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Leadership in Early Childhood:
the kindergarten experience

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Abstract

The kindergarten service was, until 1997, a state sector service. It is staffed principally by women teachers who work in groups of two or three in kindergartens. Senior Teachers in the service carry the responsibility for the professional leadership and support of these teachers.

This qualitative, exploratory study investigates the perceptions of leadership of a group of Senior Teachers. It examines how these ideas are expressed in their work. The constraints, tensions and dilemmas experienced in working in a New Public Management or neo liberal environment are also investigated, and the coping strategies of these women are analysed.

Six Senior Teachers were asked to keep a log of their work for a week. Semistructured interviews were used to investigate the Senior Teachers' personal theories of leadership and explore how these theories influenced their work, using the log as a springboard for description and reflection. In order to increase the validity of the study, further perspectives on their leadership practices were obtained through interviews with the General Managers of the associations and a selection of Head Teachers with whom they worked. Relevant additional material, such as job descriptions and Association reports, was also collected. The interviews were transcribed and sorted into categories that arose out of the material.

The personal ideas of this group of Senior Teachers about leadership were found to be similar to those identified in several studies of women leaders in schools. These ideas included a commitment to children and to teaching and learning and a preference for collaborative, supportive leadership.

The ways in which these Senior Teachers were able to carry out their ideas about collaboration, power sharing and supportive action within the setting of their job, were described and analysed. The dilemmas for these women were identified as an increase in workload and a multiplicity of additional jobs, and an intrusion of work into their private lives. In most cases, the question of where power and authority lay between the Senior Teacher and the General Manager was a constraint, and there were role tensions in their relationships with the Association.

The study argues that despite the dilemmas, tensions and constraints described above, these women managed to enact their leadership in ways that were mostly consistent with their personal theories of leadership. They used a variety of strategies in order to ensure that their leadership was consistent with the values they had about teacher support and their aspirations for young children and the kindergarten service.

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