Making sense of leadership in early childhood education: Tensions and complexities between concepts and practices

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Abstract

Effective leadership within early childhood settings is aligned with the perceived successful implementation of high quality care and education programmes (Thornton, Tamati, Clarkin-Philips, Aitken & Wansbrough, 2009). With growing attention on the role early childhood education (ECE) plays in preparing children to be successful in their lives, it is not surprising that there is increased focus on the work and impact of educational leaders in this endeavour. An expanding body of research specifically exploring leadership within ECE settings illustrates how much of the educational leadership theory corpus lacks contextual relevance and fails to recognise the complexities and realities of leading in early years contexts (Rodd, 2013). The qualitative research reported on in this article examines the leadership understandings and perceptions of five qualified, registered early childhood leaders. The findings illustrated that whilst participants were cognisant of the role effective leadership plays in providing quality care and education, there was much confusion about what leadership entailed and how leadership differentiated from management in this context. The contextual complexities of the ECE sector were a significant influence on each participant's opportunity to learn about, and practise leadership. Findings also revealed a need for contextually relevant and progressive approaches to leadership learning to support early childhood leaders and teachers in their leadership work.

Keywords: *Leadership; management; early childhood; learning; theory*

Introduction

The notion of acquiring and demonstrating quality leadership practices continues to be a much discussed topic in early childhood education (ECE) settings. Despite widespread leadership research in educational settings across the decades, a focus on leadership within the specific field of early childhood education has only more recently begun to receive sustained and deep attention.

In New Zealand, and abroad, the ECE sector is rapidly expanding and changing, with a consequent requirement for, and focus on effective leadership. Changes to the political context of ECE in New Zealand have increased demands for centre staff to professionalise and be accountable to consumers and regulatory bodies. This has created the need for efficient, skilled and effective leaders across all early childhood contexts (Henderson-Kelly & Pamphilon, 2000). Recurring themes in the literature indicate that while it is agreed that leadership is pertinent in achieving quality care and education in ECE (see for example, Aubrey, Godfrey & Harris, 2013; Reynolds & Cardno, 2008; Taba, Castle, Vermeer, Hanchett, Flores & Caulfield, 1999), clarity with regard to leadership practices specifically related to this context remains elusive, both in New Zealand and overseas (Thornton, Tamati, Clarkin-Phillips, Aitken & Wansbrough, 2009)

Defining leadership in early childhood settings

Recent publications attest to leadership's centrality in providing high quality learning experiences (for example, Ako Aotearoa, 2015), yet confusion remains over what this leadership might look like in ECE settings (Aubrey, 2007; Brownlee, Nailon & Tickle, 2010; Haikka, Waniganayake & Hujala, 2013; Thornton, 2010a). Leadership is a complex phenomenon and, in order to develop effective leadership, time is required to allow for reflection

and the development of new leadership understandings (Levy, 2004). However, this can be problematic as whilst reflection may occur, there is limited literature examining leadership in ECE settings, and a "lack of agreement about what leadership means or looks like" in this field (Thornton et al., 2009, p. 8).

In her study on centres of innovation in New Zealand, Thornton (2005) highlighted a lack of clarity in educators' understandings of leadership and suggested the lack of leadership identity in ECE settings was due to the transfer of mainstream theories, the unique female dominated context, and the deep underlying ethic of care. It appears that little has changed since, and the same arguments currently exist over this lack of clarity and understanding. Acknowledging this, Rodd (2013) laments the progress made with regard to leadership in ECE and highlights important implications for the sector:

> The lack of agreed definition, limited access to experienced role models and mentors, the reluctance many display towards roles and responsibilities that involve authority and power, and limited opportunities for leadership preparation and training have impeded the development of an understanding about what leadership in early childhood entails and whose responsibility it is (p. 22–23).

With little leadership theory specifically focused in ECE settings, it is not surprising that leaders have sought clarity and deeper understanding from other sectors.

Complexities of leadership in the ECE setting

The early childhood educational landscape is diverse, encompassing a range of offerings, for example, Ministry of Education centres, profit based centre models, playcentre, kindergarten frameworks, Kōhanga reo and home-based childcare. This broad and varied educational landscape demands investigation of the complexities relating to leadership in early childhood settings. These include aspects such as high levels of collaboration, flattened leadership structures, and formal and informal positions of leadership that include centre leaders, senior teachers, room leaders and, in some instances, parents.

Leadership and management in early childhood education settings

Leadership and management actions required across ECE settings draw prominence depending on the individual context in which they are exercised. The nature and presence of leadership and management in some of these contexts creates a duality of roles, which are interwoven. In early childhood education, however, there appears to be a lack of clear distinction between these two terms (Reynolds, 2011). Rodd (1996) attributes much of the difficulty in understanding leadership in early childhood to the confusion between the role of leadership and the importance of management. Scrivens (2002) suggests this may be due to those in leadership positions becoming "preoccupied with management, and thus relatively unaware of, or confused about, the obligations for leadership" (p. 44). Furthermore, the terms leadership and management are often used interchangeably within documentation pertaining to early childhood education, which may be contributing to the confusion (Cable & Miller, 2010).

In practical terms, the separation of management and leadership in the work of early childhood centres is rare and difficult to achieve (Krieg, Smith & Davis, 2014), as they are both "complementary and essential for the optimum functioning of the centre" (Jorde-Bloom, 2003, as cited in Thornton et al., 2009, p. 9). Waniganayake, Morda & Kapsalakis (2000) similarly suggest that management and leadership, although integrated into the same role, form different dimensions of the work of early childhood leaders.

Further complexity arises from the impact of privatisation on ECE. Many early childhood leaders are working in unique contexts where centres are developed and run as businesses, and are therefore required to be managed as such, while also providing educational experiences founded on an ethic of care. Business imperatives, together with the perceived need for relational leadership, create tensions that may not manifest so

obviously in other settings. Approaches to leading learning, developing curriculum and working across physical spaces require leadership structures that recognise the dynamic nature of learning in these contexts. However, with a small but growing body of research focused specifically on leadership in early childhood settings, aligning useful and contextually relevant theory to support leaders in their work generates challenges for leaders. This has resulted in many leaders drawing on models of leadership from other education and business settings (Krieg, Smith & Davis, 2014), and tensions arise as leaders seek to align managerial functions with leadership aspirations.

"Borrowing" leadership theory and applying to early childhood settings
The concept of leadership in early childhood settings draws significant silences in current educational debates. Many teachers, leaders and centre managers express a lack of certainty and reluctance towards locating the notion of leadership within their work, with many not recognising themselves as leaders (Humphries & Senden, 2000; Thornton et al., 2009). The transfer of mainstream theories from wider educational settings and the business sector into early childhood has exacerbated this lack of leadership identity (Krieg et al., 2014; Thornton et al., 2009; Heikka et al., 2013). Rodd (2013) suggests "the complexity of the early childhood context makes it difficult to deconstruct, analyse and define leadership in ways that are specific to, and authentic and meaningful for early childhood teachers" (p. 27).

This lack of understanding has generated feelings of inadequacy and resistance towards notions of leadership in many early childhood teachers, especially when generic models of leadership don't "fit" with their practices (Humphries & Senden, 2000), prompting Thornton et al. (2009) to warn that the transfer of leadership ideas from other education sectors "must be done with caution" (p. 4). Echoing Sergiovanni's (1994) view that ECE leadership "will remain characterless as long as it continues to import its models, concepts and definitions, rather than inventing them" (as cited in Woodrow & Busch, 2008, p. 86), Thornton et al. advocate for the independent examination of early childhood leadership so that theorising becomes fit for purpose and contextually relevant.

ECE as a gendered occupation reflecting gendered leadership practices
The high proportion of female leaders in ECE creates implications for leadership practice in this context. In 2014, statistics revealed 24,788 female and only 494 male ECE teachers in New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2016). Hard and Jónsdóttir (2013) acknowledge that leadership has been a highly gendered concept, and much research has prioritised discourses that position leadership as a phenomenon best suited to men. These gendered leadership stereotypes have created challenges for early childhood practitioners, the majority of whom are women (Diamond, 2014), and dominant notions of leadership have "inhibited dialogue about alternative leadership approaches" (Hard, 2005, p. 23) in the field of early childhood. The high percentage of females in ECE provides a basis for examining Krieg et al.'s (2014) argument that concepts of power and hierarchy implicit in traditional male-dominated leadership models do not correspond with the realities of leaders' work in an ECE field focused on relationships and the care of others (see also, Henderson-Kelly & Pamphilon, 2000). Reluctance to engage in formal leadership roles is thought to derive from the perception held by many women that the ethic of care inherent in the practice of early childhood professionals is not suitable for leadership (Hard & Jónsdóttir, 2013) and the non-hierarchical structure and collaborative nature of working in ECE services is divorced from leadership as a whole (Thornton, 2006).

Limited access to leadership learning and development
The low profile of leadership in ECE may be partly attributed to a lack of leadership training and professional development (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003). Limited access to experienced ECE role models and mentors,

along with few opportunities for those working in ECE settings to experience progressive and contextually aligned leadership preparation has "impeded the development of an understanding about what leadership in early childhood entails" (Rodd, 2013, p. 22–23). Despite acknowledging leadership as a key component of achieving quality, the lack of leadership learning opportunities available for early childhood leaders is widely recognised (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003; Thornton, 2010b). In her study on centres of innovation, Thornton (2010a) found that those in ECE leadership positions had few opportunities to engage in leadership development programmes, and comprehensive long-term programmes, in particular. This contrasts with the high level of support available to those working in the school sector (Thornton, 2006).

Given the lack of clarity over the definition of leadership, and how it is enacted within ECE, it has been suggested that ECE leadership should emerge from a new paradigm (Henderson-Kelly & Pamphilon, 2000). The leadership practices in this unique context have been widely discussed, yet, as Andrews (2009) illustrates, "instead of achieving conceptual clarity, discussions about contemporary practice have raised new questions, particularly in relation to connections between leadership and pedagogy" (as cited in Heikka et al., 2013, p. 37). Henderson-Kelly and Pamphilon (2000) believe that female ECE leadership is emerging from a new paradigm underpinned by a culture of nurturing and care, and the recognition of relationships.

While the uniqueness of the ECE sector creates difficulties in transferring leadership models from other sectors, Kagan and Hallmark (2001) assert "the diversity with which early care and education approaches leadership is the source of our greatest strength and provides the greatest potential for continuing positive change in the field" (p. 9). Fasoli, Scrivens and Woodrow (2007) contest that "reconceptualising traditional leadership offers some potential ways forward for the early childhood field" (p. 232) and the potential to address ongoing challenges that are part of the early childhood landscape. Similarly, Rodd (2013) acknowledges "the complex and multi-faceted nature of leadership called for in early childhood highlights the need for leadership to be viewed more appropriately as a distributed process and continuum, reflecting the power of communication, relationships, social interaction and cooperation" (p. 27).

To this end, the multifaceted nature of leadership in ECE settings suggests a layer of complexity in the roles ECE leaders fulfil which remains less understood and worthy of further attention. With the context of early childhood continually changing and becoming increasingly complex in the face of challenges such as political interests, the gendered nature of the field, and the pace of change, it is important for those in the field to develop new and robust frameworks for leadership that support leaders in facing, initiating and facilitating change. As such, it becomes essential to gain insights into women's experiences and understandings of leadership from within the context of early childhood education. By doing so, contextually located understandings about leadership can be illuminated, and these can ultimately contribute to new theorising to inform and enhance future leadership practice.

Research design

This research explored how current early childhood leaders interpreted the notion of leadership and its enactment in the ECE field. The core question that guided this research was: How do ECE leaders understand and experience the concept and practice of leadership, in early childhood education? From this question, further curiosities were explored: What are ECE leaders' perceptions of leadership? What experiences influence their perceptions and practice? What are ECE leaders' understandings of the concepts of leadership and management? What do they perceive as enablers or challenges to their leadership?

The qualitative research framework for this investigation was underpinned by the constructivist paradigm. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather detailed accounts from each participant of their leadership experiences, understandings and beliefs. The study involved five ECE teachers located in the Waikato region of New Zealand. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, with specific criteria requiring them to be

qualified and fully registered; to be currently in an ECE leadership position; and to be situated in a corporate or private ECE setting. The rationale for this was that including kindergartens, Kōhanga reo, and in-home childcare would broaden the scope beyond a small-scale research project. Participants in this research came from community-based and privately owned centres. Each participant had at least seven years' experience in ECE and had been in more than one leadership position over the course of their career. All five participants were female, as there were few male teachers overall and even fewer who met the selection criteria.

Interviews were transcribed and the transcriptions checked by participants to ensure fair representation of meaning. Thematic analysis was used to examine recurring patterns and concepts (Aubrey et al., 2000) and emerging themes and key points were illuminated and checked within each individual account. Comparisons were then made across accounts (Menter, Elliott, Hulme, Lewing & Lowden, 2011), and the clustering and coding of key ideas or themes allowed for patterns to be identified.

Research findings

Exploring ECE practitioners' experiences and understandings of leadership provided valuable insights into the ways leadership was perceived and enacted, together with features that supported and limited leadership learning and practice overall. The data generated is presented through two emergent themes: early childhood educators' perceptions of effective leadership and the challenges experienced in ECE leadership.

Sense making: What do ECE leaders notice about their leadership practice?

Participants in this research unanimously recognised leadership as an important and influential aspect in obtaining high quality care and education; however, they struggled to explicitly define or conceptualise leadership in their own practice, or even espouse leadership ideals linked to their ECE contexts. It became clear that each participant's understandings of effective leadership were based primarily on personal experiences and the contexts in which they experienced or practised leadership. Data suggests that leadership manifested itself simply in the ways in which these teachers worked and it was difficult to separate explicit leadership actions from their everyday activities. However, some common themes emerged from the participants' contributions.

ECE leadership was an inclusive practice

All participants believed everyone possesses leadership qualities and everyone could lead. Rather than a position being held, Cassie saw leaders "everywhere", likewise Diane recognised that everyone had an area of expertise in which they could lead. Anna felt: "Leadership can come in many ways, at all different levels. I believe we can all be leaders. Staff can lead various aspects of the programme and children also have a critical role in leading".

The ability to recognise and develop leadership in others was significant to Anna who believed it "important that staff and children are given the opportunity to develop their leadership skills". Like Anna, the other participants included children in their leadership perceptions. Cassie recognised leadership "in the children, they're leaders" and Diane saw "leadership coming through in the children". What was interesting, however, was that although this rhetoric existed, when describing their leadership practices, there was little mention of engaging children in leadership in their everyday work.

Effective leadership involved being a role model for others

With the notion of everyone capable of being a leader, all participants believed it was the leader's role to unveil the leadership potential in others. This was achieved by being a role model and empowering others. For example, Anna stated that "good leadership means there is someone who is prepared to walk the talk". Similarly, Diane felt effective leadership required leading by example and making sure that the expectations they had of others were things that they were prepared to do themselves: "Basically, for myself I aim to lead by

example, don't expect anybody to do anything I wouldn't do, I'll have a go at everything". Each participant also acknowledged the important roles other leaders had played in their own personal and professional development.

Effective leadership involved empowering others

The images of a leader as inspiring, motivating, encouraging and being visionary were common to the perceptions participants held of effective leadership. For example, Anna summarised leadership as being about "working with a team of people towards a shared vision and encouraging and empowering them … giving different people different opportunities based on their own strengths". Similarly, Ellen described leadership as "empowering and giving others an opportunity to lead as well". Cassie believed it was important that the members of her teams had a voice and that everyone was involved when changes were being made. She summarised this as acting "as a mentor to the people and delegating tasks for others to emerge from their own self to discover their own leadership". In the sense of empowering and growing leaders, these practices resembled a form of shared or distributed leadership.

Effective leadership developed a positive organisational culture

The team culture or "vibe" was a common theme when discussing how to identify effective ECE leadership. Like many of the other participants, Cassie felt teamwork was an important aspect of effective leadership. The unique context of ECE was also identified as having a strong impact on the culture and it was desirable that the leadership complemented the flatter structure of these settings. Diane explains that in her setting, although one may perceive a "leadership structure", the culture of the team suggests otherwise:

> We laugh. We say we have got a flat hierarchy. But, I mean, we have got one. There's the owner, there's the manager, there's the team leaders, and all the staff, if you want to look at it that way, but you wouldn't know if you walked in here.

Cassie summarised that she felt good leadership was achieved "when you can't really identify a leader in the room but you know everything's working as it should". In the same way, for Ellen, the culture was also a good indicator of effective leadership: "The team itself will show if the leadership is good".

The examples of leadership given by participants were based on strong relationships being formed amongst teaching and leadership staff. All of the participants felt that effective leadership in this sense resulted in staff being motivated and wanting to do their best. Most of the participants valued shared decision making as an example of how they practised effective leadership.

Effective leadership involved strong and trusting relationships

One of the strongest themes was the concept of effective leadership being maintained through effective and trusting relationships. Participants used words like trust, honesty, openness and communication when describing their perceptions of what they believed was an essential part of effective leadership. Trust, in particular, was mentioned by all five participants as they felt "your team needs to trust you" (Ellen) in order for the leader to be "somebody the staff are comfortable with, that they will look up to and listen to" (Diane). They expressed that leaders should be approachable and, as Cassie highlighted, that "communication is very essential to build a trusting connection". From this trusting connection, the participants felt the leader would have the ability to motivate the individual and develop their own leadership capabilities. Cassie suggested that if these strong relationships are lacking and a hierarchy is implemented, it has the potential to "destroy" a quality centre. Diane described it as being an empathic leader, suggesting "as a leader, you have to be aware of everybody, empathy I suppose, you have to be aware of everybody's feelings". They believed that understanding each member of the team, recognising individual strengths and encouraging them to lead in these areas allows the leader to gain the team's trust, from which they can lead change towards higher quality care and education.

Effective leadership required knowledge and experience

Many participants also discussed knowledge and experience as being key attributes of effective leaders. For Ellen, an effective leader was someone who has had some experience and a clear understanding of a range of aspects pertaining to ECE, including regulations and policies. Similarly, Anna considered a leader to be "someone who has been there, done that, someone who is skilled in many areas, knows their strengths and weaknesses". Having an understanding of themselves and others was important, alongside the expectation of being the "knower" and therefore being experienced in the field of ECE. For Diane, this meant as a leader you need to have "a good grounding and know yourself. If you really want to lead something you have to know your subject". For Cassie, a leader's knowledge must be continually developing and therefore "leadership means the leader feeds the mind with continually reflecting, observing, motivating, challenging and supporting each other". While each participant acknowledged professional development courses as one way to develop knowledge, Anna acknowledged support groups of early childhood professionals, or communities of practice, as a valuable tool for keeping knowledge current and broadening experiences. The participants felt it was the leader's responsibility to continue learning whilst sharing knowledge.

The challenges of being an ECE leader

The participants identified a range of challenges that impacted on their ability to lead within the ECE setting. While many of these were contextual, some common elements were shared by the participants.

Privatisation, profit and people

The development and privatisation in ECE has meant that centres are businesses and are therefore required to be managed as such. Some participants found settings that focused on profit resulted in leaders feeling restricted in the ways in which they could provide for the children, particularly in the case of resources and extracurricular activities. Cassie felt there was a "more genuine outcome from the one which is not profit based … Even though they're aiming for the same education and care for the children it's not going to be the same, the underlying foundation … is for the money".

Diane had experienced a range of settings and the felt the importance placed on profit within each setting had a clear impact on her ability to lead:

> The first place I worked was community based and the director was all for the children. Didn't matter about anything else. If the children needed it, they got it, and it was lovely, really lovely. Then I went to a corporate centre and that was horrible because it was all about the dollar.

Likewise, Cassie preferred "to be with the community side because they entrust on our capabilities to look after their kids and their education".

The participants felt, due to privatisation and therefore the impact of profit, that while some centres were quality focused others were "mainly concentrating on making a profit than sometimes doing what is right". Anna felt fortunate to work in her current setting as she knew that the "money can go back into the kids". Beth, who has experienced both types of settings, felt her centre was able to focus on quality because while they needed "to make enough to sustain the centre" they are not driven by profit - "here we're just for quality really". It seemed that when profit was a higher priority, leaders felt there was less trust in their capabilities. Anna agreed that "profits adds an added challenge depending on who you're working for". There becomes a tension between meeting the financial goals of the owners and providing quality care and education for the children. It was clear that profit impacted on the leaders and their abilities and/or desire to lead. Participants who had experienced different settings preferred leading in community-based and not-for-profit settings.

While many participants initially felt privatisation had little impact on their leadership, when they began to consider profit they highlighted these aspects as being highly influential on their ability to lead. It was clear that

participants preferred to work in community-based settings where they felt trusted and able to lead to the best of their abilities, without profit dictating every decision. In addition, they recognised wages and staffing as providing ongoing challenges. In centres that were profit based, participants felt staffing was inadequate as the focus on profit resulted in less money budgeted for wages. The poor ratios then resulted in participants feeling stressed and unable to provide the quality care and education they desired. Furthermore, participants recognised that their management responsibilities required much of their time, leaving little time to focus on effective leadership.

The multifaceted role of the ECE leader

As the contexts were so varied, the expectations of leaders were significantly different in each. What became clear was the tension and complexity in leaders' roles between managing a centre and leading the learning. The multifaceted nature of leadership across the participants' roles was identified as a significant challenge to their leadership success. Anna illustrated, "the business management side of things takes up so much time," including financial administration and employment issues, which she felt "leaves less time to concentrate on the leadership side". Ellen agreed, "It's challenging as a head teacher. Responsibilities on top of the paperwork. You need to know lots of stuff as well like regulations and policies". The leader's roles included responsibilities such as organising meetings, organising relievers to cover staff sick leave and annual leave, staff relations and performance reviews, wages, building maintenance, teaching, preparing the curriculum, parent and community relations, enrolments, business advertising and reports for funding. Workload associated with these tasks was seen as diverse, but immense.

Cassie noted that whereas both a lack of leadership and the implementation of a hierarchy can destroy relationships quickly, resulting in a loss of quality, "great leadership sustains the revenue of the quality childcare centre". Cassie clarified that if "the leader portrays an image of positivity, encourages the team to find solutions together, and guides them with effective tools towards the future goals" then this creates quality within the centre. Ellen also highlighted that a leader must also value their role: "If you think is just a 9-to-5 job, where you just come and do your job and go, this is not the place. Many children are here for over seven hours so it's our responsibility to . . . nurture them as well".

Lack of status and recognition in the wider community

The stigma surrounding the field of ECE and the perceived lack of professionalism was noted by participants as a challenge. Being excluded from government professional learning support, and the lack of recognition for the importance of the sector, resulted in many of the participants feeling marginalised. Anna felt that ECE was not valued by the wider community and that this was an important step in building up ECE's profile in order to get leadership programmes funded by the government. She went on to state: "It is really important that ECE is acknowledged by the government, the community, society, and seen as just as valuable and important as other education sector.… I think ECE is often overlooked". The participants expressed a desire for greater support and recognition from the government as they believed this in turn would both improve the profile of ECE in the wider community and result in increased leadership training opportunities.

Discussion

The findings of this research provided important insights into the beliefs, understandings and practices of a group of early childhood leaders. The complexities of the leader's role became evident and the nature of leadership in this context presented itself as unique.

The unique features of leadership in the ECE context

ECE leadership has been demonstrated through this research to be highly contextualised. As Rodd (1996) and Krieg et al. (2014) have argued, leadership theories transferred from other sectors have little to offer ECE as

they fall short of recognising the complex nature of leadership. The complexity of the ECE context remains a challenge for early childhood leaders. Researchers such as Jorde-Bloom (2003) have identified the multiple teacher classrooms, flat structure, strong care and privatisation as significant features and contextual challenges of ECE. The research highlighted that the need for settings to be run as a business can sometimes remain at odds with the leader's role and desire to provide quality care and education. The participants in this research similarly acknowledged the multifaceted nature of their roles where they are required to undertake managerial tasks within their leadership roles, particularly those in centre manager positions. As such, participants struggled to segregate leadership and management. It would appear that it is inherently difficult for ECE leaders to separate leadership actions from management actions due to the multifaceted nature of their roles (Rodd, 1996).

The notion of ECE leadership was generally perceived as collaborative in nature (Clarkin-Philips, 2011) and founded on good relationships with colleagues (Hard & Jónsdóttir, 2013). The identification of these relational attributes echoes the work of Jordan (2008) and Nupponen (2006) who found ECE leaders preferred collaborative approaches to leadership. As such, the difficulty in separating explicit leadership actions from everyday teaching might contribute to ECE leaders having difficulty in defining leadership outside of their teaching work. Rather than seeking to extricate and isolate leadership qualities, it may be more useful for ECE leaders to consider their leadership and the leadership of others as linked to their teaching practice. This may allow the complexities of the role, and the unique contextual features such as a strong focus on relational activities to be more readily embraced. Rather than seeking to extract leadership practices from other settings, it may be more useful for ECE leaders to identify and consider their leadership as an embodied practice (Ord & Nuttall, 2016) linked more closely to their teaching identities and the ways in which leadership manifests itself. If this is the case, it may be useful to consider new ways of theorising about leadership, through the lenses of early childhood educators and leaders.

The challenge of identifying and practising leadership in ECE contexts

Identifying leadership

ECE leaders have been recognised as having an apparent avoidance of, or reluctance towards the notion of leadership, with teachers not recognising themselves as leaders (Humphries & Senden, 2000; Thornton, 2006). In contrast, the findings of this research illustrated that ECE leaders are willing to recognise themselves as leaders and able to articulate the ways in which they demonstrate leadership within their current practice.

Opportunities for participants to reflect upon their leadership highlighted the importance of women working in collaborative and relational ways that distribute leadership across the organisation. In their work with women ECE teachers, Hard and Jónsdóttir (2013) identified the "highly feminised nature of the field as a major factor in determining the workplace culture" (p. 319) and favouring an emotional and caring leadership style. Similarly, the five participants in this research were female and valued relational based leadership where the care and understanding of others plays a fundamental role in the work of leaders. However, it is important to note that such a finding also represents a gendered stereotype and further critical reflection across broader leadership theory is essential.

Leadership learning and development

The perceived lack of leadership learning opportunities available for early childhood leaders was widely recognised, thus echoing the work of others (for example, Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003; Humphries & Senden, 2000; Thornton, 2006). There were no clear pathways of ECE leadership development identified by the women in this study. This finding echoes the literature emphasising that most early childhood leaders have little professional training for their leadership and management roles (Larkin, 1999). This was not due, however, to a lack of desire by the participants.

The identification of the lack of training for ECE leaders echoes the work of Thornton et al. (2009) who highlight studies from a number of different countries that reported the lack of preparation and training opportunities for ECE teachers and their leadership roles. These findings demonstrate the slow development in effective and relevant early childhood leadership development courses.

The discussion of leadership training for ECE teachers in New Zealand is not new. Whilst the addition of one-day professional development courses has resulted, these courses do not appear to be meeting the needs of those in this research, whereas postgraduate study was noted as highly influential. This may be due to the nature of the courses and the need for more sustained and progressive approaches to leadership learning.

Reforming leadership identities in early childhood settings

The findings of this research illustrate a collective desire by ECE leaders for their leadership to be recognised by the government and the wider community. With government support, ECE would be able to begin reforming a contextually specific leadership identity, increasing the recognition in the wider community, and increasing support through the implementation of leadership programmes similar to those in the primary and secondary sectors. This shift in government support may enhance the development of new leadership practices specifically relevant to the ECE context and assist in reforming and affirming the leadership identities of ECE leaders overall. Currently, changes are occurring in the education sector with the review of the curriculum and changes in legislation that support the formalising of ECE qualifications. These will no doubt impact on the identity of ECE and leaders must be prepared to lead these changes.

Conclusion

A clear definition of early childhood leaders is still to emerge, the terms leadership and management remaining a source of confusion for early childhood leaders. Differentiation between these terms is evident and while a definition of leadership remains unformed, specific characteristics valued as being those of effective leaders are readily identifiable and include relational aspects such as trust, communication, collaboration and forming strong relationships. The desire of leaders not only to empower others but to create an organisational culture of collaboration suggests that a form of distributed leadership would be suited to this context. While developed forms of distributed leadership were not explicitly articulated as part of the participants' current practice, it would appear that the actions they were involved in evidenced distributed leadership, and were in fact embodied in their ways of working. This provides scope for exploring leadership as an embodied practice within early childhood education, which extends beyond formal positions into aspects of relational, personal and professional leadership formation.

Most importantly, this research highlights the need for early childhood leadership and management learning opportunities to be revisited. Not only is it recognised as being a key influential aspect on ECE leaders' perceptions and practice, but a lack of ongoing and contextually relevant learning opportunities is clearly noted.

Universities and education providers involved in the preparation of preservice early childhood teachers should take note of the degree and complexity of the leadership component in their programme offerings to better prepare graduates for entry to leadership. Postgraduate studies could potentially provide contextually relevant ECE leadership learning opportunities that complement and enhance ECE leaders' experiences.

Recommendations for further research include an exploration of current leadership development opportunities, in a range of ECE settings (beyond private ECE providers) in New Zealand, as a means to support current research and further clarify the potential these opportunities have in advancing leadership in this field. Furthermore, research on the impact of privatisation on the practices of ECE leaders, and on possible ways to overcome the challenges of leading in complex times could also be useful.

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