# Leadership is not a dirty word: Exploring and embracing leadership in ECEC

Louise Hard [a] & Arna H. Jónsdóttir [b]

[a] Faculty of Business, Charles Sturt University , Albury , Australia
[b] School of Education, University of Iceland , Reykjavik , Iceland
Published online: 27 Aug 2013.

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

# Leadership is not a dirty word: Exploring and embracing leadership in ECEC

Louise Hard[a]* and Arna H. Jónsdóttir[b]

*[a]Faculty of Business, Charles Sturt University, Albury, Australia; [b]School of Education, University of Iceland, Reykjavik, Iceland*

ABSTRACT: Leadership continues to be an energetically debated and contentious concept. In many contexts it elicits heated and robust discussion and illustrates a degree of disenchantment with the enactment of leadership by corporate moguls, politicians and others in positions of leadership responsibility (Wheatley, M. 2005. *Finding Our Way: Leadership for Uncertain Times*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Inc; Sinclair, A. 2007. *Leadership for the Disillusioned: Moving Beyond Myths and Heroes to Leading that Liberates*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin; Preskill, S., and D. Brookfield. 2009. *Learning as a Way of Leading: Lessons from the Struggle for Social Justice*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons). This was clearly illustrated in the 2008 Icelandic economic context where the community was turned upside down due to adventurous 'entrepreneurs', who, within a defective surveillance system, caused the collapse of the bank and financial system. In contrast leadership in the field of early childhood education could be expected to reflect aspects connected to the stereotypically feminine leadership style and demonstrate a collaborative or team approach, participation and power sharing (Shakeshaft, C. 1989. *Women in Educational Administration*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE; Strachan, J. 1993. "Including the Personal and the Professional: Researching Women in Educational Leadership." *Gender and Education* 5 (1): 71–80). However, this article explores two studies of leadership in the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC), one conducted in Iceland and the other in Australia and findings illustrate aspects such as micro-politics and horizontal violence which emerge as powerful influences on leadership aspirations and enactment.

RÉSUMÉ: Le concept de direction demeure controversé et énergiquement discuté. Dans de nombreux contextes, il soulève des débats chauds et toniques. On remarque quelque désenchantement face à la prise de direction par les magnats d'entreprises, les politiques et d'autres personnes en position de responsabilité directionnelle (Wheatley, M. 2005. *Finding Our Way: Leadership for Uncertain Times*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Inc; Sinclair, A. 2007. *Leadership for the Disillusioned: Moving Beyond Myths and Heroes to Leading that Liberates*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin; Preskill, S., and D. Brookfield. 2009. *Learning as a Way of Leading: Lessons from the Struggle for Social Justice*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons). Cela a été clairement montré dans le contexte économique islandais en 2008, lorsque la société a été bouleversée à cause d' « entrepreneurs » aventureux qui, dans un système défectueux de contrôle, ont causé l'effondrement du système bancaire et financier. En revanche, on pourrait s'attendre à ce que dans le champ de l'éducation de petite enfance, la direction reflète des aspects liés au style de direction dit typiquement féminin et témoigne d'une approche coopérative et en équipe, de participation et de partage du pouvoir (Shakeshaft, C. 1989. *Women in Educational Administration*. Newbury

---

*Corresponding author. Email: LHard@csu.edu.au

Park, CA: SAGE; Strachan, J. 1993. "Including the Personal and the Professional: Researching Women in Educational Leadership." *Gender and Education* 5 (1): 71–80). Quoiqu'il en soit, cet article examine deux études sur la direction dans le champ de l'accueil et de l'éducation de la petite enfance (AEJE), l'une réalisée en Islande et l'autre en Australie. Leurs résultats montrent des aspects, tels que la micro-politique et la violence horizontale, émergeant comme de puissantes influences sur les aspirations à la direction et la prise de direction.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Führungsverhalten bleibt ein lebhaft diskutiertes und umstrittenes Konzept. Es löst in verschiedenen Kontexten hitzige Diskussionen aus. Darüber hinaus ist eine gewisse Ernüchterung in Bezug auf das Führungsverhalten von Konzernleitern, Politikern und anderen Personen in Führungspositionen spürbar (Wheatley, M. 2005. *Finding Our Way: Leadership for Uncertain Times*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Inc; Sinclair, A. 2007. *Leadership for the Disillusioned: Moving Beyond Myths and Heroes to Leading that Liberates*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin; Preskill, S., and D. Brookfield. 2009. *Learning as a Way of Leading: Lessons from the Struggle for Social Justice*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons). Dies wurde zu Zeiten der Wirtschaftskrise in Island 2008 deutlich, während derer die isländische Gesellschaft von abenteuerlustigen "Entrepreneuren" auf den Kopf gestellt wurde, die innerhalb eines nicht funktionierenden Überwachungssystems den Kollaps des Banken- und Finanzwesens verursachten. Im Gegensatz dazu könnte erwartet werden, dass Führungsverhalten in der frühkindlichen Bildung Aspekte eines typisch weiblichen Führungsstils im Sinne einer gemeinschaftlichen oder Teamherangehensweise, Partizipation und Machtteilung (Shakeshaft, C. 1989. *Women in Educational Administration*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE; Strachan, J. 1993. "Including the Personal and the Professional: Researching Women in Educational Leadership." *Gender and Education* 5 (1): 71–80) widerspiegelt. Diese Arbeit erkundet zwei Studien zum Thema Führungsverhalten im Bereich der frühkindlichen Bildung, die eine Studie aus Island, die andere aus Australien. Die Ergebnisse beschreiben Aspekte wie z.B. Politik auf Mikroebene und horizontale Gewalt, die als einflussreiche Faktoren auf Wünsche zum Führungsverhalten sowie deren Umsetzung wirken.

RESUMEN: La dirección (El mando) continua siendo (a estar) un concepto discutido con energía (y uno) que suscita controversia. En muchos contextos la función directiva (el mando) suscita fuertes discusiones y debates (débates) acalorados. Hay alguna decepción ante la asunción de esta función (l mando) por los magnates de empresas, gente política y otras personas en posición de responsabilidad directiva (de mando) (Wheatley, M. 2005. *Finding Our Way: Leadership for Uncertain Times*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Inc; Sinclair, A. 2007. *Leadership for the Disillusioned: Moving Beyond Myths and Heroes to Leading that Liberates*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.; Preskill, S., and D. Brookfield. 2009. *Learning as a Way of Leading: Lessons from the Struggle for Social Justice*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons). Esto ha sido demostrado (muestrado) con claridad en el contexto islandés de 2008, donde la sociedad ha sido avocada (tumbado) por emprendedores aventurados en un sistema de vigilancia defectuoso, causando el hundimiento del sistema bancario y económico. En cambio, (el mando) la dirección en el campo de la educación de la primera infancia pudiera reflejar (reflectar) aspectos conectados al estilo de gestión (mando) llamado típicamente femenino y pudiera mostrar un enfoque de colaboración o del equipo, participación y distribución del poder (Shakeshaft, C. 1989. *Women in Educational Administration*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE; Strachan, J. 1993. "Including the Personal and the Professional: Researching Women in Educational Leadership." *Gender and Education* 5 (1): 71–80). Al contrario, este artículo explora dos estudios de la función directiva (mando) en el campo de la educación y el cuidado de la primera infancia (early childhood education and care, ECEC), (el) uno hecho en Islandia y (el) otro en Australia.

Los resultados muestran aspectos como la micro-política y la violencia horizontal. Estos aspectos surgen como influencias poderosas en las aspiraciones y el asunción del mando.

**Keywords:** early childhood; leadership; micro-politics; horizontal violence

## Introduction

> I don't think that we are very good at putting ourselves forward and being competent. It's almost like it's a dirty word leadership … it is just something that people see as containing too much ego. (Female participant in Hard 2008)

How one defines leadership is a major factor in interpreting its success. For many people, leadership is positional, involving a person in a particular role of responsibility (for example CEOs of companies, political leaders, principals). For others, the concept is something which can be enacted by everyone given the opportunity (Harris 2008). Preskill and Brookfield (2009) interpret leadership as a means to preserve hegemonic privilege when they state the following:

> … the very words *leader* and *leadership* – have been culturally framed to equate effective leadership with authoritarian control imposed by those at the apex of a hierarchy. A smooth and seamless ideological manipulation has ensured that those we automatically think of as leaders are precisely the people who represent the interests of the status quo: males from upper-class families who function as protectors of wealth and privilege. (Preskill and Brookfield 2009, 2)

From this perspective leadership is a hegemony defined by gender, social position and capitalism. It is about preserving the existing advantage of some over others. In contrast others define leadership as involving authenticity, integrity and organisation building (George 2003, xvii). Research work in the area of leadership has moved from an early focus on the individual and their particular characteristics (Black and Porter 2000), through appreciation of context (Fiedler 1967), behaviours of leaders (Black and Porter 2000), distribution of opportunity (Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond 2001), servant leadership (Greenleaf 1977) and authentic leadership (George 2003). These diverse perspectives illustrate the breadth of interpretations ascribed to the notion and imply the contested nature of the concept. In the highly feminised field of early childhood educationand care (ECEC), there are both positional leaders and informal leadership opportunities (Aubrey 2007; Ebbeck and Waniganayake 2003; Rodd 2006) however, leadership remains a somewhat tainted notion possibly due to the interpretation of it through traditional masculinist models which do not fit a field involved in the care and nurturing of others.

   This article is the result of an international collaboration between two early childhood academics teaching and researching in the area of leadership. Our story originates in both presenting at the 2007 EECERA conference in Prague and hearing each others' work. We came to realise that in our separate studies we had uncovered similar issues and practises that were detrimental to leadership enactment in our two countries. As a result of interrogating the findings of the two research projects we suggest, in this article, that leadership in ECEC cannot be left to chance or that adoption of models developed external to the field, will suffice. Rather, facilitating effective leadership enactment in early childhood education (both positionally and informally) will

require acknowledging the feminine heritage of ECEC, appreciating the value of lea-
dership research and building knowledgeable, skilful people who continue to learn
about the craft of leadership.[1]

## Background

The two studies which form the basis of this article come from an ECEC context and
explore leadership with one located in Iceland and the other in Australia. While not
intentionally cross-cultural we are appreciative of the value of cross national discus-
sions and the range of challenges and opportunities involved. Dimmock (2007)
suggests that there has been a neglect of cross-cultural aspects to research in the
areas of leadership and management and acknowledges that such work is valuable in
the increasing global economy, as policymakers often draw on the same evidence
base in making policy decisions. In addition such work can break down the domination
of literature and research from English speaking scholars and societies as well as assist
native researchers to learn much about their own culture through the examination of
other cultures (Fleer 2006). As ECEC researchers we identify value in exploring
what we perceive to be strong similarities in our findings but also appreciate the
subtle contextual and historical differences from which we can both learn.

### Icelandic context

Iceland is a small island nation with a population of 317,630 (Statistics Iceland 2010a).
In 2009, the number of children attending preschools was 18,699, or about 73% of one-
to three-year-old children, and about 96% of four- to five-year-olds (Statistic Iceland
2010b). In the preschool law from 1991 (48/1991) all education programmes for chil-
dren up to six-years-old were named 'leikskóli' (playschool) and according to the law
from 1994 playschool/preschool is the first level of schooling in Iceland (78/1994).[2]
The local authorities (municipalities) finance and run the preschools. The average
payment made by parents is around 15% of the costs of the municipalities (Samband
íslenskra sveitarfélaga 2010). Qualified preschool teachers are about 34% of the staff
(Statistics Iceland 2010b) and therefore a minority within the preschools. The high turn-
over rate of other staff has, until now, also had a great effect. The influence of the finan-
cial recession has, on the other hand, led to unemployment in many professions and the
percentage of professionals from varied groups is growing in the preschools (Statistics
Iceland 2010b). Many preschool head teachers have a diploma in leadership (one year
of graduate study) and some have a master's degree. The union has negotiated with the
municipalities on higher wages which are associated with a clearer responsibility for the
department leaders (middle managers) in the preschools making the structure more
hierarchical.

### Australian context

Australia is a large island nation with a population of 22,482,373 in 2010 (http://www.
abs.gov.au/ [accessed 8th October 2010]). Similar to Iceland it is somewhat geographi-
cally distant to more populated and urbanised countries. The ECEC context in Australia
is multilayered with six states and two territories administering their own regulations
and until July 2009 their own curriculum guidelines The Early Years Learning Frame-
work (EYLF) (Produced by the Australian Government Department of Education,

employment and Workplace Relations for the Council of Australian Governments) was released in mid-2009 and provides a framework to guide the development of curriculum and pedagogy in services (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2009). According to the 2006 OECD report *Starting Strong II* parents assume on average 31% of costs for childcare and for preschool/kindergarten, 22% of costs (Bennett and Tayler 2006). The overall percentage of qualified staff in long day-care is 55%, pre-school 57% and family day-care 26% (Bennett and Tayler 2006). Attendance at ECEC services is not compulsory and is subsidised variously by each state government and long day-care is subsidised by the federal government. The qualifications of staff working in the ECEC field vary considerably ranging from un-trained to PhD levels (of which there are very few). Early childhood services include long day-care (for children six weeks to six years of age), family day-care (where children are cared for in an approved carer's home), preschool or kindergarten where children attend a number of sessions per week (with a three to four year trained teacher and an untrained but experienced assistant). The two countries provide financial support for ECEC provision and have increasing expectations of qualifications for staff. The field has is highly feminised in both countries and while formal leadership structures differ there emerges similarities in the challenges of leadership enactment.

## Literature review

### *The ongoing influences of history and gender*

The current ECEC contexts of both Iceland and Australia have long histories which contribute to the contemporary constructions of the field and impact leadership understandings, aspirations and enactment. The Nordic preschool arose out of a 'perceived societal need to provide substitute maternal care and home-liked environments for "disadvantaged" children's circumstances and/or labour market's demands for women in the workplace' (Wagner 2006, 300). Women were therefore the leading figures in the early development of preschools, both as 'substitute mothers', poor mothers and working mothers. As Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2003, 5) argue, the development of children's services in Western societies has been linked to the social structure and position of women in society. Various researchers claim that within the Australian context the early childhood profession is largely underpaid, undervalued, with high rates of staff turnover. The profession is regarded as a 'pink ghetto' (Ebbeck and Waniganayake 2003). Moss (2006) argues that gendering of the workforce in early childhood education cannot be explained in terms of low pay. More likely it is a combination of how this work is understood in society, as essentially 'women's work', and of how education and employment are structured in ways that reproduce gendered workforces. Working with young children is therefore gendered and still seen as women's responsibility, with those gendered expectations embedded in institutional life (Cameron, Moss, and Owen 1999). The field continues to reflect these historical constructions and remains a highly feminised workforce.

### *Leadership and ECEC*

Leadership has been a highly gendered notion and until the latter part of the twentieth century it was often considered a traditionally male activity. There has been a so-called

stereotypically feminine leadership style (mainly embodied by women) which is purported to emphasise relationships, communication, be motivating and privilege democracy and participation (Shakeshaft 1989). This approach is said to reflect a preference to achieve power for people, rather than power over them (Hall 1996) and is more affiliative, less hierarchical, and also based on collaboration and power sharing (Strachan 1993). Research indicates that early childhood practitioners seem to favour this style, preferring caring and emotional leaders (Jónsdóttir, 1999; Muijs et al. 2004; Rodd 2006). Reay and Ball (2000) have however, argued that there are many different femininities and the form they take is powerfully shaped by the roles women undertake and the context within which they perform these roles. These authors are referring to Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe's (1995) emphasis on the shift in values within the schooling sector, in which subordinates are increasingly viewed as means to management ends. Such a context hinders the stereotypically female ways of leading described above (given the leadership preference for exercising care and emotion) as these appear incompatible with current management objectives.

## Women, power and conflicts in ECEC

Positional leadership is inherently linked to the exercise of power and the distribution of leadership can only be effective if there is power to impact change. Grisoni and Beeby (2007) articulate this clearly when they state:

> If leadership is fundamentally about power and power is about the ability to define situations with and for others then the exercise of power becomes the exercise of sensemaking. Traditionally this has been the preserve of individuals (usually middle-class, white, Anglo-Saxon, men) who have power over others through command and control forms of leadership. An important part of this debate concerns the recognition that men have dominated the production and use of language and therefore meaning (Grisoni and Beeby 2007, 194).

Our studies indicate that the nature of power in ECEC is fraught. In their analysis of power in preschools in a historical context, Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2003) maintain that many early childhood professionals have not wanted to engage in discussions about power and authority, seeing it as irrelevant to working with children and their families. Leadership is seen as related to a takeover, associated with aggression and this understanding appears to be related to the idea that power is generally exercised by one strong man. 'It is therefore not something that early childhood professionals, who are 'nice ladies', ought to be concerned with' (Ebbeck and Waniganayake 2003, 27). Despite these interpretations of power there still seems to be inter-personal struggles within early childhood contexts which illustrate contradictions between this apparent aversion to power and the reality of staff behaviours. For example, informal staff status and positions involve struggles which are often partly indirect and obscured by other factors (Solberg 1995). In Brunner's (2005) research, women who were considered successful used gender appropriate power. When women wielded power in a stereotypically masculine way it made others around them extremely uncomfortable, and those women were referred to as 'bitches' (Brunner 2005, 134). Conflicts are often related to power relations and Rodd (2006) argues that many early childhood leaders' accounts of bickering, quarrels, minor conflicts and ongoing tension reveal that their attempts to deal with the difficulties are not targeting the heart of the issue but instead are dealing with symptoms caused by other underlying problems. In an attempt to shed

some light on these underlying issues Hard (2006) explored the application of horizontal violence to the ECEC field given the tension between resistance to power and interpersonal struggles evident in participants' descriptions. Horizontal violence is discussed extensively in nursing literature as an attempt to explain staff conflict (Duffy 1995; Farrell 2001). Specifically it is defined as 'psychological harassment, which creates hostility, as opposed to physical aggression. This harassment involves verbal abuse, threats, intimidation, humiliation, excessive criticism, innuendo, exclusion, denial of access to opportunity, disinterest, discouragement and the withholding of information' (McKenna et al. 2003, 92). Horizontal violence in a highly feminised profession such as nursing assists in shedding some light on the complexities around how leadership is understood and enacted in the field of ECEC. In this article we explore what we identify as some of these underlying problems and their relationship to leadership enactment.

The variously qualified ECEC personnel in Australia and Iceland create a potential for tensions and power dynamics. Bacharach and Mundell (1993) argue that different groups may view ideologies, policies, means and goals in radically different ways. Power dynamics can occur as power groups with authority try to impose their 'logics of action' on influential interest groups and those with influence in turn try to sway those in authority. According to Slåtten (2005), the tendency towards uniformity in preschools is strongly connected to 'feminine values' and the 'habitus of care' (Slåtten 2005). These values and attitudes are considered worth striving for but differences in opinions and social behaviours are not considered as desirable. Moyles (2001) reports of the work of Moyles and Suschitzky (1995) who found that qualified teachers in the early years sector tended to work 'down' to the level of their variously trained and qualified colleagues rather than raising the standards within the settings through acknowledgement of different roles, experience and expertise. By 'dominating' the context with their views, experiences and expertise, they would be 'marginalising' those of others. Hard (2008) also identified issues around leaders feeling compelled to continue to prove that they could do the work of their staff by changing nappies and mopping floors. However, rather than viewing this as a means of control or domination, Hard interpreted these behaviours as an expectation by participants that they continue to demonstrate their similarities to their staff (rather than difference which is evident in their positional leadership role) (Hard 2008). Moyles (2001) quotes Abbott and Pugh (1998) and Smith and Langston (1999), and maintains that a clear paradox exists here between a 'shame and blame' culture and a supportive, developmental culture in which everyone may benefit from sharing specialised knowledge at different levels. It emerges that attitudes to and the exercise of power is a complex factor in the ECEC literature particularly around the exercise of leadership.

## Methods

This article reflects findings from two qualitative research projects. One conducted in 2007 was an in-depth case study of an Icelandic preschool through field study. The study in the field lasted for about eight weeks, and interviews involved 70% of the staff group, or leaders, preschool teachers and non-professionals (Jónsdóttir 2008, 2009). The second conducted in 2005 was a doctoral study that explored how leadership is understood and enacted in the field of ECEC in Australia. Twenty-six participants were from a range of ECEC services including preschools, long day-care, students, academics, family day-care and personnel working in organisations that
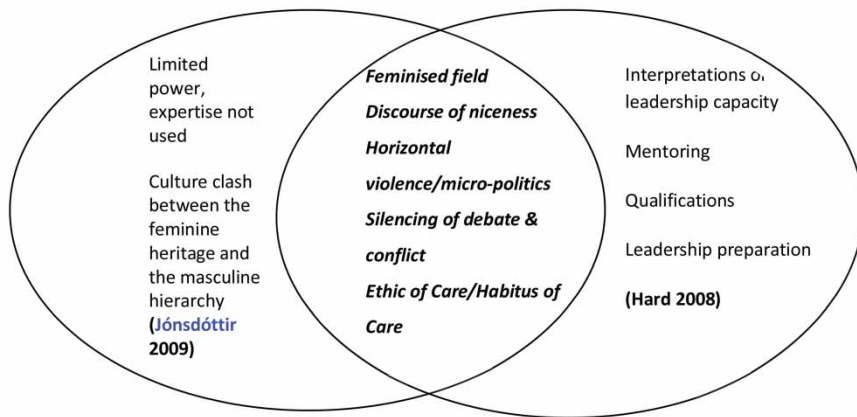
**Findings**



Figure 1.    Jónsdóttir (2009) and Hard (2008) research findings.

complement direct service provision and were involved in interviews and two focus groups (Hard 2008). In the case of both original studies ethical approval was sought and received from the respective institutions. During the construction of this article both authors were mindful to protect the identity of their participants from each other and ensure their continued anonymity in this secondary process of analysis.

This article was derived from in-depth discussions between the authors over a two year period to compare and contrast the themes which emerged in each of their studies. While there were important differences between the studies (such as leadership struc-tures and training) similar themes emerged around the culture of the workforce. Micro-politics and horizontal violence impact the enactment of leadership and aspira-tions to lead and these factors are not combined elsewhere in ECEC literature. The inter-relationship of factors from both studies is depicted in Figure 1.

**Findings**

Figure 1 indicates a number of factors which emerged from Jónsdóttir's (2009) study (left hand circle) and Hard's (2008) study (right hand circle). The details on the middle intersecting area of the diagram indicate aspects that were reflected in both studies and are the focus of the discussion in this article. These aspects include the implications of the highly feminised field such as the nature of the micro-political dimension, horizontal violence, the culture of niceness, avoidance of debate and con-flict, a sense of equality and the underpinning of an ethic of care. The remainder of this article will explore these aspects and provide evidence from participants of these issues from both studies. The article will then focus on the implications of such issues for leadership in the ECEC field and suggest that literature and leadership theory can only partially satisfy the current leadership requirements in ECEC.

**Discussion**

Not surprisingly different project intentions and research questions are major factors in contributing to a variety of findings in the two studies. However, the overlapping area

of Figure 1 contains the factors that were similar in the two studies. Both studies identified the highly feminised nature of the field as a major factor in determining the workplace culture. For example, both studies noted a strong cultural expectation which Hard (2008) described as the 'discourse of niceness'. In addition Jónsdóttir's (2009) study identified the discourse of the preschool as family-friendly, flexible, kind and caring towards staff but with micro-political aspects which were embedded in the discourse. This could be due to the day to day work of staff which requires a strong ethic of care (Noddings 1992) as staff care and nurture children and families. However, despite the identification of these aspects which appeared as caring and positive, there was evidence of behaviours between staff that were to the contrary. Both studies identified reticence by staff to debate and discussion of issues for fear of open conflict. There was a sense that all ECEC personnel should be viewed as being equal (or team-based). These factors will now be explored in more depth to illustrate the combined understandings now available through examination of these two studies.

### What is niceness all about?

The field of ECEC is currently, and has been historically, staffed by women (Bennett and Tayler 2006) and this has a powerful impact on the creation of a workplace culture. Both studies recognise that the nature of the field is heavily impacted by the mono-gendered nature of the workforce. The discourse in the preschool in Iceland and the ECEC field in Australia appears to maintain gendered expectations, traditional gender patterns and reproduction of the gendered nature of preschool workforces, rather than to change them (Jónsdóttir 2009). For example, one participant in Hard's (2008) study illustrated this well when she stated the following:

> I think the other thing that is problematic with early childhood is that it is predominately female based … women don't generally get up on their soapbox and rant and rave and try to force people to think about things. People that are generally attracted to the early childhood profession are fairly gentle people. (Hard 2008) (Int. I, 7)

In Jónsdóttir's study (2009) almost every participant praised the friendly and caring atmosphere among the staff. Some of them spoke of each other as friends. The head teacher described the atmosphere as 'kind-hearted' when she first arrived in the preschool. She tried to meet the staff's personal needs when planning the work schedule and the staff did not feel that their work–life balance was under threat. A preschool teacher made the following remark.

The fact that I have a family is respected and it does not affect my work in the preschool … you never feel you have to prioritise one or the other, the work or your family. I was once working in a preschool … If I had to stay home with a sick child I felt guilty. (Jónsdóttir 2009, 4)

The 'discourse of niceness' appears to be a result of the highly feminised field. It is in some ways entwined in the expectation of care for others and prevails to impact intra-staff expectations of behaviours. Despite this it is problematic in that it appears to demand a level of conformity as one participant in Hard's study states:

There's niceness there indirectly, directly it's there and in a way you're swayed into being you know nice, nice, nice. I reckon it's at odds with us as a profession. (Hard 2008, 11)

This comment implies a strong expectation for compliance but also a tension about the relationship of this to effective professional behaviour.

### Micro-politics/horizontal violence

In stark contrast to this discourse of niceness both studies (Hard 2008; Jónsdóttir 2009) identified the exercise of control as part of the ECEC context. For Hard (2008), there were behaviours akin to horizontal violence which involves staff conflict and activities that marginalise and diminish others. For Jónsdóttir (2009), this involved micro-politics, or as Blase (1991) puts it:

> Micro-politics is about power and how people use it to influence others and to protect themselves. It is about conflict and how people compete with each other to get what they want. It is about cooperation and how people build support among themselves to achieve their ends. It is about what people in all social settings think about and have strong feelings about, but what is so often unspoken and not easily observed. (Blase 1991, 1)

When Jónsdóttir (2009), analysed the relationship between department leaders and assistants considering the micro-political dimension, the department leaders' power position appeared quite vulnerable. When they used power in a commanding, controlling, and a more stereotypically masculine way, they met resistance from the assistants, and by using it in the more 'nice' stereotypically feminine way there seemed to be some troubles as well. Then unpopular decisions could be 'forgotten' with negative consequences for quality and success. For example, the department heads hesitated to shorten the coffee breaks because they feared the reactions of the assistants. The department leaders' inactive behaviour can be connected to the concept 'horizontal violence' as described by Hard (2008), where the culture of the field demands compliance and conformity of leaders often couched within a discourse of niceness (Jónsdóttir 2009). It emerges that the discourse of niceness is in contrast to complex staff interactions which involve the use of power in both positive and negative ways. Hard (2008) uses the concept of horizontal violence to suggest a relationship between low staff self-confidence and destructive inter-personal behaviours.

### Equality and teams

In both studies analysis identified a theme around the notion of ECEC staff being equal or all the same. This was articulated by many of Hard's (2008) participants who made mention of teams although the form and function of such a collective was not articulated. For example, one participant stated the following:

> I think as a leader you have to be part of the team as well. Where you sort of put all of your skill base in a pot … and it doesn't necessarily have to be the one person who leads constantly at the head of the ship … (2008, 133)

In Hard's (2008) research an assistant was very content with the leadership of a department leader.

> She does not interfere with what you do … What I mean is she sees us all as equals. … The atmosphere here has been very good … sometimes you get the feeling that someone is arrogant and rigid and you feel uncomfortable with them … she is not like that. (participant in Hard, 2008, 37)

In both studies ECEC staff sense a strong desire or expectation to work together and to value all. However, this desire does not inherently articulate into a collaborative

leadership style as defined by Raelin (2006). Collaborative leadership is characterised by a stance of nonjudgemental inquiry, is receptive to the critical scrutiny of others, and assumes the view that something new or unique might arise for a dialogue that could reconstruct the participants' view of reality' (2006, 157). In contrast, what is evident in both studies is an absence of conversations about the value of difference and using individual skills effectively within a team approach. Rather than work as team (which is described by Hersey, Blanchard, and Johnson [2001] as involving a shared and clearly articulated vision or team goal), ECEC personnel appear to be flattening the field and avoiding the potential diverse contributions individuals can make to the effectiveness of the workplace. In other words, we suggest the notion of teams and teamwork does not articulate into an egalitarian workplace but rather is proving problematic to effective leadership. This may deter people from aspiring to leadership if leaders are perceived to be different to others and that they may suffer for their difference. It may also contribute to a culture that is adverse to difference, debate and discussion for fear of not being part of the team.

In both studies there was recognition that personnel avoid conflict and in some cases there are actions that silence debate. The strong expectations of conformity required through the discourse of niceness and the ethic of care can demand that staff seek agreement and adherence to these expectations rather than engage in open and robust debate for fear of conflict. In Jónsdóttir's (2009) study the head teacher described her leadership style in the following way: 'I do not say: "I am in charge and this is how it will be done"… but of course you have to do it sometimes and I think it is difficult. It is difficult for me if many people show me resistance' (Jónsdóttir 2009, 4). The head teacher described the department leaders in the following way. 'They are so free from responsibility … I don't know how I could make them more responsible … they don't solve the problems within the departments … the uncomfortable things are not discussed' (Jónsdóttir 2009, 5). About implementing changes the assistant head teacher said it took a long time, and they used to 'squeeze them in through the backdoor, to keep everybody happy' (Jónsdóttir 2009, 6). A department leader was concerned that it could be hard for staff to speak up when they were unhappy because they had become such good friends and hoped that their sentimentality and closeness would not damage things (Jónsdóttir 2009). For Hard's (2008) participants there were also issues around open debate and discussion. One participant described how she believed people in the ECEC field in Australia are loath to talk about deeply held views and beliefs 'because it's very close to them as a person' and people don't want to look closely at what they do 'because we don't want to change, we don't want other people to challenge us to change'. This participant (near the end of her career) commented on the lack of discussion and debate she had experienced in the field now asserting herself by saying '… I don't care now, I'm going to say it because this is important and whether people like it or not I'm going to say it because we need to say these things for the profession' (Hard 2008). These data indicate a tension around frank and robust discussion for fear of being marginalised by one's peers.

### Leading ECEC into the future

The examination of two studies into leadership in the field of ECEC has highlighted some similarities in interpretations of leadership and enactment. These emerge despite different structural and formal leadership arrangements in two countries. They reflect a strong similar base in the historical and feminised nature of the field

and confirm some key challenges to leadership in ECEC. Firstly the conceptualisations of niceness entwined or extrapolated from Nodding's (1992) concept of the ethic of care, and Slåtten's (2005) description of 'habitus of care', emerges from both studies as influential to ECEC culture. Secondly the identification of behaviours attributed to micro-politics and reflective of horizontal violence is in sharp contrast to the culture of niceness and suggests some subversive rebellion against this expectation. Interwoven is the concept of staff being all the same and talking of working as a team which we believe contributes to an avoidance of debate and robust discussion for fear of disagreement and its potential consequences. The commonality of these issues in both studies suggests that there are some similar challenges to the enactment of leadership in ECEC in both the Icelandic preschool and Australian ECEC field which may have resonance elsewhere.

It is apparent that leadership is an important component of effective ECEC provision. We believe leadership is about creating change and positive development and therefore contributing to quality education and future directions of the field. As Muijs et al. (2004) suggest: 'Whatever else is disputed, the contribution of leadership to improving organisational performance and raising achievement remains unequivocal' (2004, 157). But what are the future leadership needs of ECEC? In Moss' view ECEC should be '… a children's place and public forum, where children and adults meet and which are capable of many projects and many possibilities: social, cultural, economic, political, aesthetic, ethical, etc., some predetermined, others not predicted at all (2008, 124). Whalley (2006) articulates a ECEC future ideal which involves places for both children and their families which encompass early years education, year round extended hours provision, inclusive and flexible education for children with special needs, adult community education, family support services and a focus on voluntary work and community regeneration (2006, 3). If these visions, as espoused by Moss (2008) and Whalley (2006) are examples of possible ECEC futures, then what implications do they have for leadership in ECEC?

### Leadership takes knowledge and skill

We contend that leadership in ECEC needs to be knowledgeable and to achieve this, there needs to be specific attention to the study of leadership and particular skill development. Leadership in ECEC should not be left to chance and cannot be considered a 'dirty word'. ECEC professionals need to build their leadership capacities through scholarship into leadership history, theory and practice. Research indicates a collective ECEC desire for collaboration and team work and hence appreciation of distributed and collaborative leadership approaches would seem pertinent. A distributed leadership perspective recognises that leading and managing can involve multiple individuals and not only those who are at the top of the organisation or with formal leadership titles. In this model individuals who are not formal leaders may take responsibility for organisational routines and provide leadership and management (Spillane and Diamond 2007). However, there are critics of distributed leadership who have articulated doubts about its application in early childhood settings where staff are often young, under-qualified and lacking experience (Aubrey 2007; Siraj-Blatchford and Manni 2007). It may therefore be irresponsible for the manager to delegate too much responsibility. These authors highlight that certain conditions have to be in place before such capacity building can authentically occur, including the internal capacity to manage change and sustain improvement and the existence of collegial relations between all potential

participants. We maintain that such conditions can be fostered by knowledgeable and skilful leaders. Siraj-Blatchford and Manni also suggest (perhaps paradoxically, as they say) that strong leadership may be necessary to develop the high levels of collaboration and team work that are required (2007, 29). While we ponder on the suggestion of 'strong' leadership we argue that leadership is needed and it is likely to involve both positional and more distributed approaches in ECEC. We also argue for knowledgeable, skilful leaders who continue to learn about the craft of leadership in order to build leadership capacity in others and the collective capacity of the group. These people might become expert leaders who collaboratively develop organisational visions and values, facilitate leadership capacity building and expertise and create effective ECEC communities such as those described by Moss (2008) and Whalley (2006) previously. Such leaders will build collective leadership for advocacy, develop networks, research communities and other initiatives to enhance quality in ECEC and the futures we are yet to imagine.

## Conclusions

Leadership literature identifies challenges for women in building leadership aspirations and then enacting leadership in societies where leadership is still often viewed from a historically male paradigm or what Blackmore refers to as the institutionalisation of patriarchal masculinism which supports some discourses of leadership over others (Blackmore 1999). From our combined ECEC leadership research we know the field is complex with a highly feminised workforce often exhibiting deference to power but demonstrating frustrations through micro-political behaviours and horizontal violence. The articulated desire for sameness amongst practitioners, impacts on individual aspirations for leadership as people avoid being different to their peers. A strong discourse of niceness informed by the ethic of care contributes to an apparent avoidance of debate and open discussion. In such a context how is leadership built and sustained? Despite the challenges we contend that ECEC needs effective leadership and this will require the development of leadership knowledge and skills by ECEC personnel. Like pedagogical, curriculum and other specialists, these people will make their focus leadership excellence and through this build leadership capacity and affordances for others.

## Notes

1. In Iceland the term Early Childhood Education (ECE) is most often used when referring to the field. In this article we use the term Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) as '… a global term encompassing all arrangements providing care and education for children under compulsory school age' (Bennett and Tayler 2006, 229).
2. In laws and regulations, published by the Ministry of Education and Culture (Iceland), the term 'preschool' is still used, and we use that term in the article, when referring to Icelandic 'playschools'.

## References

Abbott, L., and G. Pugh (Eds.). 1998. *Training Issues in the Early Years*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
Aubrey, C. 2007. *Leading and Managing in the Early Years*. Sage: London.
Australian Bureau of Statistics. 2010. Accessed September 9th, 2010. http://www.abs.gov.au/

Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. 2009. *Belonging, being and becoming: the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, http://www.deewr.gov.au/Earlychildhood/Policy_Agenda/Quality/Documents/Final%20EYLF%20Framework%20Report%20-%20WEB.pdf

Bacharach, S. B., and B. Mundell. 1993. "Organizational Politics in Schools: Micro, Macro, and Logics of Actions." *Educational Administration Quarterly* 29 (4): 423–452.

Bennett, J., and C. Tayler. 2006. *Starting Strong ll: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

Black, J. S., and L. W. Porter. 2000. *Management: Meeting new Challenges*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Blackmore, J. 1999. *Troubling Women: Feminism, Leadership and Educational Change*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Blase, J. 1991. "The Micropolitical Perspective." In *The Politics of Life in Schools: Power, Conflicts and Cooperation*, edited by J. Blase, 1–18. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.

Brunner, C. 2005. "Women Performing the Superintendency: Problematizing the Normative Alignment of Conceptions of Power and Constructions of Gender." In *Leadership, Gender and Culture in Education: Male and Female Perspectives*, edited by J. Collard and C. Reynolds, 121–135. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Cameron, C., P. Moss, and C. Owen. 1999. *Men in the Nursery*. London: Paul Chapman.

Dimmock, C. 2007. "Cross-Cultural Differences in Interpreting and Conducting Research." In *Research Methods in Educational Leadership and Management*, edited by A. Briggs and M. Coleman, 53–68. London: Sage.

Duffy, E. 1995. "Horizontal Violence: A Conundrum for Nursing." *Collegian Journal of the Royal College of Nursing* 2 (2): 5–17.

Ebbeck, M., and M. Waniganayake. 2003. *Early Childhood Professionals: Leading Today and Tomorrow*. Sydney: MacLennan and Pitty.

Farrell, G. A. 2001. "From Tall Poppies to Squashed Weeds: Why Don't Nurses Pull Together More? *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 35 (1): 26–33.

Fiedler, F. 1967. *A Theory of Leadership Effectiveness*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Fleer, M. 2006. "The Cultural Construction of Child Development: Creating Institutional and Cultural Intersubjectivity." *International Journal of Early Years Education* 14 (2): 127–140.

George, B. 2003. *Authentic Leadership: Rediscovering the Secrets to Creating Lasting Value*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Gewirtz, S., S. J. Ball, and R. Bowe. 1995. *Markets, Choice and Equity in Education*. Buckingham: University Press.

Greenleaf, R. 1977. *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*. New York: Paulist Press.

Grisoni, L., and M. Beeby. 2007. "Leadership, Gender and Sense-Making." *Gender, Work & Organization* 14 (3): 191–209.

Hall, V. 1996. *Dancing on the Ceiling: A Study of Women Managers in Education*. London: Paul Chapman.

Hard, L. 2006. "Horizontal Violence in Early Childhood Education and Care: Implications for Leadership Enactment." *Australian Journal of Early Childhood* 31 (3): 40–47.

Hard, L. 2008. *Understanding Leadership Enactment in Early Childhood Education and Care*. Saarbrucken: VDM.

Harris, A. 2008. *Distributed School Leadership: Developing Tomorrow's Leaders*. New York: Routledge.

Hersey, P., K. Blanchard, and D. Johnson. 2001. *Management of Organisational Behaviour: Leading Human Resources*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Jónsdóttir, A. H. 1999. *Starfsánægja og stjórnun í leikskólum* [Job satisfaction and leadership in preschools]. Unpublished M.Ed. dissertation: Iceland University of Education.

Jónsdóttir, A. H. 2008. *The preschool head teacher and staff related problems: The micropolitical dimension*. Unpublished Institution Focused Study: Institute of Education, University of London.

Jónsdóttir, A. H. 2009. Kvenlægur arfur og karllægur valdapíramídi: Sérstaða leikskólans og hin eilífu átök. [Feminine heritage and masculine pyramid: In constant conflict within the preschool]. Netla – Veftímarit um uppeldi og menntun. Menntavísindasvið Háskóla Íslands. Accessed February 24th, 2011. http://netla.khi.is/greinar/2009/007/02/index.htm

McKenna, B., N. Smith, et al. 2003. "Horizontal Violence: Experiences of Registered Nurses in their First Year of Teaching." *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 42 (1): 90–96.

Moss, P. 2006. "Structures, Understandings and Discourses: Possibilities for Re-Envisioning the Early Childhood Worker." *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 7 (1): 30–41.

Moss, P. 2008. "The Democratic and Reflective Professional: Rethinking and Reforming the Early Year's Workforce." In *Professionalism in the Early Years*, edited by L. Miller and C. Cable, 121–130. Abington: Hodder Education.

Moyles, J. 2001. "Passion, Paradox and Professionalism in Early Year's Education." *Early Years* 21 (2): 81–95.

Moyles, J., and W. Suschitzky. 1995. "A Matter of Difference: Nursery Teachers and Nursery Nurses Working Together." *Education 3–13* 23 (3): 41–46.

Muijs, D., C. Aubrey, A. Harris, and M. Briggs. 2004. "How Do they Manage? A Review of the Research on Leadership in Early Childhood." *Journal of Early Childhood Research* 2 (2): 157–169.

Noddings, N. 1992. *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Preskill, S., and D. Brookfield. 2009. *Learning as a Way of Leading: Lessons from the Struggle for Social Justice*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.

Raelin, J. 2006. "Does action Learning Promote Collaborative Leadership? *Academy of Management Learning and Education* 5 (2): 152–168.

Reay, D., and S. J. Ball. 2000. "Essentials of Female Management: Women's Ways of Working in Educational Market Place? *Educational Management and Administration* 28 (2): 145–159.

Rodd, J. 2006. *Leadership in Early Childhood*. 3rd ed. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Samband íslenskra sveitarfélaga [The Association of Local Authorities in Iceland]. 2010. *Skólaskýrsla* [School Report]. Reykjavík: Samband íslenskra sveitarfélaga.

Shakeshaft, C. 1989. *Women in Educational Administration*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.

Sinclair, A. 2007. *Leadership for the Disillusioned: Moving Beyond Myths and Heroes to Leading that Liberates*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

Siraj-Blatchford, I., and L. Manni. 2007. *Effective Leadership in the Early Years Sector: The ELEYS Study*. London: Institute of Education, University of London.

Slåtten, V. M. 2005. "Kvinnelige ledere i barnehagen: En balansegang [Feminine leaders in pre-schools: A walk of balance]." *Å være leder i barnehagen [To be a leader in the preschool]*, edited by E. Skogen, 45–60. Bergen: Fagbokforlaget.

Smith, A., and A. Langston. 1999. *Managing Staff in Early Years Settings*. London: Routledge.

Spillane, J., and J. Diamond, eds. 2007. *Distributed Leadership in Practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Spillane, J., R. Halverson, and J. Diamond. 2001. "Investigating School Leadership Practice: A Distributed Perspective." *Educational Researcher* 30 (3): 23–28.

Solberg, A. K. 1995. *Ledelse-på kvinners vis? [Leadership-the women's way?]*. Oslo: Kommuneforlaget.

Statistics Iceland. 2010a. Accessed December 2nd, 2010. http://www.statice.is/Statistics/Population.

Statistics Iceland. 2010b. Accessed December 2nd, 2010. http://www.statice.is/Statistics/Education/Pre-primary-institutions

Strachan, J. 1993. "Including the Personal and the Professional: Researching Women in Educational Leadership." *Gender and Education* 5 (1): 71–80.

Wagner, J. T. 2006. "An Outsider's Perspective: Childhoods and Early Education in the Nordic Countries." In *Nordic childhoods and early education: Philosophy, research, policy, and practice in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden*, edited by J. Einarsdottir and J. T. Wagner, 289–306. Greenwich, CO: Information Age.

Wheatley, M. 2005. *Finding Our Way: Leadership for Uncertain Times*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Inc.

Whalley, M. 2006. "Leadership in Multi Disciplinary, Multi Functional Centres and Services: A Community Development Approach." *Childrenz Issues, Journal of the Children's Issues Centre* 10 (2): 8–27.