

“Trying to wrap your head around all of that” – Leadership and curriculum implementation in early childhood settings

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This article examines the evolving role of leadership in the implementation of *Te Whāriki* within Aotearoa New Zealand’s early childhood education (ECE) sector. Drawing on qualitative data from two phases (2017 and 2023), the overall study explored how leaders and teachers had responded to both the original and refreshed versions of the curriculum. The findings reported in this article revealed a shift from hierarchical to more distributed and collaborative leadership approaches, with increased emphasis on pedagogical leadership, professional dialogue, and reflective practice. Leaders were shown to play a central role in fostering curriculum alignment, supporting teacher accountability, and embedding *Te Whāriki* into planning and assessment. The research highlighted ongoing challenges in distinguishing leadership from management and underscores the importance of relational and transformational leadership for effective curriculum enactment. Implications are discussed for leadership development and practice, offering insights for ECE leaders navigating the complexities of curriculum implementation.

Introduction

Leaders in early childhood services across Aotearoa New Zealand play a pivotal role in shaping curriculum that is responsive to the needs of tamariki, whānau, and their local communities. The principles outlined in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 1996, 2017), the national early childhood curriculum, require teachers to reflect on the diverse philosophies and contexts within the sector. The curriculum’s open-ended design, coupled with the complexities of educational leadership, means that leaders must draw

on a range of strategies to support effective curriculum implementation alongside their teaching teams.

This article presents findings from a study that explored teachers' and leaders' understandings of curriculum implementation, both prior to and following the release of the refreshed *Te Whāriki*. Through interviews with early childhood education (ECE) leaders, we examined the layered nature of leadership practices and highlight key themes that emerged. These centred around accountability, management, and pedagogical leadership, with each identified as being central to supporting teaching teams in enacting curriculum. The findings are discussed in relation to existing literature, offering insights that will be of interest to ECE leaders and teachers engaged in the ongoing implementation of *Te Whāriki*, as well as highlighting implications for practice.

Leadership

The role of the leader in ECE settings is both complex and multi-faceted (Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2018). The diversity of the sector, as reflected in its varied philosophies and operating structures, means that conceptions of leadership differ widely across contexts. Moreover, leadership in ECE remains a contested concept, with limited research conducted within Aotearoa to date (Thornton et al., 2009). Despite the time elapsed since Thornton et al.'s initial report, challenges around defining and enacting leadership persist (Thornton, 2019). While progress has been made in elevating the profile of leadership in ECE, researchers such as Thornton (2019) and Cooper (2019), highlight that areas for improvement and ongoing challenges remain for leaders in the sector.

Although there is no single definition of leadership in ECE, several foundational ideas appear to shape teachers' and leaders' understandings of effective practice. One such idea is the growing recognition that all teachers are leaders, as they lead children's learning (Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2022). Cooper (2022) refers to this as everyday collective leadership, where the emphasis shifts from individual leadership to collaborative efforts aimed at enhancing the quality of the setting. Similarly, Denee and Thornton (2021) highlight the value of distributed leadership, in which roles and responsibilities are shared across the team. This approach supports all team members to contribute meaningfully and to develop their own leadership capabilities.

The Education Council (2018, p. 3) defines leadership as “essentially influencing others to act, think, or feel in ways that advance the values, vision and goals of the organisation, and the learning and flourishing of each of its learners.” This definition underscores the influence leaders have not only on their teams but also on the broader ECE environment, including tamariki, whānau, and the community. Leadership, therefore, plays a critical role in curriculum implementation, particularly in relation to *Te Whāriki*. How teachers enact the curriculum, and what tamariki and whānau experience, is shaped by teachers’ knowledge and understandings, as well as the guidance and direction provided by leaders.

Curriculum implementation

Curriculum implementation varies across early childhood services in Aotearoa New Zealand, with each setting interpreting *Te Whāriki* in ways that reflect their local community, philosophical orientation, and the knowledge and experience of their teaching team. Designed as an open and aspirational curriculum, *Te Whāriki* does not prescribe specific content or teaching methods, affording teachers considerable autonomy in how they interpret and enact it. However, this autonomy is balanced by the expectation that curriculum decisions are grounded in the strengths, needs, and interests of tamariki, as well as the aspirations of whānau and the wider community.

Further insights into both the strengths and challenges of curriculum implementation are offered by Cameron et al. (2023), whose small-scale study found that teachers demonstrated considerable knowledge and provided many examples of effective practice. However, the study also revealed that teachers often struggled to articulate their role in implementing *Te Whāriki* and in building a responsive curriculum, likely due to the layered and complex nature of the curriculum itself. Although ERO’s earlier findings predate the 2017 refresh of *Te Whāriki*, more recent evaluations suggest that challenges persist. In 2019, ERO reported that over half of early childhood services “had not yet taken steps to engage deeply with *Te Whāriki*” (ERO, 2019, p. 6), despite the refreshed curriculum having been in place for nearly two years.

Given the complexity of *Te Whāriki*, supporting teachers to understand and enact the curriculum is not straightforward. Leadership within teaching teams plays a critical role in this process (Denee & Thornton, 2021), with pedagogical leadership emerging as particularly influential. Pedagogical leadership involves leaders working alongside teachers, modelling, guiding, and supporting practice with the aim of fostering professional growth (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood

Development [NBDEECD], 2022). ERO (2016, p. 44) also emphasises the importance of pedagogical leadership, stating:

Our findings highlight the critical role of pedagogical leadership in effective curriculum implementation that promotes positive outcomes for children. Pedagogical leadership plays a significant role in promoting and enhancing the quality of curriculum implementation, teaching practice, assessment and internal evaluation in early learning services. This particular aspect of leadership is essential to implement the service's priorities and guide teachers to implement a curriculum that is responsive to children and their language, culture and identity.

In light of the central role of leadership in curriculum implementation, the small-scale study reported in this article focused on exploring leaders' perspectives on how they support their teams to enact *Te Whāriki* effectively.

Methodology

The findings reported in this article are drawn from a small-scale qualitative study. Further information about the study can be found in Cameron et al. (2023). This article focuses on data drawn solely from the leaders in the study, who were all qualified, certificated and working in a range of early childhood settings. The leaders who participated in 2017 had between 6–23 years teaching experience, with all but one having more than 20 years teaching experience and all had been leaders for four years or more. The four leaders from the 2023 data collection had between 4–28 years teaching experience, with two having participated in the early data collection. Of note, one leader gained their qualification in 2019 and said they were only familiar with the 2017 version of *Te Whāriki*.

This article reports data gathered from a key question asked of leaders in both the 2017 and 2023 interviews: “*What’s your responsibility as a leader in relation to how curriculum is enacted?*” In 2023, this additional question was included: “*How have you supported team members to learn about and implement the differences between the 1996 and 2017 versions of the curriculum framework?*” This focused slice of the data provided valuable insights into the role of leadership in curriculum implementation, revealing both consistent practices and evolving challenges across time.

Findings and discussion

To capture insight into the practicalities of curriculum leadership, leaders in the study were asked to describe their responsibilities related to the implementation of curriculum. Given the significance of the curriculum refresh between the two data collection dates, we indicate below whether the data comes from the 2017 or 2023 survey to help identify any resulting shifts. In identifying key themes, it was evident that leaders described their roles within three overlapping but distinct functions: accountability, management and pedagogical leadership.

Accountability

Accountability in early childhood education leadership encompasses responsibilities for compliance, review, and internal evaluation—both within individual organisations and in relation to external agencies such as ERO. Leaders in this study consistently positioned themselves as central figures in ensuring these processes were not only completed but also meaningfully led. For instance, the Leader of Setting 4 (2023) explicitly acknowledged their role in guiding internal evaluation, while the Leader of Setting 5 (2017) referred to her responsibilities as including “it’s that ERO folder” highlighting the procedural and documentation aspects of accountability. References to leading internal evaluation processes were common across settings. Notably, Marnell and Thornton (2021) emphasise that internal evaluation should be a collaborative endeavour, involving all team members to foster collective contribution and shared understanding. The leaders’ descriptions in this study suggest that while team involvement is encouraged and enacted, the ultimate responsibility for initiating, guiding, and ensuring the completion of internal evaluation rests with the leader.

Accountability was also interpreted by some leaders as supporting individual teachers to take ownership of curriculum implementation. For example, the Leader of Setting 2 (2023) stated:

I am not responsible for making you do things. I just try and keep you [teachers] accountable and make sure things are happening. Like it’s not my job to do everything. That’s their job. I just have to make sure that they know it’s their job and they do it.

This quote highlights a leadership approach focused on enabling teachers to fulfil their responsibilities. Similarly, the Leader in Setting 5 (2017) described their role as that of

an overseer, ensuring that required actions were carried out. In contrast, other leaders expressed a more hands-on approach, such as the Leader in Setting 6 (2023), who expressed her role as “constantly checking and ensuring that teachers are focusing on the curriculum ... a little bit like a quality control.”

These varied perspectives suggested that leaders conceptualised their roles in different ways. While some saw themselves as ultimately responsible for ensuring curriculum implementation, other respondents viewed their role as facilitating teacher accountability, with the expectation that individuals would uphold their own responsibilities. These differences reflected a spectrum of leadership styles and behaviours, as discussed by Stamopoulos and Barblett (2018). Some leaders appeared to embrace distributed leadership, promoting shared responsibility and collaboration, while other respondents retained elements of hierarchical leadership, blending oversight with collegial support.

Management

Leaders in this study described a range of management-related responsibilities, encompassing both the operational aspects of the setting and the management of people within it. For example, the Leader in Setting 2 (2023) explained their role as “ensuring that all of the teachers are fulfilling their role” which included monitoring tasks such as meeting documentation quotas for assessment. These insights suggested that leaders often navigate overlapping understandings of leadership and management, with some ambiguity around where one ends and the other begins. Marnell and Thornton (2021) noted that the distinction between leadership and management remains a developing concept, with ongoing debate and confusion about their respective roles and functions. The findings of this study reinforced this observation, highlighting the fluid and sometimes blurred boundaries between the two.

Additionally, leaders positioned themselves as intermediaries between the organisational management and the teaching team. For instance, the Leader in Setting 2 (2017) described their role as “to branch between what management says I need to do, and then I need to sell it to my team,” illustrating the complexities of translating organisational directives into practice. This reflected the structural tensions described by Nuttall (2016), where misalignment between organisational expectations and teachers’ pedagogical values can create challenges for leaders. These tensions underscored the multifaceted nature of leadership in early childhood settings, where leaders must balance managerial responsibilities with relational and pedagogical leadership.

Pedagogical leadership

Throughout the interviews, all leaders emphasised the importance of their role in supporting team members to develop their teaching practice through pedagogical leadership. This form of leadership was described as encompassing robust professional conversations, observation of teacher practice to inform feedback, and “providing professional guidance” (Leader, Setting 6, 2017). Leaders reported that challenging teachers and prompting reflective questioning about their practice were key strategies in fostering professional growth. These findings aligned closely with Carroll-Lind et al. (2019), who identified that conversations focused on change, and subsequently leading change, are central to effective pedagogical leadership.

Several leaders also highlighted the importance of ensuring a strong connection between curriculum and assessment. For example, the Leader of Setting 6 (2023) described their role in supporting teachers to use the language of *Te Whāriki* within assessment documentation, stating, “we use it as a reference document constantly.” Similarly, the Leader of Setting 4 (2017) explained “I ask the whys and the wheres, and how comes, for the team to be thinking about what they are doing in regard to curriculum, their planning and assessment.” These examples suggested that leaders viewed their role as ensuring that *Te Whāriki* was not only visible in documentation but also actively guiding teaching and assessment practices. Interestingly, despite the emphasis on guiding and supporting practice, none of the participants explicitly described themselves as role models—an aspect often highlighted in pedagogical leadership literature. As noted by NBDEECD (2022), modelling effective practice is a key component of pedagogical leadership.

In 2023, an additional question was posed to leaders regarding their role in supporting teachers with the refreshed version of *Te Whāriki* (2017). Responses varied: one leader noted they were not in a leadership role at the time of the refresh, while another leader had entered the sector post-refresh and was unfamiliar with the original version. The remaining two leaders described a collaborative journey of learning, involving webinars, professional conversations, and appraisal goals focused on the refreshed curriculum. The leader of Setting 1 (2023) explained “I think it's a journey that we've taken together. I think it's about when you're having those professional conversations and just making those connections. It's about doing the doing. It is about having the document out.” These findings echoed those of ERO (2019), which reported that ECE teams adopted diverse approaches to engaging with the refreshed curriculum, likely reflecting different interpretations and enactments of pedagogical leadership.

Conclusion

This analysis of leadership data collected in 2017 and 2023 revealed several consistent themes, alongside potential shifts in leadership practice over time. Key themes included distributed leadership, accountability, pedagogical leadership, curriculum implementation, and the leader's role in fostering professional growth. Leaders across both data sets described their responsibility for ensuring curriculum was enacted effectively, with a strong emphasis on supporting teachers through professional conversations, feedback, and critical reflection. However, differences emerged between the two time periods. In 2017, leadership was often framed in more hierarchical terms, with leaders positioned as overseers and enforcers of expectations. By contrast, the 2023 data reflected a more collaborative and distributed approach, with leaders facilitating shared responsibility and team-led initiatives. Engagement with *Te Whāriki* also deepened over time, with 2023 leaders demonstrating a more nuanced understanding of curriculum and a stronger emphasis on integrating curriculum into planning and assessment. These findings suggest an evolution in leadership practice, moving from directive models toward more relational and transformational approaches that support pedagogical growth and curriculum responsiveness.

The findings continue to illuminate the multifaceted and complex nature of leadership in early childhood education, particularly in relation to supporting teams to effectively implement *Te Whāriki*. Leaders were found to juggle multiple priorities, revealing the layered responsibilities and diverse roles they enact in their everyday practice. The data highlighted the interconnectedness of accountability to external agencies, team management, and process oversight, all of which contribute to the broader leadership landscape. Pedagogical leadership emerged as a central theme, with leaders actively supporting teachers to make meaningful connections between curriculum and assessment. This included encouraging the use of *Te Whāriki* language in documentation and prompting critical reflection through questioning and professional dialogue. Such practices may lead to shifts in teaching practice and deeper engagement with the curriculum.

Importantly, the study underscored the complexity of leadership in curriculum implementation, offering valuable insights into how leaders navigate their roles. It also highlighted the dynamic interplay between leadership styles, organisational expectations, and pedagogical priorities—demonstrating that effective curriculum

implementation is not a linear process, but one shaped by relational, reflective, and strategic leadership.

The findings of this study underlined several important implications for future leadership practice in relation to curriculum implementation, particularly the enactment of *Te Whāriki*. Leaders play a pivotal role in ensuring that *Te Whāriki* is not only referenced but meaningfully embedded in planning, assessment, and everyday teaching practice. This requires a shift toward more distributed leadership, where team members are empowered to take ownership of curriculum decisions while being supported through pedagogical guidance. Leaders must foster reflective dialogue, ask critical questions, and provide feedback that strengthens curriculum alignment. Clarifying the distinction between leadership and management can help leaders navigate structural tensions and maintain a focus on curriculum quality. Additionally, internal evaluation processes should be used collaboratively to inform curriculum development and ensure responsiveness to children's interests, whānau aspirations, and local contexts. Investing in leadership development that supports transformational and relational approaches will further enhance leaders' capacity to guide curriculum implementation in ways that uphold the principles of *Te Whāriki*.

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