

A review of ECE evaluation indicators: A leadership focus

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to stimulate discussion on the evidence base for the leadership-focused aspects of ERO's current Framework for Review (ECE), Ngā Pou Here, as a contribution to the reshaping of the framework and a refreshed and reduced set of evaluation indicators. The first section describes the context in which the indicators are being reviewed. In the second section I review and discuss current literature relevant to te Pou Ārahi, suggest guiding principles, critique the current indicators, and suggest revised indicators and examples of effective practice. In the third section I provide a brief, summative response to each of ERO's five guiding questions.

Context

There is a lack of empirical research focused on effective leadership practice in ECE. Unlike in the school sector, there is no Best Evidence Synthesis (BES), and because New Zealand ECE teachers generally have a higher level of qualification (than, say Scandinavia, where untrained assistants are used), much of the limited international literature is not directly relevant.

Until recently none of the guiding documents have mentioned leadership – for example, it is not referred to in the original *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). The revised *Te Whāriki* (2017) has a section under each strand, 'Considerations for leadership, organisation and practice', which is more about kaiako leadership responsibilities than professional or positional leadership.

The *Code of Professional Responsibility and Standards for the Teaching Profession* (Education Council, 2017) includes a standard, 'Professional Relationships' which requires teachers to: "Establish and maintain professional relationships and behaviours focused on the learning and wellbeing of each learner" (p. 18). This standard sets out an expectation that teachers will "Actively contribute, and work collegially, in the pursuit of improving my own and organisational practice, showing leadership, particularly in areas of responsibility" (p. 18). Both *Te Whāriki* and the Professional Standards appear to support the view that leadership is something expected of all teachers. While there are Professional Standards for principals in primary, secondary and area schools, there are none for professional leaders in ECE settings, meaning they have little guidance as to their roles and responsibilities. The Education Review Office's current indicators do not provide any greater clarity in that they refer to 'leaders', without specifying whether teacher leaders or professional leaders is meant.

A further consideration is that Pacific and Māori ECE services may differ in their approaches to leadership. Literature relating to these contexts is discussed below.

Literature review

This review of the current literature begins by focusing on educational leadership more generally before going on to consider leadership in early childhood education, and the role of the professional leader.

Leadership approaches for successful student learning

A recent OECD report, *School Leadership for Learning* (OECD, 2016), recommended two complementary leadership approaches that contribute to successful student learning: instructional leadership; and distributed leadership. The term 'instructional leadership' has a similar meaning to the terms 'pedagogical leadership' and 'educational leadership', the latter term being commonly used in New Zealand policy documents. Instructional or educational leadership focuses on teaching and learning and has been defined as "the guidance and direction of instructional improvement" (Elmore, 2004, in Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009). The conclusions of the OECD report are consistent with the findings from the BES *School Leadership and Student Outcomes: Identifying What Works and Why* (Robinson et al., 2009), which emphasised the role of school leaders in making "a critical difference to the quality of schools and the education of young people" (p. 35). The leadership dimension with the highest impact on student outcomes, 'promoting and participating in teacher learning and development', can be linked to the instructional leadership approach identified in the OECD report.

The value of distributed leadership is also identified in the BES. Distributed leadership is concerned with the distribution of meaningful and authentic opportunities for leadership, where participants hold some power and enact self-management (Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2004). Although a range of terminology is used to describe distributed leadership, it can be distinguished from other approaches by its focus on practice rather than the person (Harris, 2013), and can be aligned with Raelin's leadership-as-practice model (Raelin, 2016). According to Harris, when leadership is seen as a practice rather than a position-bound role, it becomes available to everyone. Robinson et al. (2009) argue that distributed leadership should be focused on teaching and learning and that it is necessary to address the challenges facing New Zealand schools. Beneficial aspects of distributed leadership approaches include staff retention and engagement, learner outcomes, and the development of effective professional learning (Leithwood, Mascall & Strauss, 2009). 'Distributed leadership' has much in common with 'teacher leadership', in which leadership is seen to be derived from "influence and interaction, rather than power and authority" (Poekert, 2012). The recently released standards for the teaching profession, referred to above, set out expectations of teacher leadership.

Leadership in ECE

While there may be differences – such as the diversity of ECE provision and the smaller size and corresponding lack of hierarchy of most services, which have contributed to a lack of urgency about leadership and leadership development – I have suggested that leadership practice in ECE is more similar to than different from leadership in schools (Thornton, 2010). Both educational and distributed leadership appear to be as relevant for the ECE sector as for the school sector. Distributed leadership is recommended in international studies (Colmer, Waniganayake & Field, 2015; Heikka & Hujala, 2013), although effective implementation is not often seen. A lack of engagement in debate about notions of leadership and leadership practices has been highlighted (Cooper, 2014; Thornton, Wansbrough, Clarkin-Phillips, Aitken, & Tamati, 2009). Those in professional leadership roles have little incentive or support to develop their leadership capabilities (Thornton, 2015), and teachers may be unaware of their leadership potential (Cooper, 2014). There are however a number of New Zealand studies that have explored aspects of leadership distributed across members of the learning community, and which could usefully inform revision of the indicators.

The ‘four responsibilities’ framework developed by Te Kōpae Piripono as part of their Centre Innovation work offers a different way at looking at leadership practices, and is based on the belief that everyone involved in ECE services is already a leader whether they realise it or not. The four responsibilities are:

- Being responsible: this relates to an individual’s attitude and actions and is about being professional, acting ethically and appropriately, being honest, being positive and being open to others and to different perspectives.
- Taking responsibility: this about courage, risk taking, having a go, taking up the challenge and trying new things.
- Having responsibility: this relates to having designated roles and positions of responsibility.
- Sharing responsibility: this is about sharing power, roles and positions. Sharing responsibility also denotes an interaction and engagement with others, being able to listen to others’ points of view, acknowledging different perspectives and both asking for and providing assistance. (Te Kōpae Piripono, 2006).

A recent study (Denee, 2017) drew on a survey of the New Zealand ECE sector to explore perceptions of distributed leadership practice and professional learning, and on case studies of three highly effective ECE services to understand how distributed leadership can be enacted. The study found that professional leaders encouraged distributed leadership through mentoring and coaching, fostering relational trust, and creating vision and designing supporting structures. Despite the different contexts, the study found similarities between the approaches of the teams and professional leaders interviewed. When given opportunities to act as leaders, teachers led and participated in inquiry, learned through being encouraged to articulate their thinking, and grew professionally through engagement in collaboration and dialogue. Effective professional leaders established relational trust as a foundation for

distributed leadership, and used mentoring and coaching strategies to develop their team, while providing oversight and vision.

I have suggested that the professional learning communities (PLCs) model may provide a useful framework for reflecting on how shared and supported leadership, collective learning, shared personal practice and supportive relationships are enacted in ECE services (Thornton, 2015). PLCs have been described as “an inclusive and mutually supportive group of people with a collaborative, reflective and growth-oriented approach towards investigating and learning more about their practice in order to improve pupils’ learning” (Stoll, 2011, p. 104). Distributed leadership is inherent in the PLC model, although the professional leader also has a crucial role, as will be discussed later. A case study (Thornton & Cherrington, 2014) aiming to identify factors contributing to effective PLCs in the New Zealand ECE sector highlighted the importance of the support of the professional leader. This support was necessary for the effective functioning of the PLCs and for any shifts in practice to become embedded. To some extent, leadership was however distributed, with teachers taking roles related to their knowledge and expertise. This confirmed earlier research into PLCs (Thornton & Wansbrough, 2012), which found that leadership actions influenced how effectively changes in practice were embedded.

A recent study of factors influencing the sustainability of PLCs in ECE settings investigated how PLC engagement supported changes in teacher practices that improved teaching and enhanced learning (Thornton & Cherrington, under review). Two PLCs were researched over a two-and-a-half-year period and the differences in approach analysed to reveal what factors were influential in developing and sustaining them. Over that period neither PLC reached the ‘mature’ stage characterised by broad-based leadership and decision-making, ‘lived’ shared values and vision, collaborative and innovative teaching practices, and deprivatised practice. Getting to this stage required: clarity from positional leaders regarding PLC membership and effective induction for new members; shared focus, commitment and research orientation; clarity of roles including leadership roles; opportunities for dialogue and deprivatisation of practice; and stimulus of new ideas. Each of these factors will now be discussed with reference to the relevant research.

Continually changing membership – or as was the case in one PLC, optional membership – was a barrier to embedding desirable PLC characteristics. Staff turnover is not only a problem for ECE services, it has also been recognised as a challenge to sustainability for PLCs in schools (Stoll & Louis, 2007). Hargreaves (2007) recommends revisiting the shared vision in times of high turnover, and in our study, it would have been helpful to have revisited more frequently with teachers the nature of PLCs, and the research focus. It was important that the teachers involved in the PLC chose and agreed on their research focus. While the focus of one PLC and the research approach of both changed over the course of the project, the shared vision and commitment to the inquiry, whether action-research or self-review, enhanced teaching and learning and led to shifts in teacher practice. In both the case-study services these shifts resulted in better communication between teachers and between teachers and parents. Members of both the PLCs often mentioned how excited they were about the research and their learning. Schaap and de Bruijn (2017) refer to this shared commitment and enthusiasm

as 'ownership' and suggest that it influences relationships between teachers as well as teaching and learning practices.

Some participants were not clear about the different roles in the PLC, including the leadership. While they seemed to understand that leadership would be shared, there was a perceived lack of transparency around who should be leading what. This suggests that leadership roles and actions should have been discussed in more detail with respect to expectations and understandings. This finding may reflect a general lack of understanding about leadership across the sector. The professional leader has an important role to play as they influence the conditions under which the PLC operates, and, according to Stoll (2011), they also need to encourage others to become involved in leadership and engage them in meaningful, shared learning. While the professional leaders in this study demonstrated awareness of the need to involve others, not all teachers felt empowered to practise leadership. This may have been because the 'distribution of leadership' concept (Easton, 2011) was not adequately deconstructed or explained.

Participants in this study appreciated opportunities to engage in professional dialogue and share their practice. Relational trust appears to be a necessary condition for robust conversations of the kind described by teachers in both PLCs. As Hargreaves (2007) has suggested, unless teachers trust and value their colleagues, they will be unwilling to challenge practices and debate evidence. Engaging in observations and feedback, scheduling time for meetings where all teachers could attend, and prioritising professional discussions were all effective strategies used in the PLCs in this study. While participants would have liked more time for professional conversations, there was significant deepening of reflection and debate. Members of both PLCs appeared to benefit from being part of professional learning opportunities that exposed them to different ways of thinking. Stoll (2011, p. 112) supports the involvement of outside facilitators who can "help PLC members engage with external knowledge so that it stimulates dialogue that makes their presuppositions, ideas, beliefs and feelings explicit and available for exploration". Hargreaves (2007, p. 188) has termed this external support 'being facilitated and fed'. In addition to benefiting from the literature and reflective questions posed by the researchers, participants also learned through giving and attending presentations. These influences have been described as 'inside out' (as distinct from 'outside in') because they were sought by the teachers themselves rather than externally imposed (Easton, 2011); as Hargreaves (p. 190) suggests, "[Teachers] learn from the outside as well as the inside".

The role of the professional leader

In this section I will discuss, with reference to relevant literature, the role of the professional leader in school contexts and the role of the professional leader in encouraging distributed leadership. The OECD report referred to earlier uses the term 'integrated leadership' to refer to principals who are "attentive to both instructional and distributed leadership in their schools" (OECD, 2016, p. 15). This is consistent with the approaches advocated in *Kiwi Leadership for Principals* (Ministry of Education, 2008). This document emphasises the importance of effective educational leadership in building "the pedagogical, administrative

and cultural conditions necessary for successful learning and teaching” (p. 7). According to Day (2017), while teacher and teaching effectiveness are not directly dependent on the professional leader, “successful principals, as leaders of learning, influence teachers to teach to their best through their values, qualities, strategies and actions (p. 132). The *Kiwi Leadership for Principals* framework suggests that principals “use their leadership and management skills in ways that motivate and develop the capabilities of others so that responsibility for strengthening and sustaining the work and direction of the school is shared” (p. 7). *Kiwi Leadership for Principals* also refers to principals having the capacity to build “strong learning communities where there is shared commitment to investigating, exploring and evaluating practice” and views this as “a critical leadership responsibility” (p. 9). These views of the principal’s role suggest that a focus on encouraging leadership in others is essential for educational success.

Researchers in both the school and ECE sectors have begun to recognise the crucial place of the professional leader in developing distributed leadership (Colmar et al., 2015; Day, 2017; Marsh, 2015; Murphy, Smylie, Mayrowetz, & Lewis, 2009). These authors suggest that professional leadership is complemented by allowing different members of the community to take leadership roles. Colmer et al. (2015, p. 104) argue that, in the ECE context, “Distribution does not replace professional leadership structures, and site leaders play an important role in coordinating leadership and developing leadership capability within the group.” This idea is reinforced by Murphy et al. (2009, p. 181), who suggests that professional leaders “occupy the critical space in the teacher leadership equation,” and are central to the work redesign necessary to “bring distributed leadership to life.” According to Harris (2004, p. 14), “the job of those in formal leadership positions is primarily to hold the pieces of the organisation together in a productive relationship”, and to ensure maximisation of the organisation’s human capacity. She also describes formal leaders as “the gatekeepers to distributed leadership practice”, and suggests that they create the conditions under which distributed leadership can flourish (Harris, 2008, p. 175).

Several aspects of the professional leader’s role recur in the literature on distributed leadership: maintaining vision and learning focus (Marsh, 2015), offering teachers opportunities for leadership (Colmer et al., 2015; Murphy et al., 2009), developing relational trust (Day, 2017; Marsh, 2015; Murphy et al., 2009), and managing supportive structures (Colmer et al, 2015; Murphy et al, 2009). Enacting distributed leadership can be complex and challenging, and it is quite different from delegating (Marsh, 2015). According to Murphy et al. (2009), professional leaders need strong identities as leaders before beginning to distribute leadership, particularly when redefining the professional leadership role in the face of entrenched hierarchical models and traditional views of leadership. This suggests that distributed leadership is unlikely to be enacted unless the professional leader has opportunities to learn about the theory and practice behind this more collaborative approach.

The important role of professional leaders in Pacific ECE contexts was highlighted in a 2015 ERO report, *How do leaders support improvement in Pacific early childhood services?* This report, based on the reviews of eight Pacific services with good leadership practices, highlighted the importance of strong relationships and stewardship. Four improvement-related themes emerged: leading organisational change, developing leadership capability, leadership for curriculum, and ensuring quality (ERO, 2015). These themes fit well with the literature referred to earlier and add to our understanding of the role of the professional leader.

This review of literature highlights the crucial role of the professional leader in influencing both educational and distributed leadership practices within services. While the ECE context is conducive to distributed leadership, there is little guidance available to professional leaders as to how they encourage and support this and build effective PLCs. Notwithstanding this lack of direction, the literature suggests a number of principles that underpin effective leadership practice.

Guiding principles

- Effective leadership is culturally responsive and appropriate to the context of each ECE service.
- Leadership roles and responsibilities are open to everyone, including parents, whānau and children.
- Professional learning communities provide a framework for collaborative and critically reflective teaching practices, and this model provides guidance for effective professional learning.
- The professional leader is responsible for overseeing and coordinating all aspects of the service's operation including curriculum, teaching, professional learning and self-review.

Critique of current framework and indicators

The current review framework Ngā Pou Here, strongly connects the different elements of the review framework. But when the indicators are reviewed the five elements of te Pou Ārahi will inevitably face scrutiny and possible change. Suggestions for changes are made below. There do seem to be overlaps between some of the current elements and the indicators, not only between te Pou Ārahi and the other pou but within te Pou Ārahi. For example, the current contributing element 'Realising the vision and philosophy' is very closely linked to the 'vision', 'philosophy' and 'strategic goals' of Pou Whakahaere and may not need to be included under te Pou Ārahi. Also, aspects of 'Building and supporting professional practice' are similar to each other. It would be good to provide greater clarity around who the term 'leaders' refers to.

I like the format of the School Evaluation Indicators, so my suggestions for a revised set of indicators (ECE) follow that model.

Suggested revised indicators:

Evaluation indicators	Effective practice
<p>A philosophy, vision and goals are collaboratively developed and realised. (may fit better in Pou Whakahaere)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All teachers show a strong commitment to the philosophy, vision and goals of the service • Allocation of resources is clearly aligned to the philosophy, vision and goals of the service • The philosophy, vision and goals are focused on equitable outcomes for all children.
<p>Teachers work as a professional learning community to enhance teaching and learning.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A high level of relational trust is evident among all those involved in the service • The service culture is conducive to debate, negotiation, problem solving, critical reflection and deprivatisation of practice • Teacher professional learning and development is focused and deep and there is shared commitment to investigating, exploring and evaluating practice • Outside expertise is used to enhance internal expertise.
<p>The professional leader demonstrates effective leadership capabilities and is clear about their leadership responsibilities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional leaders build trusting and respectful relationships and effectively collaborate with all those involved in the service • Professional leaders are committed to Te Tiriti-based practices including promoting the language, culture and identity of Māori children • Professional leaders and teachers encourage parents, whānau and children to take on leadership roles and responsibilities in the service • Professional leaders actively seek cultural expertise from their community • Professional leaders mentor and coach teachers to develop their leadership capacity • Professional leaders are willing to challenge practice and engage in open-to-learning conversations.

The elements of te Pou Ārahi have to be viewed holistically with the elements for the other pou. As a starting point, I would suggest that the current elements (building capability, leadership, realising the vision, organisational culture, and professional practice) be replaced with culturally responsive leadership, professional leadership, and professional learning practice.

Response to questions

While most of these questions have been responded to in the discussion above, I now summarise key points:

1. What are the most significant influences in terms of promoting children's learning and progress?

The role of professional leader has been overlooked in documents guiding the practice of ECE services. While distributed leadership is to be encouraged, this is unlikely to happen without an effective professional leader who can support and encourage teachers, parents/whānau and children to become involved in leadership. A teaching team that works as a PLC is likely to support and enhance children's learning; it would be useful for teams to consider in what ways they reflect the characteristics of PLC practice.

2. What dimensions of practice associated with those influences have the greatest impact on positive learning outcomes (as defined in *Te Whāriki*) for children?

These emerge from the literature review and are embodied in the evaluation indicators and indicators of effective practice.

3. What do we know about how the influences and dimensions work together to promote and support improvement in an early learning service context?

Interplay between the influences and dimensions is addressed using the frameworks of distributed leadership and PLCs, and by making the role of the professional leader more specific. We know what actions professional leaders take that make a difference, and these need to be reflected in the indicators. The PLC model gives guidance concerning the characteristics of effective professional learning.

4. What are the implications for the conceptual framework that underpins ERO's evaluation indicators (ECS)?

The conceptual framework itself is sound, but overlaps between pou may be confusing for teachers. The repetition of partnerships with parents and whānau, and sustainability through self-review may also be confusing. See the suggested changes to the Pou Ārahi elements.

5. What are the most important considerations in the framing, definition, identification and selection of the indicators of education quality and their potential use in evaluation in the early learning services?

The role of the professional leader needs to be made more specific. Without professional standards to guide professional leaders, there is a lack of clarity regarding who is responsible for which aspects of leadership. There is also overlap between the current contributing elements across the different pou, resulting in a large number of indicators. Reducing this overlap should help provide clarity for professional leaders and teachers, and reviewers.

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