A paradigm for leadership

This chapter will examine the usefulness of paradigms and definitions in assisting understanding of leadership. It will provide a broad overview of the development of leadership thinking up to the present day and consider whether our thinking needs reframing to meet the needs of the twenty-first century and the particular context of the early years sector, commonly referred to as early childhood education and care (ECEC).

A paradigm as a mental frame

A paradigm is a useful construct for framing our thinking about a topic – in this case, leadership. It provides a mental frame or lens through which we can examine ideas and create an approach to researching the experience of leadership. The intention is that it casts some light on our understanding of the topic, when seen within that frame, and creates conceptual tools to support exploration. It can be likened to a picture frame in that it should draw attention to what is inside and should complement its subject, yet the choice of materials and design can alter the way in which the subject is viewed, changing the emphasis of some of the features in the eye of the beholder. It is important, therefore, to remember that a paradigm cannot and should not attempt to be definitive but can allow us to see an old subject from a new perspective.

A paradigm is an academic device which provides:

- a value position or perspective giving a world-view, stance or lens through which to examine the topic;
- characteristics, features or concepts which make the paradigm distinctive;
- boundaries and scope to examine the topic in different situations and contexts, using the paradigm features to develop understanding;
models which can be derived from the above ideology to use in practice.

The test of a paradigm is its usefulness when applied in the real world. It requires theory and practice to be brought together in a way which can support making sense of the lived experience. A paradigm provides a perspective for research which makes the value base and world-view explicit and can, in turn, influence the adoption of particular research tools. By implication, therefore, the limitations of the paradigm should be apparent for scrutiny. It may have temporal and cultural limitations in illuminating the topic under consideration but this is not necessarily disadvantageous when working with such a complex and wide-ranging topic as leadership.

**Defining leadership**

Leadership has been a topic of research and study for centuries and yet there is no generally agreed definition (Avery 2004; Gill 2006; Western 2008). In fact, there are well over a thousand definitions demonstrating that whilst it is a common term it has diverse meanings (Gill 2006). For such a complex concept, there is a danger of reductionism if a narrow view is taken, yet a danger of being too amorphous if a broad definition is adopted. So, leadership ‘remains elusive and enigmatic, despite years of effort at developing an intellectually and emotionally satisfying understanding’ (Avery 2004: 3).

Definitions tend to reflect the approach taken to the subject and the context in which it is being studied and therefore definitions vary in emphasis from seeing leadership as something individual (based on authority or influence) or more generic (as a group process). It has been variously defined in terms of traits or competencies, or as a process, relationship or construct (Gill 2006). Western (2008) highlights the diverse and subjective nature of leadership when he says it can have multiple forms and meanings and can be found in many different places, so it may be considered individual, collective, or a process depending on where we are looking. What is common is that leadership operates in the realm of human relations.

The search for a generic definition is not our task and, indeed, may not be helpful as the notion of leadership needs to embrace a multitude of human and organizational contexts and allow examination of the complex nature of human relationships. Leadership can take place among friends, with peers, in formal positions, informal groups, within or outside of an organization and with or without management responsibilities. It can emerge in an instant, such as an emergency, or it can be a way of being as a person or a group. The notion of leadership needs to embrace this potentially endless range of situations and be responsive to change and capable of adaptation over time, allowing historical,
cultural, social, political and experiential influences to modify interpretations of what leadership means.

The complexity of the notion of leadership is part of its nature and should not be avoided but it is probably too limiting to see it only as a notion. If leadership is also seen as a phenomenon, then the world of experience and interpretation of that experience becomes part of what it is. Exploration of that experience becomes a valid and necessary part of a research paradigm seeking to develop leadership understanding. Inclusion of the experiential dimension is important for leadership learning, drawing attention to what is occurring in the process of leadership and in the behaviours and responses of those who are involved or affected. Attention to the experiential dimension makes leadership inherently reflective and reflexive, enabling change and adaptation individually or collectively. ‘Critiquing one’s personal leadership practices and the leadership encountered within our organizations and workplaces, liberates us from being trapped within the dominant normative discourses and enables emancipatory change to occur’ (Western 2008: 6).

When viewed as a social construct, leadership is normative. It is influenced and shaped, at least in part, by the values, beliefs and assumptions of the culture in which it operates and the underlying dominant political and philosophical discourses, both historical and current. Post-modernism highlights the need to consider pervading influences and authority and the way in which they affect general perceptions and expectations of leadership. Western (2008), however, argues that post-modernism underplays personal agency, having a tendency to see the human players as passive, dominated and subjugated to social norms, rather than active and creative. He calls for means to liberate thinking from social, political and cultural constraints, placing more emphasis on autonomy and the ability of individuals and groups to be self-determining and creative, allowing reconstruction and interpretation of leadership in new ways.

These world-views enable us to understand how, as a social construction and experienced phenomenon, leadership can be a broad and changing notion. It has no fixed identity because it is in a constant state of deconstruction, interpretation, and reconstruction. The absence of an agreed definition of leadership frees up possibilities for revisioning within any specific set of circumstances and influences. We will not, therefore, attempt a generic definition but intend to use this freedom to explore leadership within the specific set of circumstances that is early childhood education and care (ECEC). This context is developed further in Chapter 2.

Paradigms of leadership

Ideas about leadership have developed in an historical perspective with particular characteristics and emphases which can be traced through a timeline
from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century. These have been broadly categorized into paradigms of classical, transactional, visionary and, most recently, organic theories which demonstrate their distinguishing features, concepts and ideology (Avery 2004). While a paradigm can be a useful construct for study to aid interpretation and understanding, a single paradigm is unlikely to be manifested in a pure form or in a single historical period, simply because it is part of a process of developing thinking and examining experiences. The variety of different paradigm characteristics can help us understand the range of leadership approaches which can operate contemporaneously within the same organization and within individuals, depending on context and situation. So it is probably more apt to see the development of ideas about leadership as a spectrum rather than a continuum, with a chameleon-like ability to adapt and blend colours to fit the environment and context.

As well as evolving in a social, historical, cultural and political context, paradigms of leadership embrace theories which have arisen out of studying a particular situation, for example business, public service or education, and therefore emphasize different elements and values relevant to the nature and purpose of that organizational sector. Consequently, paradigms differ in their focus depending on where they situate leadership – in the person, position or process. When leadership is located in personhood, the traits, attributes or competencies of a leader and the leader/follower relationship are central. In positional leadership, power, authority, role and hierarchy will feature with the emphasis on the leader within organizational systems. When leadership is seen as a process, interactions and reciprocity of relationships will be the prime focus of attention. The interplay of ideas relating to person, position or process in leadership theories are not mutually exclusive but the emphasis gives those theories a character which can be broadly placed within current paradigms of leadership, depicted in Table 1.1. This table represents the four main paradigms developed to date, demonstrating how they can be characterized by the way in which leadership is exercised; what focus is dominant; and where leadership is situated.

The first three of these paradigms (classical, transactional and visionary) have different emphases but still largely situate leadership with the leader in a designated position, exercising leadership through power, systems and the strength of personal traits or behavioural competencies.

Classical and visionary ideologies might seem like stark contrasts in the way leadership is exercised, yet both focus on the personhood of the leader with the emphasis moving from inherent traits to personal and behavioural qualities exhibited in the ways of working which inspire others to work towards the organization’s goals. Leadership of this nature is quite commonly, but not exclusively, found in flat hierarchies where the authority or influence of a single person, usually the positional head, is strong; consequently there is a merging of meaning between leadership and management. Flat hierarchies are not uncommon in small ECEC settings where a single person overwhelmingly has major
responsibility for provision. There is sometimes a significant difference in qualifications and expertise from the other staff members who look to the titular lead person to provide all the leadership, whether by command or inspiration. Lambert (2003: 423) suggests: ‘Timeworn assumptions have persuaded us that leader and leadership are one and the same’ and therefore expectations and beliefs about effective leadership are focused on the skills, qualities and dispositions of the designated managers. Traditional views of leadership as a single positional leader are remarkably durable in public perception. Avery (2004) found that the idea of command and control and the authoritative leader continues to be a persistent model dominating popular thinking about leadership even though leadership literature has moved more towards visionary, emotion-based and distributed models (Day 2004; Harris 2004; Harris 2008). Whatever individual style of leadership the positional lead person adopts, this focus on the leader as a single individual in a management position is neither suitable for long-term sustainability of the organization nor ultimately well suited to the nature of early years work where responsible and reciprocal relationships are central.

Transactional leadership also focuses on the positional or designated lead role in a structure with hierarchical superiority between leader and followers. There is a differing emphasis, however, on management of systems and procedures to exercise leadership and fulfil organizational purposes (Harris et al. 2003). The focus is on efficiency and the breakdown of tasks to individual performance, where success is measured against targets, outputs or standards. Transactional leadership developed from the rationalist–scientific management perspective in the 1970s and can be considered bureaucratic,
with the focus on task management, delegation and performance measurement. This is in contrast to ideas which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s where achieving organizational goals was seen to require leaders to create a culture of followers with a shared mission; a period which saw the emergence of the visionary (transformational) paradigm. This does not, however, mean that the influence of scientific management and transactional leadership is over. Eacott (2010), citing Kanigel (1997), suggests that it is so embedded we hardly recognize it, using the concept of ‘best practice’ as an example of a simplistic means–end approach to finding what works in order to replicate it. The attempt to define and use standards or traits as a basis for assessing professional competency is another example of using rationalist logic in the belief that a single set of criteria can provide the means to achieve the desired end. The problem with reducing leadership to a set of standards, traits or behaviours is that it takes no account of the social context or the interplay of human relationships.

The ECEC sector is not traditionally highly bureaucratic so it is generally less pertinent to talk about hierarchies. While some providers base their organization on positional authority for management and commercial considerations, the essential nature of the business is to provide care for the well-being and education of young children. This requires consideration of shared and effective practice which is heavily reliant on relationships and interaction, elements which are not readily amenable to standard measurement. The idea of leadership as an allotted function of management, where a leader assumes a central designated role, conflates concepts of leadership with the position of the ‘leader’. It also creates categories of leader and follower which carry notions of superiority/inferiority and therefore power and authority. This implies that leadership is done to others rather than being something which people can participate in, which is not to deny that nominated leaders, unequal power and authority exist, but that as a concept of leadership it does not offer sufficient inclusivity. It encourages too much emphasis on the personhood and attributes of a leader and is insufficiently broad-ranging.

When examining current paradigms of leadership, it is important to bear in mind that many theories draw their understanding of leadership from the business sector. Public sector and educational leadership literature developed to counter the predominance of the technical–rational business perspective in order to reflect better the values, purposes and intrinsic nature of services ultimately aimed at furthering the well-being of society. This body of literature places greater emphasis on a sense of service and shared mission (Fullan 1999), values and relationships (Sergiovanni 2001) and emotional and ethical leadership practice (Day 2004; Harris 2004). A body of educational leadership literature and research has developed which sees leadership as not entirely explained in what leaders do or their characteristics but containing an important affective dimension. It is this dimension which has been attributed with the facility
to enable change and development by providing certain emotional conditions conducive for change (Day 2004). The idea of emotional intelligence has been very influential and Goleman et al. (2002) produced a list of attributes of the emotionally intelligent leader. The emphasis, once again, is on the individual and the personhood of leadership and unfortunately, in this case, the leader is also presupposed to be male! We need to place less emphasis on ‘the leader’ to be able to conceptualize ‘leadership’ better and to lose a gender orientation in thinking about leadership to avoid stereotypical thinking.

Visionary and transformational paradigms of leadership gained popularity in educational circles in the early twenty-first century when the drive for school improvement was seen to require strong and effective school principals who could communicate a vision and create a sense of shared mission in followers (Day et al. 2000). Studies of successful leaders showed how they effected change in working cultures through transforming the needs and aspirations of the individual or group to align with organizational purposes, a move away from self-interest to collective interest (Avery 2004). In some cases, this idea of leadership is akin to the heroic leader but operating through emotional effects between leader and followers. Theories in the visionary or transformative paradigm often identify leadership as working through charisma, inspiration or modelling an explicit and recognizable set of values (such as ethical or authentic leadership). Eacott (2010: 271) suggests this line of thinking has arisen from studies focusing on what successful school heads do, which has led researchers into normative theorizing resulting in ‘a proliferation of adjectival leadership theories each prescribing their own specific ideal model for effective leadership’. Such ‘how to do’ models of leadership return to an unrealistic idea that there could be a ‘one size fits all’ prescription for leadership. This does not do justice to the complexity of the phenomenon of leadership or the variety of leadership contexts, neither does it provide tools for supporting reflection on leadership practice which is where active knowledge-creation about leadership is generated. Theory needs to support reflection on practice rather than provide a template for action (Spillane et al. 2004).

Transformational leadership perspectives gave rise to theorizing leadership as a collaborative culture based on positive relationships (Harris et al. 2003). Sergiovanni (2001) suggested that superheroes were a thing of the past and that leadership in the twenty-first century would be exercised through developing communities of responsibility. A change of emphasis in the literature, from the task to the process of leadership, is becoming evident (Lambert 2003; Gill 2006) and Lambert (2003: 424) suggests that ‘those who are redefining leadership situate it in the processes among us, rather than in the skills and dispositions of a leader’. While there remains a persistent focus on the ‘leader’ as a designated position with an underlying leader/follower perspective, most recent theories are moving towards group-based, participative and shared leadership. These are described as within the organic paradigm and
include the idea of distributed leadership developed primarily from educational leadership literature (Spillane et al. 2001; Harris 2008). Theories in the organic paradigm have grown out of concern for lasting improvement arising from culture change but with an emphasis on sustainability of change and leadership capacity. There has been growing recognition that sustainable improvement cannot be achieved by a single leader. Alma Harris suggests ‘there is a powerful argument for looking at alternative ways of leading, looking for competing theories of leadership and challenging the orthodoxy that equates leadership with the efforts of one person’ (Harris et al. 2003: 1).

In developing a new paradigm for early years leadership, we need to bear in mind that popular perceptions are durable and bring expectations about ways of working, relationships and responsibility that may need to be challenged if we are to develop greater understanding and take our thinking about the experience of leadership forward. The cultural and historical context and nature of ECEC services are generally, although not entirely, different from both business and public service, and while there is much in common with educational purposes the ECEC sector is multidisciplinary and has a differently constituted proportion of public, private and voluntary providers. It should be expected, therefore, that current paradigms may have limited application and a new paradigm needs to have clear relevance to the whole workforce and visible application to a range of work situations for greatest impact. As Rodd (2006: 11) identifies, ‘Research into leadership has been criticized as being too focussed on exploring what leaders do (Mitchell 1990) and the attributes they possess . . . [these models] do not offer insight into the complex process of leadership, which is multifaceted and based on reciprocal relationships (Morgan 1977).’ Relationships are central to leadership generally and especially pertinent to the nature of work in the early years. So disaggregating the notion of positional leader or a single individual from the concept of leadership can be useful and Lambert (2003: 424) suggests that ‘as a concept separate from, yet integrated with leader, leadership stands as a broader notion, a more encompassing idea’.

It is this more encompassing idea that we shall explore further in this book with specific application to ECEC. In considering a new paradigm of leadership for early years we wish to avoid equating leadership with the idea of a ‘leader’ because of the danger of reducing leadership to traits or norms of behaviour and also to remove assumptions that leadership refers only to particular individuals in a designated position. We will focus more on the process of leadership, which moves the focus away from who is doing the leading to how leadership is taking effect. It directs our attention away from concerns about what is led (people or organizations) and towards leadership with or within (collective or personal orientation and endeavour). We will do this by examining and applying three new paradigm features through a number of leadership profiles and scenarios in Chapters 4–9.
Leadership for the twenty-first century

While there is much to be learned from the vast array of leadership theories encompassed within paradigms which have evolved over a significant period of time, there is a constant need for re-examination within the perspective of current experiences and changing conditions. Each historical period has its own social, economic and technological developments which affect how people and organizations work and what is considered conducive to working effectively. These in turn influence expectations, requirements and interpretations of leadership. The twenty-first century is characterized by globalization and technology creating more open and immediate access to information and quick communication. There is more emphasis on the rights of individuals and groups and more facility to make their views known and contribute to consultations. This is changing the ability of consumers, stakeholders and staff to be more immediately involved in and influence the business of an organization, breaking down or reducing hierarchical boundaries. In some fields of work, there are also significant changes in the nature of relationships where contact is remote or rarely face to face. In ECEC, the focus on rights and communication is a modern emphasis with greater involvement of stakeholders in service provision. The service, however, is essentially immediate and face to face between practitioners, children and families in a shared physical space, so relationships remain central and more traditional. Clearly, there are also remote and technological communication methods involved but they do not characterize the essential nature of the service.

Recent literature on business, public service and educational leadership have some common perceptions about the challenges of the twenty-first century related to globalization, technological development, the rapid pace of and demand for change, work intensification and issues of sustainability (Avery 2004; Hargreaves and Fink 2006; Bennis 2007; Harris 2008; Western 2008). Greater distribution and decentralization of knowledge are bringing expectations of immediate and open communication and a demand for transformation and improvement. Social and cultural changes increasingly emphasize the need for a more inclusive and participative perspective of leadership and the complexity and demands of modern working life make the heroic individual leader an untenable model. There is recognition that leadership needs to be present across and throughout an organization to be sustainable, where agency for change can be released and a greater sense of involvement can be generated among the workforce. This reflects a more equal, complex and diverse society where common responsibilities are being encouraged for social, environmental, and educational well-being.

The twenty-first century is seeing the emergence of a paradigm of leadership described variously as ‘organic’ (Avery 2004) or ‘ecological’ (Western...
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2008) that is less focused on the single leader, less about command and control and more about building networks, collaborating, acting ethically and responsibly through a shared leadership process. It draws on the language of human ecology, examining human relations and interactions with each other and the environment, and emphasizing interdependence, connectivity and sustainability. It is non-hierarchical, flexible and responsive, enabling leadership to emerge at any level in an organization, wherever the appropriate knowledge, expertise or initiative occurs and with the ability to identify and act on challenges and opportunities. The collective and ethical nature of responsibility ensures that the leadership process has checks and balances and is orientated towards commonly negotiated goals (Avery 2004). The organization is seen as a living system interconnected to a wider environment which needs to take the long view for sustainability (Hargreaves and Fink 2006; Harris 2008). This is particularly appropriate to the ECEC sector where practices and investment are intended to have a long-term return in the child and society’s future.

The notion of distributed leadership falls within the early development of the organic paradigm. Distributed leadership, as all leadership theory, is open to different interpretations in different contexts and sometimes still retains a leader/follower distinction and terminology which sees leadership as management authority bestowed from the top down, distributed to maximize use of time, knowledge and skills. The emphasis is on the interactions between leaders and followers seeking to release expertise at local level, enabling responsive and responsible action. Some interpretations of distributed leadership have more emphasis on the potential for collective leadership and broad-based participation if structural obstructions are removed (Harris 2008). They call for empowerment and involvement rather than delegated spheres of responsibility. Alma Harris (2008: 152) believes that ‘Future leadership will be concerned with participation and relationships rather than leadership skills, competencies or abilities. Future leaders will be spread across the organization, and will constantly nurture and fuel new knowledge, new ways of knowing and new ways of doing.’

Western (2008) argues that a critical theory approach is needed to achieve this, providing a framework to support examination of leadership practice so that it can be freed from dominant ideas, opening up new ways of thinking and options for change. He argues for an emancipatory paradigm which enables a greater sense of individual and collective autonomy with the ability to effect change.

Reframing thinking

In conclusion, there are calls for a new paradigm to reframe thinking about leadership which is more suited to the needs and issues of the twenty-first
century. A more inclusive perspective is developing which invites involvement and shared responsibility across a community or organization. This enables participative leadership models to emerge which embrace the idea of connectivity between people and their environment. A critical framework is needed to bring theory and practice together, releasing creative thinking about leadership to bring about new ways of working. The paradigm shift we pursue in Chapter 3 contains three concepts to support critical thinking about leadership in the particular context of ECEC, encouraging a focus on active participation and relationships. These concepts characterize the paradigm of leadership within, namely catalytic agency, reflective integrity and reciprocal relationships.

**Further reading**