Learning leaders, new professional identities and the implications for Children’s Centres and Early Years

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to explore the findings from a research project conducted in England in 2010 on the impact of the programme National Professional Qualification for Integrated Centre Leaders (NPQICL) on two cohorts of participants (2006-8). The research focused on the outcomes for the participants as leaders and their professional identities; their organisation; learning within the Children’s Centre and the wider community. The UK Government announced (2010) that Sure Start (which includes Children’s Centres) has been one of the great success stories of the last decade delivering 3,500 Children’s Centres ahead of time. This has been evidenced by various research projects and evaluation reports (Blesky et al, 2007; Canavan et al, 2009). The Centres have enabled over 2.7 million children under 5 and their families to access a range of integrated services. However, in the announcements there was no mention of the impact of how the NPQICL programme had transformed the leadership in the Centres, particularly as it was heralded as an innovative programme grounded in research, both in its construction and delivery. Therefore, this research also seeks to relate the story of those most influential in achieving this success, the participants of the programme as Centre leaders.

The involvement of the authors was as Programme Managers of the NPQICIL programme in the South East of England and as researchers for the project, which has been funded by two universities.
Learning leaders, new professional identities and the implications for Children’s Centres and Early Years

Introduction:

The purpose of this paper is to explore the findings from a research project conducted in England in 2010 on the impact of the programme National Professional Qualification for Integrated Centre Leaders (NPQICL) on two cohorts of participants and how this transformed their Centres.

This paper connects directly with the Congress theme of “Leader learning and learning leaders: Tracing implications for leaders and leadership in supporting learning”

Investigating the world of Early Years and Children’s Centres

The notion of Early Years intervention has been at the forefront of national policy for over two decades and began in 1998 with the development of the Sure Start initiative in the UK. Sure Start had ambitious intentions which emanated from the establishment of Educational Priority Areas of the 1970s and was modelled on similar early intervention programmes in USA, such as Headstart. The UK interest in this policy transfer was to boost children’s educational attainment and counter the effects of poverty on development (Welshman, 2010). The transformation of Sure Start in 2004 led to the development of Children’s Centres which offered integrated provision of health, education and family support for children from birth to 5. The government set a target of 3,500 Children’s Centres throughout the UK in an attempt to support the areas of greatest deprivation.

Prior to the UK adopting the programme of reform, there is evidence from government policy and debate that the approach had been evidenced by research (O’Brian, 2009; Belsky et.al, 2007). The overarching purpose of creating the Children’s Centres was to impact on the life chances of the children and their families and to narrow the gap in achievement. In the UK, we saw the development of such papers as Meeting the Childcare Challenge (1998) Every Child Matters (2003) and the 2020 Children and Young People’s Workforce Strategy (2008) that all focused on developing Children’s Centres even further. The Government Select Committee (HMSO 2010) acknowledged that the Sure Start programme has been “one of the most innovative and ambitious Government initiatives of the past two decades”.

Sure Start brings together childcare, early education, health and family-support services for families with children under 5 years old. It is the cornerstone of the Government’s drive to tackle child poverty and social exclusion, working with parents-to-be, parents, carers and children to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of babies and young children so that they can flourish both at home and when they get to school. Sure Start
brings together service providers from the statutory sector like health, social services and early education, as well as voluntary, private and community organisations and parents themselves, to provide integrated services for young children and their families based on what local children need and parents want.

The shift in policy to childcare demanded a shift in the workforce for the future. The Centres that were created needed leaders who could embrace this policy change and transform what had been a more traditional approach to Early Years education into something that not only impacted on the child but also their families and the communities around them, alongside managing a transdisciplinary organisation as they brought together multi-professional and partnership services, for example education, health and social services with the voluntary sector. The preparation of these leaders required a different approach, one that modelled how the Centres were to be organised and run. The National College for School Leadership introduced an innovative programme developed by Pen Green, a state sector early years centre for young children and families. This was known as the National Professional Qualification for Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL) and was piloted in 2004 before being rolled out nationally the following year. The intention was to set the bar high in that this was a national qualification and was to be accredited at Masters level as a Postgraduate Certificate. Designing transformative programmes to enable transformation in individuals and those with whom they work is a complex process (Precey and Jackson, 2009). The programme incorporated processes and methodologies drawn from a number of disciplines and used innovative practices. It involved cutting edge workplace and workbased learning techniques and focused on changes in practice within the setting in all the assessment and activities (Jackson 2004).

Having completed the programme, the participants could continue their studies and complete a Diploma or full Masters qualification. In terms of impact programmes such as NPQICL initiate some immediate change, they also might effect more longer term change in practice but the the intention was to be more transformational. The basis for the research was therefore to consider the various components of the programme and investigate what and how much they had been integrated into changes within the Children’s Centre. The methodologies for the research were intended to pick up some of the programme delivery processes and turn them into research tools thus maintaining the integrity and spirit of the NPQICL programme.

The success of Surestart does not end here and the UK Government has already set the agenda for the coming years (O’Brien, 2009). The recent review of Surestart (HMSO 2010) gave a clear indication of what is needed, such as:

- the importance of embedding local partnership working, particularly with the health sector;
- how best to extend the reach of Children’s Centres to support all vulnerable children and the role of outreach;
- the importance of demonstrating impact and the need for robust national data; and
- the need for continuing investment in Children’s Centres.
The Centres are being required to take more innovative approaches to care and development such as the volunteer support programmes for mothers with new babies (MacPherson, 2010). To prepare the workforce the Government has outlined (HMSO 2008) that everyone who works with children and young people should be:

- ambitious for every child and young person
- excellent in their practice
- committed to partnership and integrated working
- respected and valued as professionals.

If these intentions are to be met then consideration needs to be made to how the Centres will be led and managed and how those leaders prepared. What better way than to use research that indicates what has had the greatest impact on those undertaking the programmes?

The development of Children’s Centres in England

Although Children’s Centres were initially developed in the poorest local government wards in England they were conceptualised as a universal service to support all children and their families. All Children’s Centres are expected to provide:

- early years education provision;
- high quality, flexible childcare;
- opportunities for parents to be involved in their children’s learning;
- adult learning;
- family support and outreach services;
- child and family health services;
- support for children and parents with special needs;
- appreciating the variety of human experiences and culture; and
- effective links with job centre plus local training providers, and further and higher education institutions

Additionally, Children’s Centres act as ‘service hubs’, within communities offering a base for childminder networks with links to neighbourhood nurseries, out of school clubs and extended schools. Children’s Centres also have an instrumental role to play in training the childcare workforce and contributing to the childcare career development framework.

The rapid expansion of individual children’s centres has led to them becoming complex organisations. Children’s Centre leaders are required to lead and manage new partnerships within their own community, with other Integrated Centres, between their Integrated Centre and the wider community and with other agencies.
We would suggest that the creation of these new relationships and the building of effective communities of practice will require new knowledge, skills, behaviours, relationships, processes, actions and outcomes, as shown in Figure 1. Indicative material for the National Professional Qualification for Integrated Leadership programme implies that leaders of Children’s Centres will require more of the ‘soft’ leadership behaviours as opposed to ‘hard’ behaviours (NCSL 2004).

![Diagram of relationships between leadership requirements and building effective communities of practice](image)

**Fig. 1. Relationship of leadership requirements with building effective communities of practice (Jackson, 2006a)**

**Developing Leaders in Children’s Centres**

The original NPQICL programme was designed, developed and piloted by Pen Green staff in consultation with the National College for School leadership (NCSL) and social and health care organisations. The intention was to create leadership communities for Children’s Centres that reflected perspectives from education, social work and health. Rooted in a pedagogy of participation and co-constructed with participants, the original characteristics of the programme included an ethos intended to empower, challenge and transform leaders through the construction of experiential learning communities, supported by a network of tutors and mentors (Whalley et al 2008). The pilot course was conceived with international visits, a high tutor/mentor participant ratio and as residential to safely contain some of the challenging personal and professional issues engaged with as part of the process. As the programme rolled out in 2005 and subsequent years, the format was changed to become only partly residential and the international visits were no longer included. However, the andragogical underpinnings of the programme remained the same, co-construction in which
tutors challenged and supported participants’ individual and group leadership development. Occasionally this was the cause of de-stabilising situations which were not wholly resolved before participants left for the day.

A range of challenges needed to be considered in terms of forging effective and transformational learning communities. Participants came from a variety of professional backgrounds including social work, health visiting, the voluntary sector, business development, education, and other public sectors such as the armed services. In spite of concerns that the rollout programme teams may not have the partnership working experience to tutor effectively, the context free element of the programme activities enabled participants to use their own experience and practice, supported by course teams. The varied level of educational qualifications varied from pre-degree level to masters. Participant entry qualifications varied from pre-degree level to masters. Forging a cohesive learning community and individually supporting each member at their own level to develop masters level research capability needed creative and systematic approaches.

As indicated above, Children’s Centres are complex organisations. Jonas Ridderstrale (Stockholm School of Economics) describes the situation in terms of ‘Leadership in a modern organisation is highly complex and it is increasingly difficult – sometimes impossible – to find all the necessary traits in a single person’. Yet that was what the programme was designed to find and develop. Given the complexity, academics such as Gobbiolot (2006) ask ‘What if management thinking to date has been directed at the wrong problem? In terms of more traditional professional development programmes for leaders there has been a focus on skills and less so on preparing individuals to lead organisations with complex relationships and partnerships. Therefore there was deemed a need to redefine both leadership and our idea of what an organisation is in terms of the creation of Children’s Centres to serve the needs of communities in crisis thus giving a new focus and new tools to make those organisations more agile and responsive to need.

The starting point for the programme design was the set of standards: National Standards for Leaders of Integrated Centres for Children and Families are similar to the standards for school leaders and focus on six key areas:

1. Shaping the Present and Creating the Future
2. Leading Learning and Development
3. Building and Strengthening teams
4. Being Accountable and Responsible
5. Developing Strong Families and Communities
6. Managing the Organisation
The purposes of NPQICL are to:

- Provide for early years integrated centre leaders a programme and qualification equivalent to the National Professional Qualification for Headship;
- Create opportunities for integrated centre leaders to consider leadership implications of their roles;
- Examine the nature of multi-professional services and their implications for integrated centre leadership;
- Create a forum for reflection, dialogue and discussion about leadership practice on integrated centres;
- Examine how leadership is defined and described in the literature of leadership and to relate theory to practice;
- Guide and support practitioner research into the leadership issues in participants’ own centres; and
- Develop leadership capability.

The structure and processes of the NPQICL programme can be found in Table 1 below.

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**Table 1. Structure and processes of the NPQICL programme**
The programme spans a year and consists of a 13 or 19 day taught programme with additional time being spent on intersessional activities, on line activities and assignments. Participants select between a research or study route depending on their academic experience. The NPQICL Learning Journey over an academic year is illustrated in Table 2.

<table>
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<th>Element</th>
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<tr>
<td>Induction</td>
<td>Where concepts of the programme are introduced along with the Personal professional Development Record (PPDR). Participants begin to identify the most appropriate route for them (Study or Research). Participants are also introduced to University procedures, registered as University students on a Post Graduate Certificate and are introduced to the Virtual Learning Environments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Initial based assessment</td>
<td>The participant and Line Manager are guided through the PPDR, by an assessor, where leadership-learning priorities are identified.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Introduction to study and research methods</td>
<td>These two days begin to raise the awareness of participants to the world of academic study at Masters level.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Study Route</td>
<td>This aspect of the programme consists of two five day blocks with two themes: Exploring the Leadership Experience and Leading Across Professional Boundaries. Having set a leadership learning contract the work is geared towards the assignments through micro projects.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research Route</td>
<td>Participants are given 2 two-day blocks of time to work with a tutor on building a significant research project that leads to a dissertation type submission at Masters level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Assessment</td>
<td>The participants’ leadership capability is assessed through their PPDR, portfolio of evidence and witness statements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentor visits</td>
<td>Each participant has three mentor visits during the year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutor support</td>
<td>The tutor(s) delivering the NPQICL give participants support throughout the year.</td>
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| Table 2  The NPQICL Learning Journey |

Eligibility to participate on the programme includes entry requirements for Masters level study and the ability to be assessed in the workplace against the standards. As an integral part of the programme, successful participants will gain 60 credits at Masters level at the end of the programme. To fulfil the workplace assessment, participants needed to be in a Children’s Centre environment.

During 2006-7, 400 funded places were available with the South East of England having up to 36 of those places. In 2007-8, similar places were available with the South East being
allocated slightly lower numbers. Our research intention was to use our participants across the two cohorts and review the impact of the NPQICL content and processes on participants two and three years after successful completion of the programme.

Research Project

The data was drawn from the authors using two cohorts of participants in the NPQICL programme which had been assigned to them through the National College in England. The participants were all leaders or aspiring to become Integrated children’s Centre Leaders within the Government South East Region which embraces Basingstoke, East Sussex, Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Kent, Medway, Oxfordshire, Portsmouth, Reading, Southampton and West Sussex. All participants (52 in total) were involved in phase 1 of the research and through self selection they put themselves forward for a more in depth analysis. Phase 2 of the research involved 15 participants taken from cohort 1 and cohort 2 which gave representation across the geographical region. The research took an innovative qualitative approach translating many of the programme delivery processes into research techniques. In summary the research used:

(a) Questionnaire
Investigating changes in practice as a result of undertaking the NPQICL programme in the areas of self, the Centre and the wider community. (sent to all participants – Phase 1)

(b) Documentary analysis (for Phase 2 participants – i.e. those who indicated their willingness to take part in follow up research having completed the original questionnaire) original programme evaluations indicating intended changes in practice in self, the Centre and the wider community.

Government Self Evaluation Forms on the Centre
Ofsted reports (inspection reports on the Centre)

The sources of data have been the participants in the NPQICL programme; Self Assessment Forms (Pre Inspection forms) from the Centres. Inspection reports (where Centres had been inspected); learning walks; semi structured interviews; interactive discussions; National and Local documentary evidence; literature reviews.

(c) Semi structured interviews (for Phase 2 participants – i.e. those who indicated their willingness to take part in follow up research having completed the original questionnaire) These were hour long interviews on areas that had been identified in the questionnaire related to changes and evidence of impact on self, the Centre and the wider Community as a result of undertaking the NPQICL programme. The interviews focused on three areas.

(d) Interactive research questions
The second part of the interview was to include some interactive research questions which were developed by the researcher and the participant. This took on one of the
learning processes from the original NPQICL programme. The recording of information was in the form of mind mapping.

(e) Learning Walks
The final part of phase 2 was to undertake a learning walk around the centre or provision involving the researcher and participant. Again this drew on the NPQICL programme methods which involved co-construction and evidence based methods.

Results and discussion

Learning leaders, new professional identities and the implications

In terms of leadership and professional identity, most of the participants had extended their level of influence since finishing the programme. In some cases those who had been deputy managers were now managing a centre and others had taken on a locality coordinator role where they were responsible for up to 6 centres. Typical was the experience of a manager who was line managing 2 centres and overseeing four others. Two of the participants had moved to a local authority strategic coordination role. Several of them had returned to mentor or tutor participants on subsequent NPQICL courses or had extended their own learning by completing a Masters. In discussion research subjects identified that the opportunity to engage in a deep dialogue about their own leadership with colleagues and tutors had had a lasting impact on the way they saw themselves as leaders.

A focus on an exploration of leadership was evident.; ‘I think some of the strengths I have developed is to realise more how other people see me - to the extent that maybe whereas before I was very collaborative…. sometimes whether they actually agree with it or not is not really the main issue, they just want someone to take that responsibility and tell them what to do’ For others it was a recognition that strategic leadership involved letting go of hands-on leadership role in the Centre or understanding that ‘leading as I had been led, that one size does not fit all’.

The most common response in a dialogue about their own leadership was to talk about an increase in confidence and self belief; ‘I think more about how I do things. I have always been a very considered person but now I think more about the requirements, what we can do, outcomes.’

Their role as leaders; professional identity and sense of agency

This new found sense of identity was often a feeling of shared professional expertise and empowerment, particularly in terms of their relationship with Head Teachers on co-located sites or who they regularly came in contact with in partnership working. One participant recounted how the Head Teacher of the school on the same site had been superficially welcoming but had then arranged for a high wall to be built between the school and the
Centre which totally obscured the view. For another there were similar issues involving status and identity:

‘I think in terms of my biggest challenge it is probably not about the two centres I directly manage but the school based ones and my credibility with the Head Teachers. In my past I was a Head Teacher for ten years; I have been there and done their job. So I find it comes quite hard when they treat you as if you are really quite stupid which some people do or they will refuse to talk to you. In my current role that’s probably my biggest challenge and having the confidence to kind of square up to that and go and be a bit more assertive’

Partnership working provided a particular challenge:

‘When I came here everyone was doing everything separately. I had to break down barriers and alleviate fears that I was taking everything over. Some of it is how you are- personality and leadership skills. Partnership working is all about we are different people but our aims and ethos are the same’

Leadership learning

Learning leaders – type of learning they undergo

In their reflection on the activities and methods used on the course, participants identified several essential components of the course which had a long term and continuing impact on both their professional practice and development, enabling them to continue their leadership learning and evaluation of practice. In particular, the reflective journaling was seen as a key tool for continuing to focus on leadership challenges: ‘I look at myself in a way I never looked at myself before’. Networking over a period of time had proved invaluable, ‘meeting peers with similar problems and ideas’ had been continued after the end of the programme, and the opportunity to use Action Learning Sets had enabled some participants to model good practice in collaborative learning and problem solving for their colleagues in their centres. Other more specific exercises were mentioned in facilitating shifts in their thinking and practice. For example the fishbowl exercise, when participants role-played, a multi-agency case conference, had a lasting impact for several participants:

‘we go in as professionals and in the course I was filled with dread thinking I was going to be a parent professional and it made me think, it was just role play - how do parents feel when it is real going to a load of professionals and now I am different when dealing with CAFs (assessments) etc with parents’.

Another participant reported that the exercise ‘was painful but really useful. No–one thought about the child’.
Engaging with the concept of restraining and driving forces had proved useful to use with other staff when taking on a challenging leadership role in a Centre and the iceberg exercise enabled one participant to reflect that the ‘realisation that you only see a part of someone and to lead effectively you need to focus on the part you cannot see’ had become central to her thinking. The opportunity to apply theory immediately and then to analyse and reflect later was seen as crucial, particularly in the partnership working field. The longevity of the programme was also seen as key: ‘it’s not a couple of days and then forget it. You keep revisiting, you keep getting back – you refer to things you’ve done before’.

Others felt they had benefitted from an understanding of andragogy, which acknowledges that adults may not always want to do things in one way but underlined the shared vision and values: ‘you need to ‘hang on to what you believe in even if you do take a different route – the fact that you arrived at the destination is more important’.

**Implications for effectiveness and improvement**

In a fast moving and complex field participants reported a new confidence and effectiveness in their practice and leadership. For some this was the confidence to remove ineffective staff or to challenge their own ineffective line management. For other participants it was the ability to remain stable and resilient under restructuring or a shifting focus, for example to localities and from universal to focused service. The extension of Ofsted regulatory and inspection services to Children’s Centres had not been too much of a challenge for one participant who reported the ability to ‘do what was right in the face of local authority staff running around like headless chickens’

One participant articulated areas of growing confidence developed during the programme: ‘decision making, delivery of unpopular messages, more evidence based using a consultation process, dealing with partners’. For others it was the challenge brought by increasing change within a decreasing budget while still supporting centres to provide the best services they can for families, or shifting roles in their local authorities which provided challenge. One participant felt her new role ‘consolidated her internal belief to be part of a strategic team’

Another participant described a strong ‘belief in what I do – families have the right to the best support within the resources there. This is a personal passion that underpins all my work’
Early interventions and improvements outcomes for children

Increased confidence in their own leadership allowed them to focus on multi agency activities which had a direct impact on outcomes for children and families. Evidence from SEF and Ofsted indicated that awareness of early support was much improved; referrals to Portage had increased and there were much better links with specialist provision. The learning walks in particular offered a rich source of data which evidenced the breadth and diversity of intervention and family support programmes offered to encourage families to engage with the centre, for example not just toy libraries and play sessions but Grow it ,Eat it sessions for things that can be grown in a hanging basket, rural garden areas created by parents and Big Chef, Little Chef demonstrations to encourage healthy eating or Art Attack sessions for mothers with postnatal depression.

One manager found the most rewarding part of her role to be ‘particularly engaging with families that you know you would not normally engage with, for example traveller families and young mums.’ There was a strong sense of outreach in terms of taking toys, models and resources to difficult to reach areas and of bringing more groups back into the fold.

Some particular challenges were identified. One of the key policy aims for Children’s Centres is to engage fathers, particularly young fathers. One manager described how she had set up ‘daddy cool’; Saturday morning sessions with young fathers and MAD Dads activities; another had set up baby massage sessions for teenage fathers.

‘Everything we do is linked to children’s learning and to develop parents’ skills in supporting their children’s learning. There are some challenges around that, in tracking children’s learning when they come into children’s centres because they don’t have to come. We don’t see the same children day in day out or week in week out.’

‘Some of our families are really disadvantaged, in that. .they don’t know the rules of the game and it is almost teaching the rules of the game, this is how you go into a school, this is how you go and talk to a teacher you know to get the best this is the best way to do it’

Good learning environment

Participants were able to articulate a strong sense of how they saw their centres. ‘We are working towards aiming to be a centre of excellence, creative excellence really. That would be the hope.’

I need to ‘make sure everybody has a good understanding really of (the centre) as a whole rather than it as being a separate thing. I would say that is probably the NPQICL which has
influenced that. I think you have to work at it rather than it just happening or just assuming that just because people work here they have an understanding of it.’

‘Keeping in mind what you are about really that is really important because in terms of my time probably the least time I spend is with children or families directly but obviously that is what we are here for and that is what the impact is, but as I say, it is very easy to spend a lot of time on the building, on staffing and things like that and actually almost overlook what you are really trying to achieve and it is almost need to keep reminding myself, actually this is what I am here for’

It is all about ‘making a difference to the individual child, family and wider groups. This is not just about targets – even just a hello or dropping on your knees to give a child a smile is worth it’.

Conclusion

This work has significance to policy makers at national, regional or local level, programme designers, practitioners and those involved in the links between policy, practice and impact. The study is also of interest on an international basis as the Sure Start Children’s Centres were developed as a direct result of policy transfer from the USA Headstart programme. The UK model for this Early Years setting has had wider implications for the Centres as organisations, the development of the Centre Leaders; how learning and communities can be impacted and is therefore also of interest to those wishing to explore a longitudinal study as an evidence base for further change.

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