Commentary

Learning to Lead – Developing Authenticity in Practice

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Deciding on effective leadership strategies when building a sustainable learning organisation can be complex. An organisation must have strategies to support their leaders to develop the skills necessary to produce and maintain sustainable learning in their community. The purpose of this article is to analyse the various ways of developing leadership that is effective and authentic. Two main perspectives are analysed in light of published literature: deciding whether learning from a text, or learning from within our own experiences is the most effective way of leading and sustaining a learning organisation. There is significant literature that focuses on leaders developing from their own experiences and identity rather than learning from a management text or formal management training. Literature is discussed, showing that a mix of experiences and formal learning is an effective leadership development strategy. It is concluded that although it is not possible to decide upon a best practice model of fostering leadership, it is important for authenticity to be shown in a leader’s practice and that distributed leadership models in education are recommended in order to produce a sustainable learning organisation.

Introduction

A learning organisation is one that facilitates the learning of its members. Early childhood education (ECE) services, schools and tertiary institutions can all be included in this category. The ultimate goal of a learning organisation is to learn perpetually and to create the conditions whereby all those in it are developing themselves and simultaneously contributing to the learning organisation. In the New Zealand early childhood education setting, the complexity of this task becomes evident. Registered teacher shortages, increasing multi-culturalism and curriculum changes have occurred rapidly in the past decade. This has implications for the ECE organisation. The challenge is to not only change the way teachers lead to increase and sustain performance in the ECE setting, but to decide what leadership model is most effective when working with diverse identities within their own community.

Thornton, Wansbrough, Clarkin-Phillips, Aitken and Tamati (2009) recognise these implications, noting that, due to registered teacher shortages, there has been an increase in the appointment of newly trained ECE teachers taking on management roles. They discuss how these teachers feel unprepared and are more likely to step away from these tasks rather than become effective leaders in their organisation. The lack of support for leadership development in New Zealand ECE has intensified this situation. Thornton et al., (2009) note that the
need for specialised leader development programmes in New Zealand ECE has only recently been recognised. They encourage new ways of viewing the role of the leader and suggest that the manager of the ECE setting is not the only person capable of taking on leadership tasks. Sergiovanni (2000) discusses this concept further, describing how the role of the leader in the learning organisation is to “lead the leaders” (p. 27) This suggests that teachers have opportunities to be capable of self management as well as being more aware of the responsibilities that they can engage with alongside of the leader of the organisation.

Due to the lack of literature surrounding leadership in the ECE context, leadership perspectives from other organisations and education sectors can be drawn upon. Robinson (2007) investigated differing case studies in the school sector. These studies focussed on effective leadership qualities in light of academic achievement from students. The findings of this investigation showed that leaders who were close to the “[c]ore business of teaching” (p. 21) were more likely to make a difference to student outcomes. It was noted that for leadership literature to be more valuable to the reader, it needed to recognise the importance of a leader being close to its followers and the work that they do (Robinson, 2007).

Another perspective of leadership development is that of Evans (2000) who argues that “the authentic leader practices outwards from core values and beliefs rather than inward from management texts”. (p. 143). This statement allows consideration of leadership that is not taught but rather developed over time by gaining understanding of our own identities as leaders. Evans (2000) elaborates this statement by describing how a leader makes assumptions based on all prior learning and leading experiences. When reflecting on this idea, it becomes clear that leaders will develop in a way that sits with their own visions, not only of effective leadership, but also with the aspirations of the particular organisation they are leading.

Both Evans (2000) and Thornton et al., (2009) have strong ideas around the concept of effective leadership in an organisation. Evans (2000) shows that leaders need to be authentic and lead from within, while Thornton et al., (2009) believe that all teachers in the ECE setting should take on leadership roles in their practice. Both raise questions: how does the role of the leader and manager become separate if leaders are everywhere in the organisation? What makes the people in these roles authentic? Attempts will be made to answer these questions while investigating the perspectives held by Evans (2000) on leading from within. This perspective will be explored in light of current research in both the ECE sector and other organisations to find out whether it is correct, or if a leader can learn to be authentic by formal training.

**Leader versus Manager**

In order to discuss the strategies for achieving authenticity, while creating a sustainable learning environment, the role of the manager and leader in the learning organisation needs to be unpacked. Thornton et al., (2009) emphasises that, in ECE contexts, there has been a major focus on management roles, rather than leadership roles. It is noted in their review of literature that, due to inadequate leadership development support, teaching teams are not being led to
reflect on their practices with view to improvement. Concentration on the day-to-day tasks of maintaining the educational setting has become a priority for management, thus leadership roles are often discarded. This practice does not ensure the quality of the educational programme and therefore does not create a sustainable learning organisation.

There are diverse titles for the centre manager in the ECE setting. These roles are labelled as centre director, head teacher or centre supervisor. Regardless of the title, the general day-to-day role of this person is to manage compliance, curriculum and staffing tasks (Ministry of Education, 2010). They work alongside the teachers in the environment, ensuring the regulations are upheld, that clients, parents, whānau and children are catered for and that there are enough teachers working with the children that attend. They manage documentation, finances and other tasks that ensure the business runs smoothly.

One might question why the duties of the ECE manager need to be separated from the leadership role. Centre managers certainly engage in many leadership duties in their work. Thornton et al., (2009) discuss the notion of leadership in regards to previous literature and note the non-hierarchal structure in ECE settings, thus the need for all members of the organisation to be capable of showing leadership. Meade (2008) confirms this thinking, stating that it cannot be assumed that the centre manager is the person responsible for educational leadership, as the structures of an ECE organisation are diverse. Gardner (2000) contributes to this separation of titles, stating that a manager has to be part of an organisation where a leader does not. He goes on to give clear and concise reasoning for the separation, stating that being in the management role does not mean that a person is capable of being a leader, although management roles do offer opportunities for leadership to be developed.

It is also important to examine the role of a leader. Robertson (2005) broadly describes leadership as decision-making based on observation and critical reflection that improves outcomes for children. Thornton et al., (2009) describe leadership more deeply, stating that a leader is somebody who strives for change, professional practice and ensures that each member of the learning community can learn and develop to their full potential in their own individual roles within the ECE setting. Gardner (2000) sheds different light on the definition of leadership by giving the leader the label of persuader. This label refers to somebody who gives their followers the information and skills needed to follow the leader’s visions.

This consideration of some of the literature around management and leadership makes clear that although most managerial positions contain leadership tasks within the roles, the two can be separated. Leaders have the opportunity to create a sustainable learning organisation while managers ensure the smooth day-to-day running of the organisation.

**Authenticity and leadership**

In the statement made by Evans (2000), quoted earlier, he mentions the concept of authenticity. Authenticity can be described by way of traits and behaviours that a person displays. The investigation of these traits and characteristics are essential in order for the leader to reflect on their practice in light of authenticity.
Starrat (2004) describes authenticity as knowing who we are as a person and how we fit within the wider world. This forms our identity, which is built through socialisation with others. This identity can shift, dependent on who we are socialising with. Starrat (2004) mentions the need for freedom in holding our own identity and this freedom is a need for not only the leader but for all members of the learning organisation.

Human dignity is an aspect of freedom that the leader needs to ensure occurs in their role. In a leadership context, this refers to acting in a way that is moral and for the good of others. Freire (1998) discusses this notion in depth, in relation to teachers, ideas that can be related to leadership. A teacher (leader) needs to allow students (followers) the freedom to make their own decisions and have opportunities to learn from mistakes. A teacher (leader) needs to be courteous towards others and their identities as well as show non-authoritarian practices. (Freire, 1998). Authentic leaders will not hold power over their followers, but will show them respect and allow them to be true to themselves (Starrat, 2004).

Several authors that focus on leadership agree on this trait of authenticity. Sergiovanni (1992) discusses these traits, stating that moral respect provides opportunities for not only autonomy and freedom to be oneself but also for supporting the development of a shared vision between all members of the learning community. Ryan (2010) confirms this thinking and discusses how, in order to be authentic; a leader needs to encourage democracy within the learning organisation. It is noted that it is not the skills of leaders that make them effective, rather it is the view that leaders have of their role. If leaders see this role as one of power, and are dictatorial, then this is what they will practice and democracy will not be evident.

Freire (1998) does, however, argue that freedom can become non-ethical if there are no limits. The role of the leader therefore includes forming limits that allow all members of the organisation to have freedom, but without affecting the rights of all other members. Although this task can be complex, an environment without limits is not necessarily helpful to any members of the organisation. Freire (1998) uses an example of a teacher who allowed interruption within his classroom because of his attempts to implement freedom. This did not uphold the rights of all students to learn without interruption so therefore limits in this context would have been more effective.

Honesty and trustworthiness are authentic qualities, according to Evans (2000). He elaborates on the concept of authenticity by stating that if leaders are consistent, true to their word and can be counted on, then they can be trusted in the organisation. Although Evans (2000) claims that authentic leaders can never be perfect in every way, and is aware of their limitations, he suggests that they should not let these limitations hold them back. ‘Savvy’ is described as a trait needed for authenticity in leadership (Evans, 2000). Being savvy refers to being creative and finding solutions for problems that arise in the organisation. Leaders need to know more than just how to be a strategic leader. They need to know what is happening in the organisation and assist other members to solve the problems that occur there. These actions are possible for leaders to engage in if they are competent in reflecting on experience and have the practical wisdom needed for the tasks of the organisation. Evans (2000) also notes that authentic leaders do not necessarily verbally communicate the traits that they show. These traits need to be role modelled and shown through actions and through relationships with others. He describes authentic leaders as people who
know what the direction of the organisation is and where it is going, doing everything in their power to ensure that all members of the organisation are following that journey. This is not done by way of power but by way of challenging and transforming the members in an educational way.

Kouzes and Posner (2007) have written extensively on leadership in organisations, offering diverse traits for authenticity. After completing research throughout the world on traits that leaders should have to be successful in their role, honesty, being forward looking, inspiration and competence are the traits most commonly named by followers. These traits are consistent with the literature already discussed. Leaders need to be honest in order to gain credibility. They need to be forward looking to hold a shared vision amongst their team and organisation; they need to be competent, or have knowledge about every aspect of the organisation; and they need to inspire their followers to be motivated and enthusiastic about the journey that the organisation is on.

Authenticity in leadership provides opportunities for all members of the learning organisation to develop themselves further. It allows them a chance to be true to themselves, which is important because, if teachers can work within their own identity, they can be passionate about what they are working towards professionally (Evans, 2000).

Sustainable learning organisations

Sergiovanni (1992) puts emphasis on the need for the members of a learning organisation to think of themselves as a community, in order to hold shared visions and sustainable learning to occur. Sustainable learning is learning that is worthwhile and purposeful to not only teachers and society but to the students who are engaging in the learning (Hargreaves & Fink, 2003). For sustained learning to occur, leadership needs to remain consistent, even if the leader changes. Sustainable organisations “secure success over time”. (p. 4). This thinking links with a distributed leadership model, which is recommended by Starrat (2004). If every person in the organisation is able to lead the direction and shared visions for the organisation then this journey will continue even after the leader has moved on. This shared leadership and vision concept allows formation of a community of learners and therefore allows room for sustainable teaching and learning.

Leader burnout is something that can easily occur if the learning community does not give support and nourishment to the leader. Scrivens (2002) reaffirms the thinking of Starrat (2004), emphasising the need for distributed leadership in order to support the leader within their role. As noted by Thornton et al., (2009) it takes more than just a leader to make a learning organisation sustainable. Starrat (2004) believes that authenticity is formed through socialisation, while Hargreaves and Fink (2003) believe that distributed leadership creates sustainable learning. This suggests that if leaders can share their visions and goals with all members of the organisation, they are more likely to produce a sustainable learning organisation that benefits all. This link between authenticity and sustainable learning organisations as well as the concept of distributed leadership, make a complex task for leaders and their development. Not only do they need to develop themselves to become authentic, but also empower and
transform all other members of the organisation to do the same. Only then can they provide a sustainable learning organisation for all who are involved.

**Learning to lead from within**

Authentic leaders construct visions and goals for the organisation from their own values and beliefs. They inspire others to believe in these goals and create shared visions that are fulfilled collaboratively. By reflecting on both Evans (2000) and the perspective favouring leadership by development, it becomes evident that, in order for leaders to be authentic, they need to understand every aspect of themselves and how this fits with their leadership role. Batagiannis (2011) agrees with this notion, suggesting that before leaders can develop their skills, they need to first develop their own leadership identity.

Hertneky (2010) discusses spiritual leadership in education and holds ideas similar to those of Evans (2000). Her research findings are that leaders who are able to work from within show more authentic traits than those who are unaware of themselves and how this affects their role in leadership. Authentic leadership is “found not in external arrangements, but in the human heart. Authentic leaders aim at liberating the heart, their own and theirs, so that it liberates the world”. (Palmer, 2000, p. 2). Many other authors also reaffirm the perspective of Evans (2000). Starratt (2004) describes that it is a human right to be able to recognise who we are and live within the boundaries of self-actualisation. If we cannot do this then we cannot live up to our true potential. Day, Harris, Hadfield, Tolley and Beresford (2000, cited in Thornton et al., 2009) state that leaders need to be able analyse their own professional and personal values and emphasise interpersonal skills.

When reflecting on the need to work from within ourselves, we can begin to piece together the answers to whether the statement made by Evans (2000) is accurate in an ECE context. The literature that has been used in this article and the discussions, thus far, show the need for leaders to work within themselves and discover others by working closely with them. An investigation of literature surrounding learning to lead from a management text is also necessary, however, when evaluating the perspectives on leadership development by Evans (2000).

**Learning to lead from a management text**

While staying true to ourselves and being autonomous may be part of being authentic, what about the management text? Is authenticity all we need to be a good leader in a sustainable learning organisation? There is significant literature that can offer theories on leadership in learning organisations. Theories and knowledge used in this article show vast and differing ideas about what makes a good leader. The question remains: can a management text alone offer the skills needed to develop an effective educational leader? If leaders are unable to relate the relevant texts they are reading to practice and practice leadership in ways that they have read to be effective, rather than what is true to them, then how can they be sure they are being authentic and autonomous towards their followers?
Other perspectives on leadership that differ to those of Evans (2000) include Carden & Callahan (2007), who offer an argument that professional development in leadership is the only way for effective leadership to develop. Their research findings show that leaders who learn through leadership development programmes know how to sacrifice their personal roles in order to develop a professional one. This makes them less likely to feel in conflict between their personal life and their role as a leader. Carden and Callahan (2007) did, however, note in this research that leadership development programmes focussed more on individual development, rather than collaborative leadership. This research, therefore, does not sit with a distributed model of leadership for the learning organisation. Thornton et al., (2009) also add that professional development programmes are essential for the development of leaders, stating that leaders are unprepared when entering ECE leadership roles in New Zealand.

Other authors of leadership development believe that blended modes of leadership development are best. Roberts (2006) states that studying through text and theory is important for leaders but, in order for them to be successful, they also need to know how to put this theory into practice. This emphasises the need to use a blend of both theory and critical reflection of this theory based on practice, in order to be effective as a leader. Raelin (2004, as cited in Thornton et al., 2009) notes that removing leaders from their practice while giving them effective strategies and traits for leadership is not a successful way of developing them. It is suggested that this type of learning is too detached from practice and therefore will never be implemented fully within the context of the ECE setting.

**Conclusion**

The effectiveness of developing leaders through a management text is difficult to evaluate, due to the diversity of the content provided by different leadership development programmes. If a management text offered information on authenticity and encouraged leaders to reflect on previous experiences, the development of leaders could be successful. There are diverse perspectives around what traits, behaviours and theories make an effective leader. The literature discussed here has shown that many authors believe that to be authentic, leaders need to know who they are and what is important for them. It has also become evident through investigation that to create a sustainable learning organisation, leaders need to show traits of authenticity in their practice. It is not possible to give a concrete conclusion as to whether the perspective on leadership development by Evans (2000) is correct. The diverse identities and needs that are present in each individual organisation influence this. What is evident is that no matter how leaders develop, they need support to show authentic practice that honours the rights of others. Sustainable learning organisations need all members to be working towards shared visions and this can only occur when leaders show a proactive approach to both their own development and that of others.
References


