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 New leaders in Early Years: making a difference for children in England

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Title page

Title: **New Leaders in Early Years: Making a difference for children in England**

Short title: **Making a difference for children in England**

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Abstract

This paper examines the extent by which the four domains of the sustainable early childhood leadership model were evident in the experiences of New Leaders in Early Years (NLEY) participants. This original piece of research explores the impact of pedagogical leadership and focuses on participants recruited to a national pilot to make a difference for children in areas of social disadvantage in England. The significance of this paper is timely given the continued focus on leadership, evidenced in the 'Early Years Workforce Strategy' (2017). This paper contributes a conceptual framework for early childhood leadership as a methodological tool to make sense of the data. The findings suggest that NLEY did have an impact on the settings and the families they were working with and that the conceptual framework for early childhood leadership was an effective tool for making sense of their journey from novice to leader.

Key words: early childhood, leadership, pedagogical leadership, qualifications, impact, social justice, sustainability

Introduction: The Role of New Leaders in Early Childhood within the Early Childhood Leadership Introduction

> Of all the lessons in the past decade, the critical role of leadership is perhaps the most important one to take into the new century. Leadership is imperative if we are to improve the lives of children, their families and communities (Kofi Annan, 2002, cited in Rodd, 2006, p.6).

As highlighted in Annan's quote above, leadership is an aspect of early childhood education and care, which can make a significant difference to the quality of children's early experiences. The diversity of early childhood settings and practice creates a climate in which contesting leadership is the norm. Internationally, the discussion about leadership and what it looks like in early childhood education and care settings has occurred since the 1990s (e.g. Hayden, 1996; Boyd, 2001; Nupponen, 2001; Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003; Hard and O'Gorman, 2007; Rodd, 2006). There have been efforts to define it for the specific context of early childhood, drawing on wider education and business adopting a range of theoretical perspectives. The early childhood field is characterised by low pay, low status and it is female dominated. Early childhood practitioners and teachers are critical in the lives of young children's learning and development. The need for a sustainable model of leadership in which the four domains are recognised as being equally critical in making a difference to the life outcomes of children and their families.

Currently in England, the policy, social and economic landscapes are shifting, and this is the context that the research was undertaken. At the establishment of the New Leaders in Early Years programme in 2010, the early childhood sector in England was dominated by the 'Every Child Matters' agenda under the 1997-2010 Labour government (Close and Raynor, 2010). This policy approach provided 'universal' service model for the children and families of England. Sure Start Children's Centres were based in local communities and provided a hub for support for children and families, deemed to be 'at-risk'. The introduction of the Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) was part of the government's 'Children's Workforce Strategy' to upskill the early childhood workforce. This strategy aimed to have an Early Years Professional in every Children's Centre by 2015 and one in every full day care setting by 2015. The award of EYPS recognised the achievement of 39 standards, viewed as the 'gold' standard for graduates working in the early childhood sector. Achievement of the EYPS was through a standardised and rigorous assessment procedure, which ensured a level of quality and consistency of the standards required for the status.

The Coalition government (2010-2015) moved away from the previous agenda to provide targeted support to children and families. They used the Income Deprivation Affecting Children

Index (IDACI) as a measure for ensuring children and families in these areas would benefit most from funding, particularly in times of austerity. Children's Centres in areas not deemed by local authorities to meet this agenda closed and services emerged in the third sector to fill the gap in these communities. Early intervention services have emerged around the country to target children and families in particular the 'toxic trio'. That is, those children who are at risk due to families whose families may be characterised as having issues with domestic abuse, mental health and substance abuse. The Coalition government introduced the 'More Great Childcare' (2014) policy, which aimed to improve the quality of childcare and at the same time provide more choice for parents. Within this policy, the Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) superseded EYPS, in order to raise the profile of those people working with children from birth to five years. The EYTS is viewed comparably with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) with the same entry qualifications required, training programmes and both are subject to Ofsted grading.

Since 2005, there has been a concerted effort by successive governments in England to support the improvement of qualifications and quality in early childhood education and care settings. The drivers for this comes from external sources, such as PISA rankings, OECD reports and as well as national statistics, which show high levels of social disadvantage and intergenerational poverty. The Save the Children report (2016) reiterates the importance of investment in the early childhood. The qualifications of those working with young children is a determinant of improving children's life chances and educational outcomes. The Conservative government, elected in 2015, continued to support the idea of teachers in the early childhood. The aim of the government is to reform society and the economy through high quality education in the Early Childhood, which would also help parents to go back to work. Subsequently, in 2016, the Educational Excellence Everywhere (DfE, 2016a) policy highlights the intended directions of the government. The focus on leadership and effective leadership in education is central to the government's platform for educational reform, although this is not specifically related to the early years, there are clear references to this age group.

It was highly significant in 2010, at a time when the impact of the global economic crisis was hitting England and the 'austerity' budgets from Whitehall saw cuts to many frontline services, the Conservative-led Coalition government piloted a programme to recruit and retain top graduates into the early Childhood sector. Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU) was the successful bidder in the competitive process and developed two-year postgraduate programme to achieve the aims of the pilot. Building on previous work of the New Labour government and in particular the Children's Workforce Development Council, the initiative aimed to attract, retain and train highly qualified candidates without any prior qualification or experience in the early childhood. The New Leaders in Early Years pilot aimed to develop specialist knowledge in the field of early childhood for people with no prior qualifications and experience. On the two-year programme, two cohorts of students

completed Masters level modules, the Early Years Professional Status award, 120 days placement, enhancement and professional development days in business, entrepreneurship, leadership and specialist early childhood input. Students experienced challenges in moving from little or no knowledge of the early Childhood sector to leadership roles within a new professional domain, with associated challenges related to status and recognition.

Impact of New Leaders in Early Years in shaping policy in England

Three significant reports and one policy document for the Coalition Government between 2010 and 2014 mentioned New Leaders in Early Years. Frank Field (2010, p.7) in his report "The Foundation Years: preventing poor children becoming poor adults: The report of the Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances" recommended:

> 4.30: Department for Education should continue to look for ways to encourage good teachers to teach in schools and work in Children's Centres in deprived areas, including through schemes such as Teach First and New Leaders in Early Years – a new programme starting in a number of disadvantaged areas.

Similarly, Graham Allen (2011) in his report, "Early Intervention: The Next Steps" recommended that the Government continue to:

> • increase graduate-led, or even postgraduate, pre-school leadership; and
> • ensure that all early years settings employ someone with Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) on site (p.xix).

In her report about the Early Years Foundation Stage, Dame Claire Tickell (2011) "The Early Years: Foundations for life, health and learning" recommended that the:

> Government retain a focus on the need to up-skill the workforce, to commit to promoting a minimum level 3 qualification and to maintain the ambitions for a graduate-led sector (p.43).

Specifically, with regard to developing leadership in the early years, Tickell (2011) recommended:

> The evidence is clear that more needs to be done to support continuing professional development and to build a professional early years workforce. Early years leaders should value, promote and actively encourage their staff to develop their skills to the highest possible level. This requires effective leadership both within and across organisations. I have heard

encouraging comments about the positive impact of the National Professional Qualification in Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL), which has brought together multi-agency approaches in children's centres, instilling greater leadership across the early childhood system. This practice should be continued with a particular focus on supporting middle leaders and developing coherent local strategies for leadership development. Likewise, I also support the **New Leaders in Early Years** programme, the ambition of which encapsulates my desire to see the best people working in the early years (p.43).

At the conclusion of the New Leaders in Early Years pilot, the "More great childcare: Raising quality and giving parents more choice" (2013) policy, Elizabeth Truss outlined her plans for a more qualified workforce. Drawing on findings from the New Leaders in Early Years pilot, recommendations were made, for example some of the features embedded in that programme became part of the new graduate level teacher training pathways, for example, 120 day placement requirement and specialism in birth to 5 years.

> We want more high quality graduates to work in the early years. Early Years Professionals have helped improve the quality of early education but public recognition of their status remains low. We will introduce Early Years Teachers to build upon the strengths of the Early Years Professionals programme. Early Years Teachers will specialise in early childhood development and meet the same entry requirements and pass the same skills tests as trainee school teachers (p.7).

Towards a sustainable model for leadership in early childhood

The changes to education and training of the early childhood workforce in England has seen the goalposts moved on more than one occasion (Lumsden, 2012, p.97). The recent 'Early Years Workforce Strategy' (2017) reviewed previous entry qualification requirements that had been introduced to raise standards in ECEC. Following consultation, it was found that the requirement for Level 3 Early Years Educators to have a Grade C in GCSE Mathematics created a barrier, which meant that recruiting suitable candidates for the workforce was limited. The 'Early Years Workforce Strategy' (2017) recognises that a sustainable approach to improving quality across the sector will in the long-term make a difference for children and their families. It also reaffirms a commitment to pedagogical leadership and the role of the 'expert' practitioner for children from birth to five years.

It is encouraging that the government recognises the challenges that the early childhood workforces faces in terms of low status and pay and this context is not unique to England. For example, Oberhuemer (2011) acknowledges considerable divergences in formal education and training

requirements across Europe, along with divergences in the desired professional profiles for working with young children. However, she also recognised similar challenges across the workforce in Europe regarding a lack of flexible and inclusive pathways to qualification and status, and a need for more men in the workforce. Reform in England has been well intentioned yet the consequences for the profession have not been fully realised (Oberhuemer, 2011). Education models from other countries, particularly the USA, have influenced policy in England. For example Gourd (2014, p.61) argues that the USA view ECEC through a deficit model of children and families, who need normalising and preparing for success in future life.

Leadership is a key factor in making a difference for young children and their families. Meehan and Meehan (2017) suggest that children's life chances are enhanced when relationships between educators and families are strong, which is a core responsibility of early childhood leaders. Pollard (2010) suggests that the "single most effective means of improving the performance of national educational systems is through excellent teaching." Excellent teaching in the early years requires collaboration with children and their families to promote learning in partnership.

Policy writers internationally recognise that investment in early childhood is critical. Significant investment in educational excellence by improving the qualifications of those working with young children will make a difference to children in the first five years of life (Meehan and Meehan, 2017). Studies such as EPPE (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2008) provide a clear rationale for the difference that quality and qualifications make to children's ECEC for their later academic outcomes and aspirations.

In the wider context of education, there have been increased demands on teachers and leaders working with children and families. The Save the Children (2016) 'Untapped potential: How England's nursery lottery is failing too many children' report illustrates how previous findings from the OECD (2005) remain relevant. For example, in 2005 an international trend of the aging population of teachers was revealed as a major concern (OECD, 2005). Sustainability of the profession is considered desirable as it is a 'knowledge rich' profession, not only subject knowledge, but the knowledge teachers carry about children, their learning and their families. This is also the case with those adults working with children from birth to five years.

This paper presents a sustainable model of leadership. Drawing on the findings of the NLEY project, in which a community of learners was established in person and using a virtual learning environment and Facebook, inclusion of mentoring throughout the programme and for many participants this continued informally post programme and the curriculum of NLEY over an intensive two-year period supported the transformation of this unique leadership programme.

Grooms and Reid-Martinez (2011) suggested that sustainable leadership is developed through ongoing leadership development, which is a process not an end state. This was implicit in the design of the NLEY programme, which included intentional leadership modelling, mentoring and reflection. Similarly, Close and Raynor (2010, p.13) recommend that effective leadership development programmes hold certain characteristics, based upon a review of a number of leadership programme approaches. They recommend that it is necessary to provide opportunities to reflect, question one's own practice and leadership, make links between learning about leadership theory and research and practice, as well as relevance to everyday work. They also suggest it is important to offer chances to solve real life, real time issues, membership to a community of like-minded others, as well as mentoring and feedback, which challenges and supports existing thought and actions. This approach to leadership development is supported by the literature, for instance in New Zealand, the use of mentoring by experienced facilitators establish a collaborative leadership style, in which the development of a shared vision and an emphasis on the emotional intelligence is considered important (Thornton et al., 2009)

The Sustainable Early Childhood Leadership model below contains four domains, which highlight key attributes that contribute towards effective early childhood leadership. Meehan (2011) developed the conceptual framework to acknowledge the necessary facets of becoming a more sustainable and effective early childhood leader. Firstly, specialist knowledge are the specific skills, attributes, qualities and experience that a leader holds, which may be gained through both academic and vocational aspects. This includes pedagogical knowledge and leadership skills. Secondly, being an effective early childhood leader requires notions of professionalism, for instance in relation to a leader's ethics, values, cultures, beliefs, communication and interpersonal skills. Thirdly, Meehan (2011) argues that the recognition placed on early childhood leaders, in respect to their status, pay and the conditions of the early childhood sector, plays a role in how effective their leadership may be. Finally, the qualifications that a leader holds, both in relation to the level of study and specific areas of study, contribute to an early childhood leader's success. When combined, these four elements create leaders who can provide quality opportunities and outcomes for children.

 INSERT FIGURE 1

The Importance of Pedagogic Leaders in the Early Childhood

Another important factor in the discussion of early childhood leadership is the concept of pedagogical leadership. It could be argued that Early Years Professionals are in fact teachers and educators. The emphasis of EYPS was on the role of leadership and the extent to which they are leaders were

responsible for leading teaching, learning and curriculum development for young children. Pedagogical leadership is becoming increasingly significant in the field of ECEC due to the need within the sector to increase quality through organisational change. The key contribution of a pedagogical leader is the partnerships they facilitate with others in order to change their practice and challenge others to see themselves as researchers in the teaching and learning process (Coughlin and Baird, 2013: 1).

In ECEC, pedagogical leaders ensure that practices are appropriate for children and also advocate on behalf of children and families. This is important but often overlooked, partly due to a reluctance on the part of early childhood practitioners to see themselves as leaders (Blatchford and Manni, 2006). It is significant that in EYPS and in subsequent qualifications such as New Leaders in Early Years and EYTS, that a focus on leadership remains. This constitutes an attempt to break this mould and demonstrate to practitioners the vital role they have in leading teaching and learning.

The New Leaders in Early Years Programme

The New Leaders in Early Years programme was developed with characteristics of effective early years leadership programmes in mind. Research findings from projects such as EPPE (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2008) highlighted the need for enhanced qualifications for those working with young children. The EPPE study found that young children's life chances significantly improved when practitioner qualifications were higher. As a result, Department for Education was keen to set up a pathway, based upon the success of Teach First model, for people who were high achievers from other backgrounds who may not have considered working with young children.

The programme included four core components over a two-year period. The first component was an MA in Early Years. Secondly, in the first year of study, MA modules took place alongside training Early Years Professional Status (EYPS), with the assessment for EYPS taking place at the end of the first year. Thirdly, a further facet of the course was an immersive and bespoke early childhood and leadership programme that spanned both years of study, which included workshops, professional development and facilitated coaching. Finally, central to the whole programme throughout the two years was the element of placement. In the first year, students undertook 120 days of placements, including a placement in a Children's Centre, with a childminder, and a Private Voluntary and Independent (PVI) setting. The IDACI score of placements was a primary consideration in ensuring that the participants had the potential to make the most impact in high-need communities. During the second year, owing to their status as Early Years Professionals, students gained paid employment within the sector, and were encouraged to seek employment in areas of disadvantage.

INSERT FIGURE 2

Research Method: Gathering Experiences of New Leaders in Early Years

Research Question

The rationale for this piece of research stems from a belief that pedagogic leaders in the early childhood are vitally important, and that a sustainable model of effective early years leadership is necessary to make a difference to the life outcomes of children and their families. Thus, this piece of research intends to contribute to a discussion about what a sustainable model for effective early childhood leaders may look like and what the challenges of achieving a sustainable workforce of early childhood leaders might be. This is significant in light of policy such as the Educational Excellence Everywhere (2016a), which emphasises the role of effective leadership within education, and given views such as that from Annan (2002) that it is effective leadership within early childhood that can make the biggest different to the lives of children and families.

With this in mind, this piece of research sought to consider Meehan's (2011) sustainable model of early childhood leadership by asking:

- *To what extent do (1) Specialist Knowledge, (2) Recognition, (3) Professionalism and (4) Qualifications play a role in creating effective leaders through the NLEY Programme?*
- *What are the barriers to creating a sustainable workforce of early childhood leaders?*

The New Leaders in Early Years Participants

The selection and recruitment of students to the programme were based on a strict set of entry requirements, which included a UK Bachelor's degree with an upper second class or above, Grade C or above in GCSE English Language and Mathematics and a commitment to join the two-year full time programme. Potential students were required to participate in a one-day Assessment Centre. This Assessment Centre screened students for knowledge, dispositions and attributes against a set of eight competences and looked not only for those who demonstrated leadership qualities, but also those candidates who had the potential to develop. The competences screened at the Assessment Centre based around knowledge, dispositions and attributes that link with Aubrey's (2007) attributes for leadership. These eight competencies were:

☐ Ethical and principle driven practice

- [ ] Planning and organisation
- [ ] Reflective
- [ ] Commitment to working with children
- [ ] Creativity and problem solving
- [ ] Knowledge and desire to learn
- [ ] Resilience and commitment to change
- [ ] Self-evaluation skills

In November 2010, Cohort 1 began study, whilst Cohort 2 commenced in September 2011. Cohort 1 comprised initially of 23 students and Cohort 2 initially consisted of 30 students. These students came from a diverse range of backgrounds, including with undergraduate degrees within Modern Foreign Languages, Business Studies, Criminology, Drama, Geography and Psychology and with prior professional backgrounds including education, retail and project management.

Following completion of the programme, students gained employment in a variety of fields related to ECEC, which both encompassed direct work with children and families as well as work influencing them indirectly. This work included roles as FE and HE lecturers, nursery managers, early years practitioners, within family support and as outreach workers. Their academic outcomes from the course were as follows (Tivey, 2013):

INSERT TABLE 1

Methods

In order to examine the extent to which the four facets of Meehan's (2011) sustainable model of early childhood leadership were a factor in the learning and development of the NLEY participants, this study triangulated data from three different sources. Firstly, it examined written statements of around 1000-1500 words from the programme application forms of the 53 Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 participants. These statements outlined participants' beliefs about their suitability for the programme and evidence of meeting eight competencies: ethical and principle driven practice, a reflective approach, a commitment to working with children and families, creativity and problem solving, knowledge and desire to learn, planning and organisation, resilience and commitment to change and finally self-evaluation skills.

Secondly, semi-structured interviews of 30-35 minutes, with 10 of the NLEY students (6 from Cohort 1 and 4 from Cohort 2) took place. For Cohort 1 students, these interviews took place 18 months after course completion, and Cohort 2 students had completed the course 6 months prior to interviews. The

semi-structured interviews focussed on participants' current job role and responsibilities, perceptions of making an impact in the early childhood sector, perceptions of the role of the NLEY programme in supporting students to make an impact and future career aspirations.

The use of semi-structured interviews as a means of data collection fitted with the dialogic approach to formative evaluation had been central to the NLEY programme. As a pilot, the course had used a dialogic approach through surveys, focus groups, telephone interviews, programme evaluations and reflective diaries (from both of staff and students) to aid ongoing co-construction of the course (Jackson and Meehan, 2012). During the process, ethical procedures in place at the University were used to ensure that participants' right to anonymity, privacy and participation were considered at all times.

Finally, qualitative data from electronic destination questionnaire that 35 students had completed after completing the programme was analysed. For Cohort 1 students, the destination survey came 13 months after completion of the programme, and for Cohort 2 students this came 3 months after course completion. The destination questionnaire had gathered information about students' current employment duties and salary, future career plans and the continuing professional development they had undertaken, but for the purpose of this research were considered solely in light of the participants' statements about how they believed they had had an impact in the ECEC sector.

Data Analysis

To analyse the data, qualitative thematic analysis took place by adapting Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps of thematic analysis. The analysis sought to consider the extent to which the data generated from the application forms and interviews aligned to the four elements of Meehan's (2011) Sustainable Early Childhood Leadership model. Coding in this way intended to identify the extent to which participants referred to elements of specialist knowledge, professionalism, qualifications and recognition. The themes emerged from the participants' initial aspirations and their desire to make an impact in ECEC in relation to their lived experiences as Early Years Professionals. Comparisons were made between participants' identification with the four elements both pre- and post- programme, with respect to their values, experiences and self-perceived impact on the lives of children and families.

INSERT TABLE 2

Findings and Discussion: The Conceptual Framework as a tool for Reflecting upon Leadership Elements

Using the conceptual framework as a methodological tool for data analysis has identified the extent to which NLEY students align their beliefs, experiences and views with the four domains of the conceptual framework, both prior to the programme commencing and post course completion. Thus, the analysis and discussion of findings for this study seeks to break down the conceptual framework into the four domains and analyse the data within these four themes.

INSERT TABLE 3

Specialist knowledge

Meehan (2011) outlines Specialist Knowledge as indicators of knowledge, skills, attributes, qualities and experience. The NLEY course sought to develop participants' understanding of children's growth, learning and development and their management and leadership ability. This was in part through adapting aspects of the National Professional Qualification in Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL) (Jackson and Hryniewicz, 2011; National College, 2010). Although specialist knowledge within the early childhood was not an essential or desired characteristic of potential NLEY participants, proof of a desire to develop knowledge and skills was considered within applications. Participants outlined on application forms evidence towards this.

For example, one participant on their application form wrote:

> The passion I have has been demonstrated by my volunteering jobs, notably the Sure Start Centre. The Sure Start Centre gave me an insight into how diverse a community can be. I was able to work with children from deprived areas with little social skills, who thrived on attention and fun. This made me more determined to choose a career path where I could continue to make a difference.

Certainly, this specialist knowledge was built up through studying on the MA and towards Early Years Professional Status, with participants in semi-structured interviews identifying the importance of specialist knowledge for positive impacts within their job roles, for example another participant said:

> The programme helped me develop my skills so I can be reflective and learn in different situations. It helped me open to different pedagogies and to become a more reflective teacher.

Within application forms, several participants outlined their specialist knowledge in the field of early childhood already, with one participant with an undergraduate degree in Theatre, Performance and

Event Design having completed a dissertation on children's play in relation to effective environments. Others expressed that they did not have practical experiences, but showed awareness of policy:

> Though I do not have a great knowledge of the education system or the curriculum, I have read through the Government's 'Every Child Matters' policy, and my thinking and philosophies align with it quite closely.

Having completed EYPS and an MA in Early Years, in the final semi-structured interviews, participants outlined the impact their specialist knowledge was having in their current roles. One participant, who following the course has opened her own private day nursery, spoke of how the course had "given a good understanding of early childhood, the skills to be reflective and made me able to lead other members of staff in being the same". This example highlights elements of pedagogical leadership (e.g. Heikka and Waniganayake, 2011) which the course aimed to promote. Another student working in a private day nursery spoke of the impact that gaining EYPS had had on their personal practice in terms of their knowledge of children's needs, stating:

> I see children as independent individuals, not babies who just need caring for, but they are growing and on their way to being a good person, who may have difficulties, but I am able to give them support.

One added that through the NLEY programme she was able to start employment "very aware of what I was doing and why I was doing it" through picking up experiences first hand on placement. However, a potential barrier to specialist knowledge was that some students felt that, despite the integral element of placements within the programme, more opportunities to develop practical skills could have enhanced Specialist Knowledge:

> The only aspect that perhaps the course itself didn't contribute to was in terms of practical skills, although I guess the placements provided and tested our practical skills, as a real life experience.

Professionalism

Application forms, semi-structured interviews and destination data showed evidence of the participants' ethics, values, culture, beliefs, communication and interpersonal skills. The recruitment process for the programme specifically looked for potential participants who demonstrated that they were or had the potential to be ethical and use a set of principles to underpin their practice, were reflective and able to evaluate themselves in a range of contexts. In addition, a commitment to working with children and a desire to learn were highly desirable attributes.

> I am passionate about improving outcomes and opportunities for young children in deprived areas, as I have seen some of the challenges that they face and understand how vital the early years of a child's life are to their future.

In the semi-structured interviews, participants identified the importance of reflection, which was a key characteristic of the NLEY programme. One participant stated: "The programme helped me develop my skills so I can be reflective and learn in different situations". Another participant succinctly explained that when considering the concept of making a difference to the lives of children and families, what is crucial "is not only the relationships formed between children and their families, but more important is making a difference to the attitudes of staff". She cited the need for a common vision and goal, and believed that she was having the most impact by sharing her vision with colleagues, as well as modelling good practice to them. One other participant noted that she felt a shared vision and ethos in particular with other members of staff in her setting who had Level 6 qualifications, perhaps suggesting a link between a similar level of qualifications and a same shared ethos.

Lumsden (2012) identifies that there is a resistance to higher levels of qualifications by members of the early years sector, due to the belief that providing quality childcare is instinctive rather than theory-driven. Some participants experienced resistance in being accepted into the culture of the early years workforce due to their backgrounds and qualifications. For example:

> Although my training had impact on my practice I did not feel the EYP collective identity to be strong and robust enough to accommodate NLEYs, instead I found this to be a hostile environment.

Recognition

Participants identified issues such as low status, pay, poor conditions and esteem/value. Two participants cited low pay as being an influential factor in leaving the ECEC sector entirely. Several participants felt that they did not receive recognition for holding EYPS or an MA degree, and felt it had a negative impact on how other practitioners perceived them. Salary levels of the NLEY participants broadly fit with the Department for Education's (2014) 'Childcare and Early Years Providers Survey 2013'.

Salaries of NLEY participants differed post course completion, dependent on the job role they gained after graduation. The most highly paid NLEY held a position as Lecturer in Early Years, earning slightly over £30,000 per annum. Yet the 22 participants who identified from their final destination

surveys that they were working directly with children in either a practitioner or a management/leadership role had average salaries of significantly less. Of the 18 participants that worked directly with children who supplied information about their salary, on average these earned approximately £15000 per annum. However, several of these roles were term-time only, which may account for the low figure. The salaries of the NLEY participants working directly with children closely link to the wage of early childhood practitioners as a whole; staff in full day care settings earned on average £8.40 per hour in 2013, whilst the average hourly rate for the UK workforce as a whole stood at £15.19 (Department for Education, 2014, p.134). However, the introduction of the National Living Wage in 2016 to £7.20 has seen an improvement in the average salary of practitioners (Department for Education, 2016b).

NLEY participants cited low levels of recognition as reasons why they did not want to remain in certain settings or within the ECEC sector. Within an interview, one participant had handed in their notice because they did not feel that their setting recognised or valued their MA or EYPS. Within the final destination data collection, some participants wrote comments that related to their low recognition, for instance "I am the most qualified I have ever been, working the hardest I have ever worked, earning a third of what I have previously earned." Another wrote that "the status, pay and conditions of early childhood workers needs to improve in order to make a real difference to young children and their families in a meaningful way". However, one participant finished their interview confidently with "I am confident that changes to pay and status in the early childhood landscape will come, because people are always working just so hard".

Qualifications

The NLEY participants form part of the 13,352 people who held Early Years Professional Status in 2013 (Department for Education, 2014, p.160). Yet in 2013, only 74% of full day care providers viewed it as important to employ someone with EYPS, despite Save the Children (2016) stating the importance of graduate level qualifications for children's outcomes. This is in contrast to Blanden, Hansen and McNally (2017) who claim that high-level qualifications provide only a small effect on academic outcomes, although the study found that interactions that those with higher qualifications had with children were of higher quality. Sylva, Sammons, Siraj, Taggaart, Mathers and Melhuish (2017) reject Blandon et al.'s (2017) findings, identifying shortcomings in the research methology and scope of the study. Surely, in the longer-term, the quality of the interactions will have an impact on children's learning, resilience and development.

Recent changes in policy and the 'Early Years Workforce Strategy' (2017) reaffirm the importance of graduates and leadership of learning and teaching for England's youngest children. Whether future

changes mean that owners and managers of ECEC settings make changes to the role, job titles and salaries of high-qualified ECEC graduates is yet to been seen.

In terms of graduate and postgraduate qualifications, only 2% of paid practitioners in early childhood full-day care and sessional settings held a Level 7 qualification in 2013. Thus, the NLEY participants who had gained an MA in Early Years working in those settings are within an incredibly small minority, in which the most prevalent qualification held was a Level 3 (Department for Education, 2014, p.228). Between 2013 and 2016, the number of nursery staff holding at least a Level 3 qualification has risen, and now stands at 94% (DfE, 2016b). At the time of the destination data survey, 30 participants had achieved an MA in Early Years and three participants had gained a Postgraduate Diploma. Of the 30 awarded an MA in Early Years, slightly over a third (n=11) were awarded a Distinction, and an additional 14 were awarded a Merit. This high number of Merits and Distinctions may reflect the intensive nature of the course and the additional of supplementary and specialist sessions. It may also reflect, in a similar way to a Foundation Degree, the requirement on some occasions to base MA assignments on research carried out in the workplace or on placement, which acted to supplement the practical and theoretical knowledge base that the programme sought to construct.

Several participants noted what they believed was the distinction between EYPS and the typical Level 3 qualifications that many of their colleagues held. For instance, one participant stated that the NLEY course had "a whole different approach to Level 3 qualifications" was evident in terms of the examination of theory and links to practice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Sustainable Early Childhood Leadership Model (Meehan, 2011) was a helpful lens to interrogate the experiences of participants who had embarked on an ambition programme aimed at making a difference for young children and their families. The data presented confirms that the conceptual model is effective in drawing together the key elements of leadership, and acknowledges the complexities for sustainable pedagogical leadership in ECEC.

One notable finding, which has implications for future research, was the strength within the NLEY programme of the facilitated coaching scheme for participants in their employment year. This type of scheme may lead to better outcomes for children and their families and is conducive to a sustainable leadership model. This scheme was highly successful for participants. Within the destination survey participants considered the role, success and impact of the facilitated coaching scheme, and many suggested that the opportunity to have support and guidance from an established member of the field

provided a means by which conversations around the four domains could take place and, potentially, help the participants cement their role within the sector.

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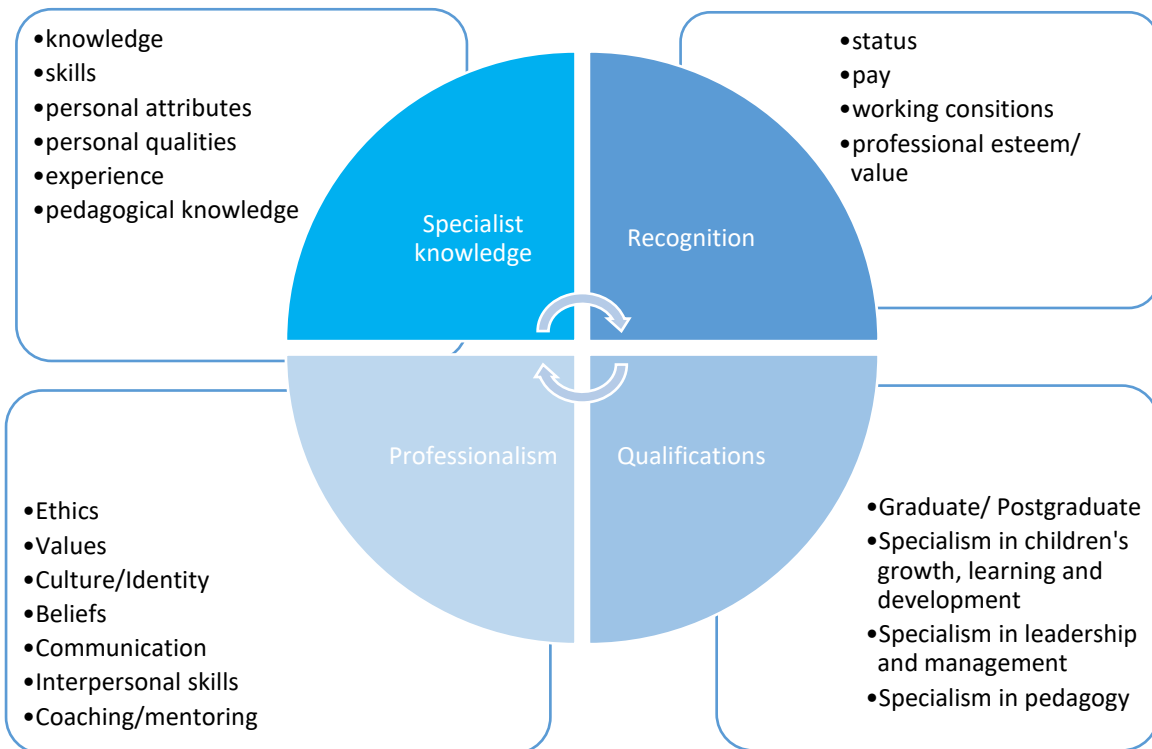
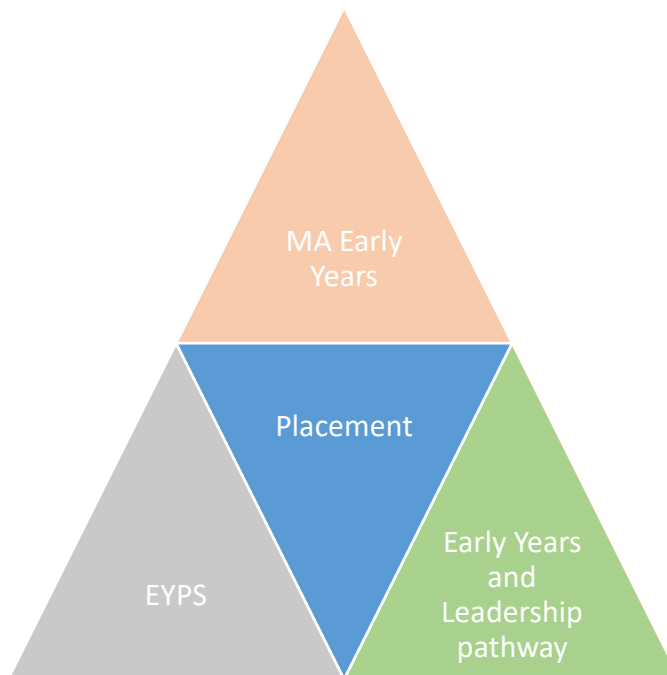*Figure 1: Sustainable Early Childhood Leadership Model (Meehan, 2011)*

Figure 2: The New Leaders in Early Years Model

Table 1: Results of NLEY Students

Status	Cohort 1	Cohort 2
Number of candidates at outset	23	30
One student transferred to Cohort 2 through illness	22	31
Passed EYPS and Final dissertation and awarded MA Early Years (New Leaders in Early Years)	15 4 Distinction 6 Merit 5 Pass	17 7 Distinction 9 Merit 1 Pass
Passed EYPS and left with Post Graduate Diploma Early Years	3	3
Left with EYPS and PG Cert.	0	1
Left with no EYPS and PG Cert Early Years	1	8
Left with some MA credits but no EYPS	1	1
Left with no credits and no EYPS	2	1
TOTAL	22	31*

Includes one participant who interrupted from Cohort 1 and joined Cohort 2.

Table 2: Phases of thematic analysis, adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006)

Braun and Clarke's Phases	Method used in this study
Familiarizing yourself with your data	• Interview data transcribed. • Data read through three times. • During third time, data annotated with initial notes.
Generating initial codes	• Data systematically annotated with 'theory-driven' codes (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.88) based around elements of leadership featured within Meehan's (2006) model.
Searching for themes	• Thematic map created. • Codes generated and organised into themes and sub-themes based upon the parameters of Meehan's (2006) conceptual framework.
Reviewing themes	• Coded extracts reviewed in light of the sub-themes and themes.

	• Data set as a whole considered ensuring the thematic map of themes, sub-themes and codes accurately represented the data.
Producing the report	• Final analysis of the extracts and data set took place. • Extracts that best represented each theme selected for inclusion in the write-up of the study. • Themes considered in line with the research question and existing research literature to produce the final report.

Table 3: Four themes emerging from the data

Themes	Sub-themes	Typical Response
Specialist knowledge	- Skills - Knowledge - Personal attributes	*"The programme helped me develop my skills so I can be reflective and learn in different situations. It helped me be open to different pedagogies and to become a more reflective teacher."*
Professionalism	- Professional resilience - Interpersonal skills with staff, families and children - Shared ethos with workforce	*"The word 'resilience' was frequently quoted during our course and that's exactly what it demanded of us, right up until the end. I grew such a lot during the course, in terms of my time management, research and written skills, as well as my knowledge and experience."*
Recognition	- Low status - Low pay - Poor working conditions	*"It's a tough sector and the pay and working conditions are still terrible, especially considering the demands and responsibility put on practitioners."*
Qualifications	- Academic qualifications - Professional status - Pedagogy specialism - Leadership specialism	"*There's a whole different approach from Level 3 qualifications when linking theory and practice.*"