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Early Education Volume 65 Spring / Summer 2019

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Early Education' is a professional journal for people involved and interested in early childhood education. A partially peer-reviewed journal, it is published yearly by the Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research, University of Waikato.

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Our thanks for the photos

Thank you to Ashleigh Barnett who supplied the photo for the front cover.

Thanks also to Jessica Smith for allowing us to use the image of Millie and Declan Edwards in the photo.

This issue is the first issue of Early Education published by Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research, The University of Waikato.

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Walking the Talk

Leadership in New Zealand early childhood settings

Raewyn Higginson

There are few publications on leadership within centres in New Zealand early childhood settings. Thornton, Wansbrough, Clarkin-Phillips, Aitken and Tamati (2009) noted, "The limited literature on notions of leadership in ECE reveals a lack of agreement about what leadership means or looks like" (p. 8). The authors also noted that the variety of centres (e.g., privately owned, community based, teacher led, parent led, etc.) added to the confusion of what leadership looked like in the early childhood settings. This has led to the existence of different leadership styles which may have contributed to this lack of consensus.

This article attempts to address this confusion by reporting on two aspects of recent research on leadership conducted in a variety of early childhood settings:

  i.   The importance of the leader having a vision.

  ii.   The leader's espoused theories and theories in use.

These are discussed in relation to data collected during the case studies. The participants of the study were those who had overall responsibility of their centres and have been called the designated leader (DL) for the purposes of this article. The discussion that follows clarifies the two named aspects from the findings, plus some suggestions for further research.

Background to the study

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is an important component of education in a child's life. By attending ECE, the child is able to develop and learn many important social and developmental skills needed for on-going education and life in general (Ministry of Education, 2017; 2018). Te Whāriki suggests "children need to be adaptive, creative and resilient" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 7) to be a part of the ever changing global society.

The draft *Early Learning Strategy Plan* (Ministry of Education, 2018) suggests there needs to be good leadership (as opposed to mentoring or supervision) within all early childhood centres (ECC) to ensure

children learn the important social and developmental skills. However, there is a paucity of research on leadership in New Zealand (Ord et al., 2013; Thornton, 2014) and also a limited number of formal leadership programmes in early childhood education (Ryder et al., 2017). Therefore, a team of researchers from the staff of Te Rito Maioha Early Childhood New Zealand (ECNZ) investigated leadership within early childhood teacher-led centres that varied in their teaching practices and included different settings such as privately owned centres, kindergarten and community run early childhood centres.

The present study

Over an 18-month period the research team examined the processes and structures that supported effective leadership in ECE (Ryder et. al., 2017). The team explored the 'on the job' leadership beliefs and practices to build a model of leadership practices within ECE. Drawing on the work of Argyris and Schön (1974), the team compared espoused theories with theories in use. Espoused theories differentiates between explanations of what people do and what they actually do (known as theories in use). This article reports on the findings of the Ryder et al.'s (2017) research, relating to the designated leader (DL) vision, and the espoused theories and theories in use of the DL's.

Ethics for the research was approved by Te Rito Maioha Early Childhood New Zealand's Research and Ethics committee. The research team also followed the New Zealand Association for Research in Education Ethical Guidelines. An advisory committee was formed to provide advice and guidance on all aspects of the research. The nationwide research took place between 2015 and 2017, with the six researchers volunteering their time to investigate this important aspect of ECE.

The research team used a mixed-methods design over three phases that Cresswell (2009) explains as using a number of methods to collect the data for the findings. At the conclusion of the

research the DL and the centre were asked if they would like to use their own names or a pseudonym. Six of the seven centres chose to have a pseudonym of their own choosing. All Phase One, Two and Three data collection tools were designed collaboratively within the research team and then analysed together as a team to ensure consistency.

Phase one —Survey

A survey was sent out to all early childhood centres across Aotearoa/New Zealand. Self-defining positions of responsibility were indicated by 95% of the 223 respondents. An Expression of Interest and consent form for each centre's DL were attached should they wish to be involved in Phase Two and Three of the research. Ethical considerations included participants being assured their information would remain confidential.

Case studies were drawn from those who completed the Expression of Interest at the end of the survey. A total of seven philosophically different centres were selected for Phase Two and Three. They were comprised of four early childhood education and care centres (one being privately owned), two kindergartens and one parent lead Kōhanga Reo. The centres chosen are representative of the survey respondents. The positions held by the DL at each centre were different: one was an owner, another two head teachers, three were managers and one was a tumuaki of the Kōhanga Reo.

Phase Two—Espoused theory

This phase involved case studies. Seven centres (all of whom had indicated a willingness to participate further at the conclusion of the survey) and who were rated as 'well placed or very well placed' by the Education Review Office (2010) were selected according to the research member's location within Aotearoa New Zealand.

During the initial visit, the researcher reviewed the study's consent form with the DL. Once this was confirmed the researcher then conducted one semi-structured interview with the DL and asked them to complete three critical incident reports of instances where they displayed leadership in their centres. These were collected at the end of the research and analysed as a 'research team' to ascertain the 'espoused theory' of the DL.

Phase Three—Theories in use

This was the 'theories in use' phase. DLs were visited to explore their leadership practices. This phase included one focus group interview with the teaching team, three observations of the DL, researcher field notes, along with the collection of the critical incident reports and centre documentation (e.g., philosophy, team meeting minutes etc.) (Ryder et al., 2017).

Findings

The vision

Having a vision is deemed as an essential skill for any leader (Goodnow & Wayman, 2009; Kagan & Hallmark, 2001; Rodd, 2012) For all DLs a vision was essential and helped them to move their centre forward. The vision provided clarity and a sense of who and what their centre stood for, as well as ensuring the staff were trusted and valued. For each DL the vision was different and helped them with the clarity of their role as a leader. As one leader explained: "I happen to love the whole vision, um, you know setting and I miss having more time for um those kind of things" (DL, Tamariki o Mātua).

To be a strong leader and 'make the big calls' was a common theme across the centres. Sometimes the DL had to take on the ultimate accountability and responsibility. Constant communication, high expectations, knowing 'the bigger picture' of the DL's plan for the centre and advocating for staff were also desirable as the DL led the team through their vision. As one teacher explained: "Kathryn's [DL] prepared to make the final decision or do some of the hard, hard yards" (Teacher, Mayfield Kindergarten).

As part of the vision (and to encourage staff to share the vision), empowering staff was highly valued and was influenced strongly by the values and beliefs of all the DLs who encouraged their teachers in enacting and/or implementing the DL's vision of the centre in a variety of ways. In Whānau Akomanga, the DL expressed this as: "I think we work well together, it's like a collaborative. […] Yes, we try and help each other as much as we possibly can". Both teachers and DLs spoke of the importance of sharing the vision, while this was enacted in many differing ways including DL led and teacher led.

Recognising the value of the staff was also apparent with many of the DLs. Appraisals always recognised the contribution of individual staff members work within the centre. However, as leaders all DLs thought it important to show their appreciation in other ways as well. Sadly, not all centres could show this appreciation through pay

rises, instead finding other ways to demonstrate their appreciation. Often this was paid for out of the DL's own money, especially in centres that did not have the funds available. As one of the DL explained: "I'm looking at rewarding in some way, you know, cos quite a few of them have been here like 3, 4, 5 years or longer. So, I wanted to shout them … I'm looking at ways to treat them" (DL, Whānau Akomanga). This particular DL was looking at providing a mini break for her staff as well as hosting a Christmas party at her own home. However not all valuing of staff were in the big gestures: sometimes the smaller gestures such as morning teas and birthday cakes were appreciated by staff in the centres.

Another way of valuing the staff was through trust: trust in the way the staff were teaching; and trust when delegating responsibilities. As one DL clarified "So, my advice is to trust your staff, to empower them to complete and to achieve and then to accept that reward of having that as a shared responsibility" (DL, Tamariki o ngā Mātua).

Trust of teachers was viewed by both the staff and DLs within the act of building teamwork and encouraging advancement in many of the centres. The DL from Kōhanga Reo described this as

> Kaiako stepping into the Pouwhakahaere position, we have for some years practised the same concept when Pouwhakahaere is absent. The qualified staff will rotate the responsibility of stepping into that leadership role in the whare [house] for each day the Pou is absent.

This quote indicates the trust of the teaching staff in being in positions of leadership as well as advancing their careers through hands on practice.

Walking the talk (espoused theory and theory in action)

Across all of the case studies centres, the DLs demonstrated how their espoused theory did match their theories in action, while occasionally there were tensions between these two. Often congruence was apparent when the actions the DL took matched their words, while incongruence occurred when there were inconsistencies between the DLs actions and words (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

Congruence appeared in a number of instances with the DL. This became apparent when there was an expectation of strong leadership roles discussed and met between the DL and head teachers or teachers. As one DL explained:

> I think delegation's the key … And providing staff with opportunities to lead so and being prepared for someone to do it their own way, yeah, and just learning that it might get done, but it might get done differently. (DL, Mayfield Kindergarten)

Furthermore, congruence was also found when the DL valued and supported the team morale within their centres. This included allowing teachers to make their own decisions and acknowledging good problem solving. Congruence also occurred where ongoing professional learning and development was encouraged. For instance, a couple of centres sent the entire teaching staff to conferences so that they all learnt about a specific teaching concept. As one teacher explained, "*Yes, we [all] went through Triple One Care and if there are more than six people, they do an in-centre one*" (Teacher, Whānau Akomanga). A few teachers discussed the DL's description of her role as ensuring the staff members felt safe within the centre policies as seen in their actions when guiding staff.

Sometimes the DL had to have the 'hard conversation' and manage tensions within the teaching team to ensure the centre was a safe place for all (DL, staff, children and parents/whānau). One DL was particularly proactive in the area, as she stated:

> But I'm the overseer so if I can see that something's happening between staff members or you know I can hear talk that I don't think is very positive or something like that, that's a major thing for me. I'm always keeping an eye on that because I believe in really if something's not right then we meet and we talk about it. (DL, Mayfield Kindergarten)

However, the teachers did value their DL despite the hard conversations. As one teacher put it:

> We're grateful for the leader she is, for the role she has in our lives … she takes really good care of us [not just] as teachers but as people. She's got high expectations, but those high expectations are what drive us to be better teachers, better professionals, better people. (Teacher, Tamariki o ngā Mātua)

Sometimes the walk did not match the talk. The following are examples where the espoused theory did not coincide with the theory in action:

- The tension between working collaboratively within a team while also having to be responsible as the leader and spend time on management. Some DLs viewed the management aspect as a 'necessary evil'.
- Balancing the role of upholding the overall leadership of the centre, while knowing there is a need to grow the leadership within the teaching team. As one DL explained, letting go was difficult. She went on a two-week holiday overseas but still had to lead her team from a distance.
- The internal individual struggles between how the DL saw themselves as a leader and the leadership practices that were enacted.
- The time issues between 'being in ratio' while teaching on the floor and dealing with the organisational tasks that were part of their leadership role.

Discussion

The findings indicate that the DLs' vision for their centres was highly influenced by their beliefs and values, which they shared with their staff. Although not specifically questioned, the induction of new staff were hinted at by two of the DLs. In Te Kōhanga Reo new staff were treated as teina by the staff who had worked there longer and were gently introduced to the centre. In Whānau Akomanga the DL was very aware of the need to ensure the new staff member being part of the team at the centre. To this end the DL 'trialled' the new staff member before employing them and then ensured they were inducted, relying on her head teachers to do this. These two very different approaches were the DLs attempt at ensuring the needs of the children were met and were developing into adaptive, creative and resilient children (Ministry of Education, 2017). Additionally, for the DL from Whānau Akomanga needed to ensure the centre was a 'specialised' and profitable business as she owned the centre and was responsible for the culture of the staff within the centre and ensuring her 'clients' (the children and their families) were satisfied with the service they were getting; confirming the findings of other studies (Penn, 2019).

The DLs' espoused theory was congruent with their theory in action (i.e., 'walk the talk') when they could take responsibility for influencing and enacting change. This was apparent in how they described their roles (i.e., manager, head teacher, principal, tumuaki), the leadership expectation which could be discussed with others, when the staff wellbeing was supported by the leader and there was strong, relevant on-going professional development for all teachers as well as each DL.

However, the espoused theory was incongruent with the theory in action when a DL's inability to enact change was caused by time pressure, a managerial style of leadership, having a need to balance teaching with organisational commitments (working as part of a team while being the person accountable), allowing other teachers to act in areas of leadership and the different leadership roles needed. This could be interpreted as the leadership may not be supported, sustained or encouraged in different centres where incongruence occurred.

Limitations

It is clear there were limitations within the research, which include:

- Those without a formal leadership title (such as manager or principal) were reluctant to view themselves as leaders.
- There were few responses from Māori and Pasifika centres in the survey. The team thought this was, probably a result of the lack of face to face engagement, which is a preferred way of researching with Māori (Smith, 2012) and Pacific peoples (Amituanai-Toloa, 2009) peoples.

Areas for further research

While this list is not exhaustive, this small study suggests the following areas would be of interest for further research:

- Do all centres have appointed or acknowledged leaders with a vision that is shared and practiced?
- Besides 'on the job' training, where else can teachers seek leadership knowledge?
- How can centres work towards sustainable leadership?

Conclusion

Leadership is an important aspect within all ECE settings and needs to be taken seriously in this important educational sector. Having leadership programmes to support current, new or aspiring leaders is a good first step. While leadership in ECE

is complicated and comes under many headings (owner, director, head teacher, manager, tumuaki etc.), it is a worthwhile endeavour as a leader with sound leadership skills acknowledging the impact they have on staff, children, their families/whānau and the community.

Acknowledgments

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