

RECOGNITION? TRUST? SUPPORT? PRESENCE? WHAT REALLY COUNTS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD LEADERSHIP?

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ABSTRACT

Nineteen school principals, twenty-one senior staff leaders (including assistant principals and advanced skills teachers) and one hundred and one Kindergarten to Grade 2 (K-2) teachers responded to a survey concerning the relative importance of thirteen attributes of early childhood leadership. Each participant was asked to rank in importance five attributes of successful school leadership from the thirteen aspects provided. Demonstration of trust and support for K-2 teachers was perceived to be the central aspect of successful leadership by both leaders and teachers. Ensuring adequate resourcing provisions for K-2 education was seen to be the second most important aspect of leadership by teachers, whilst leaders perceived helping to improve teaching practice to be the second critical aspect of successful leadership. Conflicting perceptions between the two groups were seen in relation to the aspects of sharing leadership with K-2 teachers and encouraging innovation by teachers, with leaders placing greater emphasis on these two aspects than teachers. Conversely, teachers perceived that demonstration of positive leadership presence in K-2 and possession of sound conflict and negotiation skills to be crucial to a leader's role in K-2.

Key words: early childhood leadership, trust, support, presence, shared leadership, conflict resolution skills, resource provision

What implications does the new decade in education, in the early years of schooling, have for leaders in early childhood education? Currently, the early years of education are being faced with a barrage of social and educational changes. The complexity and diversity of these changes are placing challenging demands upon early childhood leaders in primary schools. What sort of leaders do we need in early childhood education to lead the profession into the new century? What aspects of leadership do current teachers and leaders in K-2 perceive as being essential?

Being a leader in early childhood education has been described as a complex, yet elusive role to define (Jorde-Bloom 1997 cited by Rodd 1998). Current literature reveals the importance of many aspects of successful leadership in school education. Trust, support and respect between teachers and leaders (Mulford & Bishop 1997; Grady, Macpherson, Mulford & Williamson 1994), effective communication and high level interpersonal skills (Anderson 1998; Rodd 1998; Leithwood, Begley & Cousins 1994) have been seen as being crucial to quality school leadership. Further, Stamopoulos (1998) and Leithwood, Begley and Cousins (1994) highlight the importance of a leader's competence in the technical core of their area of leadership responsibility. Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis and Ecob (1993) and Leithwood and Aitken (1995) stress the significant importance of a leader's presence and involvement in classrooms within their leadership role. As well as these aspects, shared decision-making and collaborative practices (Mulford & Bishop 1997;

Goldring and Sullivan 1996) and recognition and encouragement of high performance (Schmoker 1996; Grady et al. 1994) have been noted as key aspects of quality leadership. However, limited information and research related to early childhood-based leadership in school settings, with its inherent qualities, characteristics and roles, is available. The work of Rodd (1998) is acknowledged as an important contribution to this area in Australia and her “typology” of an early childhood leader is a welcome addition to this literature. Rodd (1998, p.3) states that effective leadership in early childhood education involves a leader’s ability to “provide vision and communicate it; develop a team culture; set goals and objectives; monitor and communicate achievements; and facilitate and encourage the development of individuals’. However, as the main emphasis of Rodd’s work is in the child-care sector, a comparative view of leadership, as it relates to the educational provision for Kindergarten to Grade 2 (K-2) children, was seen to be important. For this purpose, the perceptions of early childhood teachers and leaders (within both Kindergarten to Grade 6, and Kindergarten to Grade 10 settings) were gained to further enhance this limited body of knowledge.

In Tasmanian school settings, the leadership provision for children (aged between four and eight years) and their teachers has become an arguably neglected component of leadership in primary and district high schools. This has been partly caused by the move from recognition of the early childhood leadership role, within the Education Department of Tasmania, as a specialised one during the 70s and early 80s, to that of a generic leadership role in the late 80s and throughout the decade of the 90s. This move has resulted in many school-based leaders (including principals, assistant principals, and advanced skills teachers) with specialisations in other areas of education, such as secondary, primary and physical education, being appointed to positions with early childhood leadership responsibility. Furthermore, the increased pressure caused by decreased resource provision within schools has left significant numbers of early childhood leaders with substantial teaching loads, resulting in little time being available for specific leadership activities in their area of the school. Subsequently, investigation of the changing nature of the leadership role was seen as important and a study was designed to endeavour to enhance understanding of the key factors which underpin the early childhood leader’s role in Tasmanian schools.

THE DESIGN OF THE STUDY

As part of an educational doctorate study, conducted by Boardman (1999) entitled *The Nature of Educational Leadership in the Early Years, Kindergarten to Grade 2, in Tasmanian Schools*, Kindergarten to Grade 2 (K-2) teachers’ and leaders’ perceptions of the important aspects which comprise leadership in Grades K-2 were investigated. This paper presents a section of the results which sought to reveal the key aspects of quality leadership as they apply to early childhood education in Tasmanian schools. Twenty-nine schools across two of the six school districts in Tasmania participated in the research project. The sample comprised schools of differing size and socio-economic standing in an attempt to involve all levels of early childhood leaders and teachers as potential participants in the research. Responses were received from 101 K-2 teachers (48% response rate to the survey), and 19 school principals and 21 senior staff leaders (70% response rate to the survey) who had direct responsibility for early childhood education within their schools.

Postal surveys were utilised to gather data from school leaders (including principals, assistant principals, and advanced skills teachers) and teachers, responsible for education in Grades K -2. Earlier survey tools and related summaries, were utilised as guidelines in selecting appropriate statements for development of the survey. These sources included the works of Rodd (1998), Mulford, Hogan and Lamb (1997), Leithwood and Aitken (1995), as well as Tasmanian school review documents (Assisted School Self Review surveys) related to leadership, which were being

utilised in all state schools at that time. Thirteen statements were included in the selection, with the opportunity being provided for respondents to include any other aspects which had been omitted. Respondents were asked to rank statements concerning the five most important leadership factors for school leaders. In seeking participants to indicate their order of preference among the provided options, the scale employed was *one* representing the most important through to *five* representing the fifth most important leadership aspect. Inclusion of these ranked statements was seen as a means of obtaining an overall rank order (Burns 1997) of key aspects of leadership for early childhood education. Data were entered into an Excel spreadsheet which allowed the systematic and accurate handling of results (Glesne & Peshkin 1992) to occur. A detailed list of the survey statements and their literary source are presented in Appendix 1.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Responding teachers' and leaders' perceptions of the important aspects of leadership within the Kindergarten to Grade 2 area of the school were compared. The percentage of respondents who referred to each aspect and the statement priority for each item from both groups' perspectives are shown in Table 1, along with overall results, where the percentage responses from teachers and leaders are averaged.

TABLE 1

TEACHERS' AND LEADERS' RESPONSES TO MOST IMPORTANT LEADERSHIP ASPECTS IN K-2

Important Leadership Aspect	Teachers' Responses n =101		Leaders' Responses n=40		Overall Results	
	%	Priority	%	Priority	%	Priority
Demonstrates trust and support of teachers.	74	1 st	67	1 st	71	1 st
Ensures adequate resource provision for K-2.	67	2 nd	54	4 th	61	2 nd
Helps improve teaching practice.	50	4 th	65	2 nd	58	3 rd
Demonstrates positive leadership presence in Grades K-2.	53	3 rd	43	5 th	48	4 th
Shares leadership with K-2 teachers.	27	10 th	60	3 rd	44	5 th
Encourages innovation by K-2 teachers.	25	11 th	40	6 th	33	6 th
Recognises achievement/involvement of K-2 students and parents.	28	9 th	32	8 th	30	7 th
Values contributions of K-2 teachers equally.	35	5 th	22	9 th	29	8 th
Promotes commitment to school goals and processes.	18	12 th	38	7 th	28	9 th
Leads with energy and by example.	35	5 th	20	10 th	28	9 th
Recognises K-2 teachers' performance.	30	7 th	20	10 th	25	11 th
Possesses sound conflict and negotiation skills.	29	8 th	10	12 th	20	12 th
Attends to K-2 teachers' personal needs.	16	13 th	10	12 th	13	13 th
Other aspects	4	14 th	8	14 th	6	14 th

What do K-2 Leaders and Teachers Perceive to be the Important Aspects of Leadership?

Analysis of the results of Boardman's (1999) study indicated that there were three key aspects, which both teachers and leaders believed to be central to quality leadership in K-2. These were:

- * Demonstrate trust and support of teachers
- * Ensure adequate resource provision in K-2
- * Help improve teaching practice.

Demonstrate Trust and Support of Teachers

The leadership aspect which returned the greatest congruence between responding teachers and leaders was "demonstrates trust and support of teachers". Of responding teachers, 74% were strongly supportive of this aspect of leadership, with 40% of them citing this statement as their first priority in K-2 leadership. Similarly, 67% of leaders acknowledged trust and support of teachers as an important facet of successful leadership, with 43% of respondents placing this aspect as their highest leadership priority.

These findings accord strongly with the findings of Bishop and Mulford (1997) who found developing a trusting environment to be the key aspect of leadership, with recognition, support, respect and reliability being influential in school leadership practices. Furthermore, Jorde-Bloom (1995) and Grady, Macpherson, Mulford and Williamson (1994) indicate that trust and support are central components of successful leadership in both early childhood and primary school settings.

Ensure Adequate Resource Provision for K-2

Recognition of the importance of the statement "ensures adequate resource provision for K-2" was received from teachers and leaders. Of teachers in the study, 67% believed this was an essential component of a K-2 leader's role, with 40% of responding teachers listing this statement as their second or third priority. Fewer leaders (54%) indicated this was important, but 36% of these respondents considered provision of adequate resourcing to be their second or third most important aspect of leadership.

Previous research by Blase and Blase (1997) and Goldring and Rallis (1993) supports this stance. They refer to the facilitative role of leaders in relation to planning and manipulating of resources, space and personnel, to enable teachers to act in a professional, enhancing manner when addressing the needs of children in their care.

It is widely accepted that early childhood teachers and leaders must be advocates for young children (Rodd 1998), and an important component of advocacy relates to resource-based issues, in both fiscal and personnel domains. The fact that so many teachers indicated their support for this aspect of K-2 leadership appears to clearly indicate they believed K-2 leaders must have this issue high on their leadership agendas. Historically, within a Tasmanian K-6 school setting, K-2 teachers and leaders have been striving to receive equity in funding for their students. In many cases, from the experience of the researcher, this has become a challenging task with the devolution of funding decisions to schools, as the many competing demands within a school's operation have seen many K-2 areas of schooling experiencing limited resourcing provision. Value laden dilemmas, such as do we paint the early childhood building, or do we buy new language resources for the entire school, are constantly being faced by school personnel. Respondents in Boardman's (1999) study, appear to strongly concur that appropriate funding is essential to ensure that young children receive a sound start to their education in all aspects of the educational program.

Helps Improve Teaching Practice

Helping to improve teaching practice was rated as an important aspect of K-2 leadership, by both teachers (50%) and leaders (65%). Further, 25% of leaders identified this item as their first priority. However, it is with some ill ease that it is noted that responding leaders in this study had specialisations in areas of education other than early childhood. Only 38% of leaders held early childhood specialisations, whilst 44% had primary, 8% had secondary and 10% had physical education qualifications. Other researchers (Rodd 1998; Stamopoulos 1998) confirm this most concerning statistic. Early childhood teachers need to see their leader as a credible role model in K-2 teaching and learning processes. If, as this study indicated, 65% of leaders saw helping to improve K-2 teaching as a significant role in their leadership, then it leaves the researcher pondering what impact the 62% of leaders who had no training in early childhood education were having on the K-2 learning program. Does this mean, as some responding teachers noted in another section of the study, that inappropriate programs and unrealistic expectations are being employed with K-2 teachers and children?

It is acknowledged that all school leaders are learners and that ongoing professional development is an integral component of a leader's role. However, compounding this problem is the fact that professional learning opportunities for school leaders, related to K-2 pedagogy, are severely limited within the state. This has resulted in a number of K-2 school leaders utilising professional learning providers from other schools and agencies to supply pedagogical leadership for Grades K-2 teachers. This approach does have limitations, as it fails to address the significant pedagogical issues, which arise each week, and in some cases each day whilst leaders complete their K-2 role. Perhaps the fact that only 50% of teachers saw "helping to improve teaching practice" as an important aspect in a K-2 leader's role, is indicative that teachers are turning to other personnel for support in pedagogical matters. If this is the case, the quality of some of this advice may be questionable, especially if it is from an ill-informed colleague. Having a leader who can provide strong leadership in K-2 teaching matters is ideal. However, the quality of this provision within Tasmanian schools at this time must be debatable, given the level of specific early childhood expertise of two thirds of early childhood leaders.

Further analysis of the results of Boardman's (1999) study revealed that the two aspects of leadership with the next highest levels of priority were:

- * Share leadership with K-2 teachers
- * Demonstrate positive leadership presence.

Share Leadership with K-2 teachers

Considering the differing opinions of K-2 teachers and leaders, related to the statement "shares leadership with K-2 teachers", it is important to note that leaders rated this as their third most important leadership aspect, compared to teachers rating it as their tenth. Much has been written over the past decade concerning the importance, value and desirability of shared leadership processes in schools (Goldring & Rallis 1993; Sergiovanni 1996; Mulford et al. 1997), and Tasmanian leaders would appear committed to this facet of leadership. However, concern must be shown to the fact that K-2 teachers rated shared leadership as a low priority in successful leadership, with only 27% of them seeing it as important.

Over the past ten years, Tasmanian education policies have promoted the notion of shared leadership. Statements such as "quality leadership ...encourages collegial decision-making and sets up processes for collegial support" (Department of Education and the Arts 1991, p.14), and "we must encourage all staff within schools to assume leadership positions and to develop their leadership skills" (Department of Education 2000, p.20), have formed a significant part of policy. It would appear that the leaders in this study are fully aware of the importance of shared leadership

in their schools, but teachers are neither fully aware, nor totally convinced, of the value of such collaborative processes. On the other hand, it may be that teachers are being asked to take on added leadership responsibilities outside their classroom and are feeling somewhat disillusioned by expectations of the entire process. Is this indicative that the push for collaborative decision-making and shared leadership in education circles has left some teachers wearied as they try to teach on a full time basis, as well as contribute in a meaningful way to leadership within their school? The fact that leaders are placing a far greater level of importance on processes of shared leadership than teachers, could well lead to dissent and tension over expectations for teachers' involvement. If collaborative leadership is seen as integral to K-2 education today, both teachers and leaders must recognise and value the practice.

Demonstrate Positive Leadership Presence

Of teachers in this study, 53% saw the third most important aspect of a leader's role in K-2 as demonstrating positive leadership presence. The strength of their conviction in this regard can be seen in the result that 32% of teachers made this statement their first or second priority, whilst 43% of leaders placed this item as their fifth priority. Positive leadership presence in the school is an important facet of educational leadership (Stoll & Fink 1996; Leithwood & Aitken 1995; Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis & Ecob 1993). School leaders need to take time to interact with both teachers and children, as this is integral in building a strong school community, which can only be achieved by the leader being involved in K-2 classrooms and/or activities on a regular basis. Further, having K-2 leaders located in close proximity to early childhood classrooms is also important. In Tasmania, some school locations have early childhood senior staff offices located in the main office block or on another campus which can be some minutes drive by car. In other aspects of the study, teachers stressed the importance of not only having their leader in close proximity, but also having them readily available. However, this is not always an option as many K-2 leaders have substantial classroom teaching responsibilities, which ultimately limits a leader's available time for other teachers, students and families. Ready access to the K-2 leader for teachers, and for the leader to be interested in, and to regularly visit, early childhood classrooms is essential, for overall successful operation of a school.

Interesting Aspects Highlighted in the Study

There were also some differing perceptions between leaders and teachers in relation to important aspects of K-2 leadership, which make for interesting consideration. These aspects were:

- * Possess sound conflict and negotiation skills
- * Promote commitment to school goals and processes.

Possess Sound Conflict and Negotiation Skills

One aspect of difference in the perceptions of teachers and leaders related to the K-2 leader possessing "sound conflict and negotiation skills". Teachers placed far greater importance on this aspect of leadership, with 29% of teacher respondents identifying this as a key leadership aspect, whilst only 10% of leaders did the same. Perhaps this finding indicates that, whilst teachers see possession of critical interpersonal skills as essential to successful leadership, leaders take these skills as inherent components within their leadership role. Alternately, it could be that the 29% of teachers who rated this aspect as important have been involved in interpersonal situations which have demanded high-level expertise from their leader. The outcomes of these situations could have been positive or negative for the teachers, leaving them feeling supported or rejected according to their leader's level of competence in demonstrated interpersonal skills. In either case, it is very important for the K-2 leader to possess high level skills in conflict management and negotiation.

The responding leaders' lack of indication of possession of sound conflict and negotiation skills, as an important aspect of leadership, is puzzling. It is widely accepted (Fullan 1991; Louis & Murphy 1994; Rodd 1998) that high-level interpersonal skills are vitally important in the success of an educational leader. Furthermore, the significance of this leadership aspect has not been overlooked in recent Tasmanian education policies, with the Tasmanian Principal Competency Profile citing one key interpersonal competence as being able to "resolve conflict, problem solve and clarify the agreed direction of the school community" (Department of Education 1998, p.12). As well as this, the professional development program designed for school leaders gives a substantial focus to interpersonal skill acquisition. Therefore, it leaves one wondering if K-2 leaders fail to recognise confrontational interpersonal situations, in which teachers require support of their leader. Or is it that teachers fail to seek assistance from their K-2 leader at critical times of conflict?

Promote Commitment to School Goals and Processes

The third aspect of leadership in K-2, which showed a major difference in opinions between teachers and leaders, related to "promotes commitment to school goals and processes". The fact that only 18% of teachers listed this aspect as important to K-2 leadership is significant. It is expected that leaders would place higher priority on this aspect, as they did (38%), since it is an inherent component of their role in the school's accountability processes. Increasingly over the past decade, the Tasmanian education department has devolved accountability to individual schools, resulting in K-2 leaders being called upon to make important contributions to the school's leadership processes. Within this climate, it is difficult to comprehend a K-2 leader's role not having a strong influence in the promotion of school goals and processes. Closer investigation of the study's results showed that 36% of those leaders who failed to list "promotes commitment to school goals and processes" as a leadership aspect in K-2, held principal positions. If, as the education department decrees at present, schools must be united, K-6, in the push towards attaining their set educational goals, as outlined in their partnership agreements with their communities, it is expected that this would be a key area of commitment for leaders. In this climate of accountability the K-2 leader must also have an integral role in promoting commitment to the attainment of these school goals.

It is recognised that all the aspects listed in this study are important facets of leadership. However, two final issues are worthy of comment. Firstly, it is interesting to note the low priority that both teachers and leaders placed on the statement "attends to K-2 teachers' personal needs". This is in direct contrast to the findings of Grady et al. (1994) who found that school principals perceived attending to teachers' personal needs as an integral component of their leadership. However, the findings of Boardman's (1999) study, appear to indicate that teachers have little desire for their leaders to provide personal support, and likewise that few leaders perceive this to be an important aspect of their leadership. Secondly, the fact that so few respondents saw the need to add an extra aspect to the statement list provided could be interpreted as supporting the depth and quality of the survey tool and its statements.

CONCLUSION

When considering the initial question of "what do K-2 leaders and teachers perceive to be the important aspects of leadership?", the study provides some clear directions. Demonstration of trust and support of teachers was perceived to be the main aspect of successful K-2 leadership by both leaders and teachers, with 71% of respondents indicating its importance. Clearly teachers and leaders perceived trust and support to be crucial to successful leadership in K-2 education. Teachers indicated they valued the support of their leaders in professional matters, with the item 'helps improve teaching practice' being seen as the fourth item of importance by this group.

Conversely, leaders were more committed to assisting teachers in pedagogical matters, as seen when they placed this item as their second priority. However, it is interesting to note that teachers did not look to their K-2 leaders for support in personal matters, in fact this item was given the lowest priority by teachers in the study. Both leaders and teachers, with 61% of study participants supporting its importance, also saw fiscal support, in the form of adequate resourcing for K-2, as an important priority.

Demonstration of a positive leadership presence in K-2 was clearly a priority for teachers (being their third most important aspect). Teachers indicated they wanted their leaders to know what was happening in their classrooms and to be available for consultation when required. Leaders placed less emphasis on this item rating it as their fifth most important aspect. Furthermore, leaders saw sharing leadership with teachers to be a more crucial aspect of their K-2 role. The value of teams was clearly important to the majority of leaders, although K-2 teachers did not consider it to be as high a priority from their perspective of K-2 leadership.

In conclusion, what does appear evident is that generally leaders had clear perceptions on what comprises important aspects of leadership in K-2, as seen by their strong commitment to the first four aspects. On the other hand, teachers were more divided overall on what are high priorities for leadership in K-2, but nevertheless, their support for the first three aspects of leadership is clearly apparent. Trust and differing forms of professional and resourcing support were clearly important for both leaders and teachers. However, the difference between the two groups regarding shared leadership processes and leadership presence in the K-2 area of the school, require further investigation.

APPENDIX

- Demonstrates trust and support of teachers. (*Assisted School Self Review [ASSR] 1.4.3 1998; Mulford, Hogan & Lamb 1997; Goldring & Rallis 1993*)
- Ensures adequate resource provision for K-2. (*Mulford & Bishop 1997; Rodd 1994; Goldring & Rallis 1993*)
- Helps improve teaching practice. (*Leithwood, Begley & Cousins 1994; Rodd 1994*)
- Demonstrates positive leadership presence. (*Mulford & Bishop 1997; Stoll & Fink 1996; Leithwood & Aitken 1999*)
- Shares leadership with K-2 teachers. (*ASSR 1.1.2 1998; Mulford et al. 1997; Goldring & Rallis 1993; Leithwood et al. 1994*)
- Encourages innovation by K-2 teachers. (*ASSR 1.4.3 1998; Mulford et al. 1997; Goldring & Rallis 1993*)
- Recognises achievement/involvement of K-2 students and parents. (*ASSR 2.1.3 1998; Grady, Macpherson, Mulford, Williamson 1994*)
- Values contributions of K-2 teachers equally. (*ASSR 1.3.3 1998; Mulford & Bishop 1997; Goldring & Rallis 1993*)
- Promotes commitment to school goals and processes. (*ASSR 1.2.1 1998; Leithwood et al. 1994*)
- Leads with energy and by example. (*Lashway, Mazarella & Grundy. 1996;*)
- Recognises K-2 teachers' performance. (*Schmoker 1996; Grady et al. 1994*)
- Possesses sound conflict and negotiation skills. (*Louis & Murphy 1994; Fullan 1991*)
- Attends to K-2 teachers' personal needs. (*Leithwood & Aitken 1995; Grady et al 1994*)

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