

Readiness of Early Childhood Professionals in Singapore to Take on a Leadership Role

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a small scale research study in Singapore which investigated leadership. Both qualitative and quantitative data were gathered from a sample of 54 teachers who responded to an online survey, and a focus group of another 10 teachers. The findings showed that 34 (63%) respondents were willing to take on leadership roles. One of the reasons for this willingness to take on leadership roles included the belief that as a result of working as a teacher for many years, they were now ready to impart their knowledge to early childhood educators in the industry. Factors identified which hindered respondents from willingness to take on leadership roles included lack of leadership opportunities in their centres, lack of clear job scope for leadership positions, new ideas were not accepted or valued and school cultures where principals and senior teachers were not willing to share status.

Keywords : leadership, readiness for leadership roles, early childhood, Singapore

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Introduction

Leadership plays an important role in ensuring the quality of early childhood establishments. An effective leader can be instrumental in guiding the centre to achieve excellence in early childhood, which includes both preschool and childcare establishments in the context of Singapore. Effective leadership is thus crucial to the development of professionalism in the early childhood industry. Both ministries in charge of monitoring early childhood quality in Singapore, namely the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF), have identified 'leadership' as one of the criteria for accomplishing licensing and quality status. The Singapore Pre-School Accreditation Framework (SPARK) started in 2010 by the Ministry of Education provides a quality rating scale that indicates expectations and standards for quality preschool programmes (MOE, 2010). One of the criteria that preschools are being rated on is leadership. Strategic leadership and Curriculum leadership are two types of leadership being measured under the leadership component. However, it remains to be seen if current early childhood professionals in Singapore are ready to take on leadership roles.

Therefore, this research project aimed to investigate the readiness of a sample of professionals to undertake leadership roles, as well as identifying factors that both encourage and discourage them, from taking on such roles.

Rationale for the Research

With the rapid expansion of preschool and childcare centres throughout Singapore, and the MSF indicating a need for additional childcare centres, there is a great sense of urgency for more early childhood educators to be prepared to take on leadership roles in centres as well as at advisory levels. This need is further compounded by the fact that *leadership* is viewed as one of the most important criterion for preschool centres to achieve before being licensed to operate (MSF, 2012a).

More often than not, leadership is viewed as an important element in "providing and ensuring the quality of early years services" (Ang, 2012, p. 95). Dynamic leadership has always been regarded as an important issue, more so now than ever before, as research has

shown the difference effective leadership can make in achieving quality status (Muijs, Aubrey, Harris, & Briggs, 2004; Rodd, 2013). However, it is also interesting to note the reluctance of practitioners to consider themselves as leaders, or to be associated with leadership roles (Rodd, 2013). The reluctance issue exists not only in Singapore, but in other parts of the world as well.

The Main Purpose of the Research

The main purpose of the research study was to understand the factors that motivate or discourage professionals from taking on leadership roles. In addition, another purpose was to gather data for use in the redevelopment of leadership programmes. The final purpose was to gather data which may help the ministries, training agencies and all relevant organisations to prepare current practitioners to take on leadership roles.

Definitions of Leadership in Early Childhood

Rodd proposes (2013) that “leadership is best defined as a profession of engagement: the leader engages fellow professionals in best meeting the needs of children and families” (p. 11). She further believes that it is the leader’s responsibility to have a good vision for achieving quality status and thus should possess the ability to influence and convince other people of the need to do so. This view is supported by Sciarra and Dorsey (2006) who reiterate the necessity for leaders to have capabilities in guiding “followers to work toward the changes described in the organisation’s vision statement” (p. 6). Leadership is thus not a stand-alone entity. Rather, it involves a group activity with a leader as the motivating figure who acts to lead the group forward. Following that, it is vital that the twenty-first century leadership evolving adopts a paradigm shift to cope with rapid changes and sustains quality practices (Clark & Murray, 2012).

Considering another perspective of leadership, Webb (2005) refers to two aspects, the first as leading professionals, and the second as a chief executive manager (p. 69). The ability to juggle administrative, teaching and learning responsibilities, especially in early childhood settings, is therefore very crucial, as the leader not only has to be responsible for managing the

setting, but also to ensure that appropriate teaching and learning is taking place.

Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2003) investigated definitions of leadership from different sources, and concluded that leadership is multifaceted, and that relationships built over time are important in sustaining effective leadership. The leader also requires a certain set of skills to remain effective and efficient.

Readiness in Taking on the Leadership Role

Over the years, early childhood education in Singapore has been evolving with the Government targeting to open more childcare centres to cater to the nation's needs. There is a demand for leaders in early childhood to operate these centres. At present, it is a Ministry requirement for an individual to possess a Diploma in Early Childhood Care and Education - Leadership (DECCE-L) with two years of teaching experience before being considered for the role of a leader in early childhood (MOE, 2013a). Thus, opportunities and support have to be extended to teachers to "develop their leadership capabilities" (Lind, 2009, p. iii) so as to meet the demand in the early childhood field. In 2012, the Ministry of Community, Youth and Sports (MCYS), now known as the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF), announced it would offer scholarships for part-time Diploma in Early Childhood Care and Education - Leadership (DECCE-L) students to "build leadership capability and expand career progression opportunities" (MSF, 2012b, p. 1). Similarly, the Ministry of Education has also drafted a guide on "professional pathways in the areas such as teaching, mentoring, specialist or leadership for aspiring preschool teachers" (MOE, 2013b, p. 2). However, the question remains as to whether experienced and/or qualified teachers who possess a DECCE-L are truly ready to take on a leadership role.

There is a degree of ambiguity surrounding leadership roles in early childhood. For example, there is the role of professional guidance, maintaining and improving standards of service, ensuring the financial viability of the service and so on. These are issues and factors facing leadership roles as a whole. It had been noted through dialogue with the in-service teachers who were undergoing the DECCE-L, that most were not yet willing or ready to take up leadership roles if they were offered to them. Their reasons generally being due to the lack of support and resources in terms of manpower (Jones, 2009). In addition, leadership can be

emotionally and physically draining due to the large amount of administrative paperwork, and the time and energy one channels into leading a centre (Crawford, 2009).

“There is no doubt that working in the early years’ settings is becoming increasingly complex and demanding in terms of the knowledge, skills and attitudes required by practitioners and leaders” (Jones & Pound, 2008, p. 10).

Factors that Encourage or Discourage Readiness in Taking on a Leadership Role

Factors that motivate or discourage leadership readiness are related to opportunities for leadership experience in the field. For example, early childhood leaders in Singapore and Taiwan often have to take care of “both organisational management and education quality” (Wang & Lin, 2007). This view was also supported by Lee and Shin (2009) in their study of reflective practices in teacher education where teachers cited issues and concerns based on their personal and professional experiences which affect leadership. Readiness for leadership then can be affected by opportunity or lack of it.

Theoretical Framework of Leadership

Though there is a “plethora of definitions of leadership being offered”, (Johns & Moser, 2001, p. 115) leadership is by and large still seen as a dynamic process (p. 116). One theory is the *trait theory*, which postulates that certain traits are more inherent in leaders as compared to non-leaders (Johns & Moser, 2001). Some examples of these traits are, “a sense of purpose and direction, enthusiasm, friendliness and affection, integrity, teaching skills” and so forth, which are necessary qualities to be found in leaders, according to Tead (as cited in Johns & Moser, 2001, p. 116).

Situational Leadership Theory (SL) was developed by Hersey and Blanchard, and its underpinning theory is that there is no single best style of leadership. Hersey and Blanchard (1979) identified SL where leadership varies from “situation to situation with changes in leaders, followers, and situations” (as cited in Johns & Moser, 2001, p. 116).

In an earlier publication, Rodd (2013) defines a Situational Leadership (SL) model as involving “leaders who understand the *requirements* of the group members and *the task* in

order to match *relevant attributes, maturity and skills* of the followers to the situation” (p. 47). Under the SL model, a leader basically understands the needs of a situation (involving tasks and people), thus developing a repertoire of characteristics and skills that are essential for meeting the organization’s goals. Yukl (2002) states that the aspects of a situation and its demands determine the importance of leadership. This adaptive situational leadership theory continues to play a big role in the leadership style of any organisation, especially in early childhood settings, where in most cases, being of small scale.

The transformational theory calls for a leader who is able to “persuade others to endure changes and show them how to adapt to changes” (Johns & Moser, 2001, p. 121). With the current economy striving in our local context as well as the world, the leader must view early childhood (EC) settings as an organisation under a social system. More recent studies have emphasised the cultural aspects of managing and leading where the leader is able to assess culturally-sensitive information when determining the needs of the organisation to stimulate individuals’ attachment to it (Johns & Moser, 2001). In addition, a cultural approach also assists leaders in determining their contribution to society at large and how the world makes sense to others as well as to themselves (Sullivan, 2010).

Singapore is a multicultural society, and culture greatly influences leadership where one needs to be able to lead in multicultural environments, and cater to diverse groups of people. Therefore, it is also important to focus on the diversity and differences one brings to the leadership processes (Sullivan, 2010).

In view of the situation in Singapore outlined to date it was decided to investigate the following research - *In what ways, if any, are early childhood professionals in Singapore ready to take on a leadership role?*

Research Methodology Design

This was an action research project using a convenience sample of 64 practicing teachers (Bell, 2006). Bernard (2000) and McMurray, Pace and Scott (2007) proposed that action research is appropriate when the researcher is targeting a *specific problem* in a *specific situation*, which in this research project refers to the readiness of these practicing teachers to consider the possibility of moving into administrative/leadership positions. Hopkins (2008)

defined action research as a substantive act that combines research and action guided by enquiry which leads to changes and improvements of current practices.

The overall methodological approach was a mixed methods research design that involved both quantitative and qualitative methods (Creswell, 2013, p 17). This approach allows various forms of data to be integrated and triangulated in order to fully answer the research questions. Sources for the quantitative results were gathered by using an online survey while the qualitative results were obtained through both the online survey and focus group discussion. It was a convenience sample for both survey and focus group discussions.

At a practical level this mixed methods approach enabled the researchers to interrogate the qualitative responses in the survey. Such a strategy is supported by Hennick, Hutter, and Bailey (2011) who state that qualitative research allows for detailed investigation of people's experiences through various means such as interviews and focus group discussions.

Method

Survey

The researchers used an online survey created through the web portal "Survey Monkey". The teachers were invited by convenience sampling to participate in the survey. The questions sought information in the two following areas:

- i. Reasons for accepting/rejecting leadership roles; and
- ii. Factors that will motivate and hinder them from taking up leadership roles.

Focus Group Discussion

A group of six teachers and four in-service school principals were invited to attend an informal focus group discussion. The purpose of this discussion was to substantiate the responses received through the online survey and to receive in-depth feedback from the participants.

Sample

A convenience sampling method was used to recruit both the survey and focus group participants who were known to the researchers. This comprised 64 practicing teachers (see Tables 1 & 2). These participants were invited to complete the survey via an online portal or participate in the focus group. They were advised that they could withdraw at any time from the survey or the focus group without adverse effect. The research respondents were preschool teachers who had several years of experience in the field, ranging from 2 to 20 years.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical considerations were in accord with the Ethics Protocols of the organisation which employs the research team.

Limitations of the Study

It is acknowledged that survey research with such a small sample can not be generalised to the total population. However, the researchers believe that rich data was obtained through the qualitative answers in the survey and through the focus group discussions.

The focus group comprised six teachers and four experienced preschool principals who had at least a Degree in Early Childhood Education (Table 1 & Table 2).

Table 1. *Profile of online participants*

Respondents' Characteristics	Number of Respondents, n (%)
Age	
20s	18 (33.3)
30s	21 (39)
40s	13 (24)
50s	2 (3.7)
No of years of experience	
Less than 5 years	12 (22.2)
5-10 years	24 (44.5)
11-20 years	18 (33.3)
Professional qualification	
Diploma in Teaching	4 (7.4)
Diploma in Leadership	41 (75.9)
Bachelor in ECE	7 (13)
Other diplomas / degree	2 (3.7)

Table 2. *Profile of focus group participants*

Respondents Characteristics	Number of Respondents, n (%)
Age	
20s	4 (40)
30s	2 (20)
40s	2 (20)
50s	2 (20)
No of years of experience	
Less than 5 years	1 (10)
5-10 years	7 (70)
11-20 years	2 (20)
Professional qualification	
Diploma in Teaching	4 (40)
Diploma in Leadership	4 (40)
Bachelor in ECE	2 (20)

Results and Discussion

Analysis of the Online Survey

A total of 54 responses out of the 60 initially targeted for the online survey portal were received, achieving an excellent response rate of 90%.

Some 34 (63%) respondents said they were ready to embark on leadership roles, while 18 (33.3%) said they were not ready to do so. Two (3.7%) respondents did not give an answer to this question.

Responses as to Why Participants said “No” to Leadership Roles

Some 18 (33.3%) respondents were not ready to take on leadership roles and cited the following reasons:

Lack of experience. Some nine (16.7%) respondents mentioned the lack of experience or opportunities to practice what had been taught in class as a major reason behind their low level of readiness to take on leadership roles. Although the course had prepared them theoretically, they felt that they had had very few chances to translate the theories into practice.

Lack of mentoring. There were three (5.6%) respondents who said that the lack of mentoring in their current workplace formed a barrier to their readiness. The lack of a mentoring programme and succession plan had hindered them from being ready. They stated that such support should be in place to prepare teachers for leadership roles and to ensure smooth transition for the school's leadership.

Personal preference - prefer teaching to supervising. Some six (11%) respondents emphasized that their preference for classroom teaching was the reason they were not ready for leadership roles. They cited that teaching was currently their 'love', and that they would rather accumulate more experience in teaching before embarking on a leadership role.

Responses as to Why Participants Said “Yes” to Leadership Roles

Some 34 (63%) of respondents were ready to take on leadership roles and cited the following reasons:

Prior experience in early childhood field and other fields. Some 13 (24%) respondents said that they had been given additional responsibilities, such as assisting the principal with administrative matters and very often taking on a supervisory role during the absence of the principal in day-to-day operations. They believed that as a result of working as a teaching staff member for many years, they were now keen and ready to impart their knowledge to early childhood educators in the industry.

In addition, before becoming an early childhood educator, many said that they were previously managers, co-ordinators or held senior posts in their respective organisations, thus equipping them with prior knowledge and experience in leadership.

Sufficient leadership skills. Another 15 (28%) respondents believed that they had the necessary leadership skills, such as possessing the charisma to lead and inspire others, and the confidence to rally the team and groom dynamic teachers to be leaders. They also responded

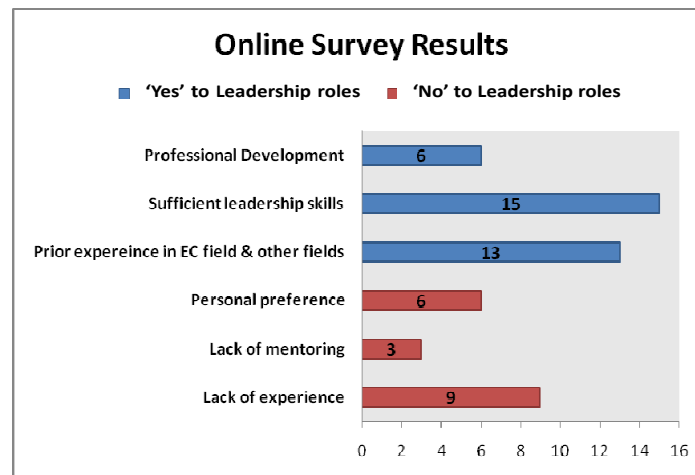


Figure 1. Online survey

that they were able to cope with stress, and had good time-management skills, which were important leadership skills. Most significantly, they shared that they were willing to excel, take on more responsibilities and learn from mistakes that most leaders make.

Professional Development. Yet another 6 (11%) respondents expressed the view that they desired to upgrade their professionalism largely by embarking on a leadership role. In this way, they would be able to advocate for children's rights, influence, guide and encourage teachers to adopt best practices in order to offer quality child care services. All 6 respondents believed that they were ready to be a principal, centre manager and even a curriculum planner after working as a teacher for many years. On the whole, all of them agreed that by mentoring others, they would be able to develop their own teaching strategies further.

Analysis of the Focus Group Discussion

In order to triangulate the responses received via the online survey portal, a focus group discussion with six participants was held. There were 5 questions posed during the focus group discussion.

What are the factors that hinder you from taking up leadership roles in your centre?. Of the ten participants interviewed, six (60%) shared that they were not given leadership opportunities, even though most were taking up some formal and informal leadership roles, such as assisting their principal with administrative tasks. In addition, four (40%) participants articulated that there was no support from the management when they were asked to take on varying forms of leadership roles, such as curriculum coordinator, sports coordinator or chairperson of various committees. The lack of support from the management was evident in most cases, and this is also reflected in research undertaken in Australia by Graham, Miller and Paterson (2009).

Eight (80%) participants said that there was no clear job scope being spelled out for the formal leadership roles and commented of the ambiguities, challenges and struggles that they encountered having to assume some leadership roles in their school setting. They felt that new ideas and ways to improve the school's learning community were not valued, and there was

lack of trust in the responsibilities delegated to them (Armstrong, Kinney & Clayton, 2009).

Another factor mentioned by four (40%) participants was the embedded school culture, where the principal or senior teachers felt threatened for fear of losing status in their leadership positions. As Fullen (as cited in Armstrong, Kinney & Clayton, 2009, p. 14) emphasised, “the school culture is a critical element of the teaching and learning process”. Similarly, Reeves (as cited in Kagy, 2010, p. 12) states that “In order to meet the accountability challenges facing schools today, principals must create a school culture that supports new roles and responsibilities for teachers”.

What opportunities have you had for leadership roles in your centre?. The participants shared that they were already involved in curriculum planning, event scheduling and a myriad of other administrative tasks like applying for grants for children and families. Teacher J felt that opportunities must be created by oneself, for instance, volunteering for activities in the centre and helping out with various events. In addition, one needs to be very proactive to ‘lead by example’ - sharing ideas and offering help as readily as possible (Armstrong, Kinney & Clayton, 2009, p. 13).

One of the participants stated that they had had to equip themselves with skills and knowledge in order for leadership opportunities to be extended. They had to stay current with the trends and issues concerning early childhood, in order to be given leadership opportunities. Generally, all of them agreed that they needed to be receptive, open to change, and always take the initiative to prove that they had the capacity to lead.

How could these leadership opportunities be further extended?. The principals and teachers interviewed all agreed that leaders could further support their teachers to take up leadership roles through mentoring and role-modeling. While most took up some form of formal and informal leadership roles, they felt that the most effective way was for leaders to continue to mentor teachers who were emerging leaders. Most importantly, leaders must provide opportunities by delegating responsibilities to teachers, thus building trust and enabling change to flourish (Armstrong, Kinney & Clayton, 2009).

Coupled with mentoring, the principals and teachers strongly believed in succession planning. It was unanimously agreed that it was of paramount importance for schools to

identify and develop internal staff with the potential to fill key roles in the organisation. Rothwell (2001) reiterated by saying that a systematic effort to ensure continuity of leadership in key positions would help to “retain and develop intellectual and knowledge capital for the future” (as cited in Kim, 2010, p. 13).

The teachers shared that shadowing a principal for a day or two each week could allow for a deeper understanding about the nature and roles of a leader. Such practice not only encouraged more open dialogue and direct contact with the day-to-day running of the centre, but also offered a wider lens with regard to the myriad of roles performed by the leader daily.

How would you go about preparing yourself professionally for leadership roles?. All participants agreed it was necessary to attend relevant courses. As these provided opportunities for them to extend, develop and further the knowledge of theories and practices of early childhood education, thus developing their skills to be leaders. Besides, one needed to read widely and carry out practitioner research, to be engaged in reflective practices to guide and advocate for best educational practices in the school programmes. With reflective practices, there were sharing of “perspectives on practices” and “opportunities to bounce ideas off and to co-construct understanding and ideas”, which in turn was “increasingly vital for professionals working with young children” (Craft & Paige-Smith, as cited in Miller & Cable, 2008, p. 95).

Secondly, similar to mentoring mentioned earlier, a need was expressed to be attached to a leader to observe the functional aspects of the different roles of a leader on a daily basis. It was also essential for a leader to be alert and observant.

Thirdly, understanding the attributes of a leader played a significant role in preparation for leadership roles. Effective leaders go beyond the call to get everything in place “to lead staff and programme to success” (Robertson, 2011, p. 8). Therefore, what really constitutes effective attributes of a leader? Many studies and texts have cited many attributes of an effective leader.

One simple attribute that stands out prominently is passion. Adams (2010), in a local newspaper, *The Straits Times*, recounted that what most great leaders, such as Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew, Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi and US President Barack Obama, have in common is passion - “An inspiring leader is passionate and shares his passion with

subordinates to inspire action, commitment and ultimately, success” (p. R22).

Fourthly, there should be opportunities created to network with and observe other leaders in other settings as well. These opportunities would widen and expand one’s knowledge and skills on leadership roles. It would be a great learning experience to view, observe and learn from leaders in other settings.

Lastly, all of them agreed that it was essential for them to take the initiative and volunteer for a leadership role. In essence, “invent opportunities to participate and volunteer anything at school” (Armstrong, Kinney & Clayton, 2009, p. 12).

How can your organisation support you in your leadership role? There were four main areas discussed during the focus group interview with regard to organisational support: *Communication, Mentoring, External Courses, and Salary/Remuneration.*

Communication

The participants stressed the importance of open communication between leaders and teachers. This would help to clarify doubts and clear misunderstandings. As Couse and Russo (2006) mentioned, “in an effort to encourage teachers to play the roles of leaders, it is important for them to engage in open communication. Communication in the form of formal and informal dialogues and supports” (p. 45) can be effective in enhancing leadership development in school settings.

Mentoring

The participants agreed that mentoring was essential in ensuring continuity in leadership. Hand-holding in the initial stage of leadership experience could help to lessen anxiety. Couse and Russo (2006) proposed that “experienced teachers need relevant field experiences and mentoring support” (p. 38) in order to develop leadership skills in early childhood education.

Salary/Remuneration

All participants raised their concerns about not being appropriately rewarded in terms of salary and remuneration. While they had been given tasks with some leadership roles, there were no ‘extra rewards’ for them. They were expected to multi-task all the time, but limited or no remuneration was included in their pay package. This is a common complaint amongst teachers (AsiaOne, 2008).

Implications of the Findings

The implications are of interest to planners of leadership courses and may also be useful to the respective ministries who accredit early childhood programmes in Singapore as mentioned earlier on page 4. Staff development implications are important if early childhood settings are to build up leadership. Support for prospective staff to attend leadership courses may enable capacity building and may prepare potential staff for leadership roles. The provision of a systematic succession plan is also important for a successful transition into leadership roles. Empowering the next cohort of potential leaders would benefit individual organisations and the early childhood industry. This would eventually raise the quality of the early childhood profession in Singapore.

Towards the Early Childhood Profession in Singapore

The results in this study show that although the teachers were willing to take on leadership roles, they needed to be supported in accumulating the skills required to be an effective early childhood leader. This could be compensated by the provision of a systematic succession plan. Leadership skills need to be nurtured appropriately if we desire to have aspiring leaders that will bring the early childhood profession in Singapore to a higher level of quality and recognition.

Potential leaders need to be given opportunities to experience leadership roles. Empowering the next cohort of leaders would not only benefit the early childhood industry, but the individual organisation as well. Management at the centre level needs to build up staff

capacity and ability through various leadership opportunities. Centres need to embrace the idea of establishing a succession plan to ensure continuation of the centre's leadership and help potential staff to grow professionally.

Conclusion

The researchers believe that the purposes of the study have been achieved and the findings are of value to the early childhood industry in Singapore. As MacBeath (2006) states 'Leadership is what teachers do outside of their classrooms as well as within them. It is what students do when their learning liberates them from a role as passive consumers of other people's knowledge'.

The need for early childhood leaders has never been greater (NAEYC, as cited in Couse & Russo, 2006). The early childhood industry in Singapore is progressing and expanding exponentially. It has the potential to be one of the best systems in the region. However, to reach the next stage, there is a need for promising early childhood professionals to lead and advocate for the benefit and growth of the industry. Therefore, it is crucial that they are supported in equipping themselves with the necessary knowledge and skills to be an effective leader. Hall (2008) points out that "the best way to prepare people for leadership is to put them into situations where they are called upon to lead. Learning by doing and learning by leading provides powerful experiences" (p. 36).

In conclusion, the participants all agreed that opportunities must be given in order to enhance leadership development in centres. This is definitely a way forward in establishing professionalism in Singapore's early childhood industry.

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