

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ROLE PERCEPTIONS AND LEADERSHIP ATTITUDES AND PRACTICE IN CHILD CARE CENTRES

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### ABSTRACT

Preliminary investigations carried out by Rodd and Clyde (1992) on a sample of Victorian child care directors indicate that Australian caregivers do not respond positively to the traditional descriptions which characterise leadership. This may be due to the fact that the role of the child care director is a female role whereas the leadership profiles have been developed from a male-oriented perspective and may not be perceived as appropriate for women. Kinney (1992) has developed a list of characteristics that better describe female leadership behaviour: these descriptions have been incorporated into a new protocol trialed on fifty directors of child care centres in Victoria. In addition each director has been interviewed to ascertain their perceptions of the leadership role and the skills necessary to fulfil this role.

Preliminary results indicate that child care directors have a concept of leadership which reflect the kind of centre they operate in (public or private) and their length of experience in the child care field. These results have strong manifestations for the kinds of training, both pre-service and in-service, offered to leaders in the child care field, and the need to develop innovatory techniques in order to assist directions to 'marry' their perceptions of the kinds of skills needed to implement their role.

### Introduction

This paper is the outcome of the third stage of an ongoing research study about the perceived skills and knowledge required by child care directors to fulfil their very demanding role. This study has

developed as a result of the proliferation of centre-based child care programs in Australia over the past twenty years with the corresponding need for more people, both trained and untrained, to assume the co-ordinating role in these centres, combined with a growing concern about the way in which these directors can be assisted in carrying out their many, often diverse, tasks. Vander Ven (1991) reported on her work in developing a three-stage model of caregivers' skills, beginning with novice caregivers, often untrained and operating under the supervision of qualified staff to those who, at the third stage, were indirectly responsible for the care of children and who were more involved in working with staff, parents, administration and other members of the community. Vander Ven posited that at each of the three stages caregivers were only able to indicate those skills they

possessed as fitting them for this particular role, but that they did possess the relevant skills. When this study was replicated on nearly 300 child care workers in Victoria, the results were disappointing: the data did not indicate that caregivers viewed colleagues in responsible positions as planful, goal oriented, assertive, authoritative, manipulative, competitive, entrepreneurial, aggressive, ambitious or powerful, all adjectives from Vander Ven's third list, and, in fact, many respondents amended 'planful' to 'playful'. However, the other two adjectives from the original list, namely, 'proactive' and 'professional' were perceived as important by 88.8% and 75.7% of respondents respectively. The sample was quite young, 37.5% were aged under 26 years and nearly 60% had less than six years' experience, and therefore had little experience of leadership qualities. In addition, the writers considered that some of the descriptions may have been perceived as inappropriate by the totally female cohort authoritative, manipulative, competitive, aggressive, ambitious and powerful, for example.

A subsequent study reported at this Conference in 1993 attempted to remedy the supposed imbalance between male and female perceptions of leadership qualities: the work of Kinney (1992) was used as a starting point to develop a revised list of descriptors which better reflected a leadership style relevant to a human service dominated by women. Rodd's (1994) work was included to develop a longer list. The list included goal oriented, ambitious, entrepreneurial, professionally confident, active, persuasive, rewarding, empowerer, influential, non-assertive, motivator, visionary, calculated risk-taker, systematic planner, professionally competent, selfless, co-operative, mentor/guide.

In addition, the 139 respondents were supplied with descriptions of Katz's (1977) stages of professional development and asked to indicate their stage in 1991/1993/1995. Over 70% of respondents considered they had reached the Renewal or Maturity stages, indicating a professional maturity. In spite of this the Indirect Care descriptions, in the

main, failed to generate support: only professionally confident (87.8%), active (91.4%), professionally competent (87.8%) and co-operative (92.8%), gained support from more than 75% of respondents.

The writers considered that although Vander Ven's list had been amended to better reflect feminist perspectives of leadership in an Australian culture, it may have been that respondents remained unclear about the meaning of some of the descriptors. This study, therefore, was conducted by interview rather than questionnaire, and attempted to tease out from interviewees their understanding of the descriptions used.

#### Methodology

Fifty-four directors or co-ordinators of child care centres in and around Melbourne were contacted by telephone and invited to undertake the interview: all accepted. The interview lasted 60-90 minutes. Table 1 indicates the number of directors from the various kinds of centres.

TABLE 1 : KIND OF CENTRE

Local Government	38.9%	21
Private	16.9%	9
Community	16.9%	9
Employer Sponsored	16.9%	9
Co-operatives	9.3%	5

Other (TAFE) 1.9% 1

54

In terms of qualifications, 48.2% had two or three year child care qualifications, 35.2% had Diploma of Teaching (EC) and/or B.Ed. (E.C.), while 5.6% had no relevant qualifications; 9.3% had other qualifications not related to child care and a further 2% did not respond to this question. See Table 2.

TABLE 2 : QUALIFICATIONS

Child Care Qualifications (2/3 years)	48.2%
Dip. Teaching/B.Ed. (EC)	35.2%
Other Qualifications	9.3%
No Qualifications	5.6%

This response would indicate that the general concern that private centres "do not have qualified staff" may be an exaggeration.

Table 3 looks at the length of time the directors have worked in child care.

TABLE 3 : LENGTH OF TIME IN CHILD CARE

(2 people)	31-40 years	3.7%
(7 people)	21-30 years	13.0%
(10 people)	16-20 years	18.5%
(10 people)	11-15 years	18.5%
(16 people)	6-10 years	29.6%
(7 people)	1-5 years	13.0%
(2 people)	0-1 year	6.7%

Two people, or 3.7% of the sample, had been directors for less than one year: presumably this is their first centre, while two people have spent upwards of thirty years in the child care field. There is a maturity in the sample (83% have been engaged in child care for more than five years which one could expect would imply experience and expertise at the upper end of the Katz (1977) Professional Development Scale whereby respondents would demonstrate a broad commitment to child care and an awareness of an overall professional role; 31% had been directors of other child care centres prior to taking up their present position, the majority (24.1%) having been responsible for one centre and the remainder (9.3%) having directed at least two other centres previously. This should indicate a breadth of experience at this level). In fact, 22.4% of the total sample had had over ten years of previous experience as a co-ordinator with one person citing 30+ years as a co-ordinator. There appears to be a wealth of experience in this cohort.

Question 5 was an open-ended question, namely, why did you decide to become a co-ordinator? The results are detailed in Table 4 below (N.B. Respondents could make up to three reasons):

TABLE 4 : WHY BECOME A CO-ORDINATOR?

(Up to three reasons)

Career Progression	27.8%	33.3%	75.9%	137%
To use my skills & experience	18.5%	7.4%	3.7%	29.6%
I was committed to the child care field	13.0%	1.9%	5.6%	20.5%
I was invited/encouraged to apply	14.8%	1.9%	1.9%	18.2%
It was a challenge	14.8%	16.7%	3.7%	35.2%
It was the only job available	5.6%	3 people	5....%	
I enjoy administration	3.7%	5.6%	3.7%	13.0%

"The Salary" 1.9% 3.7 people 5.6%

Enjoy working with people -----11.2 3.7 14.8%

Clearly contemporary child care workers perceive career progression to director or co-ordinator a normal part of the job process which could provide a challenge for them and an opportunity to use their skills and expertise. Over 20% indicated their commitment to the child care field

as a profession.

In terms of their preparation for the director's role, 88% indicated they had undertaken specific training for the role; 67.4% of this constituted "on the job training", 14.8% pre-job training, and the remaining 17.8% of training was a combination of pre-job and on the job training (see Table 5; N = 48).

TABLE 5 : KIND OF TRAINING

On the job	67.4%
Pre-job	14.8%
Combination	17.8%

Training including management and finance courses at TAFE Colleges, human management and the student supervision certificate.

The next question elicited responses about training the directors would like to have undertaken to better fit them for their role prior to assuming the role. This was open-ended for each person.

TABLE 6 : TRAINING TO PREPARE SKILLS

Opinions	a %	1234	Total	
No comment	3.7	18.5	50.0	75.9
Health and Safety	16.7	24.1	111.1	1.9
*Inservice programs	9.3	18.5	14.8	3.7
"People" courses	24.1	17.4	7.4	5.6
*Staff oriented course	7.4	11.1	15.6	5.6
On-the-job training	5.6	13.0	9.3	1.9
SACS course (budgeting, etc.)	27.8	-----	27.8	
*Aspects of social work	--	1.9	1.9	3.7
Administration of budgeting	3.7	3.7	----	7.4
*Other qualifications	1.9	1.9	--	1.9

This was followed by a similar question relating to hypothetical training which would enhance existing skills as a director. This was an open-ended question and up to three responses per person were coded and presented in Table 7.

TABLE 7 : TRAINING TO ENHANCE SKILLS

Options	as %	123	Total
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No comment 11.155.690.7X  
 "People" Courses 40.7 9.3 1.9 51.9  
 Administration of budgeting 24.7 16.7--41.4  
 Inservice on programming 7.4 7.4--14.8  
 SACS course, e.g. budgets 9.3-- 1.9 11.2

Current issues, e.g. accreditation 3.7 3.7 1.9 9.3  
 "Informal" 3.7 1.9-- 5.6  
 Inservice on Children-- 1.9 1.9 3.8  
 First Aid Certificate--3.7-- 3.7  
 Inservice on Government Policies---- 1.9 1.9

It is interesting that 48.1% of respondents thought that directors' training should take place both prior to assuming the role and on the job; (14.5% opted for prior training, and 35.2% for on-the-job training).

It is interesting to note "people" courses feature highly in both areas; it would appear that child care workers who assume management positions are aware of the need for more skills in working with staff, parents and other members of the community, could this be a weakness in our preservice programs at present?

Having ascertained respondents' concerns relating to the skills associated with their role, respondents were asked to identify, from a list of nineteen roles, as many as they thought were important for the centre co-ordinator. Responses are shown in Table 8.

**TABLE 8 : IMPORTANT CO-ORDINATOR SKILLS**

Responsive to the needs of parents 100.0%  
 Responsive to the needs of staff 98.1%  
 Commitment to working towards meeting the needs of the centre 98.1%  
 16.7% 1st choice  
 Good working relationship with all centre staff 98.1% 48.1% 1st choice  
 Opportunities to participate in professional development activities 88.9%  
 Commitment to fulfilling the roles of the professional 96.3%  
 Ability to acknowledge other staff's strengths and assets to the centre 96.3%  
 Opportunity to participate in centre decision making 96.3%\*  
 Commitment to assist less qualified staff 94.4%  
 Willingness to undertake some organisational and management responsibilities 94.4%  
 Desire to extend professional knowledge 92.6%  
 Opportunity to influence centre decision making 92.6%\*  
 A feeling of confidence in solving staff disagreements 92.6%  
 Willingness to undertake all of the tasks associated with the centre as they arise 90.7%

Aware of the role of research in creating quality programs 90.7%  
 Access to clearly defined centre roles and responsibilities 88.9%  
 Desire to participate in centre decision making 87.0%  
 Use of the Code of Ethics as a guide to decision making 87.0%  
 A wide reader of current early childhood literature 81.5%

There are several results worth noting, firstly, given that some descriptions elicited 100% or 98% responses "access to clearly defined centre roles and responsibilities" was rated as important by only 88.9% of directors, and is sixteenth in the list on popularity; secondly, while most directors are keen to have an opportunity to participate in centre decision making, not all of them have the desire to participate.

This appears to be a somewhat laissez-faire approach to leadership. Question 9 was a key question in linking co-ordinator skills and roles; it was an open-ended question: What gives you the greatest pleasure in your role as a co-ordinator?

TABLE 9: GREATEST PLEASURE IN MY ROLE

Knowing the centre is running well 29.6% 7.4%  
 Meeting children's needs 27.8% 7.4%  
 Positive feedback from parents & community 14.8% 27.8%  
 Successfully meeting challenges confidently 13.0% 7.4%  
 Seeing staff meeting their potential 7.4% 9.3%  
 Staff demonstrating dedication, motivation, etc. 3.7% 1.9%  
 Staff having confidence (in director) 1.9%--  
 Seeing childcare progress as a profession 1.9%--  
 Extending my own knowledge-- 1.9%

The responses indicate that there is no single perception of the "perfect" centre; directors perceive their role differently, from a well operating centre to meeting the needs of staff, parents, children and community to the more altruistic comments relating to child care as a profession.

The question which was retained from previous surveys asked respondents to rank in order ten director's roles which the literature has determined as relevant (Vander Ven, 1991): results are shown in Table 10 below.

TABLE 10: ROLES OF AN EFFECTIVE DIRECTOR

Options as a %123Total  
 \*Directing and managing centres or programs 33.322.227.883.3  
 \*Working with parents 27.822.231.581.5  
 \*Supervising staff 22.233.313.068.5  
 \*Training or teaching other child care practitioners 7.416.7 7.431.5

Marketing and promoting their programs 5.6 5.6 7.4 18.6  
 Fund raising 1.9 -- 7.4 9.3  
 Giving speeches/workshops at professional meetings 1.9 1.9 1.9 5.7  
 Lobbying for legislation -- -- 3.7 3.7  
 Doing research -- -- -- --  
 Writing grant proposals -- -- -- --

Respondents were emphatic about their leadership role: it was contained within the centre and involved parents, staff and the children's program. Respondents were similarly emphatic about the descriptions which they perceived as not part of their responsibilities. They included writing grant proposals (25.9%); doing research (18.5%); lobbying for legislation (42.6%); giving speeches/workshops at professional meetings (11.1%); fundraising (35.2%) and marketing and promoting their programs (13.0%). Directors were requested to plot their stage of professional development, as described by Katz's (1977) Stages of Professional Development grid. Results are indicated in Table 11.

TABLE 11 : KATZ'S STAGES OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

1991 1994 1995  
 No response 9.3 1.9 5.6  
 Survival 11.1 3.7 -  
 Consolidation 20.4 5.6 1.9  
 Renewal 44.4 25.9 31.5  
 Maturity 14.8 63.0 61.1

If we disregard the regression in Maturity for 1995 as opposed to the present (one person feels she will decline) there is a steady increase in directors' perceiving themselves in the two upper stages of the model, Renewal and Maturity: 1991 59.20%; 1994 88.9% and 1995 92.5%.

The respondents who were not able to judge their development in the past or the present could be perceived as a cause for concern; leaders need to be aware of their own professional characteristics before they can provide support and professional guidance to others.

The higher order descriptors originally developed by Vander Ven (1991) and revised by Clyde and Rodd (1994) were amended to thirteen and presented in a list with an invitation to respondents to tick any which they considered as integral to being an effective co-ordinator. The results, as indicated in Table 12 below, indicate substantial differences between this cohort and previous cohorts.

TABLE 13 : CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EFFECTIVE CO-ORDINATOR



This Cohort 1994/1993

Professionally confident 98.1% 87.8%  
 Professionally competent 96.3% 81.8%  
 \*Mentor or guide 90.7% 55.4%  
 \*Assertive 90.7% 75%  
 \*Visionary 77.8% 41.7%  
 \*Empowering 70.4% 23.0%  
 \*Influential 70.4% 33.1%  
 \*Systematic Planner 68.5% 38.1%  
 \*Calculated Risk-taker 50% 22.3%  
 Goal oriented 46% 46%  
 \*Proactive 41% 88.8%  
 Authoritative 37% 75%

Descriptors such as "mentor or guide", "assertive", "visionary", "empowering", "influential", "systematic planner", "calculated risk taker" and "proactive" had been perceived by the current respondents as being much more important than previous cohorts. It may be that in an interview situation respondents are in a better position to tease out the common meaning of these words so the degree of ambiguity present in written responses has been diminished. In any case, the results are far more positive than for those of previous cohorts of directors. The age and previous leadership experience may be positive influences on these results as well. (The ages are interesting: only two aged 20-24 years, and 10 aged each of 25-29 years, 30-34 years, 35-39 years and 40-44 years; 12 aged 45-55+ years. This is by far the most mature group surveyed, in terms of age, years of experience in the child care field, their perceptions of their Katz stage of professional development and their membership of professional associations, 22.2% belonged to Community Child Care, 9.3% to IECE, 9.3% to AECA and a further 3.8% to regional inservice groups.

The final question attempted to link the notion of the child care director's leadership role as a way of professionalising the field. While 77.8% of respondents perceived themselves as role models, nine did not believe that they had a brief to professionalise the field; this reinforced earlier data which indicated that co-ordinators' perceived their role as being centre-specific (see Table 10) rather than being a function of the broader child care field. The open-ended responses to the question: What does leadership mean to you as a child care co-ordinator? reinforced this view, the responses can be coded as centre-specific. See Table 13 below:

TABLE 13 : WHAT DOES LEADERSHIP MEAN TO YOU?

Comments	1st choice	2nd choice	3rd choice	Total 1-3
No response	20.4%	74.1%	X	

"Acting like a professional"	16.7%	11.1%	74.1%	62.9%
Guiding children, staff & parents	48.1%	11.1%	3.7%	62.9%

Meeting people's needs 5.6% 20.4% 5.6% 31.6%  
Being multifaceted & flexible (in the centre) 7.4% 11.1% 3.7% 22.2%  
Being visionary 11.1% 7.4% 1.9% 20.4%  
Taking responsibility 1.9% 11.1% 5.6% 8.6%  
Having good communication skills 9.3% 1.9% 11.2%  
Being assertive- 3.7% 1.9% 5.6%  
Having a sense of recognition in the (local) community- 1.9% 1.9% 3.8%

#### Discussion

The sample was small and this can only be accepted as a pilot of both the interview technique and the questions asked. In the main, the child care co-ordinators, although older, more experienced and highly qualified exponents of the child care industry, were not very different in their attitude to their leadership role from previously surveyed younger, less experienced counterparts. The open-ended questions and opportunity to speak freely, and at length, rather than write responses on a questionnaire, does not appear to have elicited significantly different responses or attitudes to their role or the skills needed to fulfil that role. The only apparent difference was on Table 12 in which a majority of the previously trialed descriptions of leadership characters were determined as being more important to this cohort.

There does not appear to be a belief on the part of child care directors, in spite of their mature rating on the Katz Professional Development Scale, to perceive themselves as more than experts within their own centre, rather than leaders in the broader child care field.

In an effort to try to determine whether qualifications and mind of centre can effect leadership responses, a series of correlations have been made but not analysed at this stage.

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