Early
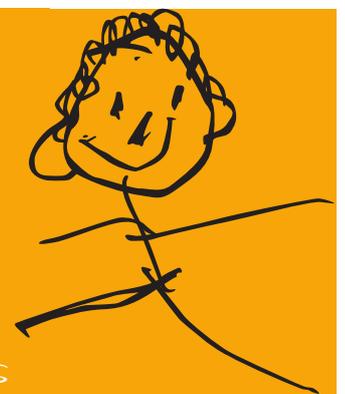## Education

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- Reflections on the role of teachers in contemporary ECE: Pedagogy, leadership and engagement with fathers
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- Supporting Associate Teachers across the years

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Perceptions of leadership in New Zealand early childhood services

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This paper reports on a recent doctoral study that investigated how educational leadership is practised through internal evaluation processes in New Zealand ECE services. The findings unveiled a complexity in the ways in which ECE teachers identified with leadership which in turn, challenged teachers to practise educational leadership. Teachers' understandings of leadership were framed by their personal and professional experiences, and they agreed that leadership needed to be relationship based, strength based, distributed, and linked to vision and values. Teachers' feedback highlighted how there was a tension in the ways in which they conceptualised their own leadership; while they acknowledged that leadership was an expectation of everyone, they also believed that leadership would only be shown by those with a formal position and title. Teachers were often unaware of their own leadership practices, viewing their everyday practices as teaching responsibilities, that did not relate to leadership. The introduction and unpacking of an educational leadership definition provided a useful tool for teachers to further develop their self-identity as leaders and build an awareness of their existing leadership practices.

Leadership in New Zealand ECE services

New Zealand has a diversity of ECE services available, offering families a choice in their child's ECE journey. The leadership structure within each service type has developed uniquely based on their philosophy and operation model and there can be complexities related to leadership that include collaboration, level leadership structures and formal and informal positions (Klevering & McNae, 2018).

Education and care and kindergarten services may have a clear hierarchy within their leadership structure and have a positional leader such as a Manager/Head Teacher, supported by additional positional leaders within the teaching team and an offsite management of an owner/association (Thornton et al., 2009). There can also be a merging of roles, with those holding leadership positions also responsible for the management of the service (Klevering & McNae, 2018). A distinct feature of leadership within New Zealand ECE, as in most other countries, is that most teachers and leaders are female (Ryder et al., 2017).

There is a requirement for all certified teachers (including those with positional roles) to show leadership within their teaching practices as part of their teacher certification, as noted in *The Standards of the Teaching Profession* (Education Council, 2017), and also promoted through *The Leadership Strategy* (Education Council, 2018b) and *The Educational Leadership Capability Framework* (Education Council, 2018a). While there may be clearly defined roles in ECE teams, positional leaders and teachers are both expected to show leadership, and as they can often teach together in the same classroom, there can be a levelling of hierarchy (Denee, 2017).

Challenges faced by leadership in ECE

A 2009 report exploring the issues faced by leadership in New Zealand ECE, identified the

low profile of leadership; the lack of an accepted definition or common understanding of leadership; and confusion between leadership and management terminology within the ECE sector which emphasises management over leadership (Thornton et al., 2009). The report also acknowledged issues such as newly qualified, less experienced teachers taking on leadership positions; a lack of emphasis on leadership in the ECE sector by the Ministry of Education; and the lack of leadership development programmes in ECE, issues which were in contrast to the school sector. A recent review of that report identified that while some progress had been made such as a growing recognition of what leadership practice entails, there are still many issues to be resolved to ensure leadership receives adequate recognition and resourcing (Thornton, 2020).

Research methodology

My research was a qualitative, descriptive case study. The research setting was three licensed ECE services; one private and one community-based education and care service, and one kindergarten. Each service had a positional leader similar to a Manager or Head Teacher, with the community-based service also having two senior teachers who held positional leadership. The purpose of my research was to develop a deeper understanding of leadership from the perspective of teachers and leaders. I gathered the data for my research through individual interviews (x18), focus groups (x4), observations (x13) and artefacts (x1).

Teachers' perceptions of leadership

The following sections present a key theme from the findings of my study, identification with leadership, and a discussion on how this theme was expressed in teachers' perceptions of leadership.

Most of the teachers and leaders described an understanding of leadership that connected strongly to their personal experiences of leadership and the practices they felt were necessary. These experiences influenced how they developed their understanding of

leadership with four ideas being shared by all participants, that leadership was: relationship based; strength based; distributed; and linked to vision and values. Effective leadership was seen to involve authentic relationships with the team and families. Leaders needed to be able to identify teachers' strengths and passions and use these to grow relationships and create solutions. Leaders needed to provide opportunities for teachers to be leaderful and lead an area of practice. Leaders needed to be committed to the service vision and role model the values that keep the community engaged to enact that vision. All participants believed that leadership within their services was an expectation of all teachers. Regardless of titles, I noticed everyone interacted equally, acknowledging their individual strengths as contributing to the success of the service.

Everyone agreed on the need for a positional leader within their teams. A common agreement was that the positional leader was responsible for facilitating the team towards their vision by blending their skills to work collaboratively. This included big picture thinking, maintaining the kaupapa of the team and directing the team on what needed to be achieved when the teachers were feeling overwhelmed. While teachers could confidently describe leadership, they often tended to describe only their positional leader, rather than the leadership within the service as a whole, despite having previously said that they see leadership as an expectation of all teachers. This feedback highlighted how there was a tension in the ways in which they conceptualised their own leadership.

Leadership without the title

Several teachers talked about finding it difficult to understand the idea of practising leadership when they did not hold a formal, leadership role. One participant, Regina, expressed it as:

> People have always struggled with figuring out what that looks like if you're not a positional leader. What does leadership look like if you aren't technically called the leader?

This raised an interesting consideration, as previously all participants had discussed that leadership was an expectation of all teachers, and the requirement to show leadership as per the *Standards of the Teaching Profession* (Education Council, 2017). This suggests that while teachers acknowledged these expectations, in reality, teacher leadership was less likely to be recognised.

Teachers' view of leadership appeared to be influenced by traditional leadership theories of the single heroic leader and a hierarchy structure that is consistent with the literature (Hard, 2006; Sims et al., 2015). Teachers' understanding of leadership was linked to the idea of formal positional leadership and authority, suggesting that leadership would only be shown by those with a formal position and title. Interestingly, the positional leaders in two out of the three services also recognised that their teachers were feeling challenged by the idea of leadership not connected to positional leadership. During a focus group, one explained:

> I already see you all as leaders, but I think that's were that definition is stopping because I think a lot of you sometimes don't see yourselves as leaders because you see the positional and you see it as management, you see this responsibility. But I see you as competent leaders, who are leading the way for early childhood and these children in our centre and each of you are a leader in my eyes. But I think the wording, sometimes allows you to not necessarily to see yourself as one. Coz maybe of our predetermined views on what a leader is.

The positional leader in the third service didn't have the same view, possibly as a result of their service being the smallest service in this study, where they taught alongside the teachers daily. It is worth then considering that in smaller ECE services where positional leaders are teaching daily and there is a flatter structure, there may be greater opportunities for leaderful practice from all teachers, a similar finding to the research of Thornton (2005).

Max Grarock and Anne-Marie Morrissey (2013) have suggested that staff can accept positional or hierarchical leadership because it is an approach they are familiar with, and which does not disrupt the status quo. If staff view themselves as followers, they are unlikely to want to participate in distributed leadership. Teachers may feel that they are not in a position to express themselves to the group or challenge a perspective, because they do not have the authority (Grarock & Morrissey, 2013). Similarly, Krieg et al. (2014) stated that if teachers do not believe they hold the 'traits' that define leadership, they can see themselves as unsuitable for leadership and decide not to take on a leadership role. It can then be argued that if teachers' perspectives of their professional identity as a leader comes from holding a formal title of authority and the associated confidence it offers, without the title they are limited in what they believe that can do.

Lack of leadership awareness

Teachers were often unaware of their own leadership practice. Some teachers suggested that they were given additional responsibilities because of how long they had been teaching rather than as a result of showing leadership capabilities, appearing reluctant to see their knowledge and expertise as a basis for leadership. Some teachers believed that you must have had experience and been on a journey of professional growth to be competent to show leadership. Two of the positional leaders commented on how teachers often connected the term leadership to associations with positional authority, which prevented them from acknowledging their own leadership practices. Some of the teachers were uncomfortable with the terms such as leadership or educational leadership, making the connection that these terms signalled positional leadership. Teachers were self-conscious of using the term leadership as they felt it would 'over inflate my capabilities',

suggesting a caution of overstepping their place in the leadership hierarchy. Another teacher commented that a term such as strong colleague would be preferred, and teachers would be more likely to identify with it.

I observed teachers, in fact, demonstrating many aspects of effective teacher leadership practices by drawing on their expertise and knowledge through coordinating staff members such as instructing relieving teachers on what to do, problem solving and guiding practice. In other work environments, this would be seen as leadership (Rodd, 2013). Teachers did not believe that their daily work practices meet the definition of leadership, perhaps due to the difficulty of separating explicit leadership actions from their everyday teaching (Klevering & McNae, 2018).

Unpacking the educational leadership definition

A catalyst for encouraging a shift in thinking about leadership emerged when all teachers in the case study were asked to reflect on the following definition of educational leadership in a focus group:

> Educational leadership is the practice of supporting others to make a positive difference to children's and young people's learning. It involves creating and sustaining the conditions known to enhance their learning. It requires the capability to work effectively with colleagues and other adults to support learning and to create new solutions and knowledge together. For those in positional leadership roles it also involves building and sustaining thriving teams and institutions that support ongoing professional learning (Education Council, 2018b, p. 8)

Across all services, teachers spoke of a shift in their thinking in how they defined leadership. Some teachers began to recognise it was their interpretation of leadership and the notion of positional leadership that was

preventing them from acknowledging their own leadership practice. In one of the focus group discussions on leadership, teachers described their self-identity, acknowledging that they were already leaders, with their teaching duties also representing leadership practices. Julia summarised this shift in view as:

> This made me think about, throughout the day of like everything that each individual teacher is doing already, but may not realize that is leadership. And also, just making sure that we're supporting them to continue to want to take on responsibility and want to do more, and not just let the leaders do it all.

In another focus group, teachers began to identify themselves as leaders and recognising that distributed leadership contributed to the sustainable growth of their team. In contrast, the exploration of educational leadership at the third focus group was formed around the idea of a supportive workplace culture, which was linked to relationships. All of the teachers appeared to achieve a greater sense of clarity and understanding as they developed an awareness of how they may already be practising leadership within their teaching roles through unpacking the educational leadership definition.

Implications

It appears that the previous lack of a clear and practically relevant definition of leadership has contributed to a unwillingness to connect with the role, hindering the ability of the ECE sector to evolve their conceptualisations about leadership (Rodd, 2013). This issue is often compounded by the use of several different, interrelated terms for leadership in the literature which adds increased complexity to breaking down the barriers for teachers to self-identify with leadership. The interpretation of leadership through traditional masculine models that do not reflect a sector of care and nurture, continue to add to the 'tainted notion' of leadership' (Hard & Jónsdóttir, 2013, p.313).

Considering the ECE sector is made up of a majority of female staff, with just 3% male (Education Counts, 2020), a notion of leadership strongly infused with traditional heroic male constructs will continue to jar with leaders and teachers' understanding of leadership. It has been suggested that if teachers had more easily accessible access to professional knowledge on effective ECE leadership, it may support teachers to recognise and foster leadership in their own and colleagues practices (Cooper, 2014).

The Teaching Council's definition of Educational Leadership signals a move in the right direction, as this definition has been defined in consultation with the teaching profession. The definition is centred on the practice of learning while also acknowledging the collaborative way in which ECE teachers work and gives recognition to the importance of positional leadership. Teachers in my study began to develop a greater understanding of their own leadership practice as they unpacked what educational leadership looked like in their service. Similarly, Rory McDowall Clark (2012), identified that it was necessary for teachers to have the opportunity to reflect on their own roles in leading practice. As teachers engage in collaborative envisioning, breaking down the barriers to what leadership entails, they begin to reconceptualise the idea of leadership. Clark advocates for continuing to develop new ways of understanding leadership, as it is a social construct that is open to reconstruction and reconfiguration. One study that focused on the experiences of early educators in a leadership programme (Douglass, 2018), found that a redefining of leadership enabled them to identify as leaders. When educators re-conceptualised leadership as collaborative, relational and purpose driven, they could link this notion with their own past and current actions and capabilities.

Growing the perception of leadership

Below I offer two different examples of how the ECE sector can continue to grow and enhance the perception of leadership for teachers.

One possibility to support teachers in their identification with leadership is the greater visibility of the concept of teacher leadership, encouraging teachers to consider leadership as linked to their teaching practices and identities. It is suitable for the ECE sector as it acknowledges the relational activities that form the design of many ECE services (Klevering & McNae, 2018). Teacher leadership prioritises teachers' relationships with children, their whānau and other teachers and encompasses an educational focus. The knowledge and expertise teachers bring to these relationships, often gained through university training, and enacted in shared decision making, can affirm their professional identity as leaders also.

Reflecting the unique, bicultural context of New Zealand ECE services, one research project (Tamati et al., 2008) examined how whānau development in a Māori immersion centre fostered leadership. The underlining theory centred on the belief that all members of an ECE community (teachers, children and whānau) were leaders already and leadership can be both an individual and collective responsibility. They developed the four responsibilities framework of leadership, Ngā takohanga e wha, which can be elaborated as: *Being responsible*, which relates to an individual's attitude and actions and involves being professional, acting ethically and appropriately, being honest, being positive and being open to others and to different perspectives; *Taking responsibility* relates to courage, risk taking, having a go, taking up the challenge and trying new things; *Having responsibility* relates to having designated roles and positions of responsibility; and *Sharing responsibility* refers to sharing power, roles and positions, an interaction and engagement with others, being able to listen to others' points of view, acknowledging different perspectives and both asking for, and providing, assistance (Tamati et al., 2008, p. 26). Through *having*, and *sharing* responsibility, you can be supported to

take responsibility and then, *be* responsible (Tamati et al., 2008, p. 27).

Conclusion

The New Zealand ECE sector is continuing to evolve at a fast pace, with demands for a professionalised workforce and accountability, requiring a focus on effective leadership (Klevering & McNae, 2018). The Education Review Office (2020) released a new framework for evaluating quality in ECE services, which may offer an opportunity to build a shared understanding of what educational leadership looks like. I believe it encourages a new persepctive of ECE leadership, as all of the indicators within it consider how can practice positively impact on children's learning. Additionally, it promotes a leadership approach that fosters collaboration, relational trust, professional learning and development to build capacity, improvement, and equitable outcomes for all children (Education Review Office, 2020). Perhaps these arguments signal a new look at leadership- leadership that is focused on the teaching and learning practices and open to all teachers. To date, there is evidence of this occurring through the *Teaching Council's Leadership Strategy* (Education Council, 2018b) and *Capabilities Framework* (Education Council, 2018a), with the overarching message from these documents suggesting leadership is a requirement of all teachers, not just those in positional leadership roles. These documents each reflect the importance and requirement of leadership to enable positive learning outcomes for children. With the sector gravitating towards a distributed approach to leadership (Thornton, 2018), the individual teachers' and positional leaders' expression of leadership contributes to enacting this approach effectively.

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