work with children and an ECEL with little experience of this work may struggle to offer appropriate mentoring. There was no significant difference between the qualifications held and the type of previous experience however when we compared the length of time people have worked in early childhood with the type of previous experience we see that management experience is significantly associated with a longer time in early childhood. Many of our participants appeared to have moved into mixed 'management/face to face' or management only roles the longer they had been in the profession. Leaders who had less than 5 years' experience in early childhood were more likely to be appointed if their past experience was in face-to-face work with children. In comparison, leaders who had many years of experience in early childhood were more likely to be appointed into an ECEL role if their experience was much broader, incorporating management and other experience (such as working in support roles).

Table 2: *The length of time ECEs had worked in early childhood compared to the type of work they did prior to their appointment as an ECEL (Uncertainty Co-efficient: time dependent = 0.85, significance = 0.001; role dependent = 0.76, significant = 0.001)*

| | Mainly face-to-face % (N) | Mixed % (N) | Mainly management % (N) | Other (eg support roles) % (N) |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|-------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Less than 5 years | 15.4 (6) | 0 | 5.3 (1) | 0 |
| 5 to less than 15 years | 43.6 (17) | 30.8 (24) | 21.1 (4) | 13.6 (3) |
| 15 to less than 30 years | 33.3 (13) | 60.3 (47) | 57.9 (11) | 59.1 (13) |
| 30 or more years | 7.7 (3) | 9.0 (7) | 15.8 (3) | 27.3 (6) |
| Total | 100 (39) | 100 (78) | 100 (19) | 100 (22) |

The majority of the participants who answered our questionnaire had been in their leadership roles for 2-4 years (N=69, 42%), reflective of the time lag between the reforms begun in 2009 and the implementation of these progressively over the following years. Some (N=24, 18%)

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had been an ECEL for 5 years or more and a smaller number less than 12 months (N=15, 11.4%). Just over half of the participants (N=85, 59.4%) had been functioning as an informal ECEL before being formally appointed though just over a third currently had a job description that identified what was expected of them as an ECEL (yes N=56 38.4%, no N=90 61.6%). This reflects the current state of uncertainty about the ECEL role and responsibilities.

What sense do ECEs make of their role?

Table 3 demonstrates the average rankings given by ELs to different elements of their role. Overall they rated the relationship work with staff and the mentoring they offered as really important. There were no significant differences in the way leaders perceived their roles on the basis of their age.

In the following tables we have combined categories in order to ensure appropriate numbers in each of the cells. Ratings of roles have been reduced from a 6 point to a 3 point scale (ratings 1 and 2, 3 and 4, 5 and 6 are combined to reflect important, a middle ground and not important). Table axes identify the categories used in the analyses.

In terms of how their professional qualifications impacted on the way in which leaders perceived their roles (see Tables 4 and 5), degree-qualified leaders were more likely to believe relationships were important and more likely to be ambivalent about their role in challenging the NQF than were diploma qualified ECEs (note that numbers in other qualification groups – eg certificates, no qualifications, qualifications beyond degree level - were too small to include in the analyses.) There were no significant differences between Diploma and degree-qualified ECEs in their reported valuing of monitoring compliance: most (91 of 97) identified it as an unimportant element of their role (this idea will be explored further in the next section as there appears a disjunction between their sense-making and their acts of street-level bureaucracy in relation to compliance work).

Table 3: What is the ECEL role about (N=118) [rank 1 = very important, 6= not important]

| Role of the ECEL | Rank | variance |
|---|------|----------|
| Building and maintaining relationships with staff | 2.30 | 2.91 |
| Mentoring/coaching staff | 2.32 | 1.50 |
| Working with staff to interpret the NQS | 3.68 | 1.74 |
| Identifying with staff what you as group think is good practice before trying to fit your practice into the NQS | 3.85 | 2.20 |
| Challenging the understandings of good quality identified in the NQS | 4.02 | 2.21 |
| Monitoring staff performance against the NQS– ensuring compliance to the NQS | 4.84 | 1.99 |

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Table 4: Rating of the importance of relationships by Qualifications (Uncertainty coefficient 0.61, significance = 0.017)

| | 1 & 2 Most important % (N) | 3 & 4 % (N) | 5 & 6 least important % (N) | Total % (N) |
|---------|-------------------------------------|----------------|--------------------------------------|-------------|
| Diploma | 45 (9) | 15 (3) | 40 (8) | 100 (20) |
| Degree | 75.6 (62) | 12.2 (10) | 12.2 (10) | 100 (82) |

Table 5: Rating of the importance of challenging understandings of the NQF by Qualifications (Uncertainty coefficient 0.052, significance = 0.018)

| | 1 & 2 Most important % (N) | 3 & 4 % (N) | 5 & 6 least important % (N) | Total % (N) |
|---------|-------------------------------------|----------------|--------------------------------------|-------------|
| Diploma | 35 (7) | 20 (4) | 45 (9) | 100 (20) |
| Degree | 11 (9) | 46.3 (38) | 42.7 (35) | 100 (82) |

Leaders were generally likely to rate building and maintaining relationships as a very important part of their role irrespective of their experience in early childhood however, those who had previously worked mainly face-to-face with children were more likely to consider this important (see Table 6). Those who rated the building and maintaining relationships roles as not important were more likely to have had a mix of face-to-face work with children and management background or a management background only. The differences were significant. It appears the more management experience our leaders had, the more likely they were to devalue relationship work. There were no other significant differences between those with different background experiences in their rating of the importance of various elements of the leadership role.

Table 6: Ratings of the importance of relationship work with staff by type of previous EC experience (Somers' d = 0.169, significance = 0.028)

| | 1 & 2 Most important % (N) | 3 & 4 % (N) | 5 & 6 least important % (N) | Total % (N) |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------|
| All face-to-face experience | 84 (21) | 12 (3) | 4 (1) | 100 (25) |
| Mixed experience | 71.2 (47) | 10.6 (7) | 18.2 (12) | 100 (66) |
| All management experience | 50.1 (6) | 10.8 (4) | 16.6 (2) | 100 (12) |

This is mirrored in the significant relationship found between the length of time leaders have worked in early childhood and their rating of the importance of relationships (given small numbers in some of the groups we recoded length of experience in EC into 2 categories as below in Table 7). Leaders rated this as crucial or very important but the longer they had worked in early childhood the

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less likely they were to do so. This appears in contrast to the qualitative data discussed below and we will explore this issue further as we examine ECELS acts of street-level bureaucracy.

Table 7: Ratings of the importance of working with staff to interpret the NQF by length of EC experience (Somers' $d = 0.147$, significance = 0.021)

| | 1 & 2 Most important % (N) | 3 & 4 % (N) | 5 & 6 least important % (N) | Total % (N) |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------|
| Less than 15 years | 87.5 (14) | 12.5 (2) | 0 (0) | (16) |
| 15 years and more | 68.3 (69) | 12.9 (13) | 18.8 (19) | (101) |

Thus, we see a shift in sense-making about the ECEL role over time, with leaders putting less emphasis on relationship work as their experience in the sector increases, and as they have more experience in management roles. Degree qualified staff were also more likely to rate the relationship element of their ECEL work as important and less likely to see their role as challenging interpretations of the NQF. In the following section we will use the qualitative data to explore how ECELS use their sense-making to shape their work.

How educational leaders use their sense-making as street-level bureaucrats to shape their performance in this role

Examining the qualitative data gives a better understanding of the way ECELS think about their roles and how their sense-making impacts on what they say they do. Whilst they indicated above that relationship work is a key part of their role, the qualitative data shows that this relationship work is positioned around aligning their practice with what is defined as high quality in the NQF (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2011b). Here they talked about monitoring practices to ensure they met the standards required of practice in the NQF. They noted the importance of monitoring pedagogical documentation. In the Australian context pedagogical documentation refers to written observations, programme plans and evaluations developed for each child:

Support educators in building their understanding of the NQF and EYLF, develop documentation systems, embed reflective practice, model pedagogical practices, reading and research, sharing information with colleagues, developing and implementing professional development plans for educators, monitoring LDCPLP funding, monitoring pedagogical documentation (ECEL 47)

In particular, this work includes:

1. monitoring and checking programming – “Monitoring programming and planning and documenting of children's learning that is done by all staff” (ECEL 92); “... oversee staffs' programs and documentation” (ECEL 78) “...monitor how many observations the team are doing, inform management of their quality and quantity” (ECEL 85);
2. creating and managing the Quality Improvement Plan - “Each year I am in charge of reviewing and putting together our QIP together with staff and families” (ECEL 95)

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3. developing policies and procedures – “I work in partnership with the director to develop policies and procedures” (ECEL 38) and
4. allocating workloads - “critically appraise practice, workloads, documentation” (ECEL 6)
5. making sure the service is compliant with the regulations – “Ensure all regulations are being met” (EDEL 80).

Our ECEs also took responsibility for a range of management/administration tasks which might in other circumstances be allocated to a line manager. These roles included:

1. performance reviews- - “performance reviews and identification of pd requirements and opportunities” (EDEL 77)
2. general administration “I am also collecting the mail, checking the email, doing the shopping, paying the bills, organising rosters for laundry and lawn mowing, it goes on and on” (EDEL 65).

This overlap between the role of the EDEL and the service manager was identified by EDEL 76 who described herself as having a “Shared leadership with Service Manager.” This confusion is evident in the words of other leaders: confusion around the delineation between the ECEL role and a line management role and confusion (presumably because of the lack of clear guidance for the role) around what is expected of ECEs:

My current understanding of educational leader is a little bit confusing. I supported students in my room but I don't actually have to worry about students in other rooms because the other room leaders are supporting them. I have the meeting once with the room leaders but they think they already knew everything so I don't push my own agenda. I only support my assistants and students in my room (ECEL 67)

Very few leaders identified advocacy as a component of their work as an ECEL. The only times advocacy was mentioned it addressed the following:

1. general advocacy – “Strong advocacy role” (ECEL 120)
2. advocacy for children – “advocate for children” (ECEL 6)
3. advocacy for better practice – “, advocacy and better practice throughout our setting. I support educators with ideas, thought provocation, proof reading and support with their studies and also with resources” (ECEL 87)
4. communicating with parents to support parents’ understanding of educational program and practice – “, to support parents understanding of educational program and practice and to promote the role of early childhood education in the community and wider community” (ECEL 90)
5. Community advocacy – “To be able to promote early childhood and communicate on all levels with other educators, director, parent committee, families and the wider community” (ECEL 15, also see ECEL 90 in 4 above)
6. networking with school teachers and principals – “We also liase with our Committee relating to our program content etc. We do, on occasions, utilize our local schools and have contact with Principals and Co-ordinators in relation to our students” (ECEL 56).

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Only two leaders talked about challenging current understandings as a component of their role:

provoking thought about how we can extend and improve the experiences we provide which scaffold children's learning (ECEL 69)

To be an advocator of high quality. What do I do? To be the best role model I can be for the educators, children and families (ECEL 15)

ECEL 19 is the only person who identified a social justice framework to his/her work:

I mentor preservice teachers, supporting them to think critically about the work they do and the relationships they have with children and their families. I challenge them to think about the ways they can actively create a more socially just and inclusive environment for children and families (ECEL 19)

We were interested in the issue of challenging the NQS and explored this further in an open-ended question: 73 leaders (44.5% of the total number of participants) chose to answer this question. Even though our question specifically asked leaders to reflect on the role they played in challenging the NQS a number of leaders instead shared how they worked to comply.

At the moment I am concentrating on improving my service so that it meets, and hopefully exceeds, NQS expectations. We are not yet at the stage of challenging the NQS as this would not be helpful (ECEL 47)

Unfortunately this isn't part of my role (ECEL 50)

Challenging the NQS was positioned by some as important in improving quality:

I believe it is our duty to challenge anything that is not working and contribute to finding solutions (ECEL 1)

We challenge the NQS in many ways to ensure our practices occur because we believe them to be best practice rather than practice that is mandated by an outside authority (ECEL 6)

The leaders shared a range of strategies they used when sharing how they challenged the NQS (noting that challenging appears to mean different things to different participants and that for many challenging was more about complying). For many, discussions with staff in their centres were very important in identifying where there were concerns (where things were not working) and these discussions were used to help them make their own decisions about what was best practice in their context. Sometimes this was done through professional conversations ("bringing up the NQS consistently, drawing out professional conversations, challenging educators way of thinking, their actions and working with reflection" - ECEL 56) and other times through professional reflection with the support of the leader ("Reflective practice, critical reflection, reviewing the quality improvement plan, being honest, having an attitude that it is okay if it did not work lets rectify" - ECEL 11).

Other leaders talked about discussions held outside their centre. For example leader 1 talked about committee roles with other early childhood organisations and her involvement in an ELs' Network as useful strategies to help her challenge the status quo:

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In regards the NQS I believe it is our duty to challenge anything that is not working and contribute to finding solutions. To that end I have been an active member on many organisational committees, including Vice Chairperson of X, Committee member of ECAX Branch and convener of the newly formed Educational Leaders X Network. I have contributed to many discussion forums both formal and social media based. Advocated for recognition of ECEC educators, and most recently tweeted and Facebooked Minister Simon Birmingham. In relation to terminology and titles of people working within ECEC (ECEL 1)

Others talked about joining with other groups to develop shared submissions to major issues such as the then recent Productivity Commission report on early childhood:

Sharing in the completion of a comprehensive submission to the Productivity Commission from the local area ECA network. Explaining what is working and what is not across services (ECEL 25).

Some leaders also mentioned social media was a useful tool which helped them make these connections and have 'discussions'.

In a personal capacity I actively participate in conversations to critically analyse these requirements – this mostly occurs on social media platforms (ECEL 70)

Discussion

In this section we present the results in terms of the two key theories we have used to conceptualise the study: sense-making and street level bureaucracy. In doing this we focus on two key elements of leadership work: that of building and maintaining relationships and the tension between compliance and resistance.

Sense-making and Street-level bureaucratisation of relationship work

The qualitative data suggests that despite indicating relationship work was held in high regard, we see this work less valued the more time our leaders spent in the early childhood sector. Their sense-making around relationship work, and the way in which they actually implemented this work was focused around mentoring, guiding and shaping the work of educators to comply with their understanding of the policy directions. In other words, their acts of street-level bureaucracy were focused on attempting to comply with what they understood the policy to require. This is supported by their claims that key elements of their role were monitoring pedagogical documentation (to make sure it was at the required standard for accreditation), monitoring and checking programming (for the same reasons) and developing and monitoring the Quality Improvement Plan (an integral part of the accreditation process). They identified that nearly a third of their time as leaders was spent on these monitoring tasks.

All of these elements of work, whilst embedded in a relationship discourse, suggest that at the street-level their work was focused on ensuring compliance to the policy based on the ways in which they had made sense of what was required. The extent to which the ECECs are themselves

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aware of how their focus on compliance work is shaping their relationships with other educators is difficult to assess in our data. The fact that they tended to discount their compliance work and focus on relationships suggests that they may not be fully aware of this.

Many of our leaders had worked for some time (at least 15 years) in the early childhood sector, and for most, this previous experience was in face-to-face work with children. The longer they had been in the sector the more likely they were to have had previous management (ie traditional management) experience. This background experience is likely to have impacted on how they made sense of the new policy agenda and indeed, our data demonstrates that leaders who had previous management experience were likely to rate relationships as less important.

Whilst the importance of relationships is present across much of the *Early Years Learning Framework* (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) this is in the context of educator relationships with children and families, and children's relationships with each other and the world around them, not in the context of educator to educator relationships. In contrast the *National Quality Standard* (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2011c) identifies leadership as "a relationship between people and the best leaders are those who are able to empower others. They listen to differing views, recognise and address areas of potential conflict, and engage and manage teams through change processes." In addition, Standard 7.1 states: "Effective leadership promotes a positive organisational culture and builds a professional learning community" (ibid, 2011c, p. 173) but the relationships to which it refers are those with children and families, not with staff. The discussion accompanying Element 7.1.4 (the element that specifically identifies the ECEL) implies interactions with staff. In relation to this standard, the Assessors who visit early childhood settings for accreditation purposes are tasked to look for "what strategies and processes the educational leader uses to lead the development of the curriculum and set goals for teaching and learning" and may sight "professional conversations" (ibid, p. 178) but relationships with staff are not explicitly mentioned.

This is worth exploring because there is a clear disjuncture between the concept of leadership as consisting of relationship work (a position held for many years by the 'nice ladies' who worked in early childhood, and the literature which addresses the feminine aspects of leadership: Due Billing and Alvesson, 2000, Vinkenburg et al., 2000, Hard, 2005, Hard and Jónsdóttir, 2013) and the positioning of leadership in the policy documents (policy documents as identified above; with the implication of a distributive model but no clear guidance). We see ECEs struggle with this disjunction in their own sense-making; pulling on their experience in the feminised early childhood sector (Nupponen, 2006) where relationship work is valued, but at the same time undermined by the absence of this discourse in the policy documents, at least in relation to relationships with staff. The study data suggested previous experience in management roles seemed to negate the value of relationship work, presumably as these leaders were exposed to a managerial approach. We wonder, with increasing time, if the feminised positioning of leadership as relationship work will stand against, or be subsumed by, the managerial work performed by these ECEs.

Sense-making and Street-level bureaucratisation of compliance and resistance work

Challenging policy did not appear to translate into advocacy. In the past, advocacy about the importance of early childhood work, and about the need to increase the esteem in which the work is held, was considered an important part of early childhood work (Rodd, 2012, Dalli, 2010). The ECEs

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3 in our study, when they talked about advocacy, positioned it as advocacy FOR children and
4 communicating with parents in attempts to have the educators' work with their child better
5 understood. It appears that the majority of the advocacy arising from sense-making and street-level
6 implementation of the policies remains within the centres where each leader works. Only two
7 leaders mentioned community advocacy but more in terms of building networks (perhaps in the
8 light of the requirements in the policy to develop a holistic approach). This suggests that the street-
9 level actions arising from leaders' sense-making are much more likely to impact within each local
10 setting and not the wider community. Advocacy is thus being limited to a local level (within
11 employing organisations and the families accessing services) and is not, in the main, being enacted
12 at community, social or political levels. This is concerning as we believe the voices of leaders are
13 essential contributors to the ongoing evolution of the early childhood sector, and the absence of
14 such voices leaves the sector vulnerable to other influences. Such other influences, according to
15 Chomsky (2016) are much more likely to have the interests of the economic elite at heart which
16 results in the exclusion of "the large majority of the population, at the lower end of the
17 income/wealth scale" (p2) from the political system and from any form of decision-making. Chomsky
18 argues it is the responsibility of those with privilege to accept the responsibility to address inequities
19 in society: using their voices and their position to speak out against injustice and to advocate for
20 positive changes and we suggest that ECEs are in that position of privilege given their tertiary
21 qualifications (albeit somewhat impaired by the low status in which EC work continues to be
22 viewed).

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Advocacy not only needs to address issues of societal inequity, and the role of high quality
EC services in addressing these, it also needs to address understandings of what high quality looks
like, and how our understandings can be further developed. Given strong critiques of the neoliberal
compliance agenda in the international literature (as discussed above), we were particularly
interested in exploring if, in making sense of the new policy agenda, ECEs were engaging in this kind
of critical thinking about the standards imposed upon them and using professional critique to shape
both how they understood these requirements and then implemented them. The writers of the *Early
Years Learning Framework* (for international readers, this is the EC curriculum), for example, were
anxious that this document was used to generate professional reflection, professional conversations
and critique and not unthinking compliance (Sumsion and Grieshaber, 2012). Unfortunately we
found that only two of our leaders referred to challenging current understandings as an element of
their role and only one identified she used a social justice framework, (a framework incompatible
with neoliberalism - Giroux, 2015).

In reality, the sense-making activities of some of the leaders led them to believe that
challenging the policy framework was about how difficult it was for them to understand and comply.
However other leaders were able to identify that they would challenge the policy if it led them to
practices they did not think were working at the level of the street. Again we refer to Chomsky
(2016) who argues that "privilege yields opportunity, and opportunity confers responsibilities. An
individual then has choices." At this early stage in the evolution of the ECEL role in Australia, our
leaders in the main are not accepting the responsibilities for public advocacy that Chomsky argues
accompany any position of privilege. Perhaps as the role evolves leaders may move into enacting
this responsibility.

Conclusion

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Our data suggests that Australian ECEs, who are relatively new to their roles, are using past experiences to make sense of the extensive policy changes which have impacted on their work in recent years (a key contributor to sense-making). Perhaps given that the ECE role is relatively new it is not too surprising that the main focus of these leaders' sense-making and street-level implementation focuses around compliance with the new policy regime. There is no evidence in the data that the leaders are aware of, or thinking about, the longer-term impacts of their compliance, either in terms of their own behaviour or of the learning opportunities compliance provides for the children. Neither is there much evidence in the data to suggest that leaders are aware of the tension between the autonomous decision-making that is inherent in professionalisation and the compliance with neoliberal expectations that they are, on the whole, performing.

Will leaders who have been in their role for a longer period of time move past automatic compliance into critique and challenge? Or will sustained periods of compliance reinforce this as the behaviour that gets results: leadership which achieves and maintains a good quality accreditation. For ECEs to challenge there needs to be other information which will impact on their sense-making; validate their right to challenge, whilst ensuring that good accreditation results can be achieved in diverse ways. As long as the practices can be justified and supported to enable ECEs to satisfy management expectations for improving quality, they can simultaneously challenge themselves and their colleagues to think critically about their professional practice.

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