

## CHAPTER 12

# Does Leadership Matter? A Narrative Analysis of Men's Life Stories in Early Childhood Education and Care

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### Abstract

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) and early childhood centres (ECC) vary across countries and are embedded in their wider social and cultural contexts. However, difficulty with workforce gender balance, and in recruitment and retention of men to ECEC, is a worldwide issue. The ECEC workforce is a female-dominated workforce, with women averaging 98 per cent of the staff. The lack of men can be regarded as a democratic, developmental, social, and quality problem. Previous research points to leadership as central to issues of retention and recruitment in organisations in general and to ECEC in

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particular. However, there is still a lack of knowledge on how leadership relates to men's career choices. In this chapter, we take a narrative approach to the life stories and graphic storylines of men working in ECEC in Australia, Norway, and Ireland. We investigate if, where, and how leadership is made relevant in their narratives and whether leadership influences the presence and retention of men in the sector. A narrative approach allows us to draw out the more subtle leadership practices embedded in interactions, relationships, and meaning making. We find that leadership can operate as a push- or pull-factor but may not be the only factor.

**Keywords:** gender balance, leadership, early childhood education and care, narrative analysis, male educators, inclusion

## Introduction

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a feminised workforce globally. Much research has been conducted into the factors that influence the trajectories and experiences of the comparatively few men in ECEC (Brody, 2014; Brody et al., 2021; Cameron et al., 1999; Watson & Woods, 2011). Workplace leadership has a direct effect on the employee's job satisfaction and well-being (Ljunggren et al., 2021; Yukl, 2008). However, research on men's experience of leadership in this feminised environment is very limited. Examining men's experiences may provide insight into the reasons they stay or leave ECEC. Taking a literary narrative approach (Czarniawska, 2004) and utilising data collected in Ireland, Australia, and Norway as part of a larger collaborative project (Brody et al., 2021), this chapter analyses six storylines and interviews from men who work or previously worked in ECEC to explore the relevance of leadership to the men's decisions to stay or leave.

We explore the link between men's experiences of leadership and their meaning making of their careers in ECEC by narrative analysis using traditional storytelling tropes of tragedy and romance (Czarniawska, 2004). By doing so, we elaborate from a different analytical angle the role of leadership in male narratives of their careers. Previous research has documented the 'pull-factors' (where men are drawn to the sector) and the 'push-factors' (where men are deterred) of occupational leadership (Hard & O'Gorman, 2007; Ljunggren et al., 2021). Going from a theme-based analysis, we now argue that a literary-inspired narrative analysis will give better insights into how

men themselves construct the role of leadership in making sense of their lives. Thus, their agency is explored in more depth. As such, the chapter also speaks to more general debates in narrative leadership research on the follower–leader interaction in terms of meaning making and the potential of leaders to form follower realities or whether they themselves are the object of follower construction (Collinson, 2006). We explore the following research question: How are the leaders' roles constructed in the men's narratives and do we see constructions of 'push-leaders' and 'pull-leaders' by these men?

### **Leadership, Meaning Making, and Narratives in Organisations**

Leadership in organisations is highly related to collective and individual meaning making, as pointed to by Weick (2001). Organisations are regarded as social systems in which meaning making is taking place. The role of leadership in these processes is discussed. Some point to the potential of leaders to form the social reality of others, as found in Smircich and Morgan's (1982, p. 258) definition of leadership as a 'process whereby one or more individuals succeeds in attempting to frame and define the reality of others'. This connects to follower self-identity theory, where leadership is understood to act on followers' self-understanding to elicit their best performances (Fairhurst, 2007). Others have questioned the leadership potential to frame and work on employees' self-understanding. In their narrative analysis of charismatic leadership, Kempster and Parry (2013) argue that this rather personalised trait must be seen constructed in followers' narratives. The point drawn from this is that leaders and leadership are also constructed in employees' narratives. Thus, the power relation between leaders and employees might be explored and also challenged in narratives.

Organisation and leadership research has therefore pointed to the role of narratives in organisations to shed light on meaning making (Czarniawska, 2004; Hernes, 2016). Narratives, in terms of storytelling, are a way that individuals make sense of otherwise independent and random events and occurrences. In the narration, these events and actors are organised by the storyteller to make sense of their own life. We align with experience-centred narrative analysis (Squire, 2013) and focus on the meaning-making nature of personal narratives.

Experience-centred narrative research operates on the basis that narratives are reconstructed rather than translated and mediated by the context in which they are being told (Squire, 2013). The context in this research considers the men's under-representation in ECEC globally, the national context of the countries in which the men's experiences are situated, and the local level in the individual workplaces in which their own individual trajectory is experienced. It is then reconstructed (in that the men make sense of the experience) in their telling of it to the researcher. By performing such an analysis, the men also construct the meaning and impact of leadership in their career life stories.

The countries for this research represent the contexts of the researchers and the men interviewed from those countries. Australia and Ireland have similar contexts in that they have low male participation rates in their ECEC sectors at 2.4 per cent and 1.8 per cent respectively (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018; Pobal, 2019) and a largely absent discussion around gender balance in the workforce. By contrast, 9.4 per cent<sup>1</sup> of ECEC workers in Norway are men. There have previously been state-sponsored measures to increase the number of men in ECEC, but there is no current active strategic plan for this. In all three countries currently, the focus is primarily on workforce development in terms of rights, qualifications, remuneration, and quality (Education Services Australia Ltd, 2012; Department of Education and Skills (Ireland), 2019; Gotvassli, 2020), though the most recent Workforce Development Plan in Ireland has a stated commitment to address the gender balance of the workforce (Government of Ireland, 2021).

## Methods

The process of collecting data for this research formed part of a larger international collaboration on men's career trajectories in early childhood education and care (Brody et al., 2021). Three men from each constituent country were interviewed. Men were recruited based on their employment status in the ECEC sector, with the aim to interview men who have remained in the sector (persisters) and men who have left (dropouts). The process included a narrative interview: inviting men to tell the story of their trajectory in ECEC, an illustrated storyline indicating the high and low points of their journeys, and semi-structured interviews. For the purpose of this chapter, we selected six of the nine men from each of the countries of the authors: Australia,

Ireland, and Norway. This was to allow for understanding of local dialects, turns of phrases, and nuances by native researchers. It also meant that the interviews had been conducted by us and therefore formed part of a co-construction of the stories analysed (Squire, 2013). The men have had a range of experience in length of service and roles varying from two to twenty-five years, assistant to directors. We analysed their narratives and storylines to create a picture of how and where leadership is made relevant in the men's narratives and whether leadership influenced their presence and retention in the sector. Storyline analysis allows us to understand how the men see their career paths over time (Brody & Hadar, 2018), recognising critical moments and interactions that influenced their journeys and how they make sense of them (Brody & Hadar, 2018; Şahin-Sak et al., 2021). Upward end points are interpreted as fitting the romantic genre as—despite some obstacles (dips) along the way—they have happy endings from the men's perspectives. Conversely, downward end points depict negative experiences that led to tragic outcomes in men's career decisions to leave the sector.

Each researcher initially began looking at each whole individual interview from her respective country to ask: How is leadership made relevant in the stories of the men? The term 'stories' here is relevant. We have taken a storytelling approach to analysing the men's narratives, investigating how they are told consistent with traditional story tropes (Czarniawska, 2004). Taking each individual's story and analysing it in depth through an iterative process of explication and explanation (Czarniawska, 2004), for genre (tragedy, romance, comedy, or satire), through the characters, the chronology, and the feelings they describe in their construction and sense making of their narrative (Czarniawska, 2004), we then moved back out one step and considered the themes across their narratives and experiences to understand the impact of leadership on their experiences and decisions. We find the genres of romance and tragedy in our narratives. Romantic stories depict a hero who overcomes hurdles that include villainous intent by an antagonist, leading to a happy ending (Czarniawska, 2004). In tragic tropes, the protagonist is at the mercy of fate and circumstances outside of their control, unable to overcome the hurdles in the path.

## Analysis

### *Tragedy*

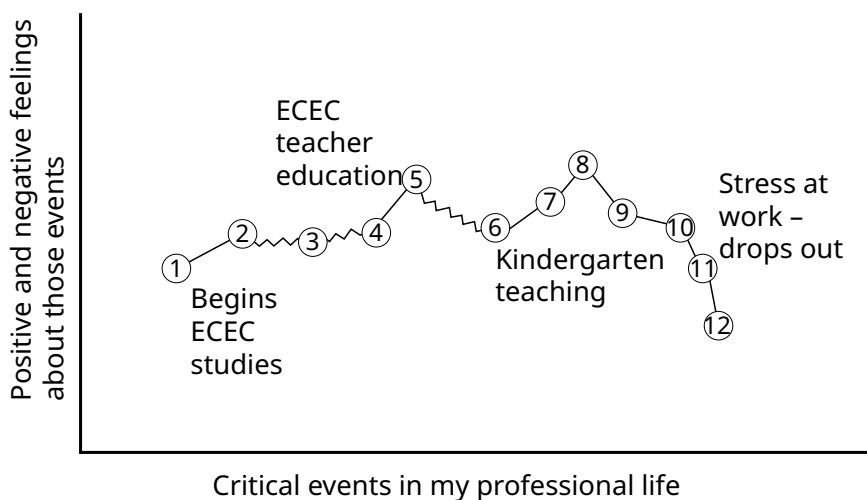
Leadership plays different roles in the represented narratives following the plot of the tragedy. It can be a contributory factor in negative experiences or can offer positive support in an otherwise difficult situation. We find that it is often seen as a negative force in the stories following the plot of the tragedy. The research showcases this in the stories of Nils from Norway and Anakin from Australia. In the story of Patrick, we see the leader as a positive force but insufficient to retain Patrick in the sector. In the three tragedies represented in this material, the hero exits the ECEC sector.

### *Contributing to the Tragedy*

In these tragedies narrated by Nils and Anakin, the men position the leaders in active roles as the villains in the stories. This is depicted through bad leadership practices such as exploitation of labour, lack of fair division of responsibility, and power abuse. Let us take a closer look at these tragedy narratives, where the leadership villains are the central forces in the plot making it hard for the men to stay in the ECEC sector.

#### Nils, Norway

Nils ruined his health working too much/being exploited as a truck driver and changed to ECEC. He experienced positive feelings in his first job (storyline point 8, [Figure 12.1](#)), where he felt he could practise the pedagogy he wanted with a good male colleague: ‘It was very good, I worked with a male colleague, and we got to open an outdoor department where we decided everything for ourselves ... we got good feedback from the parents.’ Nils’ tragedy began when he became a victim of circumstances outside his control when organisational restructuring reduced his professional latitude and his male colleague quit. He then faced trouble as a leader motivating the other staff, and the feeling of being alone with the responsibility for the children in a dysfunctional staff group caused him stress. He portrays leadership as villainous in his story, as he did not receive support even when he asked for assistance:



**Figure 12.1:** Nils' storyline.

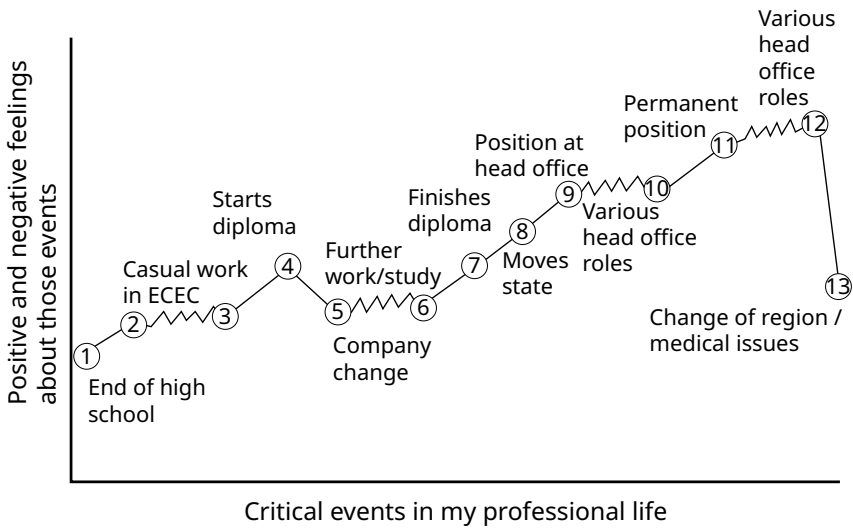
I was told to delegate tasks and trust the staff, but when the staff did not follow my instructions, then it became my responsibility if something happened. I had to work for two anyway. [The job of two people ...] it affected my health.

This period is illustrated in the storyline as a steep downward trajectory (storyline points 8–12), representing bad working conditions inflicted upon him by leadership. He then left ECEC and returned to working as a truck driver, coming full circle in this tragedy.

#### Anakin, Australia

Throughout his long career in ECEC, Anakin experienced many negative incidents involving leadership that contributed to his up and down experiences (storyline points 2, 5, and 9, [Figure 12.2](#)). He easily casts leadership as the villains in his tragic career story—for example, in how his heroic attempts to support his colleagues resulted in punishment for him.

I remember one moment where I was challenging, ethically, some things that were happening and also trying to defend some of my [staff] ... I came back here and my office, all the stuff had been unpacked out of it and just put outside. So that was their way of saying, 'Look, we're not happy with you questioning our things.' So that was a bit of a hit as well.



**Figure 12.2:** Anakin's storyline.

One of Anakin's first tales of leadership was of his mentor telling him to 'suck it up' when a mother threatened a fabricated abuse accusation after taking exception to him asking her to pay her childcare fees (storyline point 2). This mentor told him it came with the territory of being a man in ECEC. However, the major push-factor for Anakin was the lack of support and communication with him about changes while he was away on medical leave (storyline point 12). When he returned, the changes made doing the job difficult and painful for Anakin and the company did not try to help or support him (storyline point 13). For Anakin, leaving ECEC is undoubtedly a tragedy, as he loved the work: 'I mean, if I won the lotto [lottery] tomorrow, I'd pretty much just probably go and work in the kindergarten room. That would be my dream.'

### *Mitigating Against the Tragedy*

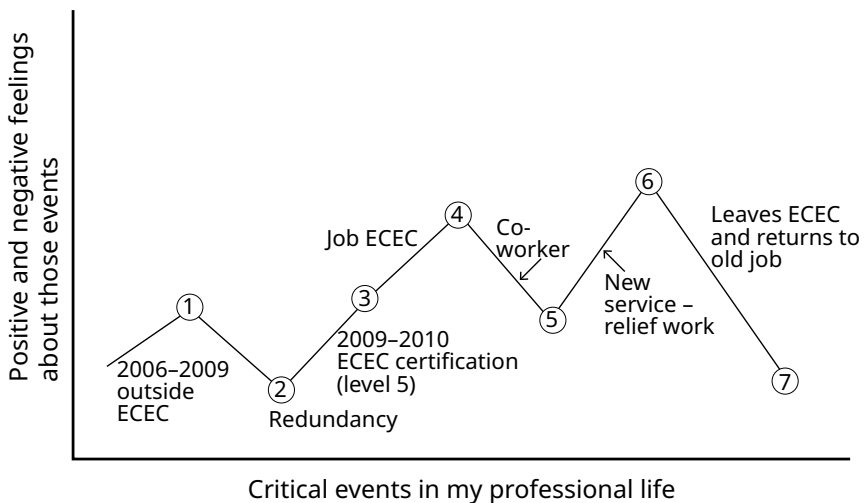
In the tragedy told by Patrick, leaders played a positive role, making the tragedy less painful (Figure 12.3). Supportive leaders play the role of allies who aid the hero in his struggle. However, they are seen as



insufficient to counteract the tragic outcome where Patrick is a victim of circumstances.

#### Patrick, Ireland

During his time in the sector, there was not sufficient opportunity to secure Patrick a permanent and consistent position in ECEC, despite the encouragement of leadership. So, when the job market improved and work became available at his previous employment outside of ECEC, he moved on reluctantly: 'Yeah ... it was hard, it was hard leaving like to say ... cos you know you grow attached to them and ... you have to go.' Patrick was drawn into the sector by another male educator who offered encouragement and support for his training and provided placement opportunities but could not offer a more secure position. 'I got work experience with Pat and ... [he] would give me hours then ... paid hours ... so I stayed in [town 1] for a while and then Pat put me in touch with [town 2] which is very near me too.' Patrick's initial employment was through an employment scheme designed to stimulate jobs, 'but again, it was a decision I had to make, I had to, financially'.



**Figure 12.3:** Patrick's storyline.

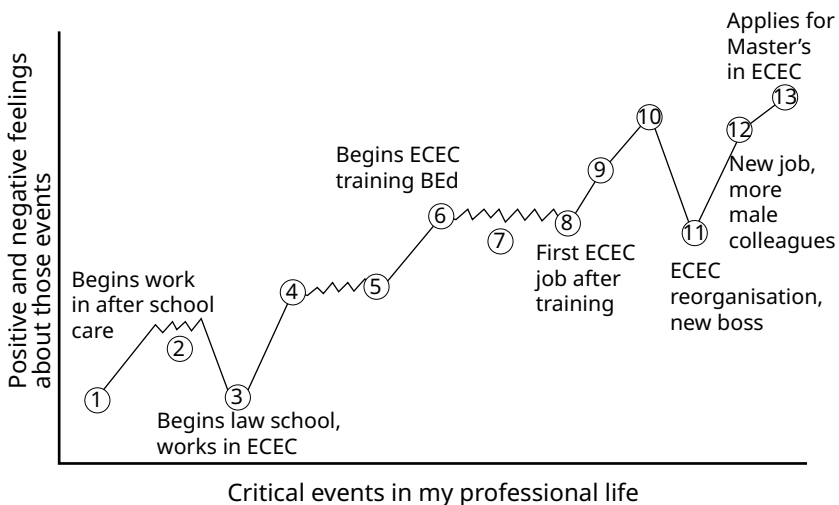
### Romance

In the romantic genre, we see leadership as a positive force. Leaders are the ally to the hero and can enable positive professional development, a positive sense of self-mastery, and a joy in working in ECEC. A male leader may act as a role model with a unique appreciation and understanding of the experience as a male in ECEC. The three narratives below have been classified as romance based on the protagonists' happy ending, with their having overcome obstacles with the help of leadership.

#### Norbert, Norway

I had a very good headmaster at the school, and I got the same headmaster as my leader when I started working at the [centre]. There have been some male role models during my education and working life.

Norbert identifies his early experience of the male headmaster as part of the positive experiences which gave him a good first impression of the work of taking care of children (storyline points 1–2, [Figure 12.4](#)). Unfortunately, parental expectations of getting a 'real job' and national service pushed him away from ECEC. However, those experiences lacked the meaning he sought, and he returned to ECEC, pulled back

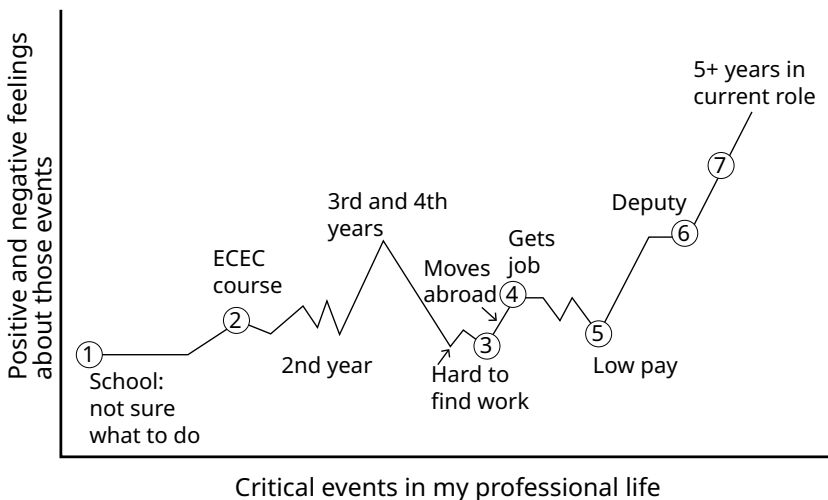


**Figure 12.4:** Norbert's storyline.

by his early encounter with the headmaster. During this time, a change of leadership in his centre created new obstacles, which he was able to overcome, like the hero of a romantic story. Interpreted in terms of the trope, the first headmaster is a support or an ally, giving positive meaning to the work with children. This allowed Norbert to focus on overcoming the obstacles created by the change in leadership, rather than being beaten back by them. The way Norbert describes leadership as an ally reflects the 'kindly elder' character we see in romantic tales that guides the hero through their trials.

#### Dylan, Ireland

Dylan identified key people along his career pathway who supported him. These characters in his story—the career guidance teacher who pointed him in the direction of ECEC, his parents, the lecturing staff in his education programme, and the friends he made along the way—are all supporting him in his quest. The low points in Dylan's journey were not completely negative (storyline points 3 and 5, [Figure 12.5](#)). He describes a tension between loving a job and finding the wage insufficient to support him. Dylan elaborates on his experience in the city crèche, emphasising the support he was given by the manager as instrumental to his journey when he first joined:



**Figure 12.5:** Dylan's storyline.

In the very first job I got in [City], when I started, it was actually her that gave me, and we'll say my break. It was lovely. So, I think that be in the current job I swear to God, she couldn't do enough for you d'you know, there's courses, there's any further training you want to do, d'you know or if anything happens, they're there for you, like it's really supportive and that just makes you kind of stay there, d'you know what I mean?

The characters Dylan identifies along the way and their function in his narrative support his decisions, providing information at critical moments, aiding in the conquering of the hurdles in his career journey. In particular, there is a leader who as Dylan describes 'gave me my break' and encouraged him in practice and in continuing professional development, followed by a leader who identified him as worthy of a deputy manager position that improved his situation in material terms. These points begin the final steep upward trajectory (storyline points 6 and 7) in Dylan's storyline to the conclusion of his romantic narrative with an uncommon and coveted position in a pre-school service with shorter hours and paid holidays.

#### Herbert, Australia

Centre and organisational leadership were prominent characters in Herbert's career romance story. His centre director, tertiary lecturer, and organisational manager all had parts to play in supporting Herbert's growth and development in ECEC, being situated as allies by him as he tells his career story. Firstly, the director of his centre positively affirmed Herbert's place as an educator (storyline point 3, [Figure 12.6](#)), repeatedly legitimising his decision to work in ECEC.

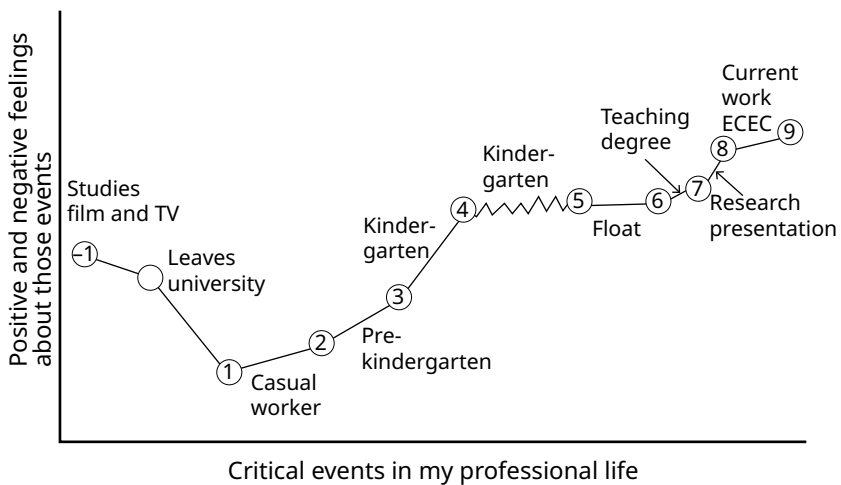
Well, the director that I had initially at the start was amazing. She loved to have me there and she noticed, I guess, the passion that I have and really tried to push me on and to grow ... She was so encouraging.

Then Herbert's supervisor for his diploma took interest in him and in his career path (storyline point 6). He had problems with feeling excluded and discriminated against with his vastly female classmates. He felt like the others were unhappy to have him in their group whenever there was group work, as they felt he would not pull his weight. As a result, Herbert worked extremely hard to ensure he proved them all wrong. As with any good romance story, Herbert had a good character come to help encourage him on the 'right' pathway. His supervisor

actively engaged and supported him throughout his studies, helping to nourish that dedication he displayed.

She was a massive support ... and she encouraged me ... She knew the passions that I had and the changes that I wanted to make to be a difference and all that. So, she just really understood why I was there and wanted to see me excel.

Herbert's diploma supervisor also brought his work to the attention of the organisation manager, who then contacted him to encourage his passion for ECEC and help him expand his horizons (storyline point 7). This particular piece of work was on the culture of the early childhood centre and the issues with teamwork Herbert had experienced both first hand and as a spectator. '[S]he got in contact with me and she's like, "Yeah, this is really amazing. You've done really good work."' Although Herbert has had obstacles throughout his career path, usually relating to the team environments on which ECEC is based, he was able to emerge triumphantly as the hero with the help of a few good allies along the way. The contribution from leadership as the story's good characters make this journey fit firmly in the romance trope. Herbert is still working in ECEC and studying towards becoming



**Figure 12.6:** Herbert's storyline.

ing an ECEC teacher. His stories of these leaders, each in different sections of his organisation, clearly demonstrate the relationship between his career trajectory and leadership support.

### Literary Genres

From our analysis, we can see that the men's experiences in ECEC took on either romance or tragic literary tropes. In the tragedies such as Nils and Anakin, their experiences with leadership characters were too much to overcome and they exited the sector. In the case of Patrick, the leadership character in his story was supportive, but other factors such as inconsistent work and insufficient remuneration were insurmountable, leading to his exit from the sector. In the romantic tropes of Norbert, Dylan, and Herbert, their leadership characters and the traits those characters displayed supported them along their ECEC journey.

### Discussion

Our analysis of the storylines and narratives of the men suggest that they actively constructed leadership positions and related leadership to their narrative through their storytelling. This supports earlier research on followers' meaning making of leadership through narration (Weick, 2001). Our data show the life stories following familiar plots of the romance and the tragedy tropes, where the men cast themselves as main characters. The leaders are cast to different roles in these plots by the men, either as 'villains' or 'allies'. Whether they are constructed as allies or villains/antagonists is related to the way they practise their leadership and their leadership style (Czarniawska, 2004). This approach from the men is relatively uniform across all three countries where data were collected. Leaders practising leadership more in terms of support and mentorship are seen as allies in the men's stories (and thus are pull-factors in men's career decisions) as expressed by Norbert, Dylan, and Herbert in their romantic narratives. Indeed, Patrick in his tragedy also found an allyship in his centre management, but it was insufficient to counteract other negative forces. For Nils and Anakin, the villainous leaders were instrumental in their career decisions (push-factors), with the behaviour of the leaders creating insurmountable hurdles.

The men might also frame the position of the leader in their career stories dependent on the men's perspectives at the time of the interview. Across all the countries they seem more likely to position the leaders as villains in the leaving stories. However, some leadership may be limited in their influence on staying or leaving, as in the case with Patrick. That is, leadership plays only a small subordinate role when they are making sense of their career stories, and other factors play a greater part in driving the plot towards a happy or unfortunate ending. This also illuminates the process of the leadership role in how leadership is made to play a part in these men's career decisions (Hard & O'Gorman, 2007; Ljunggren et al., 2021).

Expressions of power and agency can be seen as factors in the stories illustrated. In some, the exertion or abuse of power by villainous leaders can lead to untenable situations where the worker decides to leave, ending their story as a tragedy, as in the cases of Nils and Anakin. But ultimately, this still showcases the man as the hero, as they are taking back power by making this decision to leave. In romantic stories, the men succeed in spite of hurdles cast in their way, and with the help of an ally, overcome their adversities. As in all good literary tropes, the hero interacts with those characters of good intentions from time to time throughout his journey (Czarniawska, 2004).

### **Strengths, Limitations, and Implications for Practice**

Ultimately, we see that power and leadership can influence men's experiences of working in ECEC and their decisions to leave (Collinson, 2006), but that allied leadership may not be sufficient in a sector with limited opportunities (Ljunggren et al., 2021; Yukl, 2008). The organisational context of leadership in the sector must be taken into consideration. There is further research needed to shed light upon how neoliberal and austerity measures, as well as the role of ownership and leadership competence, affect men's experience of working in ECEC. We also suggest further elaboration on how leadership styles (Bass, 2015) relate to narratives. Additionally, the authors acknowledge that this is a unique way to analyse the data provided and is perhaps subject to our own positionalities. By collaborating and working on the data together, we (three) authors allowed for movement of perspectives between us given our different expertise and countries. We also

recognise the need to move beyond binary constructions of men and women, and move to focus on the intersections between gender, class, culture, background, and race. This research provides a new perspective on the way in which men construct the role of leadership in their work and careers in ECEC, showcasing the follower–leader interaction (Weick, 2001). This study presents a more in-depth exploration of the educators’ meaning making and understanding of themselves. We see here that whether leadership was portrayed as villain or ally, the platforming of these men as the heroes of their stories was consistent. While leaders may frame the reality of the worker in terms of their self-identity, the leader also becomes the object of the meaning making of the male educators (Collinson, 2006). This chapter has direct implications for gender inclusivity and leadership training in ECEC that—if done well—should have positive ramifications for all educators of diverse backgrounds. Leaders need to know that the followers are also making stories and narratives that define them as leaders.

## Acknowledgements

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## Notes

- 1 Own calculations based on numbers from Statistics Norway: <https://www.ssb.no/utdanning/statistikker/barnehager>

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