

EDITORIAL

Leading in the early years – Who leads and how?

Jeanette Clarkin-Phillips and Michele Morrison

Co-Editors

Leadership has remained a complex and contested aspect of early childhood education (ECE) for well over a decade. Following publication of the then Teachers' Council's occasional paper *Conceptualising leadership in early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Thornton, Tamati, Clarkin-Phillips, Aitken & Wansbrough, 2009), various theories and approaches have been written about. This research has enhanced understanding of leadership in the sector, yet many practitioners struggle to find a "fit" between theory and practice. Last year's release of the revised edition of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) and this year's Education Council's consultation for a leadership strategy make timely the focus on the manner in which ECE leadership is being conceptualised during the second decade of the 21st century timely. In this editorial, we situate the special issue in the Aotearoa ECE context, signal the potential for *Te Whāriki* to inform the development of an ECE leadership framework, and provide a brief synopsis of the articles contained in this edition.

In 2009, Thornton and colleagues identified six issues and dilemmas facing leadership in ECE: low profile; lack of an accepted definition or common understanding of leadership; confusion between leadership and management terminology and emphasis on management over leadership; newly qualified, less experienced teachers taking on leadership positions; lack of Ministry of Education recognition and support; and a dearth of leadership development programmes in ECE.

Gains made through the implementation of *Ngā Huarahi Arataki: Pathways to the future* (Ministry of Education, 2002), the ten-year strategic plan for early childhood education (2002-2012), meant that the 2009 Teachers' Council publication was highlighting significant priorities to be tackled in the latter years of the plan. Sadly, a change of government at the end of 2008 led to abandonment of the strategic plan and, as a consequence, leadership in ECE remains largely devoid of policy direction and resourcing initiatives. Despite lack of progress in strengthening ECE leadership at a national policy level, there is a willingness and commitment by many in the sector to continue to conceptualise and enact leadership in ways that enhance their practice and endeavour to fulfil the aspirations of their communities. The articles in this special issue provide evidence of this commitment.

Thornton et al. (2009) argue that one of the challenges facing leadership in ECE is the historical, social and political evolution of ECE in Aotearoa New Zealand. The diversity of provision, which includes parent-led and teacher-led ECE services, has generated emergent and collaborative leadership models that make the conceptualising of leadership complex. We suggest, however, that this complexity is also a strength which enables an openness and willingness to embrace multiple interpretations of "who leads?" As teachers and leaders continue to grapple with the complexities of a fast-changing world, including theoretical perspectives and a national curriculum that promotes democracy, uncertainty and inclusiveness, not having fixed ideas or structures that lend themselves to particular practices opens up spaces for all members of an ECE community to be leaders.

Distributed leadership and its multiple iterations of definition, nomenclature and practice has often been used to best explain leadership in ECE. International literature and the small but growing body of Aotearoa New Zealand leadership research would suggest that distributed leadership still provides a strong theoretical underpinning for leadership practice in ECE. It is this concept of sharing leadership coupled with the weaving metaphor of *Te Whāriki* that appears to help validate teachers' interest in and exploration of widening the leadership circle to place leadership in the hands of children, families and communities. The permeable and

integrated nature of the principles of *Te Whāriki* provide a useful framework for conceptualising leadership in ECE and supporting democratic, distributed practices. The four principles: empowerment/whakamana; holistic development/ kotahitanga; family and community/tangata whenua, and relationships/ngā hononga can be regarded as a curriculum for leadership.

The principle of empowerment/whakamana encompasses notions of agency and growth. This principle is founded on the premise that the curriculum empowers children to learn and grow, that recognising and enhancing individual mana as well as supporting individuals to enhance the mana of others is paramount in the implementation of the curriculum. This suggests that leadership must ensure there are opportunities for growth and that interactions and decisions need to be sensitive to and cognisant of the mana of both the individual and collective. As Pound (2008) suggests, distributed leadership “assumes that ‘everyone can be a leader’ and that ‘you can learn to be a leader’” (p. 79). Leadership that empowers will recognise and encourage leadership learning.

Holistic development/kotahitanga is closely linked to empowerment. In a curriculum context, kotahitanga reflects the holistic manner in which children learn and grow. When applied to leadership, this principle takes account of the unique ways in which adults and children learn and provides multiple opportunities for learning. Ord et al. (2013), in their study of leadership in Aotearoa New Zealand ECE centres, argue that “the most effective leaders are those who promote the learning of their teams” (p. ix) and support the development of knowledge, skills and attributes to enhance learning across the ECE community.

The principle of family and community/tangata whenua recognises that individuals cannot be separated from their contexts and that the wider world is an integral aspect of curriculum. This principle requires leadership to share power, to give up control and to trust others to take on responsibility. Harris (2009) writes about distributed leadership suggesting that “distributed leadership...requires power sharing” (p. 4) and is a “form of leadership that is more organic, spontaneous and ultimately more difficult to control” (p. 7). Encouraging families and the wider community to take on leadership roles requires courage and a strong commitment to empowering others but can bring a richness to learning and development not otherwise achievable.

At the heart of the curriculum is the principle of relationships /ngā hononga. This principle encapsulates the significance of people, places and things to learning. Much is written about the relational nature of effective leadership (Aubrey, Godfrey & Harris, 2013; Harris, 2009; Pound, 2008) and the significance of strong respectful relationships between leaders and their communities. Relationships are crucial for building the trust necessary to relinquish control and enable others to use the people, places and things at their disposal to realise community aspirations.

The unique bicultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand is at the heart of the curriculum and must, too, be evident in leadership practices, hence the suitability of adopting the curriculum principles as a leadership curriculum. While internationally the struggle to theorise and conceptualise leadership continues, the Aotearoa New Zealand ECE community may do well to consider its own local and time-honoured curriculum framework as appropriate for guiding ECE leadership practice in this specific and unique context.

In the opening article, Nikki Klevering and Rachel McNae highlight the inability of current leadership theorising to adequately account for the situated and multifaceted activities undertaken in diverse settings, thus echoing the challenges and dilemmas articulated by Thornton et al. (2009) almost a decade earlier. Drawing on the voices of five experienced ECE leaders, they detect amidst uncertainty the emergence of an embodied leadership grounded in an ethic of nurture and care. While further research and theorising are needed, this paradigm appears to sit well with the youthful clientele and gendered nature of the profession.

Clear alignment with the principles of *Te Whāriki* can be seen in the second article: *Dispositions of a responsible early childhood education leader: Voices from the field*. Arising from a larger study, Gwen

Davitt and Debbie Ryder explore six specific dispositions that support early childhood leaders to grasp the complexities of leading and respond appropriately: *kōrero tahi* (skilful communication), *whanaungatanga* (relationships), *manaakitanga* (care), *kotahitanga* (team unity), *whakamana* (leading growth and change), and *hoa arohachae* (being a critical friend). They conclude that these dispositions are not necessarily innate but cultivated, thereby underscoring the importance of leadership learning that is robust, ongoing, and dialogic.

Focus in the third and fourth articles shifts to the youngest and often least experienced leaders in the ECE community. Vicki Hill investigates the leadership opportunities afforded children and teachers through formal nature-based education, in the process explicating an often overlooked aspect of distributed leadership. She describes how children participating in an outdoor programme for one full day per week, over a ten week term, negotiated and co-constructed their learning through authentic planning, decision-making, risk taking, and rituals. This case study research found that not only did immersion in a local bush environment enhance children's independence skills and physical development; the blurring of power relationships, reciprocity and "apprenticeship of observation" also enhanced teachers' leadership confidence and competence.

In a similar vein, Linda Baxendine widens the leadership story, moving beyond a focus on the individual to theorise leadership as a social and democratic process that emerges through concurrent, collective, collaborative and compassionate practice. A kindergarten excursion within the local community forms the context for this study, as Sharkman (pseudonym, aged 4yrs) and her/his peers inquire into the history and geography of their surrounding landscape. Their fact finding mission quickly involves children, *whānau* and teachers in meaningful participation, transforming dialogue, and power sharing experiences that reinforce interconnectedness and turn knowledge into understanding.

Insights into contexts beyond Aotearoa New Zealand invite reflection on taken for granted ways of thinking and being. In the fifth article, Maria Cerrato and her colleagues highlight important differences in the way New Zealand and Honduras teachers conceptualise and enable young children's leadership. Contrasting *Te Whāriki's* child-centred play-based curriculum with the more prescriptive and academic focused *Curriculo Nacional de Educación Prebásica (CNPB)*, the authors examine the implications for young children's leadership identification and development. Findings from this small-scale study suggest that whereas *Te Whāriki* encourages the fostering of leadership potential in all children, *CNPB's* focus on subject competence leads Honduran teachers to determine leadership potential in certain children and allocate leadership roles accordingly.

The importance of data- and research-informed practice is reiterated several times throughout this special issue. In the second international perspective, Line Skov-Hansen expands research parameters from small-scale studies, to a broader system approach to improvement work in Denmark. She shows how a national policy commitment to "professional and strong leadership at all levels" is enshrined in legislation and deemed essential to high quality ECE provision. While the pedagogical and practice shifts required of Danish ECE leaders are, in many ways, similar to challenges facing their New Zealand counterparts, commitment to coherent leadership development at a municipal (regional /national) level is something Aotearoa has yet to see.

Returning to New Zealand shores and coming full circle, Jeanette Clarkin-Phillips converses with Emerita Professor Margaret Carr, co-author of the foundational *Te Whāriki* early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996) and expert advisor to the 2016-17 *Te Whāriki* writing panel. Having posed the question, "What does this have to do with leadership?" Professor Carr eloquently articulates a philosophy of leadership that privileges shared authority and the readiness, willingness and ability to act, regardless of age or position.

As you read the examples of ECE leadership outlined and theorised in this special issue, we hope that you, too, will be inspired to weave your own interpretations of leadership within the context of your setting and to see the curriculum principles as a curriculum for ECE leadership in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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