



Positioning theory as a framework for understanding the facilitation of professional development for educational leaders

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Abstract

The article addresses the problem of providing in-service education within government-led reform initiatives yet enhancing professionalism in the Early Childhood Education and Care sector. The study was conducted during policy-mandated reform in Australia to investigate effective ways to support educational leaders in centres rated as not meeting the national quality standard. Data were derived from a larger project designed as a formative intervention and funded by the Australian Research Council. In this article, we focus on the positioning of the educational leaders over the course of the intervention as they endeavoured to develop workplace practices. We found that the participants' status as leaders of low-rated centres was featured in the way they positioned themselves initially. How the researchers responded has been highlighted in our analysis and, we argue, repositioning these participants as professionally capable and responsible was essential to the success of the intervention for them. This article contributes an original methodological approach to researching individual learning within the collective processes of workplace practice development and provides an understanding of the reform process from the perspective of 'working-towards' educational leaders.

Keywords Educational leaders · Change laboratories · Positioning theory · Professional development

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The promotion of quality early education is a contemporary focus for government-led reform in many countries (Gupta, 2018; Nuttall et al., 2022; Qi & Melhuish, 2017). In order to raise the quality of provision across the sector, improving in-service education of the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) workforce is a key strategy. This article addresses the problem of providing in-service education within government-led reform initiatives at the same time enhancing professionalism in the sector (Brown & Weber, 2016; Cottle & Alexander, 2012; Fenech et al., 2006; Martin et al., 2020; Mistry & Sood, 2012; Molla & Nolan, 2019). We draw from a 3-year study involving educational leaders of early childhood centres that had been rated as *below* national quality standards by their national regulatory body, the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). The study was conducted during 2018–2020 in response to ongoing policy reform in Australia. Policy-mandated reforms had been introduced from 2008. In 2009, the National Quality Framework (ACECQA, no date) was introduced. This was an ambitious policy reform for early childhood education and care in Australia. It saw the introduction of a set of National Quality Standards, the first ever national curriculum for early childhood, as well as a national assessment and rating system to regulate and govern the sector. Compulsory designation of an educational leader for every registered centre was introduced in 2012.

The study was framed using cultural psychology, where consciousness is understood to be culturally mediated (Vygotsky, 1978). Data were generated from video-recorded interactions between leaders from centres that had received 'working towards' ratings and the researchers. To explain, under the National Quality Framework, all early childhood centres are assessed and rated against the National Quality Standards (ACECQA, 2017). The outcome of this rating will see a centre receive a rating of either exceeding, meeting, working towards, or significant improvement required. All the centres in this study had received a rating of working towards in Quality Area One—Educational Programme and Practice. The interactions took place during a series of professional development workshops led by the researchers for all participants, and in interviews before and after the workshop series that were conducted with pairs of leaders at their centres. In this paper, we focus on the positioning (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) of the educational leaders within these interactions. We differentiated positioning in storylines of educational leadership practice, and positioning in storylines of merit and esteem and were able to trace changes in positioning over time. Our analysis indicated that the researchers' actions repositioning participants as professionally capable and responsible were foundational to the success of the formative intervention. This article contributes an original methodological approach to researching individual learning within the collective processes of workplace practice development and an understanding of the reform process from the perspective of the 'working-towards' educational leader. The study offers evidence of potential barriers to the educational leaders' professional learning and shows how they could be overcome from a cultural psychological perspective. The findings are important for professional development providers, policy makers and early childhood educational leaders.

The role of educational leader, often referred to as pedagogical leader or teacher leader in the literature, is one of the most important leadership roles for quality early

education provision and is distinguished from managerial roles (Hujala et al., 2016). Internationally, the importance of the early childhood educational leader has been reflected in policy and research, the role entailing educational design of programmes and the professional development of other educators, i.e. their colleagues (Alameen et al., 2015; Berger, 2015; Bøe & Hognestad, 2017; Carroll-Meehan et al., 2019; Cartmel et al., 2013; Colmer, 2017; Colmer et al., 2014; Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011; Henderson, 2017; Krieg et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2020). Stated in the National Regulations governing ECEC, the approved provider of an education and care service must designate in writing, a suitably qualified and experienced educator, co-ordinator or other individual as Educational Leader at the service to lead the development and implementation of educational programmes in the service (Government of New South Wales, 2023). Although the role may have existed in some form in the early education sector long before the government policy directive, mandating the role in Australia elevated concerns related to workforce shortages (Fenech, et al., 2006, 2008; Sumsion, 2005). Furthermore, the role description is brief, allowing early childhood settings to make their own decisions about who is 'suitably qualified' and consequently the nominated person 'might be an early childhood teacher, a manager or a diploma qualified educator within the service' (ACECQA, 2017, p. 87). The rationale for this decision was based on the known workforce shortages of early childhood teachers trained at Bachelor's or Master's levels, and who could fill the role of Educational Leader (Sumsion, 2005).

Providing educational leadership-focussed teacher education both at the initial and in-service stages is now required to meet the needs of the early education sector. Consequently, educational leadership has been the focus of a growing number of studies world-wide (Alameen et al., 2015; Berger, 2015; Bøe & Hognestad, 2017; Carroll-Meehan et al., 2019; Cartmel et al., 2013; Colmer et al., 2014; Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011; Krieg et al., 2014; Henderson 2017; Nuttall et al., 2018) and whilst the role has become more defined as a result, there is still a contemporary need for theorisation of the process of professional development, particularly for in-service learning, as concurrent with practice development (Henderson, 2017; Nuttall, et al., 2018). This article traces the positioning of in-service educators who had become the designated educational leaders of an early childhood education and care service whilst learning to lead quality practice development.

In this article, we focus on the positioning of educational leaders in an in-service learning context. Data were derived from the 'Learning-rich leadership for quality early education' project, conducted in 2018–2020. The aim of the project was to theorise the transformation of Australian early childhood educational leadership for quality improvement in early childhood education and care provision and the results have been published elsewhere (Nuttall, et al., 2023, 2024; Martin et al., 2020; Henderson et al., 2022, 2023). Leaders from centres that had been rated as not yet meeting the National Quality Standards were invited to participate in the study. Framed using Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), tools for understanding leadership in systemic terms were offered to participants in a series of Change Laboratory workshops by the workshop facilitators, who were also the researchers. The participants applied these tools to their work contexts incrementally whilst receiving guidance from the researchers over the course of the project. Pre- and post- interviews

with participants from each centre (10 centres and 20 participants in total) were audio recorded and transcribed. Workshop interactions were video-recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were analysed using positioning theory. The question guiding the analysis was, how did the educational leaders position themselves and what changes in their positioning were evident over time?

In the first section of the article, following a review of the literature on in-service education for early childhood educational leaders, we begin by briefly summarising the principal claims of positioning theory that originated in the work of philosopher Rom Harré (1927–2019). After introducing the positioning triad (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999), the study's research design and methods are described. Together the three constructs of the positioning triad—action, positioning, and storyline—enable an analyst to gauge the function of what people say and do (*action*) in situ. In transcribing data from the workshop series and the pre- and post-interviews, we paid attention to words and non-verbal aspects of communication. In our analysis, we identified *storylines* by approaching the data teleologically, that is, by interpreting what was said or done according to what an interaction was directed towards, asking, what are they working on? We coded for *positioning* by highlighting direct references (to people, roles, and duties) and using features of language known as grammar of agency that can index relative responsibilities and duties, such as pronouns, modality, and tense (Martin, 2020). Next, we present the results of our analysis that distinguished storylines with a *practical* or *expressive* orientation (Harré, 1979). Practical storylines were oriented towards the educational leaders' professional goals, such as the improvement of the educational program at their centres. Expressive storylines were oriented towards their moral standing in relation to their professional community including the facilitators, the other participants, and the early education sector. The discussion focuses on how the identification of practical and expressive storylines allowed for nuanced explanations of the changes evidenced in the educational leaders' positioning, that is, their professional learning. Finally, we consider how positioning theory could inform the facilitation of professional development for vulnerable professionals, concluding with implications for in-service education and policy.

The need for educational leadership in-service learning

A shortage of suitably qualified educational leaders in early childhood education and care has been an international problem for some time (Fenech et al., 2006; Macpherson, 2010). This resulted in a substantial investment by Australian governments to increase the number of Bachelor-qualified early childhood teachers (Productivity Commission, 2011). However, significant challenges to achieving targets for qualified staff were forecast (Fenech, et al., 2006, 2008; Sumsion, 2005) and the criteria for appointment to the Educational Leader role was changed to 'a suitably qualified and experienced educator, co-ordinator or other individual' (ACECQA, 2017). In Australia, 8.7% of services on average nationally across Australia's seven states/territories were operating under an ongoing or temporary licence waiver (ACECQA, 2019) at the time of this study due to their inability to meet the requirement to have

a qualified (Diploma-level or higher) educator on staff. Nearly three times higher than the national average was the Northern Territory, with 25.4% of its centres operating under a waiver (ACECQA, 2023). In this context, indications that the educators nominated to take on the role of educational leader felt ill-equipped to do so (Rouse & Spradbury, 2016; Sims et al., 2015) were not surprising.

Although in-service education provided a potential solution to the problem by supporting in-service educators to become educational leaders (Cartmel et al., 2013; Henderson, 2017; Macfarlane & Cartmel, 2012; Nuttall et al., 2018), inequitable access to formal and local professional development opportunities was the reality in a sector historically under-resourced. Like many other countries, providers in Australia ranged from community-based, not-for-profit early education and care collectives to privately owned and school-owned single centres and franchises or corporate providers. These different providers serve diverse communities, and particularly in Australia, the remoteness of a centre could be a limiting factor in access to professional development for an educational leader. These realities bear out when the policy silver bullet of educational leadership was not reflected in assessment and rating. When this project began, in 2018, an ongoing concern was the percentage of registered centres still failing to meet National Quality Standards (i.e. rated ‘working towards’) ranging from 79% (in the Northern Territory) to 20% (in Victoria). This article investigates the process of in-service professional learning of educational leaders, with a particular focus on those experiencing professional vulnerability due to a ‘working towards’ rating at their centre.

Positioning theory

Positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) has its roots in the cultural historical psychology of Vygotsky (1978). In this article, we employ conceptual tools from positioning theory to examine the realisation of socio-psychological phenomena and for understanding these phenomena as instantiations of broader cultural templates (Harré, 1979, pp. 37–43). This combination allows researchers to examine and understand genesis and change on micro- and macro-psychological scales (Harré, 1979, pp. 309–384). Socio-psychological phenomena on a micro-psychological scale (in interactions) are understood to be in a dialectical relationship with macro-cultural psychological phenomena such as the constitutive effects of government policy and truth regimes (see Nuttall et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2020). The study of interaction can therefore provide insight into the relationships between individual learning and large-scale policy reform processes.

The positioning triad: action, positioning, storyline

As in other approaches to discourse analysis in cultural psychology (e.g. Wood & Kroger, 2000), positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) provides tools for the analyst to gauge the function of *action* in situ. The function of action, including speech-action, is called an *act*. In this study, interaction is defined as an

exchange between people. The context of interaction is conversation, the flow of daily life. An act is grounded in the history of what has been said and done before and directed towards some kind of future, immediate or long term. An act is realised when a response has been received. Acts contribute to *storylines*. The concept of storyline captures the tendency for coherence between sequential acts, contributing to a conversational flow. People not only take notice of action (words, gestures and other signals), but also make interpretations at the level of storyline when working out how to respond in an interaction. However, the analyst must be open to multiple and competing storylines as people interpret and respond to each other. Storylines can unfold unproblematically as persons contribute expected responses according to known cultural templates (known as ‘performative positioning’). Operating storylines may also be rejected, and the introduction of an alternative or competing storyline in a conversation is known as ‘accountative positioning’ or ‘repositioning’. *Positioning* is a person’s psychological location in a storyline. How a person is positioned opens up and limits their options for action to maintain coherence. Likewise, the analyst is alert to the dynamic nature of positioning. Renegotiating one’s positioning in a conversation also changes the storyline. Action, positioning and storylines are interdependent. Taken together, they provide a comprehensive analytic framework for the study of interaction.

Research design and methods

The professional development context

Participants were invited from centres rated as below the National Quality Standards in Australia. Twenty participants from 10 centres engaged in six workshops designed to introduce systems theory, specifically Cultural Historical Activity Theory (Engeström, 2015), and support them in applying the new theory to improve educative practice at their workplaces. Figure 1 shows the CHAT concepts used by the facilitators to represent systems of practice in an early education setting. In CHAT, workplace systems are understood as networks of mediational means, each mediating the realisation of all others in the totality of realised or concretised practice. The formative intervention involved workshops, known as Change Laboratories in CHAT, which were designed for generating and evaluating practice to enhance the achievement of workplace outcomes (e.g. Engeström, et al., 2005; Engeström, 2005). Our participants were provided with conceptual tools from CHAT (Fig. 1) to analyse their workplace systems (workshop 1), identify tensions in these systems (workshop 2), and were supported to address these tensions or contradictions through collective endeavours (workshops 3 and 4) enlisting those whom they led in their respective centres between workshops. Importance is placed in a formative intervention upon the collective resolution of contradictions that have been identified as barriers to desired practice outcomes. The researcher-facilitator guided the analysis of the history and current effects of the contradiction, introduced and/or helped participants to adapt practical resources and to design and re-design change efforts. The goal of this endeavour was to eventually stabilise new practices that

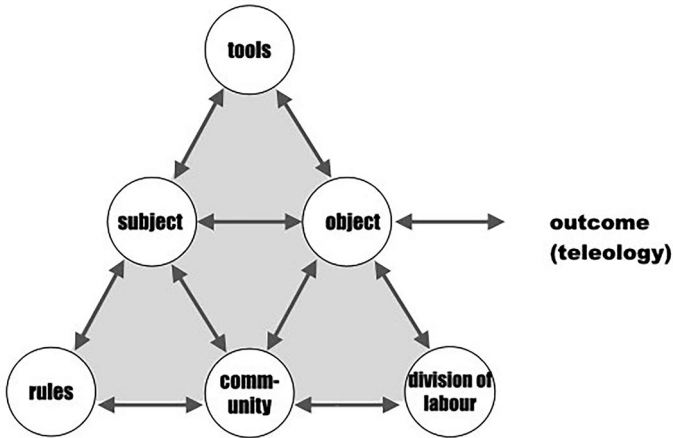


Fig. 1 CHAT concepts representing workplace systems of practice (adapted from Engeström, 2015)

resolved the original contradictions (workshops 5 and 6). It is important to note that the use of the word ‘stabilise’ in CHAT does not imply stasis because contradictions are an expected aspect of ongoing institutional life.

Participants

The larger study was designed to develop a theory of leadership in Australian early education. It was limited to two capital cities for cost effectiveness. The two states with the highest disparity in terms of average centre ratings were chosen. Participation was sought from educational leaders in Darwin in the Northern Territory and Melbourne in Victoria. Following ethics approval from the authors’ institutions and the relevant State Education systems (Victoria and Northern Territory), the participating leaders were recruited initially by emailing centres listed on the ACECQA website as having a ‘Working Towards’ quality rating (ACECQA, 2021). Twelve leaders participated from Darwin and eight participated from Melbourne. All provided written informed consent to participate, as well as written informed consent from their centre’s governing body. The researcher-facilitator names used in this article are their real names, whilst participant names are pseudonyms and all potentially identifying features of their centres have been removed from the data.

Data generation

We used a conventional Change Laboratory design, beginning with interviewing the participants in their work settings, followed by the six workshops described briefly above spaced across approximately eight months and concluding with follow-up interviews again with the leaders in their centres. The series of workshops was conducted in meeting rooms of a hotel centrally located in each capital city. Each workshop was of two hours duration and was video-recorded using a camera set up on a

tripod at the front of the meeting room and observed by a member of the research team (Jenny) who took concurrent field notes.

Data analysis

Transcripts were generated according to cultural psychological conventions, including verbatim speech and minimal descriptions of non-verbal communication (Kroger & Wood, 2000). The transcripts were analysed line by line to identify positioning of the educational leaders. Storylines were interpreted as a process of *bootstrapping* (Wood & Kroger, 2000), beginning with content analysis of action-response pairs and expanding to previous acts and cultural templates (Harré, 1979). We approached the identification of storylines teleologically. We looked for evidence of purpose in the interactions and in accounts provided by speakers in interaction, and asked, ‘What are the facilitators and participants working on, either collectively or individually?’. Positioning analysis began by coding action in the transcripts according to pronoun use. Pronominal coding is often used in positioning analyses because pronouns are indexical linguistic devices that can index relative responsibility taken or assigned (Muhlhäusler & Harré, 1990). For example, higher degrees of personal responsibility can be indexed using first person pronouns and epistemic verbs such as believe, know and think (see also Martin, 2020). This analytic approach has been made explicit in our representation of the data as transcripts in this article. Points of analysis have been included in an adjacent column alongside each verbatim transcript in the Tables that follow.

Findings

Two storyline-types were identified: practical storylines and expressive storylines. Practical storylines were practice-focussed. Expressive storylines focussed explicitly on positioning. In the context of the workshops, it was expected that the interaction between the participants and the facilitators would be oriented towards practice improvement and such interactions were coded as belonging to a practical storyline. Interactions coded as belonging to an expressive storyline were oriented towards participants’ moral standing and professional reputations, particularly in relation to the stigma of receiving a disappointing centre rating. Changes in the participants’ positioning over time were also identified. Examples included shifts in the degree of responsibility taken for leading change at their centres and shifts in their standing in relation to the professional body to which they belonged, i.e. the profession that had labelled their practices as below quality standards. We present these findings of our analysis in three sections. The first two sections, *Positioning in practical storylines* and *Positioning in expressive storylines*, elaborate the distinction evidenced between practical and expressive storylines. In the third section, *Tracing changes in positioning*, we illustrate how participants’ *self*-positioning shifted over time towards being increasingly responsible for quality practice. We illustrate the changes evident in

participants' positioning using data contributed by two participants from one centre at different points in time through the formative intervention.

Phonological conventions have been used to construct verbatim transcripts that represent speakers' pronunciation (e.g. spoken abbreviations such as 'Ed Leader' for Educational Leader are maintained), and punctuation has been used to represent pauses (.), and rising (?) and falling (.) intonation, and to represent abrupt stops (word-) (Wood & Kroger, 2000). Ellipses (...) have been used to represent gaps in the reporting of continuous speech and square brackets contain minimal descriptions of non-verbal action. Pronominal coding (Muhlhäusler & Harré, 1990) has been shown in bold, whilst statements evidencing a storyline have been underlined in the transcripts.

Positioning in practical storylines

Practice-oriented storylines were deliberately instigated and maintained by the facilitators. This is unsurprising, given the practical aims of the project related to building leadership capability amongst educational leaders. We identified three main ways practice-oriented storylines were promoted by the facilitator(s). First, there was explicit use of Cultural Historical activity theory concepts (Fig. 1) to establish and support a focus on practice-related goals. Second, there was frequent positioning of the participants. The facilitators positioned the educational leaders as responsible for understanding and transforming practical aspects of their workplace culture. The uptake by the educational leaders was evident as performative positioning (positioning consistent with the storyline) and this is illustrated in the excerpts below. The facilitators used verbs of intention and grammars of personal desire to position the educational leaders within a locus of responsibility, as well as explicit statements of encouragement. Third, the facilitators provided authoritative guidance. The facilitators drew upon previous experiences in professional learning facilitation with early childhood educators, biographical narratives of leadership in early education, and their standing in the early childhood profession to take up positions as authoritative voices on practice change in early learning settings. To introduce and maintain practice-oriented storylines, we identified consistent discursive 'moves' used by the facilitators: *Scaffolding discursive construction of practical storylines* and *Raising consciousness of mediating constructs and systemic tensions*.

Scaffolding discursive construction of practical storylines

Excerpt 1 exemplifies how facilitators employed the systems theory to scaffold the discursive construction of participants' practical storylines for educational leadership. The facilitator introduced CHAT as a way to conceptualise systems of practice in an early education service. The excerpt begins with Joece's turn, when the educational leaders were asked to map their current practice as a CHAT triangle (Fig. 1) and share these 'maps' during the second workshop. Thalia and Maris, in Excerpt 1, were both from Sandyside Early Learning Centre in Darwin. Note that 'Cert 3' as used by the participants was a reference to the qualification known as Certificate

3 in Early Childhood Education and Care, the minimum qualification for educators in Australia. ‘EYLF’ was a reference to the *Early Years Learning Framework*, the mandatory national curriculum introduced in 2009 (ACECQA, 2022).

Excerpt 1: Discursive construction of practical storylines

| Transcript | Positioning analysis |
|--|---|
| <p>Joce: [to the whole group] Its time to share with the group, what is your <u>object</u>, and what’s the <u>outcome</u> that you want to achieve by working on that object. So what is <u>the task</u> that you’re focusing on here, what is it that focus, in order to get to what are you trying to do? You’re trying to <u>move quality</u>, you’re trying to <u>improve your centre rating</u>, are you trying to <u>communicate better with-</u>? You know, what is the <u>outcome</u>? [To Thalia and Maris] so, Thalia and Maris</p> | <p>Practical storyline: The facilitator positions the educational leaders as responsible for <u>practical outcomes</u> using concepts from CHAT (object and outcome) and verbs of desire and ownership</p> |
| <p>Thalia: Umm, so we’re focusing on <u>the program cycle</u>, um, we have a few that have just finished their Cert 3’s, they’re beginning their Diplomas, and we really wanna try and help them-</p> | <p>Uptake: Thalia positions herself as responsible for practice improvement</p> |
| <p>Joce: So why would you want to <u>improve the use of the use of the planning cycle</u>? Sorry, that came out a bit cynical, didn’t it? [general laughter] What do you want to do that for?</p> | <p>Practical storyline: Use of verbs of desire (want) to position the educational leader as volitional regarding practice improvement</p> |
| <p>Thalia: So, um, our, um -</p> | |
| <p>Joce: <u>outcome-</u></p> | <p>Joce prompts the use of CHAT concepts</p> |
| <p>Thalia:—<u>outcome</u> is that we wanna find <u>something that works for us</u>. Obviously we’ve been through a few Directors, we’ve been taught many different ways and we’re just, “What do you want us to do?” like, so-</p> | |
| <p>Joce: You want to figure out <u>the Sandyside approach to planning</u></p> | <p>Restating the participants practical goal using verbs of desire and ownership</p> |
| <p>Thalia: So, yeah, we think that our—what works for us. We’ve changed it so many times</p> | <p>Uptake: positioning as collectively responsible</p> |
| <p>Joce: [to the whole group] I was just saying to Thalia and Maris before, <u>the planning cycle</u> is actually a <u>tool</u>. It’s a <u>tool</u> given to you via <u>the EYLF</u> but if you want to <u>get better at the planning cycle</u>—so it’s a <u>tool</u> ... that’s mediating your curriculum work every day, your planning cycle, if you’re using it, but if you want to <u>improve it and get better at it</u> you have to make it the focus, shift it from being a <u>tool</u> to actually being <u>the thing that everybody is working on</u>. And when you’ve got it humming it can go back to being a <u>tool</u> and you work on something else. But for a time, and this is very much <u>the role of the Ed Leader</u> is to <u>take that tool or that rule that division of labour</u> and work it baby, work it in the group until you’ve <u>expanded it</u> until it’s <u>enriched, developed</u> and you’re happy with it</p> | <p>Joce models the use of CHAT concepts 2 Joce’s use of the pronoun “you” here indicated an authoritative view on competent public performance of the Educational Leader role Joce makes authoritative statements on the role of the Educational Leader including explicit descriptions</p> |

Raising consciousness of mediating constructs and systemic tensions

Excerpt 2 exemplifies how facilitators employed CHAT to raise the educational leaders' consciousness of educational provision in systemic terms, including the existence of tensions or contradictions that are always present in workplaces but which can sometimes confound the achievement of desired outcomes (Engeström, 2015).

In Excerpt 2, the facilitator asked the educational leaders to think about their centre's practice in systemic terms (Fig. 1) to explain why they were not achieving the desired outcomes they had identified. As in Excerpt 1, the locus of responsibility to understand and lead transformation of the workplace system was put squarely on the shoulders of the participants, but in a subtle shift in language use, individual leaders were not held responsible for 'why it's not working'. This was achieved by identifying and attributing agency to the mediating constructs (Fig. 1). Uptake of this storyline is shown in Margaret's turn in Excerpt 2, by her use of 'it's', showing that she had adopted the language shift. Using CHAT concepts, the facilitator scaffolded detailed views of leadership practice and enabled the distribution of responsibility for failure across mediating constructs.

In the positioning analysis in Excerpt 2, we identified practical storylines related to the participants' professional practice as central in the workshop interactions. Yet concurrent expressive storylines were also evident. The participants were repositioned by Joce as competent leaders in the local moral order of the workshop. This repositioning made possible the decoupling of the participants' moral standing and centre practices that were 'not quite working'. We elaborate how expressive storylines made new ways of identifying as worthy professionals available to the participants in later sections of this article when we focus on tracing changes in positioning.

Excerpt 2: Raising consciousness of mediating constructs and systemic tensions

Transcript

Positioning analysis

Joce: So **you've** done a really nice job of mapping what **you** think **you'd like to do**, what's going on at the moment. What **I** haven't asked **you** is, okay, why is **it** not happening now? Which is another way of asking what are the contradictions? So, is **it** that **you've** got rules contradicting each other? Is **it** with the division of labour? Is **it** that the object and the tools don't match? So **you want** to do really high-quality assessment but **you** haven't got the tools for **it**, so where are things breaking down? So... next time **we'll** start with so what kinds of objects and outcomes did **you** think about. Um [before the next workshop] spend some time looking around the centre thinking, 'So what are the rules here? What is the division of labour? What are we working on here?' And see if **you** can identify some contradictions. So there's a contradiction here in Rebecca's one in that everyone is responsible for addressing a whole range of curriculum areas but what's actually happening in the division of labour is that there's way too much emphasis on art and craft activities, and it's probably become quite sedimented in the centre

Rebecca: Yeah

Joce: Um communication with families, this one over here that Sharon and Fiona have got, so **you've** got this desire, this object [of] **we** really **want** to streamline our communication with families but **you've** got a division of labour which is articulated in the roster, because **it's** a very powerful tool, the roster, that's actually working against effective communication with families. So it's actually not communication with families that needs to be sorted out its the division of labour that needs to be. So if **you want** to sort out the division of labour **you** actually have to sort out the roster. So **I** like the way **you've** made the connection, so that's where the contractions are between the object and the division of labour. [To Josie and Erica] Emotional climate, having a positive emotional climate where are the contradictions?

Josie: Teamwork

Practical storyline: Joce maintains a focus on practice improvement using mediating concepts (rules, tools, division of labour, object and contradiction)

Repositioning: Joce repositions Rebecca as a competent user of mediating concepts

| Transcript | Positioning analysis |
|--|---|
| <p>Joce: Teamwork, yeah, so you might have some <u>rule-rule contradictions</u>. There's a <u>rule</u> over here that says 'teamwork' and then there's another <u>rule</u> that says 'it's not really teamwork, you can really do your own thing?'</p> | <p>Practical storyline: Joce maintains a practical focus using mediating concepts</p> |
| <p>Josie: Yeah</p> | |
| <p>Joce: And that would be an <u>implicit rule</u>. I don't know because I haven't spent time in the centre. But that can often be the case, we all say "we're a team" but actually the parents tell us that going from room to room is like going from centre to centre, <u>that's not uncommon</u>. So where are the <u>contradictions</u>, that's your homework... see how many <u>implicit rules</u> you can come up with ... and the <u>contradictions</u>, what is stuffing it up at the moment? Why are you working on these things? What's getting in the way? 'Cause something's not quite [right]- you've got a niggle. Why? That's your homework. Make as many or as few notes as you want</p> | <p>Expressive storyline: By repositioning herself as a co-educator but also as a non-expert on Josie and Erica's practice, Joce positions Josie and Erica as experts in diagnosing their own practice, and by implication the other participants as experts in their own practice</p> <p>Expressive storyline: The use of systems theory (Fig. 1) deflects responsibility for things being not quite right from the leaders</p> |
| <p>Margaret: It's pulling it all apart, isn't it?</p> | <p>Uptake: Margaret's use of "it's", attributes responsibility to the theory (Fig. 1)</p> |
| <p>Joce: It is, that's exactly what this is. The way that people describe this is that [<u>systems theory</u>] allows you to get up on the balcony and look down on your centres, but really most of your life is down on the dance floor</p> | |
| <p>Margaret: [laughs]</p> | |
| <p>Joce: [laughs] But as Ed Leaders and directors, especially as Ed Leaders with respect to <u>curriculum</u> you've got to be able to get up and see the whole picture, and so this is a <u>tool</u> for allowing you to see the whole picture. Why do we do <u>things</u> around here the way we do it? Why? There'll be a history to it but how do we actually do <u>stuff</u>? What you're doing is <u>mapping the practice culture of your centre</u>, what is your centre's <u>practice culture</u>, why do we do it and why is it not quite working because that's your job to <u>change that, to lift the quality</u></p> | <p>Expressive storyline: agency is attributed to mediating constructs as enabling persons to do certain things and actually doing the doing ("a tool for <i>allowing</i> you...", "these [concepts] <i>are</i>...")</p> <p>Practical storyline: Joce explicitly states the responsibility of the leader</p> |

Positioning in expressive storylines

Expressive storylines were identified as acts oriented towards achieving a more equitable balance of power in the workshops and elevating the participants' sense of professional worth. Practical storylines, such as those reported in the previous section, were the focus of the workshops. Yet in our analysis, we also found overriding expressive storylines, where the purpose of the interaction was discursive construction or reconstruction of the educational leaders' professional standing or reputation. Expressive storylines were actively regulated by the facilitators to realise

a safe and effective learning environment in the workshops. We identified four ways that expressive storylines were regulated. First, the facilitator's use of mirror data (Engeström, 2011, p. 612) stimulated participants' identification with a generalised Educational Leader type. The mirror data were drawn from the pre-workshop interviews and were de-identified so that the issues presented could be treated as generalised strengths and concerns. The mirror data allowed the facilitators to provide an account to participants of their reputations: 'This is who you are in this moment to us'. Second, the facilitators positioned the participants as professional colleagues and as learners. A third feature was the participants' identification with each other in the workshops realising their reputations as, 'We are all capable and competent' or 'This is who we are in this moment in relation to each other and in relation to how we are seen by authorities'. Fourth, the participants were positioned by facilitators as the true adjudicators of their own worth. Facilitators balanced the tension between their own standing in the professional community (i.e. as powerful actors in the sector) and the realisation of a local moral order (a distribution of rights and duties) in the workshops that would promote participants' agency and dignity. To regulate expressive storylines, we identified consistent discursive 'moves' used by the facilitator(s): *Normalising participants' authority*, *Establishing participants' duty as learners*, and *Contextualising educational leadership*.

Normalising participants' authority

Excerpt 3 exemplifies how participants' authority was normalised by positioning them in expressive storylines from the outset. In Excerpt 3, the facilitators positioned the educational leaders as dedicated and generous professionals, colleagues in the profession and as contributors to the workshop. Kristy's response in Excerpt 3 evidences uptake of such a storyline. The acts highlighted in this excerpt were directed towards achieving a local moral order conducive to the professional development process, i.e. positioning the participants as *agentic* (see Martin et al., 2017). NQS in the transcript refers to the National Quality Standards, and 2IC to second in charge (of the centre, i.e. a managerial role).

Excerpt 3 Normalising participants' authority

| Transcript | Positioning analysis |
|---|--|
| <p>Joce: [showing mirror data powerpoint slide, quotes the pre-CL interviews] So having talked with all of our colleagues in [the other capital city] and also all of you, a couple of things come through really strongly. One of them is essentially that Ed Leaders are these <u>super people</u>... that's why we showed you the NQS because actually its very lean, but as Linda said, it's turned into this monster and we hear it coming back to us in the interviews. The other thing that is very clear in the interviews is that the Ed Leaders think it's about bringing the staff along with you... it's about getting the other educators up to speed... This is just a quote from another Ed Leader [reads from slide]. "So you have to be <u>experienced and knowledgeable</u>" ... this person places high value on experience... so you start to see that the Ed Leader is someone who is <u>very relational</u>... someone that people can bring your issues to you, you've got this mother hen kind of role... "I'll find out for you, I'll do the work for you"... these are very <u>generous, hard-working, very aspirational</u> people, very <u>committed to quality</u>... Do you recognise aspects of yourself? Yeah [but] this is a recipe for burn out, its hard work, especially if you're a centre director or 2IC ... the role of the leader is to <u>create culture</u>. So if your staff have had this culture of "This is the way we've always done it", it's your role to change the culture of expectation... you want to help others but it's very frustrating when they don't help themselves... this applies to all of you, you're all self-starters, you actually <u>take initiative, take action</u>... but even if they've been to uni[versity] they still don't have that experience... staff not taking a risk, and I think as a sector we are feeling risk averse anyway...</p> | <p>Joce positions the educational leaders as members of two collectives: Educational Leaders in early learning across Australia, and the workshop collective ("our colleagues")</p> <p>An expressive storyline is introduced, casting the educational leaders as particular person-types. A warrant for the person-type is presented in the mirror data and the participants are positioned to adjudicate ("Do you recognise..."). Publication of the person-type is novel and could be rejected or accepted by the participants</p> |
| <p>Kristy: I think you can identify with most of it, like the initiative one, I find very frustrating</p> | <p>Uptake: Kristy self-positions as authoritative on the public role of the Educational Leader and as personally identifying with the described person-type</p> |
| <p>Joce: You've been an Ed Leader in several centres haven't you?</p> | <p>Joce normalises Kristy's self-positioning by ratifying Kristy's authority</p> |

Establishing participants' duty as learners

Excerpt 4 shows how expressive storylines were promoted through the facilitators' acts. In Excerpt 4, uptake of expressive storylines established a local moral order in which participants could occupy positions as responsible professionals and capable learners and the facilitators as trustworthy mentors. In this excerpt, whilst the

participants were called on to articulate their tentative understandings, the complexity of the work context was concurrently acknowledged (underlined) and the professional knowledge and experience of the participants was validated by the facilitators.

As shown in Excerpt 4, a psychological separation of facilitators and participants was achieved in this storyline through the facilitators' pronoun choice ('we' facilitators and 'you' professional learners). Similarly, as in Excerpt 2, mediational means (conceptual tools in this example) were discursively constructed as having agency (the model 'tries'). Kristy's personal uptake of duty as a professional learner was evidenced in her self-positioning ('I'). Concurrently, Kristy's positioning as an experienced leader was evidenced in her use of the pronoun 'you' (Muhlhäusler & Harré, 1990) in reference to the role in normative terms such as, '**You** try to implement things, but **you** get constant push back'. Kristy's reputation as an experienced leader and able learner was affirmed by both facilitators, who endorsed the complexity of the educational leaders' work (underlined). The expressive storyline relieving the leaders of personal culpability was taken up by Kristy when she adopted the language of practice ('it's'), and in this example, as being hard to contain ('a constant battle'). EYLF in the transcript refers to the mandatory curriculum.

Excerpt 4: Establishing participants' duty as learners

| Transcript | Positioning analysis |
|--|---|
| <p>Joce: We're not assuming that any of this [systems theory] has gone in yet. This is not straightforward work because <u>there's a lot of moving parts in an early childhood centre</u> and this is a model that tries to help you get a handle <u>on the moving parts</u> so that you can do something about it. So last time we introduced you to the first tool which is the triangle tool [see Fig. 1] and today we're going to introduce you to the second tool which is actually the expansive learning model...</p> <p>Linda: Did anyone else attempt to <u>map their centre</u>?</p> <p>Kristy: I tried to but I failed it [laughs]. I just couldn't, like, the way the triangle worked, like I was trying to remember what each of the [concepts] were, like [what] the main ones meant, and I was trying to transfer one of our issues into it and I sort of half-[understood] it, 'cause I can't remember, 'cause there was so much</p> <p>Linda: What were the issues?</p> | <p>Expressive storyline: Joce positions the participants as learners of systems theory Practical storyline: Joce maintains focus on practice improvement by explaining the utility of the mediating concepts. In this storyline participants are positioned as the responsible leaders</p> <p>Uptake: Kristy positions herself as a learner</p> <p>Linda affirms Kristy's self-positioning and takes up positioning as a facilitator/in-service teacher educator</p> |

| Transcript | Positioning analysis |
|--|--|
| <p>Kristy: So we've just recently been brought by [Company], and a lot of the educators are struggling with the transition and what's expected of them from the [new] company. 'Cause our last company was very relaxed and, "Do whatever you want to do". So now [educators are] deciding to [resist] 'cause, "We never used to do this, why are we doing it now?" sort of thing, so-</p> | |
| <p>Joce: It's good timing to be doing this [professional learning opportunity]</p> | |
| <p>Kristy: Yeah, and you try to implement things but you get constant push back because it's "different", so that's our main issue at the moment, trying to get those things implemented, and they're things that should have been implemented 'cause they're part of regulations, it's just our other company was very relaxed on them so-</p> | |
| <p>Linda: So your system is in flux basically. That's why it's difficult, because everything is on the move at the moment</p> | <p>Linda refers to the "system", evoking the triangle tool (Fig. 1)</p> |
| <p>Erica: They're not coping with change</p> | |
| <p>Linda: Yeah. So the rules, etcetera, they're all <u>in flux</u>, they're changing</p> | <p>Linda refers to mediating concepts ("rules etcetera")</p> |
| <p>Kristy: Yeah</p> | |
| <p>Linda: So it'd be a <u>very fluid system</u>, at one point in time</p> | |
| <p>Kristy: Yeah. And they're taking things very literally. So like, when we had the meeting with the new owner, she was like, "we're not going to change anything, like obviously policies and stuff are going to change because- but like the way the centre runs, we're not really going to change a lot of it". And the centre still runs the same, but obviously we have new paperwork we've got to build, because of the new company</p> | |
| <p>Linda: So what's the <u>paperwork</u>?</p> | <p>Linda positions Kirsty as responsible for articulating her developing understanding of the tool use</p> |
| <p>Kristy: So, like, the <u>paperwork</u> side of things is just-</p> | |
| <p>Linda: Where would the <u>paperwork</u> sit?</p> | <p>Linda repositions Kristy as learner</p> |
| <p>Kristy: I was going to say, it could be an "<u>object</u>" I suppose cause that's what they need to do</p> | |

| Transcript | Positioning analysis |
|--|---|
| <p>Joce: It's probably a "tool" but it has to be[come] a "temporary object" [in order to be resolved] ... The word <u>flux</u> is a really good example for what you guys are experiencing at [your centre] because, this all looks very stable when you map it, which you can, absolutely you can map what's going on, but <u>as soon as you finish, something moves and it's constantly in motion. Things that seem to be stable become "temporary objects". "Objects" go back to being "rules" or "divisions of labour", and then something happens like, you know, the EYLF comes parachuting in from somewhere else and everything keeps moving</u></p> | <p>Joce affirms the focus of the storyline as participants' development of their understanding of the leadership tools</p> <p>Expressive storyline: Joce repositions Kristy as a leader responsible for improving a system in flux i.e. as leaders respected for taking on a difficult task</p> |
| <p>Kristy: It's a constant battle really</p> | <p>Uptake: Kristy positions herself as a competent leader shifting focus to "it" or "the system"</p> |

Contextualising educational leadership

Excerpt 5 exemplifies how expressive storylines were introduced in workshop interactions by the participants. Rita self-positioned as a 'working towards' leader and positioned the facilitator as authoritative and capable of ratifying the participants' professional capacity and, in this way, introduced a storyline directed explicitly towards establishing the participants' positioning in relation to the other participants and the wider profession. In response, the facilitator repositioned herself (an example of accountative positioning where Rita's storyline was not taken up), evoking an alternative storyline involving an early education sector undergoing historical change, where new knowledge required to meet new demands is still being developed. This alternative storyline repositioned the participants as worthy and valued professionals, and it was taken up by Rita.

Joce's speech-action in Excerpt 5 maintained the desired local moral order for professional learning. Rita's expressed concern about her own professional capacity considering her centre's 'working towards' rating occasioned Joce's response. The facilitator repositioned Rita as capable and, by implication, responsible for raising quality at her centre. Resolution of the expressive storyline in this conversation involved reflexively evoking the purpose of the workshops and participants' contribution to them. The act achieved in Joce's response was rejection of Rita's storyline, repositioning facilitators as not adjudicators of participants' professional worth, but as witnesses of their capabilities for professional learning as they learn to mobilise desired workplace outcomes (Engeström, 2011). As part of achieving the expressive outcome of maintaining the educational leaders' responsibility to the quality improvement process, Joce repositioned herself and Linda alongside the participants as fellow learners. TAFE in the transcript refers to Technical and Further Education, a post-secondary education system in Australia, and uni is short for university.

Excerpt 5: Contextualising educational leadership

| Transcript | Positioning analysis |
|--|---|
| <p>Rita: [to Joce] Can I ask you a question. I know we are, but I don't know about the rest [of the participating centres], I think we are more or less the same, "working towards" level, yah?</p> | <p>Expressive storyline: Rita self-positions along with the other participants as members of a group of leaders of centres rated as <i>not</i> achieving professional standards Rita employs the official rating as a public marker of personal professional worth: "we are...working towards level"</p> |
| <p>Joce: Yes that's actually a criterion for being in the project, yeah</p> | <p>Expressive storyline: Rita positions facilitators as authoritative and capable of ratifying the participants' professional capacity</p> |
| <p>Rita: Have you, [after] two days, I mean four hours, of sitting with us, do you think we have what it takes [to improve our centres' ratings]? I mean, we do have our background knowledge-</p> | <p>Repositioning: Joce does not accept Rita's storyline where she is positioned as a member of an authoritative, evaluative elite. Joce eschews personal responsibility for ratifying the participants capabilities and repositions herself as a workshop contributor</p> |
| <p>Joce: Oh yeah, it's not a knowledge problem. None of the work we've done in centres, and we've been around the traps... it's never a knowledge problem. Everybody's got what it takes. What we're finding-</p> | <p>Uptake: Rita accepts Joce's repositioning as a researcher and positions herself as interested in Joce's research</p> |
| <p>Rita: That's where sometimes, um, you look at things and see things?</p> | |

| Transcript | Positioning analysis |
|--|--|
| <p>Joce: Well the theory behind this project and the approach in this project is that you know everything you need to know about children, families, planning, all those kinds of things. What you don't have is a <u>methodology</u> for quality improvement that mobilizes your leadership capacity. And that's not surprising because there are a lot of centres that are 'meeting' and 'excellent' that don't have that either, but for other reasons they've been able to achieve what they've achieved. This is about, um, the link between leadership and quality and leaders having systematic approaches. But when you went to TAFE or Uni, nobody taught you how to develop adults, they only taught you how to develop children... So this is giving you- it's not an adult learning model that we're giving you, it's a <u>practice development model</u>, but you don't get taught practice development models, you get taught child development models. So <u>what we're trying to do is, um, figure out, with your help</u>, what are the- because Linda and I have spent hours in lonely rooms thrashing ideas around, but you're the experts, so with your help, figuring out- and with the help of the folk in [the other capital city], figuring out, <u>what are the components of a theory of leadership that will lift quality in early childhood? Because we actually don't know. We've got some suspicions, but we actually don't know</u></p> | <p>Expressive storyline: Joce positions Rita (and by implication in the context of the whole group discussion the other participants) within the changing professional context of the educational leaders' work</p> <p>Practical storyline: Joce acknowledges their professional expertise and maintains the participants' responsibility in the professional learning process</p> |

Tracing changes in positioning

Having provided examples of practical and expressive storylines within the workshop interactions, we now turn to an example of change in positioning across time. To demonstrate this process, we focus on two educational leaders from one early childhood centre: Daisy and Janice from Kamptown Early Learning Centre. Although each of the participants' professional learning journeys was unique (Nuttall et al., 2024), all demonstrated shifts in their positioning across the study as they took up positions as increasingly competent and knowledgeable educational leaders. In this section, we show the interplay between expressive and practical storylines that was evident in our positioning analysis to shed light upon the facilitators' role in the participants' professional learning over the course of the project.

In keeping with the temporal dimension of this section, we have arranged the data chronologically: Excerpt 6 from the initial interview; Excerpt 7 from the fourth workshop; Excerpt 8 from the sixth (final) workshop.

Positioning in the Initial Interview

In the early stages of the study, their data clearly indicated Janise and Daisy's desired focus for their participation in the formative intervention. Their initial focus was to re-establish their professional standing in relation to the mandatory assessment and rating system, and, as we see in Excerpt 6, it was endorsed by the facilitator. We coded such acts as the realisation of an expressive storyline. As shown in Excerpt 6, Janice and Daisy described the assessment and rating experience as confusing and professionally invalidating. They felt a diminished professional standing because of the encounter with the assessor and their 'working towards' rating. The importance for them of re-establishing their moral standing was reflected in their initial focus, which was to find more effective ways of communicating with the assessor and achieve the outcome of becoming respected by authority.

Excerpt 6: Positioning in the initial interview

| Transcript | Positioning analysis |
|---|---|
| Daisy: When we have assessment and rating. We explain it to them [the assessor] ... We tried to explain it, so maybe my language, my work, is <u>not connecting</u> ? Or maybe the way they're thinking is different? | Expressive storyline: regaining professional standing in relation to the regulatory authority. Daisy positions herself as professionally misunderstood |
| Joce: So coming back to the 'working towards' rating, it sounds like you've both talked about planning and <u>the need to be able to explain to an assessor</u> what the limitations and possibilities of your planning are, and what you're trying to achieve. Is that the kind of thing that you want to work on? Or are there other areas of the program or the centre that you think that you'd like to develop? | Joce takes up the expressive storyline of Daisy and Janice, positioning them as authoritative in discerning their focus for their professional learning |
| Janice: Our problem lies in <u>being able to show the regulatory body</u> how that works in our unique situation because we looked at it that way we are unique but we- so it's kind of, how we are going to be able to sell the Kamptown program? | Expressive storyline: Janice elaborates the desired outcome of regaining professional standing by explaining their practice |

Positioning in Workshop 4

By workshop four, there was a clear shift in Janice and Daisy's focus. Initially, they positioned themselves as misunderstood and wanting to find better ways of communicating with the assessor (Excerpt 6). By workshop four, a practical storyline was evident in which they would take responsibility for designing programming that was feasible. As shown in Excerpt 7, the facilitators positioned the participants as responsible for taking up the mediating concepts (Fig. 1) towards

practice improvement. Daisy and Janice's reframed focus was to reconceive planning in terms of a student collective.

Excerpt 7: Positioning in Workshop 4

| Transcript | Positioning analysis |
|--|---|
| <p>Joce: There's an empirical observation with this methodology that, in order to change, there have to be <u>rules that have to be broken because rules are what hold things constant</u>. So as long as everybody sticks to the rules, and it doesn't matter whether they're the explicit rules of, "This is how it will be done" or the implicit rules, "This is how it really is", these are what hold structures in place... So if you want to see change <u>you're probably going to have to be prepared to break some rules</u>. I'm not talking about rules like, "You don't run inside" or sensible rules, I'm talking about the kinds of rules that become taken for granted, "This is how we do things around here". It's the work of leaders to say, "Really, why? What would happen if we changed that?" So on that note I'll pass to Janice and Daisy. We'll start with the two of you to share with us... what your current struggle is and your thinking about where you want to go with it</p> | <p>Practical storyline: Joce positions the participants as wanting, striving and professionally responsible for change on the practical register. She positions herself as authoritative in asserting theoretical links between mediating concepts and practical ends</p> |
| <p>Daisy: Part of the struggle is <u>processes of planning</u> where we... only have two of us and <u>we have to do all of these [individual observations] in a short period of time</u>. It's a big struggle, we were trying different strategies... but it just- it seems like going nowhere. The time, the timing, it's just not on our side</p> | <p>Uptake: Daisy expresses a 'rule' in her use of the phrase, "we have to"</p> |
| <p>Joce: So this is what's sometimes called, "<u>Collapsing under the weight of a contradiction</u>"</p> | <p>Joce employs the concept of contradictions from CHAT Practical storyline: Solving the contradiction or tension becomes the focus</p> |
| <p>Daisy: Mmm</p> | |
| <p>Joce: So there is a <u>massive contradiction</u> between the <u>forms of documentation</u> that you were using and the <u>available time</u>, so its collapsing inwards. So the challenge is, <u>how can you document effectively in the time you've got?</u> ... <u>Back to the planning tool</u>, what is your thinking about planning and documentation?</p> | <p>Practical storyline: Joce maintains the practical focus by articulating a contradiction between two resources (planning/documentation tools and staff time), positioning Janice and Daisy as responsible for redesigning their planning tool</p> |
| <p>Janice: I'd definitely [be] <u>getting away from the single children and grouping</u> and, like what we discussed, and we know that, and we sat down here and we were rattling off different groups of children that we do...</p> | <p>Uptake: Janice positions herself as responsible for redesigning based on planning for groups and agentic (use of first person in "I'd") in changing the status quo, where planning had been for single children</p> |

Positioning in Workshop 6

By the final workshop, Janice and Daisy's concurrent achievement of both practical and expressive goals was evident. In Excerpt 8, Janice recounted the successful changes made to their practice using their newly designed planning tools (practical storyline) and was able to reposition herself and Daisy, in relation to other professionals and the regulatory body, as competent leaders (expressive storyline). The enhancement of participants' agency through practice re-mediation is a feature of the Change Laboratory methodology (Engeström, 2015). The difference in the case of these stigmatised leaders was the early focus on an expressive concern. The case highlights how professional development facilitators might navigate interactions when participants feel vulnerable or undervalued. In the case of these leaders, addressing the discord felt from the mismatch between professional esteem and merit persisted as their focus until workshop 4. This was significant for their professional development because it meant that they were concerned with learning to communicate effectively to assessors rather than learning to utilise the systems theory offered to develop educational leadership practice. However, engaging with the systems theory and in interaction with the facilitator, by workshop 4, their focus for practice improvement developed. It does suggest that once-off professional development would be insufficient under circumstances like this. In workshop 6, the participants presented posters to the other participating educational leaders present and the facilitators. Janice's turns in excerpt 6 were made as she presented the poster she and Daisy had created to represent practice change at their centre as a result of their participation.

Excerpt 8: Positioning in Workshop 6

| Transcript | Positioning analysis |
|--|--|
| <p>Janice: [presenting their poster to the group] ... we needed to incorporate reflection and documentation in a meaningful way to support the future planning and time factor... we had to work with those issues. So now we've got a <u>floor daybook</u> that has the observations and documentation which involves photos, which support what the learning involved on the day, any spontaneous activities and possibilities from what happened on the day. This also serves for our reflection, which we go through together. We have a <u>check list</u>; it's implemented and there's also a separate <u>communication book</u> for staff... and its dual role [is] so the director and educational leader are on the same page working together. And how have <u>these changes</u> affected Kamptown is more time with the children and it's meaningful with the planning cycle. So the <u>children are happy and engaged in learning</u> and we're just really enjoying that as well, the positive parental feedback, we have a <u>system that's working</u> now, just <u>effective communication</u> between the two of us. Um, we're owning the system and we're in it together</p> <p>Joce: I'm really interested that that's what you ended up doing when actually, at the start, what you wanted to do was find a way to more clearly explain to the assessor how you did your planning</p> | <p>Practical storyline: Janice and Daisy designed new planning and documentation tools as an outcome of the professional learning opportunity</p> <p>Practical storyline: content, engaged children-learners as an outcome of their workplace systems now in place.</p> <p>Expressive storyline: Janice self-positions along with Daisy as professionally agentic (use of first person plural)</p> |

| Transcript | Positioning analysis |
|---|--|
| Janice: That was- the thing I said at the end was owning it . This is it, this is Kamptown. This is how we're doing it . And we've had a monitoring inspection [by the regulatory authority] and it was all good | Expressive outcome: Janice reports that an assessor has ratified their professional capability |

Discussion

Our aim in this article has been to demonstrate how concepts drawn from positioning theory could not only evidence how facilitators could support the development of educational leaders but also leaders' understanding of themselves as professionally competent at a time of professional vulnerability. Our teleological analysis identified storylines in the professional learning interactions (orientated towards future outcomes in two distinct orders, the practical and expressive. Harré (1979) claimed that an analytic distinction between these two orders is required to explain human behaviour, leading to his development of positioning theory. The excerpts show, however, that practical and expressive outcomes are deeply inter-penetrating, reflecting Harré's (1979) acknowledgement that, 'Though the expressive and practical orders are analytically distinct, social life is lived as a continuous process' (Introduction, n.p.). By discerning both practical and expressive storylines, we illustrated that even when facilitators focus on practical outcomes, their action can (and perhaps must) also address expressive outcomes. In the discussion that follows, we highlight some of the insights we have derived from our analysis into how the facilitators instigated storylines to focus on quality improvement (practical storylines) and to reposition participants conducive to professional learning (expressive storylines).

First, there was evidence of how systems theory was operationalised by the facilitators in the service of expressive goals. Drawing on systems theory, the facilitators could explain why practices needed to change without implicating diminished professional capabilities of the leaders. The facilitators used descriptions of participants' practice as 'systems in flux' and 'complex leadership', repositioning participants as worthy professionals and capable leaders despite their inadequate centre ratings. Expressive storylines included the realisation of the local moral order within a workshop series, shown as processes of positioning by the facilitators and uptake of associated responsibilities and duties by the participants. Positioning participants as responsible for collective practice change was evidenced in Excerpt 1 as the uptake of verbs of desire. In Excerpt 2, this positioning was evidenced in the participants' uptake of systems theory for understanding practice not just in terms of the capabilities of persons.

Second, in our section on expressive storylines, we have highlighted acts in the workshops that functioned to achieve expressive storylines, suggesting the facilitator's consciousness of repositioning the participants. In workshop interactions, expressive storylines achieved the normative expectation that the agency of participants will be enhanced in formative interventions (Engeström, 2011; Nuttall, 2022). In Excerpt 3, the facilitator employed mirror data to effectively position participants

as professionally capable and authoritative. This illustrates the importance of involving participants in the identification of a problem or systemic contradiction (as differentiated from professional development already designed as a needed solution). Excerpt 4 showed the participants' uptake of facilitators' expressive storylines that positioned them as capable learners. Such uptake implies the establishment of trust. In Excerpt 5, the power of systems theory was evoked by the facilitator to reposition herself as *not* responsible for judging participants' professional worth. The facilitator's actions repositioned the Educational Leaders and elevated their professional standing in the local moral order of the workshops as knowledge creators alongside all other participants. In this sense, the facilitator was predisposed to enhancing the participants' agency notwithstanding such interactions cannot be planned for specifically. This suggests the need for facilitators with strong principles of practice in similar situations where participants could be experiencing professional vulnerability, much like an *ethics of responsibility* as framed by Bronwen Davies (2008) or *rule of care* (Henderson et al., 2023).

Third, we presented evidence of how participants, who initially conceived their professional focus in expressive terms, came to adopt practical goals. The dominance of expressive storylines for participants in the initial phase of the professional learning opportunity was evident in Excerpt 6, where Janice and Daisy were seeking to better explain their practice for positive acknowledgement by an assessor. Excerpt 7 showed how the systems theory was taken up by Janice and Daisy to reconceive their focus in practical terms. Over time, as new ways to signify professionalism and competence were made possible in the workshops, the Educational Leaders positioned themselves as acknowledged and respected professionals. This was marked as changes in their positioning alongside other participants (including the facilitators) and in relation to authority as part of the professional community beyond the workshops (Excerpts 6, 7 and 8). The advancement of participants' expressive storylines and introduction of practical storylines in the workshops were complementary processes. In this way, the workshop interactions provided an effective professional learning opportunity for these educational leaders. However, the facilitators' sensitive engagement with participants' expressive storylines was a feature of this success.

The identification of expressive and practical storylines in the analysis supports Harré's (1979) observation that an analytic distinction between expressive and practical orders is necessary for explaining institutional life. Harré's elaboration of the interplay between an expressive and practical order also provides a possible explanation for the participants' initial expressive storylines:

Expressive intention and action and impression interpretation and belief are not always coordinate. Nor does the expressive order always match the practical order. In many societies, economic power generated by a person's location in the practical order may not entitle him to the highest public esteem. Sometimes the expressive order operative at a certain time and place represents a practical order that has dissolved. In all these ways, tensions can appear as people come to perceive expressive incongruities and practical inconsistencies. (p. 5)

In this study, professional tensions originated from Australia's national system of assessment and rating (Martin et al., 2020). Such a system could have an impact upon the moral careers of educators depending on their centre's rating, as was shown in this study. In the absence of other publicly recognised social rituals that could underscore their success and professional competence, the educational leaders from the centres rated as 'working towards the NQS' positioned themselves as not yet meeting publicly determined standards of practice (see Excerpts 5 and 6). In the context of such realities, there is great benefit of communities developing their own criteria for authoring desirable professional qualities and evaluating moral worth (Harré, 1979), such as achieved in these workshop interactions.

Conclusion

Our concluding claim is that facilitators in professional development contexts, particularly when working with vulnerable professionals, must inevitably direct their action towards both expressive and practical ends, since systemic practice development is so deeply intertwined with individual psychological development. As Harré (1979) reminded us,

People have a deep sense of their own dignity, and a craving for recognition as beings of worth including the opinion of others of their kind... the pursuit of reputation in the eyes of others is the overriding preoccupation of human life, though the means by which reputation is to be achieved are extraordinarily various. (p. 3)

In the context of our project, the purpose was to enhance leadership effectiveness in pursuit of raising quality in early education practice. However, we showed that an important outcome of the workshop interactions was participants' repositioning. In positioning theory, personhood is realised through positioning in situ and in this sense, the participants were not the same *persons* (Harré, 1979, p. 327) at the end of the workshops as they were at the beginning. The workshop interactions provided the semantic space within which participants' repositioning and self-authoring became possible. Further, participants' repositioning as they learnt to apply systems theory in relation to professional colleagues, including the facilitators, provided a springboard for their moral career development. By the end of the study, participants positioned themselves as professionally capable and responsible leaders despite the 'working towards' rating that their centres had received. Importantly, this coincided with participants' improved capability to lead collective action at their respective workplaces directed towards the practical end of raising the quality of educational practice. Drawing from the case of the stigmatised leaders, our research suggests that professional development opportunities need to be designed as *places* (Harré, 1979, p. 311) of moral career development.

In summary, we were able to

- Point to moments of repositioning in the workshop interactions. In their repositioning moves, the facilitators exercised an *ethics of responsibility* (Davies, 2008) to eschew specific authoritative and evaluative responsibilities.
- Trace the uptake of the repositioning by participants. Uptake resulted in the enhancing of participants' rights and duties within the local moral order of the developing professional learning community.
- Mark self-positioning in relation to societal rhetoric and evidence moral career development as a change in self-positioning over time.

We have shown that 'by including social-expressive ends as among the main products of social activity the work model [CHAT] and the general ethogenic picture [positioning theory] converge' (Harré, 1979, p. 240). The utility of the positioning triad (action, positioning, storyline) was illustrated through our analysis of the workshop interactions as part of our attempts to advance knowledge for the design of adult learning environments. We suggest that further research framed by positioning theory can assist researchers to elucidate teaching–learning as a moral (expressive) as well as instrumental (practical) process, including how the interplay between expressive and practical storylines could promote development in different contexts.

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Data availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Ethical approval Approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the Australian Catholic University (Review Number 2018-0133). The research conducted adheres to the requirements of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research and the Australian Catholic University's Code of Conduct.

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