

Dispositions of a responsible early childhood education leader: Voices from the field

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Abstract

In our organisation's research project, "Leaders Growing Leaders" (Ryder, Davitt, Higginson, Smorti, Smith & Carroll-Lind, 2017), which investigated effective ECE leadership in Aotearoa/New Zealand, leadership dispositions were identified as one means of making sense of the complexities of leadership within early childhood education. The New Zealand early childhood curriculum Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa. Early Childhood Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2017) highlights the importance of kaiako (teacher) responsibilities. Similarly, this article argues that the six specific leadership dispositions of an early childhood education leader, identified in our research, can act as a framework to explore leadership responsibilities. Participant voices are drawn on to exemplify and articulate the specific leadership dispositions of being: a communicator; relationship focused; caring and supportive; and a leader of growth and change, whilst also acting as a critical friend. We argue that responsible leadership must be purposefully grown, developed and sustained across the culture of the ECE setting. Underpinning this understanding is the need for dedicated leadership professional development that supports emerging and current leaders, and their teams, to engage in robust collegial dialogue and reflective practice in terms of what it means to be a responsible leader.

Keywords: *Leadership; early childhood education; dispositions; responsibilities; professional learning*

Introduction

Effective leadership is one factor influencing quality in early childhood education (ECE) (ERO, 2011; Hujala, Waniganyake & Rodd, 2013; Thornton, Wansborough, Clarkin-Phillips, Aitken & Tamati, 2009). According to Ryder et al. (2017), "in most cases leadership development is limited to role modelling and on-the-job learning" (p. 3) which reiterates the concern of Aubrey (2011) and Davis, Krieg and Smith (2014) about the lack of professional learning and development specific to leadership. Thus, it can be seen that ECE leaders have a critical role and responsibility for growing leadership knowledge and practice of both themselves and others.

This first section of this article reports on our original "Leaders Growing Leaders" research (Ryder, et al., 2017) that explored effective ECE leadership in Aotearoa/New Zealand. One of the main findings from our research was the identification of six specific dispositions of an early childhood education leader which are being: a communicator; relationship focused; caring to others; supportive of the team; a leader of growth and change, and acting as a critical friend.

For the purpose of this article, we are focusing on these dispositions to forefront leadership responsibilities. Participants' voices form the crux of the article, as these voices from the field authentically engage in dialogue and reflection about leadership dispositions. Furthermore, leadership professional learning and development is proposed as a key way for emerging and current leaders and their teams to engage in robust dispositional dialogue and reflection in terms of being a responsible leader.

Our research: "Leaders growing leaders"

Purpose and scope

The purpose of our research was to gain knowledge of how effective early childhood leaders supported the leadership development of themselves and their teaching teams. The research aimed to describe the sustainable development

of leadership capacity in early childhood education (ECE) settings within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand. The scope of the research project was to (1) provide a picture of current ECE leadership experience and qualifications; (2) explore “on-the-job” leadership beliefs and practices across diverse ECE settings; and (3) develop further understanding on how to provide sustainable “on-the-job” leadership development.

Research question

The main research question that guided the data collection and analysis was: What leadership processes and structures do effective ECE leaders develop in their centres for the sustainability of the leadership culture? Four sub-questions focusing more broadly on professional learning and development; leadership actions; espoused theories and theories-in-use; and building capability and capacity within ECE leadership were also investigated.

Research method

A grounded theory methodology was adopted, using case studies as the main unit of analysis. Additionally, a mixed method qualitative and quantitative approach was adopted that consisted of observations, interviews and a survey. A nationwide survey was undertaken to collect general data on early childhood education teachers’ and leaders’ qualifications, experience, and leadership professional learning and development. Having undertaken the larger quantitative survey, our research then involved qualitative case study research in seven teacher-led ECE services, across Aotearoa/New Zealand. The research participants consisted of seven designated leaders and their teaching teams. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the designated leaders’ espoused beliefs about their practice. The next stage focused on in-centre observations and team-interviews to explore the actual leadership practices in use. Five Te Rito Maioha lecturers conducted the research across the seven ECE settings, and were supervised by Te Rito Maioha’s Director of Research. For the purposes of the research, pseudonyms are used for all but one centre who chose to retain their real name.

Research analysis, findings and how they challenged assumptions

On completion of the seven case studies, each researcher completed their own individual data analysis process culminating in the writing up of their case-study findings. Additional cross-case analysis was subsequently undertaken by two of the researchers.

Firstly, the data was analysed based upon the research questions, with a focus on the processes and structures effective ECE leaders develop in their centres, and how, if at all, this led to a sustainable leadership culture. One initial assumption we held was that we would find a number of differences between the espoused leadership beliefs and the actual practice that was observed. This was not the case. Through observation of, and discussion with those in designated leadership roles, as well as the teaching teams, high levels of congruence were found between the espoused leadership theories-of-action, and the observed leadership theories-in-use.

Another assumption held was that ECE settings enacted a shared approach to leadership; however this was not what the research found. The findings identified that almost all teaching teams in the study said they preferred a leader who acknowledged their ultimate responsibility for the ECE setting.

Through a secondary, inductive level of analysis, which included in-depth discussions across the research team, it became even more apparent that within the ECE settings researched, there was a belief in the importance of effective leadership. Following on from these discussions, the data was further analysed and a range of descriptors emerged from the research data. These descriptors were then grouped thematically. As a result of thematic analysis, six leadership dispositions emerged. The dispositions identified were: being a communicator; being relationship focused: being caring to others; being supportive of the team; being a leader of growth and change; and being a critical friend. A specific framework titled *The Dispositions of an*

Early Childhood Education Leader was then formulated to illustrate these key dispositions and the associated descriptors (see Table 1).

In the next section, we firstly define the term “dispositions” and explain how the notion of leader responsibilities is supported by the New Zealand ECE curriculum *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa. Early Childhood Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2017). We then draw on voices from the field to describe how the abovementioned dispositional framework supports the “responsible leader”.

Exploring the notion of “dispositions” in relation to ECE leadership

As lecturers and researchers working in the field of early childhood education, we are very familiar with the concept of dispositions “which are tendencies to respond to situations in particular ways” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 22). The Concise Oxford Dictionary’s (2011) definition of dispositions is “a person’s inherent qualities of mind and character” (Stevenson & White, p. 414). For readers less familiar with this term, the American National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) (2002) defines dispositions as “the values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence behaviours ... as well as the educator’s own professional growth” (p. 53). NCATE also argues that dispositions are influenced by individuals’ own values, beliefs and attitudes, which takes into consideration the relationship between sociocultural context and the enactment of dispositions in practice.

When applying the concept of dispositions to leadership, Flumerflet, Ingram, Brockberg and Smith (2007) explain that leadership dispositions develop first, then leadership knowledge and practice. Moreover, O’Neill, Hansen and Lewis (2014) argue that from a dispositional perspective teachers and leaders “must possess more than knowledge and skills. They must also know how to apply and enact the knowledge and skills in ways that are sensitive to and effective for learners” (p. 13).

In conjunction, Bolstad and Gilbert, with McDowall, Bull, Boyd and Hipkins (2012) emphasise the need for leaders to have the “dispositions, capacities or competencies to deal with new situations and environments, including those with high degrees of complexity, fluidity and uncertainty” (p. 2). Aubrey, Godfrey and Harris (2013) explain how “flexible leadership is the way forward” (p. 26) because, as Notman, Morrison and McNae (2017) attest, “leadership is not a place where we sit. It is about being, and it is about doing” (p. 11). Hence, from a sustainability perspective, we need to be cognisant that leadership is subject to change, adaptation and modification over time (Notman et al., 2017; Aubrey et al., 2013). Therefore, we believe, an awareness and application of leadership dispositions, leadership responsibilities and the associated competencies supports leaders to respond effectively to change and enact sustainable leadership.

Exploring the notion of “responsibility” in relation to ECE leadership

Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996, 2017) weaves a curriculum that is specifically designed for children that reflects the diversity of the ECE sector of Aotearoa/New Zealand. We argue that the six dispositions of an early childhood leader, formulated from our research, can be woven in a similar way to reflect the diversity of being a responsible leader.

Teacher and leader responsibility is a key notion that emerges in the revised ECE curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) that was not as evident in the earlier version (Ministry of Education, 1996). According to Ministry of Education (2017), kaiako (teacher) responsibilities, are to “facilitate children’s learning and development through thoughtful and intentional pedagogy” (p. 59) and “promoting and supporting the ongoing learning and development of kaiako is a key responsibility of educational leaders” (p. 59).

Therefore, it can be seen that there is a clear mandate, not only for teachers to be responsible for effective pedagogy, but also for leaders to be responsible for sustaining the professional learning and development of

Table 1. The dispositions of an early childhood education leader

Kōrero tahi: Being a communicator	Whanaungatanga: Being relationship focused	Manaakitanga: Being caring to others	Kotahitanga: Being supportive of the team	Whakamana: Being a leader of growth and change	Hoa Arohachae: Being a critical friend
<p>Questions</p> <p>Explains ideas/ processes</p> <p>Shares knowledge</p> <p>Makes suggestions</p> <p>Provides instructions</p> <p>Seeks clarification</p> <p>Agrees to expectations</p> <p>Prioritises time to talk to parents</p> <p>Strength in verbal communication</p> <p>Open communication</p> <p>Practises reflective listening</p> <p>Acknowledges others</p> <p>Discussions</p>	<p>Passion and enjoyment of teaching children</p> <p>Inclusive in approach to children, families and communities</p> <p>Knows clients well, engaging in conversation about families and daily events</p> <p>Advocates for staff, whānau and wellbeing of tamariki</p> <p>Aroha ki te tangata (love, respect for people)</p>	<p>Takes care of team</p> <p>Respects team as people</p> <p>Warm nature</p> <p>Cares for people whom she leads</p> <p>Supportive</p> <p>Pastoral care of team – ensures everyone is happy</p> <p>Trustworthy</p> <p>Supportive</p> <p>Lifts you up</p> <p>Approachable</p> <p>Concerned</p>	<p>Collegial</p> <p>Encourages</p> <p>Checks in with team</p> <p>Prioritises time to talk to team</p> <p>Strong leadership</p> <p>Clear leadership</p> <p>Professional</p> <p>Leader as overseer</p> <p>Ensures everyone's voice is heard</p> <p>Takes initiative</p> <p>Drives initiatives</p> <p>Ensures mana of the staff is maintained</p>	<p>Leads growth and change</p> <p>Identifies strengths in others</p> <p>Grows leadership and knowledge</p> <p>Guides</p> <p>Role models new initiatives</p> <p>Changes roles</p> <p>Learns and improves on the role of being a leader</p>	<p>Engages in critical conversations</p> <p>Challenges</p> <p>Willing to be challenged</p> <p>Inspires others</p> <p>Open and honest</p> <p>Straight talker</p> <p>Assertive</p> <p>Direct</p> <p>Likes to talk things through</p> <p>Wise manner</p> <p>Responsible</p> <p>Tenacity</p> <p>Ability to challenge staff in positive manner</p> <p>Encourager</p>

teachers. For that reason we argue that the dispositions of an early childhood leader can act as a framework to support, grow and sustain leadership responsibilities.

Reflecting on the dispositional framework: Voices from the field

Our findings support Corden and Sainsbury's (2006) argument that "having spoken words in the report ma[kes] it more convincing" (p. 106) and provides "clarity about how evidence and conclusions are derived" (p. 98). Furthermore Corden and Sainsbury (2006) state how participants' verbatim quotations "show strength of feelings, confusions or hesitations" (p. 108) and constitute "a useful contribution to the debate on 'quality'" (p. 99), validity and reliability of qualitative research findings. Consequently, the next section replicates direct quotes from the research data to illustrate the dispositions of an early childhood leader and the associated descriptors. Based on the voices of the research participants, and through the research analysis process, it became apparent there were distinct relationships between specific leadership dispositions identified hence the descriptive pairings that follow.

Kotahitanga (being supportive of the team) and whakamana (being a leader of growth and change)

Kotahitanga – being supportive of the team

Rather than the traditional hierarchal leader model, recent research about distributed leadership (Denece & Thornton, 2017) highlights the importance of the leader and the team working together to develop a culture of mutual support and relational trust. Within this shared process the knowledge, skills and strengths of the collective are recognised and extended because "everyone is supported and encouraged to make their contribution, to have their say" (Williams, with Broadley, 2012, p. 16). In addition, Dunbar's (2016) research identified attributes such as "being able to listen well, being considerate of others and showing benevolence, having integrity, accepting of constructive criticism and humble enough to admit mistakes, seeing progress and success as a team effort" (p. 134) as being important dispositions associated with team leadership. Our research participants valued a leader who had a collegial approach, one who was constantly encouraging and checking in with the teaching team, prioritising time to talk with the team and ensuring that each person's voice was heard. Such a collegial approach is reflected in the concept of kotahitanga which is about the team working and supporting each other as a collective to achieve a shared vision and/or purpose (Williams, with Broadley, 2012).

Assigning roles and responsibilities

Some participants in our study believed that while the designated leader held overall accountability and was responsible for specific decisions, the team could certainly have input. For example, a teacher at Tamariki o ngā Mātua explained, "I mean Nanny's the overall manager but I don't think she's the only leader". Moreover, at Mayfield Kindergarten the perception was that "Kathryn [head teacher] is prepared to make the final decision or do some of the hard, hard yards". Kathryn herself went on to explain that, "I think delegation's the key ... And providing staff with opportunities to lead, so being prepared for someone to do it their own way, and just learning that it might get done, it might get done differently". Nanny concurred, offering the following advice:

Trust your staff, empower them to complete and to achieve and then to accept that reward of having that as a shared responsibility, knowing that everybody comes from a different angle and it's far better to have all the heads together than one little head alone – it's too big a job.

Whilst different centres utilised different ways to establish the distribution of roles and responsibilities, ultimately the workload was collaboratively shared. Babbling Brook Teacher 1 explained that while day to day functioning of the centre relied on a roster, there was, in addition, "an annual plan with specific duties and

tasks that need to be completed by somebody. At the beginning of the year we sit down and ask who needs to learn [a particular skill or gain knowledge about a specific aspect of centre practice]”. This factor is then taken into consideration when assigning roles and responsibilities across the team to enable relevant learning and development to occur. Teacher 2 reiterated this process explaining:

[Roles] rotate so we all know what to do at any time because we've all dealt with it. And then at the end of the year or the beginning of next year we rub it all out and we've put in the new names for the next year. So it becomes someone else's responsibility.

At Tamariki o ngā Mātua one teacher articulated that:

We all sort of have a role to play in the running of the centre. We've all got certain leadership roles that we do and I think because we've all got these strengths and interests, we've all got different things to add to the running of the centre and without one of us, or one of our strengths, it wouldn't be this way.

Similarly, in the Kōhanga Reo [Māori immersion early childhood centre], the team collaborated to make decisions underpinned by advocacy for all members of the early childhood centre community. The designated leader of the Kōhanga Reo explained how “I am quite fortunate in my position that I am surrounded by a supportive team of kaiako [teacher] and whānau [family]. The skills and knowledge amongst the whānau extends enormously over many fields and professions” and becomes part of the collective knowledge and skills of the centre. In fact, as one kaiako explained:

I suppose in terms of the leadership for us, as kaiwhakahaere [managers/assistant leaders], we've got to show that direction, and we've got to show that we understand, and have that knowledge to make those decisions ... if our staff have some kaupapa [topic for discussion] or take [issue], it's up to us to be able to advocate for them as well. So we're not only advocating for what we think, we're advocating for what our staff think, we're advocating for what our parents think, and, absolutely, and at the end of the day, it's all for our tamariki [children].

When the centre leader was absent, the consensus across the research centres was that staff/kaiako stepped up to fill any void in terms of leadership and/or the assignment of the various centre roles and responsibilities. For example, at the Kōhanga Reo “qualified staff will rotate the responsibility of stepping into that leadership role in the whare [house] for each day the Pou [leader] is absent”. Faced with the simultaneous absence of both the designated leader and a staff member, Babbling Brook kindergarten explained how the centre

still ran well ... you all kind of just step up and [designated leader] enables us to have the responsibility to deal with, you know ... if something's wrong, we know who to call, what to do. We know the routines and the structure of the day so we are capable of running well.

The head teacher of Mayfield Kindergarten reflected that, “as I am not always at work, or if away, I want things to run smoothly”. The team as a whole were therefore encouraged to step up and take ownership of leadership roles, including curriculum overview. Team responsibility is also encouraged at Pukeahu Preschool where everyone contributes to the thinking process, however the person responsible for the learning area “makes sure it happens. Because then it just comes naturally, because everyone can be a leader”.

In general, the centres, as a collective, had the knowledge and/or skills to run effectively. If not, the staff were solutions focused and took responsibility to seek outside professional assistance as and when required. Furthermore, Kathryn (Mayfield Kindergarten) emphasised that she endeavoured “to delegate most of the jobs up. . . . I want to be kind of replaceable. I don't want to have to be here. I want the place to run as well when I'm away, as when I'm here”.

Whakamana – being a leader of growth and change

In the previous section, the focus was on working together or kotahitanga. The focus now turns to whakamana or empowerment and how this concept enables shared leadership/kotahitanga. New Zealand's early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) describes the concept of whakamana as enhancing and empowering the mana of oneself and others, where individuals have “agency to create and act on their own ideas, develop knowledge and skills in areas that interest them, and increasingly make decisions and judgments on matters that relate to them” (p. 18). Robertson (2016) concurs, asserting that “one of the most important roles a leader can take is to recognise and engage the potential that others have” (p. 250). Bowman (2014) also agrees, explaining how “leadership is a relational activity in which different individuals at different times intentionally step forward to motivate and inspire others in the pursuit of success and significance” (p. 120). These arguments thus emphasise how leadership is about taking responsibility to lead, empower and grow the knowledge, skills, dispositions and practices of the team for the benefit of the collective.

Role of emergent leadership

Several centre leaders (Whānau Akomanga, Babbling Brook, Tamariki o ngā Mātua) recognised the importance of empowering emergent leadership. For example, at Whānau Akomanga, the team members focused on networking within the local early childhood community. Their intention was to host and lead professional development and learning sessions facilitated by their team members. A focus on empowering others to lead was also evident in the Kōhanga Reo where the maternity leave of the designated leader provided the impetus to try a different way of working. One team leader explained:

A new process we are trialling is sharing the tumuaki [leadership] role amongst the pouwhakahaere [managers/room leaders]. [By] delegating certain tasks and duties of the tumuaki [leader] amongst the pouwhakahaere and focusing on specific skill sets, each pou [leader] contributes to the leadership team.

According to one teacher at Mayfield Kindergarten, their designated leader:

Has high expectations of everybody, and I think that's a really good thing because she's prepared to support you to reach them, and that's not like, not high expectations, that are her expectations, but [expectations] that she believes you can do really, really well.

This philosophy reflected one teacher's perception of Nanny at Tamariki o ngā Mātua: “[Nanny] pushes you to strive for the best and make sure that our practice is of high quality, so that our tamariki receive all that they can”. At Babbling Brook, the head teacher also encourages the teachers to take responsibility “for example, through doing risk analysis for an excursion ... I'll oversee it but I try and get them to step up and take responsibility”. The Babbling Brook team reiterated their perception that the designated leader recognised that roles and responsibilities were actioned by the whole team, with the support and empowerment of the designated leader. One team member explained how “you know she's not just one person in a team. There's four others, five others in the team and she [designated leader] wants everybody to have a say in things and she'll support where needed”.

Supporting emergent leadership leads to increased capability and capacity of the team and, in turn, the sustainability of centre practices. Empowering team capability and capacity is one role of the designated leader, as articulated by Mayfield Kindergarten's designated leader:

I do try and encourage teachers to come to me with solutions, not just questions or issues, [I] get them coming up with what they think is best practice or [a] strategy to use. That way it's not me making all the decisions, which can get really tiring and stressful. I also feel that when teachers are given space to come up with their own ideas the team is more independent and not reliant on me making all the calls.

Trust and belief in the team and their leadership

Within the case study centres, team members were encouraged to take on various roles and responsibilities based on their knowledge, skills, interest and passion for different aspects of the curriculum. At Pukeahu Preschool the designated leader asserted that “anyone can be a leader within their passion. I definitely think that we work from people’s strengths and give everybody a chance to be a leader in their own right”. Likewise a teacher at Tamariki o ngā Mātua explained:

The key to her [Nanny’s] knowledge and her years of experience and abilities are what supports her in her ability to draw out the best in all of us and therefore make a place that keeps going from strength to strength.

Nanny extended this discussion, sharing her belief that “the key skill of a good leader is when they identify the skills, attributes and knowledge that others in the team have and enable each person to contribute to the tasks at hand”. From a broader perspective, the designated leader of the Kōhanga Reo explained how “I am quite fortunate in my position that I am surrounded by a supportive team of kaiako [teacher] and whānau [family]. The skills and knowledge amongst the whānau extends enormously over many fields and professions”.

The aforementioned participant voices provide evidence of different ways in which the designated leaders, both implicitly and explicitly, demonstrated belief and trust in the team, and their knowledge, skills and abilities to be responsible for the collective success of the centre.

Whanaungatanga (being relationship focused) and manaakitanga (being caring to others)***Whanaungatanga – being relationship focused***

Whanaungatanga, as a concept, is very familiar to the domains of teaching, learning and leadership within the context of early childhood education. *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) describes whanaungatanga as “kinship, [a] sense of whānau [extended family] connection – a relationship through shared experiences and working together that provides people with a sense of belonging” (p. 66). This sense of belonging is established through relational connections with people, places and things (Ministry of Education, 2017). Initiating, nurturing and sustaining daily dialogue with children and their families/whānau is a crucial part of leadership, as a means of establishing ongoing collaborative, responsive and reciprocal relationships (Ministry of Education, 2017). Williams, with Broadley (2012) elaborates on this discussion stating that “whanaungatanga is about knowing you are not alone, and that you have a wider set of acquaintances that provide support, assistance, nurturing, guidance and direction when needed” (p. 8). Sims, Forrest, Semann and Slattery (2015) support being relationship focused, attesting to the ability to develop and sustain relationships as an essential component of ECE leadership.

Relationally connected to parents and community

Tamariki o ngā Mātua encouraged a holistic perspective of their centre community because:

We’ve got the parents, we’ve got the teachers, we’ve got the trust, we’ve got the community and we’ve got community organisations that we work with and it’s sort of like we become this community, you know, of learners ... We take knowledge from everywhere ... to reach everybody that’s involved in the centre and work with them and hold positive relationships and we all share our knowledge.

Mayfield Kindergarten had a similar perspective, as one teacher explained: “I think leadership is collaborative from the point of view of working with whānau, with families as well, to develop goals for their children, to work through difficulties. There’s a sense of partnership and collaborativeness within the leadership here”.

In support of this point, the Pukeahu Preschool designated leader reiterated how “it is imperative to take the time to listen to the parents and if I don’t have time to talk to each and every one, at least acknowledging them is important”. Because, as the designated leader at Mayfield Kindergarten shared:

I find, when you ask parents for help, that helps with their relationship building too [because] they feel comfortable. So you might say, “Oh could you do this for me?” and they go, “Oh, okay yeah.” So it’s amazing - when you actually put an expectation on some of them - how much they step up and then you’ve got them involved. Hopefully they might take some of those ideas home and give it a go.

Furthermore, Babbling Brook’s designated leader commented on how:

Including parents does not impact on my role as a leader because that’s what I want. I want families to be here. I want to have conversations with them, I want them to be part of this building, part of this place - this community that we’re growing.

Manaakitanga – being caring to others

Mead (2016) describes manaakitanga as the “nurturing of relationships, looking after people” (p. 32). Of significance is the derivation of the word from “‘mana’ meaning prestige, status, reputation, self-esteem, and ‘aki’ [which is a shortened] version of ‘akiaki’ meaning to lift up, build upon, strengthen” (Williams, with Broadley, 2012, p. 4). Manaakitanga is described as being “about looking for the best in a person, and finding opportunities to acknowledge that person in all different ways” (Williams, with Broadley, 2012, p. 4). Moreover caring/manaakitanga underpins the principles and strands of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) and is defined as “the process of showing respect, generosity, hospitality and care for others” (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 66). Each of these definitions resonates with our research findings around the importance of leaders being able to demonstrate respect, warmth and caring and prioritisation of the wellbeing of children, their families/whānau and the teaching team.

For example, the leader at Babbling Brook “works hard at building a team that has the foundations of trust and respect of one another and for the children in our families”. The designated leader at Pukeahu Preschool focused on how:

It’s about making a difference in the lives of the children. In order to do that you need to make sure that you’re doing things as well as you can. Therefore, you put in that much energy, as much energy as you’ve got. If you’re that sort of person, (and I think that the team that we have here are) you want to do the best for the children, and for the centre. So I think that leadership from the individual comes from a want, a need to do your best.

In agreeance, the designated leader from Mayfield Kindergarten said:

I guess my, sometimes not my biggest worry but my biggest thing is to make sure everyone loves working here [because] to me that’s just super important. I think when that’s right they will teach well and therefore the children get great learning outcomes because you’ve got enthusiastic teachers who are well and happy and energised. So, for me, I think as the leader that’s my key role. Because I want the teachers to teach and be; that’s their key role. They shouldn’t have to be looking after this or the team. We have our individual responsibilities for looking after team morale.

A teacher from Tamariki o ngā Mātua, asserted how they valued the manaaki of their designated leader:

We’re grateful for the leader she is, for the role that she has in all of our lives . . . she takes care of us, 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.

Furthermore, a teacher at Liberty Kids explained how their teaching team “is quite a close knit culture, but we are also pushed to do the best that we can do. But then there is also a very [strong] emphasis on having fun and relaxing together”. The designated leader at the Kōhanga Reo was described as “always open to hearing what we want, always open to us and [we can] share anything with her”. In conjunction, the designated leader at Babbling Brook “works hard at building a team that has the foundations of trust and respect of one another and for the children in our families but also she has confidentiality if you do need to go and speak to her as well”. The work of Bowman (2014) attests to the manner in which “leadership dispositions, including the spirit to include, the passion to serve, the discipline to listen, and the courage to question, function as a lens for viewing leadership challenges and opportunities” (p. 123), which reinforces the leadership responsibility of an ethic of care.

Kōrero tahi - being a communicator and Hoa Arohaehae - being a critical friend

Kōrero tahi - being a communicator

Emerging from the data, being a communicator was identified as a key leadership component. Open, verbal communication was determined as a strength of a leader, and was demonstrated through regular discussion and reflective listening, where all members of the learning community, including parents, were acknowledged. Notman (2017) refers to the importance of leadership learning-on-the-job and the role that associated communication plays as a leadership disposition. It is through such on-the-job leadership learning that two key themes became evident in the “voices” of the ECE leaders and teachers within our research: modelling clear communication, and offering supportive communication.

Modelling clear communication

Modelling clear communication to teams was seen as a key component to being an effective communicator. Through enacting and promoting clear communication the designated leaders developed a team who could think for themselves and were, at the same time, highly reflective. It took a lot of hard work by the designated leaders to develop teams to this point but they believed that the pay-off was worth it. The designated leader of Liberty Kids developed a new appraisal process that brought everyone together as a team, rather than having appraisal as an isolated, individualistic process. She confirmed the benefit of striving for the inclusion of robust discussions, stating:

What I hoped for [was] – curiousness, wrestling, embracing, [and] rejecting [discussions]. It's been a relatively easy culture of curiosity to create. I'm really passionate about this [appraisal system] so I can energise the girls really well. Now they love what they get from the [appraisal] process, the feeling of being excited from the new thinking, so they are driving the process now.

In the comment below, one of the teachers from Liberty Kids described how clear communication was a key quality of the Liberty Kids designated leader, something the teacher admired. She stated:

I remember [sitting in one of her meetings]. She had a really good process, she was very clear [and said], “Well you might like to think about this. Go away and think about that and I want you to do that by the time you come back. I will expect that from you”. She has high expectations but I think they are clear, like really clear.

From a leadership perspective, sharing ideas and collaboration were seen as a crucial aspect to communication. Thus, at Babbling Brook, all members of the team took turns at being the key facilitator and communicator for staff meetings:

We have a roster of people sharing ideas. So I don't take staff meetings. I participate like they [the team] do. So we have sharing of ideas around staff meetings and reviews. Everybody has a role

to play, for example, with reviews, it's your job to come to the meeting with the review question and the data.

For one designated leader, while a collective approach to communication and decision-making was desirable, there were also times for clear, concise instruction because “sometimes I have to say, ‘well, actually that’s what’s going to happen’ and the repercussions of that happening is not nice. The team, they don’t like being told what to do. And I can understand why”. Her preference was to take the time to sow the seed of an idea that would then become collectively owned by the team as a whole. She shared how “we tend to talk things through so that we have come to the same decision. Like, it might take me four or five weeks of sowing a seed so that we work collectively as a team”.

Supportive communication

The research findings emphasised the need for the team to feel supported and know that the designated leader was there to listen and offer suggestions when required. A teacher at Mayfield Kindergarten discussed the emotional support she had been offered by the leader of her teaching team, when she stated:

I'm grateful that Kathryn's the sort of leader she is. I've had times when I've been in a bit of a trough emotionally. Kathryn's supported me through that, and you know that really matters to me, in a no nonsense sort of a way, not wrap me in cotton wool but you know, do you need anything? What can I do? Okay, well you just tell me if you do [need anything].

Support did not always mean agreeing with each other. As the same teacher (as above) from Mayfield Kindergarten explained, the team needed to know that the leader would support the teaching team and take responsibility for making the tough decisions, no matter what. She described this as “robust discussion” in the comment below:

I think it's both collegial and collaborative, I think that we have robust discussion around things, I think that we don't always agree but we can agree to disagree and find a path forward.

Hoa Arohaehae – being a critical friend

The research data demonstrated that a leader being a critical friend meant a willingness to challenge others and to be challenged and building a positive, strong team through honest and straight talking. Notman (2017) discusses how an early childhood designated leader must have an “absolute refusal to engage in deficit thinking [and a belief in] building symbiotic relationships” (p. 138). In addition, Notman (2015) discusses the importance for leaders to have the strength of their own convictions and beliefs. Therefore, as a critical friend, leaders must be responsible for confronting issues and talking them through, as they occur. Notman (2015) describes how one leader in his study stated, “It’s not what people think of me that drives me, but rather what I believe in” (p. 41). Within our research data, descriptors of a critical friend such as tenacity, directness and assertiveness are also balanced by the need to be wise and act in a responsible manner. In addition, our research participants argued that the key tasks of critical friendship, in leadership, were empowering the teaching team to be independent in their own decision-making and to promote solution focused discussions.

Solutions-focused discussions

In the thread of conversation below, it can be seen how the designated leader of Mayfield Kindergarten encouraged a solution-focused discussion. She stated, “I do try and encourage teachers to come to me with solutions, not just questions or issues, [I] get them coming up with what they think is best practice or [a] strategy to use”. It is important for the Mayfield Kindergarten designated leader that she is not the only one making all the decisions because that “can get really tiring and stressful”.

For the designated leader it was important that things ran smoothly in her absence. She believed that by encouraging a solutions-focused way of working that the teaching team would continue as leaders in her absence. She concluded by saying:

I also feel that when teachers are given space to come up with their own ideas the team is more independent and not reliant on me making all the calls as I am not always at work, or if away, I want things to run smoothly.

Having those critical conversations

Hannah, the designated leader at Pukeahu Preschool, used the term “push-back” to refer to having critical conversations that provoked deeper forms of discussion from the teaching team. She said, “I do listen but I love push-backs. So if I say something, I keep at it, it’s not because I think my idea is the best, it’s just because I want some push-back”. Hannah referred to this process as a skill on behalf of both the leader and the team members, as she believed that not everyone was able to sustain this form of communication. She stated, “some people are better than others, because some give up. It’s because I feel that the more you push to and fro, in a friendly manner, the better you get to the core”.

In “getting to the core”, Hannah referred to unpacking the detail of the issue that she believed was restricting the teacher’s progress. Not all teachers wanted to “get to the core” of the issue, or at the very least found the “push-back” process a little confronting. One teacher at the centre talked about the need to be prepared to be challenged. She stated:

We are told that in this room (indicating the staffroom) things get raised and talked about. Be prepared to be challenged. So, if I have a bright idea, someone will say, “Well, convince me why”. You’ve got to be prepared to hold your own, with Hannah.

The notion of being “prepared to hold your own” is a key practice that underpins the purpose of a leader being a critical friend. In the final comment below, we see how the practice of being empowered and provoked, at the same time, led to the teaching team acting as independent thinkers. A teacher from Liberty Kids described how “I find sometimes she [the designated leader] won’t give, she won’t answer it [the question]. She will rephrase it back to you or suggest a different angle to look at [the question]”. Another teacher agreed, stating, “When we approach her with something she gets us to sort of unpack it a bit more and look at it from different angles”. Thus, it can be seen that the role of the leader is to encourage an environment of independent thinkers. With the support and critical friendship of the leader, the teaching team were guided to analyse issues and develop their own solutions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article initially reported on our research project “Leaders Growing Leaders” (Ryder et al., 2017) which explored effective ECE leadership in Aotearoa/New Zealand. In analysing these research findings, six specific dispositions and corresponding descriptors of an early childhood leader were developed. These dispositions and descriptors focused on clear communication; being relationally connected; providing care and support; leading growth and change; and acting as a critical friend.

By introducing the notion of “leader responsibilities” which were linked to kaiako responsibilities in the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) the discussion was extended. The key focus of the article then drew on participant voices to provide evidence of the six leadership dispositions and the associated leadership responsibilities in practice. To conclude, we claim that the voices of ECE leaders and teachers play a critical role in growing and shaping leadership dispositions, responsibilities, knowledge and practice and thus must be purposefully grown, developed and sustained across the culture of the ECE setting.

Consequently, as a result of our original research project, we have identified the need for specific leadership professional learning and development to support emerging and current leaders, and their teams, to engage in robust collegial dialogue and reflective practice in relation to being a responsible leader. To this end, we have initiated an ongoing investigation involving the dissemination and evaluation of leadership professional learning and development. The intention of this new project (currently in the development stage) is to facilitate the engagement of leaders and teams in robust collegial dialogue, reflective practice, evaluation and analysis, to further examine and grow leadership dispositions and responsibilities.

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