Leading Post-pandemic Organizational Change in Early Childhood Education: How Self-Awareness as a Leader and Distributed Leadership are Foundational to the Change Process

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Abstract

The changes required to work through the COVID-19 pandemic have prompted the ECE community to consider new ways of thinking about how formal and informal leaders and early childhood educators work together through small and large organizational change. Complex changes have occurred throughout the pandemic, requiring leaders to think more deeply about how they plan for and execute organizational change. The aim of this article is to initiate dialogue around factors that must be considered post-pandemic in order to lead sustainable change in early years settings. Specifically, emergent ways of thinking about how change is led in early years education through both self-reflection on the part of leaders and a culture of distributed leadership are explored.

Key words

change, COVID-19, distributed leadership, early childhood education, leadership

Author Biography

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Leading Post-pandemic Organizational Change in Early Childhood Education: How Self-Awareness as a Leader and Distributed Leadership are Foundational to the Change Process

Early childhood educators (ECEs) are committed, competent individuals who work with children from 0 to 12 years of age in a variety of settings, including early years programs, child care centres, and before-and-after school programs (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2013). In these work settings, leaders and educators administer small changes, such as adding a new child to a program and large changes, such as the implementation of a new policy, almost daily. Regardless of the size of the change, the process is similar: create a vision, communicate the need, formulate a change team, implement the change, measure the change, and celebrate success (Cawsey et al., 2016). When a change is predetermined, it is easier to follow a prescribed process, however, with most change, the process is messy, complex, and layered (Curtis & Carter, 2009, Klevering & McNae, 2018, Rodd, 2015).

Within each organization, formal leaders (those in positions of authority who are responsible for the daily operations of an early childhood education (ECE) program), informal leaders, (those who do not have formal authority over others but are experienced and influential organizational members), and ECEs are required to work through the complexities brought on by change in order to sustain or improve organizational life. For this article, small or large change will be defined as the process of making, becoming, or causing something to be different (Rodd, 2015). An organizational change refers to the transformation of organizational components brought on by internal or external pressure to improve effectiveness. Some organizational changes are planned with predetermined goals, and, typically, formal leaders tend to prefer such changes as they are more concrete and manageable (Cawsey et al., 2016).

Some changes, such as those triggered by the global COVID-19 pandemic—are unforeseeable. The aim of this article is to start a dialogue and encourage new ways of thinking about how ECE leaders can plan for and execute organizational change post-pandemic through increased understanding of themselves and by capitalizing on multiple internal sources of leadership expertise, known as distributed leadership (Harris, 2005).

Regardless of whether a change is foreseen or unforeseen, a change plan is a framework that a leader and team use to work through the process of change. It may involve what steps to take and when, methods of communication and motivation, what change team roles to fill, and how goals will be met and measured (Cawsey et al., 2016). This article suggests that planning for change in a more fluid way, by knowing or beginning to recognize one's leadership style, using storytelling, and connecting with characteristics of distributed leadership is a good approach. Although these concepts are not new to early childhood education (Curtis et al., 2013; Berger, 2015; Lindon et al., 2016), building on them to form a less prescriptive change plan, as opposed to the more traditional, direct change plans that dominate leadership discourse (Cawsey et al., 2016) is an emerging idea.

Organizational Change in ECE in a Time of COVID-19

Prior to the global COVID-19 pandemic, ECE leaders experienced significant political, social, and economic pressures for change. Across Canada, high levels of pressure and low levels of support have been largely

due to fragmented policies, guidelines, and funding (Friendly et al., 2020a). With few resources, models, and research available, all organizational members (leaders and educators) found themselves in a place of frustration as they attempted to work through organizational change (Rodd, 2015).

With the onset of COVID-19, ECE leaders have been required to work through the change process under immense pressures and with even less support (Allvin & Hogan, 2020; Friendly et al., 2020b). Although there is still little known about the widespread impacts of COVID-19 on the early years sector (Friendly et al., 2020b; Powell et al., 2021), the need for accessible child care is a top priority for policy makers worldwide (Phillips et al., 2021). Despite this need, during COVID-19, unclear and inconsistent messaging (around Ministry of Education updates, required closures, and between governing bodies such as the Ministry of Education and local health units), poor communication with information coming from secondary or even tertiary sources, and little time to make required changes amplified challenges and stressors for ECE leaders and educators (Powell et al., 2021).

A 2020 study conducted by the United States National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) aimed at understanding child care professionals' experiences during COVID-19. Results indicated that 56% of child care operators in the United States were losing money every day the centres stayed open. A lack of funding for personal protective equipment (PPE) supplies, difficulty retaining educators, and low attendance rates meant that programs were struggling and at risk of closure (Hogan, 2020). Consequently, both those in formal leadership positions and educators faced the reality that COVID-19-related change was inevitable. In order to stand a chance at remaining open, innovation, creativity, and collaboration was considered to be necessary.

The situation in Ontario was similar. An already over-loaded provincial budget delivered no increases for the early years sector in 2021 (AECEO, 2021). As noted above, despite overwhelming evidence that child care is an essential component of society's current and future economic and social growth and the quest for gender equity in the workplace (Friendly et al., 2020a), it was neglected at a social policy level.

After Ontario families and child care programs emerged from what Friendly et al. (2020a) identified as COVID-19's acute phase, they were greeted by an even grimmer child care landscape. A report released in 2020 by Friendly et al. (2020(b)) highlighted that operators of child care centres and home-based centres across Canada were experiencing stressors related to staff layoffs, and financial worries due to reduced parent fees and government funding, which led to concerns about whether or not they would be able to remain open post-COVID-19. With mandated shutdowns and significant declines in enrollment, 174 centres across Ontario have closed permanently since March 2020. Even with new centres opening, this elimination of child-care spaces remains highly problematic for the province (Davis, 2021).

With such high levels of uncertainty and rapid change during COVID-19, ECE leaders have been forced to stretch their thinking beyond step-by-step change plans that outline exactly how to work through a change.

Planning for Change Before COVID-19

Even before operational difficulties arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, opportunities for deeper thinking about leadership and change in ECE had emerged. The following story provides an example of an educator at a non-profit child care centre in Southern Ontario working through an externally driven change.

When working as a classroom teacher in a preschool program, I vividly remember the big change my colleagues and I went through when Ontario introduced How Does Learning Happen?*, the pedagogical document for the early years. Prior to its introduction, I finally felt I understood the ELECT framework (*Early Learning for Every Child Today*) and had mastered classifying children's learning into the different domains, pairing it with a photo, and taping it in the hallway of our centre. I felt like* How Does Learning Happen? *was requiring me to start at the beginning as an educator*

and, truthfully, I felt uncertain. I remember my supervisor trying to answer all our questions about this new guiding document in one staff meeting. Needless to say, our conversations went well beyond one staff meeting. After How Does Learning Happen? *was introduced, I started to realize that perhaps the documentation my team teacher and I were doing needed changing, too. I questioned if we were capturing children in a way that aligned with our image of the child, and if our documentation was conveying what we wanted it to. I remember the conversations where I suggested that we look at other tools for documenting, aside from our classroom interest webs, and my team teacher expressed that she was not interested in changing our method. She couldn't see why we would change something that was working perfectly fine. I realized that we had a long road ahead of us as we attempted to change some of the practices we had been using for many years; it wasn't going to be easy or straightforward, but I was inspired and felt hopeful with the direction of* How Does Learning Happen?

As the story above highlights, everyone will react to and move through change differently. While a leader may face some levels of resistance, Fullan (2002) points out that resistance is valuable because the leader then has an opportunity to address concerns and hear alternative points of view. Ultimately, change can be exhausting, intimidating, and flat-out hard, but it is a necessary component of organizational life (Rodd, 2015).

Given the complexity of change, many scholars and businesses have developed and marketed programs and guides to support the change process. Leaders can choose from a number of available models to create a change plan to support all levels of organizational change. Prominent models such as John Kotter's 8-step method for leading change or Kurt Lewin's 3-step change management model have been widely used across disciplines (Cawsey et al., 2016). In John Kotter's method, the 8 steps for leading change are highly structured and detailed and there is an emphasis on successfully completing 1 step before moving on to the next. Kurt Lewin's 3-step method

is simpler than Kotter's, clear and concise, and ultimately drives home the message that for change to unfold successfully, the first step involves shifting organizational equilibrium (Cawsey et al., 2016).

Prominent change models within the ECE community require some level of reflection and collaboration. For example, Susan MacDonald's 8 strategies to inspire and motivate ECE leaders involves completing a series of reflective practice exercises, with the first step of the model involving the creation of a collaborative vision (MacDonald, 2016). Another well-known ECE change model is Paula Jorde Bloom's framework for change, which is built on individual professional development. Bloom's (1991) method strives to move beyond what many ECE leaders in Ontario now refer to as "drive thru" training—professional development that does not sustain learning and happens quickly, with little substance. Bloom recognized early on the need to move beyond a "quick fix," and she developed a guide for diagnosing problems and choosing the best strategy for action (Bloom et al., 1991). Further, the work of Deb Curtis and Margie Carter (2009) presents a guide for directors to develop a collective vision that guides practice, speaks to the educators' hearts, and excites them. In their book The Visionary Director, a framework is presented for leaders to organize and strategize their work and thinking to move their vision forward. Stories from directors and activities are presented to cultivate the thinking needed for effective leadership (Curtis & Carter, 2009). Moving beyond consideration of different approaches to change, there are deeper implications on social, political, and ethical levels that leaders must consider. Some of these implications are outlined below.

Social Implications of Change

- Change within any organization can alter existing relationships and agreements; even cultures rooted in history and commonality can experience turbulence (Bolman & Deal, 2013).

- Relationships prevail over reason when it comes to change; identifying team members who will support the change from the onset by building momentum and advocating for the change is

crucial (Bolman & Deal, 2013). As Fullan (2001) noted two decades ago, it takes more than a single driver to move a vision forward and sustain it over time.

- Most often change creates fear, stress, and anxiety for people but strong relationships are a good antidote (Fullan 2001). Leaders who focus too much on the reason or logistical side of change and neglect the importance of relationships court failure. Throughout change, an investment in people is vital, including not only adequate training but also emotional support, new relationship building, and a culture of knowledge sharing (Bolman & Deal, 2013; Fullan, 2001).

Political Implications of Change

- Change can be externally or internally driven. For example, a new regulation may come from a Health Unit, as the ECE community has seen countless times in Ontario during COVID-19 (Friendly et al., 2020b), or a change may be internally driven, for example, restructuring teaching teams to form new relationships among colleagues. Both types of change must be balanced with an organization's vision and internal goals (Cawsey et al. 2016).

- As Bolman and Deal (2013) note, bureaucratic change cycles often leave people feeling hopeless and powerless (p. 225); consequently, structures and policies that support a culture of empowerment are necessary.

- As changes become larger and more complex, bureaucratic red tape can slow down the change by requiring approval on different levels from governing bodies (a board of directors, the school board, the health unit, the Ministry of Education, etc.) and create challenges with required strict codes and regulations, and difficulty accessing resources such as funding, space, and time (Cawsey et al. 2016).

Ethical Implications of Change

- Given the nature of ECE, every change made will directly or indirectly impact a vulnerable population: children. This requires leaders and educators to think with greater depth about the potential impacts on and/or benefits for the children in their care.

- If leaders are reluctant to relinquish some power, organizational cultures become powerless, and staff are not likely to be committed to or feel positive about change. As power is distributed, commitment to a common cause increases (Bolman & Deal, 2013; Lindon et al., 2016). Bolman and Deal (2013) summarize this point, stating, "Justice requires that leaders systematically enhance the power of subdominant groups." Systemically, devolution of power may include equitable decision making and career advancement opportunities, internal advocacy groups, and diversity in information and systems. Pedagogically, devolution may include consideration of whose narrative is told through documentation (Berger, 2015), fair opportunities and support to pursue pedagogical queries, and access to professional development.

- Regardless of whether a change is internally or externally driven, consideration of whose change is being prioritized and whose voice is at the change planning table is imperative. Moreover, whose history is shared and what stories are told as the change is planned or managed requires thought and attention.

The Search for a More Flexible Model for Organizational Change

Although models such as MacDonald's remain available as a template for change, large-scale, unexpected change (such as that triggered by a pandemic) is still immensely difficult to lead and work through. How leaders and educators have planned and managed change through COVID-19 is as varied (Friendly et al., 2020b) as each ECE setting in Ontario due to unique organizational structures, funding models, philosophies, and demographics. Three key components that should be considered as post-pandemic planning tools are self-awareness as a leader, storytelling, and identifying leadership style.

Planning for Change: Self-awareness as a Leader

In their recent work, From Teaching to Thinking Pelo and Carter (2018) discuss the importance of educators consciously engaging in self-reflection as a tool for deeper meaning making of children's learning. The same process is valuable for leaders; as they work toward increased self-awareness, they can effectively identify their place within the change process and organization. According to Curtis et al., (2013) reflective practice can be thought of as a disposition, a mindset for working in ECE, though it involves more than just thinking (p. 43); it encompasses critical conversations with colleagues, questioning of individual values and history, and using protocols to guide thinking and listening. When classroom educators, and, this article is suggesting, leaders, engage in reflective practice they position themselves as lifelong learners who are better equipped to navigate complex issues while staying true to their values (Curtis et al., 2013). Just as educators are not separate from the process of learning, leading in ECE does not happen in isolation. Addressing the subjectivity of what leadership is from the onset of a change makes space for leaders to explore their perspectives as one piece of the larger picture (Pelo & Carter, 2018). Knowing how leaders define themselves in their leadership roles is a big but necessary starting point.

Leadership has been studied across disciplines for decades, and a wealth of knowledge about what it means to be an effective leader, different leadership styles, and strategies for leading has been generated (Bolman & Deal, 2013, Fullan, 2001, Hersted & Frimann, 2016, Northouse, 2016). However, creating a central definition of leadership and, specifically one related to ECE, is made increasingly difficult by the lack of research, models, mentors, and ECE-focused theory (Klevering & McNae, 2018). ECE leadership is unique from other forms of leadership because it often encompasses both administrative leadership—overseeing tasks like policy development, enrollment of children and staffing (Curtis & Carter, 2009)—and pedagogical leadership—using a deep understanding of early learning and development to guide the practice of others (Coughlin & Baird, 2013). Pedagogical leadership can develop from anywhere within the organization, creating opportunities for the growth of informal leadership (Fonsén & Soukainen, 2020).

Despite the challenge of defining ECE leadership, for the purpose of this article leadership is thought of as a process rather than an individual characteristic. When leadership is seen as a process, it makes room for informal leadership to develop. Moreover, it means those in formal leadership roles can, in fact, improve and grow their leadership abilities through reflective practice and on-going professional development opportunities. For several years now, reflective practice has grown as part of work in ECE and is certainly not an emerging concept (Callaghan, 2002; Curtis et al., 2013; Pelo & Carter, 2018).

Continued learning as a leader, which involves reflection, is part of creating a culture for change, moving change forward, and motivating others (Fullan, 2002). As leaders grow their ability to authentically embrace reflective practice, they gain a deeper understanding of organizational life, have stronger communication skills, and are more apt to embrace new ways of being—all characteristics needed to navigate change smoothly. With COVID-19, leaders have been called to make small and large changes rapidly with little time to map out a direction or plans (Friendly et al., 2020b). Consequently, self-reflection for both leaders and educators serves as the base for how change is introduced, communicated, evaluated, and celebrated. Self-awareness can be further supported by sharing and recording leadership stories.

Planning for Change: Storytelling

Lives are made up of stories and each story serves to influence how the storyteller sees the world. People have a story for virtually everything (Brown, 2017). Storytelling is one way of understanding a community's sense of identity; when leaders, educators, and children share stories, they ground the history, growth, and future for the whole community (Pelo & Carter, 2018). Moreover, storytelling can strengthen learning as leaders and educators share their experiences, uncertainties, and challenges, as well as support the growth of new relationships and

practices (Hersted & Frimann, 2016).

As leaders engage in storytelling their sense of leadership identity is exposed, and new possibilities emerge for learning. If the self is viewed as a social construct, then arguably its development is influenced by language and the narratives that an individual hears and tells (Hersted & Frimann, 2016). Therefore, growing an organizational culture to include storytelling as part of practice means that storytelling can influence how leaders (and educators) think of change.

When organizations are required to change on any level, leaders' and educators' levels of stress can rise (Rodd, 2015); change is a powerful force that can threaten well-established routines and cultures (Bolman & Deal, 2013). With the introduction of COVID-19 protocols and restrictions, leaders and educators have been called to change their practices in multiple ways, and this has not been without stress (Friendly et al., 2020b; Powell et al., 2021). Dayal and Tiko (2020) looked at the experiences of educators at two early learning centres on a small island in a developing state in the Pacific region during COVID-19 and found that educators worried on both a personal and professional level. Participants shared concerns about their own health and safety, their students' well-being, and the long-term sustainability of their centre. Further, educators reported stressors around accessing resources to communicate with families and having the newly required technological skills for practice (Dayal & Tiko, 2020). The following story exemplifies an educator's experience in Southern Ontario navigating some of the stressors brought on by COVID-19.

> When COVID initially started I was on parental leave from my job as an infant teacher at a well-established child care centre. As I prepared for my return to work, I started my son at a child care centre in my community. I remember thinking that there was little communication at the end of his day about how things had gone, and, as an educator, I was surprised by this and curious about why this was so. As I transitioned back to the classroom, I quickly empathized with my son's educators. I was hit so hard with so many

> new regulations and policies that I found myself having little time to communicate with parents at the end of the day. Challenges such as parents not being allowed inside the centre, an increase in cleaning routines, and more paperwork, have meant that I am returning to a role that is vastly different from the one I left. I am still trying to grasp what my new role truly encompasses on a practical but also pedagogical level.

The above study and story highlight some of the ways in which COVID-19 is now part of educators' stories. As leaders and educators move forward, continuing to tell their COVID-19 stories can be a beneficial way to process the emotions related to all the changes brought on by the pandemic, as well as a way to help individuals remain grounded in their roots and identity and prepare for future change. As stories are shared about what was learned while leading through COVID-19, both leaders and educators continue to know more about what they value and why.

According to Brown (2017) a *value* can be described as a way of being or believing that is held as most important. Often people can talk about what they value, but only a small percentage of people are able to live their values. Identifying one's values can take considerable effort but is necessary; values that have not been identified and named cannot be lived (Brown, 2018).

Naming one or two values is important for leaders as they serve as support pillars during change. Values underpin the change process when communicating is hard, and all are unsure of direction or need to feel grounded. Knowledge of personal values and beliefs is linked not only to being a genuine leader but also to the development of a leadership presence: that powerful force that helps others view the leader as capable of making and sustaining change (Rodd, 2015). If formal or informal leaders are asking ECEs to participate in and embrace change, leaders must be able to articulate what they see as important and identify their own approach to leadership.

Planning for Change: Leadership Style

Given that leaders' values are not situational,

meaning they do not change depending on where leaders are, who leaders are with, or what leaders are doing (Brown, 2017), values influence leadership style. Aside from values, other factors, such as gender, also influence leadership. For example, women are slightly more likely to use a democratic or transformational leadership style than men are while being equally as effective and committed in leadership positions (Northouse, 2016). Once in leadership positions, women are less likely to receive the same formal training as men (which may be due to the greater number of career interruptions or less overall work experience because of the increased level of domestic responsibility they carry) and face a multitude of gender stereotypes and barriers to leading (Northouse, 2016).

The Role of Relationships When Women Lead

Within the ECE sector, most leaders and educators are women (Friendly, 2015), and often these women move directly from the classroom into leadership positions. Since women must balance societal expectations around their leadership behaviour and style, it is not surprising that the leadership in ECE tends to feature whole-hearted, relationship-based leadership styles (Lindon et al., 2016). Furthermore, holding relationships central to ECE leadership aligns with ECE work pedagogically (Pelo & Carter, 2018; Ministry of Education 2014) and serves as a foundation for high-quality programs (Rodd, 2015; Friendly, 2015). And finally, relationships are one of a leaders' best supports for planning, communicating, and implementing change, as well as sustaining the change over time (Pelo & Carter, 2018). Consider the story below from a supervisor of a large non-profit child care centre in Southern Ontario.

With enrolment declining slowly after the introduction of full-day kindergarten in Ontario, our centre was having to close our senior preschool classroom. Most of our educators have worked at the centre for a relatively long time, and we have well-established relationships with one another. Therefore, I decided to share this news at a staff meeting when we were all

together. In sharing the news, it was evident that my foundational work in building a strong relationship with each individual at our centre supported people in feeling comfortable to share their thoughts about the upcoming change. Organizational members shared different fears, which centred on being worried about their job security, not wanting to separate from a teaching partner, and being concerned about how the remaining children would amalgamate.

Our trust in one another allowed all of us to honestly vocalize our questions about change timelines and logistics. Without our strong relationships with one another, I am not sure educators would have felt comfortable asking questions, and I am not sure I would have been brave enough to answer honestly. As we moved toward closing the senior preschool classroom and bringing everyone together into one room, our awareness of individual/team strengths and challenges helped us take on different change roles. For example, one of our team members is passionate about event planning; she took on the role of planning a celebration to mark the closing of the classroom. Our assistant supervisor, who is exceptional with Excel® and logistical thinking, helped us determine when each child should transition to the new room. I think authentic collaboration and well-established relationships were truly what made our large-scale change successful.

Distributed Leadership

With the onset of COVID-19, ECE leaders were required to complete tasks and lead organizational change like never before. Not only did this challenge require a better self-understanding, but it also required increased awareness of who team members were individually and collectively and how best to work with them. Not surprisingly, distributed leadership, an emerging leadership style in the field of ECE, (Rodd, 2015) became an appropriate fit for 21st century ECE leaders leading through organizational change triggered by COVID-19.

Support for distributed leadership has been growing in the last several years in ECE literature (Baxendine, 2018 Chandler, 2016; Fonsén & Soukainen, 2020; Heikka et al., 2021; Rodd, 2015). In theoretical terms, distributed leadership means "multiple sources of guidance and direction, following the contours of expertise in an organization, made coherent through a common culture" (Harris, 2005, p. 81). In an early years' setting, it means leadership can develop anywhere, not just from the formal leader (Lindon et al., 2016) and should be part of everyone's role. In Ontario, the concept of multiple sources of guidance is stated directly in the College of Early Childhood Educators' Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice (2013), "all registered early childhood educators, regardless of position or title, are leaders" (p. 14). The growing support for pedagogical leadership by not only formal leaders but also anyone with a strong understanding of ECE (Coughlin & Baird, 2013) means there are more leadership opportunities for those interested in pedagogy. According to Fonsén and Soukainen (2020), pedagogical leadership is a form of distributed leadership and as society changes, ECE organizations need to strengthen their pedagogical leadership to be sustainable over the long term.

The implementation of COVID-19 protocols has highlighted the need for distributed leadership for organizational change as well. The intricacies of the fluid situation and the volume of change calls for multiple sources of leadership, specifically the strengths of everyone, for survival. Educators have been spending copious amounts of time implementing new requirements and regulations, while trying not to burn out (Powell et al., 2021). According to Heikka et al., (2021), distributed leadership has a positive impact on change; in the post-pandemic period, continuing to distribute leadership is a practical way to prepare and manage the next small or large organizational change.

Why Use Distributed Leadership?

As Bolman and Deal (2013) state, "the turbulent world of the twenty-first century pushes organizations to be fast, flexible, and decentralized, which requires leadership from many quarters" (p. 346). This requirement has been evident during COVID-19 as ECE roles have become increasingly complex (Powell et al., 2021). Building support from all angles to navigate large-scale change such as that sparked by COVID-19 is necessary for change sustainability (Fullan, 2002). As leaders and educators collaborate, they invest time in relationship building and continued learning, which enhances meaning making and shared understanding of proposed changes (Rodd, 2015). Collective knowledge building and the connections among educators when knowledge is shared are pivotal to effective leadership and established through relationship (Fullan, 2002). Using multiple sources of guidance and direction during and after COVID-19 aligns with early years settings and pedagogy in several ways; a distributed leadership approach is relationship-based, uses different perspectives to widen an organizational lens, builds on internal resources, and empowers educators.

Relationship-based Leadership

Directly aligning with Ontario's Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, distributed leadership means recognizing the work and strengths of other organizational members, regardless of titles (Spillane et al., 2015). The work of ECEs is collaborative in nature, and collaboration can be strengthened through the shift of some power from formal leaders to informal leaders. Power shifts when others are given the opportunity to make decisions that impact their program and/or the centre at large, for example perhaps informal leaders are involved in the hiring of a new staff member or helping with a new budget. As leadership is distributed to support authentic collaboration, relational trust must be established (Denee & Thornton, 2019) through a commitment to wholehearted listening and cultural competency (Pelo & Carter, 2018).

Realistically, distributed leadership involves some level of risk for those giving up power and those embracing new responsibilities. Thus, if educators are going to be willing and able to engage in leadership opportunities, they must feel a sense of security and support (Denee & Thornton, 2019). A study by Klevering and McNae (2018) used semi-structured interviews to gain an understanding of ECE leaders' notions of leadership in a New Zealand context. Those authors identified that one of the most prominent themes to emerge from the research was the importance of "trusting relationships" being foundational to effective

leadership. Specifically, trust was connected to building the team's communication, the quality of the program, and motivation levels. Participants "believed that understanding each member of the team, recognising individual strengths, and encouraging them to lead in these areas allows the leader to gain the team's trust, from which they can lead change towards higher quality care and education" (p. 10). Though relationship-building in any part of life takes more than trust and a commitment to listening, trust is directly linked to the success of a distributed leadership approach (Garvey & Lancaster, 2010). Given that people are unpredictable, leaders are typically faced with three overarching, recurring questions about relationships—what is really happening in this relationship? what motives are behind people's behaviour? what can I do about it? (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Although relationship building takes time and requires leaders to sit in a place of question, it prepares leaders to deal with the unpredictability of both change and people.

Using Different Perspectives

With COVID-19, leaders and educators have learned that they simply cannot see all parts at once. When called to lead change, especially on a large scale, it is far too layered for one individual. Including other team members with different strengths allows for the development of greater understanding, research, and questioning. COVID-19 has brought forth new ways of operating and thinking, adding to the complexity of ECE settings (Friendly et al., 2020b). Leaders who oversee child care operations are now faced with greater responsibilities, such as how to cover the costs of required PPE or how to meet new regulations within a current structure. Moreover, pedagogical queries like "How do we create a sense of belonging for children within new health and safety guidelines?" or "How do we ensure children's emotional and mental well-being is taken into consideration?" have surfaced (Friendly et al., 2020b). Sharing and continuing to identify these new responsibilities are inevitable in post-COVID-19 organizations. Further, distributed leadership opens the possibility for greater research to address gaps in the ECE leadership literature (Baxendine, 2018; Klevering & McNae, 2018), especially in relation to change (Rodd, 2015). ECEs bring unique experiences

and perspectives (Ministry of Education, 2014) that can be highly beneficial when they take on leadership responsibilities. Diversity in formal and informal leadership means greater attention to what it takes to lead and manage all types of change. An example of distributed leadership from an educator's perspective in a small child care centre in Southern Ontario is shared below.

My first job after I graduated as an early childhood educator was in a preschool classroom at a small centre located inside a school. I was eager to put everything I had learned in school into practice, from observation to a constructivist approach to program planning, I felt ready! I knew starting the position that I was passionate about working with preschool-aged children, however, over time I realized I also had a passion for leadership and administration. I was really interested in supporting other educators with the process of documentation, as well as learning about how the centre operated behind the scenes. Unfortunately, the initial leadership structure within the centre was hierarchical in nature and there were not many opportunities for me to feel like I was actively growing or contributing to my fullest. However, after about a year at the centre, right when I was beginning to feel constricted by the leadership, we had a significant change in organizational structure that resulted in a new supervisor. Over time this supervisor created opportunities for others to engage authentically in leadership. One of the best experiences for me was when the supervisor offered me the chance to take responsibility for parent tours of the centre. The supervisor would cover me in program whenever there was a tour, and I was able to have full autonomy over the format of the tour. In sharing some of this leadership responsibility with me, my supervisor built on the knowledge I had about our centre's history and vision, embraced my extrovert strengths as an individual, and increased my dedication to our centre.

Using Internal Resources

Distributed leadership does not mean that everyone

leads at the same time, and it is not an off-loading of work (Spillane et al., 2015). However, as the story above outlines, distributed leadership builds on individual skills and areas of leadership interest. In many parts of Canada, the need to support ECE leaders with distinct professional development related to leadership competencies is now recognized (Halfon & Langford, 2015). However, professional development that is less linear in nature and supports the development of the critical thinking required to lead change is still needed within the early years sector (Baxendine, 2018; Klevering & McNae, 2018; Rodd, 2015). Building an internal team means that educators are provided with opportunities to engage in ongoing learning and live in a place of question. Additionally, with limited funding and resources for the early years—even more so during COVID-19 (Friendly et al., 2020b), distributed leadership builds on resources from within the organization. Educators are knowledgeable, caring, reflective, and resourceful professionals (Ministry of Education, 2014) and have the potential to contribute to organizations on far greater levels. There is a wealth of literature available around roles during the change process (Bolman & Deal, 2013; Cawsey et al., 2016; Rodd, 2015) that suggest that to effectively lead change, organizational members must take on team functions to move the change forward, not to distribute workload but to capitalize on collective strengths. One individual is not expected or capable of taking on all roles but instead can be responsible for creating a culture of distributed leadership.

Using Empowerment

During these unprecedented times ECE leaders have had to work even more diligently to support and motivate others. With a high number of ECEs reporting a decrease in job satisfaction during COVID-19 as well as a sense of powerlessness (Powell et al., 2021), finding ways to help educators see the value and purpose in their work is arguably more important now than ever before. Empowering educators to take on leadership roles is one way to continue to motivate them for positive change (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Given that everyone reacts differently to change, and that feelings of skepticism and fear can arise, empowerment is identified as a necessary part of change (Rodd,

2015). Ontario's pedagogy asks educators to embrace a culture of curiosity and life-long learning (Ministry of Education, 2014) and to truly be able to do this they must feel empowered to ask questions, engage in new thinking, and look more closely at their organization. Moreover, empowering educators to be part of the change process is, as Rodd (2015) shares, one way to ease stress levels: "the most effective way to help early years professionals cope with change-induced stress is to ensure that they participate in and have some control over how the change affects them" (p. 96).

Limitations of Distributed Leadership

Despite the many ways in which distributed leadership aligns with the early years pedagogy, there are limitations to this approach, with perhaps the largest being time requirements. For educators to grow their practice and sustain change, having enough time to do so is imperative (Coughlin & Baird, 2013). Educators need time to think and question both individually and as a team, though finding this time is challenging. Even prior to COVID-19, finding time for program planning was difficult for most educators and during COVID-19 educators are required to spend an increased amount of time cleaning and sanitizing, and thus taking time out of program for planning is almost impossible (Powell et al., 2021). If leaders and educators are struggling to find the time to engage in the pedagogical aspects of their work, spending time supporting distributed leadership will undoubtedly be daunting. However, even prior to COVID-19, change in early years education was limited by scant access to resources (Rodd, 2015), and leaders have always had to be creative with how they support the development of others. Most often, the formal leader holds control over how much time educators have outside of program to engage in pedagogical and leadership work (Colmer et al., 2014). Therefore, even beginning to recognize this power dynamic and change the discourse in relation to what it means to be an ECE leader is a starting point.

Further Thoughts

ECEs are constantly being asked to make extremely complex, often time-sensitive, changes (Rodd, 2015). This was particularly evident during the COVID-19

pandemic. The pandemic pushed all leaders to think more deeply about the ways in which they plan for change and how they navigate the change process—whether for pedagogical or organizational change. More specifically, the pandemic has asked leaders to think about what must be considered before a change plan is used and how leaders can be supported in finding their own path during the change process. The purpose of this article is not to suggest that change plans do not have a time and place or that they are not effective. However, COVID-19 has brought to the forefront Rodd's (2015) notion that there is no secret recipe or one specific plan for leading change in the early years. Instead, this article suggests that leaders must commit to knowing themselves and move toward processes of distributed leadership—inviting others to be a part of the change process. With each

change required by COVID-19, leaders have built a greater sense of knowledge and insight across their organization, which, according to Fullan (2001), may be more practical than a step-by-step plan.

Educator Karyn Callaghan often encourages professional development participants not to leave their time with her thinking about all the barriers they face when it comes to change. Instead, she asks them to consider the "Now what?" Regardless of the unpredictability of COVID-19, the "Now what?" is a continued conversation around the abilities and rights that leaders and ECEs have to participate as active agents of change. As leaders and educators navigate a whole new normal brought on by COVID-19, distributed leadership can serve as a catalyst for new ways of thinking and leading together.

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