

## Calling for mentoring: Early childhood student teachers' experience and concerns on leadership roles in Australia

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### Abstract

In Australia, early childhood teachers (ECTs) are often required to take up leadership responsibilities soon after appointment. Since 2017, early career ECTs have been required to seek professional accreditation at the proficient (graduate) level (*The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers*), although their position often demands they take up leadership responsibilities at a higher level. This anomalous gap, plus our concerns about the lack of transitional support for final-stage early childhood preservice teachers led to a pilot study that examined the perceptions and concerns about leadership roles of graduating ECTs. Guided by social constructionist theory and a qualitative methodology, data were collected with this student cohort plus two current ECE directors via an online professional learning program, focus groups, and surveys. This paper reports participants' perceptions of leadership enactment and students' concerns about their future role as ECTs. The gap between the expectations of new ECT graduates and the actual leadership responsibilities they may assume is also interrogated. This paper argues that increased mentoring support from both federal and state/territory government levels and management bodies is urgently needed to promote the leadership capacities of early-career ECTs.

**Keywords :** *early childhood leadership, mentoring, early childhood teacher education, preservice teachers, transition*

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## Introduction

It has been well-documented that leadership is crucial in the provision of high-quality early childhood services (Gibbs et al., 2019; Rodd, 2013; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2012; Sylva et al., 2004). In Australia, its importance is reflected in the National Quality Framework (NQF) for early childhood education (ECE), with leadership and governance being one of the seven National Quality Standards (NQS) (Australian Children's Education & Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2018). Discussion around how early childhood teachers can be best prepared for leadership roles is now critical in Australia, due to increased service management accountabilities that require educators to focus both on compliance with external policies (NQF, 2020) and also on the validation of individual teacher performance (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2017). Understanding of early childhood leadership has evolved significantly in recent years. However, early childhood leadership has not yet been adequately studied (Rodd, 2013; Waniganayake et al., 2017), nor are ECE educators properly mentored to take up leadership roles and responsibilities in the services. Due to their qualifications, early childhood teachers (ECTs) are often required to assume leadership responsibilities soon after they enter the workforce. This has resulted in ECTs feeling ill-equipped (Campbell-Evans et al., 2014) and high attrition in the first 5 years of their careers (Weldon, 2018). Subsequently, it is important to gain an understanding of the concerns and support that early career ECTs may need and provide such support *before* they take up leadership roles in ECE services. In 2019, a pilot study that aimed to seek a better understanding of the needs and concerns of final-stage ECE preservice teachers (PSTs) was conducted at a regional university in Australia. A qualitative approach was adopted to collect data via online surveys, focus groups, and an online learning platform. Data gathered from the focus groups are reported in this article.

## Literature Review: Early Childhood Education Leadership

Early studies of ECE leadership often adopted business or school leadership models which

conceptualized leadership as traits residing in the individual. These models explore the personal traits, characteristics, attributes, and qualities of good leaders, based on the assumptions those are requirements for effective leadership. However, current research on leadership in ECE reveals that leadership does not reside within an individual but is implemented and defined within a dynamic social context, and evolves with the growth and changes in the ECE leadership team (Heikka et al., 2013; Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011; Rodd, 2013; Waniganayake et al., 2017). It is not enacted only by the positional leader, but distributed across team members within the settings, and spread over different aspects of the system or structure implemented by that person. Within a distributed model of leadership, positional leaders seek an understanding of the interests, experiences, and talents of the other members of the team, and opportunities are provided to team members based on their interests and experience through a democratic process (Heikka & Hujala, 2013; Rodd, 2013). In essence, distributed leadership is constructed in the practice of the leader, demonstrated in how they interact with the team and the situation (Spillane, 2005). It is a relational and communal concept in which not only leaders in positions, but all members of the team, engage in leadership and benefit from the process (Siraj & Hallet, 2014).

When considering a study of the varied and dynamic leadership responsibilities and roles, transformational theory, an approach that explains how leaders inspire and motivate others, offers guidance. A central tenet of the theory of transformational leadership is that all members of the team have leadership capacity and the role of the leader is to discover and develop the leadership capacity and potential within each of them (Campbell-Barr & Leeson, 2016). It is a people-oriented approach that focuses on empowering and inspiring to learn, seek changes, and improve through a collaborative process. Transformational leaders who take into account team members' needs, goals, and interests gain the trust of the members and are perceived positively within the team (Chun et al., 2009, as cited in Braun et al., 2013; Zhu et al., 2013).

Detached from the traditional models of ECE leadership, recent research investigates how leadership is constructed and enacted in contexts. Sisson et al. (2024) suggest that ECE leadership should be co-constructed by stakeholders in context as this provides the opportunity for leadership to be authentically developed. Earlier, Hujala (2013) proposes a

contextual model of leadership that conceptualises leadership as a socially and culturally constructed phenomenon. According to this model, leadership is constructed within the dimensions of an ECE mission, the vision within the organization, as well as the director's management functions and administrative tasks (Hujala, 2013, p. 54). This model defines the structural framework of both the factors and actors related to leadership and leading. The ECE leader's role is to guide and steer the team to achieve the core tasks and goals. This model resonates with Rodd's claim that "Leadership is a people-oriented process, role, and responsibilities where two or more people come together in pursuit of a common goal" (Rodd, 2013, p.12). Subsequently, the social and cultural contexts in which the people and system are situated play an important part in the decisions that leaders make.

Also examining leadership from a contextual perspective, Waniganayake et al. (2017) propose that the implementation of leadership can be examined by considering the person (the experience and background of the individual), the place (the resources, structure, and management of the setting) and the position (governed by the regulations and policies within the jurisdiction). All of these elements influence how leadership is implemented in situ. For example, in Australia ECE services are regulated by both federal and state policies and funded by different models (the position). Based on their knowledge and experiences, ECTs and educators set both short-term and long-term goals to achieve positive outcomes for the service (the person). Services can be private-for-profit, community-based, or managed by local governments or other agencies (the place). This has led to varied structures and philosophies in each service, plus a range of leadership roles and responsibilities that are not always well-defined. Consequently, contextual complexities within the ECE sector pose a significant impact on leaders' opportunities to learn about and practise effective leadership (Klevering & McNae, 2018). Coupled with different management models and ownership of service providers, defining and theorizing ECE leadership has been challenging (Murphy & Thornton, 2015; Rodd, 2013; Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2018; Waniganayake et al., 2017).

Attention to the context and structure in which leadership is enacted shifts our gaze away from the person and the assumed traits and styles that are believed to be the reasons for good leadership. This shift promotes an understanding of ECE leadership in a new paradigm where relationships are situated in the enactment of leadership (Northouse, 2010, as cited in

Campbell-Barr & Leeson, 2016; Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2018). Lund (2021) claims that leadership is constructed from interacting with a range of contextual situations, in particular, the discourse of niceness and equality between the pedagogical leaders and the staff form the basis of the enactment of leadership. This understanding of contextual enactment of leadership alerts us to the fact that new ways of thinking about leading are required so that educators at all levels can see themselves as leaders. This is particularly important as early childhood teachers are often reluctant to take up leadership roles (Ortlipp et al., 2011; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2012) and a teacher-leader identity is still recognised as a complex process (Cooper, 2023). The historical view that ECE is women's work due to their innate caring instincts and the need for an alternative to home care has resulted in low pay and low professional status (Campbell-Barr & Leeson, 2016). The lack of leadership definition, limited access to experienced mentors, and the reluctance to embrace the roles and responsibilities that are involved in a higher level of power and authority have resulted in insufficient discussion about ECE leadership (Rodd, 2013). For the discussion in this paper, leadership is defined as distributed, contextual, relational, multidirectional processes and responsibilities where two or more people come together to achieve a common goal.

### **Early Childhood Graduates in Australia: Expectations and Responsibilities**

In Australia, all ECE staff are required to have the relevant qualifications to work in ECE services. With educators, they have to obtain a Certificate III or diploma qualification from a vocational institute such as Technical and Further Education (TAFE) in New South Wales (NSW Government, n.d.). To be qualified as an early childhood teacher (ECT), one must complete a 4-year degree (or equivalent) in an accredited ECE course, comprising both theoretical and practical components (see Table 1). Since the introduction of the NQF in 2012, ECE services have been required to employ a university-trained ECT when enrolments exceeded 25 children (ACECQA, 2018), and in 2020 this increased to two ECTs for 60 or more children. This requirement has resulted in a significant increase in demand for ECTs in

all jurisdictions and localities. The National Skills Commission's five-year projections expect an increase of around 8000 ECTs in 2025 (ACECQA, 2021).

Table 1. *Qualifications and Roles of Educators and Early Childhood Teachers in Australia (information adapted from ACECQA and TAFE NSW websites)*

| Position                 | Qualification                                 | Length of study                                                                                   | Institution             | Roles                                                                                                                                         |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Educators                | Certificate III                               |                                                                                                   | Vocational institutes   | Room assistants                                                                                                                               |
| Educators                | Diploma in Early Childhood Education and Care | 18 months to 2 years full-time or part-time equivalent (length of study varies across institutes) | Vocational institutes   | Room leader. Depending on their experience and the need for the service, they may be appointed as the Educational Leader and/or the Director. |
| Early Childhood Teachers | Four-year Early Childhood Degree Programs     | 4 years full-time or part-time equivalent                                                         | Accredited universities | Room leader, educational leader, director, and placement supervisors of PSTs                                                                  |

Every ECE service is required to have an educational leader (EL) who “has an influential role in inspiring, motivating, affirming and also challenging or extending the practice and pedagogy of educators” (ACECQA, n.d.). Their responsibility is to “guide other educators in their planning and reflection, and mentor colleagues in their implementation practices” (ACECQA, 2011, p. 85) and to ensure a planning cycle is implemented. Research indicates that pedagogical leadership in developing curriculum and pedagogy positively impacts the outcomes for children and families (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2012; Waniganayake et al., 2017), however, how and how much *new* ECT graduates are being prepared for and mentored in such roles remains a concern (Campbell-Barr & Leeson, 2016). ECTs, by their qualifications, are often expected to take up a leadership role in their service, such as an EL as soon as they have obtained the qualification. This is particularly the case in rural and regional areas where the numbers of qualified ECTs are limited. Furthermore, to meet the above staff ratio requirements, those enrolled in ECT degree courses can be designated as ‘working towards’ and are therefore allowed to assume leading service roles before course completion and graduation. With the role of centre director, there is no mandated leadership preparation for centre directors pre or post-graduation in Australia (Waniganayake, 2014). Coupled with the demand to provide leadership to meet the NQS (ACECQA, 2019), current

ECT shortages, and poor staff retention rates (McDonald et al., 2018), new graduates often find themselves ill-equipped for leadership realities and expectations (Campbell-Evans et al., 2014).

### **Mentoring Early Childhood Graduates**

In Australia, as part of the accreditation requirements, ECE teacher education programs are required to address six curriculum areas specified by ACECQA, and educational leadership is one of the content areas that needs to be covered (ACECQA, 2020). While PSTs have the opportunity to study leadership at university, enacting leadership requires ongoing support and reflection in real work situations (Waniganayake et al., 2017). It has been found that one of the most effective ways to support early-career ECTs in their transition to leadership roles is through effective mentoring (Hudson, 2013; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Murphy & Thornton, 2015). Mentoring has been a cost-effective professional learning strategy for promoting the growth of both mentors and mentees (Hudson, 2013) and building leadership capacities (Langdon, 2011; Wong & Waniganayake, 2013). Besides instructional support, mentors also offer psychological support and role modelling to beginning teachers (Richter et al., 2013). The essence of mentoring is a collaborative and collegial process conducted between a more experienced person (the mentor) and a less experienced/new team member (the mentee). It is described as a complementary and bi-directional relationship to benefit them both (Wong & Waniganayake, 2013).

Mentoring is recognised in several education systems around the world. For instance, in Scotland, a mentoring guide was developed to support ECE employers and management in the provision of mentoring for new career teachers (The Coalition of Childhood Umbrella Organisations, 2010). In New Zealand, the document 'Guidelines for Induction and Mentoring and Mentor Teachers' is available for employers and mentors in ECE, primary and secondary teaching sectors to support the successful completion of a two-year induction and mentoring programme for provisionally certified teachers before they can become fully certified (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2015). Likewise, the Finnish model of peer-group mentoring is a national initiative that promotes the professional development

of teachers and educational staff in primary, secondary, and ECE (Tynjälä et al., 2021). In Australia, mentoring support in ECE appears sporadic and piecemeal. The federal government has offered some leadership workshops and online materials through the ACECQA regulatory body and some private consultants facilitate training. As the peak early childhood advocacy organisation, Early Childhood Australia [ECA] provides paid online courses such as the ECA Leadership program (Early Childhood Australia, 2024). Victoria and Queensland are the only two states or territories that offer concerted and ongoing support for early-stage ECTs. In New South Wales (NSW), a department-wide induction program is available for new teachers in the primary and secondary sectors, and ECTs working in the department's preschools (NSW Government, n.d.).

To be accredited as an ECT in Australia, ECE graduates must meet the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers [APST] known as 'The Standards', established by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL]. The Standards are based on the same domains and stages that their school counterparts must address. According to the APST, The Standards "define the work of teachers and make explicit the elements of high-quality, effective teaching in 21<sup>st</sup>-century schools" (APST, 2017, p3). There are seven standards across three domains, namely Professional Knowledge, Professional Practice, and Professional Engagement. These professional standards are also described at four career stages, thus recognising the growth of teachers throughout their careers (provisional, proficient, highly accomplished, and lead). The proficient level is stipulated by the AITSL nationally as being required to be achieved by beginning teachers to achieve full registration. In addition, each jurisdiction has a teacher accrediting or registration body, for example in NSW, the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) develops and oversees the NSW teacher accreditation system that assesses evidence of a teacher's achievement within The Standards (NSW Government, 2024).

It is against this dynamic backdrop that in 2018 a pilot study was conducted, principally with final year ECE teacher education students, but also including two experienced ECT qualified centre directors, to investigate their concerns, their perceptions of leadership, and the supports they identified as necessary for them to embrace new leadership roles upon graduation.

## Methodology

This pilot study was conducted in a regional university in New South Wales, Australia (Approval number: HE18-210). It aimed to support final-stage ECE preservice teachers (PST) in their transition to leadership responsibilities by investigating their perceptions of and concerns about leadership roles in ECE settings. This study is guided by social constructionist theory (Crotty, 1998), cognisant that leadership is a multi-faceted socially constructed phenomenon that invites many diverse perspectives. Due to personal and contextual circumstances such as geographical locations and service structure, individual participants' experiences and concerns about ECE leadership vary. In order to capture the richness of the experiences and concerns, a qualitative methodology was adopted to collect in-depth data. The data collection methods included two questionnaires (pre- and post-project), an online professional learning program, and three focus groups. Sharing of understandings around emerging leadership roles and concerns was sought with the participating PSTs and ECE centre directors. The overarching research questions were: *What are the participants' experiences and understandings of leadership enactment in early childhood services? What are students' concerns about assuming leadership responsibilities as an ECT?*

Participants in this study were final-stage PSTs enrolled in an ECE Bachelor's degree program at the University of New England, Australia. As prerequisites to enrol in this course, students in this cohort had obtained a diploma in ECE and had a minimum of one year experience as a room leader in an ECE service. It has been suggested that upgrading from diploma qualification to ECT is the most time-efficient way to address the workforce shortage (The Front Project, 2019). Furthermore, there is a clear difference in salary between ECTs and diploma-qualified educators, with the ECTs earning a weekly salary between \$1345 to \$1861 for the ECTs (Aussie Childcare Network, 2023), and the educators earning between \$910 to \$1502 (Aussie Childcare Network, 2024).

Two degree-qualified and experienced centre directors were included in the study, thus offering students the opportunity to seek those directors' views on ECE leadership. To meet the funding requirement, students of low socio-economic status (SES) in the course were targeted. Selection criteria for participation were: they had completed at least half of their

course of study, and the postcode of their home address fell into the low SES category, as identified by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Researchers obtained their information through the university's Enrolment Office and Business Information Data.

Initially, two researchers were involved in this study, with the author of this paper as the lead researcher. The co-researcher withdrew from the study after the preliminary data analysis stage due to the change to part-time work mode. Since both researchers were teaching staff of the course in which the participating students enrolled. Invitation emails were sent to eligible students by an administrative assistant to address coercion concerns. A total of 12 students agreed to participate in the study. Upon receiving their consent, online pre-project questionnaires were sent to both the directors and students. The questionnaires contained rating scale questions and open-ended questions (see Table 2)

Table 2. *Open-ended questions asked in the online questionnaires*

| Preservice teachers                                                                                         | Directors                                                                      |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| What attracted you to become an early childhood teacher?                                                    | What initially attracted you to become an early childhood educator?            |
| What do you see as the major challenges in your professional role in the next 12 months?                    | What personal skills or attributes did you bring to your current leading role? |
| What is your aspiration in 12 months, 3 years, and 8 years?                                                 | What does being a leader in EC settings mean to you?                           |
| What types of support do you think you may need before your first leadership appointment in an ECE setting? | As an educator, what do you see as the most important aspect(s) for you?       |
| What types of support do you think you need 6 months after your first appointment?                          |                                                                                |
| What strategies would you use to seek the support you may need?                                             |                                                                                |

As a pilot study adopting a qualitative methodology, data collection in this project was organic, in particular in the development of the module content in the online professional learning platform. Based on the students' responses, three modules were created, namely, Equipping Yourself; Leadership Case Studies; and Individualized Action Research. These modules covered the aspects of mentoring, professional development, networking, advocacy, and resources to deepen knowledge about the regulations. A discussion forum was created on the online learning site where participants were encouraged to share their thoughts. The

ECE directors could access the forum, however, they were not required to engage in the discussion.

Three focus groups (each about 60 minutes in length) were conducted via Zoom at 3-4 weeks intervals. This allows participants time to engage with the module materials and reflect on their learning. Questions discussed in the focus groups were generated from the responses in the discussion forum and the pre-project questionnaires. The students participated in all three focus groups with both directors participating only in the second focus group due to their busy schedules. Focus group discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed by a professional transcriber. A post-project questionnaire was sent to all participants at the project's conclusion. Transcribed focus group data, along with questionnaire responses and online forum text were coded, grouped, and analysed in an iterative process to identify patterns or emerging themes, focusing on how they answered the research questions.

## **Results and discussion**

### **Participants' experience of leadership**

#### ***Leadership is distributive and transformational***

Both groups of participants had experienced situations where leadership in ECE did not reside in positions but was shared among staff members. They described how input from staff members was sought and utilised in every aspect of service operation. The comments below of Heather a student (S), highlighted that no one person was solely responsible for taking observations of children or developing and evaluating the curriculum.

*We don't actually divide the children up, we just take observations on the children that we're working with, we do future planning together, and do the programming together. So, there's no one person that's actually responsible for doing it, if you like. (S. Heather, FGI, p. 2).*

*There are three of us in the room – no, four of us in the room, and that's a mixture of Cert*

*III, Diploma, and Early Childhood Teacher. So, even though I'm a diploma and doing my degree, I'm not actually room leader because the person I work with has been – has about, I don't know, 20 years experience, so she's running the room. But we work very closely together for programming, for observations, for all of that sort of stuff. (S. Heather, FG1, p. 2).*

Heather's comments demonstrated how tasks were shared among team members based on their varied experiences, abilities, interests, and aspirations. They also alluded to the complexity of leadership responsibilities in ECE services. Under the NQF (ACECQA, 2018), qualification does determine one's position or title in the service. However, leadership was co-constructed and connected closely to the context (Sisson et al., 2024) with consideration of other aspects, such as experience, as evident in Heather's negotiation with her room leader who has a lower qualification but more experience than she has.

Similarly, the two participating directors (D) also highlighted that leadership was shared among members of the staff.

*In terms of staff meetings, too, I think that's another way that you can lighten your load because people will take responsibility for taking the minutes, distributing the minutes, and contributing to the agenda. So, everyone has a bit of ownership about it (D. Nancy, FG2, p. 8).*

*Well, we've actually had some of our educators come in and do some office-based work to share the load, but also to experience what it's like. They go, 'Oh, I don't want to work in here anymore!' [laughter] So, when I say I just half an hour to do something, they know that it is important, you know, I've got to go and do it. So, it opens their eyes to what happens behind the scenes (D. Emma, FG2, p. 6).*

Besides respecting and utilising the knowledge and experience that team members brought, there were pragmatic reasons cited for distributing the responsibilities, namely to lessen the director's load and strategically facilitate succession planning. From the excerpts above, the

directors provided opportunities for the staff to take up responsibilities in tasks that are not their regular duties, to build ownership, and to learn ‘what actually happens behind the scenes’ – a form of empowerment and capacity building. These comments demonstrated the fluidity of distributed leadership in ECE settings, that roles and responsibilities are not “set in stone” but shared among members of the team and highly contextual (Klevering & McNae, 2018; Lund, 2021). A commitment to building trust and empowering followers by improving their skills and capabilities was a typical practice of transformational leaders (Rodd, 2013). Inspirational motivation in transformational leadership sees leaders adopting strategies to motivate and inspire members of the team to achieve the goals of the organization (Bass, 1985, as cited in Birasnav, 2014), which was evident in the opportunities that both Nancy and Emma provided for their staff.

***Leadership is multidirectional and relational***

Another theme was that leadership was enacted in the interactions among members of the team. The excerpt below by Amy demonstrated how leadership was enacted through open discussion of their reflections, through a critical reflection tool, and referring the theories, to achieve a common goal which was to find out what could be changed.

*So, our meetings are all together. A critical reflection tool that we’ve been using to write about things and then we take it to a meeting and we really nut it out and talk about, you know, what’s going on and what are the theories and links and what things can we change and why are we doing it. Yeah, those sorts of things. Yeah, so we learn – we mentor each other (S. Amy, FGI, p. 4).*

Broadly speaking, leadership aims to achieve common goals in an organization. Interactions among staff members, between positional leaders and the team was, in practice, a process to achieve this aim. “We mentor each other” (Amy’s excerpt above) suggested that leadership was multidirectional and relational, that it did not come from the top in the hierarchy but from “sideways” and “below”. As Spillane (2005) argues, while structures, routines, and tools are important to leadership, leadership is fundamentally constructed

through interactions within the team. It was enacted in how leaders behaved, as demonstrated in the example that Nancy provided below.

*You need mentoring and that's something. I really feel very strongly that I can work one-to-one with every other staff member. So, for example, I might step out into the room. We might pick a couple of children, we might observe them together, come back and I'd give them some kind of training in observation [unclear] and then we come back and we compare what we've seen and have this discussion about it. (D. Nancy, FG2, p. 11).*

In the excerpt above, Nancy's leadership was constructed by how she worked with a staff member in the observation and interpretation of children's activities in a structured session, and through interacting with the tool "cycle of planning". This bi-directional relationship benefited both the mentor and mentee (Wong & Waniganayake, 2013) as it improved their knowledge and awareness of the quality of pedagogy (Fonsén, & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019)

### **Students' concerns**

#### ***Magnitude of responsibilities***

The participating students had been working in ECE settings in different capacities at the time of the study. Among them, one was the educational leader in her service, one was a lead teacher and the other one was a room leader. Despite their experience, diploma qualifications, and "working towards" (ECT) status, students were concerned that they might not have a thorough understanding of certain aspects of their position as a leader, such as mentoring, programming, and compliance.

Amy was the lead teacher in her service and had been working in the same service for several years. Her comments below revealed her serious concerns about the breadth and depth of the responsibilities of her role.

*I guess my concerns are that you know ... is everything at a, you know, at a high quality. Am I getting across every single child? Am I connecting with all families? Am I being a*

*good mentor to those people who are looking up to me? Yeah, I guess that's – they're some of the things that I lay in bed at night thinking about (S. Amy, FG1, p.4).*

Amy was clear that she was responsible to three groups of stakeholders: children, families, and staff. She aimed to provide high-quality service to each of them – get across to *every single* child, connect with *all* families, and be a *good* mentor. This comment on “high quality” reflects the policy context in which educators are operating. In Australia, ECE services must comply with external accreditation and meet the *NQS* (ACECQA, 2020) as incorporated in the *NQF* (ACECQA, 2018). Based on this standard the quality of the service provided by ECE settings is assessed against a set of criteria and rated by external assessors. A rating outcome of Excellent, Exceeding NQS, Meeting NQS, Working Towards NQS, or Significant Improvement Required will be given to the services.

As an educational leader, Heather also expressed concerns about supporting staff through change, management, and administration, as well as implementing the EYLF planning cycle. Heather's comment reflected her concern about the level of responsibilities that she had toward other staff members.

*But also, how to support staff, particularly through changes or through difficult behaviour ... you know, when staff is stressed and that sort of thing, how to support them. And also, a lot of that sort of management and administrative stuff ... and I guess a really thorough understanding of ... you know, how you put the obs (observation) and the cycle of planning and the documentation right and, particularly if you're trying to guide other people through, how to get that working. A really thorough handle on how to do that (S. Heather, FG1, p. 9).*

The most challenging task of all for Heather was to have a thorough understanding of these tasks so that she could support other staff members. In other words, Heather felt that it was not enough to know the planning cycle and other administrative tasks required to meet the requirements of her job because ultimately, she was also responsible for mentoring other staff members to understand the planning cycle and implement any changes. It appeared that they

needed ongoing professional development to strengthen their pedagogical leadership in order to improve their knowledge and argue for ECE pedagogy (Fonsén, & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019).

***A practice knowledge gap***

As they reflected on their work experiences in the ECE sector and their observations of the director's responsibilities, the students shared concerns about their inadequate practical experience in management and administration. Implicit in the responses from the three students below was the lack of or insufficient learning about the administration and management of a childcare setting in their university studies.

*And also, a lot of that sort of management and administrative stuff. I suppose it's not part of the educational leadership role, but down the track as a teacher, there's a lot of that sort of management style stuff you sort of don't learn, really, until you have to do it (S. Heather, FG1, p. 9).*

*I suppose I've always been curious about that admin sort of part, because when we're trained, we get trained to be teachers and then I look at the managers and the directors sitting in the office doing that admin work and I think, we're not trained to do it, like, we're learning about – as you were saying, priorities and ... where does that all come into it? (S. Renee, FG2, p. 9).*

*You know, an administration role. Maybe that's where I feel a bit disconnected. (S. Amy, FG1, p. 8).*

This knowledge gap in administration and management is a reflection of the current *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers 'The Standards'* produced by the Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL] which govern the level of study among courses offered by education providers across Australia. All university courses are required to meet the requirements set by the AITSL to ensure that graduates have acquired the knowledge and

skills to become teachers, but not administrators or managers (Australian Institute for Teaching School and Leadership, 2015). However, in the reality of EC services, their responsibilities include teaching, management, and administration. As such, new graduates often have to learn 'on the spot' those aspects of their role that they have not been adequately prepared for.

Research has shown that role modelling is an important element in leadership (Szeto & Cheng, 2018; Tomlinson, 2012) and mentoring is an efficient way for beginning teachers to understand the norms, practices, and people in schools (Hobson et al., 2009), as newly qualified ECTs could find it challenging to apply the theories learned at university into practice (Nolan & Molla, 2018). What needs to be cautiously examined is that teacher education students and early career teachers appear to quickly adopt and re-enact what experienced teachers in their ECE setting do, including the practice and resources they use, rather than adopting or adapting what they have learned in their university studies (Allen, 2009; Strom & Viesca, 2021). This is perhaps not surprising considering the situated nature of learning in a social setting that occurs both 'on the job' and during university ECE placements. Still in their 'Survival Stage' (Katz, 1997, as cited in Pavia et al., 2003, p. 250), early career teachers often experience anxiety and lack time and energy to explore and develop professional networks. This has significant implications for the role and training of mentors as they have a profound influence on both the practice and development of the professional identity of early career teachers. It is crucial to ensure the mentor's interactions with these teachers encourage critical reflection and building of skills and capacities, rather than providing immediate solutions to problems as they arise.

## **Conclusion**

Due to the small number of participants, the data are not generalisable. However, participants' experiences have shed some light on the kind of support that final-stage early childhood students may need in their transition to leadership roles. Underlying their experiences and concerns is the desire to be mentored by experienced colleagues in their

workplace. Due to the distributed nature of leadership in the daily operation of ECE services, mentoring is an appropriate and contextually relevant leadership development strategy (Aubrey, 2011; Wong & Waniganayake, 2013). Mentors play a significant role in mentees' critical reflections on knowledge and applying theories in their practice (Siraj and Hallet, 2014).

The importance of professional development and the challenges for ECTs and educators to attend training is acknowledged in the document *The Early Childhood Education Workforce Strategy 2018-2022* (NSW Government, 2018). It promises online training resources and states that "a trial of a formal mentoring and networking program to support the professional development of educators and teachers will be established" (NSW Government, 2018, p.11). Online support, which enables them to engage with city-centric training opportunities, is particularly important for rural and regionally located ECTs, as they face the additional challenges of geographical isolation and lack of replacement ECTs in the community. Further, government financial support to cover travel and staff replacement would likely enable ECTs in such areas to participate in mentoring training or workshops.

Mentoring support could also be considered in teacher education courses. For instance, opportunities for mentoring could be more explicitly embedded in university courses in students' placements. A mentor in placements, who does not have a supervisory role, would discuss and demonstrate how things could be done and be a critical friend to the student teacher (Hudson, 2013). It is also an opportunity for the mentor to build their leadership capacity. Such collaboration between universities and early childhood services would potentially benefit ECEC services in rural and regional areas, as student teachers could be a conduit, bringing current theories and practices to the supervising teachers whose professional development might be limited due to physical distance (Simpson et al., 2007). To ensure mentoring is mutually beneficial for both mentors and mentees, the training of mentors is also crucial (Graves, 2010; The Coalition of Childhood Umbrella Organisations, 2010). A mentoring program that connects the universities, ECEC services, and the students would require support from ACECQA, the Department of Education in each state, and local offices of Early Childhood Australia.

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