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Value-based Relational Leadership Practice in Children's Centres: An Action Research Project

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Abstract

Children's Centres are an under-researched type of organisation, and leadership practices within Children's Centres are yet more neglected and unknown. This action research reveals how leaders of these Children's Centres understand and verbalise their leadership practices, which leadership practices are serving them well and can be levered for further good and which leadership practices are areas for development that need further improvement. The research also questions what constitutes 'action' within action research and the complications of analytical 'mess' in such endeavours.

Keywords:

Children's centre, system leadership, distributed leadership, architecture of practice.

Introduction

Children's Centres in the UK

Children's Centres in the UK are organisations that provide a range of services for families. Whilst the core purpose of children's centres is expressed simply as: child development and school readiness, parenting aspirations and parenting skills, and child and family health and life chances (Surestart, 2014), the description belies a vast array of activities and stakeholders (Stuart, 2015). Indeed, it has been said that: 'It is important to recognise that Children's Centre staff, and particularly leaders, are doing a difficult and complicated job which often requires a great deal of professional skill' (Policy Exchange, 2013). Despite this sentiment, there is a lack of research into the specific nature of Children's Centres with the wider Early Years sector and Education sector drawing more focus. Services in Children's Centres tend to be holistic rather than focussing specifically on the education of children alone. This makes them distinct from the Early Years and Education sector, alongside baby weight and breast-feeding clinics there are parenting classes and play sessions, employability and curriculum vitae writing sessions. The success of the family in its widest sense is seen as an integral part of the success of the child. As a result Children's Centres are very diverse with a wide variety of staff delivering a complex range of services to some of the most disadvantaged families in the UK. For these reasons they warrant research in their own right.

Activity Theory

Activity theory was used as a data collection tool and analytical framework in this action research, due to its position as a fundamental concept in the paper it is given

an early introduction here. Activity theory is a general, cross-disciplinary approach, offering conceptual tools and methodological principles that enable a deeper understanding of any human activity. The general nature of the theory enables it to be transferred to any activity (Leadbetter et al. 2007; Daniels et al. 2007), this also means it has to be tailored to fit the context where it is used.

Activity theory comes from a cultural-historical activity paradigm. This perspective takes account of the history and culture of a given context and places humans as active agents of change (Edwards, 2005). Agents are shaped by and shape the culture and system through their activities using tools, complying with or breaking rules, operating within a community that is directed to tasks through the explicit division of labour. This systemic view of activity theory means it takes account of all aspects of the workplace. Engeström's (1996) first generation activity theory comprises the following linked elements:

- Objective / outcome
- Subject
- Mediating artefacts and tools
- Community
- Division of labour
- Rules.

Some have criticised activity theory as lacking an account of power (Williams, Davies and Black 2007), yet the aim of a developmental research workshop is to explicitly expose power at play. Indeed Edwards and Kinti (2010: 137) caution that developmental research workshops can become: 'sites of struggle over identity and knowledge' due to the personal contradictions that individuals experience listening to the narratives of others. Engeström (2001) developed the activity theoretical analysis tool into a developmental research workshop for health care research in Finland. Since then activity theory has developed knowledge and promoted learning in a range of multi-agency settings, notably by Frost, Robinson and Anning (2005: 188), Leadbetter et al. (2007), Daniels et al. (2007), Leadbetter (2008), and Edwards et al. (2009). Claims are made of its ability to create a shared inquiry space, identify contradictions and promote dialogue (Anning et al. 2006: 83; Edwards 2005: 170; Leadbetter et al. 2007: 88; Stuart, 2012b). When used as a participative approach to work-based research, it has been configured into a 'developmental research workshop' or DRW's (Engeström, 2001). These have been found to promote change and progress in the work-based practice (Leadbetter et al. 2007; Daniels et al. 2007; Leadbetter 2008; Edwards et al. 2009). In this respect, the DRW is fundamentally a form of action research (Er, Pollack and Sankaran, 2013). As such, activity theory within a developmental research workshop seemed an appropriate tool to develop leadership practices in Children's Centres.

Leadership

The term 'leadership' is fraught with difficulties as a contested concept. Indeed it would be conceptually wise to place the term under erasure as ~~leadership~~. And yet it is a word used in organisations to describe a range of practices aimed at achieving

outcomes. This action research sought to understand and develop the particular construct of leadership at play in one group of Children's Centres, set against a backdrop of inexhaustible literature on leadership that can only be hinted at in the scope of this paper.

Leadership of services for children, young people and families in the UK has been evidenced to be challenging due to the 'volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous' (VUCA) context in which they are located (Ghate et al., 2014:6). Compounding the 'VUCA' context is a 'perfect storm' of increased demand and decreased resources in the public service sector, and the intractable 'wicked issues' ingrained in society (Grint, 2008). The dynamic complexity of these contextual factors (Fillingham and Weir, 2014:6; Senge, Hamilton and Kania, 2015; Zimmerman et al., 1998; Mitleton-Kelly, 2003) arguably demands high levels of leadership skill.

Paradoxically, although effective leadership of early childhood settings has been shown to be fundamental to quality provision (Stipek and Ogana, 2000), research also indicates that many educators in early childhood view themselves as managers rather than leaders (Ebbeck and Waniganayake, 2003). This has led some to contentiously conclude that leadership is something of an 'engima' in early childhood settings (Rodd, 2013). As Children's Centres are a part of the early years sector they may also be prone to staff who are reluctant to be seen as leaders. It is perhaps the 'heroic' masculine ideologies of leadership that deter them or perhaps the technocratic ideologies where leadership is enshrined into inaccessible terminology such as 'strategizing', 'resource mobilisation' or 'LEAN six sigma'. Given the demands of the current context it is arguable that leaders of early childhood settings need to be encouraged to view themselves and act in a leadership capacity. A reconceptualization of leadership may therefore be necessary.

In more recent times, a relational perspective of leadership has emerged. System leadership links social relations to the lifeblood of leadership that works through systems of relationships within and across organisations (Taylor, 2015). From the distributed leadership field, a leader can only achieve success by sharing power and workload with other people in an organisation – they are not able to know and do it all (Harris, 2004; Spillane, Halverson and Diamond, 2001). The constructionist perspective of leadership states that leadership is socially constructed in the relationships between people – it is both in and of relationships (Uhl Bien and Ospina, 2012). And new sociology coming from an agentic perspective (Crevani, 2015) emphasises the interdependence of people within organisations on one another and on environment.

If leadership is viewed as relational, then it is daily socialising that creates the leadership practice. The notion of acts of leadership enables these complex and subtle processes to be observed, and instantly opens leadership up to all. Acts of leadership are 'interventions made by someone who notices that something needs doing, steps up, makes a good call, and doesn't make a big thing about it' (Little, 2013:43). This could be anyone within an organisation, not just the chief executive. Such acts of leadership are said to 'arise from a state of mind rather than a cast of

character' (Little, 2013:43), and is therefore eminently open to development. People who participate in acts of leadership are said to be open, aware, and likely to act rather than stand aside, attributes that span the cleaning cupboard and boardroom (Little, 2013:43). This re-construction of leadership as open to everyone is congruent with action research. From this perspective the detail of what people do and how they relate becomes important, Kemmis (2008:280; Kemmis et al., 2014) articulates a practice framework incorporated of the 'sayings, doings and relatings' of people. This construction of leadership practice is accessible to all and perhaps more palatable to leaders of Children's Centres and the wider children's workforce than hierarchical versions derived from 'great men' (Stuart, 2012).

The primary aim of this action research was to identify the situated leadership practices in the participating Children's Centres in order to further build on strengths and overcome any weaknesses. It was possible that these findings would secondarily be of use to the leaders of Children's Centres and other multi-agency settings from a leadership and methodological perspective.

Methodology

Context

This research took place in a charity that runs 19 Children's Centres across Hertfordshire with core funding from Hertfordshire County Council. The charity has increased the number of centres it has run from three to 19 in the last decade. With the increase of number of centres and new commissioning criteria the charity organised into eight Children's Centre Groups with a leader managing two to three centres each. This change triggered the charity to review its leadership to ensure that it could work successfully with its expanded and reorganised centres.

The leadership team was made up of staff from a variety of professional backgrounds including education, health, social services, early years and the voluntary sector. Part of the team have a strategic focus and work across all the centres, while the other team members have a more operational focus for a group of Children's Centres.

Research Questions

The research questions comprised the following:

- How do leaders of these Children's Centres understand and verbalise their leadership practices?
- Which leadership practices are serving them well and can be levered for further good?
- Which leadership practices are areas for development that need further improvement?

Method

The project was within the action research paradigm. Action research is:

“a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory world view. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities” (Reason and Bradbury 2001: 1).

This focus on the participation and practical outputs lent itself to the study of leadership in these children’s centres. Action research differs epistemologically from other approaches in that it focuses on the paradigm of praxis (Reason and Bradbury 2001). Praxis involves developing knowledge from practice, and practice from knowledge. Praxis was central to the research questions in this study. O’Brien (2001) argues the position of action research further as having a paradigm of praxis itself, contrasting with theory driven research. From the praxis perspective, action research: ‘is necessarily an action science, which draws on extended epistemologies and continually enquires into the meaning and purpose of our practice’ (Reason and Bradbury 2001: 7). It is socially constructed in that the participants share in the creation of the world through being and acting (Reason and Bradbury 2001), and was therefore a congruent approach for this research on leadership practices. Action research positions practitioners as the repositories of expertise, who engage in and co-create meaning; this engagement also led to enhanced critical awareness for the participants (Winter and Munn-Giddings 2001: 261; Reason 2003; McIntosh 2010), benefitting everyone in the process and output of knowledge creation.

In order to develop a robust and nuanced understanding of the nature of leadership practices, a range of data collection tools were planned for use. It was anticipated that these would allow different perspectives to emerge, and a full picture to be built of the leadership practices. Action research is able to encompass such a ‘bricolage’ of tools (Reason and Bradbury 2001: xxiv) and added weight to its use in this context.

Equipped with a few experiences and theoretical knowledge of action research I set off as a post-doctoral researcher to use action research with these leaders of Children’s Centres. Action research would help reveal the leadership practices and stimulate learning and growth, and I was confident in the use of activity theoretical tools. From the outset the project seemed unproblematic – which is always a problematic position.

Activity Theoretical Data Collection Tools and Analysis

The activity theoretical tools were designed to check and re-check the practices of leadership in the children’s centres. These included introductory activities and a set of activity theoretical questions and diagrams. The tools asked the leaders to conceptualise their espoused leadership, deconstruct their conceptualisations, and to analyse a real example leadership practice. This multi-layered approach, it was hoped, would build a robust case for the practices in existence, rather than creating an idealised and surface understanding of leadership as a concept per se. As well as

completing data elicitation activities the leaders reflected on the tasks engaging in analysis and interpretation of their own work. This would ensure that the findings were directly created by the leaders, rather than filtered through my interpretational lens as per the aims of participatory research. Further, the use of activity theory for data collection and analysis created double reflection – first reflecting on leadership to create group work, and then reflecting on all the group work to draw out learning as a leadership team (Moon, 2004). In reality, however, there was not time for the leaders to complete all the analysis and interpretation in the time we had together and the final analysis and report writing responsibility was transferred to me despite my every attempt to avoid this situation.

I asked the leaders to complete some preliminary work, sending them a few questions by email. I collated the results and emailed back to the participants to read one week prior to the DRW. There was a three week gap between the preliminary work and the DRW in one of the Children's Centres. The DRW spanned from 10am to 4pm and generated five hours of audio taped material, 16 flip charts of group generated notes and five activity theoretical diagrams. I typed the data up and sent it back to the participants one week after the DRW in raw form hoping that they would then analyse. As time progressed, however, it became clear that I would need to complete the final summary and analysis.

Participants

There were 16 participants including the head of the group, regional managers, team leaders and an administrator. They had a range of professional backgrounds and experiences, and had worked in the Children's Centres for varied amounts of time. Strikingly the participants were all female, which may have some bearing on the type of leadership enacted.

Analysis

Some of the data was analysed by the participants during the DRW as indicated in the findings section. Unfortunately they were not able to analyse all the data due to time constraints. As a result I subsequently inductively analysed the data set using a qualitative thematic coding process (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006: 16). I used a single activity theoretical diagram as the final summary of the system of leadership practices in place. This leaves the data in a hybrid status. It has been in part subject to participant analysis and then researcher analysis. This is possibly a common tension experienced by researchers, and an uncomfortable situation to be located in, as the time and, or expertise of the researcher suddenly becomes privileged over that of the participants. It was not a situation I had anticipated.

Given the hybrid nature of the data, I read the data repeatedly and where necessary coded inductively following a process akin to Friese's (2012: 92) noticing, collecting, thinking process. I aimed to enhance rather than replace the elements of participant interpretation to generate a full analysis of the range of ideas within it and their inter-relationships (Corbin and Strauss 2008: 159). Whilst doing this I was attentive to my inner discomfort and noticed that I would have preferred to let their voices stand as they were, however partial.

I kept analytic memos throughout the coding process in order to maintain a clear rationale for the codes assigned and my accompanying feelings (Saldaña 2009: 38; Friese 2012: 135), and the process was iterative and cyclical as a new realisation would prompt me to return to earlier data. Whilst logical, analysis of data is of course subjective, and the leaders and then my conceptualisation of leadership will have influenced the analysis of the data despite best intents to let the data speak for itself. This leads to the issue of validity.

Validity

This research, like most action research, does not aim for a single truth, but for a multiplicity of truths and views (McNiff et al. 1996: 9). It adopts a position where the truth is: 'incomplete rather than fully apprehended' (McIntosh 2010: 35). The possible exaggeration, embellishment and omissions in participants' accounts were not weaknesses, but part of the individuals' interpretive endeavour (Denning 2005: 181). As the notion of 'the truth' is rejected, then notions of 'validity' are also called into question, as nothing is held as 'true and valid'. Given that validity has up to 18 different meanings (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007) it is necessary to use one that is 'appropriate whatever one's theoretical orientation' (Silverman 2010: 290). Crystalisation was the construct of choice used for validity in this case study.

Crystalisation refers to multiple methods and voices creating different perspectives like different sides of a crystal (Richardson 1994: 523). This was an appropriate metaphor for this socially constructed research as the different 'sides' of the crystal (different voices and different tools) together created a coherent whole (the case study). Looking through any one 'side' of the crystal could reveal a different 'truth'. As Richardson says, crystals: 'reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colours, patterns, arrays, casting off in different directions. What we see depends on the angle of our repose' (1994: 523). This is entirely appropriate for a case study seeking to document a context bound cultural and historical leadership practice.

Findings

Developmental Research Workshop (DRW)

The research process designed was informed by Engeström's (2001) DRW in that it drew on examples of real practice, generated insights into work-based practice, and led to the identification of developmental actions. The DRW was conducted in one day in one of the Children's Centres. There was a relaxed atmosphere and a high level of social interaction between the participants. I was familiar with many of the participants through previous work and spent time getting to know less familiar participants before explaining the purpose, process and ethics of the research.

Prior to the workshop the leaders were asked to complete some preliminary work. I collated this work and then used it as a starting point in the workshop. I felt that it would be good to start with some tangible data, and beneficial to seek the leaders interpretation of the results.

The leaders were asked to identify words that described them as leaders. A total of 27 different words were coded by the leaders into 12 categories as shown below:

- *Motivated*
- *Inclusive*
- *Communicative*
- *Democratic*
- *Developmental*
- *Patient*
- *Approachable*
- *Hard working*
- *Flexible*
- *Dealing with challenge*
- *Visionary / strategic.*

I did not amend these categories but left them as per the leaders interpretations. I later noticed that the majority of these categories (75%, n=9) were relational aspects of leadership. The rest (25%, n=3) were related to technical aspects of leadership – strategy, and working hard or dealing with challenges. In my analysis the leaders perceived relating to be an important act of leadership.

The most frequent self-descriptors were ‘democratic’ and focussed on the ‘development of others’ (n=5 each). These are linked to the key attributes of distributed leadership. Motivation (n=3), inclusivity (n=3) and communication (n=2) are also important acts of leadership where distribution exists. Flexibility (1) dealing with challenge (2) and vision setting (1) may seem to stand in contrast to one another, but can be seen as two cornerstones of system leadership practice in that it is only where there is a clear vision that individuals can enact individual leadership with confidence.

The leaders self-identification as hard working (n=4), approachable (n=3), and patient (n=1), I believed, also hinted at the key role they have in supporting and developing all staff to enact leadership.

The preliminary work had asked the leaders to identify their key strengths. This question elicited 24 strengths suggesting a positive self-perception. The results were coded by the leaders into four categories of strengths as listed below.

- *Interpersonal skills (communication, relationships, honesty, funny, friendly, open, empathetic)*
- *Developmental skills (supportive, empowering, team player, role model)*
- *Problem solving skills (problem solver, resourceful, reflective, creative, proactive, detailed, multi tasker)*

- *Positive attitude (strong, optimistic, enthusiastic, committed).*

I did not amend this coding. My interpretation of the coding was that interpersonal and developmental leadership strengths are relational, they are about the interactions that coalesce everyone around the core vision of the Children's Centre. This, I believed, also enabled capacity development, growing all staff so that they too can contribute acts of leadership. Problem solving is a key activity in the complex world of the Children's Centres, and a positive attitude is arguably helpful to ensure resilience to such problems.

Positive attitude was the most frequent cluster (n=16) and the leaders made sense of this in terms of having to be positive and determined given the constant challenges of the job. Interpersonal skills were second most frequent (n=13), closely followed by problem solving skills (n=12). The ability to develop the leadership capacity of others was the least frequent (n=10), but all four clusters are in a close range (n=10-16).

The preliminary work also prompted the leaders to identify a range of weaknesses they might have. There were 21 areas for development and the leaders coded these and developed the ten categories listed below:

- *Delegation*
- *Monitoring*
- *Patience*
- *Feeling confident*
- *Leading meetings*
- *Leading people*
- *Conducting appraisals*
- *Organisational skills*
- *Trusting intuition*
- *Looking after own wellbeing.*

I did not amend the coding or categories. My interpretation of these follows. Delegation was the area that was causing the most leaders concern (n=5), and yet the previous question had shown that it was also an area of strength for ten leaders. The second most frequent category was managing own wellbeing (n=4), and this perhaps correlates to the four leaders who considered themselves hard working in question one. Being patient, confident and organised were a challenge for two leaders each, and the rest of the concerns were true for only one leader each.

The areas that leaders most engage in, and consider themselves to be adept at are also areas of concern for them. This suggests that two truths exist concurrently for them – they are good at delegation, interpersonal skills and leading others and they do not feel good enough at them. This cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) can be explained by the challenging VUCA context. No matter how skilled a leader may feel at the full range of acts of leadership, the complexity of the context will always demand more. Supporting staff to feel 'successful' in a game that cannot be won is

therefore perhaps a key skill needed by leaders of such centres. This is reinforced by the attitudinal strengths of the leaders highlighted in the question above.

The preliminary work also led to identification of leadership challenges. 21 challenges were identified and coded into 12 categories listed below by the leaders themselves.

- *Doing too much too fast*
- *Using technology*
- *Using data*
- *Staying motivated*
- *Developing good partnerships*
- *Empowering staff*
- *Large team working*
- *Staff shortages*
- *Leading meetings*
- *Challenging people*
- *Time management*
- *Budgeting.*

I later interpreted the coding and categorisation. Time management was the most frequent challenge, faced by four leaders. Following this the leaders were challenged equally frequently by larger team or group working, doing too much too fast, and empowerment of others (n=3 each). Wider challenges mentioned by individuals were: technology, data, motivation, partnership working, staffing, leading meetings, challenging people and reduced budgets. This further reinforces the sense that the things the leaders do well also remain key challenges for them.

My interpretation was that the data suggested the leaders were uncomfortable with the label of 'leader'. I did not know the cause of the discomfort but could hypothesise that when leadership was perceived as a hierarchical position that demands authority and knowledge that it could sit at odds with the highly relational and inclusive values of the leaders. If this was the case then deconstruction of 'leadership' from a hierarchical position and heroic role into a relational process would support staff to enact leadership more than 'leadership development' that would shape them to be that which they do not want to be.

Using a survey as the preliminary form of research may sit at odds with action research, in that I designed the questions and administered the survey remotely. The leaders did, however, analyse the data as an introductory activity in the DRW which is participatory, and more characteristic of action research. My intent in all of this was to initiate the leaders curiosity about what they were doing as leaders as soon as possible, and to involve them as fully as possible in all the research activities. Practicalities around distance and time led me to design the research, and the participants then engaged in a range of data elicitation and data analysis opportunities that meant the data was of mixed status and a little 'messy'.

As an introductory activity the participants were asked to create a short definition of their day-to-day leadership practice in groups of two or three. There were 16 different statements generated and four examples are chosen to show the range of responses:

- *Encourage a participatory whole team approach and steer to ensure tasks are completed.*
- *Managing demands and the building, prioritise and delegate.*
- *Mother, counsellor, listener.*
- *Channelling a creative buzz able to respond to a change and a culture where leaders lead by example, an all role leadership model.*

The definitions were coded into eight categories shown below:

- *Inclusive*
- *Communicative*
- *Delegating*
- *Problem solving*
- *Responsive*
- *Creative*
- *Valuing*
- *Role modelling.*

These categories highlight leadership defined as a relational activity, with high levels of inclusion, delegation, communication and role modelling. The leadership task is also responsive, meeting the demands of whatever occurs on a given day. This would seem to require a great deal of creativity and problem solving. The valuing of individual staff can be seen to support all of these different strands. This resonates with the key characteristics of distributed leadership (inclusive, empowering, democratic).

The leaders were asked to reflect on the definitions that they had created (they had been written on a flip chart as they read them out to one another). In effect, this was a group analysis of the data set that they had just created. They interpreted their leadership as:

- *Participatory*
- *Inclusive*
- *Ownership*
- *Development*
- *Problem solving*
- *Channelling*
- *Distributed.*

This echoes with my interpretation of the preliminary work and also shows that there is considerable consistency across the individuals and the centres within the group. There were no definitions that jarred with or appeared very different to the others. Some of the emergent features of the leadership in the Children's Centres

are the consistency of approach across the group with an inclusive style, and emphasis on relationships.

The leaders were then asked to identify four key values underpinning their leadership practices in order to understand what drives acts of leadership. They completed this task in five small groups to aid discussion.

The values were written on post-it notes by individuals and then negotiated within their groups to develop a consensus on the four key values. This process prompted valuable dialogue. The values agreed within each group were then clustered together onto wall-mounted paper graph axes using the post-it notes themselves. This created a 'real-time' bar chart. I challenged the leaders to cluster the codes (post it notes) into larger categories, however the leaders remained certain that the following 14 categories were all different. This was an interesting instance of 'allowing' the participants interpretation to have more value than my own. I would have merged them into larger categories.

- *Respectful*
- *Good listener*
- *Positive*
- *Honest*
- *Empowering*
- *Responsive*
- *Outcome focussed*
- *Nurturing*
- *Trusting and trusted*
- *Supportive*
- *Equality*
- *Resilient*
- *Families empowered to make decisions*
- *Inclusive and giving voice.*

Positivity was the most frequent value (n=5), and was expressed by all of the groups. This was also reflected by the group's sense of their strengths. This positivity was described as keeping them going in times of great adversity and change. Being respectful and inclusive and giving other people a voice were equally valued (n=3 each). This resonates with the definitions of leadership in the previous exercise. Being inclusive has become a key within these children's centres.

My interpretation of this data set hinges on the prevalence of a range of relational and communicative values – respect, listening, being honest, empowering, nurturing, trusting, supporting, equity, being resilient, being inclusive. These relational qualities represent 64% (n=10) of the values. This supports the notion that relational work are some of the most important aspects of leadership these Children's Centres. This finding is supported by Aubrey's research (2011) which documented leadership in the early years leader task as fourfold, developing:

- Safe and caring environments with high quality early education and development
- Best pedagogical practice
- Leadership and management practice across networks
- The ability to manage increasingly complex and rapid change.

Arguably safe and caring environments, practice across networks and managing change are all relational tasks.

The remaining three values are centred on the needs of the families that come to the centres – being responsive, achieving outcomes, families making decisions. This suggests that overall the role of the Children’s Centre leaders is support for staff and for the families using their services further highlighting the link to Aubrey’s (ibid) safe and caring environments.

At the end of the exercise, I asked the leaders to reflect on what they had gained from that exercise. They listed the following learning points:

- *We do so many things*
- *We juggle so much stuff*
- *Things differ in importance depending on what time of year it is*
- *I realise how much we know and do*
- *There are different priorities by role*
- *There are different drivers*
- *Imagine starting from scratch again – we have done so much.*

It seemed that the activity had validated how complex their roles were, and reassured them that they were doing the right things as a group.

The final activity was directly activity theoretical. The leaders decided to subdivide into five groups of three each with a project in mind that they had co-led. The leaders structured themselves into five natural working groups. I guided the groups collectively through the activity theoretical questions that I had designed. I would read each one out and then explain what it meant, give examples, engage in discussion, and then allow each group time to reflect on their practice in the light of that element of the activity theory. During their working time I circulated and spent time supporting each groups analysis of their practice. I had written the queue questions in everyday language to make the abstract concepts of activity theory accessible (Leadbetter et al., 2008). After much discussion the groups annotated their answers on the activity theoretical diagram shown in figure one, creating three diagrams in total. Once the questions for each outside point of the framework had been discussed I guided them through queue questions that related to each of the lines of the framework identifying potential tensions and dilemmas.

The process of the leaders reflecting on their practices and writing down key aspects around the activity theory diagram could be viewed as data elicitation or data analysis. I believe this to be an interesting question that arises in the use of activity theory. On the one hand the leaders are answering queue card questions and so the

activity diagrams are elicited data artefacts that would then need analysis. This is how I have previously used activity theory in my action research based PhD (Stuart, 2014), and the demand of the PhD process to demonstrate your 'own' analysis rather than that of participants perhaps influenced me to the detriment of the participants. In this instance on the other hand, the leaders discussion of their leadership in response to the queue questions was viewed as the data elicitation, and their written responses on the activity system diagrams was their analysis of their leadership practices. This approach bestows the leaders with more agency within the research process and enhances their participation in the process, a development that was congruent to the aims of both activity theory and action research. The level of dialogue and energy was at its highest during the time that the groups complete the activity theory diagrams.

The small group analysis was then further enriched by the groups coming together and discussing what they noticed about all five diagrams, engaging in a collective analysis of the group analyses of leadership practices. The projects that the leaders chose to analyse were very different, from the tender process for the children's centres themselves to work to secure a new toy library. The tasks reflected the focus of the roles of the leaders. As the subjects of the projects varied, so did the objective. Common to all the projects was the identification of a wide community of practice. There were between six and 14 members of each community. Correspondingly, a range ways to divide labour existed. Some of the analyses listed very hierarchical systems whilst others were demand led or task led. There was therefore, no single fixed way of allocating tasks and great flexibility existed across the group. Complexity was also reflected in the range of tools that the leaders had at their disposal, and projects used between six and ten different tools to achieve their objectives. This highlights the adaptability that the children's centres need to appropriately divide labour and adopt tools.

The rules that governed the use of the tools and the division of labour were also highly varied. Some projects only had one set of rules and these were sometimes internal to the group or fixed by other partners. Some projects, however, had multiple sets of rules governing activity, creating further complexity. An example of this was an apparently simple activity building an accessible toy library. There were rules acting on this task from: procurement, health and safety, hygiene, transportation and storage, accessibility, equality and diversity and so on.

Once the main headings of the activity theoretical diagram had been annotated the leaders were guided to look at the connections between the different elements. The leaders were asked to evaluate the alignment of the 12 elements of the system. There was a high level of alignment in the systems of leadership used to achieve the projects. Three areas scored particularly highly alignment of; subject to object, object to community, tools to community. The alignment of these three areas is significant. It shows that the right people are directed to the right tasks with the right tools to ensure outcomes for families. This therefore suggests the leaders are managing to lead well across a wide system, achieving positive outcomes.

Aptitude for risk was a new theme that emerged in this activity. The leaders attributed their success to the following factors:

- *Being supported*
- *Team work*
- *We use our range of professional backgrounds*
- *We communicate well*
- *We have shared understandings*
- *We are multi-stranded*
- *We problem solve*
- *We have [leaders name] and how she leads and directs with confidence and creates what we are.*

This highlights that the leadership team perceive relationships as fundamental to their success. It is the mutual support and teamwork that enable them to work so well together in complex terrain.

Summary of the Findings

I took the five individual activity theoretical diagrams away and collated the results into a table under the headings of the activity theoretical diagram as shown in table one.

Activity theoretical area	Finding	Key word
Subject	Children and parents who live locally	Local children and parents
Objective	Wellbeing of children and families overall. Specifically the core offer (21 outcomes) and associated KPI's	Wellbeing
Mediating tools and artefacts	Multi-professional backgrounds in the team Interpersonal relationships Democracy Empowerment Teamwork Partnership working Communication skills Listening – always giving people time- patience Flexibility Problem solving skills and attitude Creativity Positivity	Relational collaborative practice

	Humour Care and nurture	
Rules	Value people Children and families come first Prioritise work daily to achieve outcomes Work inclusively and democratically Engage in dialogue - consult Be strengths based and solution focussed Distribute work and work together Its what you do, not who you are that counts	Inclusive and equitable collaborative practice
Community	Local community Health Education Social care Library service Church Charities Local businesses County Council Advisory Board Lead agency	Wide community of practice
Division of labour	Based on capability and capacity Needs must Equitable Collaborative Delegation Monitoring	Distributed acts of leadership.

Table 1: Activity theoretical analysis of the data corpus.

Table 1

I then further summarised the data onto the third generation activity theoretical diagram (Engeström, 2001) as shown in figure one. I again felt discomfort in taking away the work that the leaders had completed, taking away their interpretation, and imposing my own. Yet the leader of the group of Children's Centres with the endorsement of the participants had clearly stated that they wanted a short two page report that summarised the work of the leaders – they wanted me to do further analysis of their work. Despite my exhortations that this was their work and their data, they were adamant that they did not have the time nor expertise to take it further. I hoped that they had gained much from participating in the data

generation and data analysis and interpretation during the DRW. I hoped that the action plan that they had developed would enable them to move forward and that the further analysis that they asked me to complete would complement rather than undermine what they had done. I am prompted to wonder how often such messiness is found in other action research projects? I also wondered whether, at this point, the project was no longer action research, and what it might have become if no longer action research?

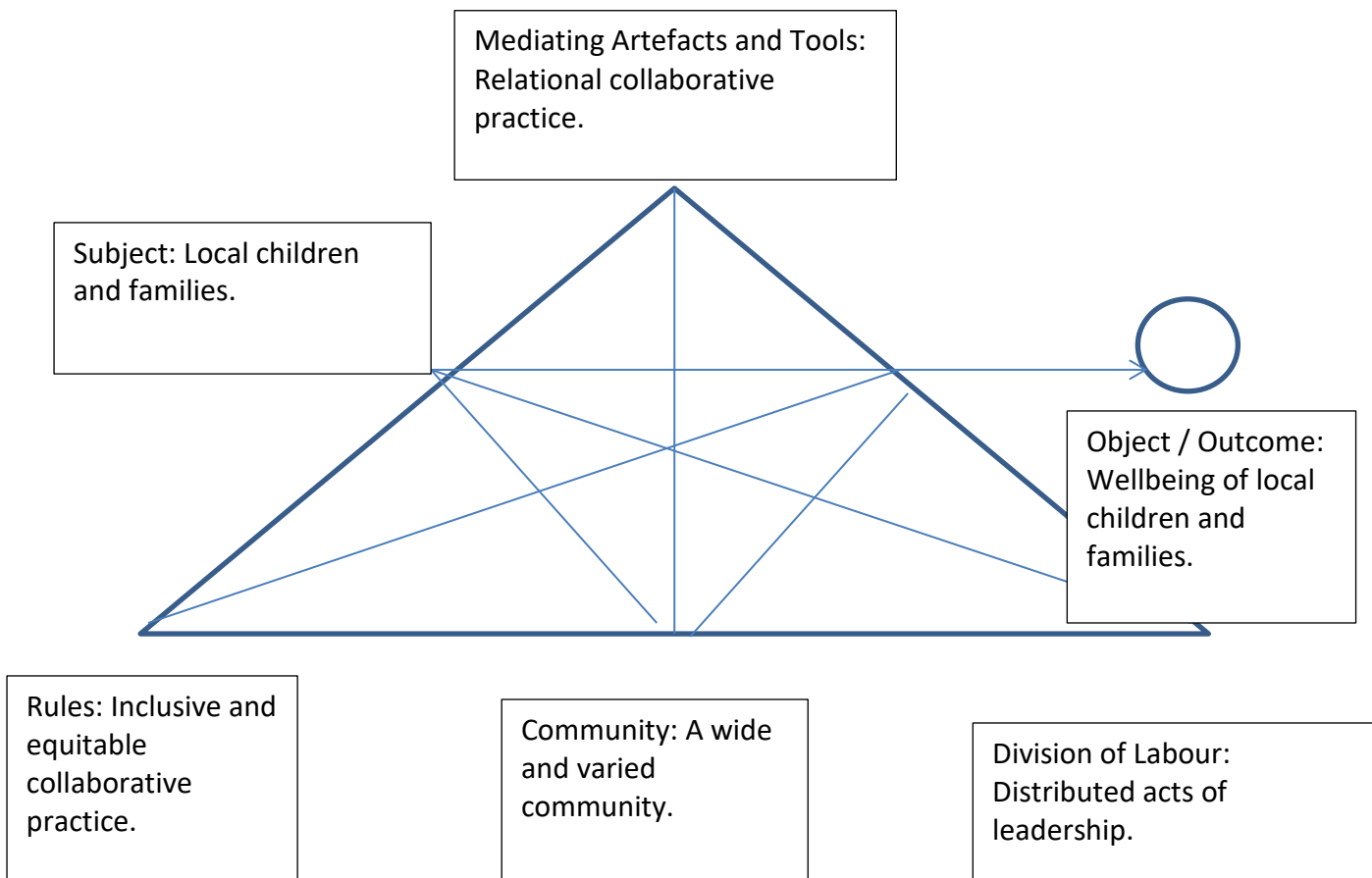


Figure 1: Activity Theoretical Summary of the Findings

Figure 1

In my analysis and interpretation, the different elements of the system complemented one another. There were some confounding difficulties however. A lack of resources (time and staff) meant that the tools and community were are

times limited and made it hard to achieve outcomes. Further difficulties were created with such a wide community of practice. Although lots of resources are available from wider partners, the time involved in navigating partnership working could render those unavailable in short time scales making it hard to meet immediate need. A final difficulty was presented by the clear focus on the needs of children and families as this could lead staff to put others ahead of themselves with a negative impact on their work life balance.

Within activity theory these tensions and contradictions become areas for learning and development (Engeström, 2008). For example, the leaders identified that whilst resources issues may be difficult to overcome, time invested in leveraging resources from partners could pay dividends later on for staff time.

The validity of the findings was judged by the extent to which they were felt to represent the leaders practices, and so participant checking was used to establish the extent to which there was 'empathetic validity' (Dadds, 2008) and 'crystalisation' (Richardson, 1994) rather than other positivistic measures of validity. The leaders individually confirmed by email that the findings represented them and their leadership practices.

Discussion – Leadership as Small Acts of Relationship

The activities engaged in and resulting data analysis by leaders and by myself the researcher portrayed a highly value based and relational leadership practice in these Children's Centres. Whether discussing leadership at an espoused level or practical level, whether talking strategy or daily problem, the leaders vocabulary remained consistently the same. Communication, dialogue, inclusivity, collaboration were central. Perhaps this accounts for the difficulty some leaders have in stepping into the role or seeing themselves in the shoes of traditional 'great' leaders. In contrast, to this archetypal image, this study positioned leadership in the small daily actions of all people, in values based relational acts of leadership. Whilst the 'heroic' all-knowing leader figure is an out-dated model within leadership studies, replaced by system leaders (Taylor, 2008) but its legacy perhaps lives on in practice. The relational perspective on leadership is becoming more popular whether from a system perspective (ibid), agentic perspective (Crevani, 2015) or constructionist perspective (Uhl-Bien and Ospina (2012), and yet is perhaps not fully reconciled as 'of worth' in leadership practice.

At this point a key question emerges – is the leadership in the Children's Centres in this study a series of valued-based relational acts due to the gender of the staff (Rosener, 1990), the nature of the work of Children's Centres (Aubrey, 2011) or a collocation of the two? Or is leadership relational per se (Uhl-Bien and Ospina 2012:1-40)? These are important questions to pursue in further research, particularly given the predominance of men in leadership roles in the wider Education sector (Blackmore and Sachs, 2007). The emergence of this question was an unexpected turn in the research – perhaps showing researcher naivety rather

than anything else. It shows the potential of action research to open up new lines of enquiry from the first and an unravelling of layers of complexity that will fuel the researchers interests for the coming months if not years.

Impact

Participation in the preliminary work and DRW provided immediate insight for the Children's Centre leaders. They reported feeling *reassured, more confident* and *clearer* about what they did as leaders. They had taken away an action plan from the DWR that stated that they would:

- *Question how family oriented every action is*
- *Develop guidelines for all staff on the community of practice*
- *Develop transparency around division of labour and rules for all staff*
- *Lever more resources into the centres*
- *Engage in less bureaucracy.*

My summary and interpretation were also written up and given back to the leaders as a resource and the Children's Centre leaders said they used it to communicate the nature of their leadership within and outside their organisations. They reported that this would enable them to "*communicate what we do to the people that matter better*".

One year on the Children's Centres have reported anecdotally that leadership practice is now seen as everyone's work rather than as the preserve of the few. The group manager said that they now saw leadership as everyone's job and kept families at the centre of decision making. Conceiving leadership as small acts of values based relationship encouraged everyone to participate, to have a role, to be a part of the team. She reported that the Children's Centres had achieved well and met many of their targets, that staff are happy and have good job-satisfaction despite the continuing challenges. The most tangible evidence of the impact of this work is perhaps that the Children's Centres are now planning to fully integrate across their 19 centres with health visitors, drawing a member of their wide community of practice into their core work. I have worked with the Children's Centre leaders for two days on this development and they consistently and persistently refer back to the action research as a turning point for them, enabling them to understand and further leverage effective leadership.

This highlights the link between activity theoretical DWR's and action research (Er, Pollack, Sankaran, 2013) and demonstrates the on-going impact of action research in reinforcing and stimulating further acts of leadership and the growth of a yet stronger, relational, collaborative practice.

Conclusions

Action research is the approach of choice for practitioner inquiry. Complications may arise, however, when layers of data elicitation and interpretation are created by the

hybrid role of academics within the action research process. The intangible nature of the 'action' that may or may not result from action research is also an issue that is difficult to resolve. Despite these difficulties, it would seem that the joint exploration and action orientation in this study of leadership practice had benefits to the participants and their organisation. A developmental research workshop, informed by cultural historical activity theory (Engeström, 1996) was employed within the action research and found to be helpful in elicitation and analysis. The use of activity theory needs careful tailoring to context and audience however, and cannot be adopted uncritically.

The findings of the research showed that leadership in the Children's Centres is constituted of small acts of leadership that are values-based and highly relational. This is not to say that everything is lovely in the Children's Centre world. To the contrary, Children's Centres are underfunded, over stretched, and work with some of the most disadvantaged families in the UK. The diverse 'work' that they do is challenging by nature and in context.

The leaders of the Children's Centres apparently feel under-skilled and under-qualified to be leaders and yet they do lead successful services with the group achieving highly against its key performance indicators, and staff enjoy working there despite the challenges. Reconstructing leadership as a series of values-based relational acts enabled the leaders to 'claim' their skill, acknowledge success, and develop further best practice. This form of leadership 'felt' consistent with their image of who they are and what they do, rather than hierarchical, role based, heroic constructions of leadership. As a result of the action research the leaders have developed more explicit leadership behaviours and further developed their partnership working model. Future research will investigate the nature of leadership in this newly integrated team to explore the extent to which it has remained stable or changed.

A key question has emerged from the research as to whether the values-based relational form of leadership found was due to the gender of the participants, the nature of the work, or the nature of leadership itself. The value of an intent towards 'action' rather than action itself within action research has been questioned and the 'mess' that can arise in action research problematized. These would be a fruitful areas for future research.

It is hoped that although the findings of this research are highly specific to one group of Children's Centres, there may be findings and questions that can be generalised to other settings.

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