



# Leader-Teacher relationships in early childhood education

Insights from LMX framework

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## ABSTRACT

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**Background and Research Topic:** Working in kindergartens across Greece, Switzerland, and the Czech Republic revealed how unclear support and conflicting messages about trust contributed to high turnover. In contrast, working in a school with a leader who practiced open communication, genuine care, and an open-door policy showed how trust-based leadership can make teachers feel heard, valued, and empowered. These experiences inspired this research to explore how strong, trust-driven connections between teachers and leaders foster supportive work environments, alleviate daily challenges, and enhance both teacher well-being and overall school effectiveness.

**Purpose:** The research investigates how leader–teacher relationships grounded in Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory and collaborative leadership models foster supportive work environments, promote teacher well-being, and improve staff retention in early childhood education (ECE).

**Sources of Information and Method:** A desk-based literature review was conducted using peer-reviewed studies from major academic databases. The key concepts of collaborative leadership and the LMX guided the analysis. These were examined with a focus on trust-based relationships, teacher well-being, and leadership in ECE to address three guiding research questions.

**Discussion:** The discussion addresses the research questions by examining the key concepts of collaborative leadership and the LMX framework. It explores how trust is built and sustained through everyday interactions between leaders and teachers, and how this affects teacher turnover. Based on these insights, the study offers practical strategies—guided by both LMX and collaborative leadership—that ECE leaders can use to create supportive and collaborative ECE environments.

**Conclusions:** The findings suggest that trust-based, collaborative leadership supports thriving work environments in ECE. Future research could examine how teamwork structures, LMX practices, motivational profiles, and diverse educational settings influence trust and collaboration in practice.

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**Key words:** ece, educational leadership, lmx, trust-based relationships, collaborative leadership

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**ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMS**

**ECE** Early Childhood Education

**LMX** Leader–Member Exchange

**VDL** Vertical dyad linkage

**RMP** Reiss Motivational Profile

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Imagine a school where every teacher feels truly supported, heard, and valued—a place where leadership is about connection, not control. In such a setting, both children and adults thrive, forming a collaborative, supportive environment.

In contrast, many educators today feel ignored and underappreciated (Barnes et al., 2019, p. 362), which drains their energy and undermines their work in the classroom (Pillay et al., 2005). Persistent conflicts with leaders or colleagues, along with the stress of managing students' challenging behavior and demanding parents, only increase the risk of burnout (Ng et al., 2023). These pressures show that caring for teacher well-being is essential not just for educators themselves but for the health of the entire education system (Lauermann & König, 2016).

### 1.1 Research Topic

Ansley et al. (2019, p. 4) states that there are two key factors that consistently shape teachers' working conditions, the quality of school leadership and the relationships they maintain within the workplace. This study will explore how strong, trust-based relationships between teachers and school leaders can create supportive work environments, help teachers overcome daily challenges, and ultimately improve both teacher well-being and overall school effectiveness.

### 1.2 Background

Across three very different kindergarten settings—in Greece, Switzerland, and Prague—I saw the same pattern: leaders who undermined teacher autonomy, ignored requests for support, and sent mixed messages about trust. These practices fueled my own burnout during COVID, blurred work–life boundaries, and repeated cycles of frustration and high stress for colleagues of every age and background. Ultimately, it wasn't until I joined a school where the principal adopted an open-door policy, genuine care, and transparent communication that I—and many others—felt heard and empowered. Colleagues often asked, “Is this just the nature of early childhood teaching?” and “Why do so many kindergarten teachers burn out despite different cultures?” These questions, and the frequent

turnover they reflect, highlighted a critical gap in leaders' communication back to teachers.

### **1.3 Purpose**

By applying G. B. Graen & Uhl-Bien's (1995) Leader-Member Exchange theory (LMX) alongside collaborative leadership models, this study offers a practical framework for building trust-based relationships between teachers and leaders—distributing responsibilities, strengthening workplace connections, and ultimately supporting teacher well-being and retention.

### **1.4 Research Questions**

This leads to the following research questions:

1. How do early childhood educational (ECE) leaders foster trust-based relationships with teachers, and what are the key factors influencing collaboration?
2. How can collaborative leadership models in early childhood education enhance trust-based relationships and contribute to teacher retention?
3. How does LMX theory explain the role of trust in leader-teacher relationships, and how does it influence teachers' job satisfaction?

### **1.5 Research Method**

I conducted a desk-based study, reviewing literature on ECE leadership and LMX theory via targeted searches in ERIC, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. After selecting key peer-reviewed articles, I used thematic analysis to pinpoint patterns and insights, which I then wove together in my discussion to answer the research questions. To critically evaluate the research methods, this study is built on two key concepts with sub-concepts:

- Educational leadership in early childhood education
  - Collaborative leadership models
  - Teacher well-being
- LMX framework
  - Trust based relationship

## 1.6 Overview of the Structure

This thesis is organized into five key sections:

1. **Introduction**– Presents the study's context and the research questions guiding it.
2. **Research Methodology** – Explains the desk-based approach and data collection methods.
3. **Literature Review** – Explores two key concepts: educational leadership in ECE and the LMX framework.
4. **Discussion** – Critically addresses the research questions in light of the reviewed literature.
5. **Conclusion** – Offers practical guidance for ECE leaders on building trust, enhancing well-being, and retaining dedicated educators.

## 2 RESEARCH METHODS

### 2.1 Desk-based Research: Data Sources and Collection Methods

This research adopts a desk-based methodology, grounded in a qualitative analysis of existing literature. It focuses on sources that explore the relationships built between leaders and teachers in ECE through the lens of LMX. This combination allows for a deeper exploration of the importance of trust-based relationships and their dynamics in the workplace. The sources also examine the conditions needed within the environment to make those relationships sustainable.

Desk-based research was chosen because it enables clear identification of the core problem and the gathering of insights from studies across different time periods and contexts, thereby establishing a well-supported foundation for understanding the current situation and guiding this study's focus (Mora, 2022). A further step—and an essential component of advancing the field—as Professor Rupert Wegerif (2020) supports, is to reflect on those findings and critically discuss them in context. Desk-based research enables this reflective layer by offering space to compare, question, and reflect on existing evidence to deepen our understanding and support meaningful progress in early childhood education leadership. A drawback of desk research is that it relies on others' data, which may be inaccurate or reflect their biases. Additionally, because this information was gathered for different purposes or populations, it might not always be fully relevant to the current study (*Desk Research*, 2022; Wegerif, 2020).

To support this research and ensure that the sources used are valid, I began by searching through TAMK's University Library database. The sources included books and a variety of secondary data types, such as peer-reviewed journal articles, blog posts, policies and educational reports.

In addition to the TAMK library, other academic databases and search engines used in this research included ERIC, JSTOR, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, SAGE Journals, Scispace, Academia.edu, and others.

At the beginning, more general search terms were used, such as:

- “Educational leadership”

- “Educational leader”
- “Trust”
- “Relationships of trust in the workplace”
- “LMX theory”

Later, as I began identifying more relevant sources, I used insights and keywords from those studies to guide my research more specifically. This helped me refine and deepen the focus of my topic. Some of the more specific keyword combinations I used included:

- “Trust in school leadership”
- “Leader–teacher relationships in early childhood education”
- “LMX and educational leadership”
- “Development of LMX”
- “Building relationships of trust”
- “Trust-based relationships and LMX”
- “Effective leadership in early childhood education”
- “LMX theory in education”
- “The role of educational leader”
- “Collaborative leadership in early childhood settings”
- “Teacher retention and leadership”
- “Trust and LMX”

In selecting my sources, I also aimed for a variety of publication dates to capture how educational leadership thinking has developed over time. This allowed me to compare earlier hierarchical approaches (e.g., Fullan, 1991; Hallinger & Heck, 1996)—where decision-making was mainly top-down—with more recent perspectives (e.g., Mincu, 2022; Vermeulen et al., 2022) that emphasize collaboration, shared leadership, and relationship-building. The same applies to the LMX framework: by including both older (e.g., G. B. Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) and newer studies (e.g., Liang & Yin, 2024; Scandura & Meuser, 2022), I was able to explore how the theory has evolved from its initial focus on formal leader–follower roles to a more relational, trust-based understanding of workplace dynamics in education.

This process of starting with more general information and gradually narrowing the focus helped me first gain a broad understanding of the role of educational leadership and the development and relevance of the LMX framework. As I refined my research, I began to build a deeper and more focused understanding of (a) how leadership and trust-based relationships are connected and why they are important in early childhood education, and (b) how the LMX framework relates to these relationships and contributes to their effectiveness. Finally, taking time to explore both general and more specific sources allowed me to ensure that the materials I selected were not only reliable but also directly meaningful to the aims of this research.

## **2.2 Organizing and Analysing Research Data**

To analyse the collected data, I used Zotero as a tool, which helped me organise my sources efficiently into customised categories and keep track of all the necessary tags and information. Firstly, I separated the sources into two main categories: *Educational Leadership* and *LMX Framework*. Then, I gradually created sub-categories, which helped guide me in narrowing down the topics and shaping the outline of my literature review. Below, I explain the techniques I used and the reasoning behind them.

### **2.2.1 Educational Leadership**

When talking about educational leadership, one of the first things I needed to clarify was: Who exactly are we referring to as educational leaders? This became especially clear after presenting my thesis topic at university, where even some educators asked, “*Who do you mean by educational leaders?*” That made me realize the importance of first defining the role. So, I began this part of the research by exploring who educational leaders are, what their responsibilities include, and what makes someone effective in that role. It was important to establish this foundation before diving deeper into the relationships between leaders and teachers.

From there, I followed a timeline-like approach, starting with more traditional, hierarchical leadership styles and gradually moving toward more collaborative

models. This shift helped me see how leadership approaches have evolved, especially in terms of the relationships they encourage. It also helped me focus more closely on the importance of trust, collaboration, and the overall dynamics between school leaders and teachers.

To wrap up this part of the literature, I narrowed the focus even more by exploring how trust functions within these relationships. I looked at what it takes to build trust, and why it's essential for leaders and teachers to rely on each other for support and teamwork. Overall, following this outline helped me gradually zoom in on the heart of my research: the value of trust-based relationships in education, viewed through the lens of leadership roles and styles.

### **2.2.2 Leader-Member Exchange (LMX)**

When it came to the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, my first step was to explore what the theory actually is—what it represents, how it works, and how it has developed over time. I began collecting articles that discussed the origins of LMX (e.g., Dansereau, Graen & Haga 1975; Graen & Cashman 1975) as well as articles that focused on its evolution, such as Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995). At first, most of the sources I found were quite general and focused primarily on the theoretical foundation of LMX. Many of the earlier articles—especially those published before the 2000s—kept appearing across multiple studies, which showed me how central those foundational works are to understanding the framework.

As I went deeper into the topic, I made a conscious effort to search for newer sources to understand how the theory is viewed today, particularly through reviews and meta-analyses. I found it especially interesting that although LMX was originally introduced as a theory, Erdogan and Bauer (2014) later reconceptualized it as a form of relational leadership. More recently, some scholars—such as Scandura and Meuser (2022, 322)—have questioned whether it should still be labeled a theory at all, especially a leadership theory. They argue that it functions more accurately as a relational approach to leadership. Since LMX is rooted in human relationships rather than fixed leadership structures, it continues to

evolve. Researchers note that even after decades of study, LMX is still undergoing development and refinement (Gerstner & Day, 1997; Scandura & Meuser, 2022; Schriesheim et al., 1999).

### **2.2.3 Connection of Educational Leadership and LMX**

The more I read about how LMX is a theory based on relationships, the more I wanted to dive deeper into my research to explore how it connects with education and educational leadership. I found several recent studies that combined LMX and education (e.g., Robinson 2019; Hardianto & Sari 2021; Vermeulen, Kreijns & Evers 2022), but most of them focused on higher education, or examined teacher–student relationships, or centered mainly on job satisfaction. In my research, I wanted to focus specifically on the role of trust in the relationship between leaders and teachers in early childhood education. Although I did find studies that recognized trust as an important element of relationship-building, few of them focused directly on early childhood education—most focused on contexts from primary schools up to universities.

For any school, and especially for early childhood education settings, to be truly effective and supportive—for both staff and students—it is essential to build a professional community rooted in trust, collaboration and mutual respect (MacNeill et al., 2004; Rogoff et al., 2008; Sergiovanni, 1992; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006, p. 22). That’s exactly where the values of LMX and educational leadership seem to meet and that’s why I chose it for my research.

One of the key challenges I noticed while reviewing LMX literature is that trust, as a concept, is challenging to measure because it is influenced by personal experiences and contextual factors, making it difficult to quantify (Migheli, 2012). Because of its abstract and relational nature, it is often explored through qualitative or empirical research. At the same time, this also makes LMX an ideal match for the kind of reflective, desk-based research I am conducting—where the goal is not just to gather facts but to understand the deeper dynamics that shape relationships in educational settings.

## **2.3 Ethical Consideration**

### **2.3.1 Use of AI Assistance and Plagiarism Considerations**

This study also acknowledges the use of AI language models, specifically ChatGPT, as a tool to support idea generation, paraphrasing assistance, and clarification of academic writing. However, the final decisions regarding the content, structure, and argumentation of the thesis were made by the author. To maintain academic integrity, any AI-generated content was reviewed, edited, and integrated critically, ensuring it aligned with the research goals and academic standards. In line with ethical academic practice, the study avoids any uncredited reproduction of existing sources, and great care has been taken to properly paraphrase and cite all references. This includes checking for unintentional plagiarism and ensuring that the voice of the thesis remains original and reflective of the author's perspective.

### **3 LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **3.1 Educational Leadership in Early Childhood Education**

Educational leadership, sometimes referred to as pedagogical leadership, was first introduced by Katz (1997). Katz (1997) explained that leaders in early childhood education have an important role in guiding teachers. They do that by encouraging them to engage and learn through research, helping them reflect their own beliefs and values regarding teaching and supporting them to think critically about new approaches to educating young children (Katz, 1997).

##### **3.1.1 Ambiguity in the Role and Definition of Early Childhood Educational Leaders**

In 1988, Cuban conducted a survey in which she found more than 350 different definitions of “leadership”, but no clear understanding of what separates leaders from non-leaders. Since then, the number of definitions has grown. Henderson (2017, p. 2) noted that in Australia, the role of educational leaders became more formal, and early versions of the National Quality Standards (NQS) used the term “pedagogical leader” to describe someone whose main job was to help other staff improve the quality of their programs. Pedagogical leadership thus centers on how teaching and learning happens—methods, techniques, assessment—and is primarily concerned with the teacher–student relationship (Hinchliffe, 2001).

Even though both pedagogical and educational leadership aim to enhance teaching and learning practices, educational leadership encompasses a broader network of relationships—among leaders, teachers, families, and policymakers (Hinchliffe, 2001). Therefore, educational leadership offers a more comprehensive lens for exploring the trust-based exchanges and collaborative dynamics between leaders and teachers in early childhood settings.

However, many educators often struggle to embrace their leadership roles, with studies like Grarock and Morrissey (2013) showing that early childhood teachers frequently felt unqualified to lead others in pedagogical development. Further-

more, many teachers in the Australian early childhood sector have reported feeling anxious and confused about the role of the Educational Leader, especially regarding the skills and knowledge needed, as well as how this role connects to broader educational changes (Fleet et al., 2015, p. 29). These challenges underscore the ongoing need for clarity regarding the responsibilities and qualifications required for educational leaders (Fleet et al., 2015).

### **3.1.2 Fostering Teachers' Growth and Advocating for Children's Needs**

While the definition of educational leadership has evolved and remains complex, its core purpose remains clear: fostering the professional growth of teachers by guiding and supporting them. This support enables educators to provide better learning environments for children, ensuring that leadership contributes to improved student outcomes.

More recent research (e.g., Carroll-Lind et al. 2016; Heikka & Waniganayake 2011; McDowall Clark & Murray 2012; Waniganayake, Cheeseman, Fenech, Hadley & Shepherd 2012) shows that leaders not only focus on improving the teaching practices of individual educators but also work to support and represent the interests of young children and the field of early childhood education.

This can involve speaking up for better policies, funding, or resources that will benefit both children and the educators who work with them. To be more precise, an example of advocating for the needs of young children is creating a better learning environment, for example by pushing for smaller class sizes. This change could allow teachers to give more individual attention to the students, which is crucial for their development. In the meantime, they could support teachers in the ECE sector, by securing better training and professional development opportunities, ensuring that educators are well-equipped to provide high-quality care and education. This example is also supported by Egert, Fukkink and Eckhardt (2018) study, which suggests that improved teacher outcomes, resulting from quality professional development, can enhance teaching practices and subsequently improve student learning and development. Heikka & Waniganayake (2011) added to this by saying that educational leaders also need to ensure that

everyone involved—teachers, staff, and administrators—have a shared understanding of the goals of teaching and learning in young children.

### **3.1.3 The Perks of Embracing Collaborative Leadership in Education**

Traditionally, leadership has been seen as the responsibility of one person in a specific role, rather than something shared among a group (Harris & Muijs, 2002). However, Ciulla (2003) observed the shift in definitions of leadership from the 40s to the 90s moving from a traditional, hierarchical model to a more collaborative relationship between leaders and their followers. More authors support this shift and suggest that schools should adopt a more democratic system, which allows teachers to have a direct impact on decision-making and school development (Katzenmayer & Moller, 2001). Hackney and Henderson (1999) argue that true democratic leadership in schools requires co-educating heads and teachers together, thereby dismantling traditional hierarchical divides and preparing all staff to participate equally in collaborative decision-making and governance. If schools aim to teach democratic values and help students to become engaged and thoughtful citizens, they should lead by example through using democratic and cooperative leadership practices (Hackney & Henderson, 1999). Teachers placed in leadership positions can develop a community that fosters democracy (Barth, 2001) and shape the school's direction, with even greater impact when combined with other leadership sources, leading to positive changes (Smylie et al., 2002). This belief is also supported by Katzenmayer and Moller (2001), who suggest that as teachers gain confidence in their leadership skills, they take on greater responsibilities across the school, which can positively impact teaching, learning, and school improvement.

To summarize, it's important to mention that educational leadership isn't just about managing or instructing—it's a deeper, ethical belief that teachers can create a better future by shaping how people understand things (Crowther et al., 2008, p. 10). Through their leadership, teachers can implement new practices that enhance the school's performance and the community's well-being, ultimately making a lasting, positive impact on education and society (Crowther et al., 2008, p. 10). With this foundation in mind, it is essential to delve into how

leadership styles have evolved from traditional hierarchies to more collaborative, democratic systems that reflect the needs of today's schools.

### **3.2 Styles of Leadership in Education**

Leadership in education has traditionally followed a hierarchical model, where authority and decision-making were concentrated at the top, often with a singular leader responsible for directing the entire organization. However, in recent years, there has been a noticeable shift towards more collaborative forms of leadership that emphasize shared responsibilities, teacher involvement, and collective problem-solving. Mincu's (2022) study highlights that this shift from the controlling hierarchical approach to collaborative framework benefits schools in various ways. It helps them to:

1. Embrace autonomy, which allows schools to build cohesive teams that support both organizational and instructional improvements
2. Foster a better teamwork environment
3. Promote a more participatory approach to leadership.

#### In this chapter we will:

- Give some insights into the hierarchical leadership approach
- Explore the movement from hierarchical to collaborative leadership
- And delve into various collaborative styles, their benefits and how they align with today's educational goals.

#### **3.2.1 Hierarchical Leadership**

School leadership is traditionally built on a structured, top-down system, where authority and decision-making are clearly defined within a hierarchical framework (Williams, 2006, p. 17). The system is guided by rules, policies, and formal roles, which tend to support a directive style of leadership (Williams, 2006, p. 17) in which leaders give instructions that are expected to be followed without much discussion. According to Ogawa and Bossert (2000), this technical-rational model of leadership focuses on the principal's control rather than collaborative practices.

In the past, school organizations relied on principals and few administrators for leadership (Sallis, 1996), while teachers, despite their central role in education, were often limited to informal or departmental responsibilities (Smylie, 1997). Ogawa and Bossert (2000) and Harris (2003), support that the hesitation to share leadership came from hierarchical organizational structures that defined the role of the principal and the way they had to communicate, which prevented them from involving the teachers in decision-making.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, principals were seen as central to school success, with effective leadership closely linked to their ability to guide and manage the school (Copland, 2001; Fullan, 1999, 1991; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Kimball & Sirotnik, 2000; K. Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; K. Leithwood, 1999). As the expectations and responsibilities of principals expanded, the effectiveness of this model was questioned. Principals were increasingly overwhelmed, unable to meet the growing demands by themselves, leading to continuous failures in meeting school goals (Copland, 2001; Kimball & Sirotnik, 2000).

This made clear that one person could not effectively manage all aspects of school leadership alone and highlighted the need for a more distributed form of leadership, where leadership responsibilities are shared among leaders, teachers and other staff members (Gronn, 2000; Spillane et al., 2001). Consequently, distributed leadership emerged as a response to the limitations of traditional, hierarchical models, with the recognition that engaging teachers and other staff members in leadership roles was essential for school success (Smylie et al., 2002).

This transition reflects a shift from a centralized leadership model, where principals were seen as the primary figure responsible for school success (Jackson, 2000) to a more collaborative framework. This emphasizes the necessity of shared leadership to address the complexities of modern educational environments.

### 3.2.2 Collaborative Leadership

In recent years, many schools have moved away from hierarchical structures towards collaborative leadership. This shift involves sharing leadership responsibilities across a group of people rather than concentrating it in one person (Lambert, 1998).

This shift allows positional leaders, such as headteachers, department heads and school administrators, to move beyond the traditional leader/follower dynamic, recognizing leadership as distributed among both formal and informal leaders (Colmer et al., 2014, p. 105). Rather than relying on a single individual to lead, collaborative leadership models, such as distributed, participative and facilitative encourage a collective approach, where responsibility is shared among formal and informal leaders alike (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006, p. 20). This means that the formal leaders, instead of seeing themselves as the main figure who gives orders while others follow, they recognise that leadership is shared, so is power and responsibility, between formal and informal leaders (e.g. teachers).

This approach values the contributions of all school professionals in driving change, using their expertise through teamwork and collective effort to put ideas into action (Clarkin-Phillips, 2018, p. 22). The role of principal remains a vital figure in schools worldwide yet, based on the OECD (2008, p. 31), it faces two key challenges. First, current principals—many of whom began their careers under very different expectations—require retraining to meet today's educational demands. This should involve targeted in-service workshops on distributed leadership practices, alongside revised terms of service, reward systems, and incentives that reflect the complexity of modern school environments. By combining robust professional development with meaningful recognition, principals will be better equipped to lead effectively and remain motivated. Second, countries must also invest in educating and mentoring the next generation of school leaders—through clear role definitions, professional recruitment and succession planning, targeted training, and supportive working conditions—to ensure a strong pipeline of capable educational leaders into the future.

So, to achieve positive educational outcomes, principal's leadership should create the conditions necessary for both collaborative and distributed leadership to flourish (Colmer et al., 2014; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006).

Furthermore, leadership styles that emphasize shared decision-making, offer autonomy and flexibility in roles, and prioritize ongoing communication and feedback between staff members have been linked to improvements in job performance and better student learning outcome (Bettini et al., 2016; Simon & Johnson, 2015; Stewart-Banks et al., 2015). Although there is little comparable data, OECD (2008) country reports highlight that fostering collaborative work cultures has become a core responsibility for school leaders. This means actively encouraging teachers to collaborate as a team and creating an environment where student learning and development are the primary focus (OECD Publishing et al., 2008, p. 50). In Nordic systems such as Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, team-based teaching has long been the norm, while countries like Ireland are now actively encouraging similar practices (OECD Publishing et al., 2008, p. 50). Denmark in particular notes that its recent curriculum reforms have increased the need for multidisciplinary collaboration among teachers (OECD Publishing et al., 2008, p. 50).

These approaches create a more inclusive and adaptable environment where teachers feel empowered to contribute actively, resulting in more engaged staff and students, as well as enhanced overall school performance.

### **3.2.3 Distributed Leadership**

Distributed leadership has various theoretical interpretations, but it generally involves concepts such as interdependence, shared leadership practices, and a focus on professional learning (Harris, 2009). As we can understand from the name of the leadership model, it distributes responsibilities across a group rather than concentrating power in a single leader (Lewis & Murphy, 2008, p. 9). At the same time, this approach doesn't eliminate the vital role that formal leader, such as head teachers and principals still play, in guiding the process and ensuring that leadership efforts are coordinated (Glatter, 2009; Lewis & Murphy, 2008). The concept of distributed leadership in the literature emphasizes leadership as

something that happens through interactions with others, fostering collaboration and building relationships, rather than just through specific actions or tasks. This suggests that the influence of leaders comes from how they engage with others, rather than from their individual actions alone (Clarkin-Phillips, 2007; Thornton et al., 2009).

For example, in a school setting, a principal might lead not just by making decisions or giving instructions, but by building strong connections with teachers and staff, encouraging them to contribute ideas, and working collaboratively to reach goals. Imagine a principal at a school (regardless of the grade or the age group) who recognizes the need to improve the students' reading outcomes or the need for addressing students' behavioral issues. Instead of deciding a solution alone and instructing teachers on what to do, the principal takes a distributed leadership approach and takes the teachers' opinion and suggested solutions into consideration. This way, the influence of leadership stems from the relationships they cultivate, which leads to shared responsibility and collective action, rather than top-down directives. In other words, leadership in this model is about building relationships and collaborative engagement, rather than simply directing or instructing others (Colmer et al., 2014, p. 105).

By bringing together the efforts of several leaders, distributed leadership creates the conditions of a more effective school leadership, as it benefits from the skills and perspectives of multiple people rather than relying on just one individual (K. Leithwood et al., 2008, 2020).

### **3.2.4 Effective Distributed Leadership Patterns**

Additionally, certain patterns of distribution prove to be more effective than others. The effectiveness of the leadership is defined by how it is distributed and why (Leithwood, Mascall & Strauss 2009; Harris, 2009) based on the school context in which it is applied (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006, p. 14). This is where situational and responsive leadership come into play, as both approaches emphasize the need for flexibility and adaptability in leadership, tailoring strategies based on understanding the specific context and evolving needs of the school.

**Situational leadership** emphasizes the need for leaders to consider both the context in which they are operating and the people they are leading (Southworth, 1998). It is essential to recognize that educational contexts vary significantly at every level. Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2006, p. 14) highlight that the needs and circumstances can differ greatly between individual students, their families, and the broader communities they come from. These differences are often shaped by various factors, such as socio-economic background, ethnicity, cultural values, and local community dynamics (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006, p. 14). It is also important to consider the differences between each school's environment dynamics and how they are constantly evolving (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006, p. 14). For example, every year might have changes in staff or student population. Therefore, effective leadership recognizes and adapts to these differences to better meet the unique needs of each student and their community and needs of school and staff, ensuring continuous adjustments and growth (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006, p. 14).

Lewis and Murphy (2008, p. 8), highlight another effective leadership practice called "Responsive leadership". In their report "Review of the Landscape: Leadership and Leadership Development" (2008) mention that responsive leadership is a flexible leadership style that adapts to the changing needs and context of a school. It emphasizes the importance of adjusting leadership strategies to both short-term issues, such as staff shortages, and long-term patterns, like student development over the school year. A key element of this leadership model is that it continuously evolves based on factors like the school's culture, community values, and external change. Some real-life examples of these factors could be:

- **School's culture** may involve respecting diverse cultural backgrounds by implementing inclusive teaching practices.
- **Community values** can be about engaging with parents and local organizations to better support student needs.
- **External changes**, such as new educational policies that require schools to incorporate technology into classrooms or shifts in societal expectations that may call for a stronger focus on student mental health and well-being.

The understanding of the context ensures that the leadership approach stays relevant and aligned with the evolving needs of both the school and its surrounding environment.

In essence, both situational and responsive leadership share similarities (Table 1, Lewis & Murphy, 2008; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006; Southworth, 1998), as both emphasize the importance of understanding that every school context and environment needs are different. For that reason, they underline the necessity to tailor leadership strategies to make sure they effectively meet the diverse and evolving needs of all stakeholders.

TABLE 1: Overview of the effective key elements of the effective distributed leadership patterns (Situational and Responsive leadership)

<b>Effective key elements</b>	<b>Situational leadership</b>	<b>Responsive leadership</b>
Context awareness	Adjusts style based on immediate context and people.	Maintains awareness of complex and changing environments
Adaptability	Adapts to specific evolving situations.	Continuously adapts to short-term and long-term changes.
Understanding Culture	Considers school's internal culture and dynamics.	Focuses on broader school culture and community values.
Tailored strategies	Customizes strategies based on the situation.	Adjusts strategies to ongoing changes and external factors.
Collaboration	Encourages teamwork.	Promotes collaboration and shared decision-making.

### **3.3 The Role of Early Childhood Educational (ECE) Leaders**

#### **3.3.1 Definition and Role of ECE Leaders**

The concept of leadership in early childhood education (ECE) lacks a broadly accepted or standard definition (Hughes et al., 2023, p. 1133). Because leadership in ECE encompasses such a wide range of contexts and roles, scholars doubt that one definition can cover its full complexity (Fasoli et al., 2007; Manjula Waniganayake & Anthony Semann, 2011). As a result, the quest to develop a practical, consensus definition is still explored (Hughes et al., 2023, p. 1133).

Despite this ambiguity, the role of an Early Childhood Educational Leader is broadly recognized as pivotal. "Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority" (ACECQA, 2018) supports that an early childhood educational leader can be a teacher, manager, or diploma-qualified educator with suitable qualifications and experience. They support that the educational leader's main job is to guide the curriculum, ensuring it's well-planned, implemented, and evaluated to support children's learning outcomes (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2018, p. 13). Similarly, the Education and Care Services National Regulations emphasize that an experienced and well-qualified educator or coordinator should take the lead in shaping the curriculum, ensuring clear objectives and expectations for both teaching and learning (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011, p. 335). This alignment highlights a shared understanding of the educational leader's role in shaping effective learning environments.

However, despite this common ground, there is still uncertainty regarding what the role entails in practice. Many professionals in the Australian early childhood sector have reported feeling unclear and confused about the expectations, necessary qualifications, and professional expertise required for the role (Fleet et al., 2015, p. 29).

Several studies have explored and highlighted the essential qualities and values that preschool educational leaders should have. However, they also reveal ambiguity surrounding the role due to variations in responsibilities. A closer look at real-world examples can illustrate these challenges. Colmer et al. (2014), in their

article “Leading professional learning in early childhood centres: Who are the educational leaders?”, conducted two case studies as part of a larger research project that focused on the key finding of 'Director as Overall Educational Leader' (106), offering insight into how leadership was enacted and perceived in practice.

- In case study 1, the director positioned herself as the primary educational leader, taking full responsibility for shaping the center’s pedagogy. She played a direct role in decision-making, particularly regarding professional development, by selecting training opportunities for specific staff members and promoting her vision for the center. Her leadership was highly visible, as she actively guided staff towards targeted learning experiences and ensured professional growth aligned with her educational goals.
- In case study 2, the director took a more facilitative approach, focusing on monitoring how educators interpreted the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) and encouraging discussions among staff. Instead of directly overseeing professional development, she delegated this responsibility to the assistant director, who played a more active role in daily operations and staff support. Decisions about professional learning were made collaboratively between the director and assistant director.

However, despite these distinct leadership styles, survey data revealed that staff in both centers had mixed perceptions about the director’s role in leading professional development, indicating a lack of clarity regarding leadership responsibilities (Colmer et al., 2014, p. 106).

Barnes, Hadley, and Cheeseman (2019) conducted research on preschool educational leaders, exploring the key personal qualities of effective leaders. When educators were asked about the most important traits, they highlighted strong communication skills, deep professional knowledge and the ability to build positive relationships, and enthusiasm (Barnes et al., 2019, p. 357). Hughes, Kilderry and Keamy (2023), undertook research using the shadow methodology and highlighted that preschool educational leaders foster trust-based relationships by prioritizing staff well-being and creating spaces for open collaboration. More specifically, through daily interactions, leaders demonstrate relational trust by ensuring staff feel comfortable and valued, particularly in meetings where open communication is encouraged (Hughes et al., 2023, p. 1140). The Leithwood & Day (2008,

pp. 50–51) study agrees and builds on that by emphasizing that effective educational leaders promote and model respect and trust, demonstrating honesty, integrity, and encouragement, while also fostering autonomy among staff. Table 2 (“Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA),” 2018; Barnes et al., 2019; Colmer et al., 2014; K. Leithwood & Day, 2008) compares how different sources characterize the core leadership roles of early childhood educational leaders, showing where they overlap and where each emphasizes particular practices.

TABLE 2: Key leadership roles in ECE settings, as described across studies.

<b>Key role</b>	<b>Leithwood &amp; Day (2008)</b>	<b>Colmer et al. (2014) - Case study 1</b>	<b>Colmer et al. (2014) - Case study 2</b>	<b>ACECQA (2018)</b>	<b>Barne, Hadley &amp; Cheeseman (2019)</b>
<b>Curriculum leader</b>	-	Directly shapes pedagogy and professional development.	Monitors curriculum implementation, encourages discussion.	Guides curriculum planning, implementation, and evaluation.	
<b>Decision-Making</b>	-	Makes key decisions about professional development.	Shares decision-making with assistant director.	Ensures clear goals and expectations.	
<b>Professional Development (PD)</b>	-	Selects training for staff, actively involved.	Delegates PD responsibility, supports collaboration.		Encourages professional growth.

<b>Building Relationships</b>	Models respect, trust, honesty and encouragement. Fosters autonomy.	Provides direct guidance and vision.	Encourages teamwork and discussion.		Strong communication and trust-building.
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Overall, the role of an educational leader in early childhood education remains complex, with research highlighting significant variations in responsibilities and ongoing uncertainty regarding its scope and expectations. This highlights the continued need for further exploration and clarity regarding its definition and practical application. Despite differences in leadership styles, a consistent theme across studies is the critical role of professional relationships, trust, and collaboration in fostering effective leadership within ECE settings.

### **3.3.2 The Role of the Educational Leader in Early Childhood Education: A Leadership Styles Perspective**

There are many theories that shape the way we understand leadership in education, which are being explored and implemented in the early childhood sector (Colmer et al., 2014, p. 105; Hughes et al., 2023, p. 1133). Styles like distributed leadership, acknowledge the capabilities of all professionals in education that can contribute in order to bring some change (Lewis & Murphy, 2008), which can be accomplished through collaboration and collective actions (Clarkin-Phillips, 2018, p. 22). This leadership style is particularly suited to early childhood settings due to the relational nature of teaching (Hughes et al., 2023, p. 1133).

The key traits of distributed leadership include shared responsibility, collaborative leadership actions, and ongoing professional growth (Harris, 2009). To achieve positive educational outcomes, Siraj-Blatchford & Manni (2006) found that it is a combination of the leader's guidance and a collaborative approach to leadership. Leadership can be distributed in multiple ways, but formal leadership structures remain important (Glatter, 2009). Site leaders, such as directors or principals,

play a key role in coordinating leadership (Lewis & Murphy, 2008) and establishing the foundation required for effective collaborative and distributed leadership (Colmer et al., 2014, p. 104). At the same time, unlike hierarchical models, where leadership is concentrated at the top, distributed leadership encourages the responsibilities to be shared among both site leaders (principals, directors, head teachers etc.) and informal leaders (teachers, mentors etc.) (Colmer et al., 2014, p. 105).

Colmer et al. (2014) provide a valuable example of how distributed and collaborative leadership function in early childhood education. Their study highlights that directors viewed leadership as a shared responsibility, emphasizing that room leaders played a crucial role in fostering professional development and applying learning in daily practice. One key finding was that room leaders actively supported their teams by mentoring staff, guiding professional learning, and ensuring that new knowledge was integrated into daily teaching practices (Colmer et al., 2014, p. 108). This demonstrates how collaborative leadership strengthens professional development by creating a culture of shared learning, where teachers continuously grow through peer support rather than relying solely on top-down directives. It reflects the essence of collaborative leadership, where leadership is not confined to a single individual but is instead distributed among educators who take on different leadership roles.

Overall, the concept of distributed leadership emphasizes leadership as a shared practice rather than just individual actions (Clarkin-Phillips, 2007; Thornton et al., 2009). Instead of focusing on what leaders should do, it highlights the interactions and relationships among team members that shape leadership dynamics (Colmer et al., 2014, p. 105). This perspective suggests that leadership influence comes from collaboration and relational connections rather than from a leader's specific tasks or decisions alone.

A genuine approach to shared decision-making is based on the idea that involving teachers leads to better decisions since they are directly engaged in daily practices and may have insights that leaders do not (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, p. 30). When administrators allow teachers to have real influence in decision-making, it shows trust and respect, which, in turn, makes them more likely to be

trusted by their staff (Hoy & Tarter, 2008; Moye et al., 2005; Short & Greer, 2002). This openness in leadership comes from confidence in teachers' competence and reliability, as well as a willingness to distribute important tasks rather than maintaining strict control over decisions (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, pp. 30–31). When school leaders share authority and involve teachers in decision-making, they build trust and strengthen teachers' sense of professionalism, which makes them feel valued (Louis, 1995; Marks & Louis, 1997). By fostering openness, leaders lay the foundation for a culture of trust within the organisation, strengthening relationships (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, p. 31).

By adopting collaborative leadership styles, educational leaders in ECE can cultivate positive relationships with teachers, creating an environment that supports ongoing professional development and shared responsibility. This foundation of trust and collaboration not only strengthens professional partnerships but also sets the stage for exploring how trust-based relationships between leaders and teachers further shape the effectiveness of leadership in ECE settings.

### **3.3.3 Trust-based Relationships**

Teachers and principals rely on each other in their shared mission of educating students, making them mutually dependent and influenced by one another's decisions and actions. Because of this, the relationship between teachers and school leaders offers valuable insight into the level of trust within a school environment (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, p. 21).

Masionis (2023) and Tschannen-Moran (2014, pp. 24,30) stress the importance of employees feeling safe and the role of fear in the workplace. Employees should not fear management but instead feel secure enough to be themselves, which fosters trust, openness, and active participation in the school's culture (Masionis, 2023). To build this trust, principals must create an environment where teachers feel comfortable voicing frustrations, even when it involves criticizing leadership decisions (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, p. 30). When trust is present, employees engage more, collaborate openly, and seek help without fear of judgment or dependence on others, leading to a more supportive and dynamic workplace (Jones & George, 1998; Tschannen-Moran, 2014, p. 24).

The importance of trust and a supportive leadership approach is further highlighted in research by Silva, Amante and Morgado (2017), who found that teachers are most engaged in collaboration when they receive professional development support and encouragement from their leaders. Similarly, King and Stevenson (2017) emphasized the value of a collaborative leadership, built on trust where principals support teachers, by providing teachers with time to plan, reflect, and engage in team teaching. Such examples show effective leadership practices, where leaders are willing to take risks, even in an educational system that emphasizes standardization, measurable outcomes, and performance-driven results (Postholm, 2019, p. 439). Postholm (2019, p. 446), also confirmed in his study that creating a culture of collaboration between teachers can contribute positively to their well-being. A supportive and empathetic environment helps educators feel connected, reduces stress, and encourages collaboration, allowing them to focus more on their students and enjoy their work (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016).

The facets of trust, as identified by Tschannen-Moran (2014), can sum up the important aspects of trust that were previously mentioned. Trust in leadership is built upon several key elements—benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence—all of which shape the way relationships function in a school setting (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, p. 21).

Leaders build trust when they demonstrate **benevolence** by showing genuine care and support for teachers' well-being and needs while also respecting their rights (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, p. 23). This facet of trust is reflected in actions such as expressing appreciation for teachers' hard work, which, in turn, fosters a positive environment. When teachers feel valued, they are more open to feedback and motivated to contribute more to their work and meet the leader's expectations (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, p. 24).

Another essential element of trust is **honesty**, which leaders cultivate by acting with integrity, keeping their promises, and staying true to their word. When educators can confidently rely on a leader to follow through on commitments—

whether verbal or written—it reinforces a culture of trust and reliability (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, p. 26).

Closely connected to honesty is **openness**, a key facet of trust that encourages honest communication between principals and teachers. When leaders freely share their thoughts and ideas, it fosters trust and, in turn, makes teachers more willing to express their own perspectives (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, p. 29). By creating an environment where teachers feel safe voicing concerns—even those that challenge leadership decisions—principals cultivate a culture of transparency that strengthens relationships of trust and supports school improvement (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, p. 31).

Equally important is **reliability**, which plays a crucial role in building trust by ensuring consistency in leadership actions. Trust in school leaders is strengthened when their declared values, goals, and actions align, demonstrating that their behavior is consistent (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, p. 33).

Trust serves as the foundation for collaboration, shared decision-making, and professional growth, making it a critical element in shaping strong educational leadership. When trust is present, it fosters open communication, mutual respect, and a culture of support, enabling both leaders and teachers to work together toward shared goals and long-term school improvement.

### **3.4 Leader-Member exchange (LMX) Theory**

#### **3.4.1 The Evolution of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory: From VDL to Relationship-Based Leadership**

The leader-member exchange (LMX) theory was initially referred to as vertical dyad linkage (VDL) approach and it was originally introduced during the 1970's by Dansereau, Graen, and colleagues (Dansereau et al., 1975). Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) in their article present the stages of evolution of the LMX theory, starting from stage 1: vertical dyad linkage (VDL) approach, all the way to stage 4 to “a network of relationships based on mutual dependencies” (G. B. Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 234).

The VDL approach was more focused on the leader (G. B. Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 226) and their different types of dyadic relationships with their followers, “in-group” and “out-group” (Kah Loong Leow, 2011, p. 130). Followers in the “in-group” developed high-quality relationships with their leader, making them the ones the leader trusted to seek help (Brower et al., 2000, p. 229; G. B. Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 227). In contrast, followers in the “out-group” built lower-quality relationships characterized by less trust and were simply expected to do what was required (Zalesny & Graen, 1987).

Later, there was a shift to the terminology from VDL to LMX (G. Graen et al., 1982). LMX theory is a leadership approach focused on the creation of relations (Bauer & Erdogan, 2015, p. 20) that offers insights into the dynamics of the interactions between managers and their subordinates, from a relationship-based perspective (G. B. Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Olutade et al., 2015; Power, 2013). It delves into how these relationships are formed and developed and how they impact organizational effectiveness (G. B. Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 229). The LMX model suggests that leaders form different types of exchange relationships with their subordinates (Sparrowe & Liden, 1997). Dienesch and Liden (1986) noted that these relationships develop in various ways—with supervisors forming high-quality exchanges with a few key employees (high-LMX) while maintaining lower-quality exchanges with others (low-LMX). The theory highlights the effectiveness of high-quality relationships and how both leaders and followers contribute to, and benefit from them (G. B. Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

### **3.4.2 LMX High-Quality Relationships and Their Key Aspects**

The 3 key elements of LMX theory that define high-quality relationships are: respect, trust and commitment (G. B. Graen et al., 2006; G. B. Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Liden, Wayne and Stilwell (1993) support that leader-member relationships improve over time when both employees and leaders reciprocate each other's efforts, building mutual trust and high-quality LMX. These reflect mutual appreciation for each other's skills, an increasing level of trust between both parties, and a strong sense of responsibility to support one another in the work relationship (G. B. Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). When both the leader and the employee

fulfil their duties, the LMX relationship will gradually grow (Bauer & Erdogan, 2015, p. 58).

Achieving a high-quality relationship with someone, means reaching a mature stage of the relationship (G. B. Graen et al., 2006, p. 452), which indicates that both parties trust each other to be loyal to each other and can depend on one another for support (G. B. Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 230). In this give-and-take interaction, it is important for leaders to show genuine care for their followers' professional growth and well-being—by actively engaging with their team, offering valuable support, and encouraging open communication—while followers give back by being loyal to the organization, following the leader's guidelines, and fulfilling their job responsibilities (Liang & Yin, 2024, p. 4).

This shift to a mature partnership involves members moving beyond their individual self-interests to prioritize shared goals (Burns, 1978). Employees understand that by contributing to shared goals within a partnership, they also fulfill their own interests (G. B. Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 223). In this partnership stage, hierarchical lines become blurred, creating a peer-like dynamic (G. B. Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 223). This strong bond empowers employees with the resources and support to take on additional responsibilities within the organization (G. B. Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 223).

Successful teams also facilitate the quicker and more effective adaptation of new employees, helping them grow in their performance as they experience a strong, supportive team dynamic (Chen, 2005; G. B. Graen et al., 2006, p. 458). It is important for leaders to try and build high-quality LMX relationships with all the team members, knowing that these connections boost the team's overall potential (G. B. Graen et al., 2006, p. 458). Likewise, followers should also put effort into developing a strong LMX with their leader, as the success of their outcomes depends on the strength of the team (G. B. Graen et al., 2006, p. 458)

### 3.4.3 High-Quality LMX: Effective Leadership Practices Built on Trust

LMX theory emphasizes the leader's role in supporting and empowering team members (Dansereau et al., 1975), with high-quality LMX relationships providing the guidance, resources, and support needed for their development and growth (T.-Y. Kim et al., 2022). Wei, Song and He (2017), support that when leaders empower their employees to take initiatives and give them space to express their creativity, they create the foundation for a culture of trust, thereby promoting effective leadership.

The concept of trust and its relationship with different factors in work organizations has mostly been explored through frameworks grounded in LMX theory (Deluga, 1994). Hirvi, Laulainen and Taskinen (2020, p. 20) noted that research has revealed strong links between trust and LMX theory. For example, Brower et al. (2000), demonstrated that merging trust and LMX concepts in a relational leadership model improves our understanding of leadership development, as both areas share similar trust-building processes.

LMX theory shows that leaders empower their teams by giving them the freedom of decision-making (Volmer et al., 2012), and those who actively engage in these processes and take on responsibility are more likely to earn their leaders' trust and empowerment (Chiu et al., 2016). This creates a positive atmosphere in the workplace, encouraging team members to share and learn from one another, which enhances their collective performance and fosters innovation (Liang & Yin, 2024, p. 4). Therefore, it is important for leaders to focus on fostering trust-based relationships with their followers, strengthening both their professional and personal interactions (Zhichao & Li, 2012).

### **3.4.4 The Balance of Trust and Professionalism in High-Quality LMX Relationships**

An interesting aspect of high-quality relationships, according to Graen, Hui and Taylor (2006, 456), is that a leader is expected to build a relationship based on trust, respect, and commitment without becoming overly friendly. However, Bauer and Erdogan (2015, 3) also emphasize the importance of trust, respect for each other and effective communication in building high-quality relationships, but they argue that leaders should be closer and more friendly with their followers. More specifically, Hirvi and al. (2020, 19), mention that as the relationship grows positively, it transforms to partnership, where both parties become more comfortable and their communication grows more informal. It is notable how the core elements of a high-quality LMX relationship—trust, respect, and commitment—have remained consistent, while the leader's approach to the relationship and the resulting communication evolved through the years into a more friendly, less hierarchical dynamic.

### **3.4.5 The Influence of LMX Relationship Quality on Turnover Intentions**

Another interesting aspect of LMX is that it appears to have a significant impact on followers' decisions regarding whether to quit or remain in their current positions (Chiu et al., 2016). More specifically, positive LMX relationships help employees feel respected and contribute their ideas, reducing quitting intentions (Adil & Awais, 2016). When employees feel that their leader and the organization treat them with respect and fairness, by giving value to their contributions, considering their ideas, and involving them in decisions, their trust in the organization grows (Liang & Yin, 2024, pp. 3–4). As a result, the employees' job satisfaction and loyalty are increasing, and their turnover intentions are decreasing (Liang & Yin, 2024, pp. 3–4).

On the contrary, a poor LMX relationship that lacks mutual understanding, and communication increases employees' desire to quit (Agarwal et al., 2012). At the same time, B. Peter Kim et al. (2010) argue that, regardless of the quality of the LMX relationship, there is a high likelihood that an employee has a desire to quit. (Nguyen & Uong, 2025) recent empirical research findings support the idea that

when organizations implement high-quality LMX practices, employees become more satisfied and committed, which in turn reduces their desire to quit and improves overall performance. Therefore, their findings offer a promising recommendation to leaders: leadership style is a fundamental factor in a company's turnover rates (Nguyen & Uong, 2025, pp. 58–59).

Overall, LMX theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the evolving dynamics of leader–follower relationships. The theory demonstrates that high-quality exchanges, built on mutual trust, respect, and commitment, encourage collaboration between leadership and staff—moving away from a strictly hierarchical, top-down approach (Bauer & Erdogan, 2015). Effective leadership processes emerge when leaders and followers cultivate and sustain these high-quality social exchange relationships (G. B. Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 229), ultimately fostering supportive work environments, enhancing organizational performance, and reducing employee turnover.

#### **3.4.6 Conclusion: LMX Application to Leader-Teacher Dynamics**

Both educational leadership and LMX theory underscore the importance of relationships, trust, and shared leadership in creating effective leadership practices. Research indicates that leadership does not have to be confined to a single individual but can be distributed among various members of the school community, including teachers, administrators, and staff. Rather than being tied to a specific role or status, leadership is better understood as a dynamic process shaped by interactions and connections among individuals within an educational setting (Day et al., 2001; Harris, 2002; Harris & Muijs, 2002; MacBeath, 1998).

While educational leadership highlights the benefits of collaborative leadership structures, LMX theory provides a framework for analyzing the interpersonal relationships that support these models. In schools, effective leadership is reflected in the way staff and administrators work together to implement best practices, fostering a cooperative environment that prioritizes shared decision-making rather than a rigid, top-down management style (Ansley, Blinder, et al., 2019, p. 191).

By combining these perspectives, educational leaders can adopt strategies that enhance mentorship, build trust-based professional relationships, and promote inclusive and participatory learning environments. Establishing strong, trust-based relationships between teachers and school leaders fosters an environment of mutual respect, open communication, and shared responsibility. Mutual trust between leaders and teachers has been found to be a critical factor in raising teacher morale, collective self-efficacy, job satisfaction (Zheng et al., 2019) and commitment to the organization (Hulpia et al., 2009). This trust is essential for collaboration, as it enables teachers to feel supported, valued, and empowered in their roles (L. Liu et al., 2024).

Furthermore, leader consistency in following through on programs and promises enhances the trust that teachers have in their school leaders, reinforcing long-term engagement and collaboration (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). When trust is embedded in leadership practices, schools experience increased engagement, improved job satisfaction among teachers, and a stronger commitment to collective goals (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Ultimately, cultivating these relationships contributes to a more effective and successful school, benefiting both educators and students alike (L. Liu et al., 2024).

## 4 DISCUSSION

Throughout this research journey, key themes emerged from the literature that shaped my understanding of the role of educational leaders in the ECE sector and the importance of building and maintaining strong relationships between leaders and teachers. This discussion critically explores those themes through the lens of the research questions, drawing on insights from collaborative leadership styles and the LMX framework. The aim is to reflect on what it takes to create trust-based relationships in early childhood education and offer a set of concrete, LMX-guided strategies that ECE leaders can use to build—and maintain—the trusting, collaborative environment.

### 4.1 Fostering Trust and Collaboration in ECE Settings

*RQ1: How do early childhood educational (ECE) leaders foster trust-based relationships with teachers, and what are the key factors influencing collaboration?*

To begin with, in the ECE sector, the role of an educational leader has not always been clearly defined. There is often confusion and overlap in how this role is understood and implemented (Barnes et al., 2019, p. 361; Fleet et al., 2015, p. 29).

Despite this complexity, one point remains consistent: a leader's core responsibility is not just managing tasks or overseeing the curriculum, but as Hughes, Kilderry and Keamy (2023) supports by fostering relationships among the staff within the workplace and making sure of the teachers' well-being.

In early childhood education, where navigating emotions is a key part of teachers' job, the need for trust and emotional support from the leaders is essential (Denee & Thornton, 2017; K. Leithwood et al., 2020; Petty et al., 2012; Simon & Johnson, 2015; Stewart-Banks et al., 2015). To support teachers' overall well-being, it is vital to create a professional community where educators can lean on one another. For example, in Henderson's (2017, p. 395) research at one of the schools where the study took place, a team of teachers worked extra hours on a project. Because no formal planning time was built into the schedule, their meetings continually conflicted with other duties. Without dedicated support from leadership, it was challenging for the teachers to keep the project going, and eventually their

enthusiasm and progress began to decrease. In such a context, a leader who understands the reality of the classroom and builds on effective professional principles, offers supportive structures, essential to collaboration (e.g. planning time, access to resources supportive leader, collectively agreed goals etc.), teachers' motivation and interactive engagement (e.g. guided reflection, hands-on pedagogical practice), can make all the difference into building relationships of trust (Burgess et al., 2010, p. 52).

With this foundation in mind, here are some concrete ways that leaders can turn these effective professional principles into daily practice:

- **Weekly informal huddles:** Start each week with a brief meeting where teachers share classroom successes and challenges, showcasing strong communication skills and genuine care for staff well-being (Barnes et al., 2019). These brief meetings can be formal or informal, for example sitting on the floor or standing up in a circle, based on the team's needs or preferences.
- **Dedicated open-dialogue time:** Reserve part of staff meetings for unstructured discussion—ensuring all voices are heard without judgment—to foster collaboration and reinforce relational trust (Hughes et al., 2023).
- **Keep your promises:** Follow through on commitments (and admit honestly when plans change), modelling integrity and respect (K. Leithwood & Day, 2008; Tschannen-Moran, 2014)
- **Open-door policy:** Let teachers know they can drop by any time for support, guidance, or an informal chat (Hughes et al., 2023). This approach helps teachers feel safe to approach their leader and share concerns without fear (Masionis, 2023; Tschannen-Moran, 2014).
- **Offer shared leadership opportunities:** Invite teachers to co-design curriculum units or lead team projects, signaling confidence in their autonomy and empowering them to innovate and collaborate (Barnes et al., 2019; K. Leithwood & Day, 2008)

In practice, in order for these practices to be effective, leaders must first assess their own school's culture, staff strengths, and community realities—then tailor each practice to fit (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006). For example, a weekly “huddle” might look different in a high teacher-student ratio classroom than in a small

sized classroom; open-dialogue time could be scheduled more frequently in teams with high turnover; and shared-leadership projects should align with each teacher's expertise and the school's immediate priorities. This need to adapt and respond to changing contexts reflects the core of situational leadership, ensuring that trust-building practices truly meet the unique needs of each educational setting (Southworth, 1998).

But collaboration does not just happen automatically. For someone to feel comfortable reaching out, they first need to identify who they trust—and feel safe enough to be vulnerable. Denee and Thornton (2017) agree with that by supporting that emotional support is the foundation to building relationships of trust. Interestingly, some of the strongest bonds form during moments of shared challenge or responsibility, a key feature of distributive leadership's main traits (Harris, 2009). Facing difficulties together—especially when the team works toward a shared goal—can foster empathy, solidarity, and ultimately trust.

What's often overlooked is that trust is not built through grand gestures—it's cultivated in the everyday moments (Hughes et al., 2023), and as Tschannen-Moran (2014) supports, through openness. Some examples could be:

- How a leader reacts to a mistake — by meeting afterward to debrief the incident, asking “What happened?” and “How can I help you recover?” before co-designing a revised approach.
- How they listen during a difficult conversation — by setting aside 30 minutes in a quiet space, paraphrasing the teacher's concerns back (“So you're feeling ...”), and asking open-ended follow-up questions to ensure they feel fully heard.
- How they support a teacher's choice even if the outcome is uncertain — by publicly acknowledging the experiment in a staff meeting, celebrating the learning gained, and offering extra planning time and resources to refine the approach next term.

These small everyday interactions of leadership matter. They communicate care, reliability, and respect, which are the key elements of any trusting relationship (Hoy & Tarter, 2008; Moye et al., 2005; Short & Greer, 1997).

One of the most effective ways for leaders to build this kind of environment is by giving teachers autonomy and showing that they trust their professional judgment. When teachers feel they have the freedom to respond to challenges in their own way, they are more likely to trust their leader in return, because they see that their leader gives them a voice (King & Stevenson, 2017; Silva et al., 2017). Importantly, it's not about the leader stepping in to solve every problem, but about being available, approachable, and respectful of each teacher's process (Louis, 1995; Marks & Louis, 1997). This approach sends a clear message: "I trust you, and I am here if you need me."

At the same time, another way for a leader to show trust and appreciation toward teachers is by offering them leadership responsibilities (Vasquez-Levy & Timmerman, 2000). Providing opportunities for shared decision-making and distributed responsibility communicates that their contributions are valued. This can also serve as a meaningful opportunity for professional growth—especially for those educators who are interested in gaining more leadership experience as part of their future career goals. This echoes Silva, Amante and Morgado's (2017) findings that teachers collaborate most when leaders actively support their professional development and offer encouragement.

An example could be teaching the teachers how to mentor newer colleagues or support peers, which helps them build the confidence and skills to guide others. It offers a safe and supportive space where they can grow, take initiative, and develop their leadership skills while knowing that a trusted leader is nearby to offer guidance. When teachers feel empowered in this way, open communication is more likely to flourish, and they are more willing to take risks, reflect on their practice, and continue learning. Ultimately, this approach builds on interactions and relationships among team members, which as Colmer et al., (2014) support, shapes leadership dynamics.

It's also important to recognize that not every teacher will wish to take on formal leadership duties. Some educators prefer to devote their energy entirely to classroom practice, finding fulfillment in direct work with children rather than in administrative or mentoring roles. Respecting these individual preferences is itself a powerful demonstration of trust: by allowing teachers to opt out of leadership tasks without judgment, leaders honor their colleagues' professional identities

and strengths. This choice empowers teachers to excel where they feel most effective and prevents overloading those who are less comfortable with extra responsibilities. In turn, voluntary participation in leadership activities becomes a genuine vote of confidence—fueled by trust—rather than an imposed requirement, which further strengthens workplace relationships and overall job satisfaction.

It's important to see collaboration and trust as essential elements of a school's daily functioning. When leaders consistently create conditions for shared responsibility and emotional safety, these values become part of how the team operates, not just something they aspire to. Table 3 (Barnes et al., 2019; Hughes et al., 2023; Masionis, 2023; Silva et al., 2017; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006; Tschannen-Moran, 2014) summarizes the key practices mentioned above that ECE leaders can use to foster trust-based relationships and collaboration, with evidence from the literature.

TABLE 3: Key practices ECE leaders can use to foster trust-based relationships and collaboration, with evidence from literature.

<b>Practice</b>	<b>Key Trust/Collaboration Factor</b>	<b>Source</b>
Weekly informal huddles	Strong communication & staff well-being	Barnes et al. (2019)
Dedicated open-dialogue time	Psychological safety & relational trust	Hughes et al. (2023)
Keeping promises	Integrity & reliability	Tschannen-Moran (2014)
Open-door policy	Accessibility & emotional support	Masionis (2023); Tschannen-Moran (2014)

Practice	Key Trust/Collaboration Factor	Source
Shared leadership opportunities	Autonomy & professional growth	Silva, Amante & Morgado (2017)
Situational tailoring of practices	Contextual fit & responsiveness	Siraj-Blatchford & Manni (2006); Southworth (1998)
Everyday leadership interactions	Care, respect & openness	Hughes et al. (2023); Tschanen-Moran (2014)

This kind of leadership promotes collaboration not through authority, but through presence and support. As Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2006, p. 20) support, when leaders step away from strictly hierarchical approaches and instead empower their team to work with and learn from each other, they model a collaborative mindset. It fosters a school culture where everyone feels ownership, agency, and a sense of mutual responsibility (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006, p. 20).

Ultimately, building trust-based relationships in ECE settings relies on creating an emotionally safe environment, where communication is open and support is mutual. Collaborative leadership plays a key role in making this possible. By involving teachers in decision-making, and by trusting them to support one another, leaders help create stronger teams—and by extension, more effective schools. In the end, the question isn't just how to build trust—but how to lead in a way that offers space for trust to grow over time. That is the mark of a truly collaborative and transformative educational leader. This kind of relational, trust-based approach has the power not only to strengthen current practice but to shape the future of education in meaningful ways.

## 4.2 Collaboration Leadership and Teacher Retention

*RQ2: How can collaborative leadership models in early childhood education enhance trust-based relationships and contribute to teacher retention?*

This question moves the conversation forward by exploring the importance and power of collaboration in the workplace, and more specifically, in the ECE sector.

Collaborative leadership in early childhood education fosters an environment where trust grows naturally, as leadership is seen as a shared process rather than a top-down function. By involving teachers in decision-making, encouraging open dialogue, and valuing their input, leaders build a foundation of mutual trust and respect—which is essential for maintaining a stable teaching team.

According to the collaborative approach emphasized in literature, one way collaborative leadership takes shape in practice is through distributed leadership. As Clarkin-Phillips (2007) and Thornton et al. (2009) also support, this model promotes interdependence and shared leadership. Responsibilities are shared collaboratively rather than held by one person, which fosters stronger relationships and a culture of trust. For instance:

- **Peer-mentoring partnerships:** pairing new and experienced teachers for joint lesson-planning and classroom observations, so they exchange expertise and support each other.

While formal leaders still play an important role, leadership becomes more about collaboration than control. By bringing together the strengths of the whole team, distributed leadership helps create a more supportive and effective school environment.

But for distributed leadership to be applied effectively, it is important for leaders to consider key elements that shape each school context. Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2006, p. 14) note that needs and circumstances vary widely among students, their families, and their communities. Every school community is unique. The team of teachers, the parents, and the students are all different, and may even come from different nationalities, with different values, educational backgrounds, and behavioral expectations. This diversity creates different needs and

team dynamics. Meanwhile, change is constant. Teachers leave and new ones arrive, new students join, and new parents become part of the school. In such cases, leaders need to assess the situation and determine what adjustments will keep their leadership style both effective and responsive to the evolving context (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006, p. 14). This aligns with situational leadership's emphasis on considering both context and people (Southworth, 1998).

That's why it's important for leaders to truly understand the community they are part of, so they can lead in ways that respond to the specific needs of their team. This is where situational and responsive leadership becomes essential. Rather than applying a standard method that overlooks individual needs, leaders need to be responsive and adapt their approach to the unique context of each school.

More specifically, they should consider the team's dynamics, individual strengths, evolving needs, and even external changes. This aligns with Lewis and Murphy's concept of "responsive leadership", which calls for adjustments to both immediate challenges (e.g., staffing shifts) and broader trends (e.g., curriculum reform) to keep support relevant and timely (Lewis & Murphy, 2008).

For example, if a sudden staff shortage arises, a responsive leader might reorganize duties temporarily and pair experienced teachers with newer colleagues for peer support—ensuring no one feels overwhelmed. Likewise, when a new curriculum standard is rolled out, they could schedule targeted workshops and follow-up coaching sessions to help the team adapt smoothly, demonstrating attentiveness to both immediate and long-term needs. This adaptability helps educators feel seen, respected, and supported, making them more likely to remain in their role. That's when distributed leadership becomes truly effective.

When teachers experience leadership that listens, responds, and values their contributions, they see the four facets of trust of Tschannen-Moran's (2014) in action:

- Benevolence (genuine care for their well-being),
- Honesty (keeping promises and acting with integrity),
- Openness (transparent communication and encouragement of feedback),
- Reliability (consistency between words and actions).

In this environment, trust is no longer something that leaders try to demand—it becomes a natural outcome of daily interactions rooted in empathy, fairness, and inclusion. As a result, teachers feel a stronger sense of ownership and belonging, know that their voices matter, and build deeper professional relationships with colleagues and leaders (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). This culture of trust and support not only boosts job satisfaction but also plays a powerful role in reducing turnover.

Turnover rates fall when school leaders provide good and clear working conditions (Simon & Johnson, 2015) such as:

- **Protected planning and reflection time:** Regularly scheduled blocks (e.g., 1–2 hours per week) for teachers to plan lessons, debrief challenges, and reflect together—signaling respect for their professional judgment and fostering LMX-style exchanges.
- **On-going, job-embedded professional development:** Tailored coaching, peer-mentoring partnerships, or workshop series that build classroom skills and leadership capacity—demonstrating investment in teachers' growth and reinforcing relational trust.
- **Small student-to-teacher ratios:** Maintaining class sizes that allow for meaningful individual attention and reduce stress, which both supports children's needs and prevents teacher overload.
- **Flexible scheduling and work-life boundaries:** Clear policies around after-hours communication, predictable staff meeting times, and occasional "well-being days" to acknowledge emotional labor and prevent burnout.
- **Shared decision-making structures:** Teacher-led curriculum committees or rotating chair roles in key school planning teams, giving educators a real voice in policies that affect their daily work.
- **Transparent recognition and reward systems:** Simple, public acknowledgments of individual and team achievements (e.g., "Teacher of the Month" highlights, peer-nominated shout-outs) to reinforce a culture of appreciation and support.

By putting these conditions in place, leaders create high-quality work experiences that attract and retain high-qualified teachers (Billingsley, 2010; Petty et al., 2012; Simon & Johnson, 2015). Without such measures, qualified teachers are far more likely to leave (Ansley, Houchins, et al., 2019).

Ultimately, collaborative leadership does more than distribute tasks—it distributes trust, voice, and recognition, all of which are essential to building sustainable teams and retaining passionate educators in early childhood settings.

### 4.3 LMX Dynamics and Turnover

*RQ3: How does LMX theory explain the role of trust in leader-teacher relationships, and how does it influence teachers' job satisfaction and turn over?*

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, or as recent scholars (Meuser et al., 2016; Scandura & Meuser, 2022) describe it, a “relational leadership approach”, offers valuable insight into how trust is built between leaders and teachers. At its core, LMX highlights the importance of leaders forming individual, high-quality relationships with their team members. In the context of ECE, this means giving teachers the freedom to participate in decision-making, take on meaningful responsibilities, and feel that their voices are genuinely heard. Silva et al. (2017), note that teachers become far more engaged in collaborative work when their leaders provide ongoing professional development support and encouragement. King and Stevenson (2017) highlight that principals who adopt a bottom-up approach build deep relational trust.

Some examples mentioned by Postholm (2019, p. 439) are allocating time for joint planning, reflection, and team teaching. More specific examples could be:

- **Weekly joint planning blocks:** Carve out a 1- to 2-hour slot each week for pairs or small groups of teachers to co-plan lessons, share resources, and anticipate classroom challenges together.
- **Reciprocal peer observations:** Organize monthly peer-observation swaps—teacher A visits teacher B’s class (and vice versa)—followed by a brief debrief to discuss insights and new ideas.

- **Collaborative curriculum workshops:** Once per term, dedicate a full afternoon for all teachers to work jointly on developing or adapting curriculum units, ensuring shared ownership and innovation.

These actions are clear signs of trust from leaders. When teachers feel trusted and heard, they are more likely to collaborate, support each other, and contribute to a supportive school culture (King & Stevenson, 2017; S. Liu et al., 2016; Piya-man et al., 2017).

By encouraging open communication, inviting ideas, and stepping back from a strictly hierarchical model, leaders signal that solutions should come from the team through collaboration. This shift strengthens both professional and personal interactions in the workplace. According to LMX, when leaders and team members reach this level of mutual respect and influence, they achieve what the theory defines as a high-quality relationship (G. B. Graen et al., 2006; G. B. Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) and reach the partnership stage (G. B. Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). This style of high-quality relationship is characterized by three essential elements: mutual respect, trust, and commitment—each playing a vital role in maintaining a strong and supportive professional connection (G. B. Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Research shows that teachers in high-LMX relationships report greater job satisfaction, as they feel satisfied, supported, and professionally fulfilled (e.g., Hulpia et al., 2009; Zheng et al., 2019).

High-quality LMX relationships reduce turnover in two ways: they boost teachers' job satisfaction and deepen their emotional commitment to the school.

Central to fostering this commitment is the quality of the leader–member relationship: in high-LMX partnerships, educators develop a stronger emotional bond with their leaders, which directly reduces their intention to leave (Adil & Awais, 2016). Moreover, LMX research demonstrates that when teachers consistently receive support, trust, and professional development benefits from their leaders, they feel more valued and are far less inclined to quit (Ferris, 1985; Vecchio, 1985).

This stage of partnership blurs hierarchical lines, fostering peer-like dynamic—one in which trust, communication, and support emerge organically between leaders and teachers (G. B. Graen & Uhl-Bie, 1995).

But it's not just about building trust—it's also about maintaining it through thoughtful communication every day. For instance, Reina and Reina (2015) stresses the importance of "speaking with good purpose," which means steering clear of gossip, blaming talk, or other negative chatter. Leaders need also to be discerning about when and with whom they share sensitive information, considering each teacher's experience and readiness (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Tschannen-Moran (2014) notes that in environments where open dialogue is encouraged, minor issues are raised early—teachers act as an early alert system, pointing out concerns before they grow.

Tschannen-Moran (2014) further emphasizes that principals who welcome honest feedback, even when it challenges their own choices, create the conditions for problems to be surfaced and resolved promptly. By treating every conversation as an opportunity to reinforce respect and transparency, trust is continually renewed. That's why it's important for leaders and teachers to feel they can rely on each other, which is one of the most important facets of trust—and essential for maintaining it over time.

Trust creates a sense of security and belonging—two things that strongly reduce the desire to leave a workplace. When a leader creates a space where teachers feel seen, supported, and empowered, it gives them a reason to remain in their roles, even during tough times (Denee & Thornton, 2017; Murray & Clark, 2013). Ingersoll (2001) found that for many teachers, the decision to stay or leave is not only about salary or workload or challenges that they face with the students' behavior, it's about how supported they feel from their leader. Therefore, a relational leadership approach, rooted in trust, can play a powerful role in reducing teacher turnover (Masionis, 2023).

Building on Masionis (2023) insight, research shows that teachers' intentions to leave diminish significantly when school leaders foster working conditions that support and enhance teachers' professional experiences (Ashar et al., 2013; Jehanzeb et al., 2013; Khan et al., 2013). Adil and Awais (2016) note that among the various factors predicting turnover, the quality of the leader–member relationship—and the resulting high job satisfaction and affective commitment—plays a decisive role in lowering employees' intentions to leave. Some concrete examples of such supportive conditions include:

- **Flexible role rotations:** Allow interested teachers to rotate into short-term leadership roles (e.g., Project Leader, Summer Concert Coordinator, Literacy Coach, Technology Integrator etc.) for a semester, broadening skills and strengthening their sense of agency.
- **Innovation grants:** Give teachers small grants or release time so they can try out new teaching ideas or projects, showing that their creativity and expertise are valued.
- **Subject-area learning communities:** Create small groups focused on specific subjects (e.g. literacy, motor skills, STEM, etc) that meet every two weeks to share successful strategies, plan lessons together, and solve problems as a team.

Otherwise, qualified and experienced teachers won't stay at the school (Ansley, Houchins, et al., 2019, p. 4).

In sum, by cultivating high-quality LMX relationships—rooted in mutual respect, trust, and commitment—leaders not only enhance teachers' day-to-day satisfaction but also foster a deeper emotional bond to the school. This dual effect makes educators less likely to leave, demonstrating that intentional, trust-based leader-member practices are key to sustaining a stable, committed workforce in early childhood education.

## **4.4 Limitations**

### **4.4.1 Personal Background**

One limitation of this study is the influence of my own background in early childhood education. My experiences as a kindergarten teacher shaped the questions I asked, the sources I selected, and the interpretations I made. While this insider perspective brought depth and focus to areas I know well—such as trust in leader–teacher relationships—it also introduces the possibility of confirmation bias.

### **4.4.2 Assuming Teachers Seek Leadership Roles**

A further constraint arises from assuming that all educators engage with or desire leadership responsibilities. Some teachers may prefer to concentrate solely on classroom practice and actively avoid decision-making or leadership roles. Their perspectives on trust and collaboration, under these conditions, remain outside the scope of this analysis.

### **4.4.3 Broad Geographical and Cultural Scope**

Finally, because this research did not restrict itself to a specific country or cultural context, its findings are necessarily broad. Early childhood education systems vary widely in terms of regulations, resources, and cultural expectations. By examining the sector in general, this study may overlook important local or national factors that influence how trust-based and collaborative leadership models actually play out in practice.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

Bringing together the concepts of collaborative and distributed leadership with the relational lens of LMX theory has allowed this research to explore trust-based relationships in early childhood education from multiple angles. I chose to focus on early childhood educational leadership because this sector demands a leadership style that goes beyond traditional top-down management—it calls for empathy, adaptability, and shared responsibility. Collaborative leadership practices and distributed models highlight the importance of building a team culture where everyone's voice matters. At the same time, LMX theory helps explain *how* those relationships are formed and maintained—through everyday interactions that foster respect, trust, and mutual support. These frameworks complement each other in powerful ways, showing that leadership is not about holding authority, but about creating the conditions where others can thrive.

So, to return to the same question I asked at the beginning of this research:

“Can you imagine a successful school where every teacher feels supported, heard, and valued by their leaders—leaders who get the support they need, creating an environment where students and staff can thrive?”

### 5.1 Personal Learnings

Throughout this research journey, I've gained a much deeper appreciation for the central role that relationships and trust play in effective leadership—especially in emotionally rich environments like early childhood education. Diving into both educational leadership theory and the LMX framework challenged me to move beyond assumptions and look closely at how everyday interactions, small gestures of support, and shared decision-making really shape a school's culture. I've learned to value the nuances in different leadership models, recognizing that no single approach fits all contexts. Equally, I've come to understand that building trust isn't a one-off event but an ongoing practice that requires empathy, consistency, and genuine listening. On a personal level, this research has sharpened my own reflective skills: I'm now more attuned to seeking out—and creating—moments of collaboration, and I feel better equipped to foster environments where both teachers and leaders can thrive together.

## 5.2 What the World Can Take from This Research

As this study concludes, three key insights emerge that any school—or education system—can embrace:

### 1. Honor and Support Teachers

Teachers do far more than deliver lessons: they guide children’s development, partner with parents, and shape school culture. This research highlights how vital it is to care for teachers’ well-being—providing regular support, listening to their ideas, and safeguarding their work-life balance—so they can continue doing their best in the classroom.

### 2. Clarify and Strengthen Educational Leadership

Early childhood leaders juggle countless responsibilities—curriculum design, staff mentoring, policy compliance—and yet their role often remains ill-defined. By recognizing leaders as both mentors and advocates, schools can invest in targeted training, clear job descriptions, and ongoing coaching, ensuring that those at the helm are equipped to guide and empower their teams.

### 3. Build Trust-Based Communities

Strong, transparent relationships between leaders and teachers create a true professional community. When trust is embedded in everyday interactions—through honest communication, shared decision-making, and mutual respect—both adults and children thrive.

Together, these takeaways offer a simple but powerful roadmap: value your teachers, empower your leaders, and nurture trusting relationships. In doing so, schools everywhere can create more supportive workplaces, retain their best educators, and deliver richer learning experiences for every child.

## 5.3 Future Research

This study lays a broad foundation for exploring trust-based and collaborative leadership in early childhood education. To build on its insights, here are some future research suggestions:

### 1. Building Teamwork

- Try out regular co-planning sessions or teacher “learning circles” and see if they boost trust and collaboration.

- Test small changes—like shifting meeting times or creating shared workspaces—to make it easier for teachers to work together daily.

## **2. Putting LMX into Practice**

- In your own context, pick one LMX idea (for example, pairing a new teacher with a mentor) and measure how it affects trust and job happiness.
- Create short workshops for principals and teachers on giving and receiving feedback, then track whether relationships improve.

## **3. Using Motivational Profiles to Form Teams**

- Use the Reiss Motivation Profile (RMP), which was founded by Professor Steven Reiss, in 1988. This questionnaire assesses individuals across five motivational dimensions (Relationships, Exploration, Effectiveness, Influence, and Stability) to put together balanced teams. You can find out more at the official website: <https://www.reissmotivationprofile.com/>
- Compare school teams chosen by job title alone vs. teams mixed by RMP to see which stay more cohesive and reduce turnover.

## **4. Learning from Different Contexts**

- Compare schools in very different settings—say, a small rural center vs. a large city kindergarten—to see which leadership practices work best where.
- Within one region, look at centers with different resources or policies to find out how local factors affect collaboration and trust.

Together, these targeted studies can turn theoretical insights into actionable strategies. By experimenting with teamwork structures, testing LMX techniques in real-world settings, leveraging motivators to build balanced teams, and comparing diverse educational contexts, future research will pinpoint what truly fosters trust, collaboration, and retention in early childhood settings. This practical focus will help leaders tailor their approaches to local needs—and ultimately create stronger, more supportive learning communities.

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