

# Effective leadership practices leading to distributed leadership

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## **Abstract**

*Leadership within the early childhood education (ECE) sector in New Zealand is both positionally assigned and a required practice of all teachers. Within this context, distributed leadership – where all team members have the opportunity to lead – is increasingly seen as an effective leadership model. This article reports on a study whose aim was to discover practices of effective positional leaders in facilitating distributed leadership. A nationwide survey was carried out in Aotearoa New Zealand to capture a picture of current perceptions of ECE teachers and positional leaders about distributed leadership for professional learning. Subsequently, leadership practices for distributed leadership in three previously-identified high quality ECE services were investigated through individual and group interviews. The analysis of literature, survey and interview findings from this study led to a framework of effective leadership practice, consisting of: mentoring and coaching; fostering relational trust; and creating vision and designing supportive structures.*

**Keywords:** *Distributed leadership; early childhood education; professional learning communities; coaching and mentoring; relational trust; professional learning*

## **Leadership within the New Zealand ECE context**

Leadership within the Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood education (ECE) context has both positional and distributed elements. In addition to those who hold hierarchically defined positional leadership roles such as head teachers, managers or supervisors carrying out assigned leadership and management responsibilities, evidence of leadership within teaching practices is required for an individual to attain and maintain teacher registration (Education Council, 2015). Thus, despite differences in responsibilities for positional leaders and teachers, both are expected to demonstrate leadership and there is often a levelling of hierarchy in that both positional leaders and teachers usually teach together, in the same space. The notion of distributed leadership is also reflected in government policy. It underpins the pedagogical leadership measure within the Education Review Office (ERO) framework (ERO, 2016) and is promoted by the Ministry of Education (MoE) in a vision of shared leadership within ECE (MoE, 2011). This article reports on the findings from a research study exploring the role of the professional leader in promoting distributed leadership in the Aotearoa New Zealand ECE sector. The next section presents literature focusing on distributed leadership, professional learning communities (PLCs), and mentoring and coaching. The study methodology is then explained, followed by the main findings of the study. Three aspects of effective leadership practice for distributed leadership are then discussed and the article ends with implications for the sector, limitations of the research, and suggestions for further research.

## **Distributed leadership in ECE**

Distributed leadership is concerned with the distribution of meaningful and authentic opportunities for leadership, where participants hold some power and enact self-management (Clarkin-Phillips, 2009; Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2004). Although a range of terminology is used to describe distributed leadership, it can be delineated from other approaches by a shift in view of leadership away from people and onto practice (Harris, 2013). According to Harris, when leadership is seen as a practice rather than being bound by position,

it becomes available to everyone. Distributed leadership models are considered beneficial in a number of ways, including in staff retention and engagement, learner outcomes, and developing effective professional learning within educational teams (Leithwood, Mascall & Strauss, 2009). As such, distributed leadership models are becoming an expectation for ECE workplaces, with a change in emphasis from leadership being tied to hierarchical positions to leadership as a set of behaviours that teachers should develop and practise (Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011). Distributed leadership has much in common with teacher leadership, a concept which views teachers' "influence and interaction, rather than power and authority" (Poekert, 2012, p. 171), resulting in leadership.

### ***The positional leader's role in distributed leadership***

Researchers in the both school and ECE sectors have begun to recognise the crucial place of the positional leader in developing distributed leadership (Colmer, Waniganayake & Field, 2015; Marsh, 2015; Murphy, Smylie, Mayrowetz & Seashore Louis, 2009; Sheppard, Hurley & Dibbon, 2010). These authors suggest that positional leadership is not minimised by allowing different members of the community to enact leadership. Colmer et al. (2015) argue that in the ECE context, "Distribution does not replace positional leadership structures, and site leaders play an important role in coordinating leadership and developing leadership capability within the group" (p. 104). That idea is reinforced by Murphy et al. (2009, p. 181), who suggest positional leaders "occupy the critical space in the teacher leadership equation" and are central to the changes needed to "bring distributed leadership to life." The role of positional leaders in enacting distributed leadership can be complex and challenging (Marsh, 2015). According to Murphy et al. (2009), positional leaders require strength of identity as leaders in order to begin distributing leadership, particularly in the face of entrenched hierarchical models and traditional views of leadership. Several aspects of the positional leader's role recur in distributed leadership literature: maintaining vision and learning focus (Marsh, 2015; Sheppard et al., 2010); offering teachers opportunities for leadership (Colmer et al., 2015; Murphy et al., 2009); developing relational trust (Marsh, 2015; Murphy et al., 2009; Sheppard et al., 2010); and managing supportive structures (Colmer et al., 2015; Murphy et al., 2009).

### **Professional learning communities in ECE**

PLCs are defined as "professional educators working collectively and purposefully to create and sustain a culture of learning for students and adults" (Hipp & Huffman, 2010, p. 12). Hord (1997) puts forward five PLC characteristics specific to educational settings: shared and supportive leadership; shared values and vision; collective learning and application; shared personal practice; and supportive conditions. These characteristics underpin the measurement tool developed by Huffman and Hipp (2003) and used in Thornton and Wansbrough's (2012) research. The practices required for ECE positional leaders within distributed leadership approaches mirror the leadership described in PLC literature, where, to use a musical metaphor, positional leaders are members of the choir but also conductors (Huffman & Hipp, 2003). In this configuration, positional leaders practise distributed leadership to encourage autonomy, deeper learning, engagement and the effective use of individual expertise (Clarkin-Phillips, 2011; Stoll, 2011). The shared teaching spaces and smaller teaching communities of many ECE providers facilitate some of the requirements of PLCs, such as having shared personal practice and collective learning and application (Thornton & Wansbrough, 2012).

### **Mentoring and coaching in ECE**

Mentoring and coaching has been highlighted as a key component of educational leadership, and a powerful tool for capacity building and development of teachers (Aubrey, Godfrey & Harris, 2013; Rodd, 2013; Thornton, 2015). Mentoring and coaching literature presents sets of practices, including facilitating goal-setting,

questioning and listening, and advice and guidance (Rowley, 2006; Thornton, 2014), which are reflected in literature on ECE leadership (Clarkin-Phillips, 2009; Rodd, 2013; Thornton, Wansbrough, Clarkin-Phillips, Aitken & Tamati, 2009). Mentoring and coaching are an important tool for developing many aspects of PLCs (Colmer, 2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Thornton, 2015). Thornton (2015) is clear that: “effective ECE leaders mentor and coach their colleagues and encourage them to become involved in leadership” (p. 10) and that much-needed professional development for leaders in ECE should include the development of mentoring and coaching skills.

Despite claims that distributed leadership results in improved professional learning outcomes (Clarkin-Phillips, 2009; Poekert, 2012) and widespread acceptance of the benefits of distributed leadership in the Aotearoa New Zealand context (Clarkin-Phillips, 2009; Timperley, 2005), there is very little empirical data on how positional leaders can distribute leadership effectively and promote shared and supported leadership through PLCs, particularly in the New Zealand context. The study this article is based on sought to better understand the positional leader’s role in facilitating distributed leadership.

### **Methodology**

This research study used a qualitative approach combined with descriptive statistics (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 1993) to answer the research question: What is the positional leader’s role in facilitating distributed leadership? An interpretative epistemological approach was used throughout the research as it acknowledges the need to understand not only the language people use to describe their practices and experiences, but also how terminology and practices are given meaning within particular social contexts (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011).

An online survey was used to gather data from a wide range of leaders and teachers. More traditionally qualitative methods, focus groups and interviews, were used to investigate the practices of select ECE services and allowed for deeper understanding of individual and group experiences (Scotland, 2012). As a whole, the methods of data collection constitute a mixed-methods approach that allows for a broad understanding of the sector, some comparison within the sector and detailed exploration of select workplaces. The workplaces themselves act as case studies in that they provided insight into how leadership can be distributed.

### **Participants and methods of data collection**

A survey similar to one on PLCs conducted by Thornton and Wansbrough (2012) (based on a survey developed by Hipp and Huffman (2010)), was sent out using the MoE’s directory of ECE kindergartens and education and care services using the Qualtrics survey platform. 631 responses were received. This number cannot be compared against the total number of emails sent as the emails were sent to providers, and providers were asked to distribute the link to the survey amongst their teams. It is conceivable that, as an example, a single team might have provided six responses while another may not have responded at all.

Following preliminary analysis of the survey results, three services were selected as case studies of effective distributed leadership practice, and semi-structured interviews and focus groups were carried out in these services. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups allow researchers to gain a deeper understanding of participants’ experiences (Mertens, 2014). Selection of these services was based on recommendations from the head of an early childhood tertiary institution, a prominent early childhood academic and researcher, and the Senior Teacher team within a kindergarten association. Diversity of service and context was also a factor in selection and the three services chosen represented a kindergarten, a community-based centre, and a private centre, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Contextual features of services interviewed

Service name	Service type	Positional leader	Number of teachers	Licensed for	Age range	Location	Decile rating of nearest school*
Fernlea	Kindergarten	Jane – head teacher	6	40	0-5	Small town, semi-rural	1
Hall Street	Private early childhood centre	Mel – head teacher	10	30	0-5	City suburb	9
Mansfield	Community-based early childhood centre	Helen – team leader	6	30	2-5	City suburb	4

\*Decile ratings are a New Zealand MoE system to rate the socio-economic level of the families which a school serves, 1 being low socio-economic and 10 being high socio-economic (MoE, 2016).

### Data analysis

The quantitative data from the survey allowed the researcher to distinguish perceptions of distributed leadership practices across the ECE sector, as well as between groups of participants. Qualitative comments in the survey provided opportunities for participants to clarify or expand on their ratings, and it is these comments rather than the ratings that inform this article's findings section and later discussion. These data were coded inductively, meaning that the researcher grouped the data through common themes derived from the comments, rather than from pre-determined categories (Cohen et al., 2011). The interviews and focus groups generated extensive data that was transcribed and then coded, also inductively.

### Ethical considerations

Standard ethical research procedures were used in this research. Survey participants were invited via email and it was explained that consent to participate was given by engaging in the anonymous online survey. Interview participants were approached via email and phone calls, and asked if they would be willing to consider participating by reading the information sheets and consent forms. After the interviews, participants were sent a copy of their transcripts to confirm accuracy before data analysis. Finally, interview participants were sent a summary of the research. Pseudonyms are used when describing and quoting the research participants.

### Survey data related to distributed leadership

The survey responses provided a broad understanding of registered teachers' perceptions of leadership and professional practice as well as comparisons between delivery services (kindergartens versus education and care centres) and roles (positional leaders versus teachers). Respondents were asked to answer Likert-style questions in each category by selecting the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements. The scope of this article does not allow for full reporting of the survey findings; however, some general trends included that leaders have a more positive interpretation of leadership at their workplaces than do teachers, particularly in relation to the statement "Leadership is promoted and nurtured among teachers" and "I am given opportunities to lead professional learning within my team". The statement "opportunities exist for mentoring and coaching" was also rated lower than most other statements.

**Interview findings by service**

Findings from each of the three services are now presented, with direct quotes referenced according to Table 2.

Table 2: Codes used to reference interview participants’ quotation

Service name				Role of participant	
Full title:	Fernlea Kindergarten	Hall Street Early Education and Care	Mansfield Early Childhood Centre	Teacher	Positional leader
Code:	<b>FLK</b>	<b>HSE</b>	<b>MEC</b>	<b>T</b>	<b>PL</b>

**Fernlea**

According to the Fernlea team, leadership is distributed through agreed structures as well as informally. Formally, teachers take turns to act as “Kaitiaki,” a recognised leadership role developed and implemented by the current positional leader. The teacher in that role is responsible for oversight of the kindergarten when the head teacher is not present.

*I have a Kaitiaki, so that’s like a guardian, one of the permanent full-time teachers takes on that role, and they sort of oversee everything that’s happening and people can go and pass on messages or they can make decisions about things that need to be made decisions if I’m off in a meeting or something like that, so that allows them to work through challenges... and it builds on their leadership skills as well. (FLK, PL)*

The teachers explain that although this responsibility could initially be intimidating, it helped them grow leadership capability and clarify their individual priorities and approaches to leadership. In response to interests and events, teachers also take on leadership of specific initiatives such as facilitating the team’s professional learning and planning, and liaising with the wider community. Fostering leadership is an important part of the positional leader’s role. In addition to establishing structures that enable leadership, such as the Kaitiaki, the head teacher mentors each member of the team to help them develop their leadership practice.

Fernlea operates under an umbrella organisation, a kindergarten association, and distributed leadership is specified through some of the association systems and processes. The team referred to their annual Strategic Teaching and Learning Plan goals which are written collaboratively by the head teacher, teaching team and senior teacher. One participant described the way that this plan encourages distributed leadership, explaining that every teacher has “areas of responsibility [where] we take on a leadership role of the two different goals that we’ve set; so we have allocated ourselves parts to play in that and facilitate to the group” (FLK, T). The development of a shared philosophy and vision is also guided by the kindergarten association.

In her interview, Jane, the positional leader identified the need for mentoring and coaching to develop leadership capability. She described a number of elements necessary for fostering leadership with teachers: communication, building confidence, goal setting, and supporting teachers in the various stages of their learning journeys. She spoke of the structures she has developed that enabled leadership distribution throughout the team including using the teacher appraisal system to identify professional goals, interests and strengths; designated roles to provide opportunities for leadership practice and development; scheduled times for professional learning dialogue requiring shared responsibility; and the development of a shared vision and philosophy.

The teachers at Fernlea lauded the value of distributed leadership which they described as being responsive to situational needs, and they also identified how Jane’s practices support distributed leadership. The teachers described her as a mentor; the strategies they saw as impacting on teacher development included

effective listening, asking questions to deepen thinking, and providing advice and resources. The team described her ability to understand individual teachers and support them in their leadership development as “a gift.” Several teachers in this team have engaged in long-term professional development on leadership and other teachers have set themselves leadership goals within appraisal and teacher registration processes.

The teachers articulated what they saw as the benefits of distributed leadership, personally, to the team, and to the children and community, and described how the distributed leadership environment exposed them to a variety of leadership approaches, knowledge and experience. One of the teachers described the reach of the benefits of distributed leadership for their learning community: “I think multiple voices are heard, people’s strengths and passions are nurtured, and the capability of all is grown ... So it grows a more vibrant learning community” (FLK, T). Responsive opportunities for leadership were described by this team as being reactive to situations, events and interests that arise, such as emergent learning in the group of children, and teachers’ areas of interest.

### **Hall Street**

Hall Street, a privately owned centre, had a multi-levelled leadership structure, with two Education Leader positions in addition to the head teacher’s role. The owners also provided leadership of different aspects of the business and educational environment. The leadership structure of the centre required a collaborative approach; in the interview the teachers explained that having multiple people responsible for leadership of learning required dialogue and the development of shared understandings. As a standard practice, the leadership team aimed to send two or more teachers to external professional development events with the intention of strengthening the transfer of learning through shared dialogue and leadership. Non-contact time was arranged so that groups of two or more teachers regularly engaged in professional dialogue to collaborate and plan aspects of leadership and learning. Thus the hierarchical leadership structure is complemented by practices that enable and encourage leadership across the whole teaching team.

Planned professional learning events for the team, for visiting teachers, as well as educational workshops for families were a distinctive feature of Hall Street and over time all teachers were expected to contribute to leading professional learning at these events. The owner attending the teachers’ group interview shared her view that the Education Leaders have developed expertise as adult-educators through the development of these events, in researching and writing presentations, facilitating workshops, and mentoring other teachers to participate. In both the positional leader’s interview and the teachers’ group interview, there was a strong emphasis on the value of teachers articulating ideas about teaching.

The positional leader at Hall Street, Mel, discussed systems and strategies for distributed leadership development, including teacher leadership of professional learning events, and highlighted relationships as a foundation for distributed leadership. She explained that a key part of her role was fostering supportive relationships amongst the teachers as well between herself and the team. For Mel, this provided an environment of emotional well-being which enabled teachers to develop confidence as leaders. She explained that strong relationships enabled the team to better tackle difficulties collaboratively: “Together, we’re just open for new challenges. We may be unsure at times but we know that together we can do it” (HSE, PL). Mel described her approach of getting to know each teacher well so that she could encourage leadership through the provision of resources on an individual basis. Mel also outlined systems and strategies she used to develop teacher leadership including the appraisal system which allowed her to see where each teacher could take up leadership. She contended that her strengths-based perspective towards distributed leadership gave teachers the chance to be experts for their colleagues in areas which interested and motivated them.

The team members highlighted emotional support from the head teacher and colleagues as being integral to their leadership development; they voiced their appreciation of the positional leader’s emotional support, and

regularly referred to the strength of their relationship with her as a supportive factor for distributed leadership. As one teacher explained,

*I'd say as well her role largely encompasses the wellbeing of the staff as well as the professional programme learning and that. But I'd say a lot of it is looking after us, making sure we're okay as well, yeah, and knowing how she can help us individually.* (HSE, T)

The teachers also discussed collegiality as allowing leadership and learning to happen: “you can always feel support from the teachers,” “the collegiality here is very special” and “it’s often about bringing your own ideas but it’s also about supporting other people” (HSE, T).

### **Mansfield Street**

Mansfield Street was a community centre with a parent management committee. The positional leader, Helen, explained that everyone benefitted from having a supportive management committee who valued and encouraged formal and informal professional learning. Both the positional leader and the teachers commented that the high teacher-to-child ratio allows time each day for spontaneous reflective learning dialogue amongst teachers.

Helen identified three features of her approach to distributed leadership. The first was purposefully using informal and spontaneous professional dialogue to develop learning and leadership; the second was recognising the value of diversity in teacher leadership; and the third was establishing positive relationships. Informal and spontaneous professional dialogue was a defining feature of the way Helen described her approach to leadership and learning. She regularly mentioned the intuitive way the team communicated and worked together. Through the interview, she developed the idea that knowing each other well supports teachers to lead. The “strengths” that Helen refers to include the diversity that the teachers bring to the centre. In this case diversity includes cultural backgrounds, knowledge and experience that all contribute to different teaching and leadership approaches. She explained that everyone has the ability to lead and contribute in their own way when appreciated and supported, and that she looked for different strengths and potential in each teacher.

Helen explained that she intentionally leads her teaching team in a fun, relaxed and positive way because she saw positive relationships and team culture as important factors in fostering leadership: “I think by promoting really good open positive respectful and reciprocal relationships with your teaching team, ... then you should be able to enable leadership ... where potential lies” (MEC, PL). Helen said she aimed for an environment where teachers enjoy their work and each other’s company and maintain a positive attitude even through challenges. She described showing the team a positive perspective on challenging situations, by purposefully re-presenting difficulties as opportunities for learning. Helen proposed that this positive relational environment fosters the kind of trust amongst the team which allows teachers to be constructively honest with one another as leaders and as learners: “It’s an environment where I think everyone feels secure and safe enough to challenge ideas, ... and just have that understanding that there’s no one right way of doing the things we’re doing” (MEC, PL).

Loyalty to the centre was a motivation for teachers to take on leadership roles. They referred regularly to the culture of the centre, and used the phrase “the Mansfield Way”. Their motivation was not only prompted by leader-teacher relationships, but also a sense of duty to the children and community. The teachers highlighted positive relationships as important factors in allowing distributed leadership, and explained that they felt their different strengths were valued by the head teacher and each other. A sense of security in their professional relationships was posited by the teachers as allowing everyone to be honest and to engage in critical dialogue leading to professional learning, mirroring the sentiments of the positional leader’s interview.

The teachers appreciated being in an environment where different ideas were welcomed and trialled. The positional leader reported that she wanted everyone to be honest, to discuss issues and share ideas, and the teachers reiterated that this professional learning climate is something they enjoyed and aimed to uphold:

*I think Mansfield kind of has the culture, a distributed leadership culture, where any of us at any time feel comfortable enough to make suggestions ... I feel like it's just part of the culture that everyone kind of suggests things and comes up with ideas. (MEC, T)*

### **Themes arising from interview and focus group findings**

Eight initial themes related to the positional leader's role in facilitating distributed leadership were identified from the interview and focus group data. These were: mentoring and coaching; scaffolding; fostering confidence; providing resources and expertise; fostering well-being and relationships; developing shared vision and shared understanding; and developing and implementing systems and roles. These themes were then crystallised into three key ideas: mentoring and coaching; fostering relational trust; and creating vision and designing supporting structures, each of which will now be discussed with reference to data and literature.

#### ***Mentoring and coaching***

The interviews revealed the multiple ways that mentoring and coaching supported teachers and encouraged them to be involved in leadership. Comments related to mentoring and coaching featured throughout all of the themes, however, four themes spoke to the concept most directly: mentoring and coaching; scaffolding; fostering confidence; and providing resources and expertise. Leadership practices related to mentoring and coaching most raised in the interviews included facilitating goal setting, using questioning to provoke thinking, and providing adaptable levels of support depending on the teacher's stage in an area of learning. These findings support Clarkin-Phillips' (2007) argument that mentoring and coaching support distributed leadership. Importantly, the role of mentor or coach is not strictly one of expertise, but requires the positional leader to be "tuned in" to individual teachers' professional learning, as described by one positional leader interviewed:

*If you've got those relationships with your teachers and you know who they are as teachers but also who they are as their own person, you can help and support and mentor them to be capable leaders in different aspects of their teaching careers. (FLK, PL)*

Harrington (2015) describes this close understanding of the mentee as part of the beneficial learning experience for the mentor, a symbiotic relationship. In this way, mentors are truly members of learning communities as well as operating distinct forms of leadership.

The survey data raised a concern about how mentoring and coaching is being practised and enabled in the wider ECE sector. A lack of agreement between teachers and positional leaders was revealed in responses to the statement, "opportunities exist for mentoring and coaching," and also in the statement, "leadership is promoted and nurtured among teachers." Those in the position to provide mentoring and coaching, and to nurture leadership in teachers, perceived this was already happening, whereas teachers who could benefit from mentoring and coaching did not perceive this as happening to the same extent. Consequently, positional leaders may not seek to improve this area of leadership practice when in fact it is in need of strengthening.

In contrast to the survey data, interviews highlighted the explicit use of mentoring and coaching. This was recognised not only by the positional leaders but the teachers as well who identified that mentorship and coaching made them feel valued and understood as individuals. Interestingly, this "softer skill" in mentoring was implicitly acknowledged by leaders as they recognised that developing personal connections



and personal understanding of others' learning journeys was also integral to leadership development. In this way, the positional leaders – regardless of the formal training in the area – had a great deal of understanding about mentoring and coaching. Mentoring and coaching literature provides clear guidance on strategies and processes which have been proven through research to help individuals make progress towards meaningful goals (Brockbank & McGill, 2007; Rowley, 2006; Thornton, 2015). This study suggests that such guidance may support positional leaders to facilitate the growth of distributed leadership in ECE teaching teams.

### ***Developing relational trust***

Relationships and well-being were factors that emerged repeatedly in the interview data. The teams reported experiencing high levels of relational trust, citing this as an important factor in their ability and willingness to participate in distributed leadership. There was a clear expectation that part of the positional leader's responsibility was to nurture relational trust and personal well-being to promote teacher leadership and development. The key idea of developing relational trust is drawn from the theme of fostering well-being and relationships. According to this study, ECE positional leaders have a responsibility to develop a positive and high functioning relational environment in the team in order for teachers to be able to engage in distributed leadership, an idea which is supported in the literature (Stamopoulos, 2012; Stoll, 2011; Thornton & Cherrington, 2014). Teachers want to feel secure to bring up issues and to have robust professional dialogue, and they want to feel supported by the positional leader and also the rest of the team trying out new leadership roles.

Even though the survey did not include questions directly on relational trust, the qualitative comments featured relationships with trust as an implicit factor that either enabled or thwarted effective shared leadership practice. It is clear from both the survey and interview data that positive and functional professional relationships must be addressed as the foundation for successful distributed leadership. The positional leader has the power and the responsibility to focus on relational trust to support team development and ultimately to benefit children's learning.

There was also an expectation of mutual support in the teams interviewed. In a distributed leadership environment there is often a blurred line between the leadership responsibility of the positional leader and the responsibility of every team member to enact leadership (Timperley, 2005), and that includes developing relational trust. One teacher described the benefits of the relational trust in her own team environment, explaining that:

*If you're leading something and for some reason you don't feel okay with something... you always know that there's some other teacher that's going to step up for you and support you. (HSE, T)*

Teachers appreciated the support of a whole team surrounding them, as opposed to relying on one leader in a hierarchical model. Positional leaders benefit from knowing the team are helping work toward a climate of relational trust, and also from being supported themselves as a member of the team.

Developing relational trust stands out from this study as one of the most important foundational factors in creating an environment of distributed leadership. Interestingly, the section from Thornton and Wansbrough's (2012) survey on relational trust was excluded from the survey in this study in order to keep the research scope manageable; however, the importance of developing relational trust was very clear in both the survey qualitative comments and also the interview data. This supports an emphasis in the literature on the importance of relational trust as a foundation for PLCs and distributed leadership approaches (Morrissey, 2000; Murphy et al., 2009; Stoll, 2011; Thornton & Wansbrough, 2012).

### ***Creating vision and designing supportive structures***

A positional leader aiming to promote distributed leadership has an important role in oversight or keeping the "big picture" in mind. The teams interviewed saw the positional leader's role as creating and sustaining shared vision and understanding, and designing systems and roles to develop and support distributed leadership. These

tasks are ongoing, mirroring the philosophy of continuous learning inherent in a PLC. These findings support previous research (Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Timperley, 2005), particularly in relation to creating vision. This key idea is mainly drawn from two themes from the interview findings: developing shared vision and shared understanding; and developing and implementing systems and roles. The interdependence of the elements of PLCs is implicit within much of the literature (Hord, 1997), but how these relate specifically to the positional leader is an area of research still in its infancy (Colmer et al., 2015; Marsh, 2015). In the interviews, the visionary role of the positional leader was illustrated by one teacher who used the metaphor of a river to represent the team's professional learning journey, explaining that the positional leader provides the structure to guide the river's direction as it flows (FLK, T).

The interview findings showed that shared vision included communicating a vision about understandings of leadership within that context. The idea of a shared vision guiding leadership development supports Lambert's assertion that, "it is so important to use a shared vision as the guidepost for building leadership capacity" (2003, p. 19). In short, this study suggests that if positional leaders do not establish shared understanding of the ways that leadership operates then the potential of distributed leadership will not be realised. The second part of the positional leader's oversight in this key idea is a responsibility for designing systems and roles. Well-designed organisational structures can create opportunities for teachers to lead. Distributed leadership requires teachers to have time, space, opportunities and resources, as highlighted through the data and the literature (Colmer, Waniganayake & Field, 2014; Murphy et al., 2009; Stoll, 2011). A key example of this is evident in the Hall Street team where significant time and planning had gone into developing systems so that teachers could jointly work on focused professional development. The creation of these systems enabled the service to manage the structural constraint of time where other services complained that this was their biggest limitation.

While positional leadership cannot improve all of the structural conditions facing ECE (for example, positional leaders have limited influence on funding), it can nevertheless provide a more enabling or disabling context. Just as the positional leader can refocus individuals on the shared vision and goals of the team, they can also help shape an environment that facilitates this refocusing. Important practices for leaders identified through this study are: developing a shared pedagogical vision and a shared leadership/learning vision; structuring the service to enable distributed leadership; mentoring and coaching; and developing relational trust. When these areas are considered in relation to the survey data, one can hypothesise that differences in perception between teachers and positional leaders across the sector may be due to dissimilar understandings about leadership, lack of skills, or lack of understanding about how mentoring and coaching functions, lack of appropriate systems to support distributed leadership, and lack of relational trust. The qualitative data from the survey – though a much smaller data set – supports all of these hypotheses.

### **Implications for the ECE sector in New Zealand**

The requirement for registered teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand to demonstrate leadership provides obvious structural encouragement for the types of practices that enable distributed leadership. The survey data paints a somewhat mixed picture about the extent to which these practices are occurring. The data was generally very positive, but when comparing groups, it is also clear that teachers do not feel that practices are as good as positional leaders do, suggesting that leadership practices across the sector would benefit from development specifically related to the leadership practices identified.

The biggest challenge to leadership development in the sector remains the lack professional learning opportunities for leaders. This issue has been repeatedly highlighted (Thornton et al., 2009; ERO, 2016). The Advisory Group on Early Learning (2015), commissioned by the MoE, recommended a major professional development initiative for the ECE sector with a focus on leadership for learning over the next four years. From 2019, the Education Council will become responsible for government funded professional learning and at the

time of writing were in the process of developing a leadership development strategy for 2017; whether funding becomes prioritised to include leadership development for ECE alongside the school sector remains to be seen.

### **Limitations of the research**

This research study aimed to give insight into current perceptions about distributed leadership in the ECE sector in Aotearoa New Zealand, and to examine examples of effective distributed leadership practice. However, as a small-scale qualitative project there are some clear limitations of the research:

- The survey sample, while reasonably large, was not designed to be representative of the sector. The self-selection method used resulted in uneven participation between various groups in the sector: teachers and positional leaders, and kindergarten and ECE employees.
- The three high-quality services chosen for interviews were selected in-part by geographical convenience. Therefore, other possible effective leaders and teams around the country were excluded. The selection was not representative of practice in different areas of the country.

### **Recommendations for future research**

The findings of this research project highlight areas which may be of interest in future research. Differences in survey responses from teachers and positional leaders as well as from kindergartens and ECE services highlight that more research needs to be undertaken to understand these differences and why they are occurring. Secondly, a programme for ECE leadership development could be informed by the research findings, with an accompanying evaluative component.

### **Conclusion**

This research drew on a survey of the Aotearoa New Zealand ECE sector designed to gain an overview of current perceptions and the practices of highly effective services, to understand the ways that distributed leadership can be enacted. The participation of different service types demonstrates that distributed leadership can be practised in a variety of settings. Similarities between the teams and positional leaders interviewed highlighted commonalities in the positional leaders' approaches despite their different contexts. Teachers, when given opportunities to enact leadership, lead and participate in inquiry, learn through articulation of thinking, and engage in collaboration and dialogue for improved professional learning outcomes. Effective positional leaders establish relational trust as a foundation for distributed leadership, and utilise mentoring and coaching strategies to develop their team, while providing oversight and vision.

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