Shared responsibility for best practice

The concept of shared leadership arose from the observation that some effective teams appear to operate without an obvious person in overall charge of the work. The concept of distributed leadership has become central to raising achievement in schools and this model is proposed by some writers as the most appropriate for the early years sector.

This chapter explores the practical issues of shared leadership, and who can operate as a leader. Such questions are relevant for the role of Early Years Professionals and any other practitioners who are tasked with taking a lead in best practice and bringing about change. Finally, questions about sharing leadership across professional boundaries and multi-agency working arise in terms of the challenges for heads and teams within complex organisations like children's centres.

The main sections of this chapter are:
- distributed leadership
- the role of early years professionals
- leadership of complex centres.

Distributed leadership

The approach to leadership which looks beyond the overall leadership of one person is often described by the word ‘distributed’, but sometimes the descriptive term is ‘distributive’. We have also encountered ‘shared’, ‘dispersed’, ‘consultative’, ‘democratic’ and ‘inclusive’ as the preferred term for discussing what sounds like essentially the same concept. We have chosen to use ‘distributed’ because that term is the most common within the literature about schools and early years provision.

Distributed leadership and early years provision

In brief, distributed leadership is a deliberate process of sharing leadership behaviour, so that team members other than the head or manager take an active lead. They accept responsibility for some areas of the work and developing best practice. This is a critical point; it is not about being the overall leader of the setting, but of practitioners adopting a leadership role. Certainly, having the capacity to act in a leadership role when required is a key element of being an
effective follower. You are not in control of everything, but have strong influence in certain areas at certain times.

**What does it mean?**

*Distributed leadership*: a deliberate organisational strategy in which aspects of leadership behaviour and actions are shared with some, not necessarily all, staff throughout an organisation.

The rethinking of leadership as a shared enterprise has been a positive for early childhood services, because it has been seen as compatible with the nature of the service and the reported inclinations of the workforce. There are three main lines of argument offered to support the proposal that distributed leadership is ideal for the early years sector, or that this model is already in place:

- The rationale that early years provision, and the mainly female workforce, operates in a collaborative rather than competitive way and so a distributed leadership model is the best fit.
- The related argument is that early years practitioners are more at ease with a democratic rather than autocratic style of leadership and distribution of leadership is democratic in nature.
- An additional rationale has been that leadership has to be distributed out from the position of head or manager, given the complex pattern of services within some large centres. There is a belief that there is no way that one manager or head can take sole responsibility to deliver the high expectations of what such provision will deliver.

There is a considerable amount of discussion about the advisability of the distributed leadership model for early years provision in the UK, Australia and New Zealand, or the assumption that this pattern is an accurate description of how a large number of settings actually operate (Henderson-Kelly and Pamphilon, 2000; Thornton, 2006; Waniganayake, 2002 and Waniganayake *et al.*, 2000). However, there is a very limited amount of observational information about the extent to which distributed leadership has consciously been implemented and how it actually works when the model is fully operational.

There is a continuing problem in some of the early years leadership literature – in the UK as well as abroad – that distributed leadership is presented as the best or the only appropriate model for early years provision. In the background reading for this book we regularly followed up references quoted with the strong implication that they were studies demonstrating that distributed leadership worked in early years provision. We regularly then found unsupported statements about the nature of a female workforce, or how women prefer to act in what is hard for us to describe as other than a non-leading leadership role. It was less common to find discussion of the downsides of a model of distributed leadership, or at least predictable problems that need to be discussed and resolved.
Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007) provide welcome honesty in their *Effective Leadership in the Early Years Sector report* (ELEYS). This was partly a re-analysis of the data from the late 1990s *Researching Effective Pedagogy in Early Years* (REPEY) project, along with a literature review and a report from a focus group of early childhood experts. The REPEY project did not study models of leadership directly. The ELEYS report discusses distributed leadership as one possible way to build professionalism and skills with the early years team. But Siraj-Blatchford and Manni conclude that within the available literature the concept is decidedly blurred and there are few concrete examples of distributed early years leadership in action.

Siraj-Blatchford and Manni argue that clear overall leadership is often necessary in order to develop high levels of collaboration and teamwork. Unlike some other commentators, they do not seem to take the collaborative approach as a given in all early years settings. They stress the importance of a head/manager who has high expectations and is able to recognise how staff might progress from their current skills level. Effective leaders set an example of reflection, providing a model with clear purpose and values. Rodd (2006) and Pound (2008) also note that young and/or inexperienced early years practitioners may benefit from a more directive style of leadership, and that a strong overall leader may be necessary when the group is struggling with change. This observation is consistent with the leadership styles described by Hersey and Blanchard – see page 51.

Aubrey (2007) also expresses reservations about the model of distributed leadership in practice. She led a study of 12 different types of early years settings based in Warwickshire. Data were gathered from questionnaires completed by the entire teams of settings and interviews with leaders, plus some group interviews. Two significant themes emerged from this study. One crucial issue is the nature of who takes the final responsibility in any kind of distributed leadership model. The second issue is the importance of regular feedback and monitoring of team members to whom aspects of leadership have been distributed. These two points were also highlighted in their own words by several of the experienced practitioners and leaders with whom we spoke for this book.

**Learning from distributed leadership in schools**

There is considerable discussion about distributed leadership in the literature about school leadership in the UK, the USA, Canada and Australia. In these reports the model is sometimes described as teacher leadership or the creation of teacher-leaders. Much of this material has been made accessible through literature reviews (Day et al., 2009; Harris, 2002; Harris and Spillane, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2008). Very practical observations have arisen from reports and there is much of direct relevance to early years provision. Yet, as Daniel et al. (2004) point out, there is a noticeable absence of reference to this source of information in much of the promotion of distributed leadership for early years provision here.

Until the late 1990s the discussion about leadership and school achievement focused on head teachers and their descriptions of what they did. The emphasis
shifted to looking at the reality in some schools, and the possibility in others, that behaviour associated with leadership was spread beyond the head teacher. Distributed leadership is a central concept in much discussion about school leadership and achievement, with a strong focus on improving outcomes for children and young people. Quality of teaching in schools significantly affects children's motivation and achievement. The quality of school leadership is seen as a strong influence on the motivation of the teachers and therefore the quality of what they offer within the classroom.

Kenneth Leithwood et al. undertook a substantial review of school leadership and the possible impact on pupils’ learning. They comment that, ‘both teacher leadership and distributed leadership qualify as movements driven much more by philosophy and democratic values than by evidence that pupils actually learn more if a larger proportion of school leadership comes from non-traditional sources’ (2008, page 9). Traditionally, power would rest with the authority of the head teacher. As Leithwood and his colleagues point out, many of the core leadership practices in school have their roots in the transformational model of leadership (from page 54).

There is limited evidence for a strong relationship between distributed patterns of school leadership and improved outcomes for children and young people. The need for caution may be explained by the fact that distributed leadership is a relatively recent concept, although Harris (2002) judges that the evidence of such a relationship is growing. An additional factor will continue to be that the label and similar ones are used to cover a wide range of understandings and misunderstanding of what distribution of leadership activity means. The early years sector has come under increasing pressure, like the school sector, to prove success in terms of outcomes. It is crucial that promoting distributed leadership for early years provision does not move to claim that this model has proven links with improved outcomes for children, because that evidence does not exist.

**How might distributed leadership work?**

It is important to realise that, even when the same words are used, distributed leadership is not a single, coherent model that means the same to everyone. It is more a collection of ideas, some of which have a longer history in educational or early years practice. The most useful aspects of the research reviews of school leadership are that they highlight essential practical points for anyone taking a serious look at whether the model could work in early years provision.

**Distributed leadership does not replace the manager/head**

The model of distributed leadership raises the question of what does a designated leader, overall leader, positional leader (all these terms are used) do when aspects of leadership are distributed across the team? There is no reason to say that the overall leader always has to embrace an identical role. Equally, there is good reason to challenge any suggestion that it is a positive move to lose the positional
leader (or manager) altogether, or to blur the boundaries to the extent that nobody is willing to own up to being the overall leader.

- The model of distributed leadership – at least in its realistic versions – does not necessitate having no overall leader at all. It is not a case of a positional leader/manager bad - distributed leadership good.
- Distributed leadership is a feature of how an organisation works: that leadership can develop anywhere in the organisation, not just from the person in overall charge.
- The concept is not the same as delegating some managerial or administrative tasks. The manager may have good reasons to pass over some routine responsibilities which have so far rested only with the person in charge. However, this situation is not the same as distributed leadership.

Take another perspective

A question to consider is whether an established model of distributed leadership should enable managers or heads of centre to be away from the setting, and be confident that practice should run smoothly in their absence.

- For instance, the introduction of no-notice inspections in England for non-school based early years provision provoked anxiety in some managers that they could therefore never be out of touch with the setting, even to take a holiday.
- Postings on early years websites, and letters pages in magazines, showed an alternative view from some managers who felt that their team, including their deputies, should be fully capable of explaining and showing their best practice.
- Should managers also switch off their mobile phones, BlackBerrys and the like, when they are delegates on a training course? This ‘do you-don’t you’ switch-off can be a contentious issue.

What do you think?

The balanced discussions of distributed leadership do not imply that a suitable aim is to whittle away at the role of manager until there is scarcely an overall leader in the setting.

- There is good reason to argue that, like any organisation, early years settings need someone who is ready and willing to bring the team back to focus on issues that are non-negotiable. What happens if the team is enthusiastically going off on a track which might be inconsistent with core values, fails to help the children or which has overlooked key issues?
- Sometimes these ‘hold on’ moments may be raised by practitioners. They have the confidence and competence to speak up and take the risk of being seen as someone to pop the balloon of a good idea. But, if this cautionary note of any kind does not emerge swiftly from within the team, the overall leader (or a close working senior group) is responsible for speaking up sooner rather than later.
- There will be times for the manager or head to make the tough decisions. The descriptive accounts provided by research sometimes illuminate how early
years managers and school heads have to speak up, even when they are fairly sure the team may not welcome their words.

- Distributed leadership is about sharing activity, open discussion and jointly reached new directions. Look at page 3 for an initial discussion about the difference between management and leadership.

**Make the connection with ... not just another team member**

The avowed aim of establishing a pattern of distributed leadership needs to be part of continued reflection by the manager and senior team. This model could well undermine best practice, if it enables the manager-head of centre to abdicate responsibility for making timely decisions in the name of seeking consensus.

During visits and informal conversations linked with this book, managers and heads of settings expressed a commitment to significant aspects of distributed leadership. However, they were clear that sharing the responsibility of leading on practice did not mean that managers were just another member of the team. It was important to have friendly relationships, yet with the slight distance that enabled managers to offer a firm guide over best practice, or to reiterate the overall direction that was being taken.

The role of room leader, and the role envisaged for EYPs (from page 128), also necessitated that practitioners are comfortable, or become at ease, with stepping away slightly from the existing social group in the room or unit. You do not have to become unfriendly, but it is misleading if discussion around distributed leadership implies that there will be no impact on working relationships. No longer is everyone equal.

- What has been your experience, or that of your colleagues or fellow students?
- To what extent did mentoring support you or, looking back, can you see that more opportunities to discuss the issues would have been beneficial?

**Staff need to be ready for distributed leadership**

Achieving the aims of distributed leadership depends on the experience and maturity of the existing team and their views on taking a lead or specific responsibility.

- Managers or heads who are new in post have to build their understanding swiftly of the usual way that the setting operates. An overall leader, committed to distributing aspects of leadership, will have to start with the current working atmosphere and habits established in the past.
- Sometimes the previous head may have taken a strongly autocratic line and the staff will not do anything without checking 'Is it all right?', 'Should I...?', 'Can you please talk with ... because I don't know how.'
- It creates uncertainty and anxiety when people are required to work in unfamiliar ways, especially if there is limited support, or they feel unsupported because the leader has not clearly defined how to work differently or explained the reasons why adequately.
Even the most secure team may hit a period of serious uncertainty and need their manager and the most senior practitioners to offer a clear lead. Changes to established work practices, plus clear communication in the time of crisis, will mean that the team welcomes strong leadership: it will be experienced as authoritative (page 98) and neither autocratic nor coercive. It provides a helpful structure in which to progress. Further, it is entirely consistent with the tenets of both transformational and transactional leadership (from page 54).

The distribution of leadership, in contrast with delegation of routine managerial tasks, will not develop if a manager, or senior team, is reluctant to let go of their positions of power. However, managers or heads of school can be confident in the legitimate power assigned by their role (see page 5 for more about kinds of power) but still make a responsible decision that the staff group, or only one or two practitioners, have the confidence and skills to share some elements of leadership.

Distributed leadership is neither a magical solution nor necessarily appropriate for every setting. Leithwood et al. (2008) emphasise that distributed leadership is not the sure-fire answer for dealing with struggling schools. It is not a ten-step plan to being a good leader, nor a detailed prescription for leaders’ actions within education or early years provision. However, the model is a constructive way of thinking seriously and deeply about leadership.

Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007) also take a realistic approach to distributed leadership, avoiding any negative connotations of the manager as clearly in charge. They suggest from their interview data that some settings need appropriate structures before it is feasible to support any responsible distribution of leadership. Although the REPEY data were from the latter part of the 1990s, their point still holds that some of the early years workforce is very young.

Responsible distributed leadership takes great care to establish an environment of teamwork, communication and problem solving that enables the concept to work. Distributed leadership, like transactional leadership, is primarily about interactions and working relationships.

● The viability of the model depends on the confidence and skills in the existing workforce. Sometimes focused professional development for the group is necessary before considering applying distributed leadership.

● Recall that the essence of being a leader is that you have followers. Distributed leadership is essentially about recognising and using the skills of competent followers.

● It is irresponsible to insist on leadership activity from people who lack the confidence to take that lead. Leadership potential may be there but it will have to be nurtured, with individuals fully involved in identifying what kind of leading role they feel able and motivated to take on.

● It is irresponsible to merely inform practitioners that they are leaders and that they should effect change, with no substantive support in understanding the process of bringing about change (page 89).
Genuine distribution of leadership depends on trusting team members to lead in some areas without constant supervision. Ideally, these would be D3 or D4 level staff in situational leadership terms. Again, well-judged continued professional development is often important before practitioners can lead safely. Distributed leadership is also sometimes described as viewing the structure within an organisation like a school as the way to empower team members, rather than the vehicle for control. This view is helpful.

Not everyone is a leader

Some of the enthusiastic, but rather unreflective, promotion of distributed early years leadership sits under the banner of ‘everyone a leader’. This phrase carries no sense at all; it is closer to a slogan. Not everyone can be a leader, nor does everyone everywhere want to be a leader. The more practical explanation that usually follows titles or headings of ‘everyone a leader’ rhetoric is that there is considerable scope for practitioners to take the lead or accept specific responsibility in development of good practice. Such clarification is constantly required if the phrase ‘everyone a leader’ continues to be used.

Leithwood et al. draw attention to the potential problems of the belief that, ‘everyone can be a good leader, that effective leadership is an entirely learnable function, perhaps even that everyone already is a good leader – without any specific preparation! This is an empirical claim almost entirely lacking any supporting evidence’ (2008, page 67). This review team base this serious reservation on some of the professional rhetoric about distributed leadership for schools. However, the same reservation equally applies to leadership discussions in early years.

Take another perspective

Unreflective sloganising diminishes the importance of the crucial ordinary day-by-day work with young children. The growing implication has to be that only by becoming some kind of ‘leader’ does a practitioner flourish into significance, rather than being stuck with humdrum routine tasks.

The argument of most users of ‘everyone a leader’ would probably be that their aim is to boost the professionalism of a workforce that is too prone to modest self-effacement – to empower people. However, an unintended consequence of heavy use of the phrase is the risk of marginalising sections of the workforce.

A consistent theme in our informal conversations with managers and heads has been that not everyone wants to step up in seniority with the associated responsibilities for taking the lead. The best practice shown in these settings was that the manager and senior team were alert to supporting practitioners through continued professional development to move out of their immediate comfort zone. Equally they respected and accepted the situation when practitioners clearly showed that a suggested direction was, for them, a step too far.
They also made a significant effort at the recruitment stage to ensure that any new staff understood the requirements for leadership as appropriate. Some examples also included a thorough application of the key person approach or a strong commitment to the outdoors to enable children to have adventures, supported by a robust system of risk-benefit assessment.

- What do you think? Should everyone lead? What may happen if you choose not to?

Leithwood et al. (2008) raise similar serious reservations about schools being full of leaders, that the more leadership there is the better, or that head teachers should aspire to be leaders of leaders. The words become meaningless. As the review team rightly ask, if everyone is a leader, then where are their followers? We agree with this challenge: it is an unwise aspiration to aim that everyone should be ‘a’ leader. A more appropriate and realistic aspiration is to create a working environment and thorough continued professional development so that team members can show their leadership qualities to be able to take a leading role in appropriate areas.

Additionally, it is unrealistic and irresponsible to push leadership upon practitioners who neither want it nor are motivated to develop themselves in the necessary direction. As SYMLOG indicates (page 64), some people are not dominant and will not embrace being given authority. You can enable practitioners to nurture the possibilities in themselves, sometimes by significantly boosting their shaky self-belief about what they can do. You can help by providing opportunities to take the first steps safely and address the factors that make it more likely that a new role will work. Providing a visible, positive role model of how it is possible to be an authoritative (task-orientated) and nurturant (relationship-orientated) early years leader will help. (Look back at Chapter 2 for discussion of these aspects of leadership.) Do not foist leadership upon anyone and everyone.

A balanced conclusion seems to be:

- An egalitarian outlook and respect for all members of the workforce is compatible with the truth that not everyone is a potential leader, unless ‘leader’ is diluted to the point of losing all meaning.
- Some people are able to take on a leadership role. Yet the social benefits to them of being part of the main staff group may be so important that they do not want the distance that leadership would necessarily entail. As a leader you are no longer ‘just one of the team’.
- It seems likely that many (rather than few) people are capable of gaining the skills needed to take leading roles.
- Some people will be more strongly motivated to develop those skills, some will develop capability more easily and to a more sophisticated level.
- Some of the ‘everyone a leader’ rhetoric is reluctant to consider, and is even hostile to, ideas that effective leaders share some common characteristics.
However, there is a lot of support that some traits and behaviours do distinguish leaders who are successful from others (pages 37–39).

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**The role of Early Years Professionals**

A significant aim of the EYP status pathways has been to offer continued professional development for individual practitioners and to raise the professional status of the early years workforce. However, guidance from the Children’s Workforce Development Council (CWDC, 2010) is very clear that the role envisaged for EYPs stretches beyond their individual continued professional development. Key themes, communicated also within local EYP networks material, are that EYPs will be responsible for leading practice within their provision. This section considers the practical issues around expectations of EYPs and the more general issues that apply about giving practitioners clear guidance about what and how to change.

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**A clear direction for everyone**

Munton and Mooney (2001) report a series of linked studies on the process of self-assessment and related action planning in English day nurseries. The research showed that many settings struggled over the next steps after self-assessment. Providing specific materials to guide action planning was still not sufficient to ensure that practice did improve. Munton and Mooney reported that the nurseries...
which were rated as having successfully introduced change, shared common features. The staff were likely to indicate on their self-report questionnaire that they:

- had a good relationship with their immediate superior in the team
- were satisfied with their job and conditions of employment
- perceived themselves as having a say in the process of decision making in their nursery
- believed that their nursery was keen to introduce new ideas
- felt committed to their employer.

Munton and Mooney point out that these findings are consistent with theories of organisational development about the impact of the working environment on the behaviour and outlook of employees. These are issues that we discuss throughout this book. Even the most enthusiastic practitioners will struggle to determine their next steps without the context of commitment for change and a leader who shares the vision and clarifies the values and goals. Without this, keen practitioners can only focus on their own room or unit. If the organisational climate is unwelcoming to change then practitioners will carry on as normal and be disinclined to make even mild efforts, when the more senior ‘they’ either do not apparently care, or insist on holding tight to any decision making.

In the decade since Munton and Mooney published their research, there has been a significant development in initiatives aiming to equip more experienced early years practitioners to lever improvements to practice or significant change. There are several different ways that practitioners are invited to take this kind of leading role:

- Practitioners who gain EYP status are expected to take a strong lead within their setting. They are often described as, and exhorted to be, an agent for change.
- The role of Lead Practitioner also exists and has evolved to mean one of two things. The first is that a named individual will take a guiding role on a specific area of practice within their own setting, such as positive ways to guide children’s behaviour. The second meaning is that the individual is given the responsibility within a local area to support and improve practice, for instance over communication within the national Every Child A Talker programme (England). This envisages a role more like a consultant or advisor. Both types of ‘lead practitioner’ share common ground over needing to understand the process of bringing about change in practice.

The next section focuses in particular on the role for EYPs, a group that at the time of writing (summer 2011) is estimated to have reached more than 7,000 practitioners, some of whom are managers. Many, probably all, of the points in this section apply equally to Lead Practitioners.

Can EYPs bring about change?

EYPs are often described as change agents. The CWDC guidance expresses it as ‘EYPs are catalysts for change and innovation: they are key to raising the quality of early years provision and exercise leadership in making a positive difference to children’s wellbeing, learning and development (2010, page 7). Leadership and
support are twin themes in materials about EYPs, along with thorough individual professional development. The guidance links these aspects very closely for EYPs: ‘It is through their personal practice in teamwork and collaboration that they lead and support others to bring about change, and thereby improve provision for, and practice with, children’ (italics in original, CWDC, 2010, page 9).

Early Years Professionals are often exhorted to be visionary and promote a vision. These words are often linked with being inspirational: inspiring colleagues towards improvement or significant change – very transformational terms. However, individual practitioners in a setting cannot be visionary on their own, even if they are the manager. They have to connect with a shared vision, and related values for this setting. An EYP may be a central figure in a team’s effort to identify, or reconnect, with, ‘Why are we here?’ and to ask, ‘What are the implications for the children of this proposal?’

EYPs have an important role but the details will often be much closer to the transactional leadership model manager (Chapter 6) than the transformational leader (Chapter 7). Many of the practical skills explored within the longer EYP pathways are directly relevant to the transactional role. The ability of EYPs to offer a clear lead is closely linked with an enhanced grasp of the reasons behind choices over practice and their skills in being reflective about their own behaviour. Many EYPs are not managers and continue to work closely with children day by day. The aim is that they set an example of best practice, model ways of behaving with children and families and are able to articulate why they behave in that way.

**Being realistic about change**

In 2009 the CWDC commissioned a programme of research about EYPs and the first wave was published by Hadfield _et al._ (2010). They report that EYPs varied considerably over what they saw as the barriers to change in their setting. Not surprisingly, this depended most on the setting in which the EYPs applied their skills.

The factors that were mentioned more often as problematic for bringing about change were also those issues on which there was less agreement in the sample. For instance, 52 per cent of the sample agreed, or partially agreed, that individuals’ reluctance to change was a barrier in their setting. Yet 38 per cent of the sample disagreed or partially disagreed that this was an issue. A barrier created by colleagues not being receptive to new ideas was seen as a barrier for change by a significant minority in the sample (35 per cent), yet just over half the sample (54 per cent) said this issue did not cause problems for them.

There was a higher level of agreement over which possible factors were not experienced by individual EYPs as a barrier to bringing about change. Only 19 per cent of the sample highlighted lack of staff as a barrier and 14 per cent pointed to the failure of the leaders in their setting to recognise the need for change. It is, however, useful to note that this minority in the EYP survey sample could still mean that roughly one in five EYPs might be struggling in a setting with
insufficient staff and (again very roughly) slightly over one in ten EYPs might face an uphill struggle because they do not have the active support of their manager.

**The authority to take a leading role**

EYPs need the confidence and communication skills to explain possible changes in current practice and provide a convincing rationale. They need to have the time and suitable context for this adult-to-adult conversation, so time and space for staff or room meetings are essential. They need to offer a consistently good example in their own behaviour to model what they mean. However, unless their colleagues are already poised to move in this direction, showing improved practice through their own behaviour is unlikely to be effective without shared reflection and professional conversation away from daily work pressures.

The CWDC guidance (2010) offers a range of suggestions for how EYPs could lead and support improved practice. Viable options include running workshops or other means to share knowledge and ideas, one-to-one working with colleagues, taking on the role of coach or mentor (different roles discussed in Lindon, 2010b), specific projects with colleagues or rewriting policies that relate directly to improvements in practice. None of these practical and feasible strands of activity will work, unless the EYP is afforded respect in the setting and is imbued with the authority to undertake such initiatives. Some EYPs are also managers; equally some managers have not gained EYP status. EYPs who are not part of the senior team need to have the public support of their manager, shown through how the EYP's proposed work is introduced and actively supported in regular team meetings.

The experiences of some EYPs have been very positive. From our informal conversations with managers and EYPs themselves, it is clear that the best use of non-manager EYP status can be made when there is a thorough discussion about a special focus for this EYP within the team. It does seem to help when the practitioner is given the authority to lead on a specific aspect of practice in the setting. One example we heard was how an EYP had taken responsibility for developing a new tracking system. Another example was a focus on communication patterns, linked with an expectation that the EYP would undertake observations and feed back to practitioners.

**Make the connection with … the working environment**

The challenge for the committed manager is to look at effective ways to use the skills of an EYP, but to avoid being naïve about persistent social patterns in the staff group, with power relations that these imply. Look back at the discussion about referent power on page 7.

Informal conversations with EYPs at training and network days – not linked with any of the settings thanked for this book – have raised the fact that some EYPs face an uphill struggle to lead on good practice. The most negative working environments have been those in which the EYPs find themselves sidelined by existing alliances within a staff.
Leadership and Early Years Professionalism

Being inspirational

Discussion about leadership in early years often includes the idea that a leader should be inspirational: that she or he should be able to inspire enthusiasm and involvement in others. Dickins (2010) is not unusual in incorporating this aspect into her working definition of leadership in the context of creating a listening culture in early years settings. So it is not surprising that EYPs are frequently exhorted to be inspirational – a bedrock transformational leadership concept.

A positive interpretation of what it means to be an inspiration to others is that someone in position of leadership has enthusiasm: they set a can-do rather than a just-tick-over emotional tone to the provision. They show optimism that developments and focused change are possible. This kind of sharing emotional energy with others needs to be well seasoned with realism about the task ahead. Free-floating inspiration, like visions that fail to connect with reality, can risk disappointment for practitioners who are then disheartened and pessimistic about being revved up again in the future.

Lee (2009) discusses the observable features that are part of the shorthand of 'being an inspiration'. She highlights the role of EYPs, whose continued professional development has enabled them to guide colleagues. The feedback to the Best Practice Network (BPN) is that practitioners with this enhanced experience do not inspire in a vague way. Their impact, and the appreciation felt by colleagues, arises because of how the EYPs behave day by day. Lee describes the shorthand of REACH: that EYPs extend the ‘reach’ of their roles by being Reflective, Encouraging, Active, Creative and Holistic.

Take another perspective

Leaders who inspire in ways that are likely to make an observable difference are also a walking example that something is possible: that this person did reach these achievements or that here is an observable model of how to behave with children or parents.

Being seen as inspirational in a vague way will not be helpful for practice – just like giving vague feedback. The risk is that this kind of inspiration is a dead-end: that this person is wonderful, someone ‘I’d like to be’ but never will.

Early years needs passionate advocates and some individual early years leaders are veritable powerhouses of energy. However, effective leadership is compatible with different personal styles and everyone has to discover their own version.
Pedagogical leadership

The role envisaged for EYPs is mostly that of pedagogical leadership, an aspect of leading colleagues that can also be part of the contribution of a manager who also acts as a leader. There has been a fair amount of discussion in recent years about pedagogy and behaving as a pedagogue: what the terms mean, whether there is a shared understanding of meaning within the early years sector and whether the terminology is useful (Lindon, 2010b).

Pedagogy is sometimes described as the craft of teaching, but that wording only works well when the discussion makes clear that pedagogues are not exclusively teachers, nor are they only located in schools. The values and practice summed up by a specific pedagogical approach are not the same as a curriculum, nor are they restricted to a classroom. Some writers use the term social pedagogy with the aim of extending to a learning-rich approach to children’s whole experience. This extension is probably not essential, so long as views of pedagogy do not get bogged down in the artificial care-education division.

Pedagogy: the details of the individual or team approach about how to support children’s learning wherever they spend their day. The core values, principles and chosen strategies create the pedagogical base for your practice.

Pedagogical thinking: an exploration to enable deeper understanding of what informs your practice and the reasons why you work in particular ways.

Pedagogical leadership: active support, guidance, explanation and setting a best practice example to other team members over a developmentally sound approach to supporting children’s learning.

Understanding what you do and why

A discussion paper from Learning and Teaching Scotland (2005) uses the phrase ‘pedagogical thinking’ in ways that are closely related to being a reflective practitioner. The ideas also link with the aim that EYPs should be able to articulate their choices in practice, and the reasons behind those choices, as part of their shared responsibility for best practice.
leadership of colleagues. The LTS paper stresses that ‘pedagogy needs explicitly to be seen to encompass a spirit of enquiry and professional dialogue about why we do what we do’ (2005, page 3).

Make the connection with … a passion for the work

The managers with whom we spoke in connection with this book all showed a passion for their work and the commitment to make a positive difference to children’s experiences. They sought and nurtured a team for whom working in the setting was more than ‘just any old job’.

The managers showed conscious pedagogical leadership in that they operated as a source of direct ideas. These suggestions were supported by a clear sense of why this would be a good idea, explaining their thoughts, and making space for practitioners to respond with their views. The atmosphere was such that practitioners could come back after reflection or observation with a, ‘That’s not working so well, how about if we…?’

The managers, and their senior team, were also visible out and about within the setting. Neither the staff nor the children were surprised to see the manager or deputy, because they were a daily presence, not cloistered in the office for most of the day.

● What have you noticed about the range of behaviour from managers in different early years settings where you worked, or have visited?

Pedagogical leadership is not all about the experience of the children – as important as that is. The children’s experiences are highly dependent on adult choices over their own behaviour. Guiding change within practice needs to rest on an understanding of adults as learners and a perspective of lifelong learning. In some teams that outlook may have to be nurtured by the senior team, including the EYPs. Depending on their experience, some practitioners may take the view that they have been trained and that is it. A proportion of early years workforce have had less than positive experiences in their own schooling. A pedagogical leader needs to build up the confidence and view of themselves as a learner, which ideally should have happened over their years in statutory education.

Even confident adult learners need support that rests on an understanding of their current skills. Adults vary in temperament just like children – there will never be a one-size-fits-all for staff development. Even the most resilient team members will struggle if there is too wide a gap between their existing knowledge or skill base and what they are now being asked to tackle. Again, even the most confident of early years practitioners will benefit from being reminded of what they can do and what they have achieved in recent times, as well as clear and sensitive communication about the improvements that are needed.

Timing can be important, along with an accurate assessment of adults’ current skills. Some EYPs, like some managers, talk about their leadership over best practice as a process like sowing a seed. Within a team or room meeting, they
offer a clear and coherent suggestion. They encourage discussion with the aim that practitioners will understand, think over the idea and come back with their own thoughts. The EYP, or manager, obviously feels very positive about the suggestion, otherwise they would not have made it. They provide a lead, but have worked hard to create the working environment that means other staff feel able to take ownership of this idea and develop their own versions.

Make the connection with … CPD in your team

EYPs and members of the senior team of a setting can share the insights from their own continued professional development. However, these ideas will fall on more fertile ground when there is a shared understanding in a team that CPD is everyone’s business.

- Do colleagues in your setting bring back ideas from training days and share them with the whole team? How?
- Do you have whole team closure days in which the team is able to explore an area of practice in depth, possibly supported by an external consultant?
- Do you access early years exhibitions, with the range of seminars they offer?

The owners of one private day nursery (thanked in the acknowledgements) took the staff group to one such exhibition and shared out the seminars between them. Everyone was equipped with the same feedback and evaluation forms and used the record to share ideas with the team in a meeting soon afterwards.

Leadership of complex centres

The increased focus on the need for early years leadership has partly arisen from the development of a considerable number of combined centres where the complexity of the work and professional relationships has necessitated a rethink of management and leadership.

There is a decades-long history of early years provision extending the boundaries of the core service offered. Some local authority day nurseries moved towards the family centre model over the late 1970s and 80s. From a similar period, combined centres aimed to bridge the artificial divide between ‘care’ and ‘early education’, and often to establish a strong community nursery model. Through the 1990s a series of government initiatives brought different versions of similar aims: neighbourhood nurseries, early years centres and early excellence centres. The first decade of the 21st century brought a significant increase in combined centres as neighbourhood Sure Start centres became Children’s Centres. These centres varied in details of what they did but shared common ground in two areas:

- The need to lead across professional boundaries, because the group was not composed of people from a single professional background. This situation used sometimes to be called multi-disciplinary teams.