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Challenging positional authority: Navigating leadership as collaboration

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This article reflects a recent symposium presentation that explored ways positional leadership limits opportunities for members of the community of practice to contribute leading practices. As many early childhood environments in Aotearoa/New Zealand become increasingly market driven, a focus on outcomes and accountability have influenced the leadership and management hierarchy. This focus places leadership as situated in a designated position afforded to one or two individuals (Rodd, 2013). The approach advocated in this article provides opportunities to develop mutually supporting and complimentary shared practices of leading, between all members of the community of practice (Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2016). This aligns with leadership founded on collaboration and empowerment of teachers, as well as student teachers, to contribute expertise and abilities, equating to leading practices. Transformation from individualistic leadership to a more collectivist style, promoting skills and attributes individuals could contribute underpins this approach. A kaupapa Māori model of leadership that aligns with a collectivist perspective, is used to challenge understandings of responsibility within the community of practice. This approach invites communities of practice to draw on people's capabilities, promote self-efficacy and provide space to grow leaders.

*Waiho i te toipoto, kua i te toiroa
Let us keep close together, not wide apart*

Introduction

In an environment that is increasingly market driven it is important for early childhood centres to consider how they are leading authentic learning for all members of the community of practice. Duhn (2010) explains neo-liberalist reforms have influenced early childhood sector management and leadership practices with emphasis on commercial outcomes, derived "from Western white masculine models" (Davis, Krieg & Smith, 2015, p.136). This approach focuses on performance and accountability that positions teaching as a technocratic activity and has the power to silence and privilege certain voices in leadership (Davis et al., 2015; Duhn, 2010).

Leadership in early childhood education in Aotearoa/New Zealand has been influenced by a number of leadership styles over time (Aitken, 2013; Duhn, 2010; Scrivens et al., 2007; Thornton, Wansborough, Clarkin-Phillips, Aitken & Tamati, 2009). Many of these celebrated the unique and collaborative nature of leadership in early childhood education. The Playcentre movement, which embraces a strong parent-led model of education, is a particular example of this (Grey, 1958). The influence of models such as this, have resulted in a blend of leadership philosophies and approaches. However, the gap between the espoused and actual leadership practices have been increasingly influenced by a free market, public/ private model of early childhood education in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Duhn, 2010).

A market-driven shift has created challenging tensions that requires all members of early childhood communities to collaborate, in order to effect transformational leading and learning. In an increasingly diverse and multicultural environment we believe that leadership rests on strong responsive, reciprocal relationships within a community of practice. These relationships contribute to an environment where many voices are heard



and diversity is celebrated (Davies et al., 2015; Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2016). This aligns with the kaupapa Māori concept of whanaungatanga as promoting collaborative leadership (Mane, Brown-Cooper & Armstrong Read, 2015).

Thornton et al. (2009) highlighted the collaborative nature of early childhood teachers' work and that the adoption of some leadership models would not be appropriate. Whilst there are many theories of leadership there is no 'one size fits all' approach to define leadership in early childhood education (Aitken, 2013; Davies et al., 2015; Rodd, 2013). We espouse the blending of leadership principles and promotion of individual leading practices that reflect the unique members of a community of practice. As such, we have focussed on principles of distributed leadership that promote individual's contributions, with an emphasis on their leading practices, in preference to positional leadership (Heikka & Hujala, 2013; Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2016).

Our ideas are informed by a range of educational leadership literature from across sectors (Aitken 2013; Davies et al, 2015; Heikka & Hujala, 2013; Heikka, Waniganayake & Hujala, 2012; McDowall Clark & Murray, 2012; Rodd, 2013; Spillane, 2006; Tamati, Hond-Flavell, Korewha & the whānau of Te Kōpae Piripono, 2008; Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2016). In our experience as lecturers in an initial early childhood teacher education programme, we engage in mentoring relationships alongside and within a wide range of early childhood centres. We also encourage student teachers to recognise capabilities that they can contribute to leading practices in their early childhood centres.

Dominant influences on leadership in early childhood education

Early childhood education in Aotearoa/New Zealand, as with other nations in the western world, has been subjected to neo-liberal agendas, that is, an "enterprise approach to education, with focus on competition in a market environment" (Mutch, 2003, p. 119). The current climate in Aotearoa/New Zealand has seen the privatisation of many early childhood centres and adoption of managerial approaches, influenced by business corporates and their models (Aitken, 2013; Duhn, 2010; Spillane, 2006). We advocate movement away from eurocentric leadership paradigms informed by neoliberal agendas that have sustained a market driven sector.

Wilkinson and Kemmis (2016) also recognised that the majority of research situates educational leadership within an individualistic paradigm. They refer to 'Anglophone nations' where leadership "is dominated by managerialist notions of leading" with an emphasis on education sites, and systems focussed on efficiencies and accountabilities (Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2016, p.37). Spillane (2006) refers to this model of leadership as having potential to have power over another's practices. This in turn, has shaped much of the discourse around leadership and challenged the potential to change existing practices. Instead, we embrace a collectivist approach favoured by many cultures, where leadership can be demonstrated through leading practices contributed by all members in a community of practice. There is a unique opportunity for early childhood centres in Aotearoa/New Zealand to make connections to kaupapa Māori principles of leadership to form part of the fabric of their leading practices (Mane et al., 2015; Tamati et al., 2008).

Distributed leadership

We align with principles of distributed leadership, as these recognise the contribution of individuals to the team and people stepping up and taking responsibility for leading practices (Heikka & Hujala, 2013; Hujala, Waniganayake & Rodd, 2013). This includes emphasis on "collective, collaborative action and how this shifts the power so that leadership becomes an agency that can be shared" (Scrivens et al., 2007, p.21). Leadership is then residing in individuals (Rodd, 2013). However, the issue with this is having a leader who draws on "collaborative strategies to achieve positive, inclusive and ethical outcomes" for the learning community (Rodd, 2013, p.15). Recognising and empowering individuals to contribute leading practices would support collective, collaborative action where leadership is shared.



“It is suggested that there can be more than one person/actor involved in leading by learning, based on their knowledge-based expertise” (Heikka et al., 2012, p.39). Adopting this approach requires understanding this expertise and its significance for defining and distributing leadership tasks (Heikka et al., 2012). The learning community’s unique site ontology would reflect how this achieved (Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2016).

Unpacking the influence of site ontologies

Leadership is impacted by site ontologies, that is, the early childhood community practices of ways of being and how this informs and shapes the adopted leadership model and leading practices. Wilkinson and Kemmis (2016) refer to a ‘societist’ approach to leadership, informed by Theodore Schatzki (2006), and his notion of site ontologies. They state “leading practices form part of the ‘characteristic arrangements of sayings, doings and relatings that are mutually necessary to order and sustain’ a practice, such as that of learning communities” (Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2016, p.48). These leading practices reflect a site’s ontology, which could have evolved from the internal social life and human practices, as well as wider historical and political influences (McDowall Clark & Murray, 2012). Wilkinson and Kemmis (2016) cite Schatzki (2005) and explain that a site ontological approach emphasises the co-relationship between human practices and the material arrangements within the context, namely the site. Examining and understanding a site requires analysis of its uniqueness, because it is within the site that certain leading practices, over others are prefigured, enabled and/or constrained.

Critical pedagogy becomes a useful lens to view influences shaping individual site ontology. Critical pedagogy, informed by critical theory, requires educators to provide opportunities for a collective dialogue which invites a range of voices to contribute to a democratic and just society. Firmly grounded in social justice and equity ideologies; it aims to alleviate bias, inequality and hegemony (Giroux, 2011). If leading practices are grounded in critical pedagogy it is important to understand that early childhood education is based on a number of dominant discourses around how children learn, who is involved in children’s learning and how children’s learning is assessed. If early childhood teachers are to engage in genuine critical pedagogy a number of these assumptions must be challenged to reflect the changing needs of children and families (Chan, 2011).

Globalisation and migration have contributed to a multicultural society. This demands educators employ critical pedagogy to ensure practices continue to reflect this ever changing demographic. Provision for early childhood education in Aotearoa/New Zealand needs to continue to be built upon strong relationships and engagement in communities of practice (Ministry of Education, 1996). Critical teachers are willing to shift or unlearn aspects of their pedagogy, in response to the diverse needs of the community in which they teach (Wink, 2005).

Diverse communities of practice and leadership paradigms

We have used the term ‘community of practice’ throughout this article as representative of the diverse early childhood centres within Aotearoa/New Zealand. This term also acknowledges the diverse learning community coming together for a common goal, including but not limited to teachers, student teachers, children and whānau. Within a plethora of early childhood education centres, leadership is situated within a number of conflicting paradigms (McDowall Clark & Murray, 2012). These paradigms, including pedagogical, distributed, transformational, authoritative, participative, autocratic and laissez-faire leadership, are socially constructed and may be shaped by individuals, or imposed by the companies in which they work (Rodd, 2013).

All members of the community of practice can reflect on and consider their site ontology and how this shapes the leading practices in their centres. This can take into consideration how the site ontology has been shaped and informed by historic, political and individualist approaches to leading and consider the discourse/s surrounding the leading practices and leadership approach. Engaging in the act of critical reflection can inform discussion and reshape future direction in the centre using what McDowall Clark and Murray (2012) refer to as ‘joint agency’ as “the catalyst for innovation and development” (p.91).



For many communities of practice, leadership privileges individual persons within the hierarchy of the centre. This reflects positional authority based on a traditional managerial leadership approach advocated in businesses. This is renowned for top down leadership where the power resides in one or two high status individuals (Rodd, 2013). Aitken (2013) also recognised this, and recommended the early childhood sector liberate leadership and shift to a position of leadership as a shared practice that encourages the skills, attitudes and practices of all teachers. She drew on research within early childhood settings that concluded the preferred approach is more facilitative, where decision-making occurs through agreement (Aitken, 2013, as cited Cardno & Reynolds, 2008; 2009; Henderson-Kelly & Pamphilon, 2000; Rodd, 2006; Scrivens, 2000). Whilst this democratic approach may be what is espoused, it is not always reflected in actual practice.

Transforming leadership

Challenging the positional/hierarchical leadership roles requires members of the community of practice to embrace the collective nature of their leading practices. This opens up the space for all members to share ideas and perspectives which contribute to effective pedagogy. This influence reaches beyond the leadership hierarchy to consider the voice of all teachers, whānau and the wider learning community. This in turn builds people's capability and contributes to individual self-efficacy. When individuals' abilities to make an active and valued contribution is not connected to positional authority, everyone's potential is fostered. This democratic approach of leading *within* focuses on leading practice, rather than leadership as a role.

The paradigm of *leadership within* adopts the views that everyone is capable of contributing towards leadership and that active involvement in the process of leadership should not reside in one or two high-status individuals alone. This makes *relational interdependence* a key component (McDowall Clark & Murray, 2012, p. 38).

McDowall Clark and Murray (2012) introduced a new paradigm for early childhood leadership underpinned by the notion of *leadership from within*. They identified critical thinking about leadership as an integral concept required to ensure effective relationships and active participation. The paradigm is based on three interweaving features: 'relational interdependence'; 'reflective integrity'; and 'catalytic agency'.

1. *Relational interdependence* acknowledges the importance of relationships, based on a valuing culture where all members share the power to make decisions.
2. *Reflective integrity* refers to members of the community engaging in ongoing critical reflection, focusing on underlying and unspoken sayings, doings and relatings informing the leading practices.
3. *Catalytic agency*, taking personal responsibility for one's own actions with personal intent to make improvement and to enact a positive change that is informed by reflective integrity.

These features contribute to a transformation of sayings, doings and relatings within the community of practice. This model combines features of participative leadership and supports thinking about site ontology by considering the connections within a community of practice. This requires thinking about and practising leadership from a distributed perspective, reflecting on the roles of the collective and how individuals contribute.

Leadership within requires an acknowledgement of the multiple and varied voices within the community of practice. It involves creating and recreating a shared vision that is reflective of shared narratives, in turn transforming ways of being. Members of the community of practice should consider individual points of difference and how they contribute to the collective vision. When members are encouraged to contribute this empowers them with a sense of self efficacy and catalytic agency. This creates space to celebrate diversity and individual contribution from all members within the learning community. Alignment between this model, kaupapa Māori principles of leadership and collectivist responsibility become clearly evident.



Kaupapa Māori principles of leadership

Kaupapa Māori situates whanaungatanga as a central concept to leadership (Mane et al., 2015). Māori ways of knowing, being and doing should underpin all teaching praxis (Ministry of Education, 1996). Te Kōpae Piripono (Tamati et al., 2008), in their Centre of Innovation research, identified that leadership as both an individual and collective responsibility rather than the responsibility of those in recognised positions. They wanted to reconceptualise leadership in early childhood education by steering away from neo-liberal market driven notions of leadership, to leadership centred on relationships and people at its core.

They cited literature (Rodd, 1998; Kagan & Bowman; 1997; Lambert, 2002) that referred to leadership as creating a quality community of practice, the rights of all individuals to be leaders and the emphasis on leadership being a social construct that emphasises reciprocal relationships. Emphasis on the concept, “shared-power”, “where leadership rests with those both with and without formal positions of authority” was advocated to give responsibility to the whole community (Tamati et al., 2008, p.24).

As such, they defined a model of four responsibilities of leadership, named *Ngā Takohanga e Whā* that empowers whānau as leaders involved in the learning. While this model focuses on whānau we observed a relevance for all member of the community of practice.

Te Whai Takohanga: Is about having responsibility. This responsibility identified that there were some “designated roles and positions of responsibility” (Tamati et al., 2008, p.26).

1. Te Mouri Takohanga: Requires individuals to be responsible and refers to an individual’s professionalism, ethics, positivity and openness to others’ perspectives.
2. Te Kawe Takohanga: Involves taking responsibility and that individuals are courageous, demonstrate willingness to address challenges and try new things.
3. Te Tuku Takohanga: Necessitates sharing the responsibility, the “power, roles and positions” with an emphasis on whanaungatanga or relationships and abilities to engage with others and listen to different perspectives. It also requires “asking for and providing assistance” (Tamati et al., 2008, p.26).

Tamati et al. (2008) refer to these as dispositions of leadership and that there needed for alignment of these for effective leadership to be established. These principles, valued by tangata whenua, form a structure for teachers to use when reviewing their own leading practices and relationships within the community of practice.

Critiquing one’s own context and leading practices

Central to critical reflection would be analysis of the discourse of leading with consideration of the language used to describe leadership roles and practices and whether this privileges positional authority. This could begin with critique of the role and titles currently used in communities of practice, that is, consider job titles in relation to educational roles to ensure that these reflect the community of practice’s philosophy. An understanding of a site’s unique ontology invites members to challenge who holds the decision making power, and how this is reflected in the job titles. An analysis of these titles should occur in relation to the community of practice’s values and beliefs and desired leading practices. Aitken (2013) observed a disconnect between job titles and actual leading practices, and how these titles and positions vary between contexts. She noted that while titles may indicate the appointment of specific leaders these may not necessarily improve individual’s understanding of leadership and the potentialities for leadership (Aitken, 2013).

Rodd (2006) explains that there is a co-relationship between leadership and management but that “leadership emanates out of vision that is based in philosophy, values and beliefs, which in turn guides policy, day-to-day operation and innovation” (p.21). Managers are seen to plan, organise, co-ordinate and control, which is



situated in a discourse of efficiencies and accountability (Rodd, 2006; Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2016). Whilst we recognise the need for management roles, we focus on leadership and leading practices. Leaders give direction, offer inspiration, build teamwork and gain acceptance (Rodd, 2006). She explains that early childhood communities have a history of people working in collaboration who influence and inspire each other, as opposed to one person focussed on productivity and end results (Rodd, 2006). Collaborative early childhood communities provide impetus to open space for leading practices being promoted and distributed through the heroic work of teachers in their day to day work.

Sustaining leading practices

Reflection on leading practices *within* provides opportunities to develop mutually supporting and complimentary shared practices of leading, between all members of the community of practice (Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2016). Whilst this challenges positional authority it presents possibilities for growing emerging leaders, building self-efficacy within the teaching team and increasing both the human and social capital within the community of practice (McDowall Clark & Murray, 2012).

Ensuring sustainable leading practices requires communities of practice to grow the potential within their teaching teams, strengthen relationships that support this growth and consider the 'practice architecture' or arrangements shaping individual's future practice (Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2016). Leading, embedded within a community of practice, "is a process of forming societies, communities and other collectivities through shaping of people's future practices" (Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2016, p. 50). Focussing on the interrelatedness of leading practices, and ensuring these are widespread across the community will also contribute to sustainability of the practices. Minor changes can be endured because of the interrelated and widespread nature of the leading practices. Space and time needs to be given to the selected leading practices and critique of these to ensure they can be sustained within the community.

Conclusion

Establishing a clear definition of leadership remains as fluid and elusive as the unique community of practice in which it occurs. Whilst there are a number of theories informing leadership practices, no one theory will fit all early childhood communities (Aitken, 2013). Adopting a critical pedagogical lens opens the way for teachers to address issues of social justice and equity ideologies. This space also invites a consideration of kaupapa Māori principles of leadership to underpin and inform the leading practices. An ongoing cycle of critical reflection with a focus on the relevant and meaningful leadership principles is required for effective leading and learning within diverse communities. It is important to have a critical understanding of the unique site ontology informing and influencing the leadership paradigm within a community of practice (Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2016). Understanding how this has been shaped over the years by a number of external and internal influences allows opportunities for transformational leading and learning. This transformation occurs within an environment that reflects the ever changing and diverse voices of the members.

Creating a unique narrative underpinned by the centre's philosophy requires ongoing, courageous and honest dialogue. This ensures that the vision remains agile and authentic in order to develop and sustain a nurturing and productive work context. Enhancing individual's *relational interdependence*; *reflective integrity*; and *catalytic agency* to be actively involved in *leadership within* could assist the transformation (McDowall Clark & Murray, 2012). Thinking about leadership and fostering teams to step up to contribute to leading practices requires open, responsive and reciprocal relationships. Kaupapa Māori principles of leadership offer some guidance here. While this 'cut and paste' approach takes time and collaboration, the reward is an environment that celebrates the heroic work of teachers and ensures that the vision is sustainable and constantly recreated to reflect the diverse learning community.



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