

**CHANGING TIMES:**  
**CHANGING CHALLENGES FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD LEADERS**

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Rapid change resulting from the devolution of responsibility to schools and their communities as part of school-based management practices, has created substantial leadership challenges across all sectors of education, with school leaders “facing more role changes than any other group involved in school reform” (Blase & Blase 1997, p.30). The early childhood area of education has not been exempt from the impact of these changes, experiencing many pressures “to accommodate rapid social change and develop services and programs that are adaptive and flexible and responsive to community needs” (Rodd 1998, p. 126). Subsequently, these significant changes have necessitated the expansion of the leadership role for early childhood leaders. No longer is it desirable or appropriate for these leaders to be seen in a mothering, nurturing role but rather they must become administrators, advocates, trainers, supervisors and educators (Rodd 1998).

In Tasmanian schools, organisational and accountability requirements, together with resourcing and educational changes, have had a significant impact upon the nature of the role of leaders responsible for early childhood education. Organisational challenges have involved leaders engaging in participative forms of leadership, founded upon collaboration and consensus building (Mulford, Hogan & Lamb 1997), with leaders working alongside others to achieve shared goals, through

provision of planning time, space, resources, professional literature and information for decision making (Blase & Blase 1997; Goldring & Rallis 1993).

Another important role for self-managing school leaders has involved forming positive links between the school and the wider community. Fundamental to this people-intensive challenge is the development of sound relationships between members of the community and the school team, with Australian principals citing new leadership roles to include personnel services and community relations (Grady, McPherson, Mulford & Williamson 1994). Further, Rodd asserts that leadership in early childhood has “communication and interpersonal relationships (as) the foundation or building blocks” (1998 p.32) on which early childhood education is founded.

A further leadership challenge, referred to by educational researchers and writers including Leithwood, Begley & Cousins (1994), is mastery of the technical core of education. This professional knowledge is crucial for early childhood leaders in facilitating the day to day operation of the school. Leaders must be knowledgeable about what happens in classrooms, to ensure they make credible decisions and provide purposeful leadership (Stamopoulos 1998).

This paper sets out to investigate the perceptions of Tasmanian early childhood leaders and teachers, regarding the key challenges being experienced by school leaders in Kindergarten to Grade 2.

## **METHOD**

A study (Boardman 1999) was conducted in two Tasmanian state school districts and comprised schools of differing sizes and socio-economic standing to ensure all levels of early childhood leaders were potential participants in the research.

The study's target population comprised early childhood leaders and teachers from 30 schools.

Surveys were utilised to gather the data required from the leaders and teachers, with an open-ended item being included to allow respondents to present their own perspectives to the following question "*What do you believe are the greatest challenges for school leaders involved in leadership in K-2 today?*". This question was seen as having the potential of providing rich and honest data with responses being found to be sometimes "unexpected or unanticipated" (Burns 1997, p.473).

Analysis of the data received was undertaken by coding responses. Themes were developed for the question and these included aspects related to change, parents, knowledge, relationships and organisation, with categories within these themes being developed for finer coding.

## **RESULTS**

### **Teachers' and Leaders' Responses**

Tasmanian early childhood teachers' and leaders' views, regarding the greatest challenges for K-2 leaders, were coded into the following five categories; Organisational, Change, Knowledge, Relationships and Parents, are presented in Table 1.

Organisational aspects of leadership were named in 32% of teachers' responses as the key challenge for today's early childhood leaders. Within this challenge, time-related matters were cited as an important aspect in 12% of teachers' responses. Leaders indicated that organisational aspects were the second most pressing leadership challenge, with 30% of leaders' responses falling into this category, with time and school requirements comprising 11% of their responses.

<b>GREATEST CHALLENGES FOR K-2 LEADERS</b>		
<b>Challenges cited</b>	<b>Teachers' Responses</b>	<b>Leaders' Responses</b>
	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
Organisational	32	30
Change	24	40
Knowledge	20	15
Relationships	17	8
Parents	7	7

Table 1: Teachers' and leaders' responses concerning the key challenges for K-2 leaders

Change aspects were cited, in 40% of leaders' responses, as being the greatest challenge, with educational change being referred to in 21% of their responses. Aspects related to change were the second most frequently named challenge in teacher's responses (24%), with issues related to educational and resourcing implications, cited most frequently.

The Knowledge category was referred to in 20% of responses from teachers, with the quality of their leaders' knowledge being of greatest concern, whilst 15% of leaders' responses were in the Knowledge category. Conversely, leaders cited the need to raise general awareness about early childhood education (10%), as being the most crucial aspect.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **The Challenge of Change**

A decade ago, Michael Fullan (1991) commented that school leaders were constantly facing change, and little has changed today. Change, and its inherent challenges, is still with all educational leaders including those involved in K-2 education. In Boardman's (1999) study educational change was cited as the greatest challenge by responding early childhood leaders. In their responses they referred to the overcrowded curriculum and the need to clarify what is of central importance in K-2 teaching and learning. Two responses from leaders captured the essence of many leaders' feelings, when they stated that the greatest challenges for leaders are "providing the correct balance in the curriculum without placing too much demand on children" and "balancing the overcrowded curriculum and time constraints".

Teachers placed a lower priority on educational change than leaders, but respondents did refer to the pressure of change being experienced by current K-2 leaders. One responding teacher captured the essence of many other teachers' responses in this following quote "my leader is always coping with the incredible pace of change – particularly socio-economic factors and stress involved with the higher and broader expectations being placed upon schools and their staffs".

The level of concern expressed by leaders and teachers would appear to reflect the impact of many departmental directives over the past three years. Specifications of lengths of time to be dedicated to mathematics and literacy teaching each day, as well as the need to provide daily exposure to special programs, has left teachers and leaders with a dilemma of how to provide a balanced K-2 curriculum. Perhaps an awareness is developing within Tasmanian Department of Education policy makers and departmental leaders of this very issue, as the latest policy document "Learning

Together” states “there are too many demands on what children should learn: the curriculum has become overcrowded and unrealistic for teachers to use. It is also difficult to allow sufficient time for consolidation and practice” (2000, p. 12).

However, what should leaders advise teachers to do? It would appear the time has come to carefully analyse whether Tasmanian children are regularly and systematically being exposed to a balanced curriculum. K-2 leaders have a responsibility to clarify this position with departmental officers, as rhetoric is not enough. Clear answers are needed. Is it acceptable to only teach units related to health, or technology or studies of society and the environment once or twice a year? Integration of learning areas is a possible solution, but the implications of this approach on the departmental stipulation for designated blocks of teaching time in both literacy and mathematics must be fully considered by all parties.

### **Challenges Related to Organisational Aspects of K-2 Leadership**

Organisational matters, were cited by K-2 leaders as their second greatest challenge, with time issues and school requirements raised most frequently. The conflict associated with time for teaching and leadership responsibilities concerned many leaders, as one Advanced Skills Teacher 2 commented “as teaching increases, leadership decreases”. Whilst an Assistant Principal noted that the challenge of K-2 leadership is about “time management and working smarter, not harder”. Teachers agreed with leaders concerning time demands and one teacher noted “there is so much contact time set (for on-class teaching time) they (K-2 leaders) have less time to casually visit and speak to children”.

Teachers expressed concern that leaders were failing to fully attend to their leadership responsibilities due to time constraints associated with heavy, often near

full-time, teaching loads. In Tasmania, many Advanced Skills Teachers 2s and 3s fall into this category. In attempting to decrease class sizes, many K-2 leaders are being requested to undertake heavier teaching loads by their principals, which can only impact negatively on the quality of their leadership. Teachers indicated that an important challenge for leaders was to allow time to visit classrooms, time to talk with teachers and parents, and time to fulfil specific leadership roles with skill, competence and regularity. However, in due respect to early childhood leaders this demands time. Time, they frequently do not have.

Leaders also highlighted the dilemma associated with dual teaching and leading roles. Leadership is a people intensive task and therefore demands the availability of quality time to interact with, and provide support for, teachers, students and parents. Responses from some teachers indicated that they believed their leader was too busy or stressed to provide assistance to them, whilst other teachers felt their leader was abrupt when asked for assistance or that their leader completed tasks ineffectively due to lack of time.

Could it be that this is an example of school-based management practices being undertaken by the principal in less than an equitable manner for early childhood personnel. Leaving some leaders with little time for leadership is inappropriate, not only for the leaders themselves, but also for the teachers, students and their parents in K-2.

### **Challenges Associated with Relationships in K-2 Leadership**

Another challenge highlighted by teachers concerned relationship issues. Twice as many responses were received from teachers (17%) than leaders (8%) in this category. Teachers indicated that access to, and support from, leaders were important

leadership challenges. A number of teachers referred to lack of support from K-2 leaders for their “stressed” colleagues. Factors cited by teachers as areas they needed extra leadership assistance and support in, were inclusion of special needs children into mainstream classes, and the number of children who have emotional and behavioral problems, both areas of increasing demand for leaders. A major reason, for the lack of provision of support by leaders, could once again be related to specific time for leadership. It could be that, leaders are fully extended dealing with their own stress levels and have little energy or inclination to assist others. A lack of support could also result from a leader’s lack of knowledge in the very areas (such as inclusion and behaviour management) in which teachers are seeking support and assistance.

Further support for this premise is provided in teachers’ responses when they perceived the category of Knowledge to be the third most important challenge for K-2 leaders. Responses from teachers (11%) referred to K-2 leaders requiring a deeper understanding of the needs of early childhood children and what happens in K-2 classrooms. Given that 62% of leaders in this study held a teaching specialisation in an area other than early childhood it is understandable that there would be a group of leaders who are perceived by teachers to be completing the technical side of their leadership with low level competence. Furthermore, there is a critical need for all early childhood leaders to enhance their knowledge base related to K-2 education, as only then will they be seen as credible, effective and meaningful leaders for early childhood teachers. Sadly, few professional learning opportunities are being provided by the education department for K-2 leaders, to alleviate this perceived deficit.

Leaders perceived the key challenge in the Knowledge area, not to be in their own K-2 knowledge, but in raising school and community awareness about K-2

education, through an advocacy role. It is well known that the power of advocacy comes from the power of a group, when similar minded people work towards common goals. The fact that the Tasmanian association for early childhood leaders (Early Childhood Educators of Tasmania) has enlarged its membership basis, to include K-2 teachers, has appeared to have had a negative impact on the association with membership by early childhood leaders dropping substantially over the past five years. This can only have weakened the links, not only between K-2 leaders in different schools, but also their collective power to positively impact on the quality of educational provision at the education departmental level, statewide.

Added to this, at the school-level, comments such as the following give cause for concern. One Assistant Principal contended that senior staff positions in early childhood education need to be justified within the Kindergarten to Grade 6 school organisation, because at present “K-2 leadership is seen as backward step or unnecessary”. An Advanced Skills Teacher 2 raised another perspective on K-2 leadership stating “recognition by school leadership, school bodies and the community at large that early childhood teachers are professionals”, is a challenge for leaders.

K-2 leaders must be advocates for young children (Rodd 1998), both at school and in the wider community. Within a school’s operation this advocacy would include the leader ensuring equity in the provision of resources (Goldring & Rallis 1993), such as teacher assistant time, funding and facilities for early childhood teaching and learning. In the study, 11% of leaders’ responses were concerned with organisational issues concerning school requirements, such as these. A responding teacher stated K-2 leaders and teachers must explain “to upper primary teachers, the different needs of early childhood classes, with regard to class size and teacher aide assistance”. One

leader, an Advanced Skills Teacher 2, noted that the greatest challenge for leaders is “to convince those who are not early childhood trained that early childhood classes need to be of a reasonable size”. In the Early Childhood Review (2000) note is made of the need for smaller class sizes. However, the document refers to the resourcing implications of this move.

Incorrect educational provisions may occur if the leader fails to possess the appropriate technical knowledge of early childhood philosophy. As one principal commented “some of the philosophically sound aspects of K-2 are being challenged from **within** the school by inadequately trained leaders and **outside** by politicians”. A teacher also contended that the leader’s role is to “challenge politicians’ ramblings” with rhetoric founded upon sound theory and practice. However, this once again requires a sound knowledge and understanding of K-2 philosophy, which some teachers perceived, was lacking in their early childhood leader.

Additionally, it is of interest that the category related to Parents, regarding expectations and utilisation was rated the lowest challenge for early childhood leaders by both leaders and teachers (7% of each group’s responses). This could mean that this challenge is being handled efficiently at this time, or is not perceived as a priority in early childhood education today.

## **CONCLUSION**

The greatest challenges for K-2 education today were seen by Tasmanian leaders in this study to involve matters of educational change, with particular emphasis on providing a balanced curriculum. Leaders also believed that there was a challenge in raising school and community awareness to the importance of K-2 leadership and education. This is congruent with the writings of Rodd (1998) who

strongly encourages early childhood leaders in the child-care sector to be advocates for young children and their education. Sadly, the latest Tasmanian departmental policy document on Early Childhood Education (2000) pays scant attention to this crucial leadership aspect of education in the early years.

Another challenge highlighted by leaders in the study related to the conflict for available time to complete classroom teaching duties and leadership tasks. This time/role dilemma has the potential to cause significant stress on early childhood leaders, when unrealistically high teaching loads are placed upon them. Further, the negative impact of this practice was noted by early childhood teachers in the study, indicating that not only are leaders feeling stressed, they are exhibiting stressed behaviour traits, which can only be having a detrimental effect on the quality of their leadership.

Teachers in the study believed that one of the key challenges for K-2 leaders involved the need to enhance leaders' knowledge and understanding in relation to the educational needs of early childhood children and what happens in their classrooms. The necessity for the facilitation of appropriate professional development for K-2 Tasmanian leaders by the education department is essential. Further, ongoing professional learning, designed to master the technical core of teaching and learning, must be a high priority for those K-2 leaders who hold a teaching specialisation in an area other than early childhood. However, it is not enough to engage all leaders solely in pedagogical development. Rather, leaders require ongoing professional development in leadership skills and processes, because assuming that assimilation of these skills will occur whilst completing the leadership role, is not adequate. Professional leadership courses are available through many universities and educational institutions, as well as the Tasmanian education department and it is

important that K-2 leaders avail themselves of these opportunities, and likewise that the education department actively support early childhood leaders' development, especially financial incentives.

Early childhood teachers perceived that a further key leadership challenge related to a leader's ability to be accessible to, and supportive of, their staff and students. Communication and interpersonal relationships are the foundation on which early childhood is developed (Rodd 1998), and positive relationships are essential for quality leadership (Lashway et al. 1996). Some teachers found their leader to be wanting in this regard. Possible causes for this could be poor time management, being over committed to classroom teaching, or possessing low-level interpersonal skills. Leadership in early childhood is vitally important and leaders need adequate time to complete this role effectively. Early childhood leaders need to ensure that they acquire the necessary leadership skills and are given the appropriate amount of time to allow them to fulfil their senior staff role with dedication and expertise. Young children deserve the very best in leadership.

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