



## Early Years leadership development during workforce crisis: perspectives of 24 UK training providers

Mona Sakr, Kayla Halls & Kerris Cooper

**To cite this article:** Mona Sakr, Kayla Halls & Kerris Cooper (2024) Early Years leadership development during workforce crisis: perspectives of 24 UK training providers, *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 32:1, 101-113, DOI: [10.1080/1350293X.2023.2234108](https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2023.2234108)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2023.2234108>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 24 Jul 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1034



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Early Years leadership development during workforce crisis: perspectives of 24 UK training providers

Mona Sakr <sup>a</sup>, Kayla Halls<sup>a</sup> and Kerris Cooper<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Education, Middlesex University, London, UK; <sup>b</sup>Education Policy Institute, London, UK

## ABSTRACT

There is growing global recognition of the contribution that leadership development can make to improving quality and outcomes in the Early Years (EY) education sector. UK governments are responding to such evidence through the creation of new national qualifications for EY professionals across the sector and the expansion of publicly funded digitally mediated leadership development. At the same time, the sector is experiencing an acute workforce crisis with a majority of English providers self-reporting that they are struggling to recruit the staff they need. In this article, we explore how diverse training providers across the UK conceptualise their offer of leadership development in the context of a workforce crisis. Based on interviews and focus groups with a total of 24 organisations, we present three needs that guide leadership development in the sector going forward. These are the needs to: (1) embed leadership development in a coherent workforce strategy, (2) build capacity in EY settings to support engagement with leadership development and (3) emphasise collaboration over competition in the design of leadership development programmes. These findings have implications for the next steps that governments and training providers take to support EY leadership as part of a healthy workforce across the sector.

## KEYWORDS

Early Years (EY); workforce; leadership; professional learning; professional development; workforce strategy

## Introduction

There is growing global recognition of the contribution that leadership development can make to improving quality and outcomes across the EY sector. A review conducted by Douglass (2019) for the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) highlights improvements in environmental quality and children's outcomes that are possible when effective leadership is subject to significant investment. In the UK, we are seeing attempts to embrace the shift towards leadership development. In England for example, the Department for Education have launched as of Autumn 2022 the National Professional Qualification in Early Years Leadership (NPQEYL). This is the first large-scale qualification that can be accessed by all leaders in practice without

**CONTACT** Mona Sakr  [m.sakr@mdx.ac.uk](mailto:m.sakr@mdx.ac.uk)

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

cost both in state-maintained settings and private and voluntary initiatives (PVI). Simultaneously though, the EY sector in the UK faces a workforce crisis. In 2021, the Early Years Alliance – a training and advocacy body representing English providers – published the report ‘Breaking Point: The Impact of Recruitment and Retention Challenges in the Early Years Sector in England’. The report, based on 1395 responses from EY settings, found that 84% of providers who responded to the survey were struggling to recruit the staff they need and just under half were limiting the number of places for children in their setting as a result of staffing shortages. More than a third of those who responded to the survey said they were considering leaving the sector themselves, with the most common reasons being poor pay, poor conditions and feeling undervalued.

Focusing on leadership development in this context begs the question of what leadership development means and looks like amidst such difficulty and disruption. In this article, we tap into the perspectives and experiences of 24 diverse training providers across the UK (16 in England, 3 in Wales, 3 in Scotland, one in Northern Ireland and one with separate branches in England and Wales) to understand more about the current emphases in EY leadership development, including the expansion of leadership development via digitally mediated professional learning, as well as what training providers see as healthy orientations for the future of policy and practice in this field.

## Background

The following sections consider conceptualisations of leadership in EY, the global landscape of EY leadership development and the parameters of the current workforce crisis in UK EY.

### *Leadership in Early Years*

Conceptualisations of leadership in EY have been heavily influenced by the economic and political contexts in which EY providers operate. In the UK, EY operates as a mixed economy with some provision through the state-maintained sector and some through a marketplace of private and voluntary initiatives (PVI). It has been noted that a heavy reliance on PVI has influenced models of leadership in the sector, with the use and application of business models of leadership particularly during the 1990s in some parts of the world, including the US, UK and Australia (Nicholson et al. 2020; Osgood 2004). Such conceptualisations of leadership tend to draw heavily on the vision of a charismatic entrepreneur who can ensure financial profitability while upholding high standards of education and care (Campbell-Barr and Leeson 2016).

More recently, there has been a growing focus on relational models of leadership that focus more on pedagogy (Campbell-Barr and Leeson 2016, 50; see also Northouse 2015). The concept of distributed leadership has become a popular way of thinking about leadership in the sector, influenced by Scandinavian models of EY, with an emphasis on interdependent collaboration. Leadership seen through this lens moves away from the charismatic ‘boss’ towards the creation of a generative space between individuals working together (Waniganayake 2003; Heikka and Hujala 2013; Heikka, Waniganayake, and Hujala 2013). Distributed leadership can be linked to what others define as ‘pedagogical leadership’, which places an emphasis on leading pedagogy regardless of formal hierarchies (Murray and McDowall Clark 2013).

## ***Global landscape of EY leadership development***

In our global systematic review of leadership development in EY (Sakr, Bonetti, and Halls 2022), we found that a majority of articles focusing on leadership development in EY focused on the development of pedagogical, rather than positional, leadership. Of the 26 articles we included in our review, 19 focused on developing pedagogical leadership across EY professionals, regardless of organisational hierarchies. Within this focus on pedagogical leadership however, there was nuance as to how leadership was conceptualised and what was emphasised in the context of leadership development.

A number of the leadership development programmes aimed to enhance participants' understanding of change management and continuous improvement. Arbour et al. (2016), for example, focused on the benefits of combining training in pedagogical content knowledge for EY professionals with a focus on continuous quality improvement (CQI). They found that by supporting professionals to use CQI, EY teachers were empowered to bring about change in their organisation and to embed pedagogical advancements more effectively. Similarly, in their leadership development programmes, both Davis (2012) and Page and Eadie (2019) explored the potential of training in CQI as a means to enable EY professionals to enhance their day to day pedagogical leadership.

Other leadership development programmes in EY have employed the methodology of action research rather than CQI. Baldacchino et al. (2015) and Duffy-Fagan, Newman, and Leggett (2021) celebrate the use of action research as a way to facilitate the development of EY 'teacher leaders', who see themselves as leading as well as teaching. Similarly, Fonsén and Ukkonen-Mikkola (2019) used participatory action research as the central way to develop pedagogical leadership among 32 Finnish EY teachers. Their overarching research, focused on multiple small-scale action research projects among EY leaders, identified advocacy and activism as fundamental aspects of EY leadership (Woodrow and Busch 2008). Henderson (2017) evaluated action research projects with three school teams in Australia, concluding that action research is an effective tool for leadership development because it effectively enables more collaboration between EY professionals.

An emphasis on critical reflection was a common feature across the EY leadership development programmes we reviewed (e.g. Diamond 2014; Duffy-Fagan, Newman, and Leggett 2021; Skattebol and Arthur 2014). While methods of critical reflection were different across the articles, there was a general commitment to using critical reflection as a way to connect EY leaders to 'the bigger picture' of EY education as a sector. For example, Carroll-Lind et al. (2016) supported EY pedagogical leaders through coaching and mentoring that worked explicitly with cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), so that EY leaders could better see the tensions between day-to-day decision making and systemic realities in EY. The aim of the leadership development in this case was to encourage EY leaders to connect their own dilemmas and decisions with the 'bigger picture' of EY. While they did not explicitly develop skills of advocacy and activism as such, this kind of approach supports greater systems thinking and decision-making, which in turn is likely to lead to a greater preparedness to speak out and mobilise (Caudle, Moran, and Hobbs 2014; Duffy-Fagan, Newman, and Leggett 2021).

Picking up on the idea of 'identity work' suggested by Henderson (2017), we can see an emerging emphasis in leadership development on the need for not just critical reflection

but a deeper reflexivity among leaders. Layen (2015) emphasised encouraging self-awareness as a foundation for leadership development. Similarly, Nicholson and Kroll (2015) stress the need for reflexivity in their study of oral inquiry as a way to develop leadership among EY professionals. Working within a community of practice of EY professionals, they explored the power of oral inquiry protocols as a way to empower EY professionals to negotiate, with critical reflexivity, the day-to-day challenges they face in their practice.

In summary, contemporary approaches to leadership development in EY tend to emphasise pedagogical over positional leadership. Within this, there is a focus on change methodologies, collaboration, critical reflexivity and growing foundations for advocacy work.

### ***UK Early Years and workforce crisis***

OECD statistics suggest that EY provision is uniformly the 'poor cousin' of the education system in all four nations of the UK. Each year of UK education spending per student aged 5–18 is well over 10,000 USD, while across the age range of 0–5 years, the spend per child is about 4,000 USD (OECD 'Education at a Glance' statistics, 2022). As with many countries around the globe, EY in England is provided through a mixed economy of state-maintained settings and a significant segment of private and voluntary initiatives (PVIIs). How such mixed economies are divided and organised varies between countries. In various contexts around the world, including in the UK, there is recognition that in reality the mixed economy leads to complexity and fragmentation, and in particular, the creation of a two-tier system in which the status, pay and conditions of the staff in state-maintained settings is significantly superior to the status, pay and conditions of staff in PVIIs (Bonetti 2019). Similar fragmentation has been noted in research in other contexts, including Australia (Cumming, Sumsion, and Wong 2015) and the US (Johnson Harbach 2015).

Following on from this economic reality, the English EY workforce is characterised by fragmentation and under-investment. Pay and conditions within the sector are poor and remuneration is comparable to that received by unskilled retail workers (Bonetti 2019). There is general recognition that the qualification and training pathways that cater to the sector are confused, under-developed and unsustainable (Elwick et al. 2018) and there is scepticism across the sector about the rewards associated with higher-level qualifications, where no increases in pay or status are ensured, or even likely, as a result of earning such qualifications (Early Years Workforce Commission 2021).

It is generally recognised, including by government, that UK EY and particularly English EY is experiencing a workforce crisis. In the 2021 DfE annual survey of childcare providers in England, the total number of paid staff working in the sector was 328,500, significantly lower than the 344,100 in the sector the previous year. Alongside these national statistics, the Early Years Alliance conducted a survey in 2021 of 1395 EY settings and found that 84% of providers self-report struggling to recruit the staff they need and just under half report that staffing difficulties are making it necessary to limit the places they can offer to children. When asked about leaving the sector, individuals reported that the gravest challenges were feeling undervalued alongside the poor pay and conditions, mirroring the concerns raised by Bonetti (2019) in her thorough analysis of the sector workforce. In some local authorities in particular, workforce shortages are

prompting settings to close and a shortage of places for children. Between August 2021 and August 2022, 100 local authorities in England experienced a decline in the number of EY places available over a year period and 26 local authorities experienced a drop of more than 5% in the number of places they had available. This is a social justice issue because, as Johnson Harbach (2015) points out relating to the US context, the provision of EY education and care aligns with structural inequalities. The areas most likely to experience drops in provision are those with the most need among children and families for high-quality provision and support.

## Our research

Our research seeks to deepen understanding of how leadership development specifically designed for the EY sector can address and engage with the complex and fragmented realities of the sector. We are interested in not just the practical and logistical aspects of design and delivery, but deeper questions about what leadership development means in a context of workforce crisis prompted by poor economic planning. We approach the research in the pragmatist tradition, where we wish to collaboratively reflect with those ‘on the ground’ to generate helpful insights and ways forward via research (King 2022; Kaushik and Walsh 2019). The research we present here is part of a funded research project we carried out that was more broadly focused on the landscape of leadership development across the UK and its future, with a particular focus on how digital mediation could be used to support the development of leadership development. In this article we focus on the findings that relate to these two research questions:

- How do training providers conceptualise, design and deliver leadership development in the context of a workforce crisis?
- What do they see as the future of leadership development given this difficult context?

In order to contribute to these dialogues, we engaged in interviews and focus groups with 24 diverse training providers across the UK, all of whom offer some form of leadership development for EY educators. The training providers were diverse in terms of size, audience (e.g. the part of the early years sector most likely to participate in the programmes they offered), geographical regions served, as well as content and modes of delivery in their leadership development offer. We asked about their current provision, as well as their thoughts for the future of leadership development in the national context. For some organisations, we held multiple conversations and hosted a mix of individual interviews and focus groups depending on what was most convenient and relevant for the particular organisation. Across the 24 training providers included in our study, we conducted a total of 27 one-to-one interviews and three focus groups. All of these conversations took place online via the platforms Zoom or MS Teams, depending on the preference of the organisation we were inviting to participate. The interviews and focus groups lasted between 30 min and an hour.

Prior to data collection, we obtained institutional ethical approval. We have taken the approach of anonymising our data but recognise that some details beyond the name of an individual or organisation can jeopardise this anonymity. For example, there is only one

large training provider and advocacy body for EY in Northern Ireland and so, in reality, it is impossible to anonymise our references to them. Our participants were made fully aware of the limitations of anonymity prior to participation and we have checked all quotes that we wish to publish again with them. We have maintained the basics of anonymity (e.g. pseudonyms, and organisational descriptors rather than names) as a way to focus both participants and readers on the perspectives and experiences shared, rather than the politics of the sector and the role of particular organisations within it. We recognise that there are also ethical considerations that arise relating to the use of online platforms for data collection. While the convenience of such platforms made it possible for a greater range of organisations and individuals to participate in our research, what could be articulated in the conversations and the rapport established between interviewer and interviewee was shaped by the affordances of video conferencing.

Transcription of the interviews and focus groups was carried out professionally and then checked by a member of the team. The particular topic that we focus on in this article – leadership development in the context of workforce crisis – came to light through iterative and reflexive analysis of the data. To enable such emergence, we followed the process of inductive thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019; 2020). In this process, keywords are used to build up a set of codes, which are then applied across the transcripts, and grouped into emerging themes. In subsequent analyses, we focused in on particular topics, issues and questions for further exploration and interrogation of the data. The issue of workforce crisis came to light as we considered an initial theme in the data of how providers were responding practically to the constraints in the EY context and the hectic lives of EY professionals. In focusing on this, we noticed many explicit mentions in participants' responses of recruitment, retention and the funding context and we sought to analyse this more fully. We searched the transcripts again for relevant comments and organised these comments as a series of three intertwining threads, as outlined below.

## Findings

When we focused specifically on understanding the approach to leadership development within a context of workforce crisis, three interwoven threads emerged from the interviews. These were the need to:

- (1) Embed leadership development in a coherent workforce strategy
- (2) Build capacity for leadership development in individual settings
- (3) Design leadership development around connection rather than competition

### **Embed leadership development in a coherent workforce strategy**

There was a keen awareness among our participants of the current crises surrounding recruitment, retention and progression in the sector, with particular attention paid to the staffing difficulties that this then creates for leaders in the sector. There was a strong and shared sense among participants that initiatives and programmes relating to leadership development could not sit alone but rather needed to be part of a wider,

coherent package of support for the sector. Leadership was conceptualised therefore as one aspect of a workforce system, which needed to be urgently addressed through an effective government-level strategy.

You know when it comes to a workforce development strategy, we haven't really got one. This shows how these [leadership development programmes] fit into the learning pathways of staff and the need to pitch to different levels. (Carol, Private EY Training Company in England)

I'm concerned that we are going to have in the next maybe five years a bit of a death in our early years leaders because we've got a big problem with recruitment and retention. And the early years sector always grows its own leaders ... So, if we're struggling to get those qualified practitioners into the settings how are we going to ensure that we are really growing that leadership workforce? (Annette, Social Enterprise Training Provider in England)

There was a concern that in focusing on leadership development, this might act as a distraction from the 'real' issues of the workforce crisis, that is, baseline recruitment and retention:

I mean these leaders are in the rooms, working with the children. They are in numbers [i.e. they count towards regulatory ratios for staff 'on the floor' with children]. Retention is a nightmare. Recruitment is a nightmare. Sickness is a nightmare. The doorbell is ringing, the parents are going to complain about this and this staff member wonders why they've not been paid for the holiday and the funding needs doing and the payroll needs doing, and you know ... I think these leaders are absolutely drowning in work that needs to be done, and so, focusing on themselves takes a backseat. (Sara, Lead Trainer in a Non-Profit EY Training Provider)

The sense of pressure is echoed in the following comments.

I feel like we're at such a crisis point in the early years that although I want to think about leadership for the future ... it just feels like we're firefighting constantly to get a pipeline into the sector and retain those people ... So, I suppose I'd like to see investment in it [leadership development], but really until we start investing more broadly in early years, it feels that we're focusing on the wrong end of the issue almost. (Laura, EY Lecturer at a University in England)

Our nursery managers are under a huge amount of pressure at the moment, I'm sure you've heard about the staffing crisis in early years, the lack of level three practitioners. We're just struggling to recruit qualified practitioners ... I know it's a real struggle for managers to even just do their day to day role, let alone sort of doing the leadership development, I think it's kind of quite low down on their list. (Clara, Private Nursery Group in England)

With new initiatives such as the NPQEYL there was a concern that leadership would be seen as a 'fix-it' mechanism, rather than an embedded part of workforce regeneration and sustainability. Taken together, participants' response highlight the need for a more cohesive policy approach that positions recruitment, retention and progression in relation to one another rather than isolating them and dealing with them separately. Leadership development needs to sit within a clear workforce strategy in each of the four UK nations.

### **Build capacity for leadership development at the level of settings**

Providers were clear that settings need financial support to invest in effective leadership development. It was not only that programmes needed to be free at the point of access since setting budgets are severely limited in relation to professional development (Ceeda 2019) and have only got tighter since Covid (Early Years Alliance 2021), but



also that there needs to be a support system in place enabling settings to cover staff absences generated through intensive leadership development. Finding staffing cover was seen as a major issue in supporting settings to engage in leadership development and training. Providers are responding to this limitation in their own programmes through various innovations, including:

- Providing training at the weekend:

We know there's some appetite but it had to be on a Saturday really to be able to get people along because recruitment and retention is just so acute at the minute that there is no capacity within settings. (Gail, Early Years Lead at a University in England)

- Making more use of online provision:

What we found is that's much better for learners because it's more flexible with their working days, because a lot of our learners finish at six and so they're able to log on at half six and they've not got worry about commuting or ... No, they can go home, they can sit there and eat dinner, and still engaged with the training. (Ellen, Organisation for Out of School Childcare Clubs in Wales)

- And taking a more bitesize approach to leadership development programmes:

I think the biggest thing to take away is that it needs to be quick because practitioners just want to get home at the end of the day, they don't want to reflect. But actually if you do quick reflections at the end of the day, then they realise the benefit of it. (Brenda, Private EY Leadership Training Provider in Scotland)

At the same time as making these adaptations though, there were also concerns that these solutions fed into a culture where staff had to make time for their own leadership development, unsupported by their setting and the sector more generally. If there is no time and space within work for professional development, this sends a negative message about the importance of leadership development.

In our community, if you take away that that physical contact where people talk about all the richness of things that happen outside of the actual content of the programme, I think there's possibly an unintended consequence there. (Martin, Non-profit Early Years Organisation in Northern Ireland)

In my view, leadership development is about people; it's about people and relationships. And that's quite difficult to do online. (Lorraine, Childcare Group in Scotland)

EY practice done well, is inherently hands on ... I still think that leaders deserve to be inspired by each other's practice and the learning environment that they're building and how to help their teams to build phenomenally engaging and appropriate learning environment. I know that some of my most meaningful leadership development things were visiting other people's settings and seeing how the children engage with it. (Lana, Social Enterprise Training Provider in England)

Providers of leadership development are adapting to gaps in resources that settings face, but collectively they recognise that this is far from ideal. With greater investment at a

setting level, there would be much more extensive and in-depth engagement in leadership development. Most importantly, the engagement would come from across the board, including from settings that are struggling and in areas of disadvantage, rather than finding it isolated to those settings serving more affluent communities.

### **Design leadership development with a focus on collaboration over competition**

Participants placed a strong emphasis on the importance of leadership development programmes as spaces and times for authentic connection between leaders. Many providers talked about the design of their programmes in terms of fostering as much dialogue and relationship-building between participants as possible.

We want to provide a space where leaders could come together and that we didn't have a sort of predetermined curriculum ... it would sort of grow organically, with input from them. (Matt, Education Charity in Wales)

What's been great is that we've been able to encourage our learners to share information and to share experiences with each other ... they can share information and encourage each other as well. I think that's one of the main things, I think when we offer our training, we provide opportunities to share information and to encourage each other. Because like I said in the beginning, there are so many examples of good practice going on, other people need to hear it. (Megan, UK EY Training and Advocacy Body, Welsh Branch)

Predominantly it's around supporting conversations between leaders and managers in the early years. (Audrey, UK EY Training and Advocacy Body, Welsh Branch)

The emphasis on connection and learning from each other displaced the focus on business, which in turn would position other players in the sector as potential competition, as Annette highlights:

I think, particularly in the PVI sector because, typically they will see another setting as a competition. So, building up a network beyond your geographical region or area or locality is important ... you've got to meet another leader who's way over in the east and actually that forms a relationship, and you can bounce ideas off people, you can go visit and there isn't that element of competition. (Annette, Social Enterprise Training Provider in England)

While the focus on collaboration over competition was strong in the explanations of programme design, training providers were deeply aware of the competitive realities of the sector and the need to work with this:

There is still sadly the element of competition that's very strong in the EY in the monetization of the sector, so I think that could be a barrier ... The owners and the managers need to understand their role in facilitating change, not to be better than the setting next to them, but to be better than they were the day before, because then everyone benefits ... (Neil, Owner and Manager of a Private Nursery Company in England)

## **Discussion**

Findings from our interviews and focus groups with 24 training providers across the UK offering leadership development, highlight three needs that must be taken into account when considering the future of leadership development in a context of workforce crisis.

Firstly, training providers highlight the need to embed leadership development in a coherent workforce strategy, which understands the solutions for issues with recruitment, retention and progression as interconnected. Secondly, while training providers could list various adaptations they had made to their offer of leadership development in order to support EY settings to engage more readily, they ultimately hoped for a government-led boost in the capacity of EY settings to support deeper engagement with leadership development. Additional resources were required to support settings to embrace richer forms of leadership development, which demanded more time, commitment and material resource. Finally, training providers were passionate about the need to emphasise collaboration and connection in leadership development rather than cultivating a business mentality among leaders where co-participants saw themselves as competitors. A more unified sector was the ambition of all those we interviewed and the need to learn from each other was seen as fundamental.

Based on our findings, there are two calls to action for UK governments. Firstly, there is a need for governments to ensure a coherent workforce strategy for EY, which ties together recruitment, retention, progression and leadership development. Secondly, there is a need to offer more incentivisation for settings to engage in high-quality leadership development opportunities, which demand time, travel and material investment. If the future of leadership development depends on clever, but ultimately constraining, adaptations made by training providers, this will impede the potential of leadership development to foster radical improvements across the sector. If programmes such as the NPQEYL are to be effective in genuinely improving the sector, individual settings – and particularly those in the most financially precarious contexts – need practical support for individual participants to engage fully. Our findings highlight the role of training providers in advocating for the sector. They are best positioned to know how leadership development can be most effective and can use this unified understanding as part of how they design leadership development as well as pushing back against the demand to jeopardise the quality of leadership development as a result of the chronic under-investment in the sector. It is not up to training providers to ‘fix’ the lack of time available for leadership development. At the same time, we recognise the complex reality that exists for many of the training providers we interviewed, which operate as private companies reliant on adding value to their members. It would be helpful to consider this landscape of training and advocacy bodies, and the dilemma with which they are presented, as part of the aforementioned workforce strategy, which must include a full exploration of professional learning contexts across the sector and how these fit into the political and economic realities of EY.

We recognise that there are limitations and gaps in the research we present here. There will inevitably be providers in the landscape to whom we have not spoken, though we are confident to have included the ‘main players’ in the UK. We acknowledge that our research did not set out to find out about leadership development in the context of workforce crisis, but that this focus emerged through our analysis. Had we focused on leadership development in the context of workforce crisis from the beginning, we would have developed a richer exploration of the issues. We hope that future research can develop this focus and give further thought to how leadership development is best supported through coherent workforce planning.

## Ethical approval

Education Research Ethics Committee, Middlesex University, Application Number 20740, Approval received 27 January 2022.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by Nuffield Foundation [grant number FR23237].

## ORCID

Mona Sakr  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3057-2758>

## References

- Arbour, M., H. Yoshikawa, S. Atwood, F. R. D. Mellado, F. G. Ossa, E. T. Villareal, and C. E. Snow. 2016. "Improving Quality and Child Outcomes in Early Childhood Education by Redefining the Role Afforded to Teacher in Professional Development: A Continuous Quality Improvement Learning Collaborative among Public Preschools in Chile." *Society for Research in Educational Effectiveness*. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED566990.pdf>.
- Baldacchino, A., R. Doiron, M. Gabriel, A. Roach O'Keefe, and J. McKenna. 2015. "From Child-Minders to Professionals: Insights from an Action Research Project on Prince Edward Island." *Canadian Children* 40 (1): 111–129.
- Bonetti, S. 2019. "The Early Years Workforce in England." Accessed January 24, 2023. [https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/The-early-years-workforce-in-England\\_EPI.pdf](https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/The-early-years-workforce-in-England_EPI.pdf).
- Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2019. "Reflecting on Reflexive Thematic Analysis." *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 11 (4): 589–597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>.
- Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2020. "One Size Fits All? What Counts as Quality Practice in (Reflexive) Thematic Analysis?" *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 18 (3): 328–352. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238>.
- Campbell-Barr, V., and C. Leeson. 2016. *Quality and Leadership in the Early Years: Research, Theory and Practice*. SAGE.
- Carroll-Lind, J., S. Smorti, K. Ord, and L. Robinson. 2016. "Building Pedagogical Leadership Knowledge in Early Childhood Education." *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 41 (4): 28–35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/183693911604100404>.
- Caudle, L. A., M. J. Moran, and M. K. Hobbs. 2014. "The Potential of Communities of Practice as Contexts for the Development of Agentic Teacher Leaders: A Three-Year Narrative of one Early Childhood Teacher's Journey." *Action in Teacher Education* 36 (1): 45–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01626620.2013.850124>.
- Ceeda. 2019. "About Early Years: Early Years Sector Skills Survey." <https://www.eymatters.co.uk/ceeda-about-early-years-workforce-report-2019/>.
- Cumming, T., J. Sumsion, and S. Wong. 2015. "Rethinking Early Childhood Workforce Sustainability in the Context of Australia's Early Childhood Education and Care Reforms." *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy* 9 (1): 2. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40723-015-0005-z>.
- Davis, G. 2012. "A Documentary Analysis of the use of Leadership and Change Theory in Changing Practice in Early Years Settings." *Early Years* 32 (3): 266–276. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2011.638278>.

- Diamond, A. 2014. "Pre-service Early Childhood Educators' Leadership Development Through Reflective Engagement with Experiential Service Learning and Leadership Literature." *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 39 (4): 12–20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/183693911403900403>.
- Douglass, A. L. 2019. "Leadership for Quality Early Childhood Education and Care." OECD Education Working Paper No. 211. <http://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=EDU/WKP%282019%2919&docLanguage=En>.
- Duffy-Fagan, M., L. Newman, and N. Leggett. 2021. "Critically Reflective Mentoring Within Team-Based Leadership: 'Having Conversations That Matter'." *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2021.2006798>.
- Early Years Alliance. 2021. *Breaking Point: The Impact of Recruitment and Retention Challenges on the Early Years Sector in England*. London: Early Years Alliance. [https://www.eyalliance.org.uk/sites/default/files/breaking\\_point\\_early\\_years\\_alliance\\_2\\_december\\_2021.pdf](https://www.eyalliance.org.uk/sites/default/files/breaking_point_early_years_alliance_2_december_2021.pdf).
- Early Years Workforce Commission. 2021. "A Workforce in Crisis: Saving Our Early Years." Accessed January 24, 2023. [https://www.pacey.org.uk/Pacey/media/Website-files/Non-PACEY%20documents%20\(PDFs\)/a-workforce-in-crisis-saving-our-early-years.pdf](https://www.pacey.org.uk/Pacey/media/Website-files/Non-PACEY%20documents%20(PDFs)/a-workforce-in-crisis-saving-our-early-years.pdf).
- Elwick, A., J. Osgood, L. Robertson, M. Sakr, and D. Wilson. 2018. "In Pursuit of Quality: Early Childhood Qualifications and Training Policy." *Journal of Education Policy* 33 (4): 510–525.
- Fonsén, E., and T. Ukkonen-Mikkola. 2019. "Early Childhood Education Teachers' Professional Development Towards Pedagogical Leadership." *Educational Research* 61 (2): 181–196. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2019.1600377>.
- Heikka, J., and E. Hujala. 2013. "Early Childhood Leadership Through the Lens of Distributed Leadership." *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 21 (4): 568–580. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2013.845444>.
- Heikka, J., M. Waniganayake, and E. Hujala. 2013. "Contextualizing Distributed Leadership Within Early Childhood Education." *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 41 (1): 30–44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143212462700>.
- Henderson, L. 2017. "Someone Had to Have Faith in Them as Professionals': An Evaluation of an Action Research Project to Develop Educational Leadership Across the Early Years." *Educational Action Research* 25 (3): 387–401. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2016.1173566>.
- Johnson Harbach, M. 2015. "Childcare Market Failure." *Utah Law Review* 3 (3). <https://dc.law.utah.edu/ulr/vol2015/iss3/3>
- Kaushik, V., and C. A. Walsh. 2019. "Pragmatism as a Research Paradigm and its Implications for Social Work Research." *Social Sciences* 8: 255. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci8090255>.
- King, R. 2022. "The Utility of Pragmatism in Educational Research." *Creative Education* 13 (10): 3153–3161. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2022.1310199>.
- Layen, S. 2015. "Do Reflections on Personal Autobiography as Captured in Narrated Life-Stories Illuminate Leadership Development in the Field of Early Childhood?" *Professional Development in Education* 41 (2): 273–289. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2014.986814>.
- Murray, J., and R. McDowall Clark. 2013. "Reframing Leadership as a Participative Pedagogy: The Working Theories of Early Years Professionals." *Early Years* 33 (3): 289–301. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2013.781135>.
- Nicholson, J. M., and L. Kroll. 2015. "Developing Leadership for Early Childhood Professionals Through Oral Inquiry: Strengthening Equity Through Making Particulars Visible in Dilemmas of Practice." *Early Child Development and Care* 185 (1): 17–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2014.903939>.
- Nicholson, J., K. Kuhl, H. Maniates, B. Lin, and S. Bonetti. 2020. "A Review of the Literature on Leadership in Early Childhood: Examining Epistemological Foundations and Considerations of Social Justice." *Early Child Development and Care* 190 (2): 91–122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2018.1455036>.
- Northouse, P. G. 2015. *Leadership: Theory and Practice*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- OECD. 2022. *Education at a Glance 2022: OECD Indicators*. [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2022\\_3197152b-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2022_3197152b-en).

- Osgood, J. 2004. "Time to Get Down to Business?: The Responses of Early Years Practitioners to Entrepreneurial Approaches to Professionalism." *Journal of Early Childhood Research* 2 (1): 5–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X0421001>.
- Page, J., and P. Eadie. 2019. "Coaching for Continuous Improvement in Collaborative, Interdisciplinary Early Childhood Teams." *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 44 (3): 270–284. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1836939119855542>.
- Sakr, M., S. Bonetti, and K. Halls. 2022. "Advancing Leadership Development in Early Years Education via Digitally Mediated Professional Learning: A Systematic Review." Available at: <https://developingearlyyearsleaders.co.uk/systematic-review/>
- Skattebol, J., and L. M. Arthur. 2014. "Collaborative Practitioner Research: Opening a Third Space for Local Knowledge Production." *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 34 (3): 351–365. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2013.871690>.
- Waniganayake, M. 2003. "Distributed Leadership." In *Early Childhood Professionals Leading Today and Tomorrow*, edited by M. Ebbeck, and M. Waniganayake. Philadelphia, PA: MacLennan and Penny.
- Woodrow, C., and G. Busch. 2008. "Repositioning Early Childhood Leadership as Action and Activism." *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 16 (1): 83–93. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13502930801897053>.