

Nurturing Distributed Leadership in Early Years Services:

A Relational Action Research Inquiry

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Foreword

This report documents an extraordinary process of inquiry, conversation, collaboration and reflection on the critical area of distributed leadership in Early Years Education.

It draws on the experience, insights and wisdom of Early Years Educators, Pedagogical Leaders and Early Years Managers who work every day to create an environment where care, connection and learning can thrive. Key to this is the ability of services to draw on the strengths of Early Years Educators and allow them respond to the individual needs of children and families. Leadership can sometimes be reduced to issues of compliance, finances and reports. Although these are critical to the success of Early Years Services as the authors point out that success also depends on “nurturing the conditions in which care, connection, and learning can thrive”

This report also highlights how the services respond to the daily challenges faced by families in North Dublin. Recent investment in affordable childcare is very welcome but it is vital that we do not lose sight of the need for high quality learning environments in the rush to provide childcare for those seeking employment. Early Years Services lay the foundation for educational success later on and the participants in this report describe how services also function as vital Early Intervention and Prevention services for children with additional needs and other challenges.





Thanks very much to the research team of Adrian Wagner, Complexity Partners; Louise McCulloch, Research Coordinator and Jelena Simic, Early Years Programme Coordinator from Preparing for Life. As facilitators and authors, they brought sensitivity, insight and understanding to the project and created an atmosphere of openness and trust that allowed magic to happen.

This project would not have been possible without the generous support of the ESB Energy for Generations Fund. The Fund has been a key support for Northside Partnership, ensuring success across a number of social inclusion initiatives over the years.

Thanks also to the Area Based Childhood Programme in Tusla which provides core funding for the Preparing for Life programme.

We would also like to thank the board and management of Northside Partnership, as well as the Preparing for Life team for their support of the process.



Most importantly, we would like to offer our sincere thanks and appreciation to the Early Years Educators, Pedagogical Leaders and Early Years Managers of the local Early Years Services who participated in the project. We greatly value the trust they placed in the team and their collaboration throughout the project. We believe this report clearly demonstrates how dedicated they are to ensuring the highest quality, early education services for the children and families of North Dublin.

Niall Sexton,
Programme Manager, Preparing for Life
Northside Partnership.



1

Introduction

1.1 Context

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) plays a vital role in shaping children's life experiences and opportunities to flourish and thrive (UNICEF, 2024; Sylva et al, 2004). Across national and international contexts, there is growing recognition that a high-quality nurturing environment in Early Years Services (and the experiences this creates) has a profound and lasting influence on child wellbeing, development and learning (OECD, 2021). This important work takes place within a sector that is complex and pressured: shifting policy landscapes, workforce challenges, funding constraints, and the challenge of trying to meet the diverse needs of children and their families.

Given the complexity, leadership in early year services cannot be reduced to structures of management or the authority of a single individual. Management and hierarchical structures can be helpful at times, particularly to ensure certain governance requirements. However, linear, top-down responses are rarely sufficient in contexts where needs are dynamic, relationships are interdependent, and change is constant. Early years services could be described as working more like complex adaptive systems, where what matters is not just the individual parts but how they connect and influence each other. Because these interactions are constantly changing and don't follow a straight line, outcomes can be hard to predict and often bring unintended consequences when we try to control and predict them. What we can do is pay attention to the emerging patterns and use these to guide our practice, rather than trying to control everything in advance.

Recognising leadership as a relational and emergent process can be facilitative and creates conditions for increased attention and awareness of the emergence of trust, communication, and the capacity to organise collectively around shared values and work (Hersted & Gergen, 2013). However, in early years services, the space to practice this kind of leadership is often constrained by the demands of formal governance such as meeting inspection requirements, evidencing quality standards, and satisfying external accountability measures i.e. governance that prioritises management and compliance. While these are important, they can risk overshadowing the relational work of communication, trust-building, and collective organising that actually makes high-quality practice possible. Distributed models of leadership bring these relational dimensions back into focus, emphasising collaboration, shared responsibility, and the harnessing of collective expertise. Rather than placing the full burden of responsibility on one leader, it recognises the interdependence of roles and the value of shared decision making. Working in this way is not only about improving efficiency or driving innovation, but also about cultivating relationships that make environments adaptive, resilient, and responsive to local contexts (Belseth, 2025).

This inquiry was a reminder that part of sustaining high-quality practice in early years services requires attention to how relationships are nurtured and grown, particularly in the context of leadership and distributed leadership. This report is grounded in growing an understanding of these experiences. It documents an inquiry into how distributed leadership

is being nurtured in early years practice, with a particular emphasis on relational processes and systemic perspectives. It is our intention that, via this report, our gaze is widened to the possibilities and challenges within this whilst grounding us in the lived experiences of a group of Early Years Services in the Dublin 17 and Dublin 5 areas.

1.2 The Inquiry Group: Who and Where We Are

At the heart of this research was a group of people coming together from five different early years services across Dublin 5 and 17, alongside the Preparing for Life Early Years Team Coordinator, Preparing for Life Research and Evaluation Coordinator and an independent consultant. Each brought their own experiences, challenges, and perspectives.

Table 1: *Members of the Inquiry and Their Representatives and Roles*

Service	Representatives and Roles
Preparing For Life Early Years Team	Early Years Programme Coordinator Research and Evaluation Coordinator
Complexity Partners	Independent Consultant (supporting and facilitating the process)
Bonnybrook Early Education Centre	Early Years Manager Early Years Educator
Doras Buí	Early Years Manager (attended one session) Deputy Early Years Manager Pedagogical Leader (attended two sessions)
Edenmore Early Education Centre	Deputy Early Years Manager Pedagogical Leader
Kilbarrack Foxfield Preschool	Early Years Manager Deputy Early Years Manager
Moatview Early Education Centre	Early Years Manager Pedagogical Leader (attended one session)

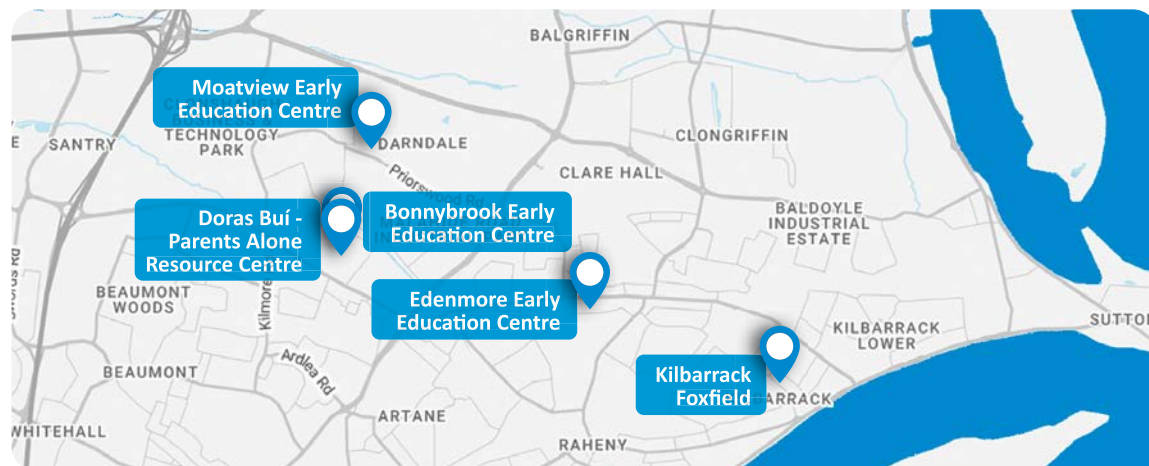
All five early years services in the inquiry were community-based, not-for-profit settings, typically overseen by voluntary boards. Several are designated as Tier 1 under the Equal Start programme¹, reflecting their work with families experiencing high levels of need. Tier 1 designation provides additional resourcing such as increased funded staffing hours to: strengthen engagement with families, enhance inclusive practice, and provide additional developmental support for children, ensuring equitable access to early learning opportunities.

This context matters. The inquiry unfolded in communities with recognised high levels of poverty, as measured by the Pobal Haase and Pratschke (HP) Deprivation Index and other demographic data. During our inquiry we heard how Early Years Educators regularly navigate a wide range of needs among children and families, including developmental, social, and emotional support. In such circumstances, nurturing distributed leadership becomes particularly vital (Heikka et al, 2025; Heikka et al, 2019): sharing responsibility,

1. <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/press-releases/equal-start-for-children-experiencing-disadvantage/>

decision making, and expertise across the team facilitates services to respond more flexibly and relationally, and ensures that the complexity of children's and families' lives is met with coordinated, thoughtful practice. Distributed leadership in these contexts is essential for responding responsively to the complex and evolving needs of children and families, relying on the team's ability to share, build, and apply expertise collectively.

Figure 1: Map of Area and Service Location

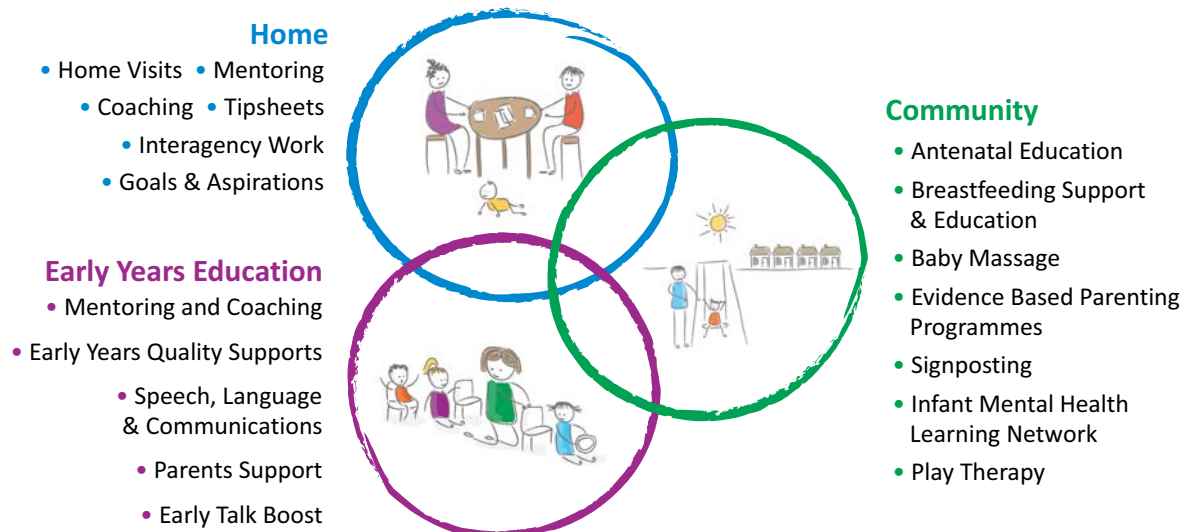


1.3 Inquiry Origins: Preparing for Life Early Years Team

The inquiry grew from the work of the Preparing for Life Early Years team. Preparing For Life is part of a wider Prevention and Early Intervention (PEI) programme funded by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) called an Area Based Childhood programme (ABC). Preparing for Life operates under the umbrella of Northside Partnership, a local development company working to promote social and economic inclusion across North East Dublin through community-led initiatives and collaboration with local and national stakeholders. Preparing For Life aims to improve outcomes for children and families in areas of high poverty so that every child can reach their potential, regardless of socio-economic background. The programme works in partnership with families, practitioners, communities, and national stakeholders to provide evidence-informed supports and services.

The Preparing for Life programme considers the experience of the child in the home, school/early years and community environments and provides supports at each of these (see Fig 2 below).

Figure 2: Preparing For Life Consideration of Experience of the Child



One of the offerings of Preparing for Life is an Early Years team who provides an Early Years Quality Support programme called Building Big Futures. Building Big Futures was developed to enhance the quality of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) by strengthening pedagogy and enriching learning environments. The ultimate goal of the programme is to positively shape the early educational experiences of children within targeted communities. This stage of life represents one of the most critical windows for development, a time when the quality of a child's experiences has a profound and lasting impact on their learning, health, and behaviour throughout life. Building Big Futures is grounded in the principles of *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) and *Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*, aligning with national policy whilst also addressing the specific realities of local communities. At its core, Building Big Futures emphasises fostering environments for social and emotional development, infant mental health, and trauma-informed practices, which are essential for nurturing the wellbeing of babies and young children.

As part of developing and delivering Building Big Futures, the Early Years team engages regularly in group reflective practice, reviewing feedback from Early Years Educators and Services, considering levels of engagement within services, and examining their own roles and learning. These reflection sessions consistently highlighted the central role of leadership in shaping how services engaged with the programme. Where leadership was distributed and relational, it was felt that educators showed greater motivation, stronger collaboration, and more willingness to embed new ideas into daily practice.

At the same time, the ongoing reflections pointed to a challenge: sustaining change. If enhancements in practice relied solely on individual leaders or hierarchical structures or where distributed initiative was not actively encouraged, the capacity for lasting, adaptive change was diminished. The Building Big Futures team became increasingly concerned with how to embed change in ways that could outlast role changes or shifting organisational pressures. This prompted a deeper question: how might distributed leadership itself be nurtured in ways that reflect the relational, collaborative ethos of quality early years practice and at the same time sustain changes in practice? This aligned with recommendations from *Síolta*, which highlighted the importance of leadership in fostering a culture of ongoing professional learning, and with national policy priorities such as *First 5*, which recognises the need to build leadership capacity at all levels to enhance quality and continuity in early learning.

With this in mind, the Preparing for Life Early Years team applied for funding to explore the theme of distributed leadership with local early years services. The intention was to do this in a participatory way that would itself model the principles of distributed leadership: sharing responsibility, valuing multiple perspectives, and learning collectively. By working in this way, the team hoped to create more sustainable ways of embedding leadership across services while also developing a shared, practice-grounded understanding of what distributed leadership might look like in context. This became the Nurturing Distributed Leadership in the Early Years Inquiry, bringing together the inquiry group described in Section 1.2 to explore, reflect, and learn together.



1.4 Inquiry Overview and Aims

The *Nurturing Distributed Leadership in the Early Years* inquiry brought together professionals as described in Section 1.2, who worked collaboratively to:

- Explore how distributed leadership is created and sustained in early years services.
- Experiment with distributed leadership practices to support high-quality early years provision, including social, emotional, and language development.
- Share insights and learning across early years services to strengthen distributed leadership and enhance everyday practice.

The inquiry aimed to:

- Support participating early years services to recognise and strengthen distributed leadership practices that sustain high-quality pedagogy, organisational learning and sustainable change.
- Deepen reflective practice and collaboration among managers, educators, and pedagogical leaders to strengthen learning environments and in turn enrich the experiences of children and families.
- Create practical insights, frameworks, and tools that help services to support the enactment of distributed leadership in their local contexts.
- Contribute to the ongoing development of inclusive, evidence-informed early years provision, grounded in the lived experiences of Early Years Educators and children.

While these aims were mostly specific to the participating services, the inquiry also sought to generate learning with wider relevance offering insights that could inform the enhancement of distributed leadership across the early years sector more broadly.

1.5 A Note on Terms and Usage

Leadership and Distributed Leadership: In this report, we use the term “leadership” in two related ways. At times, we refer to leadership in a broad sense, encompassing the skills, behaviours, and processes through which people influence, guide, and support others. At other points, we specifically focus on “distributed leadership”, which was the central focus of this research. These concepts are interlinked: “leadership” is used to discuss the broader theme and context, while “distributed leadership” is employed when we are examining issues and practices directly related to our inquiry into how distributed leadership can be nurtured in early years services.

Participants, Early Years Educators, Managers, and Pedagogical Leaders: We use the term “participants” when referring to the individuals who took part in this research. In other contexts, we refer more generally to Early Years Educators, Managers, or Pedagogical Leaders when discussing the professional groups represented in the sector. Similarly, we use “early years services” to refer to the organisational contexts in which these professionals work. This distinction helps clarify when we are discussing experiences directly from the participants of this research versus the broader workforce or organisational environment.

2

Why Distributed Leadership Matters

2.1 What Do We Mean by Distributed Leadership?

Distributed leadership in Early Childhood Education and Care invites us to recognise that effective leadership extends beyond formal roles or hierarchical structures. While formal leadership roles remain vital for setting direction and accountability, research shows that distributing leadership across teams is particularly important for sustaining change and strengthening process quality in early years services (Muijs et al., 2004; Harris, 2013; Spillane, 2005; OECD, 2020). Distributed leadership can be understood as a dynamic practice embedded in the everyday fabric of educational work, emerging through the interactions of Early Years Educators, children, families, and communities.

While discussions of distributed leadership in early years contexts are relatively recent (Aubrey, 2007; Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003; Fasoli, Scrivens, & Woodrow, 2007; Halttunen, 2009; Hujala, Heikka, & Fonsén, 2009; Rodd, 2006; Scrivens, 2006), the concept itself was introduced decades earlier by Gibb (1954), who first articulated leadership as a distributed phenomenon. Building on this foundation, Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2004) advanced the idea that leadership is best understood as a practice “*distributed over leaders, followers, and the situation.*” They emphasise that it is “*stretched over*” the social, organisational, and community contexts of a setting. In this framing, leadership is not simply a role to be filled but an enactment emerging from the interactions between people and their environment.

Rather than being traits that individuals must possess, the characteristics of distributed leadership are relational conditions that emerge through practice. Trust develops as team members share responsibility and feel supported to take initiative (Harris, 2013; Halttunen, 2016). Psychological safety arises when educators can experiment, voice ideas, and learn collectively without fear of reprisal (Heikka, Waniganayake, & Hujala, 2013). Flexibility and responsiveness naturally emerge as leadership responsibilities shift according to context, task, and the needs of children and families (Spillane, Camburn, & Pareja, 2007). In this way, distributed leadership facilitates the emergence of the very relational processes - trust, communication, and collective organisation around shared values and goals - that underpin the sustainability of high-quality early years practice.



2.2 Relationality in Early Years Practice

Distributed leadership in early years services is less about creating new layers of hierarchy and more about noticing, naming, and nurturing leadership where it already exists (Heikka & Hujala, 2013). Best practice and learning can thrive when Early Years Educators pool their knowledge and skillsets (Halttunen, 2016; Harris, 2013) and when leadership is embedded in the routines of daily practice (Fasoli, Scrivens, & Woodrow, 2007). In practice, power is shared, expertise is celebrated, and leadership is recognised as a living, collective process that strengthens quality, resilience, and a shared sense of purpose across a service.

Leaders in these contexts model relational practices: listening, supporting, and creating spaces where others can step forward. This relational orientation is central not only to staff collaboration but also to wellbeing. A supportive work environment, one where leadership is shared, peer learning is encouraged, and autonomy is balanced with collective responsibility, has been shown to mitigate stress and enhance motivation to stay in the profession (OECD, 2020). By cultivating relational cultures, distributed leadership helps to sustain both Early Year Educators wellbeing and pedagogical quality.

2.3 Sustaining Quality and Change Through Distributed Leadership

Sustaining quality in early years provision is not a matter of one-off improvements but of embedding practices that endure. Distributed leadership strengthens this process by creating conditions in which responsibility and expertise are shared across the team. As Spillane (2005) argues, leadership is a matter of “response-ability” i.e. the professional capacity to act responsively to children’s and families’ needs. When this responsibility is distributed, staff are empowered to lead from their own areas of expertise, making practice more resilient to staff turnover, shifting roles, or external pressures.

International evidence highlights the role of leadership in supporting quality and sustainability. OECD (2020) reports that when Early Years Educators perceive opportunities to participate in centre decision-making, they are more collaborative, show greater job satisfaction, and adopt practices linked to higher quality. Pedagogical leadership, in particular, has a positive association with educators’ confidence in their ability to support the child. Distributed leadership often goes hand in hand with pedagogical leadership, as leaders who share responsibility are also more likely to support educators to engage in reflective practice and professional growth (OECD, 2020).

Equally, sustaining change depends on creating a supportive environment for educators. OECD findings emphasise that a collegial work culture (i.e. one where peer learning, idea exchange, and autonomy are supported) can buffer against the limited professional recognition in the sector and low pay that often characterise the sector. Distributed leadership supports this by embedding mentoring, coaching, and reflective dialogue into the daily life of services (OECD, 2020). In this sense, it not only enhances quality but makes the profession more attractive and sustainable, both intellectually and relationally.

For children, the implications are direct. Stronger collaboration among Early Years Educators leads to more coherent, responsive practices. Sustained quality, underpinned by distributed leadership, translates into more consistent relational experiences for children with experiences that support learning, wellbeing, and resilience particularly important in contexts of poverty and socio-economic deprivation.

2.4 Complexity in Early Years Settings and the Need for Distributed Leadership

Anyone who has ever organised a children's party will understand the difference between something being complicated and complex. You can plan the food, decorations, and activities, but once the children arrive, their interactions, energy, and unpredictable responses quickly shape the course of events. Early years services operate in much the same way: they are dynamic, multi-actor environments where children, families, educators, and external demands meet in ways that cannot be fully controlled or predicted (Snowden & Boone, 2007; Davis & Sumara, 2006). Early years environments are dynamic and multi-actor systems, shaped by shifting child and family needs, evolving policy requirements, and the interdependence of relationships. Linear, top-down approaches are rarely sufficient in such contexts. Distributed leadership offers a way of navigating this complexity by enabling adaptive and responsive practice.

In such contexts, rigid, top-down leadership is insufficient. Rather what is required is adaptive and responsive styles of leadership, which treat uncertainty as a normal feature of practice. Distributed leadership supports this by empowering Early Years Educators at every level to notice, interpret, and act in the moment. This shared responsibility strengthens resilience, enables context-sensitive decisions, and sustains quality even amid unpredictability (Gibbs, 2021; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). By embracing complexity in this way, early years services become more responsive, innovative, and ultimately more capable of centring children's experiences.

Furthermore, by involving multiple voices in decision-making and creating space for Early Years Educators to act from their expertise, distributed leadership increases the collective capacity of teams to adapt. As the OECD (2020) report observes, educators who perceive leadership as distributed are not only more satisfied but also more collaborative, qualities essential for navigating unpredictable environments. Importantly, this is not about diluting responsibility but about strengthening resilience by weaving leadership into the everyday actions of many.

2.5 Policy Context

Distributed leadership in the Irish early years context is outlined in national policy and practice as a fundamental driver of quality improvement, good governance, and workforce development. It has gradually become more visible as outlined in Appendix One (see table of the History of Leadership and Distributed Leadership for Early Years in Irish Policy).

Distributed leadership is also increasingly recognised within Irish and European policy as central to building a sustainable, high-quality early years workforce. At Irish national level, Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare (2022–2028) sets out a vision of:

“A well-qualified, skilled, diverse and valued professional workforce that is centred on children's rights, needs and potential and that provides quality experiences for children in partnership with families, and which continues to advance its professional development within a coherent and competent system.”

Distributed leadership is integral to this vision, with commitments to develop new roles such as Family and Community Partnership Coordinators and enhanced Inclusion Coordinators that intend to explicitly embed distributed leadership responsibilities in services. These roles

are designed to support inclusive practice, family engagement, and community partnerships, ensuring leadership is shared across multiple dimensions of practice (Government of Ireland, 2022).

The launch of Equal Start in 2024 further embeds distributed leadership within the national policy framework. Equal Start is a new government-funded model of supports designed to ensure children experiencing poverty can access and meaningfully participate in early learning and care and school-age childcare. As part of its phased rollout, Equal Start commits to strengthening distributed leadership roles within early years services, particularly to support inclusion, wellbeing, and equity. By resourcing roles such as the Inclusion Coordinator as designated “*distributed leadership*”, Equal Start recognises the importance of embedding leadership in inclusive pedagogy and culture, rather than relying solely on positional authority.

At a European level, the EU Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care has identified leadership as a key determinant of organisational quality and staff development. Its recent work includes the development of a self-reflection tool on leadership to support Early Childhood Education and Care teams in reviewing and improving their leadership practices collectively. Ireland has contributed to this process, highlighting national commitments under Nurturing Skills as an example of policy alignment with distributed leadership approaches.

Internationally, the OECD (2020) has underscored leadership as key in shaping staff working conditions, professional development, and ultimately the quality of children’s experiences. Distributed leadership, in particular, is associated with stronger collaboration, higher staff motivation, and greater job satisfaction. The OECD notes that policies which promote distributed leadership such as embedding mentoring roles, encouraging peer learning, and creating middle leadership pathways are promising practices for sustaining quality and staff retention.

Together, these policy developments signal a shift: leadership in early years is no longer understood as the domain of a single manager but as a collective process that strengthens professional practice, supports inclusion, and sustains high-quality experiences for children and families.



3

Learning in Relationship - A Relational Action Research Inquiry

3.1 Relational Action Research: Learning *With* Rather than *About*

Relational Action Research builds on the wider Action Research tradition, which integrates three key commitments: action, research, and participation (Greenwood & Levin, 2007). *Action* involves creating and implementing new practices (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006); *Research* entails contributing to new theory as well as generating and testing new knowledge (Greenwood & Levin, 2007); and *participation* emphasises the value placed on democratic process and people having control over their own life situations (Fals-Borda, 2001; Freire, 1970). These elements must coexist and if one is absent, the work ceases to be action research. As Reason and Bradbury (2001) remind us: research that is “*just theory without action is meaningless, and action without reflection and understanding is blind*” (2001:2).

In this inquiry, we were grounded by the ethos of co-inquiry (Heron, 1999), where research is done “*with*” people rather than “*on*”, “*for*” or “*about*” them. Through dialogical and reflexive learning processes, participants co-constructed knowledge and generated new possibilities for practice. Early Years Educators, Managers, and Pedagogical Leaders were intentionally invited together to meet in cycles of shared reflection and experimentation, collectively exploring how distributed leadership might be lived and strengthened in practice.

When there is a relational perspective held in action research, Gergen (2020) suggests the following may be noticed:

- A relational orientation represents a shift in emphasis from what action research achieves to how it is achieved through the social processes of co-construction, dialogue, and participation.
- Outcomes are often reframed. A relational approach often shifts the focus from goals outside a research group aiming to fix situations or produce externally measurable change. Rather there is a focus on outcomes within the groups themselves: the building of new knowledge, the strengthening of relational capacities, and the development of leadership practice.

Gergen (2020) reaffirms the importance of this orientation to research as modern institutions are increasingly driven by standardised systems of accountability, forms of “*command and control*” that, while often well intentioned, are insensitive to the complexities and shifting conditions of local circumstances. Relational action research offers a different possibility. By generating learning, creativity, and resourcefulness from *within* local circumstances, it can facilitate contextually grounded change while simultaneously cultivating trust and solidarity.

3.2 Designing and Co-Creating an Inquiry and Community of Practice

In practice, the inquiry unfolded through four sessions of four hours each, spread over four months - a total of around sixteen hours of collective engagement. Between in-person sessions, the consultant and Preparing for Life staff members met regularly to plan and reflect on the overall process.

The four sessions were structured to integrate two overlapping dimensions: an inquiry process and a community of practice.

- **Inquiry Aspect:** Each early years service was invited to bring a question connected to distributed leadership which felt alive in their own context into the sessions. These questions served as starting points for exploration, but they were not expected to remain static. Instead, participants were encouraged to “hold” their questions, noticing what they revealed in practice, while also welcoming the possibility that new or more pressing questions might emerge. This was understood as part of a natural and valuable process of inquiry: questions evolving as experience deepened. Between sessions, services were invited to continue reflecting on these questions and to try out small exercises (outlined further in Chapter 4) to support ongoing learning.
- **Community of Practice Aspect:** Alongside this inquiry process, the sessions were intentionally designed as a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). This meant creating a relational learning space where participants could share experiences, draw on one another’s expertise, and grow collective understanding. The sessions were not conceived as didactic training, but as opportunities to learn *with and from each other* in an atmosphere of openness, trust, and mutual support.

The external consultant, who is part of Complexity Partners and the facilitation training team of the Institute of Transformational Leadership Berlin², facilitated the sessions. Working in close collaboration with the Preparing for Life team, he aimed to sense what might be most helpful to explore at each stage which was shaped by each session and the local contextual insights from the Preparing for Life Early Years team. This approach allowed for a gentle framing that gave enough structure to sustain inquiry while holding space for participants’ own emergent questions. Exercises were used to strengthen understanding of complexity, helping participants see patterns, relationships, and dynamics in their settings while always returning to the living questions.

Through this design, the sessions created a rhythm of *returning to inquiry* while also expanding understanding of leadership and distributed leadership in complex environments. In this way, participants did not just talk about distributed leadership but enacted aspects of it, co-constructing knowledge, sharing responsibility for learning, and experiencing the value of collective reflection in practice.

3.3 Cycles of Action and Reflection

The inquiry was structured through a series of action research learning cycles, each following a basic rhythm of *planning, acting, observing, and reflecting* (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). In each in-person session, participants were given space to plan an inquiry focus or plan a concrete action they wanted to try in their service. Between sessions, they had the opportunity to act on these plans, experimenting with new approaches and engaging colleagues in discussion.

.....
2. <https://www.transformational-leadership.de/institut>

When they returned to the next session, they were supported to notice and reflect on what had happened which included sharing insights, challenges, and surprises. This reflective process then seeded the next cycle of planning and action as questions stayed the same, evolved or changed.

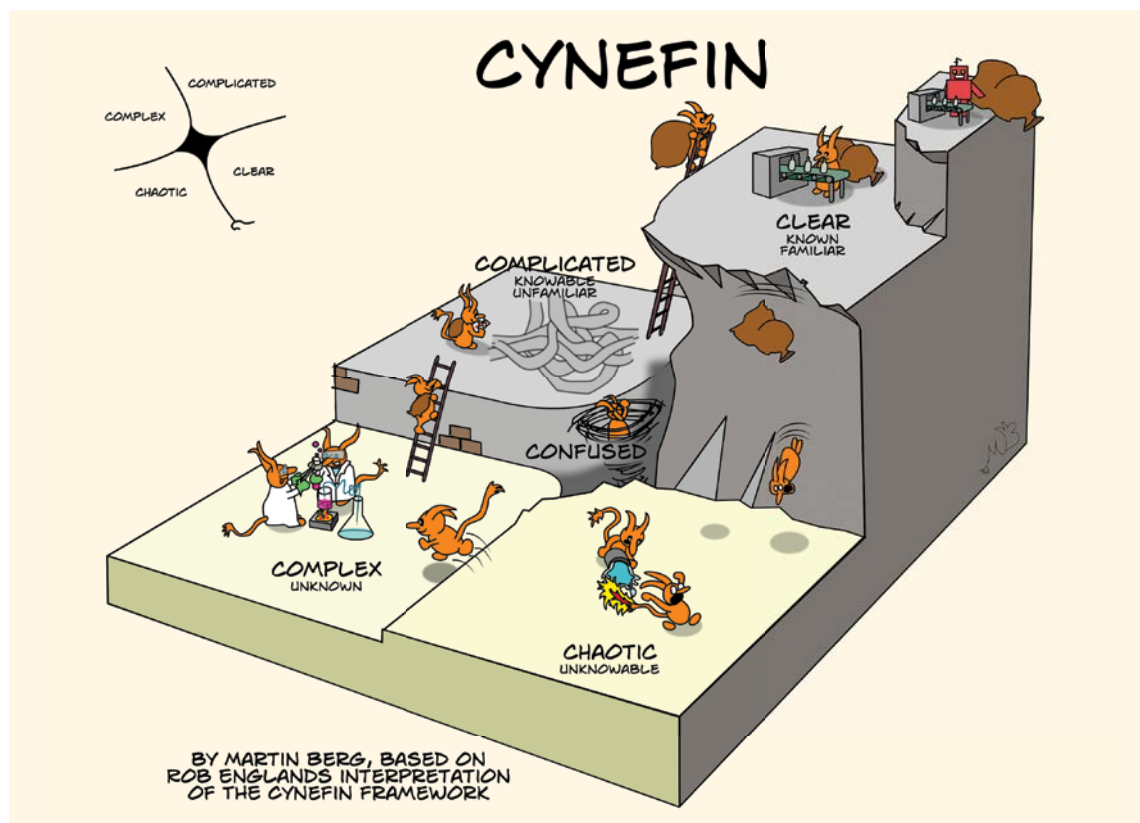
This rhythm of planning, acting, observing and reflecting created a recursive pattern of “*meeting and returning*”, with learning flowing between the collective sessions and the everyday life of services. In this way, mini cycles of inquiry also took place within services in between sessions, as participants experimented, observed outcomes, reflected, and adjusted their practice.

Over the course of four intentional cycles, the process deepened both inquiry and practice outcomes. Early sessions concentrated on building trust, clarifying inquiry questions, and facilitating planning of potential action. Later sessions introduced new frameworks (see 3.4.1) and supported services to probe leadership in more complex areas such as governance, service culture, and systemic perspectives. In this way, the action research cycles became iterative spaces for sensemaking, experimentation, and reflection that modelled distributed leadership as emergent, relational, and adaptive.

3.4 Leadership Focus and Complexity

In this inquiry, complexity was used as a lens to support both process and practice. Rather than treating uncertainty as something to suppress, participants recognised “*confused states*” as legitimate beginnings for inquiry and sensemaking. The Cynefin framework, with its Welsh roots meaning “*place of multiple belongings*,” offered a helpful orientation here. By distinguishing five domains (clear, complicated, complex, chaotic, and confused) it supported participants to listen more deeply and adapt their practice according to the context they are in (see Figure 3 and description in 3.4.1 below).

Figure 3: Cartoon Image of Cynefin Framework³



3. Cynefin Framework. Illustration by Martin Berg, based on Rob England's interpretation of the Cynefin Framework. Used with appreciation under free-use terms from [Vige.se](https://vige.se)

Complexity frameworks were introduced as sense-making tools that helped participants connect reflections to their action in practice (see 3.4.1 below for more information on what this looked like). They supported participants in exploring leadership decisions, recognising adaptive opportunities and systemic patterns, and noticing where distributed leadership was enacted or could be. In this way, complexity became both a lens for understanding and a guide for navigating leadership in early years services, grounding participants' reflections in their practice.

One example of this came as participants reflected on the balance between hierarchical and distributed leadership in their daily practice. They noticed that while some situations required clear and directive action, many others called for distributed approaches by early years services to respond collectively in dynamic, multi-actor environments. The sessions created space to sit in these tensions rather than resolve them too quickly, helping participants explore how both hierarchical and distributed leadership might play a role, and what it meant for their own responsibilities as "leaders".

Using the Cynefin Framework (Snowden & Boone, 2007), participants experimented with probing, sensing, responding and acting differently depending on the situation. This opened up conversations about governance, service culture, and everyday challenges, bringing abstract concepts of complexity and distributed leadership into the lived realities of early years practice. In this way, participants not only deepened their understanding of leadership and distributed leadership but also co-created practical insights into how different approaches could serve their teams and communities in their particular contexts.

3.4.1 Complexity Methods and Frameworks

As part of the inquiry and sessions, participants engaged with complexity methods and frameworks. The Cynefin framework, polarity work, and Estuarine Mapping were used to deepen reflection, helping the group notice how leadership shifted across contexts, from clear and predictable to complex or even chaotic. Through these frameworks participants reflected on leadership decisions across different contexts, recognised systemic patterns, and identified when distributed leadership was most needed.

Cynefin Framework: Positioning Leadership in Complex Environments

The Cynefin framework helped managers make distinctions between clear, complicated, complex and chaotic situations during the inquiry and in their daily work. It supports reflection on how leadership can look different across these domains. Challenges, such as engaging families, supporting inclusion, or retaining staff, rarely sit in the domain of clear or complicated problems where technical solutions or expert advice are sufficient. They are complex problems, where cause and effect are only visible in retrospect and where what works in one context may not work in another.

The Cynefin framework suggests that in such situations, progress comes from running small-scale experiments, observing what happens, and learning together. Inquiry sessions and action learning and research provides a disciplined way of doing exactly this. It structures the cycle of probing, sensing, and responding, while ensuring that learning is collective and grounded in the lived experience and reality of Early Years Educators and families. Therefore, the Cynefin framework offered a language and noticing for the journey of the inquiry that facilitated groups to find their way through the day-to-day uncertainty while being guided by their own questions.

Polarity Work: Navigating Ongoing Tensions

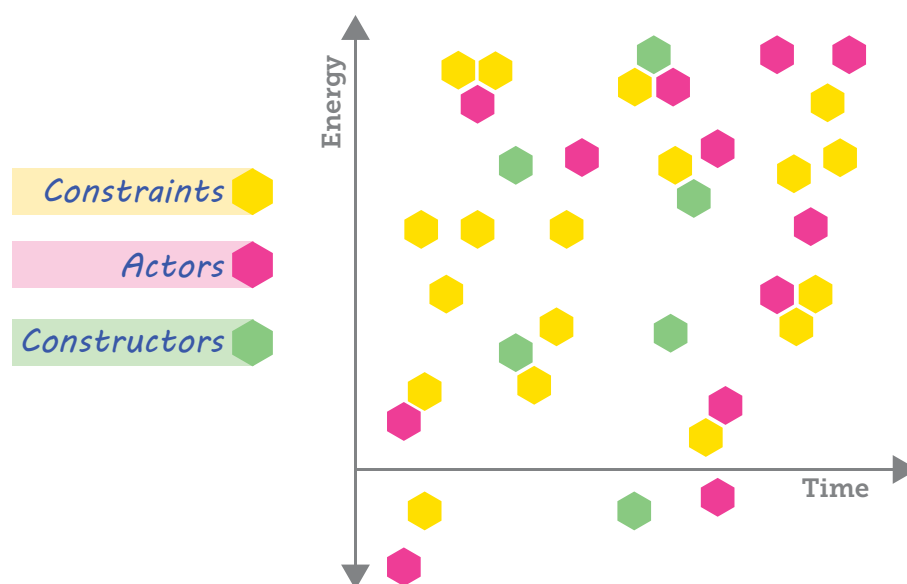
Polarity work added another dimension by helping participants recognise and work with enduring tensions that could not be “solved” in the traditional sense. In Early Years leadership, dilemmas such as balancing stability with experimentation, or individual authority with collective responsibility are not problems with permanent solutions but polarities that need to ongoing attention and sensing.

Through polarity mapping, participants were able to position themselves along spectrums between these poles, noticing how overemphasising one side risked undermining the other. The exercise highlighted the value of shifting fluidly between poles depending on context: for instance, at times leaning more towards innovation and experimentation, and at other times towards stability and continuity. This approach reframed tension as a resource for adaptive distributed leadership rather than a source of conflict. By naming and exploring these polarities, participants built greater awareness of how distributed leadership requires holding competing demands in creative balance.

Estuarine Mapping: Navigating Through Complexity

Estuarine Mapping, in turn, provided a practical way to sort leadership actions according to their level of effort and timescale. Participants used this framework to consider which initiatives could be implemented quickly within existing structures, and which required broader systemic change. This was done by identifying constraints, actors, and constructors in their particular contexts. Rather than focusing on fixed end goals, it encourages attention to what shapes a system and to define a direction of travel that is possible based on affordability.

Figure 4: Example of Estuarine Map⁴



In the early years context, these constraints might include funding arrangements, staffing patterns, cultural expectations, or regulatory requirements. Through inquiry, stakeholders surfaced these constraints, examined how they enabled or restricted distributed leadership, and experimented with shifting them. For example, rigid role boundaries might be loosened to give educators more space for initiative, while professional learning communities might be strengthened to reinforce collaborative practice. This is less about a linear journey towards a fixed endpoint and more like navigating a river estuary: the tides, sandbanks, and currents (constraints) shape what is possible at a given time, and progress depends on adjusting course together. Awareness of time and energy ensured that strategic decisions could focus on what was already possible in the here and now, while also identifying where longer-term planning and support were needed.

4. Adapted version of the Estuarine Map (original concept by Dave Snowden, The Cynefin Company, https://cynefin.io/wiki/Estuarine_framework).

3.5 Bringing in Wider Collective Insight: Early Years Educators Voices

A short parallel session with Early Years Educators was helpful to include their experiences. Early Years Educators from three services took part in focus groups designed to bring their voices directly into the discussion on distributed leadership. These sessions used a systemic play and constellation exercise, a method that combines constellation principles with creative modelling to make visible the relationships and dynamics within a system.

Early Years Educators were invited to use everyday objects and materials from their settings to construct three-dimensional representations of how leadership and distributed leadership was experienced in their daily work. This playful, hands-on approach encouraged participants to externalise patterns that are often difficult to express in dialogue alone. By positioning and re-positioning elements, Early Years Educators were able to surface tensions, highlight enabling relationships, and identify gaps or blockages in processes.

The activity grounded the inquiry in lived practice. It provided a safe and imaginative space for educators to share perspectives, compare experiences, and reflect collectively on distributed leadership as a relational and systemic phenomenon. In some cases, groups from the same setting produced different models, offering valuable contrasts and underscoring the multiplicity of perspectives within a single service.

Like the complexity frameworks, the systemic play and constellation exercise supported a sense-making process through embodied and visual representation. It enabled participants to see their settings as complex adaptive systems, shaped by people, spaces, and relationships. In doing so, it added an additional lens to the inquiry, deepening understanding of distributed leadership and strengthening the bridge between research, practice, and lived experience.

3.6 Summary

The different strands of the research served as scaffolding for relational learning. The three complexity frameworks offered complementary entry points: Cynefin encouraged experimentation across domains, polarity work highlighted the need to balance enduring tensions, and Estuarine Mapping grounded decisions in constraints and possibilities. More importantly, these frameworks acted as catalysts for first-person reflective practice. They supported participants to examine their own leadership behaviours, test approaches in real time, and notice systemic influences shaping distributed leadership. In doing so, they deepened capacity for sensemaking in unpredictable contexts and brought conversations about hierarchical and distributed leadership to the fore, supporting recognition of when each might be most helpful.

In this way, complexity was experienced as both a lens for interpreting early years environments and a practical means of reflection and experimentation. By situating their daily leadership challenges within broader systemic patterns, participants were able to make sense of uncertainty in more generative ways, recognising distributed leadership as emergent, relational, and central to sustaining adaptive practice in early years services.

This integration of inquiry and practice ensured that learning was grounded, building shared capacity for distributed leadership across the participating services. What this looked like in more detail is explored in chapter 4.

4

Action Research Learning Cycles

4.1 Introduction

The research process unfolded through four iterative cycles, each beginning with a collective group session and extending into a period of planning, acting, and reflecting within services. In the collective group sessions, managers, Early Years Educators and pedagogical leaders came together to explore inquiry questions, share experiences, and co-explore leadership and distributed leadership through dialogue and structured activities. Following each session, participants carried their inquiries back into their own services engaging in their own mini action learning cycles, planning small experiments, trying out new approaches, and reflecting on how distributed leadership appeared in everyday practice. In this way, each cycle wove together structured group learning with lived experimentation, creating a rhythm of “meeting and returning” that steadily deepened the inquiry.

This chapter traces those four cycles in sequence. It began with the first session, where participants built trust and framed their initial inquiry questions, then moved to the later cycles that introduced complexity frameworks, encouraged experimentation in practice, and supported systemic reflection. The post-session phases acted as bridges, ensuring that new insights were not left as abstract ideas but grounded in action and practice in real service contexts. Across the cycles, the process created a spiral of learning, each loop of planning, acting, and reflecting offering the potential to build on the last.

Figure 5: A Visual Representation of our Action Research Learning Cycles



4.2 Cycle One: Finding a Question That Matters

4.2.1 Collective Group Session One overview

The first session of the process focused on creating the foundations of psychological safety and trust among participants. Managers, pedagogical leaders, and Early Years Educators came together not just as professionals with formal qualifications but also as people bringing the depth of their lived experiences into the room. The inquiry acknowledged that both forms of knowledge were equally valuable, and that leadership and distributed leadership could only be explored fully when participants felt safe to share openly.

Participants were introduced to a set of principles, guidelines, and roles to help create a safe and structured starting point. Together, these were reviewed and discussed and anything that was missing or needed adapting was highlighted so that they reflected the group's needs. This collaborative framing established both the space and the framework for the inquiry. The intention was that this would provide the participants with the confidence to step in, to feel that the process belonged to them, and to begin developing their own questions as the foundation for the journey ahead.

Table 2: Summary of Session One topics

- Introduction to guiding set of principles and roles
- Icebreakers and exercises
- Setting intentions (small group exercise as an Early Years Service and then returning to group)
- Exercises to identify and deepen question(s) for inquiry (small group exercise as an Early Years Service and then returning to group)
- Co-reflection and discussion

Rather than being given research questions, participants generated them individually and collectively at their Early Years Service level. This reinforced ownership of the process and ensured the inquiry was grounded in each individual service's concerns and hopes for leadership and distributed leadership. The questions developed by each service and the Preparing for Life team are outlined in Table 3.

Table 3: Service Level Inquiry Questions Developed in Session One

Service One and Two: How can we strengthen distributed leadership so every team member feels confident in their role?

Service Three: How can we highlight or empower educators to recognise leadership in everyone's everyday practice?

Service Four: How can we empower Early Years Educators to recognise their individual skills and strengths while promoting confidence in their role as leaders within the team?

Service Five: What would support all Educators in engaging in a leadership role? What practical methods can we adopt to build leadership across the service?

Preparing for Life Team: How could we empower leadership practices within early years services?

4.2.2 Summary of Co-Reflections at Collective Group Session One

The co-reflections in Session One explored how leadership and distributed leadership in early years services is grounded in lived experience, relationships, and daily practice rather than formal authority. Educators often enact leadership naturally through responsiveness to children and colleagues, yet rigid role definitions and accountability structures can unintentionally limit this natural leadership. Participants emphasised the importance of balancing formal qualifications with experiential knowledge, recognising that trust and relational care are central to effective leadership particularly distributed leadership. Rather than focusing solely on accountability, leadership should cultivate “response-ability” i.e. the capacity to act thoughtfully in complex, evolving contexts. The group underscored the need for leadership structures that promote equal dignity, shared responsibility, and collaboration, valuing contributions across all roles. Strengthening communication within and across services, acknowledging expertise beyond titles, and fostering a culture of mutual learning and emotional support were seen as key to sustaining inclusive, adaptive, and distributed or relational forms of leadership in early years education and care.

4.2.3 Between Session One and Two: Inquiry, Actions and Reflections

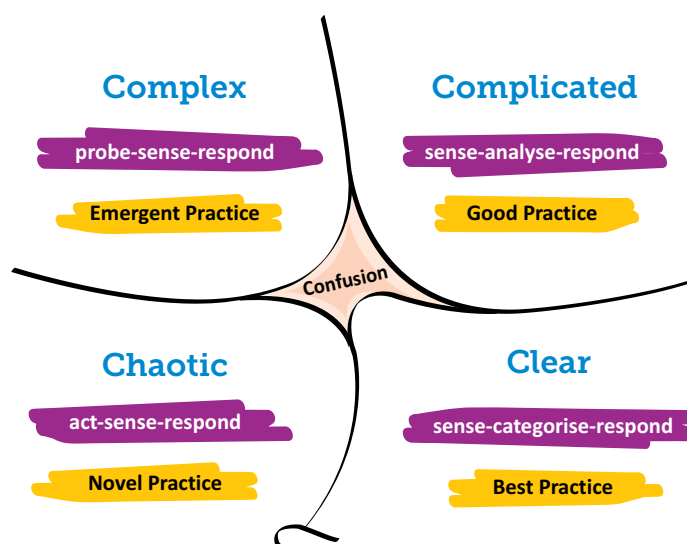
Between Session One and Two, each early years service received a short reflective handout designed to support ongoing inquiry. The handout invited teams to consider their experiences of leadership and leading; to revisit the question they had developed during Session One, and to reflect on why it was meaningful for their service. It also encouraged them to explore potential actions or areas of practice that might emerge from that question. Participants were asked to bring their reflections and the completed handout to Session Two for further exploration. During this period, services continued informal conversations and reflections within their own contexts, deepening engagement with the themes of distributed leadership in everyday practice.

4.3 Cycle Two: Living the Question

4.3.1 Collective Group Session Two Overview

The second collective group session built on the initial explorations of leadership and distributed leadership by deepening reflection and introducing the Cynefin Framework. The framework was introduced through practical activities, facilitating participants not only to understand it in theory but to experience how each of its domains can be felt and recognised in practice. From this embodied starting point participants reflected on how their leadership and distributed leadership experiences could fall into different domains, sometimes clear, sometimes complicated, but often complex. The Cynefin Framework supported attunement to the different responses that are helpful depending on the situation. For example, in complex situations it is often helpful to “*probe-sense-respond*” due to the often necessary emergent responses required versus a clear situation when you can “*sense-categorise-respond*” as there are often clear responses available for this type of situation.

Figure 6: Cynefin Framework and Ways of Responding⁵



Alongside this, participants were encouraged to notice how sometimes very obvious things can remain unseen. The group watched a short video to illustrate the example of inattentional blindness. This invited reflection on how focus shapes what leaders perceive. The group also reflected on the hidden aspects of leadership practice and service life that might otherwise be overlooked.

Through these sensing-based activities, small group inquiry, and shared reflection, participants examined how leadership and distributed leadership may unfold across varying levels of complexity. Furthermore, time was created for each service to work in small groups to further develop their inquiry, explore reflective questions and potential actions in preparation for continued experimentation within their services.

Table 4: Summary of Session Two Topics

- Return to guiding set of principles and roles
- Introduction to Cynefin Framework
- Sensing-based activities and co-reflections of domains of Cynefin (clear, complicated, complex, chaos)
- Further development of reflective handout with question and potential actions (small group exercise as an early years service and then returning to group)
- Co-reflection and discussion

4.3.2 Summary of Co-Reflections at Collective Group Session Two

The co-reflections in Session Two deepened the exploration of leadership as a relational, distributed, and contextually grounded practice. Trust was described as the foundation of effective leadership as expressed through everyday collaboration, mutual recognition, and psychological safety rather than formal authority. Discussions highlighted that while many educators naturally enact leadership, the language surrounding it can feel intimidating. Drawing on the Cynefin framework, participants examined how leadership and distributed

5. Adapted and simplified version of the Cynefin Framework (original concept by Dave Snowden, The Cynefin Company, <https://www.cynefin.io>).

leadership shifts across clear, complicated, complex, and chaotic situations, recognising adaptability, attunement, and responsiveness as key capacities. There were also reflections on Early Years Educators' confidence and the importance of mentoring. Finally, teams highlighted how distributed leadership is rooted in community and culture, emerging organically in daily interactions and collective events. The group also highlighted that distributed leadership is already present within early years practice; the task is to notice, name, and nurture it through reflection and recognition.

Furthermore, the following potential actions and small experiments were identified by participating services to deepen their exploration of distributed leadership. These ideas focus on creating space for reflection, dialogue, and shared responsibility within everyday practice.

Table 5: Summary of Potential Actions and Experiments Identified

Distributed Facilitation and Shared Meetings

- Rotate facilitation of staff meetings so all team members have the opportunity to lead.
- Experiment with shorter, more frequent meetings to encourage engagement and responsiveness.
- Develop light structures or prompts to support facilitation while leaving space for creativity and emergent discussion.

Exploring Understandings of Leadership

- Use short questionnaires or reflective prompts to explore what leadership means to different team members.
- Bring these reflections back into team dialogue to surface collective insights.
- Introduce or normalise distributed leadership language in daily practice (e.g., "Can you lead on this?") to build familiarity and confidence.

Recognising and Affirming Everyday Leadership

- Create simple practices for peer recognition of distributed leadership in action such as acknowledging moments when colleagues take initiative or support others.
- Encourage reflection on personal experiences of leading and being led.
- Use these practices to build collective awareness of distributed leadership already present within teams.

Relational and Attuned Leadership Practice

- Focus on listening with presence and curiosity, responding to what is emerging in relationships and situations.
- Use reflective dialogue and supervision spaces to explore how relational awareness informs leadership decisions.
- Continue to balance structure with adaptability, recognising that leadership often emerges in response to context.

4.3.3 Between Session Two and Three: Inquiry, Actions, and Reflections

Between the second and third collective group sessions, services were invited to engage with the actions and small experiments they had identified as potentially helpful in exploring their inquiry questions. They were provided with reflective prompts to support consideration of their experiences, the relevance to their inquiry question, and possible next steps within their service. Services were asked to bring their reflections and observations to the next session to continue the collective exploration and discussion of leadership and distributed leadership practice.

4.4 Cycle Three: From Inquiry to Action

4.4.1 Collective Group Session Three Overview

The third session focused on reflecting on the experiences services had gathered through experimenting since the previous session. Participants began with a guided meditation and reflection using the Cynefin framework, revisiting how they had encountered uncertainty, clarity, complexity, and chaos in their practice.

This was followed by polarity work, where participants positioned themselves along spectrums and between tensions such as structure versus flow, or traditional roles versus adaptability. These exercises made visible the often unspoken dynamics shaping leadership in daily practice and supported participants in engaging as peers, sharing perspectives, acknowledging differences, and recognising that such tensions are ongoing and must be continually navigated. By mapping their positions and hearing others' perspectives, participants deepened their awareness of how these dynamics shift depending on context and relationships, enhancing their capacity for dialogue and collective sensemaking.

Building on this, participants used the Estuarine Map to locate ideas along two axes: time (quick-to-implement to long-term) and energy cost (low effort to resource-intensive). They first mapped individually, then collaboratively produced a shared map that surfaced common constraints, opportunities, and priorities (see Figure 4 for example).

Through this mapping, participants identified affordable, near-term actions that could be taken immediately, while also pointing toward more ambitious, longer-term developments. Together, polarity work and Estuarine Mapping facilitated participants to see leadership as a practice of navigating enduring tensions, recognising patterns, and responding adaptively within the systemic forces shaping their services.



Table 6: Summary of Session Three Topics

- Return to guiding set of principles and roles
- Meditation facilitating embodied Cynefin reflection
- Reflections on actions and small experiments
- Group constellation and leadership patterns exercise
- Estuarine mapping
- Co-reflection and discussion

4.4.2 Summary of Co-Reflections at Collective Group Session Three

The co-reflections in Session Three explored how leadership and distributed leadership is lived and experienced within early years services, emphasising that it is often already present in everyday practice, even when unrecognised. Discussions highlighted the value of distributed leadership, where decision-making, initiative, and responsibility are shared, and the importance of recognition, trust, and flexible team structures in supporting this. Reflection, both individual and collective, was seen as essential for understanding and strengthening leadership and distributed leadership, while real-world complexities underscored the need for adaptability and responsiveness. Participants noted that leadership development must be tailored to different personalities and capacities, supported by practical strategies, space for professional growth, and opportunities for shared learning. The group concluded that fostering a culture of distributed leadership is often more effective than relying solely on formal policies or qualifications, and that sustainable change requires both empowerment and strategic focus.

4.4.3 Between Session Three and Four: Inquiry, Actions, and Reflections

Between the third and fourth collective group sessions, participants were invited to continue engaging with their actions and small experiments previously identified (see Table 5). The focus during this period was on refining these actions, considering adjustments, and reflecting on their effectiveness in practice. The exercises in Session Three (polarity exercise and estuarine map) were intended to support sensing and orientation within this. Many pursued quick, low-energy actions while also planning for longer-term initiatives requiring deeper cultural shifts. A central insight was the value of starting with Early Years Educators who are already open and willing to engage with distributed leadership. By focusing energy here, services could build momentum and allow the positive effects to gradually influence undecided team members and, over time, the wider service culture.

At the same time, participants identified a set of constraints that shaped what could realistically be achieved within the timeframe and resources available. These included initiatives requiring significant investment, external support, or systemic change, such as developing structured qualifications that recognise prior learning and experience of Early Years Educators without certain qualifications; revising organisational policies to align with distributed leadership principles; engaging board members or key stakeholders; and securing sustainable funding and supportive processes for long-term transformation. Early, achievable steps can build confidence and momentum, while deeper systemic changes require strategic planning, resources, and ongoing attention and collaboration between policy makers and communities.

4.5 Cycle Four: Learning Together

4.5.1 Collective Group Session Four Overview

The fourth and final session was designed as both a closing and a grounding moment, giving participants space to reflect on the overall journey and to harvest what they had learned. The aim was to ensure all left with a sense of completion, carrying forward any insights, open questions, and new perspectives on distributed leadership.

The day began with a journey through three reflection tables, each representing one stage of the process. Visual anchors such as photos, quotes, and models helped participants revisit earlier sessions, while guiding questions, journaling, and dialogue supported deeper integration. Session One was recalled through a focus on finding questions and stepping into the journey. Session Two revisited the Cynefin framework, helping participants remember how they had navigated uncertainty and begun to act. Session Three reflected on actions and systemic patterns, using Estuarine Mapping to surface tensions and potentials.

After a break, participants returned to the collective Estuarine map from the previous session to consider how their perspectives had shifted, which system changes they hoped to see, and what messages they would want to communicate to policymakers. This step connected their lived experiences with wider systemic and policy conversations, strengthening their collective voice.

The session closed with a circle, where participants shared what they needed next, identified what required attention at a systemic level, and offered messages for the research process. The circle also served as a ritual of appreciation, honouring the effort, trust, and insight that each participant had contributed throughout the journey.

Table 7: Summary of Session Four Topics

- Return to guiding set of principles and roles
- Journey through table stations co-reflection
- Return to Estuarine Map
- Co-reflection and discussion
- Closing



4.5.2 Summary of Co-Reflections at Collective Group Session Four

The co-reflections in Session Four highlighted that distributed leadership is embedded in everyday practice, from planning and teamwork to family engagement and responsive care, and that recognising this distributed leadership is essential. Participants noted the importance of confidence, empowerment, and supportive structures such as mentoring, reflective spaces, and peer collaboration, particularly for educators who may lack formal qualifications but possess significant experience. Challenges were also raised around systemic constraints, including top-down policies, qualification structures, and limited time or resources for reflection and professional development. Recommendations emerging from the session focused on supporting distributed leadership at all levels, creating accessible training pathways, nurturing reflective and collaborative practices, and involving Early Years Educators directly in policy development to ensure relevance and equity (see more in Chapter Eight). Overall, the session reinforced that distributed leadership is already active across early years services, but its visibility, recognition, and support are crucial to sustaining and strengthening high-quality practice.

4.6 Summary

This chapter has shown how the four sessions acted as cycles supporting an inquiry of distributed leadership in early years services. Following the rhythm of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, each cycle combined collective inquiry with service-based experimentation, creating a spiral of learning and practice.

Across the cycles, managers, pedagogical leaders and Early Years Educators moved from building trust and formulating questions, to experimenting with new practices such as rotating meeting facilitation and peer mentoring. Confidence emerged as a key barrier, with participants recognising the importance of affirming everyday acts of distributed leadership and building momentum by initially engaging Early Years Educators who were most ready to embrace new approaches. By the later cycles, participants distinguished between quick, low-energy actions that could build momentum and longer-term ambitions requiring cultural and systemic shifts. Through inquiry, reflection, and action, participants began to embed it as a lived practice within their services, while also identifying the broader conditions needed for its sustainability.

5

Seeing Leadership and Distributed Leadership in Practice with Educators' Perspectives

5.1 Introduction

Alongside the four research cycles outlined in Chapter Four, an additional strand was introduced to bring the perspective of Early Years Educators into the inquiry. It was hoped that bringing in their perspective could enrich the understanding. For this reason, the team designed a complementary process of focus groups with Early Years Educators, offered at the close of the main inquiry. Participants from three services took part.

These focus groups provided Early Years Educators with their own space for reflection, enabling them to surface insights that might remain hidden in managerial dialogue. To do this, we used a systemic playful inquiry and constellation exercise, which drew together principles of systemic constellation work and a playful inquiry. This approach was chosen for its capacity to visual relational dynamics, to involve participants in embodied and creative reflection, and to draw on the implicit knowledge present in everyday practice.

5.2 Systemic Playful Inquiry and Constellation Exercise

Early years services can be understood as complex adaptive systems: unique, constantly changing, and shaped by relationships, spaces, and communities. By engaging in hands-on activities, Early Years Educators could access perspectives that discussion alone might overlook, integrating both rational and embodied forms of knowing. The method resonated with educators' daily practice, where play and visual representation are natural tools for learning. In one service, two separate groups built models, offering a chance to compare perspectives within the same service and to recognise both commonalities and differences in how distributed leadership was experienced.

5.3 Focus Group One: The "Gold" of Teamwork

“So I know we’re very, very lucky. And sometimes I think...we have gold. We do have gold because we have a really good workplace...We have gold, because we have a big space, but we also have gold because we have a good team, you know?”

In Focus Group One, two early years services engaged in playful inquiry to build models of leadership and distributed leadership in their settings. The activity created opportunities for Early Years Educators to represent this visually, share stories, and co-construct meanings around leadership and teamwork.

5.4 Focus Group Two: How the Children Lead the Way

“They (children) really run the service, more than probably anyone, because they are the life. They come in. They’re always laughing, they’re always singing, they’re dancing, they’re playing all the time. So naturally, when you enter the doors of [Early Years Service] you’re welcomed by the sound of children playing...basically they’re what makes the service.”

In Service Three, two teams engaged with the exercise to explore how they sense leadership and distributed leadership in their setting. Their models captured not just the busy environment but also the deeper insights into how relationships, resources, and community shape leadership practice.

Team One used their model to reflect on how daily life in the service is held together by routines, relationships, and shared resources. The entrance, artwork, and garden were not only representations of space but reminders that children’s experiences are shaped by both environment and connection. The sensory room emerged as a critical insight: it symbolised the importance of inclusion and the recognition that leadership involves creating conditions where every child can thrive. Early Years Educators described how this unique space supports their practice and allows them to respond to children’s needs, showing leadership as relational responsiveness rather than formal authority.





Team Two placed emphasis on the service as part of a wider community. Including neighbours and visitors pointed to leadership as something that extends beyond the service itself, into webs of trust and partnership. Their reflections highlighted communication and the sharing of resources as essential aspects of distributed leadership. They also pointed to the challenges of misunderstandings or tensions, showing that leadership is about how conflicts are addressed together rather than avoided. Here, leadership was seen as a practice of building and sustaining community, involving children, families, staff, and local partners.

Across both teams, the insights converged around leadership as relational, collective, and grounded in practice. Respect, trust, and the valuing of each person's strengths were central. Leadership and distributed leadership was understood as the everyday work of listening, sharing responsibility, and supporting one another. Vulnerability was reframed as an opportunity for dialogue and collaboration, particularly in moments of tension or in supporting children with additional needs.

Looking forward, participants imagined ways to make distributed leadership more visible, even suggesting it could be written into policy so that the collaborative ethos of practice is formally recognised. They spoke about confidence and self-belief as vital for Early Years Educators in their professional role, and about the importance of working in ways that build one another up.

Emerging Patterns Seen Through the Eyes of Early Years Educators

What emerged from the focus groups was a shared understanding of leadership as relational, collective, and context specific. The patterns below highlight recurring ways in which leadership takes shape, while recognising that each service adapts and evolves in its own way. This underscores the importance of policy frameworks that recognise and support distributed leadership as a key feature of quality practice in early years settings:

- **Pattern of Relational and Reciprocal Leadership**

Leadership was often enacted through relationships of trust and collaboration rather than formal roles. Early Years Educators described balancing responsibilities through rotation, listening, and mutual support.

- **Pattern of Inclusion and Agency**

Creating conditions where every child could thrive was central. Spaces such as sensory rooms, gardens, and play areas symbolised leadership as inclusive practice, while children's ability to take initiative in play demonstrated their agency as part of a distributed model of leadership.

- **Pattern of Community-Embedded Practice and Policy Recognition**

Leadership extended beyond the service into partnerships with parents, kitchen staff, Gardaí, neighbours, and visitors. Early Years Educators described teamwork and trust as their "gold" and expressed a desire for such collaborative practices to be formally recognised in policy, strengthening both professional identity and sustainability.

6

Distributed Leadership in Practice – An Analysis

This chapter brings the inquiry into the lived experience of leadership in early years services, with a particular focus on the enactment of distributed leadership. This section evolved from the transcripts of the four inquiry sessions. The intention here was to deepen understanding and allow insights to surface. A thematic analysis was undertaken of the transcripts and the following represents the themes created. Understanding distributed leadership conceptually is one thing; recognising how it is felt, negotiated, and enacted in the everyday work of early years services is another.

This process further highlighted that distributed leadership *emerges* through a living practice of relationships, decisions, and shared commitments to children and community. Across the services, it was understood as something enacted together, through everyday practices of trust, collaboration, and reflection. In this way, distributed leadership was a collective, relational process that stayed closely connected to the shared purpose of supporting children’s wellbeing and learning.

6.1 Putting Children at the Centre: Insights From Community Childcare Provision

Placing children at the centre of early years provision is foundational to quality care and education. When children’s needs and experiences are the primary focus, services are better able to respond to their social, emotional, and developmental needs, supporting both immediate wellbeing and long-term outcomes. Child-centred practice shapes decisions about routines, interactions, and the design of environments, ensuring that children’s perspectives and experiences guide educational and care priorities (CECDE, 2006; OECD, 2025).

In this inquiry, all participating services were community early years services i.e. non-profit, locally embedded, and structured to (re)invest income directly into children, families, staff and service provision. This distinctive context provides services with the flexibility and support to prioritise children’s needs without the pressures of profit, enabling prevention and early intervention, responsive care, and holistic approaches. Community early years services thus offer a unique lens into how child-centred practice can be enacted in practice and how this orientation shapes collective responsibility and leadership.

Early years services in this inquiry described the practical and relational ways child-centred approaches are realised: creating safe, stimulating environments, addressing social and emotional needs, and supporting children through transitions or challenges. Services also acknowledged that supporting families and Early Years Educators is integral to sustaining high-quality care but this was not always the case:

“It (early years services) is run like a business model. They [referring to policymakers] are looking at it as in...How do we get so many children into a classroom? You know, we want a workforce. So, you know, to get a workforce, to get women back in the workforce, what do we need? Oh, we need to have childcare places so it's childcare places. So, how do we do that? How can we fund them? Not looking at it from an early education perspective, you know, that's, you know, quality...But it's not, it's not about that, like all of us here, we're talking about, it's about the children, it's about the families, it's about quality, it's about leadership. They are the things that we are focusing on...We value that in its own right. And it's about valuing early education in its own way, as a time of development and education for children. And that's what it should be seen as.”

Child-centred practice is further reinforced through trauma-informed approaches, which shape how Early Years Educators engage with children, families, and colleagues. Trauma-informed care is a support for children but also described a form of everyday leadership within the service, as staff guide, model, and scaffold relationships in ways that promote wellbeing across the community:

“Even kind of the families you are working with, the teams you are working with and you are coming from that trauma informed lens. There is a leadership piece within that, I think that isn't acknowledged because your minding children or families or staff members or whoever it might be every day... trauma informed is a way of leading as well and supporting people.”

Particularly in community early years services, they described how they tried to meet the needs of children and the community:

“Like you have children who were in homelessness... we are also supporting the parents to kind of get through these changes in their lives.”

In this way, placing children at the centre does not sit apart from leadership, it embodies it. Child-centred and trauma-informed practice make visible the kind of leadership that is relational, distributed, and responsive to context. In community early years services, leadership emerged less from position and more from shared purpose, as educators collectively responded to the needs of children, families, and one another. This orientation highlighted that leadership, at its most meaningful, was not only about “*managing*” but about nurturing the conditions in which care, connection, and learning can thrive.

It was from this grounding, where purpose and practice meet, that the following sections turn to distributed leadership more directly, exploring how it is enacted in everyday practice, how policy enables or constrains it and how we might support it so we can have high quality child- and family-centred spaces of care and education.

6.2 Noticing the Enactment and Emergence of Distributed Leadership as a Living Practice

Building from the shared commitment to child-centred and relational practice described, the inquiry revealed how distributed leadership is nurtured within the everyday life of early years services. Leadership here was not understood as a fixed structure but as a **living practice**, continually co-created through relationships, dialogue, and shared purpose. What sustained this practice were the ways teams worked together: how they communicated, collaborated, made decisions, reflected, and created trust over time.

Across the inquiry, participants described distributed leadership as something that grows out of connection and mutual responsibility, rather than delegation or hierarchy. It was evident in moments when staff came together to plan, problem-solve, or reflect, as well as in being trusted to act with professional judgement.

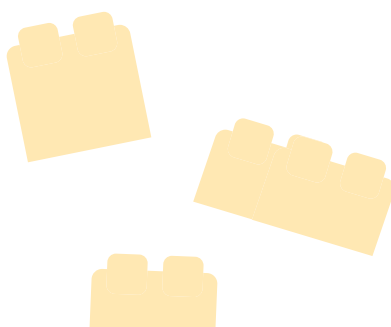
Rather than existing as a set of prescribed behaviours, distributed leadership was experienced as a pattern of interrelated practices that shaped the social fabric of each service. Practices of collaboration, communication, shared decision making, shared learning and reflection, empowerment, noticing and recognition, and trust were distinct yet interdependent. Together they created the conditions where leadership could be shared, adapted, and sustained. The following sections explore these practices in turn.

6.2.1 Collaboration

Collaboration emerged as a living practice through which leadership was continually enacted and renewed. It was something that unfolded in the everyday tasks of shared work, through connection, communication, and collective problem solving. Furthermore, coming together across roles enabled Early Years Educators to draw on one another's expertise, share learning, and build confidence in their **collective capacity**. Collaboration was about creating spaces of trust, reflection, and reciprocity where distributed leadership could surface through the act of working together toward shared goals for children, families, and communities.

Collaboration was grounded in communication and a shared sense of direction, which provided both safety and trust in collective work. As one participant reflected:

“I think it's important that everybody knows what's expected...there's a safety in having a plan...when you are working as part of a team, we all have a collective idea of what the plan is, that then you can trust people a little bit more, whereas when you are clarifying all the time, who's doing my job, you know. But I think it's important to have plans not too rigid.”



Beyond having a shared plan, participants emphasised that collaboration required intentional time and space for dialogue, especially when teams changed or new dynamics emerged. The process of collaborating was about **sensing and nurturing collective capacity** and recognising the strengths and rhythms within the team and adapting together. As one participant explained:

“When new teams come together, [they need] to spend time together...and people are working to their strengths, rather than feeling they have to, because not everyone’s memory is the best to hand out sheet paper every day...the little things that happen every day but to be mindful of them...how that fits for everybody in the team could be quite a complex process but look, we will get there through conversation some way. And like, willingness and building people up to realise that that is happening every day, no matter their role.”

A further dimension of collaboration concerned the conditions that support it. This referred to the organisational structures that make such connection possible. As one educator noted, the lack of time and space for genuine dialogue limited the potential to sense and strengthen the collective:

“Yeah, we just, we would love more opportunities to collaborate as a team. Because it’s such a big team, everyone works different hours. Everyone works, like some people work mornings, some people work afternoon, some are all day so it’s just to have that space to really collaborate, like our staff meetings are very structured and they are very much ‘This is what’s going on in the future. This is what we are looking at next time, and there isn’t really that space to communicate. It would just be nice to have those.”

These reflections demonstrate how collaboration serves not only as a mode of working together but as a means of *sensing into the collective* i.e. attuning to the capacities, needs, and potentials of the group as they evolve through relationship and shared purpose. Collaboration enacts and emerges from distributed leadership as an ongoing relational practice through which teams learn to sense, trust, and act from their collective capacity.

6.2.2 Communication

Communication emerged as a living practice through which shared meaning and **collective understanding** were continually formed and renewed. It was about how teams made sense of their work together i.e. how they listened, responded, and stayed connected. In this sense, communication facilitated trust, coherence, and a shared sense of direction across the service. Participants described how open, consistent communication created psychological safety, facilitating Early Years Educators to voice perspectives, share responsibility, and navigate the day to day together. Yet communication was also recognised as requiring time, attentiveness, and adaptability, particularly in large or changing teams. Whether through structured meetings, informal check-ins, or everyday conversations, communication grounded distributed leadership in lived relationships.

Participants spoke about communication as part of the culture of openness that underpinned everyday leadership:

“I suppose the culture of the organisation that’s been developed... in terms of that open communication piece, which we constantly do, the door is always open. I am always in and out of rooms. The team know they can come to me. The team knows they can go to each other. So it’s that open communication piece for us in the leadership role definitely helps, because people get to go ‘this person’s really good at that’, and then we are drawing on each other’s knowledge and experience. Like I would walk into the room and instead of [saying] ‘girls like, what happened with this?’, or ‘what happened before?’, or ‘what’s happening now?’ - it’s that acknowledgement of people’s knowledge and experience... So I suppose we always do it in staff meetings, planning time, end of year reflections, general conversations is probably the strongest piece on kind of just the practice of leadership... people naturally go to whoever they might feel might they have knowledge or experience or something or offering a bit of advice. It just happens on a daily basis rather than happening once a week or something... We are coming back to getting comfortable with the language again, and... looking for the team to recognise leadership and feeling empowered from it.”

This everyday flow of communication created space for shared learning and mutual recognition. It also encouraged reflection on how communication itself shapes relationships and professional growth:

“Communication was probably a key kind of aspect...we have to understand someone’s feelings. So I suppose it’s communicating stuff to staff, having a chat where they are at... it definitely made me and all of us much more reflective in our roles and as a person, I think. As well as reflecting on everything that you’re doing... how you give the information out, how you communicate it as well, or lack of communication as well. And I suppose to me, we’re getting back to reflection on, you know, how we speak to people, how we engage.”

However, it was also noted that digital communication could flatten nuance and emotional tone, making relational understanding harder to sustain:

“Sometimes for communication purposes, we have got Teams, and we are sending messages to different classrooms, and so you have got the message sent, but actually, how somebody’s feeling, all of that can be lost. And you are like, ‘oh, just, you know...’, they are like ‘that’s fine’, whereas somebody else can be like, ‘well that was a little bit blunt’. Whereas in that face-to-face space, you can see somebody’s maybe taking it slightly wrong. You are like, ‘oh yeah, I can check in with you’, and we can balance it out. So I think that’s been, you know, an important kind of part of that.”

Some also emphasised that presence, being physically and emotionally available, was a powerful form of communication in itself:

“Taking yourself out of the office and going into classrooms to go ‘how’s things today?’ Not even to communicate, just to go in and be there. You are present. People are more likely to maybe share something, or you will notice something... I think it’s valuable.”

Others described how intentional structures, such as planning time and mentoring, supported communication as a space for sensemaking and growth:

“We do a half an hour planning time where the teams get to come out and actually sit together without noises, because you never finish a conversation and that’s invaluable. Yes, it takes time... but that supports the team in their roles.”

Together, these reflections highlight that through conversation, presence, and shared reflection leadership was distributed, confidence was created, and **collective understanding** was sustained. In this sense, communication was not simply the exchange of information but a relational practice of meaning-making. One that wove the fabric of distributed leadership and enabled teams to sense, respond, and grow together.

6.2.3 Shared Decision Making

Shared decision making represented a core practice through which distributed leadership was enacted in daily life. It involved trusting educators to exercise judgement, contribute ideas, and take ownership of choices within their areas of expertise. Rather than being directed from above, decision making unfolded as a *relational practice of collective responsibility*. Shared decision making relied on trust, reflection, dialogue, and professional respect. Services spoke of “*putting decisions back on the team*” not as abdication of responsibility, but as an act of empowerment that cultivated confidence, autonomy, and mutual accountability. At the same time, participants acknowledged the importance of boundaries, structures, and ongoing dialogue to sustain coherence and support. Policies and procedures provided a foundation, yet teams emphasised the value of interpreting them collectively, exploring what they meant in context, and how they could best be enacted for the benefit of children and families. Through this, decision making became a site of relational learning: a living practice where leadership was distributed, responsibility shared, and collective capacity strengthened through reflection and mutual trust.

Bringing these ideas into practice, participants described how leadership was enacted through everyday decisions from classroom-level choices to policy interpretation. Decision-making was understood as something that happened *with* others, where reflection, trust, and dialogue created space for professional judgment to grow:

“That has given the team more leadership in their own role... because a lot of the decisions are put back on them... Not in a bad way but with stuff that their input is invaluable too... It comes back again to that kind of distributive leadership... To have their voice as well.”

This sense of relational responsibility required services to trust in the team's knowledge and capacity, recognising that leadership was distributed through everyday acts of judgement and care:

“I suppose it took a while for people to understand, like their voice and opinions are valuable...I do think it works well also from my point of view as a manager, I can't make every decision. It's absolutely impossible. So I trust the team to make that decision. You know, trust their knowledge and if there is an issue they can come and ask but like that I don't always have the questions or the answers.”

Across teams, this shared agency was reflected in how Early Years Educators engaged in joint problem-solving and decision-making, balancing autonomy with collaboration:

“Generally speaking, we kind of can get through the day or get through the weekend without needing too much support. The team feel like they can take the lead and make suggestions and it will be listened to. If you know something's not working right, or you know, I think that something could work better then when it's brought back to the management and, that it is always kind of listened to. We have discussed it then most times as part of the larger team. And then you kind of make a decision on, maybe we'll try it, maybe we won't, like, it might work or it might not.”

Shared decision-making also extended to how teams interpreted policies and procedures. Participants emphasised collective sense making, focusing on how to apply guidance thoughtfully within their own contexts while upholding their responsibilities to one another, rather than following procedures in a purely rigid way:

“And then, how can we support our team members to follow any policies, procedures and government guidelines. Policies are policies, as you said. They are there. However, to have the open-ended discussions where a team's going 'right what does this look like for us?', and 'how do we implement it?' Yes, we need to tick boxes certain ways. But how can we do that that would work best for everybody? And everyone kind of okay with it, or will say, actually, not for me thanks very much. I will step back on that, and someone else may step forward...So we just said, like it's more reflection, it's your knowledge, it's your experience, it's your understanding...how that fits for everybody in the team could be quite a complex process but look, we will get there through conversation some way.”

Finally, participants described shared decision-making as a reflective and developmental space. It was one that nurtured confidence in professional judgment while reinforcing the shared responsibility to act with integrity, especially in complex or urgent moments:

“We said how do we support leadership when all the decisions must be made? So we said that people would feel a sense of trust in their own ability to respond with the best intentions in that moment. So yes, there’s all the procedures and stuff, but in that moment you’re going to do what you can do. Yeah, and sometimes it might not be the procedural way of doing it, however it can be, you’re doing your best... And then people feel and develop a sense of trust in their own abilities before the urgent decision happens.”

Shared decision making emerged as a lived expression of reciprocal trust and reflective dialogue that enable teams to act collectively, navigate uncertainty, and continually learn from one another.

Shared decision-making was not simply about delegating tasks or distributing authority. It was a living expression of **collective and relational responsibility** i.e. a process of thinking and acting together that deepened trust, strengthened professional judgement, and sustained coherence within the team. In this way, decision-making became both a shared practice and a shared ethic: one through which distributed leadership was continually renewed in relationship, reflection, and mutual accountability.

6.2.4 Shared Learning and Reflection

Shared learning and reflection illustrate how teams learned from experience, supported one another, and built capacity over time. Reflection was not confined to formal supervision or evaluation but was woven into everyday conversations, staff meetings, and shared problem-solving. Services described how cultures of reflection created space for questioning, dialogue, and learning from day-to-day tasks in an ongoing process that strengthened trust, understanding, and professional growth.

Through these exchanges, teams engaged in **collective sensemaking**: exploring, interpreting and taking meaning from experiences together. Reflection was a shared, relational practice, enabling educators to co-construct understanding and act with greater confidence, particularly in moments of uncertainty or change. In this way, reflection became both a means of professional learning and a mode of sustaining collective responsibility within distributed leadership.



An iterative process of experimentation and feedback underpinned this sensemaking in practice. Early Years Educators described how reflection helped them build trust in their judgment, to act thoughtfully in the moment and to revisit those actions later with others to understand what could be learned:

“We want people to feel a sense of trust in their own ability to respond with the best intentions in that moment. So yes, there’s all the procedures and stuff, but in that moment you are going to do what you can do. Yeah, and sometimes it might not be the procedural way of doing it [but] you are doing your best...you have built that confidence and trust and empowerment in yourself to be able to address it the best way possible, and say, ‘Well, this is why I did x, y and z’...but and then, obviously there’s a way to do it, but being able to come back and say, ‘Well, this is why I did it’, and let’s look at it and let’s respond. So we spoke about having that reflective cycle in it...What could we do better?... it’s kind of always responding and reflecting, and not even by yourself. We are talking about, like reflecting with another person who is a safe space for you to be able to build up that knowledge and skills.”

This process of interpreting experience together was also seen as a way of shifting reflection from individual blame to collective learning and transforming decisions or challenges into opportunities for growth:

“Sometimes we can’t change anything, but it’s looking at, could we do a little bit better? Could we be sitting as a team and talking about that. Not, it’s all on the person. Because we had a bit of an event recently, and the person who was probably involved in that took all the blame. What could I have done better? Certain procedures might not have been followed, but that person didn’t know that. So it’s taking away that sense of guilt and blame. She did her best in the moment. Yeah, what more can you ask from somebody? It’s building up people and building up the leadership piece that when it gets there, there’s some tools in the pocket that they can feel that and bring it with them.”

Collective sensemaking was particularly visible in how teams reflected on crises or moments of pressure. Through shared discussion, they revisited experiences, identified what had worked, and built a shared understanding of how to respond in the future:

“So, we went how do we engage leadership in those moments of crisis? So we were kind of chatting about historically, you know, we come together as a team, and we used to share experience and knowledge to try and find a solution, and then we make a decision and an action plan for going forward. That’s kind of how we managed you know, previous crisis situations, what immediate steps restore leadership stability, so calmness, reassurance and guidance, because people sometimes need something to latch on to...sometimes it’s reminding people like you have done this before...it’s the sharing of knowledge, making space for that, developing a policy together, or reflecting on your policy, so that it’s a living document, and not just something that’s put in a little folder.”

Such reflective cycles also included pausing to make sense of events after they unfolded, facilitating calmness to become part of the learning process:

“When it’s over, if you sit down, you go, okay, what did we learn? But like, in the moment is not the time to be doing the learning. The moment, it’s the getting through it, and then afterwards you can sit down and go, Okay, we all did our very best in that situation. Next time what can we do?...How do we manage next time? What could we do if that would happen again?”

Reflection also outlined that deep sensemaking required honesty and depth, noted the difference between surface-level reflection and critical engagement with one’s own and others practices:

“I think sometimes when we reflect, maybe [we] don’t have the time to really tease it out, so you can kind of say, ‘oh yeah, yeah, I’m doing that’...You are kind of ticking those boxes mentally. But when you actually really kind of deep dive, and think I’m doing this how often? What’s the quality of what I am doing, you know? And I think to have time to really tease those things out. If you are really honest with yourself, you could say that’s one thing that I’m doing, really, really, really, well... but I do need to develop those skills a bit more. I think supporting staff around that.”

Finally, this was all sustained through peer support and relational scaffolding such as colleagues offering reminders, reassurance, and perspective when work became demanding or chaotic:

“It helps to have somebody there to support you and say, Actually, do you remember? We need to do this. Because you can get kind of get bogged down because you might have so many things happening in the past with children, certain families, that you are kind of like, ‘okay, I need to keep going, to make sure the children are safe and secure’. And we have our plan, we have our goals we need to meet. And then something might flip then and then there’s chaos going on in the class and then you just need someone to come in and say do you remember you’ve to do this this and this. Actually, it serves a purpose.”

Together, these accounts illustrate reflection as a process of collective sensemaking i.e. a relational practice that transforms experience into learning. Through honest dialogue, peer support, and shared inquiry, teams made meaning together, enhancing their practice and deepening trust. Shared learning and reflection thus cultivated the capacity to learn *with and from one another*, anchoring distributed leadership in ongoing inquiry, relationship, and shared purpose.

6.2.5 Empowering Through Recognition and Noticing

Distributed leadership was also enacted through the active recognition, noticing and validation of Early Years Educators. This involved recognising the strengths, expertise, and leadership capacities of all team members, not only those in formal management or leadership positions. Participants described empowerment as both relational and developmental - a process of nurturing confidence and professional identity through trust, recognition, and encouragement. Acknowledgement, encouragement, affirmation and validation from peers and managers alike was viewed as deeply motivating, reinforcing individuals' sense of belonging and competence within the team. This relational practice nurtured confidence, professional identity, and a sense of belonging, highlighting the importance of **relational recognition and belonging** in everyday interactions. Recognition extended beyond formal roles to include all educators, enabling distributed leadership to emerge across the team.

Many participants highlighted that not all Early Years Educators initially recognised their own capacity to lead. Everyday noticing, feedback, and encouragement were key to building confidence and professional identity. Some educators struggled to see themselves as leaders, and recognition helped them understand their potential:

“We looked at how the staff kind of receive what leadership is from the questionnaires that we gave them all and it was kind of hard reading in parts because it was nearly like board of management, management, pedagogical leader, room leader, AIM. They didn't see themselves as a leader at all.”

The importance of acknowledging positive contributions and recognition are happening was described, even though they might forget to notice them. Intentional acts of encouragement, feedback, and peer support helped build professional identity and confidence:

“I understand the importance of empowerment...and I think the team would get it as well if we had, say, supports in place to be able to kind of pick that out... And then we are talking about peer support as well because it's really hard to recognise that in yourself but you might recognise it in someone else. So if you had someone going “wow you handled that really well”, like within each room, to make sure that feedback was given...And I think it's not that it doesn't happen. I think we just forget it happens and to make people more mindful of that...It happens, but it doesn't happen. To put a room and a focus on that peer support I think would be very strong. Yeah it would be very beneficial for us as a team.”

Similarly, participants emphasised that not all individuals feel comfortable stepping into leadership roles, and recognition helps them develop confidence even if they are initially hesitant. Belief in their potential, reassurance, and relational support enable them to engage more fully:

“Just on the confidence bit, we have spoke about that, because some people don’t want to be in the same roles, yeah? That’s okay. Yeah, that happens. We have had, you know, a leadership role come up, and we are like, that person is made for it but there’s no interest. They don’t see themselves there. But I think having the conversation with them and telling them that you believe in them is enough. They mightn’t go there, but they hear it from you, which is really, really important.”

Recognition also extended to those whose contributions were quieter or less visible. Intentional noticing, encouragement, and peer affirmation reinforced relational belonging and highlighted the value of everyone’s work:

“And like we were saying, we have a lot of great staff that are amazing. They are quiet in the background doing. And it’s also, you know, you have got the very vocal staff that are really vocal so it’s acknowledging everybody for their worth and they bring to the team, you know? And I think that just noticing it saying it and asking them to share something. Like we have two staff members at the moment that are excellent at doing their books... So we were talking after doing the training maybe getting them to lead at a staff meeting and asking them would they like to do a presentation on their books and just to showcase what they do. They are brilliant.”

Furthermore, participants highlighted strategies for in-the-moment recognition and deliberate planning of leadership opportunities. These practices ensured that recognition was embedded into everyday work:

“What strategies can help us better highlight everyday leadership and leading?... I hope the peer in the moment recognition, like even just saying ‘oh thanks, you really took the lead in that’... So it’s not always just coming from management in the likes of supervision and stuff like that...more in the moment.”

By acknowledging strengths, affirming contributions, and providing encouragement, teams fostered a sense of professional identity and belonging. Recognition supported those who were less confident, those whose work was quieter or less visible, and those hesitant to take on leadership roles, ensuring that all contributions were valued. In this way, relational recognition and belonging were central to distributed leadership, not only enabling leadership to emerge across the team but also cultivating trust, confidence, and engagement. Through everyday acts of noticing and affirmation, educators experienced both empowerment and inclusion, highlighting how relational practices underpin the collective growth and resilience of the team.

6.2.6 Trust and Bonding

Trust and bonding among team members were described as central to the enactment of distributed leadership. This sense of relational cohesion - the emotional and ethical glue that holds a team together - enabled Early Years Educators to act with confidence, take initiative, and feel supported within their roles. Trust was experienced not just as an individual feeling but as a collective property of the team, shaping interactions, decision-making, and the culture of shared responsibility. Participants highlighted that when trust and mutual reliance were established, distributed leadership and collaboration could flourish naturally.

Trust was often linked to autonomy in practice, where Early Years Educators felt empowered to manage their classrooms without constant oversight. This freedom fostered confidence and a sense of shared responsibility:

“How do we currently recognise leadership and leading in day work I think comes a lot from trust, from the management team to the girls in the classrooms, like, there’s no micromanagement. We are very much kind of trusted to be running our classes the way they should be ran. And we don’t tend to like, obviously every now and again, you might have a question, how you are throwing back to the end as the manager like saying, ‘What do you think about this? Is this all right?’ Generally speaking, we kind of can get through the day or get through the weekend without needing too much support. The team feel like they can take the lead and make suggestions and it will be listened to.”

However, this also depended on interpersonal comfort and everyday opportunities for connection. Limited contact or routines that reduced informal interaction could weaken the bonds necessary for trust and open communication:

“It is bonding as well to be so comfortable and especially now because I could go all day and not really bump into anybody, like with the way our routine works. I won’t be in the rooms. I could go all day and not see anybody until like three o’clock, half three when I am going home as well. So that’s difficult as well for the staff then to feel I think comfortable enough to sit together and then say whatever it is, that you might have to say, if it’s something not working, I think people aren’t as comfortable then because they are not crossing paths with you constantly.”

Trust also manifested in the confidence that team members’ decisions would be respected, without unnecessary challenge or scrutiny. This created psychological safety and reinforced relational cohesion:

“Also just on that, having the kind of like the power to trust in making decisions...like nobody’s going to say, ‘well, why did you do that?’ ...when you have the trust there, that you are trusted, that you have made the best decision with what you had at the time... I think that also helps as well.”

At the same time, participants recognised that trust required careful calibration. Even within cohesive teams, some oversight and checks were necessary to maintain accountability and ensure tasks were completed:

“You are trusting people to do certain things. And I do want to get better at that...but if the buck stops at me like I need to know. So there’s an element of checking things. People are busy. There’s been sick leave, there’s been all these things going on, if things slip through the net. So who does that land on then you are in that bit more like, ‘I’m trusting you that that’s done’.”

Relational cohesion emerged as the foundation for trust and bonding within teams. It encompassed both confidence in colleagues’ competence and the emotional support derived from knowing one was valued and relied upon. Trust enabled autonomy, facilitated collaboration, and created space for distributed leadership to be enacted safely and responsibly. At the same time, relational cohesion was dynamic, requiring ongoing attention to connection, communication, and mutual accountability, highlighting its critical role in sustaining distributed leadership and collective capacity.

6.2.7 Summary

The following table summarises key themes from exploring the enactment of distributed leadership in early years services, highlighting how specific living practices supported the development of collective and relational capacities within services.

Table 8: Summary of the Themes Noticed in the Enactment of Distributed Leadership

Distributed Leadership Practice	Potential Emergent Capacity	Description
Collaboration	Collective Capacity	<i>Doing Together</i> - learning through shared action, coordination, and mutual support that build the team’s capacity to act collectively.
Communication	Collective Understanding	<i>Making Sense Together</i> - creating shared meaning in the moment through dialogue, listening, and relational awareness that sustain trust, clarity, and coherence in daily practice.
Shared Decision-Making	Collective Responsibility	<i>Deciding Together</i> - distributing agency and accountability through trust, dialogue, and mutual reflection on professional judgment.
Shared Learning and Reflection	Collective Sensemaking	<i>Learning Together</i> - interpreting experiences collectively through reflection, feedback, and dialogue to understand what happened, why it mattered, and how to respond or improve. This deepens professional insight and strengthens adaptive capacity over time.
Empowerment / Recognition	Relational Recognition and Belonging	<i>Seeing and Being Seen</i> - cultivating confidence and inclusion through affirmation, noticing, and valuing one another’s contributions.
Trust and Belonging	Relational Cohesion	<i>Holding Together</i> - nurturing the emotional and ethical bonds that sustain shared purpose, stability, and resilience.

6.3 Policy as Enabler and Policy as Constraint

While the previous section explored how distributed leadership is enacted, participants also situated this within a wider policy landscape that both enables and constrains their practice. National frameworks and quality standards were often viewed as important reference points offering structure, language, and legitimacy to leadership practice. Yet, participants also described a tension between policy-driven expectations and the relational, context-specific nature of leadership as it is lived in practice.

Some reflected that early thinking about leadership had been shaped by a “policy mindset” where formal frameworks, documents, and definitions were sought to guide implementation. However, there was a growing recognition that distributed leadership could not be reduced to what is prescribed in official documents. Instead, it was seen as something built through confidence, trust, and everyday enactment. One participant shared how policies and frameworks are valuable scaffolds, but the real work of leadership lies in helping Early Years Educators recognise what they already do, and supporting them to grow into leadership roles that feel authentic rather than imposed.

In this way, policy was both an enabler and a constraint. It provided legitimacy and direction but could also unintentionally narrow understandings of leadership and distributed leadership to formalised roles, titles, or compliance-based activities. The following sections explore these tensions in more depth, considering how Early Years Educators negotiated the relationship between policy and practice.

6.3.1 Finding the Balance Between Hierarchical and Distributed Leadership

The tension between hierarchical and distributed leadership reflected how policy could both enable and constrain leadership practice. National frameworks promote collaboration, shared decision-making, and professional autonomy, yet they also operate within accountability structures that position certain individuals as formally responsible. Participants described how this duality between the ideals of distributed leadership and the realities of regulatory and managerial responsibility shaped everyday enactments of leadership in their settings.

While policy discourses emphasised empowerment and inclusion, in practice leaders had to navigate compliance, oversight, and accountability demands that often reinforced hierarchical dynamics. As one participant reflected:

“Somebody needs to be like doubly sure that something’s happening. Like okay, yeah, you know have we got the referrals done? We have got this many children, who is doing what role? Let’s sit down and do planning meetings on who is on, you know what’s going on this week, who is doing what? And just, it’s a collaboration, but there might be somebody that just has to be the lead.”

This recognition did not signal resistance to distributed leadership but rather an awareness of the boundaries within which it must operate.

Participants described leadership as a layered process that shifts between management and collaboration depending on context. Policies and procedures such as appraisals, planning systems, and safeguarding protocols were seen as stabilising forces, ensuring consistency and continuity. However, these same systems could unintentionally limit opportunities for shared

leadership if they were interpreted rigidly or without room for relational negotiation. The challenge, therefore, was not the presence of policy but how it was lived and interpreted. In moments of uncertainty, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, leadership often became more top-down out of necessity. Yet these experiences also reaffirmed the importance of returning to trust, dialogue, and collective reflection once stability resumed.

Participants noted that understandings of leadership were often shaped by traditional hierarchies, where authority and decision-making were associated with formal titles or managerial positions. This tendency reflected both cultural norms and policy language that can inadvertently reinforce positional understandings of leadership. For distributed leadership to take hold, services described the need to continually challenge these assumptions - to make visible the everyday, relational forms of leading that exist across the team. Yet this was not about rejecting hierarchy altogether. Participants recognised that there are moments when leadership must be more directive, particularly where accountability, safety, or regulation are concerned. The task, therefore, was to work within this tension - balancing the flexibility and shared agency of distributed leadership with the structural responsibilities required by policy and governance.

In this way, participants demonstrated how distributed leadership and hierarchical responsibility coexist - not as opposites, but as interdependent aspects of leading in Early Childhood Education and Care. Policies can provide the scaffolding for distributed leadership, but their enabling potential depends on how flexibly and relationally they are enacted within the realities of everyday practice.

6.3.2 Implicit Leading and Explicit Roles

The introduction of formal leadership roles within early years settings highlighted the tension between *implicit leading* (the everyday, relational enactment of leadership) and *explicit roles* defined through policy. While national frameworks sought to strengthen professional recognition by introducing titles such as “lead educator” or “pedagogical leader,” participants described how these designations could both enable and constrain distributed leadership in practice.

In some ways, formal roles provided clarity, structure, and recognition. Yet it was also found that once leadership was assigned to specific individuals, colleagues began to step back, viewing it as “not my role.” This shift risked undermining the very ethos of collaboration on which distributed leadership depends. Participants shared how leadership in practice rarely aligns neatly with job descriptions but rather emerges through relationships, competence, and context.

The formalisation of leadership was also seen to reduce flexibility in how teams could respond to interpersonal dynamics. Some participants described how rigid eligibility criteria, such as qualification requirements, meant that leadership roles could not always be taken on by those best suited to the task or most trusted within the team. This sometimes meant that roles were filled out of compliance rather than relational fit, constraining the adaptive, responsive nature of distributed leadership.

In long-established teams, leadership was often fluid and situational, with members stepping in and out of leading depending on their strengths and the needs of the moment. Personality, confidence, and past experiences shaped how comfortably people assumed leadership. Leaders therefore needed to balance structure with flexibility, recognising when to guide and when to step back. As one participant reflected, policy could provide a “safety net,” but the real work lies in how that structure is lived - supporting autonomy while maintaining stability.

Building confidence in *implicit leadership* was seen as central to sustaining distributed practice, particularly because formalised roles could unintentionally intimidate educators or make them doubt their leadership capacity. Participants described supporting colleagues to notice and name their everyday acts of leadership - organising, problem-solving, mentoring - often without explicitly labelling them as such. This helped Early Years Educators recognise that distributed leadership was already embedded in their practice. As one participant explained:

“Some people feel more comfortable in each of those [roles]. Other people, not so much. The confidence speaks to people’s experiences... there is possibly a lack of a perceived reward or monetary reward because...you are trying to say to people like, the reward is that you get to be a really good leader, but you’re not able to say to somebody like, but I can pay you for this, or I can give you time off for this. And for some people, you know, it’s seen as this is extra work for me. And what am I getting out of that then?”

Participants highlighted how limited support and the absence of tangible rewards sometimes made leadership feel like additional work rather than a shared endeavour. Experienced Early Years Educators without higher qualifications also felt overlooked despite their deep expertise and influence within teams (see next section).

Furthermore, some people felt that it was not what they wanted:

“Every classroom can’t operate without that leadership and they are leading their team, their children, parents, students. That’s happening all the time. But I think when you formalise that, which is what we have been all asked to do, when you go to Pobal [Government Department] and they are saying, you know, you need a room leader. That’s the disconnect, isn’t it? And Early Year Educators are going ‘hang on a second, I see myself as an educator. I didn’t want this kind of like leader role. What does that mean?’ And then it’s just happening. It’s just the formalisation of it.”

Ultimately, it was emphasised that leadership and distributed leadership is already happening across all aspects of early years practice. The challenge is not to create leadership through titles, but to recognise, value, and nurture the leadership and distributed leadership that naturally occurs within teams. When policy frameworks are interpreted flexibly and relationally, they can legitimise this existing capacity rather than constrain it.

6.3.3 Recognition of Prior Experience and Higher Level Qualifications

A tension between recognition of practical experience and formal qualifications in shaping leadership within early years services was identified. While some Early Years Educators held extensive experience and expertise, policy frameworks tied leadership roles and associated funding to higher-level qualifications, such as a degree. This meant that highly capable Early Years Educators could be overlooked for formal positions despite their proven competence, undermining confidence and motivation. One participant described this as a “*huge bugbear*,” noting that an experienced Early Years Educator with a QQI level six qualification in Early

Childhood Education and Care might be told, *“I know you have all this knowledge and experience; however, in the eyes of the government you can’t be the lead educator.”* This was viewed as a “disconnect” between policy and practice where *“on paper they’re not the lead educator because you can’t get extra funding”* which to services felt “ridiculous”.

This emphasis on formal qualifications had multiple consequences. First, it risked demotivating natural leaders who lacked the specified credential but demonstrated strong relational and pedagogical skills. Their confidence could be “knocked,” even though they were effectively leading in practice. Second, it created a disconnect between the formal assignment of roles and the collaborative dynamics that already existed within teams. In long-standing services, leadership and distributed leadership often operated fluidly, with staff sharing responsibility and supporting one another, regardless of their official title. Introducing tightly defined roles limited flexibility to assign leadership according to interpersonal fit and team dynamics, sometimes forcing Early Years Educators into positions they were unprepared for or discouraging others from stepping up.

It is important that we do not undermine the benefits and importance of higher level qualifications, however, participants emphasised that recognition of prior experience was crucial, both to validate existing expertise and to sustain distributed leadership. Staff needed acknowledgement of the skills and knowledge they already brought to the role, not just the credentials they held.

One participant reflected:

“There are such natural leaders that don’t necessarily have a degree, but they are amazing at what they do, and they are not necessarily being recognised because of that.”

Another highlighted the inequity of valuing qualifications over practical knowledge and experience developed over time:

“It’s this piece of paper that says, ‘Yeah, I went and got my degree,’ but if you’re demonstrating your knowledge every day in the classroom, that’s not valued.”

It is important that we do not undermine the benefits and importance of higher level qualifications, however, participants stressed the importance of supporting those who have been in the field for a very long time and have a wealth of knowledge, acknowledging that transition to a degree-led workforce should not leave such educators behind. Practical strategies emerged to address these tensions. Teams introduced collaborative planning time, where educators could share leadership responsibilities regardless of formal designation. Continuous professional development and credit-recognition systems were suggested as ways to translate accumulated experience into formal recognition, facilitating Early Years Educators with experience but not the formal qualification the ability to demonstrate their leadership capabilities without repeating foundational coursework. Participants argued that such approaches could both strengthen individual confidence and maintain a culture of distributed leadership, ensuring that titles complemented rather than constrained the natural enactment of leadership.

Finally, participants highlighted that having a degree does not automatically equip someone to lead effectively, and practical experience is essential:

“So we have students and they are in their final year placement... and you are a bit like, ‘oh how have you made it to final year and you don’t know how to do the practical stuff’. So they can name off every theory that’s going because they have got this great ability to memory learn. But in terms of actual relational skills, it’s lacking. You are like, ‘Okay, you are going to get to the end of this and going to be a lead educator. Like I have got my degree, but I haven’t got a breeze how to manage a classroom environment and work with parents’.”

Ultimately, participants stressed that leadership in early years services should not solely be determined by academic credentials. Distributed leadership is relational, context-dependent, and often already embedded in everyday practice. Policies that rigidly prioritise formal qualifications risk overlooking the expertise, judgement, and collaborative capacity of experienced Early Years Educators. A more equitable approach would combine formal recognition of higher level qualifications, continuous professional development (cpd) and acknowledgement of existing skills and experience. This would support all staff to lead confidently while sustaining the fluid, collaborative dynamics essential to distributed leadership and high quality early childhood care and education.

6.3.4 Values Driven and Child Centred v’s Market Driven and Metrics Based

Child-centred practice in early years services is shaped by the tension between relational, values-driven approaches and policy frameworks that emphasise economic metrics, efficiency, and accountability. Participants described how systemic structures, funding models, and inspection regimes can both enable and constrain high-quality education and care. While policies can provide recognition, stability, and funding, they often prioritise workforce participation, affordability, and occupancy rates over the developmental and relational needs of children.

Several participants noted that children and families whose circumstances do not fit dominant policy narratives, such as parents not in paid employment, can be underrepresented or overlooked in policy and funding decisions. One participant explained that policy often amplifies the voices of those seeking childcare primarily to work, while families with complex needs or less visible circumstances may remain unseen:

“If you are a parent and you are coming from that, I need child care so I can go to work. They are the voices that are heard. That’s what’s being heard all of the time. ‘I need to go to work’, ‘I need affordable childcare’, ‘Oh, it’s costing me 2000 euro a month to send my child to creche’. That’s the voice that’s shouted out all the time. It’s not the community, the families that are maybe not in employment and are staying at home and need lots of support...their voices aren’t here too. They are not equal to paid employed parents.”

Community early years services occupy a distinctive position within this landscape. As non-profit, locally embedded organisations, they can focus on relational and values-based quality without the imperatives of profit. This structure enables sustained attention to early intervention, trauma-informed practice, and holistic family support. Participants highlighted that such child-centred approaches are inherently linked to leadership: staff enact distributed leadership daily by guiding relationships, modelling supportive practices, and responding flexibly to children's and families' needs. In this sense, quality and leadership are inseparable.

However, participants also emphasised the constraining impact of policy when it privileges metrics over relational outcomes. Services described the challenge of balancing compliance with policy requirements while sustaining high-quality, child-centred practice. Funding and inspection systems rarely reward work such as early intervention or trauma-informed care, even though these practices significantly affect children's long-term outcomes.

“And we are early intervention now as well. Like, I mean, since AIM came on board, we really are so if you were to do a piece on that in years to come, like we are saving so much for later outcomes for children, but earn no recognition for it at all. We have AIM we do our best with it. You know, again, that's something that's thrown at you, but with little support. But I do think we are doing really early intervention with so many children on like we have no recognition for that either, but we recognise it within ourselves...children going through interventions and needing assessments and all that, we have done a lot of the work before they get to primary school.”

Furthermore, top-down expectations for paperwork, formal qualifications, or specific inspection targets can inadvertently devalue the expertise and contributions of skilled educators, making them feel “less than” when these metrics do not reflect their practice. Participants highlighted the importance of valuing the everyday leadership embedded in relational work:

“Why should we make someone feel less than? If they bring all these skills every day, we are all learning from them, but because the list says this is what you should do, the person feels less than.”

The contrast between community early years services and policy-driven, market-oriented frameworks illustrates the dual role of policy where it can enable quality by providing structure, funding, and professional recognition, but it can also constrain it when rigid metrics or economic imperatives overshadow developmental and relational priorities. As one participant reflected, aligning quality assessment with the real work of Early Years Educators requires attention to the practical realities of leading, supporting children, and responding to families, not just compliance with metrics or curricula.

“It's bringing it back to children, like that's the thing...the child is at the centre of this. That's what support should be...You know, we have decided that we have a national curriculum framework. We have ways to inspect for that. All those things are there, but...if people peel away some of that and get back to the real root. I think there's space for change.”

Ultimately, participants emphasised that sustaining high-quality, child-centred practice depends on policies that recognise and support relational leadership, practical expertise, and values-driven approaches and this is different to other “managing”:

“Managing a traditional business model is very different to how you manage an early years setting. Yes, there’s a business piece to it, but that’s not, you know, that’s not your primary focus. You know, for any of us here, it’s our families and children.”

The practical constraints of policy were further highlighted in discussions of funding and administration. While some services benefit from structural flexibility, many are limited by rigid funding rules and bureaucratic systems. Participants described situations where funding rules and administrative systems restricted their ability to respond to children’s and families’ needs:

“If you look at the department, the importance of that piece around staff meetings, non-contact time, finance, supervision, then turn around and go, Oh, we have given you funding through core funding. They haven’t...they will come back and go, Oh, we gave you money in core funding...or like to support families. They will say, oh, like, because our families are quite vulnerable, Oh, we gave you money in another scheme, which is Equal Start. But you didn’t like because they dictate what you can do with that. And then you are held by constraints all the time...there’s all these things that you are trying to do to build capacity and to build your service, and it’s just they don’t listen.”

This combination of prescriptive funding and limited responsiveness can leave managers feeling powerless, as their professional judgement and ability to adapt to local needs feel overridden:

“It’s top down. Everything’s top down....they do kind of do consultations with some groups. They generally do that with forums... And I think then that’s demoralizing for the sector...as a manager, then you are making decisions and like, ‘Nope, no, no, no, no, no, you can’t have that either’. So it’s just this frustration that builds in your soul, because you go in every day with the best intentions to support children and families and the team and each other within the team, and then the computer says, no, which is really frustrating. It really is, and I can understand why it gives people burn out and they leave the sector, and that’s the reality of what’s happening. It is what’s happening. And I don’t blame people for walking away, like I know many people have walked away and went to other jobs because they couldn’t handle the burnout anymore, because it’s top down, and they are not listening.”

Sustaining high-quality, child-centred practice depends on policies that recognise and support relational leadership, practical expertise, and values-driven approaches. Community early years services demonstrate that when structural flexibility aligns with supportive policy, Early Years Educators can lead collaboratively, focus on children’s wellbeing, and maintain the relational and developmental quality that lies at the heart of Early Childhood Education and Care provision.

6.4 Learning to Lead From Within Complexity

What became evident in the inquiry is that complexity is not a problem to be solved but a reality to be navigated. Early years environments involve emotional intensity, unpredictable behaviour, changing family needs, and evolving team dynamics. Participants moved from trying to manage complexity through control, towards responding to it through awareness and collective judgement. Rather than searching for the “right answer”, teams learned to see what actions became possible through attuned relationships, routines and boundaries. This aligns with complexity-informed approaches such as Estuarine Mapping, where the focus is not on finding fixed solutions but on adjusting enabling constraints and reading the flow of situations. Educators intuitively practised this: introducing small stabilising elements during transitions, mapping pinch points across the day, or temporarily shifting roles to reduce emotional overload. Leadership here became responsive and adaptive - less about giving instructions and more about creating conditions for good practice to grow.

6.4.1 Being Comfortable with Complexity

As the inquiry developed, a significant realisation emerged among participants: leadership in early years practice cannot be separated from complexity. Rather than seeking control, certainty, or step-by-step solutions, educators described learning to lead from within complexity by staying present to what is unfolding, making sense of shifting dynamics, and acting with relational awareness. Leadership, as they experienced it, was not something added to practice but something that grew from practice itself. One participant captured this transformation vividly:

“*Mine is probably being comfortable in chaos and comfortable in complex. I think that’s the biggest thing for me, is that, you know, it probably links to the image of that whole idea of like a herd moving around, and you can just step back, you can see giving yourself the space to just pause and look and reflect and see the patterns and see the things that are already there. Instead of have to do, have to do, have to do, hamster on wheel and you lose sight of things. Just pausing really gives you time to see the work.*”

This shift towards stepping back, noticing and working with patterns reflects a deeper understanding of leadership as a sensemaking practice rather than a procedural or positional one.



6.4.2 Estuarine Mapping: Navigating the Tensions

As the inquiry unfolded, participants became increasingly aware of the tensions embedded in their daily practice. There were not simply problems to solve but ongoing realities to work with rather than to fix. These tensions between policy demands and relational practice, time and quality, responsibility and capacity could not always be resolved, but they needed to be acknowledged, understood, and navigated.

The Estuarine Mapping process offered a practical way to do this. It supported participants in exploring the actors, constraints and affordances shaping their work, while mapping what drains energy and time and what can be shifted with small, achievable actions. This created space for collective sensemaking, revealing where immediate, low-effort changes were possible and where longer-term, systemic shifts would be needed. Through this shared inquiry, participants moved from feeling pressured by tensions to working productively within them.

In the upper right part of the Estuarine Map issues were represented that are high in both time and energy cost and therefore difficult to change quickly. Participants placed Post-It notes naming systemic and structural forces that shape their daily reality on the map. These forces sit largely outside their immediate control. These reflected policy-driven pressures, governance structures, and workforce conditions that require sustained, long-term change rather than quick solutions.

Policy and Regulatory Demands

- Child Safeguarding & policy requirements
- ECEC Framework
- Inspection Process (*repeated several times*)
- Funding + Process

Participants described these as essential but energy-intensive elements of the “system”. They recognised their importance but also noted how compliance requirements can become bureaucratic and draining, pulling time away from relational work with children and families.

Workforce Challenges

- Staff morale/recognition/roles
- Qualifications for roles vs experience
- Staff experience & qualification
- Staff/child ratios
- Early Years Educators with Level 4, 5, or 6 qualifications on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)



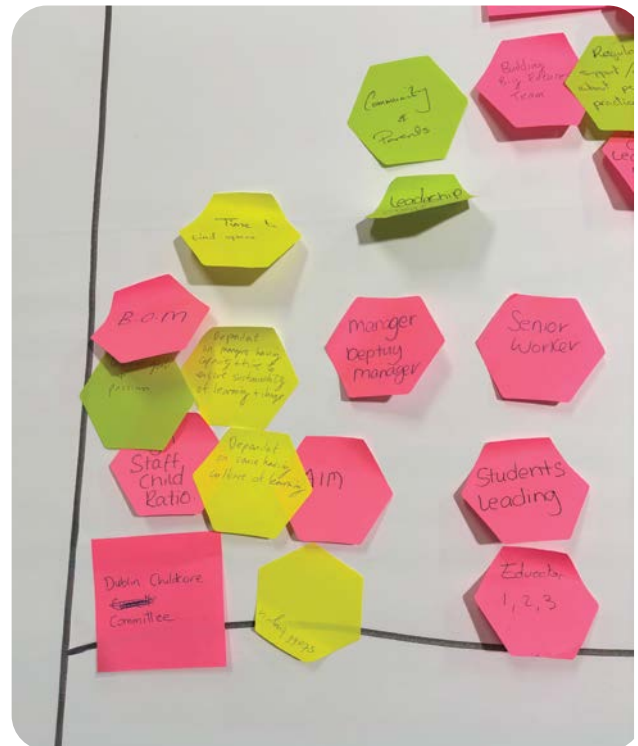
These notes revealed significant tensions around workforce policy: qualification requirements versus practical expertise, recruitment pressures, role expectations, and emotional fatigue. Participants highlighted that while workforce policies aim to professionalise the sector, they often undervalue lived experience, reduce flexibility, and add emotional strain to teams already carrying heavy workloads.

In the lower left part of the Estuarine Map areas were represented that are low in time and energy cost to influence. Participants identified actions and relationships that were within their immediate sphere of control. These were practical, people-centred shifts that could strengthen leadership and improve daily practice without requiring major system change. Many of these related to how teams organise themselves, collaborate, and build capacity from within.

Some of those were:

- Senior Worker
- Students leading
- Manager/Deputy Manager
- Leadership
- Educators
- Dublin Childcare Committee

These notes reflected locally achievable leadership and distributed leadership development creating small opportunities for staff to step into responsibility, mentor others, or lead parts of practice. Participants noted that distributed leadership can grow through everyday actions, such as delegating roles, rotating responsibilities, or enabling student educators to lead small projects. These shifts were seen as low-cost but high-value, strengthening team ownership and confidence. Participants saw relationships as a powerful lever of change. These were doable, relational actions that helped increase support, create trust, and improve practice without heavy bureaucracy. It made tensions visible, manageable, and shareable, turning them into collective, navigable challenges rather than isolated frustrations.



6.5 Summary

This chapter highlights that sustaining distributed leadership in early years practice depends not only on the actions of individual leaders but on the wider systems and cultures that enable them to lead. Reflection, professional learning, and relational trust emerged as essential conditions through which leadership can be shared and sustained. The implications of these findings, and the supports required to embed them across the sector, are explored further in the recommendations that follow in Chapter 8.

7

Service Level Reflections and Learnings

7.1 Personal Reflections From the Services: Leadership and Distributed Leadership in Practice

This chapter presents the reflections of participants following the conclusion of the inquiry sessions. All participants were invited to share both their personal learnings and the next steps they had taken since the inquiry formally ended, as well as their experiences of the process itself.

Each service contributed a separate reflection, which are presented here as Reflection One through Reflection Six, offering a rich and nuanced view of leadership and distributed leadership in context. Reflection Seven is provided by the Preparing for Life Early Years team in terms of what the inquiry meant for them in regards to the support they provide to early years services.



7.1.1 Reflection One

To begin with we were unsure of how a co-inquiry project would work, what questions we would develop for our service? How would it align with others involved? We took a leap of faith knowing that leadership in the early years is a hugely important and relevant topic, and any research on this would only be beneficial. What we didn't know was just how much it was going to shape our future thinking and planning.

In an increasingly demanding sector having time to truly reflect on 'big picture' topics can almost feel impossible. The day-to-day practicalities of children, families, and other stakeholders have a way of diverting our attention. But it is important to pause and seek time out to dedicate to developing quality in the early years.

In the beginning we developed the question 'How can we strengthen distributed leadership, so every team feels confident in their role?' and while at the end of the sessions the question remained the same, the viewpoint was different. We thought we were looking for policies and frameworks but realised while these are important there can be unintended consequences if too tightly constrained.

Leadership requires confidence and empowerment. By using leadership language and drawing attention to leadership already in action it reminds people of the strengths they already possess. Leadership is not new; quality educators are already leading curriculum, parenting supports, student training, health and safety etc. What is new is the title of 'lead educator'. This has led to confusion and stress for many in the sector. Some feel undervalued, some feel ill prepared for this new title, and others feel like leadership in any form doesn't relate to them at all.

The activities around the Cynefin framework and the framework of time versus energy really spoke to us. Maybe we need to reframe how we think about leadership, it's not a 'one size fits all' situation. With limited time and resources, we needed to think outside our usual box.

The biggest take away for us was that we need to make more time for in-person communication. We need to use our energy on the things we can change and support. We need to look at room leaders in the context of the whole service, not just their room. Who is ready for the role? Who is required for the role but doesn't feel ready? Who isn't ready but has strengths that lie elsewhere? How do we support those who don't feel ready or confident? By looking across the diverse range of skills and needs it will hopefully allow us to delegate time and resources more appropriately as we enter the school year 25/26.

A big thank you to all involved. It was wonderful to be a part of a group so open to discussion and reflection.

We look forward to seeing the report in November.

7.1.2 Reflection Two

When thinking of positive learning experiences in early years we tend to focus on those experienced by the children and the support these experiences provide to the holistic development of the individual child.

Although continued personal and professional development is very much a part of the Early Years Educators job description, we as early years providers often overlook this. Without it, we would not be able to provide a high quality service to the child and families. As a manager, this project was hugely important to support the team, as a team and as individuals.

During the Nurturing Leadership project, the sessions were thought provoking, encouraging deep conversations of both professional and personal views, options and perceptions. Through brainstorming with the collaboration of other early years professionals, was shared ideas, shared actions and critical thinking. These sessions provided the time and a safe space for reflection and growth while providing opportunities to review individual services, in particular enhance leadership in a way that would suit our own service's goals and needs.

What resonates most for me on a personal level, was the inclusion of all the team, when, after each session, I could bring back valuable insights from these sessions to start the conversations to review and reflect together, in a non-judgemental way. It examined the understanding of what "leadership and leading" actually meant to each of the team. This process encouraged team building, identifying, acknowledging in a respectful way, the individual unique skills each member of the team bring to the service. It helped to clarify and highlight the unique leadership role we each play. I believe it injected a sense of equality and pride into the team as a whole and a realization for each member of that team, personally and professionally, of the important role each play in ensuring our service provides a nurturing environment to the children, families and also to each member of staff.

Positive learning experiences are a shared privilege for all in early years. All the team in [our] Early Education Centre are very grateful to Preparing for Life for providing these experiences through our own journey in early years.



7.1.3 Reflection Three

Feedback on Leadership

- Previous to the Nurturing Leadership project, the manager of the centre understood the process of distributed leadership and that all members of the team had a leadership element within their role. For the educator team, they did not identify leadership within their role and believed that leadership was for the managements team only. The hope for the centre was that all the team understood, identified and felt empowered in their role and to take on additional leadership roles. This approach worked well for our team as it was a peer support approach from one educator to another to identify leadership within the role of an Early Year Educator.
- From engagement with the project, it was highlighted that all roles within the Early Education and Care environment have an element of leadership. From the sessions this was fed by an Early Years Educator who shared the process of the training in staff meetings to support the remaining team to identify leadership within their role.
- Both of us enjoyed that different roles were involved in the training as it helped us both to understand the role of the other people within the service. The activities helped focus each individual on their role in leadership and gain perspective of other roles and their leadership. It also helped individuals feel comfortable in these differences within roles in relation to leadership. It also highlighted that services need a distributed leadership approach to operate successfully as each individual takes their fair share of leadership responsibilities.
- It strongly identified that communication between a team is key and that trust is also required for a successful approach and team.
- After the training the team now identifies and acknowledges when they take a leadership role and there has been an improved sense of empowerment in the area of leadership.

Things to think about:

- All members of our team were unable to access the leadership project due to constraints.
- All participants on the Nurturing Leadership project were from community-based services. We both wondered how this would look in other services.

7.1.4 Reflection Four

Completing the Leadership project helped me to rethink how I view leadership—not as a top-down role, but as a collaborative, shared responsibility across the team. What stood out most about this project was its emphasis on shared leadership—the idea that effective leadership in Early Education doesn't rest on one individual, but is distributed among educators who bring diverse strengths to the table. The project encouraged us to reflect on how leadership can be fostered at all levels, creating a culture where every team member feels empowered to contribute to decision-making, problem-solving, and continuous improvement. It became clear that leading with empathy, openness, and mutual respect creates stronger teams and, ultimately, better outcomes for children and families.

7.1.5 Reflection Five

I feel that the Early Years Co-Inquiry provided us all with a powerful and reflective space for Early Years Educators and managers to come together and explore the meaning and practice of leadership within the sector. Through discussions and shared experiences, the project highlighted that leadership is not limited to formal titles, but is present in daily practice—through teamwork, planning, family engagement, and day to day interactions with both staff, children and parents.

What I have taking from the sessions is the key points to include the need to recognise and support leadership at all levels, build confidence among practitioners—especially those with less experience than others or without higher qualifications as this can sometimes hold staff back if they see others with higher qualifications. To provide accessible pathways for professional growth. We discussed the disconnect between policy and practice, the challenges of systemic constraints, and the need for inclusive, practitioner-informed approaches to training and funding.

The project reinforced that effective leadership requires time for reflection and collaboration and called for greater recognition of the expertise already thriving in early years settings. Overall, the session empowered me it validated what I already do, and it has given me the opportunity to lead the way and look at ways to continue to empower others.

7.1.6 Reflection Six

Reflections and Personal Insights - Nurturing Leadership Project 2025.

Leadership as Everyday Practice

Through the project, I began to notice just how much leadership is woven into the everyday flow of our service. For example, when I guided a staff member through managing a challenging situation with a parent, it was about offering calm support, making decisions together, and helping someone feel confident in seeing themselves a leader rather than taking over the situation for that member of staff.

Confidence and Finding My Voice

Through this project, I've seen how my experience and day-to-day problem-solving are forms of leadership. Sharing ideas in the sessions and hearing them valued by others gave me a real boost of confidence, and I've started to speak up more in team discussions and planning meetings.

Mentoring and Mutual Support

I've also experienced the power of mentoring. It reminded me that leadership isn't about doing everything yourself but creating space for others to grow. I've since made more effort to encourage newer staff, asking for their ideas and reassuring them that their perspective is valuable.

Policy Disconnect and Reality on the Ground

One frustration we all shared in the project is how far removed policy can feel from the reality of our work. For example, funding constraints. I've learned that leadership also means voicing these challenges honestly, advocating not just for children and families, but for the workforce itself.

The Importance of Time and Space

One of the most valuable parts of this project was simply having time and space to reflect. In a typical day, we are so focused on children and families that we rarely stop to think about our own growth. Having time to explore what leadership means under the surface with other managers and leaders from other services, was ideal to being able to focus what leadership means in our service.

7.1.7 Reflection Seven (Preparing for Life Early Years Team)

Reflecting on the Nurturing Distributed Leadership Inquiry, the Building Big Futures programme reaffirms its central aim: to enhance pedagogy, enrich learning environments, and promote children's health and wellbeing through approaches grounded in Aistear, Síolta, Infant Mental Health (IMH), social and emotional development, and trauma-informed practice. Leadership has emerged as a crucial part of this work. It shapes how services engage with continuous professional development and learning, and how enhancements and new approaches in practice are embedded in ways that can benefit children and families.

One of the strongest insights from the inquiry has been the importance of culture within early years services. Where managers nurture an environment of openness and shared responsibility, Early Years Educators feel more confident to take initiative and leadership is more visible across the team. At the same time, Building Big Futures recognises that while distributed leadership is vital, the responsibility for supporting quality, pedagogy, and governance cannot rest solely on creating new roles or formal positions; it must also reflect the realities of everyday practice and what is feasible on the ground. Sustaining change requires both leadership that is relational and shared, alongside clear structures that guide, support, and maintain the overall quality of the early years service.

The inquiry also highlighted how distributed leadership can help services navigate the realities of practice while staying aligned with national priorities such as First 5 Strategy, Aistear, Síolta, and Nurturing Skills. Collaborative, reflective approaches that are attuned to relationships and responsive to the needs of communities requiring support are essential for ensuring services respond effectively, while remaining strengths-focused and inclusive. Distributed leadership supports teams to work collectively and adaptively, creating environments where children's health and wellbeing are prioritised.

Looking ahead, Building Big Futures sees real value in developing opportunities for Early Years Educators and managers to explore distributed leadership together. By building confidence, encouraging reflection, and celebrating the leadership already present in daily practice, the programme can nurture environments where leadership is genuinely shared, sustainable, and centred on what matters most: the experiences of babies, toddlers and young children.

7.2 Shared Pathways Forward

The personal reflections shared by services and the Preparing for Life Early Years team add depth to our understanding of what resonated for each service during and after the inquiry.

These reflections raise important questions for the future. How do we create more opportunities for early years services to step back from the daily pressures and reflect on the "big picture"? How can leadership roles be defined in ways that empower rather than overwhelm? And how do we make sure that time, energy, and resources are used where they can have the greatest impact? These questions keep the conversation open, reminding us that distributed leadership is not a destination but an ongoing journey of learning and adaptation.



8

Recommendations

8.1 Supporting Distributed Leadership in Early Years Services

Recommendation One:

Create Reflective Spaces for Leadership Practice

Leadership reflection should extend beyond pedagogy to include space for Early Years Educators, pedagogical leaders and managers to consider their own leadership identity, values, and practice. Dedicated time for reflection, both individual and collective, enables leaders to connect with their values, recognise their strengths, and lead more intentionally (OECD, 2025; CECDE, 2006).

In this inquiry, participants described this reflective process as both validating and transformative. Engaging in dialogue and inquiry about leadership enabled participants to reconnect with their professional values and team priorities, supporting confidence in their leadership identity even amidst daily operational demands. Structured opportunities for reflection, particularly within communities of practice where educators share experiences, challenges, and strategies, supports both individual and collective leadership capacity. This aligns to the European Commission (2024) report where it is emphasised that effective leadership develops “*from within*” services, through continuous reflection, dialogue, and engagement with children, families, and staff. Embedding structured reflective spaces is therefore essential for fostering leadership that is responsive, adaptive, and grounded in local context. The European Commission (2024, pg 13) suggest this is key “*in order to be effective for improving quality*”.

Recommendation Two:

Invest in Mentoring, Coaching and Peer Learning

Mentoring, coaching and peer learning create the conditions for leadership to be shared across services, rather than held solely by managers. By supporting Early Years Educators to learn from one another, take initiative, and share responsibility in everyday practice, these approaches strengthen relational trust, build collective capacity, and embed distributed leadership in daily routines. Context-based professional learning that values lived experience and in-service reflection enables educators to step into leadership roles confidently, reinforcing both individual growth and the team’s shared leadership practice. Participants in this research recognised the power of local, relational forms of professional learning. Mentoring within teams, collaborative service level inquiry-based approaches, and in-service reflection were all described as meaningful ways to nurture leadership and confidence (OECD, 2025; CECDE, 2006).

Recommendation Three:

Provide Equitable Access to Professional Learning and Development and Recognise Expertise Beyond Qualification Metrics

Access to ongoing professional learning and development remains uneven across the early years sector. Smaller run services often face structural barriers such as staffing shortages, lack of cover, or absence of time in lieu for training, limiting participation in professional development initiatives. Ensuring all educators can engage with these opportunities is essential for sustaining distributed leadership, as it builds collective capacity, confidence, and shared responsibility across teams. Without equitable access, leadership capacity remains uneven, perpetuating a two-tier system where some services advance while others struggle to develop their leaders.

This tension reflected a wider frustration that professional learning was increasingly being shaped by compliance rather than capacity building. The value of formal qualifications is recognised, noting that degree-level study can strengthen theoretical understanding, reflective practice, and the professional identity of Early Years Educators. However, concerns arose when qualification metrics became the sole measure of expertise or leadership potential. By tying funding and leadership eligibility to degrees alone, current policy devalues practical wisdom, demotivates skilled educators, and weakens distributed leadership cultures. Participants described how funding rules, qualification pathways, and rigid programme structures often excluded the very Early Years Educators who were natural leaders. The shift of qualifications to full-time day courses, for example, was seen as particularly damaging: it reduced options for those who needed to train while working. The lack of an evening option limited the sector's ability to grow its own leaders. Participants in this research called for a more inclusive and context-sensitive approach to leadership development and learning that values practical experience and knowledge. It was suggested that national investment is needed for flexible training models, recognition of prior experiential learning, and blended pathways that combine formal qualifications with practice-based assessment (Magee, 2023; DCEDIY, 2022).

This approach preserves the relational depth, community knowledge, and practical competence essential to early years services. It creates inclusive leadership pathways while still raising professional standards but without displacing experienced Early Years Educators who carry much practical wisdom and insight.



Recommendation Four:

Nurture Relational Cultures of Leadership in Policy and Practice

Distributed leadership thrives in cultures grounded in trust, reflection, and shared purpose. To sustain such leadership, both local services and national policy environments must nurture conditions that value dialogue, collaboration, and mutual recognition, ensuring that leaders are supported to lead *with* others rather than *over* them (OECD, 2019; Nadeem, 2024). Participants in this research highlighted that building a sustainable culture of leadership (and in particular distributed leadership) in early years practice, requires aligning policy with the everyday realities and experience of Early Years Educators' work.

At the service level, this means protecting reflective spaces, developing open communication, and recognising relational expertise as a core dimension of leadership. At the same time, participants described how policy ambitions around professionalisation and quality, though well intentioned and important, could sometimes narrow what was valued in practice. Leadership was frequently tied to formal qualifications or prescribed roles, leaving less space to acknowledge the relational and practice-based leadership that occurs in everyday interactions. These dynamics were compounded by feelings of exclusion from national policy processes. Participants noted that while policies shape their daily work, Early Years Educators and managers working directly with children were rarely consulted in their development. This limited sense of "voice" reinforced a top-down culture, where policy tended to be imposed rather than co-created, leaving those on the ground feeling disempowered and disconnected from decision-making.

At the sector and policy level, this calls for aligning organisational and governance systems with relational values. Participants in this research described experiencing current policy often privileging managerial or compliance-based understandings of leadership, narrowing what is valued and who is heard. A relational approach to policy, building on the work of Lejano and Kan (2025) and Lowe and Smith (2024), recognises that policy lives through relationships. It is interpreted, adapted, and made meaningful through the everyday interactions of early years services with Early Years Educators, families, and communities. To move towards a relational policy culture, Early Years Educators and managers must be directly involved in the development, consultation, and evaluation of policy. Involving early years services "at the table" supports policies being relevant, credible, and grounded in lived experience, helping to close the gap between policy intention and practice reality. Furthermore, the European Commission (2024, 2025) highlights that leadership is most effective when it bridges top-down policy and local practice, translating macro-level strategies into responsive, context-sensitive actions. Leaders act as mediators, enabling policy to be co-created "from the ground up" while sustaining high-quality pedagogy and workforce development. Multi-level coordination across providers and community services strengthens relational leadership and ensures policies are enacted collaboratively rather than imposed.

Ultimately, aligning policy and culture around relational values strengthens the wellbeing of educators and, in turn, the children and families they serve. Participants in this research emphasised that when Early Years Educators are trusted and supported, they are better able to care for and lead for children, families, and communities articulating that child-centred policy is inseparable from Early Years Educators wellbeing. Policy would then act less as a controlling mechanism and more as a supportive framework that enables professional judgement, shared responsibility, and distributed leadership. Embedding relational principles in policy (listening, trust-building, co-creating, and responsive dialogue), creates policies that are lived, not just enforced.

Recommendation Five:

Create Learning Systems That Recognise Complexity in Early Years Policy

Early years services' practice cannot be supported by a linear system that can be controlled by checklists or predetermined procedures. The nature of this work is relational, dynamic, and shaped by the real lives of children and families. Some challenges are complicated and as such they can be addressed through expertise, training, and clear procedures (e.g. curriculum planning, safeguarding protocols or funding administration). But many of the realities educators face are complex being rooted in trauma, different family circumstances, poverty, cultural diversity, or additional needs (Bartlett et al., 2015). These situations change over time, involve uncertainty, and do not have one "right answer." They require collective judgement, dialogue, and ongoing learning, not fixed solutions.

Complexity and Sensemaking frameworks can help both policymakers and practitioners to see and respond to complexity more effectively. Below are some examples that could be supportive:

1. The Cynefin Framework distinguishes between clear, complicated, complex, and chaotic situations, helping leaders choose appropriate responses rather than defaulting to compliance or control.
2. Estuarine Mapping identifies tensions, enabling constraints, and shifting conditions in a system. It supports policy-practice alignment by making space for local adaptation rather than enforcing rigid implementation.
3. The WRASSE Framework⁶ encourages reflective decision-making by helping teams consider risks, resources, relationships, and ethical responsibilities in real time.

When used together in dialogic spaces, these frameworks can support collective sensemaking - a process where policy and practice stay connected through shared reflection, feedback, and learning.

Embedding these processes within a wider learning system (Ison, 2010) could facilitate early years policy to evolve as a living, adaptive system rather than a static set of directives. Learning systems bring together policymakers, practitioners, and communities to inquire, reflect, and adapt collectively and as such treating governance as an ongoing process of learning with and living a policy together. By cultivating feedback loops, reflective practice structures, and dialogue spaces between local settings and national policymakers, policy becomes more responsive, relational, and grounded in lived experience. This in itself could also be viewed as modelling distributed leadership particularly at a policy level. By sharing decision-making, reflecting together, and valuing the insights of all involved locally and nationally we support one another's learning and enact leadership collaboratively. Distributed leadership is therefore a practice early years services and policy makers are enacting and creating together across the systems.

6. <https://thecynefin.co/weaving-risk-and-strategy/>



Afterword



The Waggle Dance - A Metaphor for Distributed Leadership

As this report comes to a close, we return to a metaphor that seemed to capture the spirit of what unfolded throughout this inquiry. Like bees communicating direction and purpose through the waggle dance, leaders and educators continuously orient one another within complex and changing environments. Each movement, pause, and signal contributes to shared sensemaking - a living exchange of information, trust, and energy.

In this way, distributed leadership can be understood as a rhythm of communication - a collective dance of noticing, responding, and adjusting together. The metaphor of the bees reminds us that leadership is not held by one, but enacted through many; that purpose is sustained through connection; and that even in the smallest gestures of coordination, something larger is always being woven.



A Bee Colony

Although the queen bee appears central, she does not control the hive's daily functioning. Forager bees coordinate through the waggle dance, which signals the direction and distance of food sources. Crucially, younger bees learn from older ones by observing and imitating the length and angle of the dance, gradually refining their accuracy. This form of peer learning mirrors how new practitioners in early years settings develop by observing colleagues, modelling practice, and receiving guidance.

Another vital mechanism in the hive is **pheromone signalling**. Worker bees release pheromones that inform the queen of the colony's needs, such as whether more brood is required or when to swarm. In this way, the queen is not issuing commands but is instead **responding to information from the colony**.

This resonates with leadership in early years settings. Managers cannot micromanage every detail of practice; instead, they rely on **feedback loops from staff**, daily observations, professional dialogue, and reflections, to understand what is happening and to adjust direction. Just as the queen's role is shaped by signals from the hive, effective leaders listen to and are guided by the collective knowledge of their teams.

Anthro-Complexity: Humans are Not Bees

Yet, while the hive is a useful metaphor, **humans are not bees**. Bees coordinate through instinct and chemical signals, whereas humans operate within **anthro-complexity** (Snowden). In human systems, decision making and adaptation are shaped by **stories, communication, and meaning-making** rather than pheromones or purely instinctive behaviours.

In early years practice, practitioners share narratives about children's learning, reflect on experiences, and negotiate meaning with colleagues. These stories create coherence, support professional learning, and allow the team to respond flexibly to uncertainty. Unlike bees, humans embed values, pedagogy, and emotions in their interactions, making narrative and communication the cornerstone of distributed leadership.

Balancing Hierarchy and Distribution

Both bee colonies and early years settings balance **hierarchy with distributed action**. The queen fulfils an essential reproductive role, just as managers carry statutory responsibilities. But neither controls every micro-decision. The hive thrives because of the **shared intelligence of worker bees**, and early years provision succeeds because practitioners' everyday interactions and feedback shape leadership decisions.

Conclusion

The bee colony offers a powerful metaphor for distributed leadership: waggle dances show peer learning, pheromones demonstrate feedback loops from workers to the queen, and the hive's resilience depends on collective action. In early years education, this translates into practitioners learning from one another, providing feedback to leaders, and sharing responsibility for quality and care. However, unlike bees, humans operate in anthro-complex systems, where communication, narrative, and shared meaning drive collaboration. Together, these perspectives highlight how distributed leadership, grounded in both structure and dialogue, enables early years settings to be adaptive, resilient, and child-centred.

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Appendix One:

History of Leadership and Distributed Leadership for Early Years in Irish Policy

The table below presents a chronological overview of leadership in early years policy in Ireland, from the Child Care Act 1991 to recent developments such as the Nurturing Skills Workforce Plan 2022. It highlights how the focus of leadership has shifted over time, from managerial oversight to distributed and collaborative approaches across teams and communities.

Table 9: History of leadership for Early Years in Irish policy

Name of Document	Type of Document	Key Focus	Context to Practice of Distributed Leadership
Child Care Act 1991 (Pre-School Services) (No. 2) Regulations 2016	Regulations	Improving the quality of childcare, the safety and well-being of children, and the professional development of staff. The regulations address areas such as qualifications, child protection, health and safety, and the overall environment in which care and education are provided.	Leadership was largely framed as a management responsibility to ensure statutory obligations were met, rather than as something shared across teams.
Síolta (2006)	The National Quality Framework	The framework provides a national benchmark for quality in early childhood settings, ensuring consistency, accountability, and continuous improvement while supporting children's holistic learning and development.	Introduced quality standards that encouraged managers to foster a culture of quality across their settings, hinting at shared responsibility but still largely manager-led.
Aistear 2009 (Updated 2024)	The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework	Focus on children's learning and development outcomes through curriculum planning and delivery.	Focused on curriculum and pedagogy, where distributed leadership became more evident through collaborative planning, reflective practice, and shared responsibility for children's learning.
Pobal Compliance Inspection (2010)	Inspection	Ensuring that Early Learning and Care (ELC) services receiving government funding are complying with both regulatory standards and funding requirements.	Emphasising accountability of service providers rather than collective or pedagogical leadership. At this stage, leadership could be described as centralised—primarily managerial and regulatory in nature.

Name of Document	Type of Document	Key Focus	Context to practice of Distributed Leadership
National Síolta Aistear Initiative (NSAI, 2013)	National Initiative	Mentoring and guidance to embed quality and curriculum frameworks.	Further embedded professional dialogue and capacity-building, with leaders and Early Years Educators working together to implement frameworks. This period represents the first move toward distributed leadership, as quality and pedagogy required more collaboration than compliance alone.
The Quality Development Service - Better Start (2015)	National Initiative	On-site mentoring and strengths-based practice support (via DCEDIY, Pobal, Better Start).	Introduced mentoring and coaching that explicitly encouraged collaborative leadership.
Access and Inclusion Model (AIM, 2016)	National Initiative	Ensure that children with disabilities or additional needs can fully participate in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) services.	Promoted values-based leadership, encouraging teams to adopt inclusive practice collectively.
Tusla Early Years Inspectorate Regulations (2016)	Legal Inspection Framework	Regulatory standards ensure that early years services in Ireland comply with statutory requirements for safety, quality, and governance under the Child Care Act 1991. They are designed to safeguard children's welfare while promoting consistently high-quality early learning and care.	Continued to hold managers accountable but also began assessing how whole teams engaged in curriculum and reflective practice. It is desired that early years teams are sharing responsibility for governance, safety, and quality, ensuring that statutory standards are met consistently and collaboratively.
Early Years Education-focused Inspections (EYEI, 2016)	Focused Inspection	Promoting high-quality, reflective, and collaborative early childhood education by assessing how leadership, pedagogy, and team practices combine to enhance children's learning.	Continued to hold managers accountable but also began assessing how whole teams engaged in curriculum and reflective practice. EYEI inspections highlight that high-quality provision is achieved when responsibility, and reflective practice are shared across the entire team.
Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines (2016)	Guidelines	Creating and promoting an inclusive, equitable, and diverse environment within organisations	Shared leadership ensures diverse perspectives are included across staff teams.

Name of Document	Type of Document	Key Focus	Context to practice of Distributed Leadership
LINC Programme (2016) & LINC+ CPD (2019)	CPD	Develop inclusion and pedagogical leadership skills at Level 6.	Enabled Inclusion Coordinators—who were not necessarily managers—to take on leadership roles within teams. During this phase, leadership evolved from being manager-only to role-differentiated and shared, particularly in relation to inclusion and quality improvement.
First 5 Strategy (2019–2028)	National Strategy	Strengthening leadership capacity and workforce professionalisation.	Positioned educators as professionals with agency in decision-making, embedding distributed leadership at a system level.
National Participation Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision Making (2021)	National Framework	Ensure that children and young people are meaningfully involved, listened to, and have their views acted upon in decisions that affect their lives across all levels of policy, services, and community.	Recognised children's voices, viewing them as active participants in leadership and decision-making. Highlights shared responsibility, where decision-making power is spread across adults and young people, recognizing children's voices as integral to collective leadership and action.
Nurturing Skills Workforce Plan (2022–2028)	National Strategy	The Nurturing Skills plan focuses on creating a highly skilled, professional early years workforce by embedding leadership, collaboration, and continuous development across all levels of practice.	Reinforced distributed leadership by focusing on professionalisation, career pathways, and capacity-building, and by recognising leadership at all levels, not only among managers. At this stage, distributed leadership is fully embedded, framed as a system-wide practice across educators, managers, inclusion coordinators, parents, and even children.

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