# Challenging notions of leadership in infant-toddler settings:
## My personal and professional journey

*by Maria Cooper*

*What sets effective teaching teams apart? What structures and processes shape their shared practice? How is leadership expressed and by whom? To address these questions, this paper describes key insights learned from my recent doctoral study (Cooper, 2018) on the collective leadership of teaching teams in infant-toddler settings in Aotearoa New Zealand. These insights and the reflective questions proffered may inspire other early childhood services to work towards a culture of collective leadership for the benefit of their children, families, and teaching staff.*
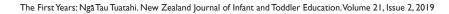
## My leadership narrative and motivation

Many years ago, I was a newly qualified teacher teaching in a large early childhood centre in Auckland. I had completed my graduate teaching diploma at the local Teachers' College and felt excited to be working with others equally committed to children. A few years into the role, I was asked to take on a leadership position: "Errr, no thanks, I'm not ready!" was my initial thought. I soon yielded with a response that went something like: "Yes of course!" I felt a bit of pressure to take it on given that some of my colleagues were unqualified and I was being asked by my positional leader, whom I admired. I felt an immediate sense of dread with the situation I'd just put myself in to. Up to that point, I'd had no education in leadership, as my qualification was in teaching and on how children learn. I also felt completely unprepared and hesitant about being a teacher and a leader at the same time, especially as I was not offered any formal professional learning support with the new role. What did this new responsibility mean? What did it involve? What's interesting to me now is that many early childhood leaders I've spoken to feel the same way.



Soon after accepting this leadership role, I found myself learning "on the job" from those around me. I've since realised that learning from practice,

or through an apprenticeship model if I had a mentor, is a common situation for many teacher leaders (Carver, 2016). I also wasn't short of role models around me, although the value of these influences varied. Moreover, I felt tension in the fact that many of my teaching team colleagues were contributing to the same work as I was, but it seemed it was me who received recognition or took responsibility when things did not go well, because I had the leadership title. I also felt tension in that while I was still a teacher at heart and very much part of the teaching team, I worried my team would view me as separate from them, especially when I had to spend time "in the office" to complete important paperwork. I realise now these tensions are shared amongst many teachers who become leaders in early childhood education (Hard, 2006).

My hope for change is that every teacher will be recognised for the positive contributions they make to strengthening teaching and learning, irrespective of the title or position they hold. In this paper, I share key insights learned from my recent doctoral study (Cooper, 2018) that bring visibility to teachers' potential to enact leadership, and that might inspire teaching teams to strengthen their collaborative work for the benefit of their centre communities. My view is that when we value the work of all and focus on strengthening our shared practices and processes, we create a culture of collective leadership that can foster positive outcomes for our centre communities.

### Who is "the leader"?

My venture into the leadership literature highlighted two things. First, I felt overwhelmed by the impressive amount of material on many types of leadership – pedagogical, distributed, relational, ethical, and so on. Second, I felt underwhelmed by the fact that the concept of leadership within teaching teams was largely under-recognised and under-theorised. Instead, a view of leadership as formal and individual dominated the literature that I had accessed and read.

Given the team-oriented nature of many early childhood settings, I

wondered what inclusive and collective leadership models existed to guide early childhood teachers in their joint work with children and families. To date, we've had little choice but to adapt models from the schooling, organisation, and business worlds. This is not in itself a bad thing as looking outside of our sector is helpful in positioning us within a much broader context. There was still a need though to research and develop leadership models grounded in evidence of the everyday realities of early childhood practice.



As an analogy, contemplate a building site and a team of builders working on a single construction. Consider how their shared goal is achieved. Clearly, this collaborative work can't happen without particular processes in place, such as effective communication, planning, and strategizing, and a shared understanding of the intended outcomes. Let's apply the same idea to what might go on inside an infant-toddler setting. If we take transition for example, most teachers will have some part to play in ensuring an infant's or a toddler's smooth transition from the loving and familiar arms of the parent to the warm and responsive arms of the teacher. A positive transition experience

can't really happen without effective communication within the team, careful planning, and thoughtful consideration for the nurturing experience they want the infant or toddler and his/her parent to have.

These examples remind us that in team-oriented contexts, we are in this together. Indeed, a positional leader's role might be to ensure that relevant policies, open lines of communication and planning processes are well established, however, the overall success of the collective work will be based on the work of many. Here, I am reminded of Raelin's (2011) thought-provoking words, which suggest the enactment of leadership is "less about what one person thinks or does and more about what people may accomplish together" (p. 196). These words press us to consider leadership as more expansive and holistic than individual.

### What do we know about leadership in infant-toddler settings?

My interest in exploring teacher leadership in the infant-toddler context resonated strongly with my own experience as a teacher of infants and toddlers. This experience made me realise it was important to acknowledge the complexities of teachers' everyday practice with very young children. Goldstein (1998) once argued that "gentle smiles and warm hugs obscures the complexity and the intellectual challenge of work with young children" (p. 244). These words encapsulate my experience in the sense that being an infant-toddler teacher can be a joyful experience, but it can also involve nuanced practices that aren't always visible or perhaps appreciated by others

outside of this context. In my reading, I learned that the participation rates of children up to 3 years continue to rise in Aotearoa New Zealand (Education Counts, 2018). My experience had even made me aware that babies in utero are being enrolled to secure a place in a desired setting. Additional reading reminded me of my experiences: that an ethical practice of care for infants and toddlers is an important aspect of pedagogy and curriculum; it is also vital to a positive start to life (Bussey & Hill, 2017; Dalli & White, 2017).

My experience also encouraged me to understand that early childhood leadership is strongly linked to the quality of care and education provision. However, the idea that many early childhood teachers become leaders without leadership knowledge and that leadership as a formal, individual position dominates the literature, highlights the risk that leadership in these and other settings might be left to chance or that teachers' informal leadership activity remains overlooked. It also leaves the sector to rely on models of leadership that may have little relevance to the nuanced realities of everyday practice. Yet it dawned on me that we still know very little about the nature of leadership practices inside our infant and toddler settings. Through my study, I wanted to respond to this situation by exploring how early childhood leadership might be re-imagined to challenge both the dominant view of leadership as an individual position only and the potential reliance on models that have no grounding in evidence of real-life early childhood practice.

## My research approach and context

I chose to carry out an in-depth investigation of the leadership practices of two infant and toddler teaching teams within one early childhood centre— Keystone Early Childhood Centre. I set out to examine the practices, processes, and perspectives of the infant-toddler teachers and positional leaders associated with the two rooms. I was keen to include the perspectives of families, given their daily encounters with, and own insights about, their children's teachers. I utilised interviews, focus groups, observations of practice, review of centre documentation, and a reflective journal, to assist with my data gathering. My aim was to foreground the voices of these multiple stake-holders in my study about teacher leadership in early childhood education.

I utilised two theories to inform my thinking about these issues. First, cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT: Engeström, 1987, 2001) helped me to understand leadership as a collective activity made up of multiple, interrelated components, that is influenced by and influences particular social, cultural, and historical factors. Second, the theoretical perspectives of leadership-as-practice (Crevani, Lindgren, & Packendorff, 2010) and leaderful practice (Raelin, 2003, 2005) helped me to conceptualise leadership, not as a characteristic innate in individuals, but as a collective practice enacted by people engaged in shared practice. These theoretical ideas resonated with my focus on the potential leadership activity of teaching teams.

*The early childhood centre and participants*

Keystone is a community-based education and care centre in Auckland. Established in the 1980s to offer early childhood provision for children whose parents work in the local area, it is currently run by a committee made up of parents and the centre's senior positional leaders (hereafter "centre leaders"). At the time of the study, the centre had a three tiered hierarchy of leadership. This included the executive committee, the centre leaders, and the room positional leaders (hereafter "room leaders"). The room leaders were qualified practising teachers with designated leadership positions situated in each room.

I selected the centre because of its reputation as a high-quality centre, as perceived by my colleagues in Initial Teacher Education. This positive reputation was confirmed by reading their past evaluation reports from the Education Review Office; the national professional body that evaluates the quality of early childhood provision in New Zealand. I assumed that a high-quality centre would give me some chance of seeing informal leadership practices from those not necessarily holding a leadership position. As such, I was keen to explore the nature of practices and processes involving teachers with and without designated leadership positions that may have led to this high-quality evaluation.

The 26 participants of my study included 16 teachers with and without designated leadership positions, and 10 parents, from across the two infant-toddler rooms. I became aware that the centre employed mostly qualified teachers, thereby exceeding the minimum requirement of at least 50% of staff holding an early childhood teaching qualification (Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations, 2008). Staff were expected to underpin their practices with the national bicultural early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017). Up to 50 of the 100 children in the centre were infants and toddlers organised across two teaching rooms, the context of my study. Both infant-toddler teaching teams maintained a maximum

adult:child ratio of 1:4 at all times, which was more than the regulated minimum standard of 1:5 for children aged up to 2 years (Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations, 2008). Analysis of data generated from all participants and data sources led me to identify a number of significant findings, some of which are introduced as key insights in this paper.



## Key insight: An explicit culture of learning

The first thing I learned through my study was that Keystone had an explicit culture of ongoing learning supported by the centre leaders. Staff participation in learning opportunities was apparent to me from the very beginning of my study. For example, the centre had a history of being involved in whole centre learning opportunities and inquiry projects. One of these projects, relevant to consideration of shared leadership in teams, encouraged staff to explore their personal identities and to develop their understandings of working with others. The centre leaders also paid course fees for any staff studying. Staff were encouraged and supported to attend local professional learning opportunities, with a view they would present their learning back to the whole team for collective benefit.

The teaching teams were also encouraged to present what they had learned through their inquiry processes during the year to teacher colleagues and parents. I learned that this yearly sharing of knowledge enabled the nature of teachers' shared practice to be made transparent for colleagues and parents, who in turn, were able to enhance their understandings of

how teachers worked with infants and toddlers at Keystone.

The expectation that staff would contribute to fostering a culture of learning was evident in centre documentation. For example, the centre's Philosophy Statement acknowledged the centre as a research active place that worked closely with the education community. Job descriptions outlined a key responsibility of teachers was to create and maintain a learning-focused environment. Similarly, the job description for room leaders emphasised a responsibility to resource and develop a learning focused environment.

These ideas indicated to me that all staff were expected, encouraged, and supported to contribute towards a culture of learning, which was affirmed in the vision of the centre, outlined as an expectation in job descriptions, and enacted in practice in a number of ways. On reflection, this centre-wide ethos of learning was one possible reason why the centre leaders and teaching staff embraced my invitation to participate in the study.

I was surprised to see such a strong shared and explicit emphasis on learning across the teaching teams, as this had not been my experience in some centres in which I had spent time. This explicit culture of learning was inclusive of teachers with and without designated leadership positions, which meant that everyone was involved in and acknowledged as strengthening teaching and learning in some way, irrespective of the position or title they held. This situation resonated with my practice perspective of early childhood leadership as a multi-dimensional activity that is aimed at strengthening teaching and learning, involves many irrespective of position or title held, and is expressed in diverse ways.

## Key insight: Core values of togetherness

A second insight learned through my study was that Keystone promoted core values, which had been established over time by the centre leaders, were embedded in practice, and supported staff coming together. I learned that this sense of togetherness helped to foster a positive climate in which teachers could enact informal leadership activities alongside room leaders as part of their shared practice. The core values of togetherness included congeniality and collegiality, relational trust, whanaungatanga and manaakitanga, and the empowerment of teachers.

*Congeniality*

Congeniality was a strong value identified in the study and evident in the interactions between colleagues. Congeniality describes a warm and friendly environment, where colleagues get along with one another and are also welcoming of families and children (Barth, 2006). In my study for example, teacher colleagues often smiled, laughed, and helped each other as they interacted with one another and with the infants and toddlers. During the focus groups and staff meetings, I observed room leaders giving time to anyone wanting to speak and then listening with interest to their viewpoints. I also noticed a team-wide interest and willingness to talk about their shared practice and infants' and toddlers' learning and well-being.

While the study illuminated one example where a teaching team member did not always feel listened to, team members still described their own teams using positive words such as trust, friendships, respect for one another, and relationships. Parents commented on the warm and friendly climate of their child's room, which was consistent with my observation of parents enjoying spending time with their children whenever they could. My reading of Sergiovanni's (2005) work led me to believe that a strong sense of congeniality supports teachers to enact leadership because it indicates that colleagues do value and are committed to one another. However, I also learned from Hard's (2006) research on a culture of niceness that being warm and friendly can be a barrier to growth and teacher leadership if it leads teacher leaders to give up their own ideas or the responsibility to negotiate ideas with the team. These insights made me realise that congeniality and collegiality are both needed to support a culture of teacher leadership.

### Collegiality

Collegiality was another value identified in the study. This value describes teacher colleagues being able to talk at length with one another about their practice, sharing knowledge and ideas, making their practice visible to others, giving and receiving feedback, and supporting one another when needed (Barth, 2006). I observed and interpreted that collegiality was present in the interactions of each teaching team. However, it did not seem as sustained as congeniality and needed teachers and room leaders to give it positive attention and work to be maintained. In my experience,

collegiality within teaching teams is not easy to establish or maintain, as it requires ongoing efforts from all team members. Also, promoting collegiality may be more difficult during times of high staff turnover or when there is tension between colleagues. I learned from further reading that if staff issues and tensions are not identified and addressed, then this neglect can lead to contrived collegiality (DuFour, 2011), which describes interactions that appear to be collegial, but behind the scenes, there are lots of complaints and talk that have little to do with promoting children's learning.

### Relational trust

Many teachers and leaders in the study also demonstrated the value of trust by showing a willingness to share ideas and support one another within their teams. They modelled interpersonal respect (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, 2003) by listening to and valuing the input of their colleagues. They demonstrated personal integrity (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, 2003) when they spoke openly about their own journeys of trusting both others in the team and parents. Personal integrity was also modelled when leaders invited team members to share their knowledge and expertise during staff meetings to address their shared concerns. I came to learn that such an approach reflects a view of leadership as being distributed across the group (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2005) and reinforces a leader's trust in teachers' potential to enact leadership. I had experienced this type of trust at times during my previous role as a teacher leader, but I hadn't considered it in relation to distributed leadership.

### Whanaungatanga and manaakitanga

The Māori notions of whanaungatanga and manaakitanga transpired as additional values of Keystone. *Te Whāriki* defines whanaungatanga as kinship and connections between people, sharing experiences, and working together in ways that foster a sense of belonging (MoE, 2017). Manaakitanga is about approaching others with care, respect, and a sense of hospitality (MoE, 2017). Both manaakitanga and whanaungatanga were explicitly stated in Keystone's staff handbook with regard to staff maintaining and fostering relationships and connections with others while "uplifting, fostering and nurturing the mana of the person". The Māori term mana referred to the capacity and power one has to do certain things and to express their skills and talents.

Whanaungatanga and manaakitanga were also reflected in the ways that teachers, room leaders, and parents connected with and appreciated the work of one another. For example, teachers referred to their colleagues as being like family, and they felt supported by them. They also valued their relationships with parents and welcomed the idea of parents spending as much time in the centre as they wished. In turn, parents described teachers and the centre in similar ways, and felt like the centre was their family and their second home. In one case, a parent described the teaching team as her child's "five mums". When I probed about parents' tensions with any teachers or the centre, only one parent from 10 indicated they'd had an issue, although this was related to centre fees, rather than teaching and leadership practices.

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*The empowerment of teachers*

The centre leaders' emphasis on empowering teachers was another value evident in the study. My observations of and analyses of practice, staff meetings, and focus groups revealed that Keystone was a place where teachers could enact leadership activity, such as contributing a range of ideas, making decisions on behalf of the group, taking initiative, and supporting others, while being supported themselves. In turn, teachers perceived centre and room leaders to be visible and accessible to them. They also felt they had a sense of freedom to contribute their ideas and have them heard. The empowerment of teachers was also an espoused value in a range of centre documentation, which emphasised teachers' potential and Keystone's aim to empower, rather than direct, teachers' decision making capacities.

Overall, these core values were seen to support the warm and collegial climate that I identified across both rooms, which enabled teachers to enact leadership activities in diverse ways, such as embracing

responsibilities within the group or exchanging expertise and knowledge with colleagues, even when it may have felt challenging to do so. As these core values were felt and lived by many teachers, centre and room leaders,

and parents, it is fair to say there was congruence in what the centre leaders espoused and what was realised in practice because of the collective efforts of many. In my experience as a teacher and professional supervisor for student teachers on practicum, this congruence is not always visible or given attention and as a result, espoused values can remain a lifeless set of words on the wall.

## Key insight: Leaderful opportunities

The third key insight learned from my study was that leadership opportunities were regularly available to teachers. Raelin's (2003, 2005) concept of leaderful practice describes leadership not as an individual property or as individual traits and behaviours but as a collective practice based on democratic participation of multiple individuals in leadership activity. My study showed me that teachers and leaders from the same team were engaged in leaderful practice when they collaborated on joint activity to achieve their shared goals.

Leaderful practice was evident in the way room leaders invited teachers to lead in areas of practice they were keen to, such as leading inquiry dialogue, or to take responsibility for the running of the room in their absence. Teachers were also able to make decisions

about children in the flow of practice, which then influenced what their colleagues would do next. This lateral influence happened often, without the need to defer to the room leaders to make decisions about next steps. For example, during meal times, without anyone being the designated person, a teacher would initiate retrieving the food trolley from the kitchen on behalf of the group, and would then organise colleagues to take on different roles and responsibilities during the meal time to ensure a calm and smooth-flowing process for children. Colleagues were not passively waiting for directives, but were reading and responding to cues to support their colleague's initiative. At the next meal time it would be another teacher who stepped up in this way, demonstrating the tenet of collective leadership responsibility. Parents similarly commented that that all teachers with and without leadership positions were able to lead practice in areas they had a strength or interest in.

The leaderful collaboration of teachers and room leaders echoed Sergiovanni's (2005) idea that a climate of teacher leadership is possible when the organisation is "managerially loose and culturally tight" (p. 39). This climate was evident in my study in the ways described and meant that teachers were able to express agency by deciding on when and how they enacted leadership as part of their shared practice with their colleagues.

## Key insight: Goal-directed inquiry into practice

A fourth key insight learned from my study was the idea of whole-team involvement in goal-directed inquiry into practice—a strong feature of the centre and of both teams. I learned that each team's inquiry process involved negotiating goals related to

**Reflective questions: Goal-directed inquiry into practice**

- *What does your current inquiry process look like? Does it involve the whole team?*

- *What inquiry skills do you collectively draw on or need to learn?*

- *What topics and goals currently motivate your shared practice and/or inquiry process?*

- *Who decides on inquiry topics, goals, and next steps? What opportunities do all team members have to contribute their own ideas?*

strengthening aspects of teaching and learning, strategizing how to achieve these goals, and talking and interacting in ways that helped to achieve these goals. This approach to involving the whole team in interrogating and changing practice resonated with Lambert's (2003) argument that an educational context based on shared visions, inquiry, dialogue, and reflection to improve teaching and learning, has potential to evoke leadership from all teachers.

The centre's inquiry process had been established a few years before my study began and was an ongoing process. During that inception period, the whole centre had been involved in in-house professional learning to learn inquiry skills that they could then use to inform their team inquiry. Teaching teams came together at appropriate times (e.g., during staff meetings after hours or while children were sleeping) to discuss and negotiate a relevant topic, such as achieving a sense of calm and flow during infants' and toddlers care routines, to hear everyone's viewpoints, and to negotiate who would take on what responsibility as part of the inquiry process. However, this process was not always straightforward. At times, teachers wanted the room leaders to establish direction, while room leaders wanted direction to come from the team. I learned that over time, they had learned to negotiate direction together, to be more patient with the sense-making process, and to value shared decision-making.

By learning to negotiate their own topics, goals, and actions, each team was able to exercise agency as a collective capacity, over extended periods of time. I sensed that this way of working encouraged teachers to believe: they were capable of making

decisions collectively about things that mattered to them; they could influence one other in ways that progressed their decision making process and; they were central to strengthening teaching and learning (Biesta, Priestly, & Robinson, 2015). Such positive regard for teachers' collective capabilities reflected the relational trust that was seen to underpin relationships between teachers and room leaders, and reiterated the empowerment of teachers, as explained earlier.

## Concluding thoughts

Bringing these four ideas together highlight that both teaching teams were part of an organisation that was open to learning, emphasised core values of togetherness, promoted leaderful opportunities for teachers irrespective of title or position, and encouraged whole-team involvement in sustained, goal-directed inquiry. Clearly, this way of working had taken time, collaborative focus, and effort. Things did not always go as planned, but challenges were viewed as opportunities to learn something new. The work of strengthening teaching and learning at Keystone was therefore approached as a collective responsibility, making anyone who contributed to this an important part of this leadership activity. Hence, the lens of leadership moved beyond the individual and towards the dynamic and interactive spaces of each collegial and collective teaching team.

The role of positional leaders, at the centre and room levels, seemed vital to establishing a climate of collective leadership. For example, they encouraged team members to come together to strengthen teaching and learning, they established a collegial tone for sharing practice, they modelled trust and valued what colleagues brought to their work, and they supported teacher colleagues to contribute to leadership activity in a range of ways, irrespective of their title or position. Despite their strong presence, they did not override teachers' efforts to enact leadership activity as and when it was necessary. This insight contrasts with my experience of some positional leaders being unwilling to share power with teachers, perhaps out of a concern of looking "leader-less".

When I look back on my experience more than 15 years ago, I can see that the positional leader in my setting was empowering me to take responsibility. But I did not understand this then, and chose to see leadership narrowly as an additional burden that would take me away from children and my colleagues. I was also newly qualified, under-prepared, and unsure about the concept of leadership, all of which led me to hesitate to take up this responsibility. With the benefit of hindsight I recognise the value and trust placed in me to lead the team and develop my knowledge and confidence along the way, but also the opportunity I missed to look beyond myself in order to see

**Reflective questions: Actualising a culture of collective leadership**

- *What changes and support might you need to work towards a culture of collective leadership in your service?*

- *What small steps can you take right now to contribute towards this worthy goal?*

leadership activity within the very collective I was part of.

My experiences of leadership were influential in pointing me to explore notions and experiences of leadership further, culminating in my doctoral work I have described here. The insights I learned identify what the teachers and room and centre leaders of Keystone were able to accomplish together for the benefit of their centre community. These insights provide empirical evidence that challenges the dominant view of leadership as a formal, individual position only, and supports an expansive and holistic view of leadership as a leaderful, collective practice. Working towards a culture of collective leadership is important, but it doesn't just happen; it takes time, focus, support, and a commitment to children, families, and one another.

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