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Leading and Managing in the Early Years

Carol Aubrey

London: Sage, 2011 (2nd edition).

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The book aims to explore and integrate leadership and management practice with a real understanding of Early Years settings and a consideration of some theoretical perspectives on leadership and management. It is written for students on Early Childhood courses, Early Years practitioners, and local authority employees involved with integrated centres initiatives. We are told that the starting point for the first edition was based on the views and opinions of some leaders in Early Years settings. Their feeling was that the changes being imposed on the sector by external forces were so great that a critical review of leadership and management in the sector would enhance the outcomes for children in such settings.

The second edition aims to look afresh at these issues, especially in the contexts of an increasing diversity of children, family structures, the effects of poverty, the increasing instability and change in work, and the development of electronic communication.

One of the key aims of the book is to provide effective links between so-called theory and practice, not least in a context where the effectiveness (or otherwise) of leadership is usually judged by reference to children's learning. This perspective informs the structure of the book, which opens with an introduction examining some theories of leadership in Early Childhood contexts; most of the other chapters then concentrate on describing and analysing the contributions of practitioners in different settings and teams, and linking them in places to theoretical perspectives.

Thus, Chapter 1 reports on the views of 25 leaders in a conference on leadership, and Chapter 2 reports the findings of a survey of perspectives on early childhood leadership, focussed on 12 settings located in a Midlands city and representing the full range of early childhood provision. Chapter 3 explores these different perceptions further, reporting on in-depth conversations with leaders and staff in their settings, whilst Chapter 4 examines a 'typical day' in the life of a variety of leaders. Chapter 5 examines leaders' and practitioners' views on entrepreneurial and business-orientated approaches; chapter 6 the varied journeys into leadership that participants took; and chapter 7, the notion of mentoring as a leadership strategy. The last 3 chapters concern the challenge of leading multi-agency teams, of leading in a time of change, and of reflective practice.

Given the author's aim to provide a link between theory and practice, I think it is appropriate to make two comments based on that distinction. With regard to 'practice', an important aspect of the book is the picture it paints of the lives of real people and real groups in real settings. Each chapter contains extracts from practitioners' logs, discussions, the results of surveys, and the like. These all have the ring of authenticity about them, so one feels confident that the picture they paint

is well-grounded. However, as the reader I would have liked to have been able to identify more clearly particular individuals and settings (identified, of course, using pseudonyms), to enable me to contextualise the details more specifically. With regard to 'theory', I would like to have seen more criticism of some so-called theories, not least those of Schön, about whom I have written myself (Newman 1999). But other theories too are ripe for criticism.

I would suggest that a holistic interpretation of the evidence within the book gives the reader the opportunity to see how "early childhood leadership clearly meant different things to practitioners in different settings" (p.35), and that "the differences in roles, responsibilities and components of leadership that emerged from the survey should also be considered in the light of the very different purposes of early childhood leadership in different types of settings" (p.36). The contextual and social nature of meaning which emerges requires such (often implicit) meanings used by one group of practitioners to be made explicit to those in different contexts. I would argue that the evidence contained within this book provides some examples of practitioners from a variety of teams (including the author) doing just that. With this interpretation, some of the so-called theories mentioned in the book (for example, Kolb's learning cycle, and Schön's notion of reflection), and techniques (such as the GROW technique) can be seen as ways of describing or facilitating social 'meaning-making'. In the same light, the methods used (questionnaires, conversations, surveys, etc), and indeed, the book itself, can be seen as ways of helping to make meanings explicit to others, and of coming to shared understandings. It is perhaps an irony of this social aspect of meaning-making that, as social contexts change, so too can meanings, and so the book's glossary is helpful - the continuing changes which prompted the book to be written makes some terms obsolete as new ones emerge.

Inevitably, in a fast-changing environment, the danger is that some terminology will quickly appear rather dated, not least as political diktat influences the scene, organisations are closed down or have a change of name or purpose, and where there are shifts in educational priorities. Overall, this is a useful book as a source of evidence of the varied understandings that inform the work of those in Early Years settings.

Reference:

Newman, S. (1999) *Philosophy and teacher education: a reinterpretation of Donald A. Schön's epistemology of reflective practice*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing

Stephen Newman

Leeds Metropolitan University