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Infant Leadership

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Abstract

Leadership is perceived to be derived or developed from a range of situations. However, little literature has devoted attention to the development and later influence of leadership amongst infants. This working paper develops initial perceptions identified in the observation of a group of three year-olds, taken over the period of two-and-a-half years.

It was identified that a natural leader developed from the group, together with a deputy leader, adviser, followers and a group outcast. Yet this was not in any organisational setting amongst adults. The setting was that of a nursery, with roles appearing by the age of one. These roles were then held throughout the period of observation.

If this demonstration of leadership and other roles are carried through into later life, then by the age of three, potentially even at two or one, leadership potential can be identified. This then should be nurtured and developed, rather than being pulled into mainstream. Similarly, the role of a creative adviser was also identified which also warrants further development. This working paper identifies aspects for further longitudinal research and asks whether roles can be nurtured from an early age.

The initiative for this piece of research came from an observation of six children at play in a nursery, starting at six months old. Smiley and Dweck (1994) have identified that children as young as four or five are significantly affected by failure and already possess a self-perception. However, does this exist at a younger age? Can infants display leadership and have their perspectives already been formed at the ages of one or two (Montagner in Kouzes & Posner, 1987; Bennett & Derevensky, 1995)? It may be that natural born leaders can be identified at a very early age in opposition to Blank's belief of a lack of this occurrence (Blank, 2001). This potential draws out Jenks' perception of a social child, interacting and developing through a range of relationships (Jenks, 1996). Shatz (1994) has identified that the period between 15 and 36 months is critical for developing a 'self', with younger children being able to recall as much as older children (Corenblum, 2003).

The leadership process involves both a leader and follower, in a context of a range of situations (Pierce & Newstrom, 2000). In this situation the leader and follower(s) are in the setting of a day-nursery, with occasional meetings outside this setting. In addition, the definition taken of leadership here encompasses a range of Bass' definitions (Bass, 1990). These include leadership as a focus of group behaviour, as personality, as an emerging effect of interaction, as and act, as a differentiated role and as the exercise of influence (Khaleelee & Woolf, 1996). Adair (1973) identifies a range of traits and actions associated with leadership including initiation, support and judgement. This is not necessarily a discussion of the born vs. made argument, rather one which looks at the presence of leadership behaviour amongst infant. Kouzes & Posner use five traits; challenging a process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others, guiding the route and encouragement – all of which can be present in infant

activities. In addition, work by Montagner (Montagner in Kouzes & Posner, 1987) has identified natural leaders amongst young children; “The natural leaders are those who offer toys to others, lightly touch or caress, clap hands, smile, extend a hand, lean sideways, and the like” (Kouzes & Posner, 1987 p. 124). Childhood has a significant effect on later life (Cox & Jennings, 1995) and therefore leaders in childhood may continue as leaders throughout their life.

In the pilot study six infants were observed between the ages of approximately six months and three years. All of these infants attended the same nursery and were together for at least two days per week. The nursery is located within the grounds of a hospital although, being a private nursery, has children whose parents work in both medical and non-medical occupations. All of the children observed were together in a group between August 2000 and February 2003. In addition they stayed together as a group until they were two-and-a-half to three years old, rarely being separated. The interactive nature of the children and their relationships was reflected in frequent observations, noting that they had significantly less personal space between children in the group of six compared to other children attending the nursery.

| Infant | Parents/Siblings | Role Taken | Actions |
|------------------|--|-------------------|---|
| <i>C</i> | Father – manual worker Mother – nurse One older sister | Leader | Directs others’ actions Listens to ideas from Jb Very physically active Friends with all four, not L |
| <i>Ja</i> | Father – IT manager Mother – midwife | Deputy Leader | Close friend – Jb Follower in presence of C, |

| | | | |
|-----------|---|----------|--|
| | One younger sister | | leader when not present |
| Jb | Father – lecturer Mother – dietitian No siblings | Adviser | Close friend – Ja Generates ideas, discusses with C or Ja, who actions |
| M | Single mother – nurse No siblings | Follower | Follows C closely, will follow Ja or Jb when C not present Friends with all four, not L |
| A | Father – lecturer Mother – council worker One older brother | Follower | Follows any other child except L Rarely initiates Friends with all four, not L |
| L | Father – doctor Mother – caterer No siblings | Outcast | No close friends Plays alone Ignored by group |

Upon first observation in August 2000 none of the children could walk, although A and Jb were crawling. C was immobile and had severe cradle cap, which lasted until one year old. He was also very overweight. Ja was attempting to be mobile and was communicative. Jb crawled and was confident in his movements. Neither M or L were crawling and L was very reticent to communicate. A was crawling but not communicating.

By May 2001 C was crawling and had begun to direct the actions of others. M and A responded by fetching C's requests, although only M was walking. Ja and Jb spent the

majority of time together and both were walking. L spent most of his time sat facing a corner, ignored by the others. The behaviour of L may be due to his environment (Boushel, Fawcett & Selwyn, 2000) or his role in the group.

A typical action of the group was observed in July 2002. At approximately two and three months, these infants were incredibly active. All were walking at this stage, with C often being seen telling other children what they should do. At the event shown here, the neighbouring children's hospital ward had received some new play equipment, which the infants could view through the fence. This was a picket fence approximately 80 cm high. Jb was seen to collect a large box (used for building objects), take it to the fence and then go to C. After a short discussion C called the other infants (Ja, M and A) who were seen collecting more boxes and adding them to Jb's collection. C did not collect boxes but directed the others. Jb organised the boxes, which reached the height of the fence. Jb then dropped further boxes over the fence, with C leading over the fence and all the other infants following in order that the group of five might play with the new equipment. This 'escape' was observed by the nursery nurses and described in detail as a typical action of the group.

Each of these children have had the same exposure to nursery nurses and activities, although not all of them have attended the nursery full-time. This small-scale research reflects a constructivist approach (Grieg and Taylor, 1999) useful when observing children's inter-relationships and reflects their findings that whilst exposed to similar environments, children develop differently. In addition, by creating a sociogram of friendships this provided the opportunity to examine a range of social and inter-personal behaviour (Sharman, Cross & Vennis, 1995).

Methodology

The full research activity is planned to be conducted over a period of eighteen years as a longitudinal study, reflecting the need to observe children throughout their development. This is taking McCall's two conceptual levels of research (McCall, 1994) deriving emergent theory from observation of infants, together with interviews and discussion.

A group of twelve children are to be selected. These will come from a range of backgrounds and full parental agreement to the research will be reached. Double-blind observations of the group of infants are planned every three months. In addition to this informal interviews will be held on a three-monthly basis with carers and parents. These will form the basis of observations until the age of five. Following this, observations and interviews are planned to occur every six months until the age of 11 and then annually following this date.

There are two key limitations to the research methodology. Firstly, the research time-scale is one which is longitudinal – this inherently places a time constraint on the research. However, without this the actual destinations of the selected infants would not be known. In addition a wider range of infants selected would be preferred. A greater range of groups, from differing social and ethnic backgrounds and in different geographic areas would be preferable. By expanding the research team this is envisaged and is one of the aims of presenting this working paper.

It is considered within this working paper that these infants have had their roles determined by the age of two years, and potentially by the age of one. As such, future leadership potential can be identified and should be encouraged through such activities as the Government academy for the gifted (Education & Training, 2003). Where these individuals are displaying potential, this needs both nurturing through exposure to mentors and experiences together with the opportunity to practice leadership skills. In addition, questions should be asked where over 50% of young people are encouraged to go into higher education, when they may not simply be suited for this activity. The question of “where are all the plumbers?” may be answered by their roles within this group setting. The infants in the pilot displayed roles which may translate through into later life. If this is the case then by the age of three, and potentially much younger, it is possible to identify talents and abilities in a range of areas. These require nurturing, not necessarily in a broad educational setting, designed to fulfil the capabilities these infants are displaying at a very early age.

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