Learning in nature: Leadership opportunities in an Education Outside the Classroom programme in a New Zealand early childhood centre

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Abstract
This article explores how involvement in an Education Outside the Classroom (EOTC) programme in one New Zealand early childhood centre provides leadership opportunities for teachers and children and highlights the benefits of [re]connecting young children with nature on a regular basis. It focuses on teachers’ and parents’ views and perspectives on their participation in this nature-based education programme, specifically in regard to the leadership opportunities that the programme provided for teachers and children.

This article highlights the powerful influence of the EOTC programme in the development of teachers’ leadership. It describes how leadership is a contextual phenomenon and explains how a formal EOTC programme in an early childhood centre provided increased opportunities for teacher leadership regardless of formal leadership position. Distributed leadership and relational leadership were identified as key components of the programme. The article also explores how involvement with the EOTC programme and the natural environment provided significant opportunities for the leadership development of children, in addition to developing their physical abilities, independence and social skills. This article adds valuable knowledge in the area of leadership opportunities resulting from involvement in an EOTC programme.

Keywords: Leadership; distributed leadership; early childhood education; nature programme; bush kindergarten; Education Outside the Classroom (EOTC)

Introduction
Connecting and [re]connecting children with nature is a theme that has received increasing awareness, attention and media exposure in recent years. While some of the benefits of being immersed in nature are common knowledge and well researched, it appears that many facets are yet to be explored. This article throws light on how involvement in a formal Education Outside the Classroom (EOTC) programme, in one New Zealand early childhood centre, provides leadership opportunities for teachers and children as well as highlighting the benefits of [re]connecting young children with nature on a regular basis. While there is a broad scope of literature concerning EOTC, there are very few academic publications regarding EOTC specific to early childhood education, with a noticeable paucity of New Zealand based literature. Through the contextual lens of a qualified early childhood educator, centre manager and leader, and drawing on my own experience, relevant theory and literature, this article provides insight into the nature and complexities of a research project undertaken in one not-for-profit childcare centre located in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The initial concept of an education outside the classroom programme within this early childhood centre was born from a small group of passionate teachers and my own strong personal desire to encourage increased engagement between young children and the outdoors. The positive outcomes for teachers and children, observed and documented by teachers, parents, families and myself over three years, reiterated the benefits of nature-based education programmes and are a strong driver in the continuation of this valuable
programme. Given the current worldwide attention to nature-based education and lack of research around resulting leadership opportunities, this research is timely and worthy of attention.

The paper first outlines literature specific to the study, including leadership in early childhood education; the New Zealand early childhood context; EOTC and its benefits and influence. The methodology used in the research project to investigate the leadership potential of EOTC is then presented. The main section provides a discussion of the research findings and the paper concludes with comments on the potential value of the study.

**Leadership in Early Childhood Education**

Leadership is an elusive and complex phenomenon, difficult to observe and define, despite the huge range of definitions available in the literature. Within a learning organisation, the role of a leader includes both management and leadership tasks, intertwined in a complex web. While the broad range of literature concerning leadership in education is plentiful, literature specific to leadership in early childhood education is more limited (Bella & Bloom, 2005; Rodd, 2006; Scrivens, 2002). However, it is encouraging to observe a growing range of literature on leadership in early childhood emerging from New Zealand e.g. Carroll-Lind, Smorti, Ord and Robinson (2016); Clarkin-Phillips (2011); Thornton (2013); and Thornton, Wansbrough, Clarkin-Phillips, Aitken and Tamati (2009).

If the broad concept of leadership is difficult to define, then defining leadership in early childhood is even more challenging. Rodd (2006) asserts that this challenge arises from the uniqueness of each early childhood context, which is compounded by the diversity of the workforce. She offers some broad statements on leadership: “leaders are people who can influence the behaviour of others for the purpose of achieving a goal” (p. 11) and leaders “appear to possess a special set of somewhat elusive qualities and skills, which are combined into an ability to get others to do what the leader wants because they want to do it” (p. 12). Leadership is not a set of static attributes, but a dynamic activity. Leaders must work towards stability while steering their team towards innovation and change. They must set goals, roles and responsibilities, collaborate and make decisions, plan and encourage and constantly communicate with the team (Rodd, 2006).

A number of researchers consider that there are major differences between leadership across the various education sectors (Ho, 2011; Thornton et al., 2009). Thornton et al (2009) explain that the unique nature and context of early childhood education means that while some notions of leadership from the other education sectors may be applied, due to the diverse and multifaceted nature of early childhood education, caution should be considered in this application. Early childhood educators frequently work in collaboration, with a smaller hierarchical structure in comparison to other sectors, and therefore the accepted definitions of leadership in other education sectors may not match leadership in the early childhood education sector.

Similarly, Ho (2011) asserts that because leadership is context-bound it is problematic to simply assume that practices and policies for early childhood can be taken from the knowledge base of other educational sectors. In contrast Rodd (2001, as cited in Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2002), claims that there is a much smaller difference in leadership across education sectors, and states, “being a leader is not at all different from being a leader in any other field. Effective leadership, be it of a large multi-national company or a child-care centre, requires certain attitudes, attributes and skills” (p. 22). However, Rodd’s comparison of leadership across sectors does not take into account the influence of the socio-political context, and how the different sectors within education are highly influenced by the volatile political climate.

Recently, literature around leadership in early childhood recognises that leadership is not the activity of an isolated individual (built on notions of competition and power) but is distributed across a variety of people who contribute to effective leadership. The collaborative practice of early childhood education in New Zealand very much lends itself to a distributive leadership model (Dunlop, 2008).
Distributed leadership in Early Childhood Education

The distributed leadership literature contains a wide range of interpretations, compounded by the various contexts to which the definition is applied. Whilst Fitzgerald and Gunter (2007, as cited in Harris, 2009) claim that it is not a new model, others, including Leithwood, Jantzi and McElheron-Hopkins (2006) and Spillane, Halverson and Diamond (2001), argue that it provides an innovative way of considering leadership in learning organisations and can offer a powerful tool in assisting the transformation of leadership practices and organisational change.

Historically a sole leader namely the “Principal” or “Head Teacher” led an education setting: this traditional hierarchy is now being challenged (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2002; Gronn, 2000). Distributed leadership focuses on the nature and form of leadership practice and acknowledges that all the teachers within a learning organisation have a role to play in implementing change. Distributed leadership is determined by the multiple interactive influences of staff within a setting, where the lines are blurred between leaders and followers, and power relationships are distorted (Harris, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2006; Spillane et al., 2001).

Within the context of early childhood education, distributed leadership appears to be particularly fitting (Clarkin-Phillips, 2007; Thornton, 2005). This is potentially due to the context of team teaching, with an onus on shared responsibilities across multiple team members. Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2002) along with Scrivens (2002) believe that distributed leadership fits well with the predominance of women in early childhood education and the style of leadership that women are more likely to exhibit, such as democratic and participatory, taking into consideration a broader view of the curriculum and encouraging inclusiveness. Research has suggested that distributed leadership can impact positively on increasing desirable outcomes for children in early childhood education, as the power is distributed and teachers are provided with increased agency (Clarkin-Phillips, 2011; Rodd, 2001; Thornton, 2005).

The relational leader

Relational leaders view others as human beings in relation to themselves, and not objects that can be manipulated. Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) state that relational leadership requires morally-responsible leaders who understand the intricate web of inter- and intra-personal relationships at work in the organisation. Carmeli, Tishler and Edmondson (2012) believe that when people work collaboratively they develop more intimate relationships with others and develop positive expectations of others’ intentions.

Relational leaders are caring and honest, value others’ contributions and believe that everyone is valuable, acknowledging that people are an organisation’s greatest asset (Komives, Lucas & McMahon, 2007). Their behaviours help to create an environment where a sense of trust is gained and augmented. Trust is a core relational construct, where individuals are willing to be vulnerable in a relationship and trust that their vulnerability will not be exploited or harmed by others (Carmeli et al., 2012). Reciprocity is central to trust; both individuals must bring something of value to the relationship (Brower, Schoorman & Tan, 2000). Brower et al. (2000) explain that when trust is established, leaders are more likely to engage in risky behaviours such as delegation, which can lead to higher levels of empowerment, satisfaction, motivation and performance. However, Brower et al. (2000) further explain that trust is context specific, with the level of trust in an individual only relevant to that situation.

Relational leadership sits well within the early childhood context. Empowering others, and authentic and meaningful relationships are core values deeply embedded and acknowledged in the sector (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2002; Grey, 2004; Rodd, 1997). Te Whāriki, the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, highlights the importance of “respectful, reciprocal and responsive relationships” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 37) with “relationships” forming one of the four guiding principles of the curriculum.
The benefits of connecting children and nature

It is clear, both from significant research, and from the experience of many parents and teachers, that the benefits of connecting children and nature are extensive. See for example, Gill (2014), Louv (2010), MacEachren (2013) and Warden (2012). Elliott (2010) makes the bold statement that “contact with nature outdoors is as important for health and well-being as are daily food and sleep for children” (p. 62). The benefits are enhanced when children are given the chance to play uninterrupted and for long periods of time (Louv, 2010). This allows children to become deeply engaged where they develop the higher-level skills of problem solving, hypothesising, predicting and analysing (Katz & Chard, 2000; O’Brien, 2009).

It is widely acknowledged that children in the 21st century are experiencing a more inactive and passive life in comparison to previous generations (Carr & Luken, 2014; Clements, 2004; Davis, Rea & Waite, 2006). Clements (2004) maintains that the reduction in children’s opportunities to interact with the natural environment has a negative effect on their emotional and physical development. Their lack of access to the outdoors limits the opportunity to be physically active, contributing to the current epidemic of childhood obesity (Louv, 2010; Rosenow, 2008, as cited in Prince, 2010). Prince (2010) notes that in New Zealand the [re]connection of children and nature is important, as “in New Zealand people pride themselves on an outdoor lifestyle and children do have access to beaches, parks and the great outdoors. However, this access is being eroded by the urban lifestyle trends of the working parent and indoor entertainment” (Prince, 2010, p. 425).

Education Outside the Classroom in Early Childhood Education in New Zealand

New Zealand’s geography offers unique opportunities for strategic engagement between children and nature. However, early childhood education in New Zealand is variously governed and regulated through Ministry of Education regulations and guidelines and health and safety legislation, leading to teacher perceptions that outdoor education is difficult to achieve while meeting formal regulations.

Despite this, teachers are increasingly acknowledging the significant learning environment nature provides for children (Kelly & White, 2013), and growing numbers of New Zealand early childhood services offer some form of nature programme (Catto, 2014; Wastney, 2016), increasingly influenced by the European forest kindergarten movement (Kane & Kane, 2011; Knight, 2013). The underlying notion of education outside the classroom links strongly with all four principles of Te Whäriki (empowerment, holistic development, family and community, and relationship). Te Whäriki enables nature programmes to be a core part of an early childhood centre’s daily programme and curriculum.

Early childhood has been identified as a critical time for developing children’s sense of respect and care for the natural environment. Ghafouri (2014) and MacEachren (2013) both declare that attitudes and values can be shaped in the early years and therefore it is important for exposure to nature to begin early. With the decline in children’s opportunity to be immersed in nature, early childhood education provides the perfect platform for this vital [re]connection with nature. Nature programmes provide meaningful relationships between the children and their local community, for example children are encouraged to learn through responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places and things in nature. Children are empowered to learn and grow in many different ways and are provided with varied opportunities to take increasing agency over their own learning, and to learn leadership skills.

This paper explores the opportunities for encouraging leadership of children and teachers through involvement in an EOTC programme in an early childhood centre in New Zealand.

Methodology

The study adopted an interpretive approach, with qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and questionnaires. The views, perspectives and experiences of teachers, leaders and
parents were gathered from those who had been involved in the nature programme and were analysed alongside relevant literature, which provided a theoretical framework. The study involved the researcher’s interpretations of peoples’ perspectives, experiences, and interactions situated in a unique context.

The research was a case study, conducted over a 12-month period. The aim was to explore how involvement in an EOTC programme in an early childhood centre encouraged leadership opportunities for teachers and children. It was undertaken in Melody Childcare Centre, a not-for-profit stand-alone early childhood centre located in an urban area of Waikato, New Zealand. The Melody Nature Outdoor Programme (MNOP) was established in the latter part of 2014 and entails a group of nine four-year-olds accompanied by two teachers, and when possible one parent. The group spends one day a week in a local bush environment (instead of their usual conventional classroom), for a ten-week term.

Teacher participants
Five teachers participated in this research, comprising one male and four females, two of whom were unqualified and three were fully certificated teachers. The teacher participants had a combined 59 years teaching experience in Early Childhood Education. Of the five, only one had held a formal position of leadership, which was in the role of “head teacher”. This teacher was heavily involved in the establishment of the MNOP. The other teachers had been involved to varying degrees in the programme including its establishment. Prior to the establishment of MNOP, the teachers’ prior experience of EOTC was relatively limited.

Data collection
This research utilised a mixed methods approach, engaging three different methods: focus groups, semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. This combined approach provided qualitative data to investigate how participation in an EOTC programme in an early childhood centre encourages leadership opportunities for teachers and children. The qualitative data approach allowed for the gathering of information about the beliefs of parents and teachers (Menter, Ellito, Hulme, Lewin & Lovden, 2011). The benefit of using a questionnaire with parents (over interviews, for example) allowed data to be gathered from a larger sample of the centre community, providing a broader representation of parents’ perspectives on EOTC in early childhood education (Menter et al., 2011). Undertaking semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion with a small sample of teachers allowed the opportunity to gather a greater depth of data regarding individuals’ perspectives.

Analysis of data
The data generated from the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion were analysed using a thematic analysis framework. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe this as a strategy that organises and describes data in rich detail. Some of the codes identified were: leadership in teachers, leadership in children, relationships, imagination, social skills, physical activities, limitations/challenges, confidence/responsibility/independence, decision-making, co-leading/shared-leading/working-together, trust/commitment, benefits of nature, physical growth, safety/risk/RAMS and systems/rituals. Using the codes, the transcripts were analysed and emerging key themes were identified and explored further. These key themes, which formed the basis of the research findings and subsequent discussion are: teachers’ leadership (leadership in action; confidence; commitment, passion and trust; reshaping relationships; professional knowledge; systems and rituals; and challenges of EOTC and leadership) and children’s leadership (learning to lead others; risk-taking and confidence; decision making and negotiation, teamwork, physical abilities, independence and communication).

Ethical considerations
This study was conducted under the University of Waikato Ethical Conduct in Human Research and Related Activities Regulations (University of Waikato, 2017). The main ethical considerations were access to
Findings
The research findings indicate that the intricacies around the leadership opportunities offered by a unique EOTC programme in an early childhood centre are significant. The findings are clustered into two main areas: teachers’ leadership and children’s leadership.

Teachers’ leadership
The first area of findings highlighted the powerful influence of the EOTC programme for the teachers involved, especially with regard to their leadership development. The findings portrayed leadership as a contextual phenomenon, which manifested itself in many different ways. Within the EOTC programme, the sharing of leadership was fluid, and flowed effortlessly between the teachers and children. As such, distributed and relational leadership showed close alignment with the leadership opportunities offered in the bush. Teachers worked closely together, co-constructing the programme and the learning opportunities. Leadership was often strength based, and this provided an increase in teachers’ confidence to step into uncharted areas of their leadership development.

In order for the EOTC programme to be successful, teacher participants were required to be passionate and committed to nature-based learning. Trust was frequently described as a powerful and motivating force. This included the trust required from those in formal leadership positions, trust between participating teachers and also trust in the children. Trust enhanced the feelings of teachers’ confidence in leading an EOTC programme, and other facets associated with this. This confidence in leadership was also transferred back to their teaching and leadership in the classroom.

Involvement in EOTC provided a surprising opportunity for the nurturing and reshaping of relationships. The deepening of the relationship between teachers and parents as a result of the programme was profound and significant, arising due to the unique circumstances afforded from the EOTC programme. This included the extended periods of time spent together, as well as the unconventional environment of the bush, where perceived professional boundaries were reduced, and opportunities for more personal relationship increased.

New professional knowledge was gained from teachers’ participation in the EOTC. This included a growth in the teachers’ self-perception as competent leaders; in addition, the programme awakened teachers to capabilities in themselves that they had not been aware of. The research highlighted the importance of systems and rituals in providing leadership opportunities. Light was thrown onto the enhancement that rituals played in teachers’ and children’s experiences in the outdoors. It was observed that these extended beyond the classroom and into nature and vice versa. Overall EOTC provided significant opportunities for the growth and development of teachers’ leadership and their confidence to step into new areas of leadership.

Children’s leadership
The second area of findings related to the leadership opportunities afforded to children. Overall it appears that education outside the classroom programmes offered increased opportunities for children to step into leadership roles and develop their leadership capacities. Children had increased opportunities for decision-making, which led to experience in negotiation and co-construction of their learning experiences with others. This contributed to their growing ability to work as a team and added to the growth of their communication with others, including their peers and teachers. Due to the structure of the programme, children’s independence skills were developed. This included a growing ability to display initiative and take control for various aspects of the excursions. Children were heavily involved in the preparation of the EOTC, and this provided frequent opportunities for their
independence skills to be challenged. Independence was also strongly encouraged throughout the programme and this was described as having a significant impact on the children’s growing independence skills.

Children’s physical development was further enhanced from exploring the outdoors. Children were frequently challenged to step outside their comfort zone and to develop their confidence. Risk-taking was a significant benefit that arose from nature-based play, and the children displayed leadership skills in assessing potential risk-based activities. Children were also noticed taking increasing levels of responsibility and leadership for the safety and well-being of their fellow team members.

In summary, EOTC provided many varying opportunities for the development of children’s leadership, and most children appeared to take up these opportunities with ease.

Discussion of research findings
It is a challenge to completely segregate teachers’ and children’s leadership, as the research highlighted the intertwined nature of leadership arising from engagement in EOTC. This section is separated into four, with each sub-section highlighting a key finding from the research in relation to the relevant literature.

Leadership knows no boundaries
The overarching focus of this research was on the leadership opportunities that arose from engagement and participation in an EOTC programme for teachers and children. The study illuminated that leadership is a contextual practice and that leadership opportunities and experiences are not confined within the walls of a traditional classroom. They can be offered in a variety of places, including within the canopy of the New Zealand bush. Aitken (2005) and Mitchell (1997) highlight that leadership is not constrained to those with formal leadership titles, and the research supports this assertion. Teachers and children displayed various acts of leadership, regardless of their position in the centre hierarchy, level of qualification, years of experience or age. This aligns with the paradigm of relational leadership, where Uhl-Bien (2006) states that leadership is not restricted to those in hierarchical positions, but works to reduce the divide between leaders and followers.

EOTC provided increased opportunities for both children’s and teachers’ leadership. Closer analysis revealed that this was the result of smaller adult to child ratios, the underpinning philosophy of the programme and the open-endedness and unpredictability of the natural environment. This finding resonated with Louv’s (2010) firm belief that it is in nature that children find freedom. The research showed that in EOTC, children were given more opportunities to make influential decisions and take on roles of leadership, for example leading the group through the bush and deciding what activities to do.

Leadership evolves over time
The research findings highlighted that teachers’ commitment and passion towards an EOTC programme, and their ability to lead in EOTC, can develop over time. The level of teachers’ investment into the EOTC programme blossomed as their opportunities to participate in a nature programme grew. Rodd (2001) echoes the importance of providing teachers with opportunities to participate in ongoing activities that involve leading. The teachers in this research commented that the MNOP provided regular opportunities to participate in acts of leadership.

Ernst (2014) identifies teachers’ attitudes towards the natural environment as a significant influence in their desire to engage in and provide a nature-based approach to learning. Teachers’ willingness to engage in EOTC flourished with time, and this positively influenced the opportunities for children to engage with nature. The research exposed the positive view the teachers held towards the MNOP, and its motivational force in offering nature-based education.

This research highlighted that teachers were required to work closely together, co-constructing the learning programme, especially given the potential risks the outdoor environment posed. This close relationship
provided the opportunity for an informal “apprenticeship of observation”, where teachers were learning alongside others. This was especially significant for those with less experience and less confidence to be able to closely observe (consciously and subconsciously) contextual teaching practices as well as models of effective leadership (Rodd, 2006).

**Personal growth in leadership**

The MNOP provided the opportunity for the growth in teachers’ perceptions of themselves as competent leaders. The findings also illustrated that the opportunity to lead others also provided children with new confidence in themselves. Gill (2014) described how children require the time and opportunity to explore nature regularly as it allows open-ended and child-directed opportunities. This was observed in the MNOP, as the nature programme provided children with the time and opportunity to explore. It is interesting to note that the teachers’ and children’s growth in confidence was developed in an expansive physical landscape (the bush) but occurred in a small relational model (two teachers and nine children).

Teachers actively encouraged and supported leadership opportunities for children and less experienced teachers. This finding aligns well with the theories around relational leadership, where individuals work together to construct knowledge, make a positive change and support others (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Leadership arising from EOTC was successful as it was available in manageable portions. The roles of leadership in the outdoors were fluid in nature, with children and teachers stepping in and out of the roles of leader and learner effortlessly. This concept of flexibility and fluidity is explored further in the following section on distributed leadership.

**Opportunities for “different” kinds of leadership - Distributed leadership**

Rodd (2006) proposes that leadership is not a static set of attributes but a dynamic and complex activity. The research provided evidence that shared or distributed leadership has become a default practice of the teachers and leaders involved in the MNOP. The teachers made reference to distributed leadership, using terms such as “co-leading”, “shared-leading” and “working together”. These findings support the claims that the distributed leadership approach sits nicely in educational contexts (Clarkin-Phillips, 2009; Harris, 2003; Thornton, 2005), and that distributed leadership in the outdoors is a significant element for enabling leadership growth. Distributed leadership is influenced by the contextual interactions of teachers, where power relationships are blurred and the line between leaders and followers becomes hard to distinguish (Leithwood et al., 2006; Spillane et al., 2001). This corresponds to the findings of the research, where within the context of the bush, often, formal titles of leadership are obsolete.

Distributed leadership arises from the premise that education and positive outcomes for children are not the sole responsibility of one person and that by working together more can be achieved. The MNOP boasts a team-teaching approach, whereby teachers share in the responsibility of all aspects of the programme. A key notion of distributed leadership is that everyone has his or her own strengths and it is through collaboration that expertise is developed. Additionally, another core element illuminated was the provision of time for teachers to co-construct the learning and reflect on the programme and process. There were regular and varied opportunities provided for professional development and ongoing learning for individuals to strengthen their skills and knowledge around leadership. And finally, teachers’ confidence to step up into acts of leadership was fully supported and embraced in order to develop individuals’ leadership potential. Many teachers spoke of the opportunity they were given by those in formal leadership positions to take on various leadership roles, and described how they were trusted and encouraged to grow the programme.

Distributed leadership is about growing capacity and one distinctive element is the provision of leadership opportunities for teachers, which results in the development of greater agency and motivation. Harris (2003)
states that outcomes for children are improved when teachers are empowered in areas of significance to them. This aligns to the findings that passion and commitment are important drivers in a successful EOTC programme. Literature suggests that distributed leadership has the capacity to increase desirable outcomes for children in early childhood education (Ryder et al., 2011; Spillane et al., 2001). The teachers sharing the leadership roles and responsibilities and providing children with the opportunity to lead demonstrated this. Teachers identified that the children showed previously unnoticed leadership traits and confidence within a group environment in the bush. This resulted from the increased agency teachers were provided with and the distributed power (Clarkin-Phillips, 2011; Rodd, 2006; Spillane, 2005; Thornton, 2005), not only between teachers but also among children.

The shared nature of leadership outlined in the findings showed a positive correlation between distributed leadership and the success of the MNOP, as well as the growth of teachers’ confidence to lead. It is key that in order to sustain such leadership successes as EOTC, distributed leadership must be a strong philosophical underpinning of such a programme.

The foundation of trust

It appeared that traditional and formal hierarchies diminished in the outdoors as relationships were strengthened. This perhaps arose from the reciprocal requirement to rely and trust each other implicitly in the expansive and relatively unpredictable context of the bush. Trust was a crucial underpinning element in the success of the MNOP programme. A key attribute of relational leadership defined in the literature is the importance of trust (Carmeli et al., 2012), trust in self and trust in others. The findings showed that significant levels of trust were required and formed between everyone involved. The investment in trust is not taken lightly and requires a belief in another’s ability and judgment. The research revealed that trust had to be earned, which is illuminated by Brower et al. (2000). Trust was most often mentioned as being implicit, and that simply being provided the opportunity to participate in an MNOP programme was a signal of trust. Trust was valued by the teacher participants and contributed towards their self-confidence in leading a perceived high-risk programme. Many spoke of the importance of the strong relationships that were based on trust and this resonates with the relational leadership literature (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Komives et al., 2007; Uhl-Bien, 2006). In summary, without trust, the EOTC programme would not have provided the leadership opportunities for teachers and children revealed from this research.

A different way of relating to others

The power of the outdoors for bringing people together was noticed by many of the teachers. Nature, more specifically the bush, provided the platform and the MNOP provided the vehicle for the evolution of intimate connections with others. The findings strongly indicated that the EOTC programme provided a different way of relating to others. The sustained time gifted and perhaps the miraculous energy of nature significantly assisted in the transformation and strengthening of existing relationships. Teachers especially noticed a more personal connection that transpired with parents, with many teachers commenting on the deeper bonds they developed with the parents who join in on an MNOP adventure. The relationship between parents and teachers is significant in early childhood and Te Whāriki focuses on the important intertwining partnerships between teachers, parents and family/whānau (Ministry of Education, 1996).

The natural environment provides children and teachers with unlimited opportunities to engage in dialogue with others (MacEachren, 2013), which enables children to forge deep and meaningful social relationships through language. The findings provided examples where teachers and parents noticed children using language and conversation in order to enact leadership roles. Examples included children directing others with tasks to assist in bivvy building, with children voicing their opinions on paths to follow or activities to engage in.
Akram, Hussain, Haider and Akram (2016) believe that relational leaders must maintain solid relationships with others and work to empower them. This was noticed as the bonds developed by teachers through the shared experience of participation in the MNOP encouraged the shrugging off of existing leadership rituals and the embracing of new ones. The literature on relational leadership by Komives et al. (2007) maintains that relational leaders value others’ contributions, acknowledge that everyone is valuable and view people as an organisation’s greatest asset. These values were identified in this research and align closely with the repeated mentions of trust in the research literature. While in the centre there was a more noticeable hierarchy, this hierarchy was often relaxed in the outdoors, as the facets of distributed leadership and relational leadership were encouraged and accepted ways of being. The aspects of distributed and relational leadership that emerged in the EOTC programme strongly supported the opportunities for teachers’ and children’s leadership to emerge.

Importance of rituals in Education Outside the Classroom
Rituals are defined by Gillespie and Petersen (2012) as:

Special actions that help us navigate emotionally important events or transition our lives as well as enhance aspects of our daily routines to deepen our connections and relationships. They provide a way to acknowledge the importance of such events and are usually comforting. (p. 76)

Rituals are established behaviours reinforced by example and repetition and provide strong leadership opportunities for children and teachers. “Rituals” are not addressed in the literature review, however their significance and importance was a key finding for both teachers’ and children’s leadership. This research illuminated that these rituals extend beyond the centre and home life and traverse into other contexts.

A number of different rituals were identified in this research and associated strongly with leadership opportunities that arose from the MNOP. Some emerged as inaugural rituals established by the foundation group, for example pausing before entering the bush and asking permission and providing the promise to Tane Mahuta that they will respect the bush. Unintentional rituals evolved which were most often initiated by children, for example smearing mud on their faces in a symbolic gesture of the adventures had and a visual representation of a great day. In both these examples, the rituals provided leadership opportunities for children, as the teachers explained how children would take turns at initiating the various rituals. Some of these rituals lasted the passage of time while others diminished naturally with the natural evolution of children.

Rite of passage
The teachers in this research described the children’s explicit desire to be “eligible” for MNOP. The teachers speculated that being “selected” to join the MNOP provided them with a sense of “status” and became a rite of passage within the centre. Similarly, leadership for children was often revealed through the ritual of succession. Older children would induct the younger children into the programme. As time passed and experience grew, the younger children took up increasing opportunities for leadership acts, like a baton being passed on. In turn these new children became the older children, and the leadership succession cycle would continue.

Tuakana teina
The research indicated that adults and children alike treasured the ritual of the tuakana teina relationships that developed between children. These relationships were an important vehicle for experiential learning, and have close links to the contribution strand in Te Whāriki, where children are “encouraged to learn with and alongside others” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 24). The ritualistic learning aspects of leadership through observation and practising of leadership occurred regularly throughout the programme. Examples of such tuakana teina relationships occurring include the sharing of knowledge from the older to the younger children, for example relating to behaviour expectations in the bush and the need to take turns at leading the group. As a result of such interactions the children...
who attended the MNOP often developed unique relationships that spanned between contexts. In addition, the finding threw light onto the view that many of the children held the MNOP and the physical location as a sacred taonga. The “taonga” was mutually shared and respected with their fellow group members, and which contributed to a heightened sense of belonging (Ministry of Education, 2017) on the EOTC programme.

**Rituals disguised as routines**

Getting prepared for the MNOP each week was a ritual-based leadership opportunity disguised as a routine. The children would show leadership by taking initiative for gathering the bags together, packing their lunchboxes and their clothes, and encouraging others to do the same. Similarly, the packing down ritual provided a symbol of the end of that day’s adventure. The sharing of the written record of the day’s activities with accompanying photos provided an opportunity for rituals to be created at home (Ministry of Education, 1996). This sharing of the day’s adventure at home allowed children to continue leading their learning, and this ritual was acknowledged by parents in the research.

Children have an innate desire to feel valued for their contribution and being given opportunities to participate and lead in meaningful activities is crucial to developing a sense of responsibility to the community (Kane & Kane, 2011). This research illuminated that rituals associated with the EOTC programme provided regular and familiar opportunities for children to practise acts of leadership in a non-threatening way. This finding has strong links to the work of Louv (2010), who believed that children gain significantly from routines that link to regular engagement with nature.

**Conclusion**

This qualitative case study, undertaken in a New Zealand early childhood centre, examined how involvement in an education outside the classroom (EOTC) programme encouraged leadership opportunities for teachers and children. Although the limitations of a small-scale study are acknowledged, the key findings highlight that EOTC provided varying and positive opportunities for the development of teachers’ and children’s leadership.

This small-scale study offers valuable findings in the area of leadership opportunities for children and teachers through EOTC, and the opportunities for further research are significant and exciting. Some potential areas to explore in the future include: How does children’s self-perception of leadership develop from involvement in an EOTC programme?; How do those in formal leadership and management positions enable and encourage opportunities for leadership development of teachers through the implementation of EOTC programmes?; and finally, how can the increase in leadership opportunities offered to children in an EOTC programme transfer to increasing opportunities for children’s leadership inside the centre? Further longitudinal research is crucial to evaluate the on-going opportunities for leadership development in a variety of EOTC programmes across different contexts within the early childhood education sector. The key insights that emerged from this article are integral in guiding further research. I concur with Ernst that nature programmes have the potential to make a significant impact on the development of children, as well as make a meaningful contribution to a more sustainable society.

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**References**


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