

# Leadership in ECE in New Zealand: History and context

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ECE resources

Leadership in the early childhood education (ECE) sector in Aotearoa New Zealand has historically had a low profile, although recent documents and guidelines have started to recognise its importance. This guide will outline the current expectations regarding leadership both for professional or positional leaders and teachers in the sector in New Zealand, as well as considering recent research on leadership related to these documents and guidelines.

## The historical context for leadership in ECE in New Zealand

Historically, there has been scant attention paid to leadership in the Aotearoa New Zealand ECE sector. The first guiding document to refer to leadership was *Pathways to the future: Ngā huarahi arataki*<sup>1</sup>, the early childhood strategic plan, and that reference related to the provision of 'leadership development programmes to strengthen leadership in ECE'<sup>2</sup>. This plan was abandoned at the end of 2008 following a change in government and there was no policy developed nor targeted leadership development programme provided. Leadership was not mentioned specifically in the first edition of *Te Whāriki*<sup>3</sup>, the early childhood curriculum document, although responsibilities in management, organisation, and practice were specified. The Education Review Office (ERO) did not focus on leadership to any great extent either, although a 2008 report, *The quality of assessment in early childhood education*<sup>4</sup>, did refer to 'strong professional leadership' and 'poor leadership' in relation to assessment practices<sup>5</sup>. This was followed by the establishment of a link between effective leadership and quality ECE in the report *Quality in early childhood services*<sup>6</sup>. The (then) Teachers Council<sup>7</sup> published a discussion paper entitled *Conceptualising leadership in early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand*<sup>8</sup> which explored the state of leadership and leadership development in sector at that time, highlighted the lack of attention, discussed various issues and dilemmas facing the sector, and identified possible future directions.

## Current documents and guidance

The last few years has seen a significant increase in the attention paid to leadership in the sector, particularly in guiding documents. The *Code of professional responsibility and standards for the teaching profession*<sup>9</sup> includes a standard entitled 'Professional relationships' which requires teachers to 'Establish and maintain professional relationships and behaviours focused on the learning and wellbeing of each learner'<sup>10</sup>. The revised *Te Whāriki*<sup>11</sup> includes a section in each of the strands entitled 'Considerations for leadership, organisation and practice'. These considerations appear to be focused on the pedagogical leadership practices of teachers rather than those of professional or positional leaders. Both the code and *Te Whāriki* appear to support the view that leadership is something expected of all teachers.

Other Ministry of Education documents such as *Tātaiako: Cultural competencies for teachers of Māori learners*<sup>12</sup> and *Tapasā*<sup>13</sup>, a cultural competencies framework for teachers of Pacific learners, provide guidance on culturally responsive leadership competencies. These documents both have indicators for leadership practice which apply to leaders across the education sector but, while there are Professional Standards for school principals, there are none for professional leaders in ECE settings. There has been, therefore, little specific guidance for positional leaders in the sector as to their roles and responsibilities.

Two more recent programmes of work by the Teaching Council and ERO have resulted in documents that have the potential to provide much needed guidance to leaders in the ECE sector. In 2018 the *Leadership strategy for the teaching profession of Aotearoa New Zealand*<sup>14</sup> and the *Educational leadership capability framework*<sup>15</sup> were released. The vision of the strategy is to enable all teachers to develop their own leadership capability, and it specifically refers to the historic lack of support for leadership development in the early years sector<sup>16</sup>. Both the strategy and framework identify the important role of the positional or professional leader as well as the expectation that all teachers should be involved in leadership. The framework identifies nine educational leadership capabilities and provides examples of what these look like in different leadership spheres. These examples reflect the ECE sector as well as the school sector, and publications from the early years context are drawn on<sup>17</sup>. Recently, the Teaching Council has also launched its leadership 'space', *Rauhuia*, whose vision is to develop an approach for educational leadership that utilises the rich variety of knowledge, skills and attributes present within and beyond the profession<sup>18</sup>.

The revised *Indicators of quality for early childhood education: what matters most*<sup>19</sup>, released in 2020, focus much more strongly on leadership than the previous indicators<sup>20</sup>. The introductory section to *Kaihautū: Leaders foster collaboration and improvement* also provides a useful overview of current understandings of leadership and refers to a range of Aotearoa New Zealand research. Examples of effective practice are provided for each indicator that are helpful to leaders and teachers wishing to reflect on their practice and make improvements to the learning and teaching in their settings. By making leadership practice explicit, the guidelines provide direction on how leaders can ensure their practices focus on what is most important for high-quality early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand. Many of the examples of effective practice refer to leaders and teachers working collaboratively to positively impact on children's learning, although the examples make it clear that leaders are expected to model effective practices and expect accountability, actively seek the perspectives of others, and ensure access to relevant professional learning opportunities. The role of positional leaders in creating a collaborative organisational culture focused on improvement is emphasised<sup>21</sup>. Another guiding document that references leadership is *He taonga te tamaiti: Every child a taonga, Early learning action plan 2019-2029*. One of the objectives is entitled 'Quality teaching and leadership' and the plan promises some overdue support for leadership learning and development<sup>22</sup>.

## Related research

Despite the lack of recognition in policy, research on leadership in the sector continued to grow in quantity with a number of masters and doctoral theses exploring aspects of leadership<sup>23</sup>. Two Centres of Innovation, Te Kopae Piripono and Massey Childcare, also researched aspects of leadership practice which led to useful publications<sup>24</sup>. Recent research has found that teachers without a formal leadership role often do not see themselves as actively involved in leadership, despite the expectations in the guiding documents discussed above. One study challenged the notion of formal, individual, positional leadership as the only way of conceptualising leadership by exploring [everyday collective leadership](#) activity<sup>25</sup>. This study shifted the leadership lens from a formal, individual position to more inclusive, collective practices.

The value of positional leaders leading discussions that result in shared understanding of the ways that leadership operates has been established in two local case studies. One study found that one of the challenges to facilitating distributed leadership was teachers' conceptions of leadership<sup>26</sup>. Similarly, another recent case study found tensions in how participants conceptualised leadership<sup>27</sup>. While teachers acknowledged that leadership was an expectation of everyone, they also believed that leadership related to formal positions and titles and were often unaware of their own leadership

practices, viewing them as teaching responsibilities only. These findings have implications for practice which are discussed below.

### Implications for practice from the guiding documents

There are two main implications for practice arising from the guiding documents discussed above. The first is that professional leaders have particular leadership responsibilities, and that all teachers need to be actively involved in leadership practice. Secondly, a greater understanding of what leadership means and how it is implemented in each context is needed. Research shows that currently many teachers do not identify with the concept of leadership: therefore, discussions within individual settings and contexts about what leadership looks like based on the definition of educational leadership in the leadership strategy<sup>28</sup> would be beneficial. A summary of possible considerations for both leaders and teachers is outlined below.

### Considerations for professional leaders

Professional leaders need to ensure they are aware of their responsibilities as outlined in the guiding documents, particularly the *Educational leadership capability framework*<sup>29</sup> and the *Indicators of quality for early childhood education: what matters most*<sup>30</sup>. Both of these documents clarify the roles and responsibilities of professional leaders, which include:

- building and sustaining trusting relationships
- supporting leadership in others through [mentoring](#) and coaching
- collaboratively developing and enacting a philosophy, vision and goals that recognise Te Tiriti o Waitangi as foundational
- [designing and implementing a curriculum](#) for all children that is rich and responsive
- ensuring access to and leading professional learning
- participating in networks
- promoting ongoing improvement through internal evaluation
- reflecting on their own leadership practices

### Considerations for teachers

Leadership is an expectation of all teachers, as outlined in various guidelines and documents. This leadership practice takes the form of:

- building and sustaining trusting relationships
- ensuring an understanding of what [culturally responsive practice](#) based on Te Tiriti o Waitangi looks like
- actively participating in professional learning and keeping up to date with evidence and research
- contributing expertise to the sharing and building of knowledge
- reflecting on their own leadership practices.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Ministry of Education. (2002). Pathways to the future: Ngā huarahi arataki: A 10-year strategic plan for early childhood education. Wellington: Learning Media.
- 2 MoE, 2002, p. 15.
- 3 MoE, 1996.
- 4 Education Review Office. (2008). The quality of assessments in early childhood education. Wellington, New Zealand: Ministry of Education.
- 5 ERO, 2008, pp. 15-16.
- 6 Education Review Office. (2010). Quality in early childhood services. Wellington, New Zealand: Ministry of Education.
- 7 Note that this body was originally called the Teachers Council before being renamed The Education Council and subsequently The Teaching Council.
- 8 Thornton, K., Wansbrough, D., Clarkin-Phillips, J., Aitken, H., & Tamati, A. (2009). Conceptualising leadership in early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand. Wellington, New Zealand: New Zealand Teachers Council.
- 9 Education Council of New Zealand (2017). Code of Professional Responsibility and Standards for the Teaching Profession [www.teachingcouncil.org.nz](http://www.teachingcouncil.org.nz)
- 10 Education Council, 2017, p. 18.
- 11 Ministry of Education. (2017). Te Whāriki: He whāriki matauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum. Wellington, New Zealand: Ministry of Education.
- 12 Ministry of Education. (2011). Tātaiako: Cultural competencies for Māori learners. Wellington, New Zealand: Ministry of Education.
- 13 Ministry of Education. (2018). Tapasā: A cultural competencies framework for teachers of Pacific learners. Wellington, New Zealand: Ministry of Education.
- 14 Education Council. (2018a). Educational leadership capability framework. [www.teachingcouncil.org.nz](http://www.teachingcouncil.org.nz)
- 15 Education Council. (2018b). The leadership strategy for the teaching profession of Aotearoa New Zealand. [www.teachingcouncil.org.nz](http://www.teachingcouncil.org.nz)
- 16 Education Council, 2018a, p. 17.
- 17 See, for example:  
  
Davitt, G., Carroll-Lind, J., Ryder, D., Smorti, S., Higginson, R., & Smith, M. (2017). Poutoko whakatipu poutoko: Whakamanahia ngā poutoko kōhungahunga hei hautūtang a toitū: Leaders growing leaders: Effective early childhood leaders for sustainable leadership: Case Studies. Wellington, New Zealand: Te Rito Maioha Early Childhood New Zealand & Ako Aotearoa National Centre for Tertiary Excellence.  
  
Denee, R., & Thornton, K. (2017). Effective leadership practices leading to distributed leadership. *Journal of Educational Leadership, Policy and Practice*,

32(2), 33–45.

Thornton, K., & Cherrington, C. (2014). Leadership in professional learning communities. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 39(3), 94-102.

18 Teaching Council (2021). <https://teachingcouncil.nz/faqs/leadership-strategy-faqs/>

19 Education Review Office. (2020). Indicators of quality for early childhood education: What matters most. Wellington. New Zealand: Ministry of Education.

20 There are two types of indicators, process indicators, which describe the conditions contributing to high quality ECE, and outcome indicators, which are the learning outcomes from Te Whāriki. Four of the revised five process indicators refer to the role of leaders and two specifically focus on leaders and leadership practices. These indicators are Whakangungu Ngaio: Collaborative professional learning and development builds knowledge and capability and Kaihautū: Leaders foster collaboration and improvement.. These specific leadership responsibilities are:

Leaders collaboratively develop and enact the service's philosophy, vision, goals and priorities, recognising Te Tiriti o Waitangi/ the Treaty of Waitangi as foundational

Leaders ensure access to opportunities for professional learning and development that builds capability

Leaders develop, implement and evaluate the organisational systems, processes and practices that promote ongoing improvement (ERO, 2020, pp. 16-17).

21 ERO, 2020, p. 32.

22 'A national programme of PLD will also be designed to grow the leadership capability of teachers in leadership roles. The content of this will be informed by research evidence about effective leadership and the Teaching Council's Leadership Strategy for the teaching profession and Educational Leadership Capability Framework' (Ministry of Education. (2019). He taonga te tamaiti: Every child a taonga: The early learning action plan 2019-2029. Wellington, New Zealand: Ministry of Education, p. 26).

23 See for example:

Donald, N. (2018). "Held together and happy": Unmasking experiences of emotional labour in early childhood leadership. Unpublished master's dissertation, Auckland: University of Auckland.

Dowling, L. (2017). Democratic leadership: A local story. Unpublished Master's thesis. University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand.

McLeod, L. (2002). Leadership and management in early childhood centres. Unpublished PhD thesis, Massey University, Palmerston North.

Thornton, K. (2005). Courage, commitment and collaboration: Notions of leadership in the New Zealand ECE 'Centres of Innovation' (Master's thesis). Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.

Thornton, K. (2009). Blended action learning: Supporting leadership learning

in the New Zealand early childhood education sector (PhD thesis). Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.

- 24 Bary, R., et al., (2008). Ako ngatahi teaching and learning together as one: From leadership to enquiry: Teachers' work in an infants' and toddlers' centre. Wellington: Ministry of Education; Te Kōpae Piripono. (2008). Ngā takohanga e wha: The four responsibilities.
- 25 Cooper, M. (2018). Shifting the lens: Everyday collective leadership activities in education (Doctoral thesis). University of Auckland, New Zealand.
- 26 Denee, R. (2017). Distributed leadership for professional learning: Effective leadership for professional learning and distributed leadership. Unpublished MEd thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington.
- 27 Egan Marnell, C. (2021). Educational leadership practised through internal evaluation in New Zealand ECE services. Unpublished EdD thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington.
- 28 Education Council, 2018b.
- 29 Education Council, 2018a.
- 30 Education Review Office, 2020.

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