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How do Graduate Leaders in England discursively construct their leadership roles in Early Childhood Education?

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Abstract

The professionalisation of the workforce in Early Childhood Education (ECE) is aligned with policy aspirations in England and internationally to raise the quality of provision, reduce inequalities in children's outomes, and improve standards. This paper aims to consider how policy discourses of leadership are interpreted by Graduate Leaders, and the discursive conceptualisation and enactment of their roles in practice. The analysis adopts a reflexive re-viewing of interviews with Graduate Leaders in a range of ECE settings in the context of continued crises in the workforce in England. The interviews were conducted in Phase 1 of the Australia-England project *Learning-rich leadership for quality improvement in early childhood education,* funded by the Australian Research Council (DP180100281). The project aimed to develop a new theorisation of ECE leadership, and to understand the ongoing effects of policy on leadership practices for quality improvement. The analysis identified four main roles: team player, pedagogical leader, responsible agent, and change agent. Evidence of the impact of policy took the form of attributes related to accountability and compliance, whereas constructions related to learning and quality were characterised by attributes linked to established discourses of work in ECE. The conclusion highlights the tension between policy discourses of leadership, and the discursive resources that informed how leaders were constructing their roles.

Keywords: Leadership, Early Childhood Education, policy, responsibilisation

Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) in the United Kingdom has been the focus of policy reform and government investment for over 25 years. Each of the four nations (England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland) has discrete ECE policies but share common discourses and aspirations for raising quality and standards, and all foreground workforce reform as essential for achieving policy goals. Strategies for

workforce reform include raising the status and qualifications of all employees, and charging leaders with overall responsibility for achieving educational goals. Taking into account the range of settings in the private, independent, and voluntary (PVI) sectors, and the maintained sector, it is not a requirement that those designated as leaders (and/or managers) have graduate-level qualifications. In England, government policy states that 'A level 3 Early Years Educator may be expected to supervise staff or lead a setting' (Department for Education, 2024: 44). However, based on an analysis of longitudinal data from the National Pupil Database, Bonetti and Blanden (2020) identified a small but positive and sustained association between the presence of degree-qualified early years staff and children's learning outcomes. Furthermore, high quality ECE is known to impact positively on children's achievements, which draws attention to the association between Graduate Leaders/ teachers, improving quality in all aspects of provision, and ensuring positive outcomes for children on transition to compulsory education. Informed by this association, this project provides new insights into how Graduate Leaders discursively construct their roles, including the attributes (understood as qualities and characteristics) they consider to be inherent to their roles, and how policy discourses are taken up and interpreted in the contexts of practice.

The first section reviews the international literature to identify the distinctive ways in which leadership in ECE is conceived. The second section describes the statutory policy and regulatory framework in England, showing how leaders are discursively positioned and responsibilised for ensuring that policy goals are achieved. The third section describes the research design and analytical strategies for the Phase 1 data, and justifies the reflective thematic analysis to address the aim of this paper. Drawing on the perspectives of Graduate Leaders, the thematic analysis identified four categories that portray how the participants constructed discourses of leadership in relation to their roles, to policy and to practice. The discussion considers these findings in light of persistent structural problems and current crises in the ECE workforce, and the role of Graduate Leaders in the achievement of policy goals.

Leadership in early childhood education: international perspectives

Research on ECE leadership reflects the influence of international and national policy drivers towards quality improvement via professionalisation of the workforce and, specifically to this paper, effective leadership (Dyer, 2018; Douglass, 2019). Although notions of quality and quality improvement are contested (Elwick et al., 2018; Hunkin, 2019; Hunkin, et al., 2022), policy and regulatory discourses have become increasingly powerful as governments buy into the logos of a virtuous cycle of investing in ECE, raising children's outcomes and improving their life chances. Improving both structural and process quality has associated the qualifications of the workforce, and specifically graduate-level teachers with raising overall quality (Manning et al., 2019). As a result, governments have become regulators of provision, with recruitment, qualifications, and standards for initial and continuing professional development as recommended policy drivers for effecting and sustaining change (European Commission, 2021).

Graduate-level ECE leaders in England occupy a strategic position within policy discourses, because they are responsibilised for ensuring quality improvement in line with maintaining standards, managing change, and being accountable to families and to regulatory and inspection bodies. The responsibilisation of their roles is also evident in related expectations that ECE will contribute to achieving health, welfare and social policy goals, and ameliorating the effects of poverty and disadvantage on children and families (Douglass, 2019; Archer and Oppenheim, 2021; Sutton Trust, 2024). Therefore, how leaders discursively construct their roles in the contexts of policy and practice is critical to understanding their strategic position.

Research evidence indicates the range of discourses that inform how leaders take up and interpret their roles, with a focus on individual dispositions, skills and identities. Themes include relational practice, an ethic of care, and emotions, including the emotional labour that leaders perform towards staff, children and families (Bøe and Hognestad, 2017; Heikka et al., 2019), all of which indicate the breadth and complexity of the role. These dispositions, skills and identities are mobilised in the socio-cultural-historical contexts of ECE, including the impact of national policy frameworks. Based

on a small-scale study of 26 teachers and leaders in an early childhood centre in Aotearoa New Zealand, Cooper (2023) acknowledges the complexity of constructing multiple roles and identities as teachers and teacher-leaders with a designated leadership position. Cooper also identifies the tensions reported by the participants between taking up positional/individual power in contrast with typical ECE practices of working within collective, team-based approaches where roles, tasks and responsibilities may be distributed (such as room leaders, curriculum leaders).

Building on existing research, we argue that in policy-intensive systems, the cultural, historical and structural conditions of leaders' work are significant, including the power relations that inhere in workplace systems. This is because leaders must be able to influence systemic change with teams via the components that have been identified in policy frameworks as necessary for achieving quality, such as curriculum planning, pedagogy, assessment, professional development, shared understanding of visions and strategies, evidence-based reflection, as well as professional and ethical commitments to children and families (Heikka et al., 2019; OECD, 2022). However, there are limitations on what aspects of their roles can be shared across team members because leaders bear ultimate responsibility for demonstrating the relevant quality standards. In policy-intensive systems, certain attributes may be valued and desired, for example where 'strong' and 'effective leadership' are critical for achieving policy goals.

Based on this brief review, we argue that leadership is informed by available models based on established beliefs, knowledge, values and practices in the field, and newer models based on policy goals. To contextualize Phase 1 of the project, the following section presents a brief policy genealogy of the Graduate Leader within the policy assemblage for ECE in England.

The Graduate Leader in England – policy genealogy

In 2012, the Conservative-Liberal Coalition Government commissioned a review of Early Years qualifications. The report, *Foundations for Quality* (DfE, 2012) (also known

as the Nutbrown Review), identified inconsistencies in the standards, rigour, and depth of some qualifications. The recommendation to create a new early years specialist route to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) would replace the graduate level Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) with teachers who would be able to lead settings, with parity of pay and conditions with the existing QTS for teachers in maintained nursery and reception classes (age 3-4 years) and compulsory (age 5-16 years) education. In the context of economic austerity following the 2008 financial crisis, the government response to the Nutbrown Review, *More Great Childcare* (DfE, 2013) failed to recommend the full suite of recommendations. The Early Years Workforce Strategy for England (DfE, 2017) subsequently set out the government's aspirations for raising the qualifications and status of the workforce, and creating progression routes through different levels in order to improve the quality of provision across the sector. The new Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) replaced the EYPS qualification, and created the new designation of Graduate Leaders who would lead education and care in settings for children age birth-five. The Strategy made the optimistic claims that

> Achieving EYTS can give a real feeling of professionalism to nursery staff, increasing their confidence, giving them the ability to promote excellent practice and the authority to share knowledge and good practice with colleagues. Early years teachers inspire and encourage learning and provide children with the best possible educational start, ensuring they are prepared for the transition to school (DfE, 2017: 14).

This claim exemplifies the policy assumptions about the relationship between effective ECE leadership, programme quality, and children's outcomes. Moreover, the implication is that achieving EYT status means that leaders understand the characteristics of 'excellent practice', and have the capability to 'share knowledge' from the individual leader to the team. However, these optimistic claims were problematic from the outset: persistent structural problems were built into the system in terms of a lack of parity between EYTS and QTS, including different status, salary scales, working conditions, and career progression (Kay et al., 2021). Those with

QTS (early years specialism) train to teach children age 3-7, and can take on leadership roles in the Early Years Foundation Stage, and other roles if working in a Primary school (4-11). In practice, leaders with EYTS and QTS work across these age ranges, as indicated in the qualifications and experience of the participants in Phase 1 of the research (Appendix 1). This lack of parity has created a persistent contradiction in the field: the intensification of policy demands to raise quality and outcomes, but limited attempts to raise the status of the graduate workforce and reward their work. Furthermore, students undertaking QTS and EYTS must demonstrate almost identical graduate-level Early Years Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2011; NCTL, 2013) for practice. The standards define the knowledge, skills, behaviours and attributes that are required for QTS and EYTS to achieve and demonstrate with children and other practitioners in their settings, as well as their roles and responsibilities.

Within the wider policy assemblage, the professional standards sit alongside the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2021a). The EYFS is the curriculum framework for children from birth to five years which all providers in receipt of the Early Years funding in England are required to follow. The framework defines the desired outcomes for children across seven areas of learning on transition to compulsory education (Reception into Year 1). At the end of the Reception year, children (aged 4 – 5 years old) are assessed using the summative EYFS Profile (STA, 2017) to establish whether they have met the required learning outcomes, the results of which are reported to the government. In addition to these curricular and assessment performativity constructs, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspects all training providers, and all education settings in order to judge the standards and quality of provision. Ofsted thus exerts considerable power as the 'sole arbiter of quality' through inspection, practice guidance and research reports, which are direct interventions into practice (Wood, 2019; Kay, 2022, 2024).

This brief summary indicates how the workforce strategy created leaders with different types of qualifications, but with similar responsibilities within a complex and changing policy assemblage. Graduate Leaders are responsibilised for all aspects of

provision: curriculum, pedagogical practice, quality and accountability, and continuous improvement of practice. These are significant requirements in light of the range of workforce qualifications, and the roles leaders are expected to deploy alongside their own pedagogical work. Dyer (2018) questions whether graduate-level qualifications have empowered practitioners to claim a professional status arising from specialised knowledge, or produced compliance with externally regulated, policy-led conceptions of what is needed to improve practice and raise quality. We propose that this is not an either/or question, rather the focus needs to be on the discursive resources leaders draw on as they work with historically evolving discourses within complex work environments. The following section sets out the Phase 1 research design and methods used to elicit how leaders discursively construct their roles, how they mobilise their professional knowledge in the contexts of practice, and how they orient towards policy compliance.

Research design and methods

The project, including the parallel analysis of the Phase 1 data for the participants in Australia, is reported in Nuttall et al. (2024) and Martin et al. (2020). The empirical research in England was conducted with twenty teachers. All were Graduate Leaders with at least Level 6 qualifications in Early Childhood Education, working in a range of Early Years Foundation Stage settings (i.e., with children from birth to five years old) across the private, voluntary, independent (PVI) sector and maintained (government funded) sector, including nursery and Reception classes in Primary schools (Appendix 2). Around 40% of the participants in the semi-structured interviews held both qualifications (EYTS/EYPS and QTS) which enabled them to work across the sectors.

Ethical review was undertaken at the University of Sheffield, Australian Catholic University and Monash University prior to the commencement of the project. Consistent with institutional standards, protocols were followed regarding de-identification of the participants and their workplaces following data gathering, with due regard for principles of research ethics at each stage of the research. Informed consent to participate was given in written form, including the use of individual data

for publication purposes. The Phase 1 sampling strategy in England was opportunistic, using social media to recruit participants, with the assurance of de-identification of the data in subsequent publications and dissemination. Interviews took place according to participants' availability and choice of location, and were conducted either face-to-face or online, lasting typically up to 90 minutes.

As a way of identifying the concepts and practices Graduate Leaders were using to discursively construct the role of leader in a practice context, the data from the Phase 1 semi-structured interviews were analysed combining a Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA) and thematic analysis approach. MCA is an approach to discourse analysis that enabled us to focus on the types of people Graduate Leaders constructed during the interviews (categories) and how they assign attributes concerning how people act in a particular membership category (King, 2010; Nuttall, et al., 2023). The data sets for England and Australia were analysed deductively using sensitising concepts that informed the project. A further inductive analysis aimed to identify any new concepts arising on completion of the project (Nuttall et al, 2024). This stage of the analysis enabled us to extract four specific aspects of leadership from the data with a focus on:

- Participant identity (How do participants describe who they are?)
- Roles (What roles (categories of leaders) do people adopt?)
- Activity (What activities are linked to the adopted roles?)
- Ethos (What values, beliefs, knowledge, and motivation do participants have?)

A table was created with the headings Identity, Roles, Activity and Ethos (Appendix 3) and data from each participant transcript was entered into the table along with specific quotes that substantiated these aspects of leadership. The data in the tables were then thematically analysed as a whole corpus to identify recurring themes and the associated attributes.

Based on this analysis, four categories of leaders were constructed: team player/builder, pedagogical leader, responsible agent, and change agent (towards

practice and towards staff). Participant identity was gathered from the interview questions (e.g., nursery owner, manager, early years consultant). The data in the tables were then analysed to highlight the activities that the leaders carried out and the values and beliefs that they held to identify the emerging themes. Each of the interview questions was followed by an invitation to provide examples of practice, which enabled us to link attributes with policy and practice (Appendix 4). For example, in the theme of 'Responsible agent', an attribute is 'Knowing when to assert authority'. This is exemplified in practice as 'when you're accountable for Ofsted … at some point you have to stand up and be an autocrat'. Inevitably there were areas of overlap in their responses because teachers tend not separate out their roles and practices, for example, managing policy changes but 'keeping children at the heart of everything we do'. Our analysis thus generates knowledge about how policy discourses of leadership in ECE are taken up and interpreted, and how leaders conceptualise and enact their roles in practice. The participants' own words illustrate their understanding of their roles, and the knowledge that informs their actions and decisions in the contexts of practice. When the participants use the term 'practitioner' they are referring to colleagues with different levels of qualifications, including Level 3 Early Years Educators, teaching assistants for children with additional needs, other EYTs and EYPs.

We then reflectively reviewed the Phase 1 data to explore how Graduate Leaders in England discursively construct their leadership roles considering the continuing crises in the workforce. In early childhood settings, how leaders describe themselves and their work is a salient concern because of the absence of traditional hierarchical structures. For example, some leaders typically undertake parallel pedagogical work with children and team members. Leaders in PVI settings may also hold managerial roles, with responsibility for budgets, staff recruitment, and other operational matters. Whilst the breadth of these roles was evident in the data, our focus in the project has been specifically on educational leadership in their work with children and team members.

Team player/builder

Figure 1: Team player themes/ sub-themes

The theme of team player/builder was constructed through enabling staff to support children's learning in effective ways. This included drawing on strengths, skills and interests of the team members, leading by example, and modelling good practice:

I make sure I draw upon their strengths so then we are using their skills, their interests which in turn is fed into the children, so the children are able to get different perspectives and views.

So it's very very collaborative. You've really got to be a good listener and then dovetail it all together and work out "Well okay, so this practitioner wants to do this but this one wants to do something completely different. How are we going to make that work? How are we going to incorporate that into our week or the next couple of weeks?"

Other attributes were: being articulate, supportive and collaborative, being a strong communicator (including listening and sharing information) and being respected by others:

I think really strong communication is the absolute key so that everyone knows what's going on, what's happening, and just to be able to ask if they don't understand something, or if they don't like it, you can help them develop with that and have an understanding so they can all work effectively as a team.

Flexibility related to being willing to change, helping people to develop, and working effectively as a team. These attributes supported leaders to lead by example. With regard to the relational qualities of leaders' work, the discursive construction of team player illuminates a tension between working alongside the staff in a democratic way (relational), but at the same time being aware of having overall responsibility and accountability for the quality of provision (positional):

There's no them and us. I'm one of them.

I don't over delegate and I accept that at the end of the day it is my head on the chopping block and although I want them to have their own control over what they do and their own satisfaction, I wouldn't ask them to do anything that I wouldn't do and I like seeing them see me do the same job.

The comment '*it is my head on the chopping block*' indicates some boundaries to the concept of distributed leadership because leaders are responsible for ensuring the statutory requirements are implemented. Accordingly, leaders have to balance their democratic/relational and positional orientations*.* This balancing work is also reflected in the leaders' emotional labour and ethic of care:

It's a physically and emotionally draining job. Sometimes at the end of the day it's reading signs of whether we're sitting down to have an evaluation meeting or ... make a cup of tea and have a group hug.

We've got some lovely people in our team, and they're willing to go the extra mile, but equally we're willing to support them and be flexible in the way that we recognise their

needs, both professionally and personally. We're dealing with human beings here who have lives and have crises that need taking care of.

The democratic/relational and positional orientations recur in the second theme 'Pedagogical leader'.

Pedagogical leader
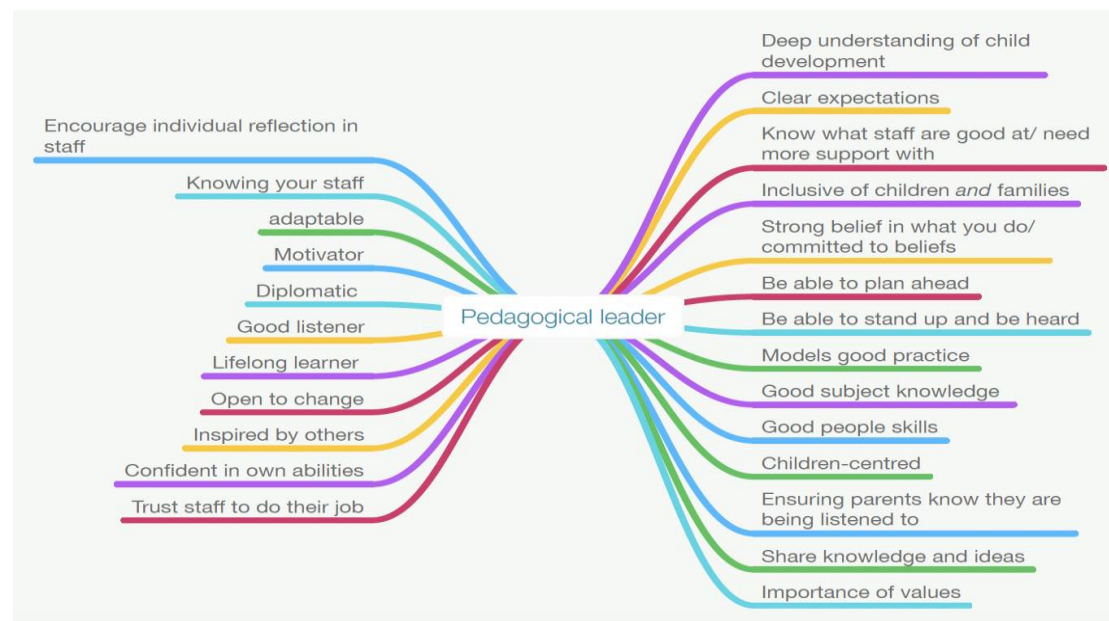
Figure 2 – Pedagogical leader themes/ sub-themes

This theme included overlapping attributes with the other themes, and was constructed through the leaders' confidence in their roles and responsibilities, their specialist knowledge and understanding, as well as being a good motivator, being adaptable and open to change, and trusting staff to do their jobs. In the context of specialist knowledge for ECE, having a graduate-level qualification was a positive asset in several areas of their work:

I definitely think having done my EYT, having that pedagogy and having that understanding of how children learn at this key point in their development really helps me to feel confident to lead the practice ... it has helped me become more reflective and I am always thinking about and assessing what went well, what hasn't worked

well, talking it over with my TA as well, making sure she is always involved in the decision making. We are making joint decisions together about how we take our practice forward and I don't think you can ever stop learning…I am always thinking, always questioning why whenever I am asked to do something with Reception children. Why and how? How is this going to benefit the children? Is this something that you would want everybody to do because its consistent across the school but will it actually benefit my children in Reception?

It's quite hard to put into words because it's a fluid responsive system.

The staff are really good at saying I really don't like what's happening here, let's talk about it now … they don't wait … they come to it straight away … so we're very responsive in that way … Let's see what's happening and what we can do.

I think being trained to that higher level … it does make you more of a reflective practitioner … It's built into the training that you need to be reflecting on everything that you do and understanding how you are doing things and why you are doing those things.

I'm a teacher.. I work in Early Years .. but there's a little bit of hesitation over whether that's what I'm doing ..of course we are teaching but I don't value that ..I think I'm caring as well, and I'm guiding and facilitating and doing all those things. But I'm an Early Years teacher and I need to be saying that and being confident when I'm saying it.

This last comment reflects some tensions in how ECE specialists construct their identities as teachers and leaders, and how they assert their specialist knowledge to parents and colleagues in other age phases. The established knowledge base in ECE emphasises the skills of guiding and facilitating children's learning, typically through play. In contrast, the emphasis on 'teaching' may be related to practice guidance from Ofsted, which includes direct teaching and guided learning, and understands curriculum as 'what we want children to learn' (Wood, 2019; Ofsted 2024).

Leaders expressed that being clear in their expectations is a way of "*making it work*" and supporting staff to learn and understand change. On the one hand leaders are enabling staff to bring "*new vision and new energy*" but at the same time pedagogical leadership might also be about doing things in a specific way, and articulating the warrant for their actions.

So I think you've got to be quite diplomatic, quite skilful in how you deal with people because you don't want to squash people's ideas and thoughts and passion for their job. But at the same time, it's got to function. There's 30 children in there every day, it's got to work. So I think you've got to have very, very good people skills and always be planning ahead, knowing that it takes time to change.

So I do try a lot with the planning, if I want them to do something specific I make sure it's quite detailed so they know what they're doing. And though it might take me another half an hour to do that planning, but I know then that they'll feel more comfortable with it.

Being a pedagogical leader also involves professional learning, specifically how individual leaders learn, and how they support the learning of others:

And you think, how am I going to learn if I don't listen and respect others' views?

Being "firm but fair" and understanding practitioners need support.

Relational work within the leaders' roles is revealed here as complex and nuanced, in that it is directed towards specific pedagogical goals: supporting practitioners and respecting their contributions, but ensuring the the work gets done in certain ways. Their relational work also embodies affect which is expressed as empathic understanding and reflexivity towards colleagues, and awareness of the affective impact of their roles and responsibilities on themselves. The ability to improve the capacity and capabilities of team members is significant because leaders must

interpret or contextualise policy in light of statutory goals and standards, as well as their own professional knowledge and values. Leaders are aware of how they are positioned by the policy context: "*this is what we're doing because we have to*". Given the high stakes of the Ofsted inspection regime, it is understandable that leaders find certain aspects of their role "*really hard*" or in tension with their own knowledge and desired practices. As the next section indicates, positional and relational work are also evident in the category 'responsible agent' as leaders focus on staff and the best interests of the children and team members.

Responsible agent

Figure 3 – Responsible agent themes/ sub-themes

The category of responsible agent was constructed through leaders expressing how they take 'ultimate responsibility' for all aspects of practice. They identified multi-dimensional approaches to dealing with different challenges, contextual factors, policy changes, and responsibilities of leading and managing the setting (including business skills in the PVI sector). Being a responsible agent means being organised and confident in one's own leadership, with professional knowledge supporting those attributes:

I'm very organised and I have to be. I think knowing who's where, who's meant to be doing what, who's out on apprenticeship training. Who's covering lunch that day. It's

being organised and kind of playing to people's strength … I deal with whatever's thrown at me.

I do actually know what I'm talking about. I've done it for a long time.

Whilst they see themselves as empowering their staff, they also expressed the need to set high expectations, advocate for children, and maintain confidence and resilience:

If you want to deliver a difficult message and drive improvement within a team of people who have been doing things a certain way for a long time..that's challenging..you have to be confident and stick to your guns.

Standing up for things that you really, really don't agree with .. but then again sometimes you need people to stand up .. children don't have a voice that's going to be heard very loudly .. I think in all my careers I've never been afraid to stand up and say when I think something is wrong.

Resilience as an individual disposition can be interpreted as toughness, and the ability to deal with difficulties. However, resilience was associated with agency, and both were evident in their accountability practices, particularly in relation to the focus on pedagogy and curriculum in the Ofsted inspection process. One leader referred to receiving an Ofsted grade of Outanding, and noted that

It was a lot of hard work to get it and keep it..it almost became a bit all-consuming.

The inspection/accountability regime also implied managerial and autocratic elements in their roles:

… when you're accountable and responsible for Ofsted .. at some point you have to stand up and be an autocrat and so what I try and do now is empower people to do as much as is humanly possible...and if it goes wrong it doesn't matter, we can sort it. But

when it's a big issue .. I have to say, I know you don't want to, but .. you're doing this and this is why you're doing it. And I've given you a reason. If you don't like it and you don't understand it, I'm sorry but you're doing it because you have to have some accountability.

Being an 'autocrat' indicates the impact of surveillance and accountability, including how this flows into the setting via the leaders towards the team, and the ongoing self-surveillance required by the Ofsted inspection regime.

The responsibilisation of the individual leader relates to systemic responsibilisation: everybody in the team has a role in implementing change and maintaining quality. Leaders accept the accountability agenda, but not uncritically; for example, they recognise the pressures that are placed on staff, the pressures they place on themselves, and the importance of learning from mistakes. However, as the following category indicates, they are not passive recipients of change, because they engage in interpretive work with policies and with colleagues.
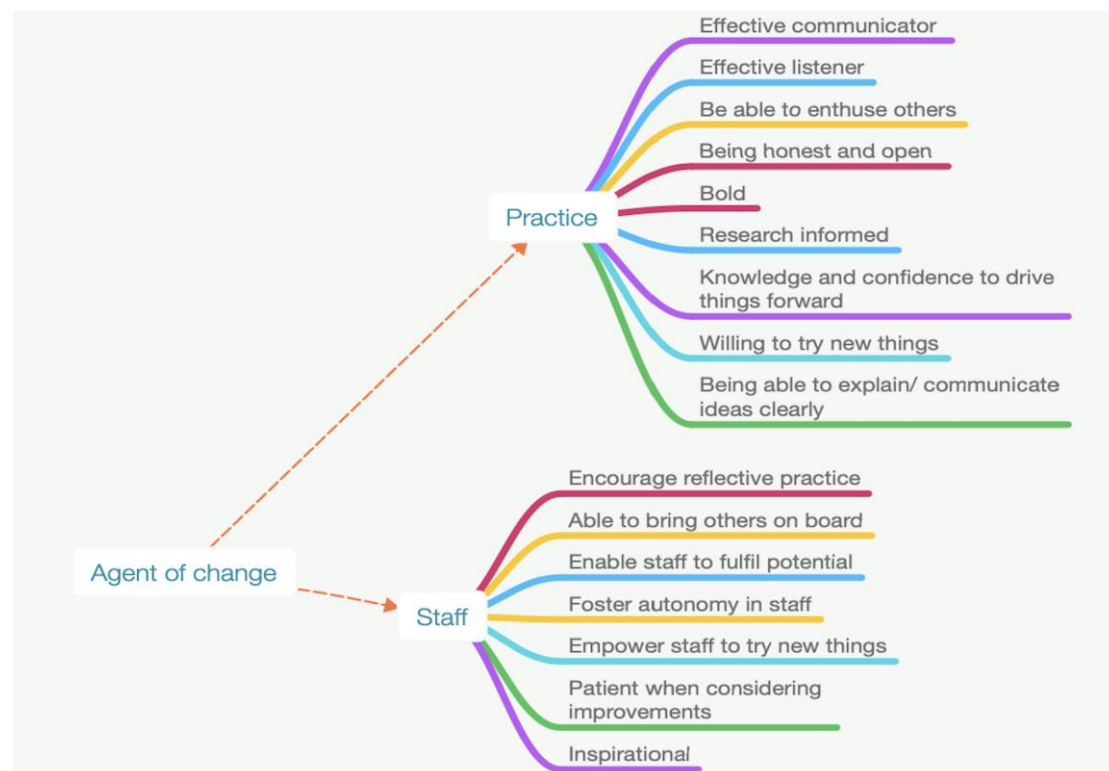
Agent of change

Figure 4 – Agent of change themes/ sub-themes

The category 'agent of change' involves leaders developing their own and others' knowledge, which includes contextualising policy requirements alongside the practice changes they want to implement in their own settings. In light of the policy context outlined above, it is not surprising that the theme of change recurs, because they were preparing to implement another revision of the EYFS (DfE, 2018) and EYFS Profile (STA, 2017).

Policy changes often have to be implemented in a short time frame, whereas leaders understand that change and improvement evolve gradually:

You need to be patient, I think, because sometimes things need to be drawn out over a period of weeks and months to see change and improvement, particularly in staff members, rather than instantaneous.

The educational leaders interpret and re-interpret policy in order to ensure that any changes work in the best interests of the children and staff. The following example shows the temporal, emotional, and relational qualities of getting alongside staff to support practice change:

So I've been doing a lot of room observations and working out not just resources and environment but how people need to perhaps change their practice to be able to respond to the children's individual needs rather than imposing what they think on the child, very different sort of waiting and listening and getting alongside children and allowing the children's ideas to develop.

Leaders spoke of demonstrating the qualities they expect to see from the staff team by mobilising their own epistemic resources. This was also necessary becasue, as one participant stated, the qualifications of staff do not always prepare them for demands of working in quality provision. Leaders also expressed determination and tenacity in implementing change, as evidenced in the choices they were making in their settings:

... I think you do have to be open to change as well. Early Years at the moment is changing and there's lots of things happening across the board.. You have got to be aware of what's going on, not just within your school in terms of these pressures, but the top down pressures that are happening nationally...I think you do have to have an opinion on it. I do think you have to thrash out whether you think these changes are good or not and maybe that you have to go with them if they do come into being, but how you might make those changes work best for your children.

This participant refers to the top down pressures in the Reception class (age 4-5), as the final year in the EYFS. The tension between consistency across ECE and the primary school is relevant for Reception teachers because some policies may be enacted at a whole school level. For example, the Ofsted focus on school readiness impacts most strongly on Reception teachers because they are charged with producing the school ready child, as measured by outcomes in the EYFS Profile (Kay, 2024).

Being persuasive about the benefits of a particular course of action again draws attention to the relational/positional dimensions of leaders' work, and how they have to work on and with their staff to design and implement practice change:

I find change really hard and any changes that we put in place, they may have real intrinsic benefits for the children but, if the staff aren't on board with it, then it just isn't going to work.

But you need to get people on board to explain why and how and why it's good for the children but why it's good for them [staff].

I think being reflective is a really strong thing to have because if you're afraid to say let's stop this wasn't right then you are going to keep going down a path that isn't appropriate for the children and that's what's keeping children at the heart of everything that you do.

Being an agent of change encapsulates the complexity of the interpretive work leaders do across all aspects of their practice. Leaders are simultaneously working on people (getting staff on board, supporting their learning) and on practice to secure the collective thinking and action needed to bring about systemic change. "*Making it work*" incorporates their understanding of policy, at the same time as identifying policy-practice tensions '*but will it actually benefit my children in Reception?*'. This comment exemplifies how the work of leaders includes interpreting the (sometimes) contradictory discourses within available models in the field, and the models within policy frameworks.

Summary

The findings from this analysis indicate that these Graduate Leaders claim a professional status arising from their qualifications and experiences, and the discourses drawn from specialised, field-specific knowledge and values. Their professional status underpinned their practice across all four themes, as leaders and as agents of change. Referring back to the questions posed by Dyer (2018) the practitioners in this study articulated a professional status arising from specialised knowledge, whilst at the same time enacting compliance with policy. Evidence of the impact of policy mainly took the form of attributes related to accountability and compliance, whereas constructions related to learning and quality were more strongly characterised by attributes found in available models based on established ECE discourses, particularly those that focus on the best interests of children.

Both discourses are salient for the following reasons. In order to lead practice and manage change, they needed to access the epistemic resources available within the setting, and engage team members in professional learning. Mobilising those resources through shared meanings also oriented leaders towards collective appproaches to support team members and sustain the relational qualities of their work. However, as designated leaders they also worked towards policy compliance because they held responsibility for standards and accountability. In their approaches to leadership, the breadth and scope of their roles demand that they simultaneously

work on different workplace goals, including statutory policy requirements and 'top-down' pressures from the next phase of education. Some tensions were evident for leaders as they managed the collective/relational and individual/positional discourses in their orientations towards practice and policy. Thus their interpretive work encompassed espoused or desired ways of leading in collective and relational ways, and taking individual responsibility for accountability. These tensions are understandable in light of the systemic impact of policy reforms and, in the context of ECE in England, the frequency of changes to the EYFS and EYFS Profile.

The collective/relational and individual/positional attributes of their roles draw attention to the multiple discourses they draw on to inform their leadership practice, and how this is enacted in the structural and cultural conditions of their work. Accordingly we are not arguing that leaders engaged in the kind of policy compliance that is expected in the policy assemblage in England. Whilst the policy assemblage conveys technical (and arguably limited) understanding of 'what works', leaders' decisions and actions were framed by their moral agency and 'what works for us'.

Conclusion

We now return to the implications of the reflective re-viewing of these data in the context of subsequent policy changes in ECEC. Because the sample in this study was limited to 20 Graduate Leaders in England, with a focus on educational leadership, no generalisations can be made from the findings. However, the findings remain relevant to current policy aspirations in England and internationally to raise quality. In the contexts of post-COVID changes and economic austerity, the policy focus on ameliorating the effects on children of living in poverty and disadvantage creates additional demands on leaders' work with staff, families and communities, as well as raising quality and improving children's outcomes (Montacute, 2020; Social Mobility Commission, 2020; Sutton Trust, 2024). Our research shows how Graduate Leaders managed the complexity and demands of their roles, the knowledge they mobilised to interpret and contextualise ECE policies, and the moral agency that permeated their decisions and actions. The findings thus contribute to wider debates about the association between Graduate Leaders/teachers and raising quality as complex and

multifaceted. Specifically, there is an implicit understanding that a compliance-oriented approach is limited when applied to improving quality.

The Teacher Standards, and the designation of Graduate Leader were necessary policy interventions into building the capacity of the early childhood workforce. However, although 'strong' and 'effective' leadership continue to be recognised as critical to policy aspirations in ECEC (DfE, 2021b), the work of Graduate Leaders may be constrained considering the persistent structural problems identified by Kay et al., (2021), and the absence of sustainable solutions. There is a crisis of capacity and capability within the workforce to meet increased expectations (Nutbrown, 2021), which calls into question the sustainability of the role of Graduate Leaders/teachers in improving quality and raising children's outcomes. In an analysis of the impact of previous workforce reforms in England, Bonetti (2018; 2020) has shown how contradictions emanate from the continuing disparities in pay, status, and career progression between those with EYTS, and those with QTS, and pay disparities between the PVI and maintained sectors. As Bonetti argued, the lack of a coherent government strategy for workforce development, 'turned into a missed opportunity for real impact' (Bonetti, 2020: 7).

It remains to be seen whether recent attention to these problems will lead to the sustainable solutions and transformative change needed across the sector, or increase expectations of leaders' roles and responsibilities. A policy response to enhancing leadership capacity is the National Professional Qualification: Early Years Leadership Framework (DfE, 2021b), which can be undertaken by leaders who are qualified to at least Level 3 and will enable them to work across the maintained and PVI sectors. As the following extract indicates, individualistic discourses of leadership pre-dominate, within hierarchical structures:

> *This framework is a codification of essential knowledge, skills and concepts that underpin successful leadership of a high-quality nursery. It sets out what those leading a nursery should know and be able to do within the areas related to*

their role and in relation to approaches that enable their nursery to keep improving (DfE, 2021b: 12*).*

It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse this framework. However, the emphasis is compliance oriented which, as we have argued, is a limited way of understanding and raising quality. When set alongside other changes in the policy assemblage in England, leaders and their teams are likely to be working with further policy intensification and policy compliance. Our findings indicate that the association between Graduate Leaders/teachers and raising quality is complex and multifaceted, which calls into question whether a minimum standard of Level 3 for undertaking leadership will be sufficient for meeting policy aspirations and performing the range of roles and responsibilities we have identified in this research. Moreover, Graduate Leaders will be expected to accomplish this work without changes to pay and career progression, or parity between those with EYTS and QTS.

This reflexive reviewing of the Phase 1 data has highlighted the ongoing process of policy reform, its effects on leaders, and their perspectives on the sustainability of their roles. We have also highlighted the complexity of leaders' roles, including how they mobilise different discursive resources in ways that work for their setting, children and families. In light of the Phase 1 findings, and the research project, (Nuttall et al., 2024) we argue that leaders need to sustain the collective/relational and individual/positional attributes of their roles. However, the complexity of their work needs to be recognised and supported through urgent attention to the current crises in the ECE workforce, and sustainable solutions to persistent structural problems.

Acknowledgement

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Qualifications Framework in England

- National Vocational Qualifications Level 3 Early Years Educator EYE (minimum standard)
- Apprenticeships Levels 4,5
- Early Years Professional Status Level 6
- Qualified Teacher Status QTS – early years specialism Level 6
- Early Years Teacher Status (management and leadership roles in ECE settings) Level 6
- QTS and EYTS must demonstrate the same graduate-level Early Years Teacher standards
- National Professional Qualification in Early Years Leadership (NPQEYL) (81 hours, 18 months, different providers) introduced in 2022

Appendix 2 – Participants' qualifications, experience, and responsibilities

Name (pseudonym)	Qualifications	Professional experience	Current responsibilities
Amanda	BA/ EYPS/ MA	Room leader/ Nursery manager/ OfSTED inspector	Early Years improvement officer (Roughly 100 Private, Voluntary and Independent Early Years settings and after-school clubs)
Charlotte (25 years experience)	BA/ EYPS	Paediatric nursing, Montessori trained, adult education	Owner manager Private Nursery (10 staff, 60 children)
Caitlin	BA/ EYT/ QTS	Solicitor, Special Needs Teaching Assistant	Private Nursery manager (31 staff, 154 children)

Dominic (19 years experience)	BA/ EYT	IT, room leader, nursery manager	Private Nursery owner/ manager (9 settings, 160 staff, 1000 children)
Esther	BSc/ EYP/ QTS	Clinical podiatrist, SENCO, Deputy head	Independent school (3 - 18) Nursery Head (6 staff, 25 children)
Lindsay (20 years experience)	BA/ EYPS	Banking, Business owner	Pre-school (11 part time staff, 35 children)
Lucy	BA/ EYT/ QTS	Nurseries and schools	Reception teacher Independent school (3 - 18) (4 staff, 33 children)
Nancy	BA/ EYT/ QTS	TV/ radio, SureStart volunteer	Reception teacher Primary school (1 staff, 30 children)
Ruth	BA/ EYPS/ QTS/ MA	Pre-school leader, Nursery deputy manager	Pre-nursery teacher Infant school (3 staff, 15 children)
Ruby	BA/ EYT	Nursery practitioner	Pre-school room leader/ early years teacher (12 staff, 72 children)
Sally	BA/ EYPS	Nursery teacher	Nursery teacher Primary School (Multi-Academy Trust) (3 staff, 31 children)
Valerie	BA/ EYT/ MA	Solicitor	Childminder
Eloise	BA/ EYPS	Nursery deputy manager, Ofsted	Early Years consultant and trainer

		inspector, Nursery manager	
Hattie	BA/ EYPS/ MA	Manager in alternative provision (Nursery)	Early Years lecturer
Helen	BA/ EYPS	Nursery nurse	Pre-school owner/ manager (6 staff, 21 children)
Jasmine	BA/ QTS/ EYPS	Primary teacher, Pharmaceutical industry team leader	Nursery manager (37 staff, 185 children)
Jenny	BA/ EYT/ QTS	Graphic designer, Childminder,	Early Years Teacher (Maintained Nursery school) (18 staff, 120 children)
Keira	BA/ EYT	Publishing, Childminder, Teaching Assistant	Nursery Deputy Manager (12 staff, 46 children)
Kareena	BA/ EYPS	Childcare manager, University Lecturer	Senior Support Manager (Private Day Nursery) (100 children, 37 staff)
Sofia	NNEB, BA, QTS, MA, EYPS	Nursery Nurse	Nursery teacher (Primary school) (26 children, 3 staff)

Appendix 3 – Example of the thematic analysis

Identity (How do people describe who they are?)	Roles (What roles (categories of leaders) do people adopt?)	Activity (What activities are linked to the adopted roles?)	Predicates (Values, beliefs, knowledge, motivations)
Early Years lecturer			
Manager	More and more responsibility	Office based	"I wasn't really focusing as much on the children as I was when I first came …. In a way, a bit disappointed as to what the original role was and what my vision was"
		Rota staffing/ holidays	
		Staff training (safeguarding, child dev)	
		"The day-to-day"	
		Answering emails	
		Quality assurance scheme	
		OfSTED	"OfSTED was a big part of my role – we had three inspections while I was there" "This put a big pressure on not just me … I thought we're not dropping down [from outstanding] .. so I put pressure on myself but also I think it made
			a difference. I think some staff did find it difficult because we did have very high expectations but once we got it we didn't want to go back" "But it was a lot of hard work to get it and keep it .. it almost came a bit all-consuming"
		Writing policies	
		Risk assessments	
		Staffing	
		SENCO and safeguarding lead	
EYP	Leading the 'children's house' (pre-school room)	Projects, initiatives, "everything that I really thought an EYP role would be"	"lots of hands on, sit down work with the children"
	Collaborator (<mark>staff: parents – relational pair</mark>)	Offer workshops to parents re: alternative provision approach Managing parent expectations	
	Change agent		"managing change but supporting practitioners to make the changes as well"

Appendix 4 – Thematic analysis