

# **The role of the Children's Centre teacher in developing early years settings in the Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) sector**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study assessed the impact of the role of the teacher in two Children's Centres and identified some of the supporting and limiting factors which influenced the outcomes. The teachers worked across several settings in the PVI sector, with the aim of enhancing early years practice and practitioner confidence within settings. A conceptual framework was devised to model the impact of the teacher role based on Letihwood and Levin (2005). Teachers were found to bring vital professional knowledge and experience to the role and delivered their methods through a range of leadership styles (Goleman, 2000; Goleman et al., 2003). Teachers were successful in developing practice and staff confidence in settings; this also impacted positively on outcomes for children. However, the extent to which the teachers were successful was dependent on a number of moderating factors (such as policy environment, sector related factors, qualifications of staff). Implications for policy and practice are discussed.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Part of the current national strategy (HM Treasury, 2004) for children and families is to include a qualified, early years teacher in the staffing of Children's Centres. The national strategy developed in part as a response to findings from the large scale quantitative study of the effectiveness of early years education and care across different settings, the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project (Sylva et al. 2004) which provides evidence that settings employing staff with higher qualifications provide higher quality environments, and that children make more progress. In addition, "*quality indicators include...having a trained teacher as manager and a good proportion of trained teachers on the staff*" (Sylva et al. 2004, p1). Guidance for the new Children's Centres states that the provision of qualified teacher support is a core component of the new centres and any linked provision; teachers are expected to develop their roles in innovative ways to promote effective practice within this new approach to the development of early years services.

The teachers working in these roles will not only have the ability to provide good quality educational experiences for children, they will also need to be able to articulate and disseminate effective practice to a wide range of audiences, as well as embracing the Children's Centre philosophy (DfES, 2006). The early years teacher role, as conceptualised by the DfES (2006) is essentially a leadership role, with a focus on pedagogical leadership. The role of the leader is about generating constructive change (Kotter, 1990) through direction-setting and influence (Leithwood and Levin, 2005). The Children's Centre teacher role relates to both

adult and children's learning (Whelan, 2004) and is complementary to the role of the Children's Centre manager, who is expected to lead and manage across the broader, multi-disciplinary aspects of centre work, including pedagogy (Whelan 2004). There is consequently an expectation that Children's Centre managers and teachers work collaboratively as pedagogical leaders within centres.

This study draws on concepts from the academic literature on leadership (Goleman, 1998; 2000; Goleman et al., 2003) to support an analysis of the impact of the Children's Centre teacher role, in particular concepts relating to the emotional intelligence of leaders. An emotionally intelligent leader is one who is self and socially aware and who skilfully manages themselves and their relationships (Goleman, 1998). Goleman (2000) suggests that skilful, emotionally intelligent leaders use up to six leadership styles in different situations; the styles are:

- Affiliative (a collaborative style which focuses on emotional needs)
- Democratic (a style which values participation)
- Visionary (a style which moves people towards a shared vision)
- Coaching (a style which supports the development of others)
- Commanding (a style which gives clear directions through a powerful stance)
- Pace-setting (a style which builds exciting goals and expects excellence)

The present study also draws on the research of Leithwood and Levin (2005) who devised a model to conceptualise the effects of school leaders and leadership programmes on pupil learning. This model suggests that *antecedents* - the personal characteristics of the leaders (including their traits, values and emotions) have a significant influence on leadership effects. The antecedents in turn have an influence on the leadership practices of the leaders (the *independent variables*). The effects of the school leaders and leadership programmes are the *outcomes*, these include pupil and school outcomes, such as academic achievement, motivation and drop-out rates. Effects on outcomes, however, are influenced by *moderating* and *mediating* variables; these include factors such as family background, gender as well as school and class conditions. This model has proved to be very influential and has been refined by a number of researchers working in the leadership field (Day, 2006; Simkins et al., 2006).

### **The study**

This article reports on a study to evaluate how one Local Authority piloted the development of the teacher role within its Children's Centres. In the study Local Authority, two qualified teachers worked across one Children's Centre each. Children's Centres were linked to a small group of early years education and care settings, including maintained nursery classes, private nurseries and pre-schools. The teacher's role was to work with these settings to impact positively on outcomes for children through improving educational provision and raising the confidence levels of Foundation Stage practitioners. At Crossways Children's Centre, in the town location, the teacher worked across four private nurseries, and a centre drop-in for parents, carers and young children. At Maybury, the rurally located Children's Centre, the teacher worked across two private and one voluntary linked setting, as well as the centre's drop-in provision.

## **Aims and objectives**

The study aimed to investigate the impact of the early years teacher role on children's learning and on practitioner's confidence in two Children's Centres. The specific objectives were:

**1. To investigate the effects of the teacher's role on aspects of children's learning and development**

The specific aspects of children's learning and development investigated through the study were: communication, language and literacy (CLL); personal, social and emotional development (PSE); interaction; diversity and inclusion, and promoting parental involvement.

**2. To investigate the effects of the teacher's role on practitioners' confidence in delivering key aspects of the Foundation Stage curriculum and pedagogy**

These key aspects were those identified above.

**3. To investigate the factors affecting the impact of the qualified teacher on children's learning and practitioner confidence**

## **Methods**

A number of methods were used, including:

### *1. Questionnaires*

These were used to investigate the perceptions of the early years teachers and setting managers regarding the effectiveness of the teachers' work. Questionnaires for both teachers and setting managers focused on:

- perceptions of progress made by practitioners in relation in the focus areas;
- rankings of the early years environment within each of the settings, again in relation to focus areas;
- perceptions of what had worked well and less well in terms of the teacher's work in individual settings.

Teachers completed a questionnaire for each of the non-maintained settings linked to the Children's Centres. In each setting, managers completed a similar questionnaire.

### *2. Assessments of setting quality*

The authors worked with the two early years teachers to assess the quality of the early years environments in five focus areas (see Objective 1). Relevant scales were taken from established evaluation tools (ECERS-R: Harms et al., 1998; ITERS: Harms et al., 2003).

### *3. Focus group*

In the final phase of the study, a summary of the findings of the first three phases was provided for the early years teacher and the two Children's Centre managers. This was in the form of a draft version of the model presented in this article (see Figure 1). A focus group discussion took place with the two Children's Centre

teachers and the two Children's Centre managers. Discussion focused on the accuracy of the model, including reflections on the outcomes of the pilot programme, experience of the change process and perceptions of what had worked well, what has worked less well and the reasons for this. The aim of the focus group discussion was to collaboratively produce additional data and to support key staff in thinking about possible future development of the teacher's role within these and other Children's Centres.

### **Conceptualising the Children's Centre teacher role**

A complex set of factors relating to the impact of the Children's Centre teacher role was identified during the study. A diagrammatic model (based on Leithwood and Levin, 2005; Simkins et al. 2006) was developed to summarise these factors and to chart the likely relationships between factors (see Figure 1). The model aims to provide an insight into the Children's Centre teacher role; it includes both successful and less successful aspects of this role and some likely reasons for these. The lines and arrows in the diagrammatic model represent the way that different factors impacted on or fed into other factors.

The first set of factors that are considered in the model are the *antecedents* to the Children's Centre teachers' performance as pedagogical leaders within their centres and linked settings. These are the prior experiences and characteristics that teachers bring to their work, particularly their professional experiences. They include previous training and continuing professional development (CPD), as well as ongoing training and support for the leadership role.

These antecedents impact on the second set of factors that are considered in the model, the *independent variables*, which are seen to be the key instigators of change; in this case, the teachers' pedagogical leadership behaviours. Goleman (2000) argues that effective leaders have high levels of emotional intelligence; they are able to draw on a broad repertoire of leadership styles and can select styles that are particularly well matched to context. The leadership behaviours evidenced during the study and identified in the model match to five of the six leadership styles outlined by Goleman et al. (2003).

The independent variables, using leadership behaviours in a variety of ways, achieved a number of *intermediate outcomes*, as shown in the model, these included the professional development and learning of teachers, managers and staff; the collaboration of managers, practitioners and parents within learning communities and the development and learning of parents. These intermediate outcomes may impact on *final outcomes*; in particular influencing setting-based practice with children and families. The remaining three final outcomes were, to a degree surmised from intermediate outcomes and were less easily evidenced in the study.

There was some variability in the extent to which outcomes were being achieved by the two Children's Centres and their linked settings; this was the result of a number of *moderating factors*. Some of these factors promoted the achievement of outcomes, while others presented challenges to their achievement.

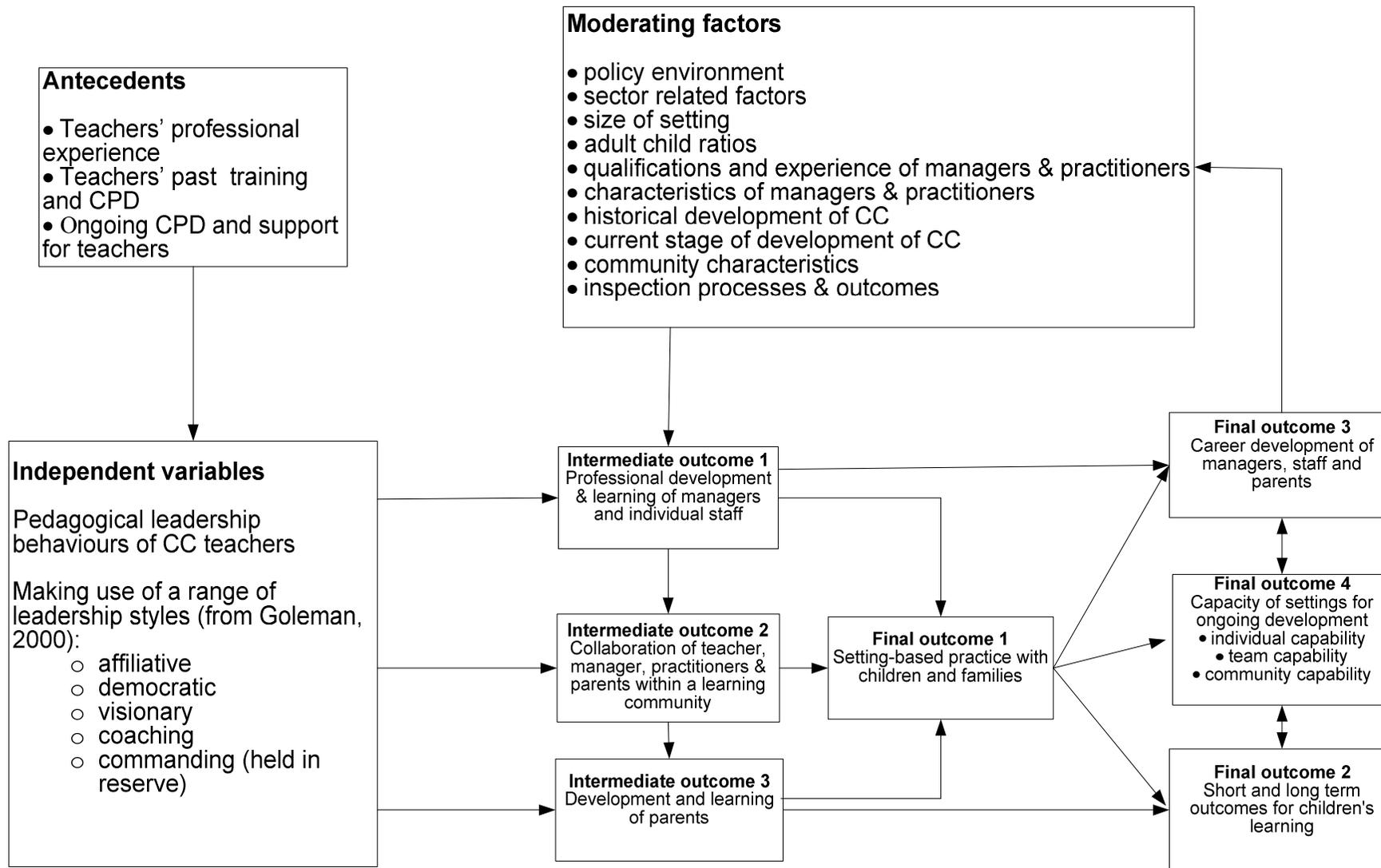


Figure 1: Model of the impact of the Children's Centre (CC) teacher role

### ***Antecedents: Personal characteristics of the Children's Centre teachers***

Both teachers were very experienced; they had respectively eleven and eighteen years in practitioner and leadership roles prior to taking on the role of a Children's Centre teacher. They brought a range of relevant experience as practitioners to the role; both were experienced nursery and reception teachers. One had further experience in special schools and leadership experience as a consultant teacher and the other had experience as the head of a large nursery offering extended day-care and with a significant number of non-teaching staff working towards Level 3 qualifications. She had also worked as an area SENCO, providing support in the voluntary, independent and private sectors. It seems likely that the professional experience and expertise of the two teachers, both as early years practitioners and as leaders, contributed to the successful elements of their work within the Children's Centres.

## **Independent variables**

### ***Pedagogical leadership behaviours of teachers***

#### *Making use of a range of leadership styles*

There was evidence that both teachers effectively utilised a number of leadership behaviours (as identified by Goleman, 2000). For example, setting managers identified personal qualities in the teachers, and this supports the theory that they adopted, at key times, an *affiliative* leadership style (Goleman, 2000). Such an approach is used by leaders who are emotionally intelligent, empathetic and have good communication skills. Setting managers spoke highly of both teachers, for example:

*"Jane is an excellent childcare provider who is always supportive, articulate and well motivated"*

*"The positive relationships have been crucial, with trust and mutual respect"*

One teacher had collaborated with a number of professionals both within and outside the local authority, such as the Pre-School Inclusion team, Speech and Language therapists, childminders and Bookstart. As a result, a number of initiatives had been undertaken within the linked settings, such as a programme which promotes good behaviour, and the Passport to Nursery booklet, which supports transition to nursery.

There was some evidence that both teachers also adopted a *democratic* approach, which involves '*collaboration, team leadership and communication*' (Goleman, 2000, p. 82-3). Teachers arranged visits and planned their work collaboratively with setting managers, visiting settings every 2-4 weeks. The pattern of visits to settings was dependent on the identified needs of managers and staff in particular settings. Teachers also modelled particular ways of working in response to practitioner requests. One manager commented:

*"Together, Jane and I have some good ideas - it's good for staff to have ... input from someone other than me."*

Another manager commented that the '*hands on*' nature of the teachers' work had been effective.

A *visionary* approach in which people are moved towards '*shared dreams*' (Goleman, 2000, p.82-3) was also utilised. This approach is most appropriate '*when changes require a new vision, or when a clear direction is needed*' (Goleman, 2000, p.82-3). This was illustrated in a number of setting manager comments which stated that the teacher had brought new ideas and activities to children and staff. Such ideas were reported to '*make staff think*'. One manager felt that staff confidence had been enhanced through the leadership shown by the teacher at staff meetings, suggesting a visionary approach. Both teachers commented that while they were involved in direction setting activities, there was a good deal of flexibility in their way of working.

Both teachers used a visionary approach in their roles, pointing managers and other staff towards professional development opportunities in the form of networks and other CPD training. Teachers themselves led a number of courses, for example, on implementing policy guidance and enhancing communication, language and literacy. Both teachers had held workshops for parents, for example on using Storysacks, Treasure Baskets, storytelling, early literacy development and sand play.

There was some evidence that both teachers utilised a *coaching* approach to leadership (Goleman, 2000); this may help an employee to improve their performance or develop long term strengths. Examples include modelling good practice and running training sessions for staff. Teacher modelling of good practice focused on a number of areas, such as the learning environment, the routine, interaction with children, introducing resources, styles of interaction with children and families, individual in-house training and evaluating the impact of the training. Teachers felt that in general, the modelling had worked well in all settings, although one commented that some practitioners were not seeing beyond the 'activity idea'.

Teachers have also provided mentor support to workers in some settings, giving them the opportunity to develop their practice and gain qualifications. One manager reported that the teacher:

*"always supports you to find the solutions that are best for you and your setting. There is no 'one size fits all'"*

Both teachers felt that coaching and mentoring of managers was a very important part of their role. In one setting, the teacher stated that:

*'there has been a lot of work one to one with the manager which has resulted in total development of the setting and individuals'*

Several setting managers commented positively on teacher modelling; they felt it had reassured staff and enhanced their confidence in their ability to replicate the good practice. Some said it had also led to a development of staff skills, for example, having '*helped all staff to improve their interaction and questioning skills*'.

There were no examples of teachers using the *commanding* style of leadership (Goleman, 2000), which '*demands immediate compliance*' (Goleman, 2000, p.82-3). Both teachers felt this approach was held in reserve; that it was necessary to have an

approach that communicates a clear expectation of compliance, although neither reported having used this approach in working with settings in these centres.

## **Moderating factors**

Moderating factors influenced the ways in which the teachers' strategies impacted on the work of the Children's Centres and on outcomes. The desired outcomes were most likely to be achieved where moderating factors were supportive of the teacher's work. However, a number of factors appeared to place limits on the successful achievement of outcomes. Both supportive and limiting moderating factors are outlined below:

- *Policy environment*

Teachers were sensitive to the current policy environment and ran training for setting managers and staff in policy guidance (such as *'Birth to ThreeMatters'*). Teachers and settings appeared to perceive curriculum focused policies as positive factors, providing a supportive framework for their work.

- *Sector related factors*

The day-care settings observed were in the private and voluntary sector and there appeared to be a number of sector related factors which impacted upon outcomes (such as staffing issues, environment, resources and the size of the setting). However, moderating factors did not always impact on the two Children's Centres in the same way. Staff in the more rural, Maybury settings tended to be settled and moved post relatively infrequently, while there had been relatively high turnover of staff in one of the Crossways settings and was reported to have had some negative impact on practice. High staff turnover is a particular issue within the PVI sector nationally and seems to be linked to wages and conditions of service in the sector. Long hours of opening and the length of staff shifts were felt, by one manager, to have had a negative impact on setting development.

- *Size of settings*

There was considerable variation in the size of settings, particularly in Crossways Children's Centre, with varying number of rooms and staff numbers and it was felt that this may have had some impact on outcomes. For example, it took longer for the teacher's work to have an effect upon larger settings because there were a number of staff teams within the larger setting and the time the teacher was able to spend in settings was spread out across staff groups.

- *Adult-child ratios*

Adult-child ratios were good in the settings observed, and significantly better than would be found in most maintained sector settings. This might be expected to be a positive moderating factor, and one that supported quality adult-child interactions. However, one teacher suggested that there were some difficult issues arising from high levels of staffing which could limit children's opportunities to act independently within a setting. In addition, the extent to which good ratios were used to positive effect was likely to be dependent on the pedagogical

knowledge and skills of staff, both in working with children and in supervising staff with lower level qualifications and limited experience.

- *Qualifications and experience of managers and practitioners*

The qualifications of practitioners were similar across settings, with few practitioners qualified above Level 3. One setting manager in Maybury Children's Centre had a degree, which is likely to have a positive impact on practice in that setting. In several other settings, managers / owners had completed other training (such as High / Scope or Montessori) which appeared to influence practice. In one setting, the fact that there were relatively large numbers of inexperienced staff was identified as an issue in the implementation of the teacher's work.

- *Children's Centre factors*

It is important to acknowledge that the two Children's Centres were very different in a number of areas; namely in their historical development, the current stage of their development, geographical location and community characteristics. For example, in the rural Children's Centre there was more community ownership than in the urban centre, partly due to the different nature of the two communities. It was also felt that in the rural area, there was more of a community 'readiness' for the Children's Centre.

- *Inspection processes and outcomes*

Ofsted reports for settings were used by teachers to inform individual settings' action plans. In one setting, an unsatisfactory Ofsted report had united staff in their determination to improve their practice and challenge this negative judgement. In this case, the Ofsted report seemed to have had a galvanising impact, and some very positive aspects of practice were noted during observations.

- *Other factors*

An important factor is that it is difficult to change long established practice. One of the teachers and one manager acknowledged that steady development over a longer period of time was required in such situations. In addition, staff in some settings had difficulty recognising the importance of the work around cultural diversity. The teacher at Crossways Children's Centre felt that sustaining change in some settings had been difficult, particularly when there were other pressing issues to deal with, such as staff leaving the setting and low staff morale.

## **Outcomes**

The work of the teachers had many positive effects, although the degree of certainty about the nature of the impact does vary in terms of the different outcomes. Intermediate outcomes tended to be more easily evidenced than final outcomes (with the exception of '*enhanced setting based practice*').

### ***Intermediate outcome 1: Professional development and learning of managers and staff***

There was some evidence of successful support by the Children's Centre teachers for the professional development and learning of some setting managers and for many individual staff. In one private Maybury setting, the manager had attended the High / Scope training and she was now keen to put this learning into practice within her nursery. In another setting, the teacher reported that there was '*a culture of self improvement*' and it was felt that attending the training and frameworks provided by the teachers had contributed to this culture of self-improvement.

### ***Intermediate outcome 2: Collaboration of teacher, manager, practitioners and parents within a learning community***

Some strong links with communities were apparent in the more established Maybury Children's Centre. The Children's Centre manager reported that monthly evening 'Ask the families' meetings were held for staff, teachers and parents to discuss issues, such as resourcing. The manager stressed the importance of listening to parents in the development of the Children's Centre. The Crossways Children Centre was at an earlier stage of development, although promising work was being developed and it is likely that the teacher and manager will be able to work together to make further progress in future.

### ***Intermediate outcome 3: Development and learning of parents***

Through parent workshops the teachers impacted upon the development and learning of parents. It is anticipated that this learning in turn will positively impact upon the home based practices of families and upon children's learning.

### ***Final outcome 1: Enhanced setting-based practice with children and families***

Assessments of the early years environments revealed that both settings and curriculum areas varied widely in quality. Teachers' scores tended to be similar to ECERS/ITERS scores, suggesting that they had a good understanding of recognised measures of quality in setting provision and practice. In general, managers' own ratings tended to be higher than the ECERS/ITERS scores. This was particularly true for CLL and may be due to the fact that settings had focused on this area in their work with the teacher, and managers felt that much progress had been made, leading to an over-estimate of the quality of improved practice. Another possible explanation for the discrepancy between manager and teacher ratings is that managers' knowledge and understanding of best practice in the area is less well developed than that of teachers. In contrast, while the teachers saw that progress had been made, they were also realistic about the work that still needed to be done. One area that achieved particularly low scores in all settings was diversity, although setting managers tended to rate their settings consistently higher than their ECERS/ITERS scores.

Both managers and teachers reported increased confidence in all focus areas, although such increases ranged from limited (for diversity in several settings) to excellent (for CLL, PSE and interaction in a small number of settings).

### ***Final outcome 2: Impact on children's learning***

There was some qualitative evidence suggestive of likely gains in terms of learning. For example, teachers felt that CLL had been enhanced in the majority of settings, resulting

in positive impact upon children's learning. In particular, teacher modelling of good practice in this area meant that staff now provided many more opportunities for CLL. One setting now provided more frequent and better quality role play, small world play and messy play, another provided increased opportunities for child-led mark-making role play. In two urban settings, the impact of the teacher's input on early literacy had been only partly successful, despite sustained efforts to increase, for example, practitioner understanding of the value of child-led mark-making and opportunities for children's talk. There were also positive outcomes around interaction in the majority of settings with the development of effective role play areas, book corners and modelling of storytelling. Positive outcomes had been achieved around children with disabilities, with improved links with pre-school inclusion services in three urban settings. A number of positive initiatives that had impacted upon children's learning had been achieved in PSE, such as a programme which promotes good behaviour strategies. Another setting had changed its routine, in consultation with the teacher, to create an independent snack time; this was seen as a positive development that would enhance child outcomes through encouraging independence.

There was still work to do in several focus areas in a number of settings. For example, some interactions were still considered to be rather adult directed, more work was needed around cultural diversity; in several cases, teachers felt that practitioners' understanding of the issues around cultural diversity remained relatively limited.

### ***Final outcome 3: Career development of managers, staff and parents***

This outcome is closely linked to the professional development of managers, staff and parents (Intermediate outcome 2). There were a number of positive outcomes for managers and staff. Several staff in one setting were working towards a relevant childcare qualification. In addition, one staff member had recently been appointed as Speech and Language support worker. With regard to parent career development, many parents volunteered to work in Maybury Children's Centre and as their skills and confidence developed, they moved on to paid employment within the Children's Centre or elsewhere. One manager was considering applying for a foundation degree course to improve her career prospects.

### ***Final outcome 4: Capacity of settings for ongoing development***

It is clear that there is scope for continuing *individual development*, particularly in Maybury Children's Centre, where training and networks offered by teachers were reported to enhance staff confidence and child outcomes. The Children's Centre will continue to provide parents who have an interest in developing their skills and confidence the opportunity to work as volunteers; this often provides a route to paid employment.

There are opportunities for the future *development of teams*. Inviting all staff to training and networks and including staff in planning and evaluation meetings may enhance team capability, although a possible threat to team capability is the high turnover of staff in some Crossways settings. Poor working conditions, poor owner support for managers and low pay could also be perceived as a threat to team capability in some settings. The Children's Centre Network for early years practitioners from both schools and settings provided very positive opportunities for staff from different teams to work together.

There was capacity for *community development*, particularly in Maybury, where the population was relatively stable and community ownership of the Children's Centre was high. The community was ready for the Children's Centre and appreciated the fact that they had a say in its future development. In Crossways, however, there was a great diversity of cultures and languages and a transient population. Many people using the daycare were people who worked in the town centre and were not part of the local community.

## Discussion and conclusions

This article has described the impact of the work of two Children's Centre teachers and identified some of the supporting and limiting factors that influenced the outcomes. The development of a model of the impact was particularly beneficial for conceptualising the role and the relationships between variables. Key factors contributing to the success of the role were the wide and relevant professional experience and expertise of the two teachers, their engagement in a network of teachers working in a similar role and their strengths as pedagogical leaders. In carrying out the role effectively, the teachers drew on a wide repertoire of pertinent leadership styles as outlined in Goleman and colleagues' research (2003). Some of the main limiting factors related to the distinctive characteristics and particular stage of development of each Children's Centre. There were also issues relating to the characteristics of the non-maintained sector. A further factor was that time for changes to be embedded was very important; while in some areas, the teachers were moving settings in a positive direction; this remained at an early stage.

The findings from this study point to some key factors that are important for future policy and practice. Firstly, the ***careful selection of teachers*** will be vital for the future success of this challenging role. The two teachers leading the development of practice in the present study offer a very useful model for the kind of teacher who is likely to be successful in this role. To take on the role of pedagogical leader, Children's Centre teachers are likely to need wide and relevant experience of early years practice and some prior experience in leadership roles. They will require a secure repertoire of leadership styles and the emotional intelligence to draw on styles as appropriate to particular contexts (Goleman 2000). Secondly, offering some ***tailored professional development opportunities*** to Children's Centre teachers might be helpful, since situations can often be very challenging and complex. Although the two teachers in the present study displayed high levels of leadership skills, it cannot be assumed that people coming into these roles will have the necessary skills. Children's Centre teachers are eligible for National Professional Qualification in Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL) programme and it would be useful to consider the advisability of encouraging Children's Centre teachers to follow this route.

Thirdly, ***the Children's Centre teacher role should be used as one part of a package of strategies to support the change process*** by Local Authorities. It can be particularly difficult for teachers to impact on settings where there is a high concentration of practitioners with Level 3 qualifications and below. Other key elements are the Local Authority training programmes, as well as the networks and opportunities for practitioners to move to higher qualification levels. Very few practitioners in the settings observed had qualifications above Level 4. It would also be useful to consider the possibility of planning tailored subsidised training for some setting owners; for example where an owner has a solely business background and no professional qualifications in

early years education and care, knowledge and understanding of quality issues may be relatively weak.

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