Challenges Singapore Early Childhood Centre Leaders Face

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Abstract
In accord with emphasis made by the local government authority for early childhood services and education in Singapore, namely Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) on the importance of effective leadership in early childhood settings, this research investigated the challenges that   a sample of centre leaders faced in accomplishing their roles and responsibilities. Thirty experienced centre leaders were interviewed face to face for this research. Amongst the many challenges identified were juggling administrative work and managing diverse staff while ensuring they met licensing and ECDA's quality certification requirements. These were the most pressing concerns the leaders faced. Other challenges included efforts needed in raising professionalism in the centre and in the field; the need for support in managing children with special needs and meeting the expectations of parents. In order for the leaders to overcome those challenges, management support was deemed necessary in rendering assistance especially towards administrative duties. Most importantly, the centre leaders agreed that fundamentally, they needed to improve their own mindset and work attitudes in order to progress as effective leaders. Another interesting finding of the research was that although the centre leaders felt stressed and challenged, most mentioned that they have actually gained a certain level of job satisfactions especially when seeing some of their staff grow and become better teachers and witnessing noticeable progress in the children.

Keywords: Leadership challenges; early childhood leaders; early childhood centre leaders

Introduction

> Professional leadership is important, because very
> often if you have a very good leader in a centre, it makes
> all the difference
>
> Ang, 2012, p.94

Many studies have found that the quality of an early childhood centre relies very much on the leadership at the helm of each early childhood establishment (Rodd, 2013; Muijs, Aubrey, Harris, and Briggs, 2004). With much discussions and critiques highlighting the need to monitor professionalism in early childhood industry, the focus on leadership seems to be heightened and emphasised. Research has shown that the quality and practice of leadership is linked to consistent and demonstrable way in improving outcomes and educational equity in children (Mitgang, 2012, p. 3). In a local study commissioned by the Lien Foundation, Singapore, Ang (2012) reiterates that leadership is recognized as an essential element in the provision of quality care and services.

Often, the roles of the leader are ambiguous and complex. Given the unclear boundaries, multiple responsibilities and the norm of wearing many hats as a centre leader, it is not uncommon that these leaders often feel that they are not duly supported in many ways. Hence, that is what makes leadership challenging.

It was the aim of this study therefore, to identify and then understand the challenges EC centre leaders face and what are the supports they need to assist them in becoming a more efficient and effective leader.

Background and purposes of the study

The recent intense focus on the importance of leadership in ensuring quality early childhood education, is putting more pressure on centre leaders to perform and to lead their staff and children to greater heights. Leadership is one of the criterion being measured in SPARK, the local Singapore's quality assessment tool, used to determine the quality of an early childhood centre in Singapore (Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA), 2014).   Hill and Lewis (2012), in their discussion of how early childhood leadership should look like, emphasise that effective leadership is crucial to ensuring the success of education and scare settings. With this increasing demand, there is added responsibility on centre leaders, thus adding to the list of challenges these leaders face. Rodd (2006), advocates the need for centre leaders to overcome the challenges as it will help to bring the team they are leading to the next level (p. 157).

The purpose of this study was to examine and find evidence to understand the myriad of challenges the centre leaders face and how they were able to overcome those challenges. Parallel to this, the study   investigated the kind of support centre leaders needed to help them become better leaders. The findings of this study may help the relevant agencies and employers to better comprehend the needs of these centre leaders and thus render necessary help needed by them.

The study hoped to achieve the following objectives.

1. Identify the different challenges that the centre leaders face
2. Understand the kind of support the centre leaders deemed necessary to help them become effective leaders

Research Question

The central question addressed here is what were the challenges centre leaders in the study faced? This is further broken down into five main categories which include: Challenges in managing and administrating centres; challenges in managing staff; challenges in promoting professionalism in self and staff; satisfaction as a leader and lastly any other challenges which might not be covered in any of the categories here.

Methodology

The Singapore Preschool System

In Singapore, with the exception of Ministry of Education kindergarten, preschools (both kindergarten and childcare centres) are run by private, community, religious, social or business organizations, which are oversee by the Early Childhood Agency (ECDA). These preschool centres are further categorized into private, anchor operators and partner operators. Anchor operators scheme first introduced in 2009 refers to preschool centres, run by bigger organisations that are placed under a scheme that provides funding support to selected operators to increase access to good quality and affordable early childhood care and education, especially for children from lower income or disadvantaged backgrounds (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2014). Currently there are 5 anchor operators selected by ECDA.

Background of Participants

This is a small scale study that involved a total of 30 centre leaders from various early childhood organizations, either **anchor operators** or private settings. The participants were either heading a childcare centre or a kindergarten and varied in qualifications and experiences. The following table demonstrates the profile and background of participants.

Age	20s	30s	40s	50s
	7	11	9	3
Professional Qualification	Diploma in Leadership with Diploma in Teaching		Diploma in Leadership with Bachelor in Early Childhood	
	13 (including 2 undergoing degree)		17 (including 2 with Masters and 1 undergoing Masters)	
No of years as a Centre Leader	2-3 years	4-5 years	6-8 years	More than 8 years
	12	8	1	9

Method

All 30 participants were interviewed by the researchers. A qualitative face to face interview was selected as a mode of data collection to add credibility and validity to the study. Face to face interview, though time consuming offers better insight and nuances for a research study (Giorgi, 2009, p. 122). Though the sample was small, nevertheless, we still sought out deliberately to leaders from two biggest anchor organisations and private operators in order to have a qualitative in-depth understanding of the current phenomenon of challenges faced by these leaders.

Literature Review

1. Leadership in Early Childhood

Leadership in early childhood education assumes its importance in recent years. Many studies have linked school success with leadership where 'leaders play an important part in the provision of quality service' (Dunlop, 2005, p. 4).

The definitions of leadership in early childhood education vary in different contexts leaders serve due to the vague nature of tasks and the styles of leaders (Rodd, 2013). In Singapore, the roles of early childhood leaders vary as some may hold differing positions such as administrators, principals and supervisors. In conjunction, senior teachers and teachers are given leadership roles in the workplace.

HM Inspectorate of Education (2000) as cited in Dunlop (2008), defines leadership as visionary, based on shared values where leaders are expected to motivate and provide direction to staff.

> "In general, leadership is about vision and influence."
> (Rodd, 2006, p.11)

Rodd (2006), believes that it is the leader's responsibility to have a good vision for achieving quality status and thus should possess the ability to influence and convince other people of the need to do so. This is supported by Sciarra and Dorsey (2006), who reiterate the necessity for leaders to have capabilities in guiding "followers to work toward the changes described in the organisation's vision statement" (p. 6). Leadership is thus not a stand-alone entity, but involves a group activity with a leader as the motivating figure leading the group forward. Pound (2008) on the other hand, defines leadership as the style and role one adopts. More recently, Bloom and Abel (2015) stress the importance of leadership with its strong vital influence on team in setting organizational culture and climate.

2. Challenges in Early Childhood Leadership

Due to the ambiguity of the job-scope, a leader tends to carry out multiple tasks in a preschool setting. In their study on leadership tasks in Early Childhood Education, Hujala

and Eskelinen (2013) confirmed that leadership tasks vary significant and the responsibilities and roles of leadership vary too in different contexts of leaders (Hujala, Heikka & Halttunen, 2011 as cited in Hujala & Eskelinen, 2013). Many research studies have placed strong emphasis on leadership which is the pivotal point in ensuring high quality Early Childhood Education programme (Nupponen, 2006; Muijs, Aubrey, Harris, & Briggs, 2004; Rodd, 2013). Bloom and Bella (2005) reiterated that strong leadership is critical in creating and maintaining a culture of high quality programme that promotes optimal growth and development in children.

There have been an emerging and paramount importance of training practitioners fast for leadership roles as the Singapore government places emphasis to provide quality pre-school settings for families by opening up 200 more childcare centres by year 2018 (MSF, 2012). Hence, it is an emerging and urgent trend to train as many practitioners to fill in the roles of leadership.

3. The Support Needed by Early Childhood Leaders

With the heightened recognition of Early Childhood Education globally and a high demand of qualified professionals needed in the field, it is essential and important to support and prepare a generation of Early Childhood leaders. Ramey (2015) emphasizes the need in supporting and promoting early childhood leadership which is essentially beneficial in 'shaping the profession and ensuring excellence in education and care of young children' (p.7). As leaders play valuable roles in carrying out multiple tasks in the early childhood setting (Hujala & Eskelinen, 2013), and making their leadership visible by building links and being dynamic. Recent research by Walsh, Jeon and Davies (2014) has also shown that leaders impact changes as a result of building active links within the community and the early childhood setting.

Findings and Discussions

The participants were asked questions that are l divided into 2 parts, the challenges they face and ways in overcoming those challenges. Below are the detailed responses given by the participants.

Part 1 - aspects of challenges

1. Challenges in Managing and Administrating Centre

Some 21 out of 30 participants cited administrative duties as the biggest challenge. Besides being busy running the centre, leaders are also expected to do administrative work such as collecting school fees, book fees and enrolling a new child. These are on top of writing the various reports such as budget report, updating of all required documents from the various Ministries that are to be submitted to the management or headquarters. Next on the list are time management and multitasking, where 17 out of 30 participants see as the next biggest challenge. Multi-tasking affected an effective time-management. Monitoring the effectiveness of the centre's curriculum and programme is also seen as a challenge to 16 participants, who reasoned that the administration work hinders them from being an effective curriculum leader.

Another 13 out of 30 participants find demanding parents a challenge; that is quite common in many centres. The rising demands and expectations of parents are something that they have to manage and resolve every now and then. While some cases are quick to be resolved, others may take longer period. In the raise of focus on quality, SPARK is a force the leaders have to reckon with. Achieving SPARK certification and then maintaining the requirements also demand a lot of monitoring, according to 9 participants.

Some 8 out of 30 participants felt that unclear job-scope and responsibilities could lead to confusion and low job satisfaction. And 2 participants are concerned about the increase in initiatives from ECDA that sometimes take them out of the centres too many time for meetings and workshops.

2. Challenges in managing staff

Challenges in managing staff

(Bar chart values: Mentoring teachers = 13; Dealing with different... = 17; Teachers' attitude and aptitude = 16; Developing and maintaining... = 12; Resistance to change = 12; Communication (esp with FT) = 15; Creating good team and dealing... = 12; Sustainability (high turnover) = 10)

Another area of challenge to the centre leaders are that of managing staff. It was found that 17 out of 30 participants felt that dealing with different personalities and style to be the most challenging. This can be further aggravated if the teachers have bad attitude and aptitude. With the increasing number of foreign teachers, communication can be greatly challenge too according to 15 participants, especially if they are non-English speaking teachers. Documents thus have to be translated in order to avoid further misunderstandings. Efforts to creating good team dynamics may also be compromised. 12 participants raised the issues of dealing with teachers who are resistant to changes. Most of these teachers have very little sense of ownership towards the centre. Such are the effects of bad communication.

There were 13 participants who cited mentoring teachers as also being challenging as they sometimes could not find time to do so. As a result some centres do away with mentoring system or rely on the more senior teachers to mentor the younger ones with or without proper mentoring plan. Sustaining teachers is thus another problem to deal with.

3. i. Challenges in promoting professionalism in Self

Challenges in promoting professionalism in self
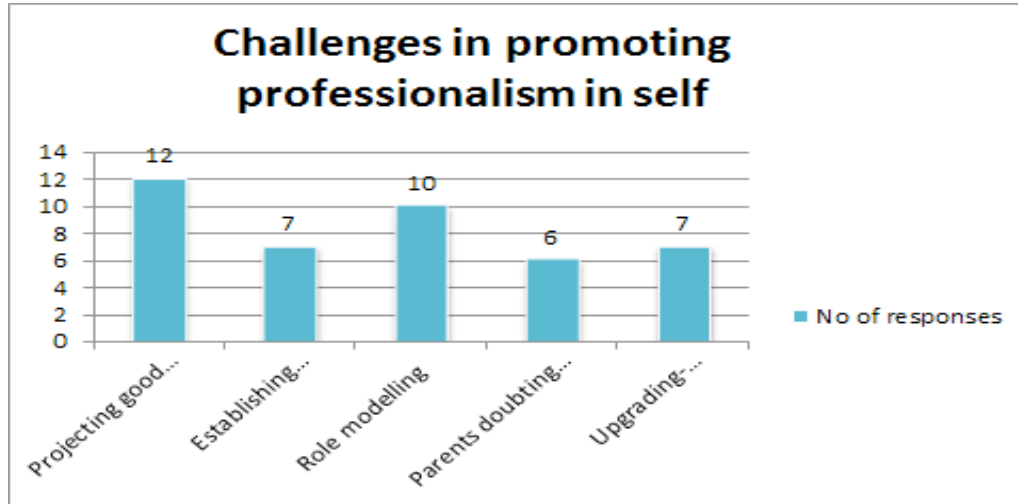
Quality demands professionalism. The centre principals listed the efforts to projecting good image as a challenge (12 out of 30). Being a leader would mean that they have to look, behave and project themselves as a professional, worthy the position they are shouldering. They have to constantly be a good role model (10 out of 30) to not only the staff, but children and parents as well. As much as they want to show example of executing lifelong learning, many centre leaders find themselves grappling with ability to upgrade themselves professionally as many face time and financial constraint to keep doing it (7 out of 30).

Establishing partnership with parents is another challenge to exercising professionalism. Some 7 out of 30 felt that the increasing demands and expectations of parents, sometimes hinder the effort made to partner parents. This is worse if the centre leader is seen young and inexperienced, thus increasing the doubts parents may have on credibility of young principals (6 out of 30).

3. ii. Challenges in promoting professionalism in Staff

In promoting professionalism in teachers, the most challenging one to overcome is when teachers not seeing themselves as professionals (19 out of 30). The general public perspectives of teachers as being a mere caregiver, resulted in low self-esteem in many teachers. The young teachers especially may lost interest and feel demotivated to remain in this field. Inspiring them to remain in the early childhood profession therefore can be difficult (16 out of 30).

The teachers' personalities and traits would also hinder efforts in promoting professionalism. Many teachers lack communication skills (15 out of 30) and may have problems communicating effectively with parents and the general public. They do not dress appropriately sometimes (11 out of 30) and lack initiatives in taking up new challenges. In worst case scenario, staff have problems conforming to centre's culture as they are not open to other people's ideas and practices and thus not wanting to change (2 out of 30).

4. Other challenges

Other challenges
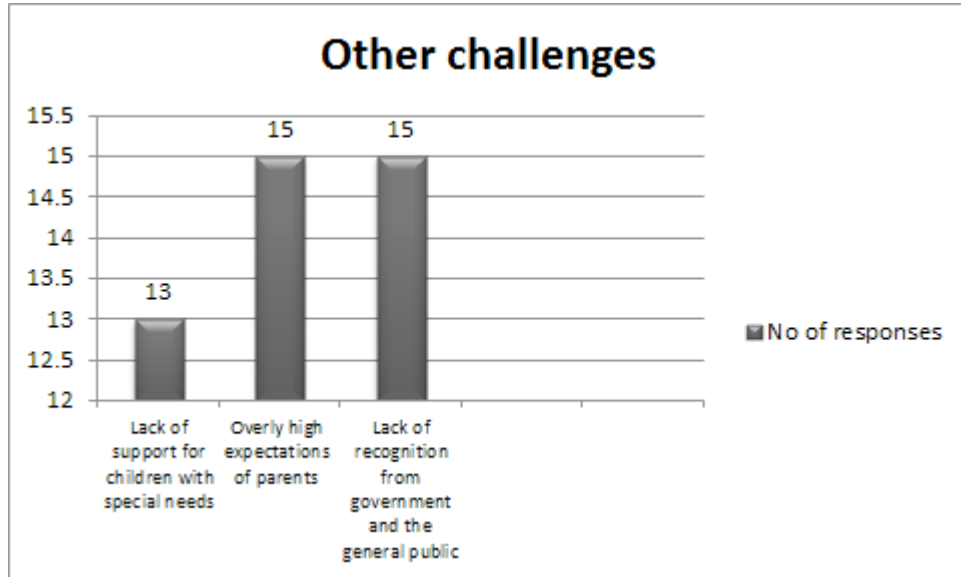
Besides the above discussed challenges, the participants cited the following as factors that may affect their efficiency as a centre leader.

With the initiatives and measures undertaken by the Singapore government to include preschool children in the mainstream settings (MCYS, 2012), there has been an increase with children with diverse and identified learning needs in many of the ECE classrooms. 13 participants echoed a lack of support for all these children, citing lack of adequate resources such as external supports like the therapists or engaging an extra assistant teacher to help in their inclusionary settings.

Almost half of the participants (15 out of 30) reported that parent's expectations on the settings ranging from programming, the environment and quality of the teachers are significantly high and it is challenging trying to convince parents that the programme is right for their children. Another similar number specify exact number of participants stated that there is always a lack of recognition from the government and the general public with regards to early childhood education as compared to principals and teachers from the mainstream schools. They believe that this is a serious discourse to early childhood education where teachers play an essential role in laying the foundation for lifelong learning.

5. Satisfaction as a centre leader

Satisfaction as a leader

(Bar chart titled "Satisfaction as a leader", y-axis 0–25, No of responses)

- Staff – seeing them grow and become better teachers: 21
- Children – achieving milestones and success: 21
- Parents – giving positive feedbacks and accolades: 23
- Management showing full support: 6
- Supportive staff: 2

Despite the many challenges, many centre leaders find job satisfaction in their work. The top on the list is when they receive positive feedbacks and accolades from parents (23 out of 30). Next on the list are satisfaction at seeing how much their staff grow (21 out of 30) and witnessing children achieving the various milestone and successes; 6 out of 30 participants are satisfied when the management show full support and 2 out of 30 cited supportive staff as a motivating factor.

Part 2 - Ways of overcoming the challenges

1. Self

In all, 28 out of 30 participants agreed that one way of overcoming the challenges is by preparing oneself to be opened to sustainable workable solutions. 18 out of 30 suggested empowering staff to take on various responsibilities. By delegating workload, they can avoid burnout and frustration in multitasking. This will also entail the necessity to devise good working support system, where help, not only for the centre leader but the staff is ensured and be readily available if needed. Networking with other centre leaders will also enhance their scope of resources whenever needed as mentioned by 13 of the participants. Involving and partnering parents and the community at large will also impacted on their efficiency as a centre leader (12 out of 30) and create a more transparent system.

However, the need to act as a professional is an essential to manage the challenges so as a leader, there is a need to be a good role model (9 out of 30) and be a reflective leader (2 out of 30) who is ready to take on new challenges. This will also mean that the centre leader should always look towards upgrading themselves and practices good time management to be able to juggle the different responsibilities (5 out of 30).

2. Management

The participants also hope that the management helps to lessen the challenges by providing centre based admin staff (15 out of 30) who will be able to handle administrative issues, thus offloading the centre principals from admin duties. There is also a need for management to ensure that more teachers receive adequate training on special needs and be ready to manage children with special needs in the centre without having to wait for specialised staff from the headquarters to come down to the centres (15 out of 30). 7 out of 30 participants hope that centre leaders will be equipped with soft skills such as counselling, listening skills and so on to better lead their staff. The participants also hoped for understanding and supportive management (5 out of 30) who constantly touching based with the ground and not only concern with enrolment (13 out of 30).

3. Governmental Agency

The participants also believed that the various governmental agencies could help enhance the public perspective of early childhood by giving more funding to help defray running cost (19 out of 30), promote EC professionals through roadshows, workshops and advertisements just like MOE's advertisement for teachers (21 out of 30) and declare Teacher's Day as a holiday for all child-care centres (9 out of 30), standardising salary and benefits (18 out of 30) that will help to streamline the salary scale for early childhood profession, amend the criteria for scholarship to consider the number of working years and not only educational qualifications (7 out of 30) and organise more professional learning circle for centre leaders. It will also help if a more training is developed for leaders, for example in topics such as challenges faced in running a centre (1 out of 30) and provide more subsidies/ funding for professional growth (4 out of 30).

The participants suggested that the number of childcare centres within the same vicinity to be closely monitored to avoid over-supply of centres (3 out of 30). A compulsory primary school partner could also be introduced (4 out of 30) as some preschool centres are having problems finding a primary school to partner. Last but not least, 4 participants hoped for a smaller class size with lower children to teacher ratio (2 out of 30).

4. Others

The participants suggested that a more assertive parent education on awareness of special needs and early childhood should be advocated (15 out of 30). There should be a greater collaboration between governmental bodies especially for children with special needs (12 out of 30) and this may involve better funding and expertise support for special needs (13 out of 30). And in order to encourage more centre leaders to stay, there is a need to look into work-life balance (3 out of 30) and a culture of sharing like visiting other centres and share expertise (1 out of 30).

Summary and Conclusion

Greater emphasis on centre leadership has recently been emphasized by ECDA (ECDA, 2015). Therefore it is essential that the centre leaders be given all the support they need to become a more effective leader in the centre. The participants in this study have high awareness of the challenges they face on a daily basis and have even made suggestions as to how the current practice can better be improved. Nonetheless, this small study has identified that there are more challenges which are still highly complex. Thus a school leader who can hone their abilities to meet the challenges may become a highly successful school leaders (Whitehead, Boschee & Decker, 2013).

Despite all the challenges they have very high satisfaction in the job. Their passion and commitment go a long way in helping them to cope with the barriers and problems that come with their job. Sugrue (2005) stated that passion is central and crucial to the work of a centre leader which is often submerged. It is this kind of passion that should be given recognition and harness into lifelong commitment in the early childhood industry in Singapore. The lack of support on the other hand may result in burn-out and loss of interest.

The data and findings of this small scale study provide valuable insights into what leadership initiatives might require from all stakeholders to make them more viable and sustainable. This research also shows that most of the leaders experience and view the roles of leader as highly complex as they attempt to juggle multiple responsibilities and with no defined tasks revolving around the day to day operations in their settings. It is essential therefore for the related agencies and organisations to take heed of the suggestions made and to develop channels of assistance that can be rendered to centre leaders to sustain their interest and thus professionalism for the betterment of early childhood landscape in Singapore.

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