

## Leadership practices and indicators of quality, connected through internal evaluation processes in the New Zealand ECE sector

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*The last few years has seen a significant increase in the attention paid to leadership in the New Zealand early childhood education (ECE) sector, particularly in guiding documents. While these provide greater clarity than previously on expectations around leadership practice, a greater understanding of what leadership means and how it is implemented in different contexts is still needed. This article is based on a study exploring how educational leadership is practised through internal evaluation processes in New Zealand ECE services, and how these practices support the professional capabilities and capacities of teachers. Previous research has highlighted that a practice approach to leadership removes the focus on the individual leader and allows leadership to emerge from collective action. The objectives of this research study were: to develop a better understanding of how educational leadership is practised through internal evaluation processes; explore what challenges or enables teachers to become involved and practise educational leadership through internal evaluation processes; and to understand how services monitor the impact of changes on teaching practice, made as a result of an internal evaluation.*

*This qualitative research, which took the form of an interpretive case study, was framed around a single case design with multiple units of analysis. Data were gathered from three participating ECE services through interviews, focus groups and observations, and drew on the perspectives of both teachers and positional leaders. A reflexive thematic data analysis approach was employed, and four key themes were developed: identification with leadership; supportive workplace culture; continuous improvement; and effective leadership practices in ECE services. Seven effective leadership practices were also identified: relational leadership; creating the conditions for teamwork; engagement; knowledge expertise and sharing opinions; shared decision making; facilitating and guiding and accountability and organisation. This article contributes to our further understanding of educational leadership practices in New Zealand ECE services.*

**Keywords:** early childhood education, leadership practice, educational leadership, internal evaluation

### **Introduction**

Leadership in New Zealand early childhood education (ECE) services has been undervalued, and complexities such as: confusion between leadership and management roles; the application of leadership theories from the business sector and wider educational settings to the ECE sector; gendered leadership practices; and limited access to leadership learning and development, have not been adequately addressed (Klevering & McNae, 2018; Thornton, 2020). While the importance of ECE leadership is yet to be fully recognised, research in New Zealand is slowly expanding through a deeper analysis, contextual understandings and creation of new knowledge (see for example: Clarkin-

Phillips, 2011; Cooper, 2018; Davitt & Ryder, 2018; Denee & Thornton, 2017, 2021; Hill, 2018).

The past few years have also seen a significant increase in the attention paid to leadership in the ECE sector in guiding documents. Significant guiding documents include the revised *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017), the *Leadership Strategy for the Teaching Profession of Aotearoa New Zealand* and *Educational Leadership Capability Framework* (Education Council, 2018), and the revised *Indicators of Quality for Early Childhood Education: What Matters Most* (Education Review Office, (ERO), 2020).

While the amount of research has grown and recent guiding documents provide greater clarity on expectations around leadership, there is limited literature exploring educational leadership practices in New Zealand ECE services, particularly studies that consider the perspective of both teachers and positional leaders. This article is based on a study exploring how educational leadership is practised through internal evaluation processes in New Zealand ECE services, and how these practices support the professional capabilities and capacities of teachers. This approach removes the focus on the individual and instead, highlights the actual practices of leadership. Viewing leadership from a practice perspective embodies a collective effort, that occurs intrinsically, without the requirement for one person to take action on behalf of a group (Raelin, 2017). This approach can create opportunities for all teachers to become involved in leadership and to develop their own professional identities. The objectives of this research study were: to develop a better understanding of how educational leadership is practised through internal evaluation processes; explore what challenges or enables teachers to become involved and practise educational leadership through internal evaluation processes; and to understand how services monitor the impact of changes on teaching practice, made as a result of an internal evaluation.

The following sections of the article discuss the current guiding documents and related research, the study methodology and the findings of the research. Connections between identified leadership practice and the ERO Indicators of quality practice are highlighted, and finally, study implications are discussed.

### **Leadership in NZ ECE: Guiding documents and related research**

Historically, there has been scant attention paid to leadership in the New Zealand ECE sector. In an article published in the 2019 edition of this journal, Thornton (2020) reflected on the research and guiding documents that recognised and provided guidance on leadership practice, and therefore only a brief update is needed here.

#### ***Guiding documents***

The most significant guiding documents as mentioned above are the revised *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017), the *Leadership Strategy for the Teaching Profession of Aotearoa New Zealand* and *Educational Leadership Capability Framework* (Education Council, 2018), and the revised *Indicators of Quality for Early Childhood Education: What Matters Most* (ERO, 2020). The revised *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) 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/kaiako rather than those of professional or positional leaders and support the view that leadership is something expected of all teachers/kaiako. These considerations do not however provide guidance for those in positional leadership roles, and as Cooper (2019) has suggested,

reflect “mixed messages about who might enact leadership and the nature of those leadership actions” (p. 34).

Both the *Leadership Strategy for the Teaching Profession of Aotearoa New Zealand* (Education Council, 2018a) and the *Educational Leadership Capability Framework* (Education Council, 2018), which was designed to support the intention of the strategy, also promote the view that all teachers should be engaged in leadership practice. The vision of the strategy is:

To enable every teacher, regardless of their role or setting, to have the opportunity to develop their own leadership capability so that through principled and inspirational leadership, a culturally capable, competent and connected teaching profession achieves educational equity and excellence for all children and young people in Aotearoa New Zealand. (p. 4)

The strategy specifically refers to the historic lack of support for leadership development in the early years’ sector stating: “there is a need to address areas of leadership development that have been underserved, especially leaders in early childhood education” (p. 17). Both the strategy and framework identify the important role of the positional or professional leader as well as the expectation that all teachers/kaiako should be involved in leadership as suggested in the standards referred to earlier. The framework identifies nine educational leadership capabilities and examples of what these look like in different leadership spheres are provided. These examples provided reflect the ECE sector as well as the school sector and publications from the early years’ context are drawn on (see, for example, Davitt, et al., 2017; Denee & Thornton, 2017). In 2021, the Teaching Council launched its leadership ‘space’ *Rauhuia*, with the priorities for the initiative to be confirmed in 2022. The vision for *Rauhuia* is to develop an approach for educational leadership that utilises the rich variety of knowledge, skills and attributes present within and beyond the profession, in order to enable leaders and communities to respond to challenges (Teaching Council, 2021).

The revised *Indicators of Quality for Early Childhood Education: What Matters Most* (ERO), released in 2020, focus much more strongly on leadership than the previous indicators. Of the two types of indicators, outcome indicators and process indicators, it is the process indicators that describe the conditions contributing to high quality ECE while the outcome indicators are the learning outcomes from *Te Whāriki*. Four of the revised five process indicators refer to the role of leaders and two, *Whakangungu Ngaio: Collaborative professional learning and development builds knowledge and capability* and *Kaihautū: Leaders foster collaboration and improvement*, specifically focus on leaders and leadership practices. 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; and
- Leaders develop, implement and evaluate the organisational systems, processes and practices that promote ongoing improvement. (ERO, 2020, pp. 16-17)

The introductory section to *Kaihautū: Leaders Foster Collaboration and Improvement* provides a useful overview of current understandings of leadership and refers to a range of New Zealand research. Examples of effective practice are provided for

each indicator that are helpful to leaders and kaiako 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 matters most in the provision of high-quality early childhood education in the unique context of Aotearoa New Zealand” (ERO, 2020, p. 10). Many of the examples of effective practice refer to leaders and kaiako working collaboratively to positively impact on children’s learning. However, 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 importance of the leader establishing “organisational conditions that support debate, negotiation, problem solving and critical reflection on practice” (p. 32) emphasises the role of positional leaders in creating a collaborative organisational culture that is focused on improvement. A leadership-as-practice approach also reflects the indicator of *Kaihautū*, as it considers that “leadership is about shared vision, collaboration, shifting the balance of power, negotiating, mutual engagement and ongoing learning. While appointed leaders may have positional authority, leadership roles and responsibilities are open to everyone, including parents, whānau and children” (ERO, 2020, p. 30).

This revised framework from ERO offers an opportunity to build a cohesive understanding of what educational leadership within New Zealand ECE looks like, with a focus on leadership to promote quality, as all indicators are centred on how practice can positively impact on children’s learning. Additionally, it promotes a leadership approach that fosters collaboration, relational trust, professional learning and development to build capacity, improvement, and equitable outcomes for all children (ERO, 2020). The framework and quality indicators are focused on continuous improvement and the factors that contribute to children’s developing knowledge, skills, attitudes, dispositions and working theories that support lifelong learning. The internal evaluation processes required of ECE services focus on assessing what is and is not working, for whom, and determining changes that may be needed to increase equity and excellence for children (ERO, 2016). Internal evaluation is a collaborative process, where all members of a team can be involved, and it requires evaluative thinking and leadership.

### **Related research**

While there are no previous studies specifically focusing on leadership practised through internal evaluation, a number of New Zealand studies have explored related aspects of leadership practice including the concepts of relational leadership and distributed leadership. Relational leadership involves reciprocal relationships, with leadership emerging in a dynamic and social process, and considers knowledge rather than position being the source of leadership with influence coming from the bottom up rather than the top down (Clarke, 2018). Distributed leadership is concerned with the distribution of meaningful and authentic opportunities for leadership, where participants hold some power and enact self-management (Spillane et al., 2004). While there is some overlap between these two conceptualisations of leadership, each has been the subject of research in the sector so will be considered separately. Klevering and McNae’s (2018) study into ECE teachers’ experiences and understandings of leadership, suggested that effective leaders display relational aspects of communication, trust, collaboration, and form strong relationships. Similarly, teachers in Denee and Thornton’s (2017) study, appreciated a collaborative approach to leadership that centred on motivation,

empowerment and engagement. 'Relationships' is one of four guiding principles of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017), thereby highlighting the importance and requirement for responsive and reciprocal relationships to deliver equitable learning outcomes for all children. Relational trust can be considered particularly important to the ECE sector due to the close working relationships teachers engage in and its impact on children's learning outcomes (Thornton, 2010). Hill (2018) examined leadership opportunities in a nature based programme and observed examples of relational leadership occurring as teachers and children displayed leadership, regardless of hierarchical conditions. Teachers and children co-constructed knowledge and supported one another, strengthening the relationships between all members, which were built on a foundation of trust.

Distributed leadership has the potential to harness the collective expertise of the teaching team and utilise their skills to support the learning and development of children and has been the focus for a number of studies in the New Zealand ECE context (see, for example: Clarkin-Phillips, 2011; Cooper, 2014, 2018; Denee & Thornton, 2017). Denee and Thornton's (2017) study examining the positional leader's role in promoting distributed leadership in an ECE service highlighted the importance of interpersonal relationships to professional learning and distributed leadership practice, with positional leaders suggesting that fostering well-being and relationships could support teachers' confidence and the development of distributed leadership. Effective relationships and the development and maintenance of relational trust was also seen to benefit children's learning (Denee & Thornton, 2017). Cooper's (2018) study, exploring leadership in two infant and toddler teaching teams within one high-quality early childhood education and care centre, focused on collective teacher leadership practice rather than the leadership of those in formal roles. She found that in order for everyday collective leadership to be enacted, teachers needed opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogue, to discuss goals and practices, and to consider their own leadership practice. They also needed their professional leaders to share power with them, promote values-based norms, and encourage the exploration of the congruence between espoused and lived values. Both Denee and Thornton's and Cooper's studies involved exploring distributed leadership practices in high-quality services and both provide useful guidance for teachers/kaiako and professional leaders.

The methodology of this study exploring how educational leadership is practised through internal evaluation processes in New Zealand ECE will now be explained.

## **Methodology**

The research question for the qualitative research study this article is based on was: In what ways does educational leadership practised through internal evaluation processes build professional capability and capacity in New Zealand ECE services? The research took the form of an interpretive case study focused on educational leadership practices within ECE services engaged in internal evaluation. Data were gathered from the three participating ECE services (the units of analysis) through interviews, focus groups and observations, and drew on the perspectives of both teachers and positional leaders. The research was focused on a common case, as opposed to an unusual or revelatory case, with the objective being to "capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday situation, providing insight into the social processes related to theoretical interest" (Yin, 2018, p. 50).

The selection of the three services involved filtering potential services in an identified large, urban area against the MoE ECE services directory (Education Counts,

2018) according to evaluative reports from services on the ERO website. Only services that had been reviewed by ERO as 'well placed' to promote positive learning outcomes for children and had effective internal evaluation procedures and leadership were considered. This ensured that the services had been previously reviewed to a similar standard by an external agency. The research involved one private and one community-based education and care service, and one kindergarten with all services being teacher-led, following the same curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017), and representative of the majority of New Zealand ECE services. The intention was for all members of the teaching team to participate in the research, including the positional leader, so that there would be opportunities for the conclusions and recommendations of this research to be of interest to a wider audience.

### **Data collection**

Data were gathered from three participating ECE services through interviews, focus groups and observations, and drew on the perspectives of both teachers and positional leaders. An initial introductory meeting was held at each of the three services in early 2019 with data being collected from March 2019 to April 2020. The emphasis of this study was placed on understanding leadership from the participants' perspective. There were 18 individual interviews in total, with the questions centred around two themes, understanding internal evaluation, and understanding leadership. The positional leader of each service also participated in an interview, and this was deemed to add value, as the positional leader often supports the development of distributed leadership within the wider team.

Each service participated in a focus group which included both the positional leader and the teaching team and focused on participants' understanding of leadership in practice. The community-based care and education service held a separate focus group for the leadership team and one for the teaching team as the positional leader suggested that the teacher participants may offer different perspectives without the leadership team present. The data from all focus groups provided a unique insight into how participants conceptualised educational leadership and their own identity as leaders, that was not present in the individual interviews. Thirteen observations took place involving the positional leader and the teachers during a team meeting which focused on their internal evaluation. These were designed to capture events of leadership being expressed through day-to-day practices or through organised events. The observations provided complementary data to the interviews and focus groups, supporting participants' assertions with evidence of actual practices of leadership occurring.

A reflexive thematic data analysis approach, developed from the leadership-as-practice literature (Raelin, 2016), was used to ensure a focus on the practices or activities of leadership. While Raelin's earlier work comes from organisational literature, leadership-as-practice resonates with other closely related traditions such as shared, distributed and relational leadership (Raelin, 2016), which regularly appear in ECE-based research as noted above. This theoretical framework considers practice as a "coordinative effort among participants who choose through their own rules to achieve a distinctive outcome ... encompassing routines as well as problem-solving or coping skills, often tacit, that are shared by a community" (Raelin, p.125). The data analysis demonstrated the activities or practice of leadership occurring and supported the triangulation of the data. The observations provided complementary data to the interviews and focus groups,

supporting participants' assertions with evidence of actual practices. This data analysis process led to the development of themes which will now be discussed.

### ***Ethical issues***

Particular attention was paid in this study to ethical issues of informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality, interview ethics and consultation with participants about their data (Oliver, 2008). In consideration of the researcher-participant relationship involved in academic research, services were excluded from the list where the researcher (first author) already had established relationships with the service, to prevent any potential bias. Ethical approval was obtained from the Human Ethics Committee of Victoria University (Victoria University of Wellington, 2018) prior to commencement of the research. All participants were informed in the consent form that the research data could not be anonymous but would be treated as confidential, wherein the identity and details of the participants would not be revealed. Pseudonyms were used when referring to services and participants. As the research was conducted in ECE services, the service's code of conduct and policies regarding interactions with children during the research were adhered to, to protect vulnerable participants. Observations at all staff meetings occurred outside of the services' operational hours while the participant interviews were conducted in a room where children were not present or when there were no children on site.

### **Case study findings and discussion**

Four themes arose through the data analysis process: identification with leadership; supportive workplace culture; continuous improvement; and effective leadership practices in ECE services. The first three of these will now be briefly discussed supported by quotes from research participants before a fuller discussion on the identification of effective leadership practices.

#### ***Identification with leadership***

This study unveiled a complexity in the ways in which ECE teachers identified with leadership, which in turn challenged teachers to identify with and practise educational leadership. While participants acknowledged that leadership was an expectation of everyone, they also believed that leadership was only exhibited by those with a formal position and title, viewing their everyday practices as teaching responsibilities that did not relate to leadership, with one participant asking:

*What does leadership look like if you aren't technically called the leader?*  
(Regina, Hoiho)

Teachers' understandings of leadership were framed by their personal and professional experiences and they agreed that leadership needed to be relationship-based, strength-based, distributed, and linked to vision and values. Participants' responses highlighted a tension in the conceptualisation of their own leadership; while they acknowledged that leadership was an expectation of everyone, they also believed that leadership would only be exhibited by those with a formal position and title. Teachers were often unaware of their own leadership practices, viewing their everyday practices as teaching responsibilities that did not relate to leadership. The introduction and unpacking of an educational leadership definition in one of the focus group meetings at each service provided a useful mechanism for teachers to further develop their self-identity as leaders

and build an awareness of their existing leadership practices. In beginning to identify themselves as leaders, one teacher stated in the focus group how the definition supported a new conceptualisation:

*This made me think about, like throughout the day, everything that each individual teacher is doing already, but may not realize that is leadership. And also, just like making sure that like we're supporting them to continue to want to take on responsibility and want to do more, and not just let, kind of like the leaders do it all.*

(Julia, Tawaki)

These findings have shown there is a need for the ECE sector to continue to explore understandings of leadership, reconstructing its meaning to one that is context specific and develop new ways of understanding ECE leadership. The Teaching Council's definition of Educational Leadership signals a move in the right direction, as this definition has been defined in consultation with the teaching profession. The definition is centred on the practice of learning while also acknowledging the collaborative way in which ECE teachers work and gives recognition to the importance of positional leadership. In developing new ways of understanding ECE leadership, Denee and Thornton (2017, p. 42) cautioned that "if positional leaders do not establish shared understanding of the ways that leadership operates then the potential of distributed leadership will not be realised." They suggest that developing a shared vision within an ECE service should also include a shared understanding of how leadership operates as this can support leadership development and capacity.

Positional leaders have a responsibility to develop organisational structures, such as allocating sufficient time, space and resources, that can create opportunities for teachers to lead (Denee & Thornton, 2017). This study demonstrated that when teachers have the opportunity to reconceptualise their understandings of leadership, they can be empowered to self-identify as leaders and develop their leadership capacity.

### ***Supportive workplace culture***

This theme explored how leadership was promoted and encouraged through a culture whereby educational leadership provides the environment or the right conditions for the team to succeed, through fostering leadership, providing opportunities for distributed leadership, and working collaboratively.

Fostering leadership was viewed by the positional leaders as a process of collectively building teacher's confidence and knowledge in the process of internal evaluation through developing an environment of trust and support to empower teachers to lead in the future. All of the teachers acknowledged that leadership was an expectation in their service and were encouraged to contribute with one teacher suggesting:

*If we can foster a space that is open to new leaders coming through and making mistakes but then being supported to get through those mistakes, then I think that is really beneficial for the teaching practice itself, as well as the governance of the centre.* (Sam, Kororā)

Although teachers did not explicitly reference distributed leadership, it was evident in their daily practices. This process appears to align with "unconstrained distributed leadership," which Leithwood et al. (2007, p. 46) describe as "the distribution of leadership to whomever has the expertise required for the job, rather than only those in



formal leadership roles,” which not only utilises the shared expertise of individuals but also builds upon it. This also aligns with ERO’s (2015) findings wherein distributed leadership builds capacity for those leading aspects of an internal evaluation process.

Participants interpreted working collaboratively broadly, including collaborating on tasks, sharing the curriculum, focusing on the same topic in different spaces, and working with external agencies in supporting children. As teachers worked collaboratively, the practice of shared decision making was frequently highlighted as a process for building teachers’ leadership capabilities through opportunities for increased responsibility and valuing of their contribution. Previous research has found that effective leaders also play an essential role in establishing a supportive workplace culture which demands an unwavering commitment to a collaborative environment (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2007). By recognising the value of differences and using the strengths of individuals within a team, positional leaders can positively influence the collaborative culture. In discussing the supportive workplace culture in their service during a team meeting, one leader shared her perspective with her team:

*You created that trusting environment for yourselves as well. You create the team culture and the environment for an internal evaluation. So, you provide a safe space and trusted each other to be able to express and participate your personal ideas, you create that space with each other, to be honest with each other and have that trust, that's created by all of you. (Opal, Kororā)*

When leaders establish positive working conditions that include a supportive workplace culture and support the professional learning and development of staff, they can improve the organisational and leadership capacity of teachers, which in turn can lead to higher quality care and education. This research also underlined the essential role the positional leader plays in building and sustaining a supportive workplace culture that fosters leadership. It can be argued from this study that if positional leaders have a strong sense of their own leadership identity, they were more likely to show a genuine commitment to collaboration, which enabled them to step back and create a space for teachers to step forward and practice leadership.

### ***Continuous improvement***

This theme investigated how a cycle of continuous improvement supported services to monitor the impact of changes on teaching practice made as a result of an internal evaluation. Engaging in continuous improvement was seen as having a growth mindset. Rather than becoming complacent, teachers needed to investigate what was actually happening and constantly adapt the programme to improve learning outcomes for children. This also involved debating and negotiating, seeking feedback, assessment, and most importantly evaluating effectiveness. One participant in their interview described their understanding as constantly striving to improve together and:

*really unpacking it instead of just making changes. Taking away all those assumptions. And find out what's actually happening and then make changes for the better. (Opal, Kororā)*

Reflective thinking was a central component of the internal evaluation cycle, with all teachers acknowledging how it provided the catalyst to improving teaching practices and the quality of the programme. Reflective thinking can enhance critical thinking (Choy

& Oo, 2012) with teachers scrutinizing the assumptions that underly their beliefs, to enhance the quality of their teaching. Reflective thinking can also encourage teachers to think systematically about the learning experiences the children are engaged in and how to improve teaching practices. Effective teachers incorporate metacognition into their practices, engaging in a process of reflection and planning with their colleagues to improve pedagogical practices to enhance children's learning outcomes and continue to increase their effectiveness (Farquhar, 2003).

Leadership can play a critical role in encouraging reflective thinking within teams by creating a conducive environment for reflection and feedback, such as creating a space of psychological safety (Matsuo, 2016). Leaders can create an atmosphere of support and respect that will allow teachers to be vulnerable when reflecting on their own teaching practice and desired improvements. Additionally, effective leaders are reflective practitioners who lead by example in modelling practice and behaviours and influence others (Hallet, 2013), creating a catalyst for change and the motivation for on-going learning and development (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2007). One leader reflected on her own leadership practice:

*I'm not sure if I really want to know things that I need to improve on but it's actually if you're asking that of your teachers, to be quite transparent with asking for the feedback and taking that feedback and looking at that constructively thinking about how can I improve or better myself by applying different strategies or whatever it might be. Then you have to be prepared to be vulnerable. And take on that feedback too, you know? (Melanie, Hoiho)*

Positional leaders often teach alongside their colleagues, and this collaborative interaction offers them the opportunity to role model reflective practice, engaging teachers in reflective discussions. This leadership practice also encourages reflection by "triggering thoughtfulness within the self and with others to ponder the meaning of past, current, and future experience to learn how to meet mutual needs and interests" (Raelin, 2016, p. 7). Positional leaders can perform an essential role in 'triggering thoughtfulness' by role modelling a deeper exploration of a topic. They have the unique benefit of 'insider knowledge' within an ECE service, supporting teachers to see how it may connect to the vision of the service or their teaching practices. As teachers continue to develop their abilities as reflective practitioners and how different areas of practice connect to the vision of the service, they may also feel competent to lead the change process, growing their professional identity as leaders in the process.

This study identified that reflective thinking can lead to changes in teaching practice. In reviewing the impact of change on teaching practice, it was possible to view the *changes* to teaching practice that were introduced, the identifiable impacts from these changes to the practice and the evidence of leadership practices occurring within the teaching team. All of the positional leaders in this study had also identified changes to their own leadership practice through the process of continuous improvement. They could articulate how these changes were now, or would in the future, build teachers' capabilities and capacity. This highlights how the practise of educational leadership by positional leaders can impact teaching practice. It has been suggested that leadership is one of the most important drivers of continuous quality improvement as it can create positive and supportive workplace conditions (Douglass, 2019), impacting indirectly through the leader's influence on the teachers (Douglass, 2018), but also through the leaders' focus on curriculum and pedagogy (Daniëls et al., 2019).

### ***Effective leadership practices***

Seven leadership practices were identified through the analysis of the study findings which describe the tangible actions taken by leaders and teachers to achieve their agreed goals, highlighting “how leadership emerges and unfolds through day-to-day experiences” (Raelin, 2016, p. 125). The participants in this study shared their views on what constituted effective leadership practices in internal evaluation through their interviews and focus groups. Some of these practices were embedded as part of the team culture and occurred naturally, while others were actively selected at opportune times to move the process forward. Participants constructed these practices as largely positive experiences, practices they had showed or experienced through others.

The seven practices are: relational leadership; creating the conditions for teamwork; engagement; knowledge expertise and sharing opinions; shared decision making; facilitating and guiding; and accountability and organisation. The following table explains each of these in more detail.

Table 1.

#### *Leadership practices in internal evaluation*

Relational leadership	Building relationships and forming connections with whānau and teachers.
Creating the conditions for teamwork	Creating a trusting environment where teachers can be vulnerable, honest and encouraged to share their ideas in a respectful way.
Engagement	Supporting teachers to become involved, and maintain that involvement by suggesting meaningful topics for investigation and ensuring the process is accessible and relevant for everyone.
Knowledge expertise and sharing opinions	Having discipline relevant knowledge that is communicated in a clear and consistent way. Encouraging teachers to share their opinions and ideas to engage in a discussion, creating alternative perspectives for consideration.
Shared decision making	Creating sustainable and effective practice, whereby decisions are agreed upon and supported by everyone.
Facilitating and guiding	Developing of knowledge, an awareness of the learning process and a necessity for leadership that embodies values of care and sensitivity.
Accountability and organisation	Implementing the agreed upon strategies and decisions with each person taking responsibility within the process.

These practices acknowledge relationships as a core value that enables contribution to any process through scaffolding a trusting and supportive environment within the ECE service, while engaging the community and working towards the service vision. Having discipline relevant knowledge that is communicated effectively while sharing opinions can generate robust discussions and offer different perspectives. These practices require opportunities for the identification and co-construction of shared objectives and decisions, while facilitating and guiding each member with different levels of support. The

practices encompass the role modelling of accountability and organisation of the process required for the implementation of the strategies agreed upon.

A unique contribution of this study is that it is the first to identify a connection between the indicators of quality practice and the identified leadership practices in internal evaluation processes, highlighting how educational leadership builds professional capability and capacity. To further explain this connection, the revised indicators of quality for effective practice from ERO (2020), specifically *Whakangungu Ngaio – Collaborative Professional Learning and Development Builds Knowledge and Capability*, were drawn on to highlight the conditions that contribute to quality ECE and positive learning outcomes for all children. ERO suggests that the key purpose of the indicators is to promote improvement for equity and excellence within education through a journey of knowledge and learning, providing greater clarity on what type of conditions (systems, processes and practices) support quality ECE, alongside the valued learning outcomes of *Te Whāriki* (ERO, 2020). The leadership practices identified in the case study complement the effective examples of practice within ERO’s framework by providing that clarity to leaders and those interested in growing their leadership practice. (When this study started the final indicators of quality practice had not yet been released and, as such, further investigation of the practices and indicators was not possible).

These leadership practices connect strongly with the examples of effective practice in the *Whakangungu Ngaio - Collaborative Professional Learning and Development Builds Knowledge and Capability* indicator (ERO, 2020), as outlined in Table 2 below.

Table 2.

*Indicators of Quality Practice related to leadership practices in internal evaluation*

Process indicator: <i>Whakangungu Ngaio- Collaborative Professional Learning and Development Builds Knowledge and Capability;</i>	Examples of effective practice:	Leadership practices in internal evaluation:
2.1 Children’s learning and development is supported by leaders and kaiako, and others with culturally relevant knowledge and expertise;	Leaders and kaiako: - have developed the cultural competence and expertise to provide a rich, responsive and inclusive curriculum for all children, - are committed to practices that promote success for Māori children such as fostering tuakana-teina relationships or groupings, - learn about Māori theories and pedagogies, to assist them to enact culturally responsive practices, - engage with Māori as tangata whenua, - value and celebrate Pacific and diverse groups of children and their parents and aiga for who they are and what they bring to the service.	Relational Leadership  Knowledge expertise & sharing opinions
2.2 Leaders and kaiako work collaboratively to develop the professional knowledge and expertise to design and	Leaders and kaiako have the professional knowledge, including subject content knowledge, to respond meaningfully to children’s interests and inquiries and to	Relational Leadership

<p>implement a responsive and rich curriculum for all children;</p>	<p>support development of their understandings, working theories and dispositions.</p> <p>Leaders and kaiako work together with children, parents and whānau to design, implement and evaluate a curriculum that is informed by current theories of teaching and learning.</p> <p>Leaders and kaiako can explain how the service’s curriculum is consistent with the principles and strands of <i>Te Whāriki</i>.              Leaders and kaiako can explain the rationale and process of reviewing and designing their curriculum which includes, for example, the history, protocols and legends of the local area.</p> <p>Leaders and kaiako demonstrate understanding that, for all children, assessment should promote holistic learning and development.              Kaiako practices demonstrate that care is understood to be an integral part of the curriculum, particularly for infants and toddlers.</p>	<p>Knowledge expertise &amp; sharing opinions</p> <p>Shared decision making</p> <p>Facilitating &amp; guiding</p> <p>Accountability &amp; organisation</p>
<p>2.3 Children’s learning is enhanced through leaders and kaiako engaging in professional learning and development opportunities that contribute to ongoing and sustained improvement and;</p>	<p>Leaders and kaiako:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- take personal responsibility for their own professional learning,</li> <li>- gather, analyse and use evidence of children’s learning and outcomes to improve individual and collective practice,</li> <li>- actively engage in critical reflection, problem solving and collaborative practice</li> <li>- subject their teaching practice to ongoing inquiry and evaluation.</li> </ul>	<p>Relational Leadership</p> <p>Creating the conditions for teamwork</p> <p>Engagement</p> <p>Knowledge expertise &amp; sharing opinions</p> <p>Shared decision making</p> <p>Facilitating &amp; guiding</p> <p>Accountability &amp; organisation</p>
<p>2.4 Children’s learning is enhanced through leaders and kaiako working as a</p>	<p>Leaders and kaiako have access to professional learning opportunities that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- integrate theory and practice</li> </ul>	<p>Creating the conditions for teamwork</p>

<p>professional learning community.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- engage and challenge their beliefs and practices</li> <li>- encourage them to individually and collectively take responsibility for their own professional learning and development, and deepen their understanding of the curriculum and pedagogical and assessment practices,</li> <li>- use evidence of children’s progress and learning as a basis for collective inquiry into the effectiveness of teaching practice,</li> <li>- develop professional knowledge and expertise using context-specific approaches informed by research,</li> <li>- include multiple contexts in which to learn and apply new knowledge and discuss with others.</li> </ul> <p>Leaders and kaiako inquire into aspects of their practice, asking themselves what works (practical insight) and why (theory); they make evidence-based changes to practice and evaluate the effectiveness and impact of this change.</p> <p>Leaders and kaiako seek opportunities to share their professional knowledge, expertise and practice with the wider professional community.</p>	<p>Engagement Knowledge expertise &amp; sharing opinions</p> <p>Shared decision making</p> <p>Facilitating &amp; guiding</p> <p>Accountability &amp; organisation</p>
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The identified leadership practices of relational leadership and knowledge expertise and sharing opinions support leaders and teachers to value the opportunity to build relationships and form connections with whānau. Through sensitively learning about the values and beliefs of whānau, they can then work collaboratively with them to support their child’s learning. While this study was not focused on this area, the findings may have particular relevance to working with Māori and Pacific families where cultural competence can play a key role in achieving educational success. Additionally, the collaborative and interdependent relationships that occur naturally as part of the structure of the working environments with an ECE service support positional leaders to identify teachers’ strengths and interests and use these to build their capability. Relational leadership is not constrained by the ideas of hierarchal structures of an organisation, but rather it occurs through the relational dynamics of the organisation (Uhl-Bien, 2006), allowing it to be viewed as relational, everyday practice.

**Study implications**

Participants in this case study identified a lack of guidance and support available for ECE leaders. Some participants commented on the scarcity of ECE specific research, with much of what is available relating to models of leadership situated outside of education that do not always sit well with ECE teachers. Participants’ perspectives on the challenges facing ECE leaders are reflective of considerations already debated in the existing literature (Cooper, 2019; Klevering & McNae, 2018; Krieg et al., 2014; Thornton, 2020), highlighting continuing issues that still need to be addressed. Perspectives on supporting the future of leaders and leadership have centred on appropriate and relevant professional learning

and development, in particular during initial teacher training programmes so that leaders would be better prepared (Klevering & McNae, 2018). This perspective is also supported by the research of Thornton (2010, 2020) who has highlighted a lack of support for leadership development in New Zealand ECE. In addition, Cooper (2014, 2019) has indicated that if teachers had access to professional knowledge on effective ECE leadership concepts, it would improve their ability to recognise and nurture leadership within their own and their teams' teaching practices. The findings of this research have also highlighted a tension with historical understandings of leadership, implying that future leadership development should include opportunities for teachers to build their leadership capacities through research into leadership history, theory and practice, a finding supported by Hard and Jónsdóttir (2013).

Within a New Zealand ECE context, there has been increasing attention on the status of leadership within ECE with the publication of the guiding documents referred to above. These documents reflect the importance and need for leadership to enable positive learning outcomes for children. It has been well documented that effective educational leadership produces positive effects on the learning outcomes for children and teachers (Leithwood et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2009). Appropriate investment is therefore required to enable the sector to achieve the vision of the Teaching Council's Leadership Strategy, whereby all teachers have the opportunity to develop their own leadership capability and achieve equity and excellence for all children (Education Council, 2018a).

*He Taonga te Tamiti: Every Child a Taonga: Early Learning Action Plan 2019-2029* (MOE, 2019) includes the intention to have a dedicated programme to grow the leadership capability of positional leaders, drawing on the work of the Teaching Council's Leadership strategy and framework (Education Council, 2018, 2018a). This has been the only indication of practical training and guidance offered towards the implementation of these frameworks for the New Zealand sector, with both Cooper (2019) and Thornton (2020) commenting that there needs to be a stronger acknowledgment of leadership and commitment to leadership development by the government, which raises the concern that these initiatives may not be utilised to their full potential. The impact of services being required to focus on leadership practice through the revised indicators of quality (ERO, 2020) is yet to be seen, and future ERO evaluation reports will be of interest to the sector.

## **Conclusion**

This article, based on a study exploring how educational leadership is practised through internal evaluation processes in New Zealand ECE services, highlights the complexity in the ways ECE teachers identify with leadership, restricted by a belief that leadership requires a formal title, with teachers often unaware of their own leadership practices. The research found that a supportive workplace culture can encourage and promote leadership, while a cycle of continuous improvement can promote quality teaching practices. Finally, seven effective leadership practices are identified: relational leadership; creating the conditions for teamwork; engagement; knowledge expertise and sharing opinions; shared decision making; facilitating and guiding; and accountability and organisation. This article contributes to our further understanding of educational leadership practices in New Zealand ECE services.

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