

SCEL Fellowship Programme

Area of Enquiry

# Developing system leadership for Early Learning and Childcare settings in Scotland

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This enquiry addresses two main focus questions:

1. Within Early Learning and Childcare settings, are serving leaders' understanding of the tacit knowledge, skills and attributes required to effectively lead staff teams delivering on political aspirations to expand the ELC service within Scotland?
2. How can system leadership models be developed in ELC to drive further improvements and support the improvement of leadership within the sector?

## The Scottish Context

Internationally it has been recognised that the experiences children are exposed to from a very young age have a significant impact on their attainment and achievement throughout their school experience and adult life beyond school (Dunlop 2008). The Scottish government and local authorities have supported the provision of early education for more than a century in a variety of contexts and childcare settings (Wingrave 2015). Early years' provision in Scotland (and the UK as a whole) is more diverse and complex than other sectors within Education for reasons given below (Siraj-Blatchford 2013). The Children and Young People's Act Scotland 2014 - enshrined in law the entitlement for young children to access 600 hours (political aspirations were to increase this to 1140 hours by 2020) of Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) which is expected to be available through the wide range of contexts and providers currently in existence across the country. These providers range from local authority nursery schools led by head teachers to care provided by child-minders within their home. Staff teams within these settings are led by managers who have often followed very different career paths to their appointments (GTC; SSSC).

Leadership within the early years' sector has been seen as increasingly challenging, partly due to the perceptions of professionals in other sectors of education who have considered ELC as extraneous to the education provided within the primary and secondary sectors (Sharp, Lord, Handscomb et al 2012). However, the increased focus on ELC by politicians over recent years and the acceptance that experiences of children in such settings have a major impact on subsequent academic, social and career development has resulted in a strong policy drive to raise the standards of professionalism within the sector and improve leadership capacity (Clark & Murray 2012).

Leaders who are currently employed within the ELC sector are required to register with either the General Teaching Council (GTC) or Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) as having achieved a relevant degree level qualification beforehand. Each of these professional bodies has at their core, expectations for leaders within their educational context, and have more recently revised their standards and codes of practice to reflect such raised expectations (see GTC 2013; SSSC 2015 – Wingrave 2015). In examining the professional

practice of both GTC and SSSC, many similarities are apparent in terms of expectation of ELC staff: curriculum, professional standards, commitment to continual professional development and the expectation that staff will commit to on-going training and development (Wingrave 2015). It has also been accepted that leadership in all sectors, including ELC, has to retain active focus in terms of Continual Professional Development (CPD) in order to have the greatest impact on outcomes for all learners (Donaldson 2010; Siraj-Blatchford 2015).

The aims of this enquiry are firstly, to explore the extent to which existing levels of knowledge, skills and attributes of leaders within the ELC sector in Scotland match the changing requirements and expectations of leadership in the sector; and secondly, to explore the efficacy of system leadership within the Scottish ELC sector. These aims are expressed in the following four specific questions that frame the enquiry:

1. To what extent do present leaders of ELC contexts possess the knowledge, skills and attributes required to lead teams of professionals?
2. To what extent do leaders have an understanding of their changing role within the ELC setting? How confident do they feel as leaders in terms of the political aspiration to expand and transform the service?
3. What support do serving leaders feel they require to enable them to improve their leadership skills and build capacity?
4. What knowledge/understanding do leaders within ELC have of system leadership?

## Literature review

There has been a wide range of research regarding leadership across all areas of life and within each sector of education resulting in a vast array of definitions of skills, attributes and traits required of exceptional and inspiring leaders explored by academics and researchers (Clark & Murray 2012). This has led to the belief that leaders within the ELC context may require to display a different paradigm of leadership relevant to their context and that perhaps the leadership required within ELC has more of an emphasis on relationships, collaboration and group processes than is the case in other sectors (Clark & Murray 2012). There has also been some exploration regarding the professional qualifications linked to effective leadership and how this, in turn, impacts on outcomes for children and families related to the social and economic context in which an establishment is set (Blatchford & Manni 2007). There is some evidence to suggest that leadership is a process where one person (the leader) sets standards and expectations, influencing the team to achieve a shared vision or goal (Blatchford & Manni 2007). There is also consensus regarding the impact that a leader can have over the quality of learning and teaching provided in a setting and the success of individual establishments to evidence progress in attainment and achievement through the more formal government inspection process (Sharp, Lord, Handscomb et al 2012). Early year's leadership has long been viewed as distributed and

integrated, implying that capacity to lead is developed within a team (Dunlop 2008) with mixed staffing models ever evident across the sector (Early Years Collaborative: EYC 2013).

Among the skills and attributes which have consistently been identified as those possessed by highly effective leaders through a range of qualitative and quantitative data (Blatchford & Manni 2007; Sharp, Lord & Handscomb et al, 2012; Clark & Murray 2012; Sutcliffe 2015) are - vision, courage, passion, emotional intelligence, judgement, resilience, persuasion and curiosity. I would agree that as a starting point these are helpful in clarifying some of the attributes an individual within a promoted position within an educational setting requires to support staff and drive forward improvement. In the current political climate it has been recognised that external pressures and political aspirations have had an impact on the self-efficacy of leaders and their ability to strike a balance between managing and leading (Blatchford & Manni 2007), a belief that the administrative role in some circumstances dominates their pedagogical role as leader. As the government's aspirations in Scotland move from a focus on early years education towards joint emphasis on flexible childcare and education in light of increased expectations of parents (GUS 2016) and research emphasises the importance of a professionalised workforce (Wingrave & McMahon 2016), there is further tension in terms of the perceived role of leaders within the ELC context. In short, the most profound change taking place for the ELC sector is the shift in focus from provision of government funded protected educational hours in local authority and partnership providers to a more flexible service meeting the needs of working parents with less emphasis solely on the individual needs of children in line with the "Getting it Right for Every Child" (GIRFEC) policy (Children and Young People's act 2014 Part 6: 52).

## Methodology

In order to answer the focus questions, I designed a questionnaire seeking qualitative and quantitative data to support my findings. I selected a group of experienced heads who have been in post for a minimum of ten years, having experienced the many changes which have taken place within the ELC sector over that period. In order to gain views reflective of staff registered with both the GTC and SSSC, I sent the questionnaire to head teachers, depute heads within primary schools and heads of centre from across the three sectorial areas of Glasgow city. The questionnaires (Appendix 1) were designed to address the four focus questions. They were sent to twelve local authority ELC leaders, five SSSC and seven GTC registered members of local authority staff. These staff members were selected as a reflective balance of staff currently employed to manage within the local authority ELC contexts. I received ten responses to the questionnaire. Findings (Appendix 2), both quantitative and qualitative, are summarised as follows:

**Focus question 1:**

To what extent do present leaders of ELC contexts understand the knowledge, skills and attributes required to lead teams of professionals?

On a scale of 0-5 how relevant do you believe the following qualities are for leaders in an ELC setting? (5 being very relevant and 0 not relevant at all)

	0	1	2	3	4	5
Vision						100%
Courage **					22%	78%
Passion					11%	89%
Emotional Intelligence					11%	89%
Judgement					22%	78%
Resilience					11%	89%
Persuasion				11%	11%	78%
Curiosity				11%	11%	78%

**Table 1: Skills and attributes**

From Table 1, it is apparent that all respondents had a strong belief that the attributes identified were extremely relevant for them as leaders. There was consensus that having vision was fundamental for leaders within ELC. The results suggest that those questioned had a strong understanding of the skills they required to undertake their responsibilities within their establishment with persuasion and curiosity being viewed as less important. Two respondents emphasised courage as an attribute that was essential to them which is interesting in the current political climate with aspirations to expand the ELC service.

In addition to the skills and attributes leaders thought important to the changing role of ELC leaders, I wanted to find out how important the sample thought each of the following roles were:

*On a scale of 0-5 how important do you view your role in the following? (5 being very important and 0 not important at all)*

	0	1	2	3	4	5
Setting vision & culture						100%
Engaging families						100%
Making improvements based on evidence & research					22%	78%
Strategic use of business skills				34%	22%	44%
Facilitating communications					22%	78%
Integrated working					11%	89%
Motivating & empowering staff						100%
Personal learning & development					22%	78%

**Table 2: Leadership role and responsibilities**

From Table 2 responses, it is evident that to motivate and empower staff, along with setting a strong vision and culture, was of the highest importance. There is also evidence that the engagement of families, and their ability to lead on this, was paramount. Of less importance are those aspects of their role linked to managerial tasks. This links very strongly to previous references included earlier in my enquiry where the emphasis moved from managing an ELC setting to leading with a focus on pedagogy. It can also be concluded from the findings that all those questioned had very strong beliefs about their role and the skills and attributes required to perform their duties as leader effectively.

**Focus question 2:**

To what extent do leaders have an understanding of their changing role within the ELC setting? How confident do they feel as leaders in terms of the political aspiration to expand and transform the service?

In the current climate of expansion and change, how confident do you feel as a leader in an ELC setting? (5 being very confident and 0 not confident at all)

0	1	2	3	4	5
11%		11%	44%	34%	

**Table 3: Leadership confidence**

*On a scale of 0-5 how confident do you feel in terms of pedagogical leadership? (5 being very confident to 0 not confident at all)*

0	1	2	3	4	5
			33%	56%	11%

**Table 4: Pedagogical leadership confidence**

The comparative data shown in Tables 3 and 4, reveal an important gap in terms of how confident leaders feel related to their role within the wider system, and that as pedagogical leaders in their own context. In general, leaders had greater confidence in their ability to lead pedagogy and learning in their centres than they had in their ability to cope with uncertain future changes in the roles of ELC leaders in general. There is a sense of anxiety related to the expansion of ELC and how local authorities will respond to these demands. There was also a feeling of disquiet from those leaders who were head teachers, as indicated in the following quotes.

**Comments made by respondents:**

*I feel very confident in my ability as a leader in my current place of work. I do not however feel confident that my role as head teacher is valued in the current climate of expansion and change.*

*I am extremely confident in my skills as an experienced head teacher and leader within the early years sector. I would always embrace opportunities for further quality CPD opportunities with colleagues at this level.*

There was some consensus across all respondents regarding the lack of support for serving heads, as the following quotes illustrate:

*I feel there is a direct lack of support for leaders in ELC.*

*Confidence varies depending on situations. I lack confidence due to constant changes in staffing resulting in improvements being at a slow pace. HR issues can be complex and stressful to deal with.*

*Weary with the changes and expectations without the human resource to support and concerned that those who are promoting the changes have never been practitioners in either education or early years.*

The written responses related to pedagogical leadership were more positive and reflected the confidence respondents felt in leading teaching and learning. However, there was still anxiety and uncertainty regarding the expansion of ELC and the quality of staff working in the sector, as exemplified below:

*I feel confident in my expertise in pedagogical leadership, but less confident that this expertise will secure me a viable future in early learning and childcare.*

*Can be challenging to build reflection and inquiry with all members of staff team.*

*From outwith the school very concerned as this does not appear to be a priority. From a personal perspective concerned at the lack of opportunity to build on my own knowledge but embrace any opportunity I get.*

*We are so busy managing on a day to day level that by the time I get to the pedagogical aspect of my job I have lost momentum and feel I am always playing catch up. I also feel I have to 'teach' some staff, as they are not always confident in various aspects of pedagogy and curriculum (through no fault of their own).*

In conclusion, there is concern regarding the lack of support available for leaders – especially by the local authority, uncertainty regarding the future of ELC, questions around the quality of staff and the current managerial structures within ELC establishments.

### **Focus question 3:**

*What support do serving leaders require to enable them to improve their leadership skills and build capacity?*

In order to address the question of the type of support respondents thought they needed to improve their leadership skills, the following data were collected: (see Table 5)

*In terms of support in improving your own leadership skills, please indicate from the following list those activities that would benefit you?*

Professional Learning – courses and training	78%
Professional Networks	78%
Professional reading and research	67%
Mentoring	44%
Coaching	44%
Leading on collaborative working	67%
Professional visits	100%
Peer support	78%

**Table 5: Learning activities**

From Table 5 it is clear that serving heads within ELC would value highly the opportunity to participate in professional visits. This may be indicative of the levels of confidence affected by the potential changes and expansion of the service. Of the other CPD opportunities more than three quarters of respondents desired further opportunities to work within networks and engage with colleagues for CPD purposes or for professional support. Less than half showed an interest in mentoring or coaching, which may again be reflective of the generally low levels of self-efficacy among these respondents in the ELC sector, the lack of self confidence in their abilities to effectively coach and support colleagues across the system.



*Would you like support to improve your leadership skills and capacity?*

Yes – 78%	No – 11%	No comment – 11%
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**Table 6: Demand for leadership support**

How could your local authority support your aspirations to improve?

According to Table 6, more than three quarters of respondents expressed an interest in receiving support to improve their leadership skills and capacity. This is reflective of the level of professionalism amongst serving heads and an aspiration and desire to improve and build on current capacity. It shows a willingness to engage in CPD (as expected within the professional standards of GTC and SSSC) within and across the system.

The qualitative comments show coherent responses in terms of how respondents felt the local authority could support them in the above, as exemplified by the following comments:

*Support and recognition that you are ‘out there’*

*Scheduled individual meetings with a Line Manager, more than once a year would be beneficial.*

*Quality CPD opportunities specific to this role.*

*CPD on leadership styles and what works best for particular situations*

*Support in developing capacity of staff to ensure a quality service.*

*Ensure that there are relevant courses and training available to heads.*

*Ensure that what is available is equitable, fair and transparent.*

*Supply cover to enable heads to attend courses and training.*

The uncertainty respondents felt regarding expansion of ELC and the conflict between management responsibilities and pedagogical leadership was also evident, as shown by the following comments:

*I feel to be a more effective leader the authority would need to look at the management side of my role. A leader will be involved in leading change whilst a manager will follow through and ensure the changes take place. A lot of my time can be taken up focusing on systems and procedures and ensuring tasks are completed. I do believe however that as leader I do strive to motivate and inspire my staff team in achieving our shared goals and vision*

*Ongoing opportunities to work with others in small groups such as trios; I am aware that there are several of these in operation and that it is perhaps down to individuals to initiate*

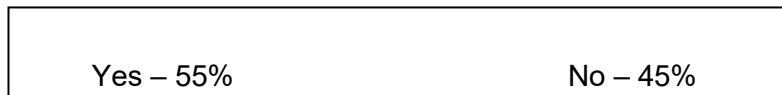
*setting one of these groups up. Time, workload and staffing issues can be a major constraint to leaving the nursery however, without opportunities to have professional dialogue and debate, it can be challenging to consider how new developments can be planned for and managed. Looking at how existing meetings are conducted may free up some time to spend on more valuable leadership activities.*

#### **Focus question 4:**

#### **What knowledge/understanding do leaders within ELC have of system leadership?**

In view of the recent importance and prominence of system leadership, the following was asked of these respondents in ELC:

*Do you understand what is meant by the term “system leadership”?*



**Table 7: System leadership**

Just over half of the respondents said that they understood the term ‘system leadership’. From additional comments provided it can be concluded that there is some confusion among this group as to what the concept means:

*My understanding of system leaders is to support and develop existing leaders, not replace them (this seems to imply the term applies to local authority and possibly national level leaders?)*

*Leadership from the authority’s point of view rather than individual leaders/establishments.*

*Systematic leadership is a system which looks at the bigger picture, the barriers, cultural etc. It looks at the organisation before looking at individual leaders. It identifies what needs to be fixed in the organisation, what would make it better for the individuals to be part of resulting in clear objectives and vision. Using the fish tank metaphor it explains it so well ‘there is no point polishing the fish and putting them back into the dirty tank’ meaning we have to look at the service and the need to change whilst also looking at the staff/leaders.*

*Not fully, but my understanding is that it is collective leadership of a group of leaders, to enable leadership of education itself on a wider scale.*

*It is to do with working with other schools outside your own school.*

*My understanding is that these leaders would work within and beyond their own schools or establishments on support and development.*

*As a new term unknown to me I feel it will be an area of concern as what is the purpose of such a system?*

Interestingly, only two of the above responses are accurate in understanding the concept of system leadership, as defined in the emergent literature at this time.

## Recommendations

Having considered the data gathered and the views of serving heads on the four focus questions, I would recommend the following:

- Opportunities for appropriate leadership CPD should be considered by the local authority with emphasis on supporting professional networks, peer support and high quality training aimed at improving self-efficacy, building leadership capacity and nurturing and preparing aspiring future leaders within the ELC sector (Dunlop 2008).
- A review of current meeting structures is underway; the local authority should take into account data such as that gathered through this enquiry to shape future area and city-wide meetings providing opportunities for heads to participate in professional dialogue, engage with qualitative and quantitative research, facilitate trios and professional visits and provide pastoral support – in short, there is a need for sustainable Quality Improvement Partnerships (QIPs) for ELC leaders, in order to provide support for each other during transition, and share expertise in improving the quality of their service
- The local authority should support heads in engaging with the SCEL framework that is the basis of the Fellowship programme; developing their understanding of system leadership as a driver for quality improvement with aspirations for heads to become “system thinkers”. System leadership is a necessary element of QIPs. The SCEL framework should be further developed responding to the requirements and aspirations of leaders within the ELC context (Dimmock, 2016; Wingrave 2015).
- The local authority should ensure that heads are consulted regarding future expansion of the service and consider the management structure of establishments with a focus on transparency and fairness.
- The questionnaire used for this enquiry should be refined and then disseminated to deputes and team leaders within ELC settings to gather wider views to enable future planning around leadership, workforce development and CPD opportunities. Staff with the BA in childhood studies need adequate professional development opportunities to focus on leadership and experience courses with an emphasis on educational leadership and management (Wingrave &McMahon 2015).

Through this enquiry it has become evident that there are unique challenges in developing system leadership across ELC (Blatchford & Sum 2013). There is work to be undertaken in clarifying within and across the ELC system (macro) the meaning and purpose of system leadership. ELC leaders and managers need to be “system thinkers” – understanding the whole of the system and not just the parts (Dimmock 2016). With the Scottish Government’s aspiration to expand ELC, system leadership must be considered as important a driver for heads to focus on their role, as high quality pedagogical leadership and improving outcomes for all learners (Wingrave 2015).

There is concern regarding opportunities for staff within the sector (GTC & SSSC registered) as to the current CPD opportunities available; there is an urgent need for nurturing system leaders and system thinkers to effect change and improvements impacting on outcomes for learners with a focus on raising attainment (Blatchford & Sum 2013). Indeed, system leadership is vital in setting up QIPs among ELC centres, to enable them to develop their staff professionally and provide collaborative support for their improvement. As Blatchford & Sum (2013, p.13) state,

*“Improving the quality of the workforce and helping leaders to support each other to improve must certainly feature as core drivers”*

## My Reflection

On reflection, participation in the SCEL Fellowship programme has provided me with a new optimism in terms of my role within the wider system. It has afforded me the thinking time to consider the national context and where I may be best placed to influence and support colleagues within the system. I have participated in events locally and nationally where I have had the opportunity to discuss and evaluate my thinking related to leadership and pedagogy; discussing national policy and drivers for change.

I have had the opportunity to engage with current research and participate in professional dialogue; I have considered what is meant by enquiry and how this process influences practice, enabling me to justify or defend my views regarding leadership within the system. I have been supported in broadening my views of leadership and have had access to high quality support from academics and researchers. I believe that I have developed as a system thinker and I am now able to more confidently contribute during discussions related to Scottish education and the wider influences on the system.

Participation in the programme has been enjoyable, challenging and empowering; an opportunity to develop as an individual and aspire to effect change, improve outcomes for learners and educators and engage with research to improve leadership capacity in myself and others.

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