Early childhood teachers engaging with leadership narratives in policy: Coherence, contextualisation, and complexity

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Educational leadership resists a unifying definition, assumption, or theory. This complexity encourages us to learn about leadership to understand its core components, underlying assumptions, and relevance for context. In Aotearoa New Zealand, policy rhetoric promotes leadership as being enacted by teachers and positional leaders. This consideration for teachers is positive but problematic, as it requires them to consider leadership in ways beyond what they feel equipped or supported to achieve. Augmenting this concern is the limited professional learning support for leadership development, especially in early childhood, and the increasing responsibility for teachers to achieve policy aspirations. To understand the rhetoric used to emphasise this responsibility, we utilise qualitative document analysis to examine the leadership narratives promoted in the Teaching Council's Leadership Strategy and Capability Framework, from the perspectives of provisionally certificated teachers, teacher leaders, and positional leaders. Our argument suggests the leadership narratives promulgated by these texts are ambitious and raise issues of: coherence, contextualisation, and complexity. We discuss these issues in relation to support for teachers to critically engage with policy texts as important leadership learning.

Keywords: early childhood education, leadership, policy engagement, teachers

Introduction

In contrast to its historically low profile in early childhood education (ECE) (Thornton, 2019), the topic of educational leadership has been emphasised in recent years in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) as a lever for educational improvement. Consistent with recent international trends, the New Zealand government promotes high quality teaching and leadership as a national education and learning priority (Ministry of Education, 2020). The Education Review Office (ERO) highlights the critical role of leadership and related responsibilities in ensuring high quality ECE. One key responsibility for leaders is that they will facilitate "access to professional learning and development that builds capability" (Education Review Office, 2020, p. 32). Specific examples include leaders mentoring and coaching teachers to improve both teaching and leadership skills. While this policy document suggests that leaders are both capable and have access to leadership learning support, this may not be the case for all. Recent research points to the ongoing limited access to leadership learning in ECE (Egan-Marnell & Thornton, 2021). This indicates that a more concerted effort at the national level may be necessary to ensure equitable access to leadership learning support for all. Fortunately, there is a growing focus in NZ on policies that specifically address leadership practices of both teachers and leaders in education (Egan-Marnell & Thornton, 2021).

The promotion of leadership is endorsed by the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand – previously the Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand. The Council affirms the importance of leadership learning through *The leadership strategy for the teaching profession of Aotearoa New Zealand* (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018c), hereafter referred to as LS, and *Educational leadership capability framework* (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018a), hereafter referred to as CF. Foregrounding leadership in national policy texts, which are often used to persuade educational professionals through a particular rhetoric (Kay et al., 2021), raises the need for policy readers to be aware of the leadership narratives that are being promoted and that, essentially, reflect policy aspirations. Such narratives shape the leadership understandings, expectations, and practices of those who engage with them. This can be problematic if there is little research-based guidance to support policy readers, such as teachers and positional leaders, to engage with these narratives beyond a compliance lens. Based on our analysis of selected policy texts, we argue that sector-specific professional learning opportunities are needed to support ways teachers and positional leaders can reflect on and discuss policy rhetoric about leadership before shifts in practice to improve education are made.

We first review relevant literature to understand the complex landscape of leadership in ECE in NZ. Our literature review shows that while the leadership evidence base in ECE is evolving albeit limited, we also draw insights from the schooling evidence base. This reflects a need for practice-focused leadership research in ECE settings to strengthen the case for resourcing ECE-specific leadership development. We then explain our approach to document analysis, before presenting findings from our analysis of the LS and the CF. This analysis involved us exploring what leadership narratives are communicated through these texts for three groups in ECE: provisionally certificated teachers (PCTs), teacher leaders, and positional leaders. PCTs are newly qualified and registered ECE teachers who hold provisional practising certificates (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2023). We focus on PCTs who are NZ-educated and enter the profession with limited ECE work experience. Teacher leaders in this paper are qualified teachers with ECE experience and no designated leadership role, who work directly with children and other teachers to support children's learning. They enact leadership informally when they lead in teaching and learning. Positional leaders are individuals who have a designated leadership role in addition to a teaching role. They are expected to enact leadership in ways that foster positive outcomes for all children and the organisation. However, we argue that engaging with the leadership narratives emphasised in selected policy texts may be problematic for PCTs, teacher leaders, and positional leaders.

Leadership in ECE in New Zealand

The landscape of leadership includes the myriad of ways leadership is defined, described, and understood (Dugan, 2017). In ECE in NZ, leadership takes various forms across services, due to diverse governance structures, modes of operation, and ideologies. For example, Playcentre, a family cooperative service, has promoted emergent leadership since the 1940s (Manning et al., 2011). This approach involves parents leading the service for an agreed period and then stepping aside and mentoring other parents to step into this role. Kindergartens, a teacher-led service for children aged 2 to 5 years, are supported by a regional association that provides management and leadership support for the

positional leaders (Head Teachers), and support for the teachers of individual kindergartens. Education and care centres, another teacher-led service, typically cater for children aged 0 to 5 years and adopt a variety of leadership structures and hierarchies depending on the unique expectations of their owners, organisational leaders, and/or directors.

Despite the possibilities that can come from contextualising leadership to suit the service, community, or sector it serves (Heikka et al., 2012), leadership in ECE remains problematic because of several tensions. Examples include newly qualified teachers taking on leadership too soon because of their qualified status, the ongoing limited national support for teacher leadership development, minimal emphasis on the importance of teacher leadership and associated power dynamics; and the importance of teachers learning from good leaders and positive leadership experiences (Cooper, 2019; Gorst, 2021; Thornton, 2019). It may be that ongoing and contextualised sector-level support for leadership development, which has hardly been forthcoming up to this point due to limited government support compared to other parts of the sector (primary and secondary) (Thornton, 2019), may help to reconcile some of these tensions.

Leadership and ECE teachers

When teachers enact leadership, including nurturing positive relationships with colleagues, there can be positive outcomes for learners (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). However, understandings of and support for teacher leadership is an ongoing complexity. For example, reviews of the teacher leadership research spanning over three decades identified a range of complexities and possibilities related to understanding and enacting teacher leadership, albeit in schools and not ECE (Nguyen et al., 2020; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). One longstanding tension noted for many teachers was the mixed conceptions, titles, roles, definitions, and narratives of leadership potentially leading to misunderstandings about what leadership can look like or ways to enact it in practice (York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

Teachers in ECE can take up leadership roles and responsibilities as part of their everyday practice, for example, by leading areas of curriculum and pedagogy, organising daily routines, and supporting other teachers through role modelling and opportunities for professional learning. Cooper (2014) promoted the idea of "everyday teacher leadership," where teachers who feel empowered because of their positional leaders, can demonstrate their capacity to lead and develop a sense of their leaderful selves whether they hold a positional leadership role or not.

Some teachers, however, feel cautious about aligning their practice with leadership for several reasons. These include hesitancy to enact power over others possibly due to a limited view of leadership, inability to recognise their own acts of leadership, and uncertainty about the link between teaching and leadership (Cooper, 2020). It is vital that teachers accept themselves as potential leaders who can influence educational outcomes for learners (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2016). However, some teachers continue to associate leadership with formal titles only, leaving them uncertain about how the notion of leadership applies to their own practice (Egan-Marnell & Thornton, 2021). Therefore, it is equally important to acknowledge that teachers may feel hesitant about leadership as a policy or practice expectation, and to consider ways such hesitancies might be addressed.

Teachers benefit from positive experiences and opportunities to enact leadership so they can feel capable and confident about their leadership abilities. More emphasis on

the preparation and development of teachers as leaders, including with and from their colleagues, is needed (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Certain factors can positively influence teacher leadership, including support and encouragement from others, establishing relationships, and the influence of the positional leaders, organisational structure, and culture (Nguyen et al., 2020). Similarly, for teachers to develop their leadership practice, they need structures and conditions that enable them to have positive and rewarding leadership experiences (Wang & Ho, 2020).

Despite this knowledge about ways to support teacher leadership, and returning attention to leadership in current policy, there remains a need to focus on leadership learning in ECE, fundamentally because there has been little of this to date and because the quality of leadership affects the quality of learning outcomes for children and their ECE communities (Douglass, 2019; Thornton, 2019). One way to do this is to understand the leadership narratives being presented to teachers with and without leadership titles through relevant policy texts, and to consider the support teachers need to critically engage with these narratives.

Leadership learning in ECE

Leadership learning in ECE in NZ had been an ambiguous feature of educational policy until the 10-year strategic plan *Ngā Huarahi Arataki (2002-2012)* (Ministry of Education, 2002). This Plan outlined the then government's commitment to the provision of leadership learning programmes to improve the quality of ECE services. While aspects of the Plan were progressed, the Plan was abandoned before it reached full term and, importantly, before national support for leadership learning was able to be actioned for ECE (Thornton, 2019). After this abandonment, Thornton et al. (2009) highlighted the problematic situation of leadership in the sector, lamenting the lack of policymakers' attention on leadership learning while highlighting the complex nature of leadership in a sector characterised by diversity. A decade later, the 10-year *Early Learning Action Plan* 2019-2029 (Ministry of Education, 2019) has put leadership learning back on the national policy agenda by arguing for "Quality teaching and leadership" (p. 6) as one of three main objectives for education, alongside the commitment to "grow the leadership capability of teachers, Kaiako, and educators in leadership roles" (p. 26).

This promising agenda was reiterated in the Teaching Council's development of two statements – the LS (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018c) and the CF (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018a), which respond to the under investment in leadership learning in the NZ ECE sector. However, despite educational leadership being affirmed in these policy statements, we remain unclear about how positional leaders *and* teachers are supported with sector-specific professional learning opportunities to understand the leadership narratives that are intended to be used to shift practice and improve education.

Leadership in policy

Educational policy about leadership is receiving current international attention (Kay et al., 2021). The LS and the CF, which are aimed at strengthening the enactment of leadership to improve the quality of educational provision in NZ, are recent examples of this. These leadership initiatives reflect the Teaching Council's self-described role as "broker, enabler, connector and partner" (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2017a, p. 2), bringing people and ideas together in a "currently fragmented" (p. 2) education system to

shift practice and improve learning. While this agenda is explicitly expressed, it conveys messages that may not be immediately obvious to policy readers, such as the responsibility that is implicitly placed on teachers to lead significant change in their settings. Implicating teachers in this way reflects the issue of teachers undertaking responsibility for realising policy aims and aspirations (Kay et al., 2021). Kay et al. suggest a need to understand how policy texts convey certain ideas about problems and solutions by paying attention to how the language can be persuasive, or even derisive at times. In this vein, we emphasise the need for positional leaders *and* teachers to critically engage with how these policy texts "touch down at local levels" (p. 180) before they are "persuaded of a particular course of action" (p. 184) to shift practice in their educational settings.

ECE teachers in NZ are exposed to a range of narratives about leadership in different policy texts. For example, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017)*,* the early childhood curriculum, acknowledges that both kaiako/teachers and "educational leaders" need to take on leadership responsibilities. In *Tapasā* (Ministry of Education, 2018), the cultural competencies framework for teachers of Pacific learners, "leaders" are offered a set of competencies, which differ from those for teachers, to support Pacific children in educational settings. *Te Ara Poutama,* the quality indicators for ECE centres and kindergartens, expects leaders to enact leadership by fostering collaboration and improvement to contribute to high quality ECE (Education Review Office, 2020). Altogether, these varied messages give shape to the narratives of leadership that may inform or confuse teachers about who can be leaders, what part they may play in leadership, and what they may be expected to do.

Developed in consultation with the profession, the Teaching Council's LS (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018c) provides a set of leadership principles and capabilities for the profession, hence it is more comprehensive than the policy texts just mentioned. The ambitious aim of the LS is to support the leadership understandings and development of registered teachers in positional or non-positional leadership roles to achieve equitable educational outcomes, inclusion, and equity for all learners in NZ. The strategy outlines core educational leadership capabilities that are elaborated on in the accompanying CF, which "gives life to the Leadership Strategy" (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018a, p. 3). Given their focus on teachers, positional leaders, and leadership learning in education in NZ, these two policy texts are central to our analysis.

In conclusion, leadership in ECE is a complex concept, phenomenon, and practice, and is subject to many tensions that teachers need to understand leadership in practice. Nonetheless, this complexity creates opportunities for teachers to enact leadership differently to suit their situations and settings. They may, however, need support to understand the varied messages, which can create issues in coherence about leadership expressed in policy texts. Although the policy emphasis on leadership reflects the increasing focus on improving educational quality internationally, the expectation for teachers to enact leadership against the backdrop of varied messages about leadership highlights an issue for teachers and positional leaders in NZ. Specifically, the LS and the CF raise leadership expectations for all registered teachers. However, teachers do not develop as leaders by themselves; their leadership learning is shaped by experience, professional learning, leadership opportunities, support from positional leaders, colleagues, and organisational structures and cultures. In this paper, we address the question: What leadership narratives are presented in the LS and the CF that ECE PCTs,

teacher leaders, and positional leaders are expected to engage with and make sense of for practice?

Document analysis

Our qualitative research method was inspired by Bowen's (2009) approach to document analysis. Document analysis provided us with a systematic procedure to review documents that impact practice for meaning and understanding (Bowen, 2009), including from different perspectives. Bowen's process of finding, selecting, making sense of, and synthesising data guided our approach to understanding the contents of educational policy documents. After careful consideration of the range of policy documents relevant to ECE teachers' work in NZ, we decided on the Teaching Council's LS (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018c) and CF (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018a) because, currently, these are the most relevant policy texts that inform understandings and expectations of leadership for the teaching profession, including ECE. This selection enabled us to gain insights into how teachers and positional leaders are positioned and represented in the rhetoric around leadership. We corroborated our analysis with a review of associated policy texts and relevant literature.

We engaged in document analysis as a collaborative process, not to achieve agreement but to enrich the meanings of our data. This first step involved each of us browsing both policy texts for an overall feel of their contents. We then independently read, reviewed, and paid close attention to language, excerpts, and entire passages. We approached this work with three groups in mind: PCTs (Alice), teacher leaders (Louise), and positional leaders (Maria) in ECE, as each group is expected to show leadership as part of their professional registration/certification as a teacher (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2017b), but likely need support and guidance to do this well. We then came together to share and discuss our initial analyses in relation to each group. We refined and deepened the analysis by identifying three themes. Consequently, our collaborative analysis enabled us to explore features that shape the narratives of leadership that are presented in these policy texts for these groups. It also helped us to identify key issues – coherence, contextualisation, and complexity – that may complicate how teachers understand and enact leadership in practice.

Findings

Our analysis of the LS and the CF shows that while their contents are informed by a range of NZ-based leadership literature, which is positive, most sources are school-based and very few sources derive from an ECE context. This imbalance mirrors what we found when reviewing the literature. It reflects the evolving ECE research base, but also suggests a general under-regard for leadership and leadership learning in the sector to date. We now present our findings from the perspective of each group, organised around three themes: definitions and descriptions of educational leadership, visibility and positioning, and leadership expectations.

Definitions and descriptions of educational leadership

Leadership is defined and described in the LS and CF in similar ways; leadership is inclusive of everyone in the educational organisation who makes a positive difference to children's learning. Instead of only being tied to a designated title, leadership is also described as encompassing practices like collaboration, problem-solving and continuous learning.

Further, leadership is referred to in other ways: as a role, responsibility, interaction, system, journey, and capability. Reflective of the NZ context, the LS also recognises leadership as culturally distinctive. For example, in some educational settings, leadership may be based on Māori Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing, or reflect elements based on the diverse multicultural community of Aotearoa (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018c). This multi-dimensional nature encourages and enables teachers and positional leaders to enact leadership in various ways, although this nature reiterates its complexity.

From the perspective of PCTs, while the definition appears to be inclusive of everyone who enacts leadership, including PCTs as registered teachers, the narratives about leadership presented in the LS and CF do not make explicit reference to this group. Also, there is little mention in any description of leadership of the support PCTs might need, which is surprising given PCTs are assumed to be in a mentoring relationship as part of their induction into the profession (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2023). On the one hand, the multi-dimensional nature of leadership encourages PCTs to engage in various leadership practices and avenues to develop their leadership. However, there are also multiple leadership-related terms and concepts, such as educational leadership, leadership of curriculum or initiative, and middle leaders, for PCTs to grapple with given they are new to the profession.

In contrast, teacher leaders are included and acknowledged in both the LS and the CF and the inclusive definition, although not consistently. Both texts refer to teacher leaders in several ways. For example, teacher leaders can be included in the references to "teaching professionals" (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018c, p. 12), "expert teachers and those who take responsibility for a particular initiative" (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018a, p. 4), and "expert teachers" (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018c, p. 13). The named groups of leaders (referred to as "different spheres") that teacher leaders may not identify so much with are "team and middle leaders; and those who lead organisations" (p. 13).

For positional leaders, the description of leadership as embedded in practice in both texts is a move away from viewing leadership as a position only. Therefore, the focus on all registered teachers alongside the many references to positional leaders in both texts reiterate the view of leadership as being enacted by positional leaders *and* teachers. The LS also assigns positional leaders the responsibility of creating a positive team culture for "building and sustaining thriving teams and institutions that support ongoing professional learning" (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018c, p. 9). Hence, the definitions and descriptions of leadership in the LS and CF seem pertinent to positional leaders.

In summary, the definitions and descriptions of educational leadership in both policy texts appear to be highly relevant to positional leaders, somewhat relevant to teacher leaders although not consistently, and potentially relevant to PCTs, but at a surface level. This variability is important to identify given the overall aim of these policy texts to apply to all registered teachers.

Visibility and positioning
Visibility and positioning refer to how individuals might see themselves and feel a sense of belonging, or not, in these policy texts. From the perspective of PCTs, despite the inclusion of "all registered teachers" (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018c, p. 3), PCTs or even "new teachers" are not explicitly referenced in the LS and CF. This

omission minimises their visibility and positioning, potentially compromising their ability to feel a sense of belonging in relation to them. This might be understandable since leadership is not one of the six standards in *Our Code, Our Standards* (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2017b), another policy document which sets out the ethical responsibilities and teaching expectations of all registered/certificated teachers in education in NZ. Rather, the expectation of "showing leadership" (p. 18) is a brief part of the elaboration of the "Professional Relationships" standard, which teachers are encouraged but not expected to evidence for the purposes of appraisal against the standards. Another possible reason for PCTs' minimal visibility and positioning in the LS and CF may be traced back to the original development process of these policy texts. It remains unclear if any consultation occurred with PCTs since many individual responses included in the consultation summary report (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018b) were noted as coming from teachers, and leaders with designated titles, largely with 10 or more years of experience in education.

Conversely, there is some visibility and positioning of teacher leaders in the LS and CF, however, there is a clearer emphasis on the roles and responsibilities of positional leaders. Teacher leaders are visible, for example, as part of a collective of teachers and positional leaders responsible for leadership in their settings (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018c). For example, the LS outlines that the "leadership capabilities will enable a common language and shared understanding of leadership" across all three spheres of leaders (p. 13). Teacher leaders are also included in the LS objectives for "personalised professional learning" where all spheres of leaders, including teachers, are required to have "equitable access to leadership development" (p. 13). Despite these inclusions, teacher leaders are only implicitly referred to in the nine educational leadership capabilities of the CF, for example, in the statement: "effective learning happens when teachers responsible for it work together to share their knowledge and inquire into their practice" (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018a, p. 5).

There are also examples of responsibilities that go beyond the realm of the teacher leader's role and instead are more likely to be expected of the positional leader's role. For example, there is recognition upfront in the LS that it is a guiding framework to support leadership learning of those in "positional and non-positional leadership roles" (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018c, p. 4), thereby affirming the place of positional leaders. Moreover, positional leaders seem central to the successful implementation of the LS given the nature of the responsibilities outlined, which in many situations only those with appropriate authority might undertake. These responsibilities include: "promoting and enabling leadership learning opportunities" (p. 15), "Develop[ing] an implementation plan for professional learning" (p. 15), and "tak[ing] responsibility for building leadership capacity in their respective settings, in terms of both depth and breadth" (p. 17).

What is also problematic is that the term "leaders" is used in many places in both the LS and CF, without clarity as to who or which roles this refers to. At times, it seems to suggest those in positional roles, and at other times, it suggests anyone who sees themselves as a leader. One term, however, that gives prominence to positional leaders in ECE is "early childhood professional leaders" (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018c, pp. 15, 17).

In summary, PCTs seem to have minimal visibility and positioning in the policy texts. Teacher leaders are implicitly rather than explicitly implicated in a range of phrases

regarding leadership responsibilities, while positional leaders are strongly and explicitly affirmed as leaders with clear leadership responsibilities.

Leadership expectations
Leadership expectations are expressed as nine leadership capabilities introduced in the LS and detailed in the CF. These capabilities target different leader groups, that is, those who lead organisations, those who lead teams, and expert teachers or leaders of curriculum/initiatives (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018a), albeit in varying degrees. The capabilities themselves are broad and aspirational. Therefore, they provide direction for leadership learning and growth. Their interrelated nature means they are not easy to pull apart without consideration for the other ones.

As registered teachers, PCTs are encouraged to develop these capabilities. PCTs may be able to demonstrate some of them, but we propose more in relation to self-development than influencing others, for example, it is possible a PCT "seeks and uses feedback for continued personal growth" (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018a, p. 10). However, it may be too much to expect PCTs to also be "contributing to the development and wellbeing of education beyond their organisation" (p. 10). Even so, both the LS and CF fail to acknowledge the newness of PCTs, who often need support to develop their professional capabilities, including leadership capabilities, in practice.

In relation to teacher leaders, both documents provide examples of leadership expectations, such as having a shared understanding of leadership and taking up curriculum responsibilities and initiatives. However, the lack of specificity about who enacts leadership and how, means it is left to the interpretation of teachers and positional leaders. This leaves these leadership narratives open to discussion and debate about what is meaningful for each setting. In our view then, the capabilities that seem the most applicable to teacher leaders seem to be those that relate to a focus on their own practice and working with others, but not necessarily on how the organisation does overall, for example, "building and sustaining high trust relationships" (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018a, p. 5), "ensuring culturally responsive practice and understanding" (p. 5), "building and sustaining collective leadership and professional community" (p. 5), and "attending to their own learning as leaders, and their own well-being" (p. 6). The capabilities that may not be as relevant to teacher leaders are those mentioned in relation to positional leaders in the previous section (e.g., "tak[ing] responsibility for building leadership capacity in their respective settings, in terms of both depth and breadth" (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018c, p. 17), and also those emphasised shortly, because they likely require a certain level of authority that comes from having a positional leadership role that involves certain duties beyond the role of teacher.

With regard to positional leaders, while the message in the CF is that the capabilities apply to all teachers who enact leadership, even if they look different for the "three different spheres" (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018a, p. 4), the capabilities of "Strategically thinking and planning" (p. 6), "Evaluating practices in relation to outcomes" (p. 6), "Adept management of resources to achieve visions and goals" (p. 6), and "Contributing to the development and wellbeing of education beyond the organisation" (p. 7) seem more appropriate for positional leaders to initiate, given the assumed capacity, designated authority, and access to resourcing often associated with a designated role.

These leadership narratives that are conveyed in the documents may not be clear and coherent to every group. This is because each group has varied experiences and understandings of leadership. For example, it is assumed that established positional leaders may have more contextual knowledge of leadership than PCTs. Such a situation can lead to complexity in relation to how each group develops their leadership over time. It seems then that this matter of who can and should be expected to engage with each capability requires robust dialogue in teaching teams and reflection on what is best and possible given each setting.

In summary, the expectations of educational leadership are expressed in the LS and CF as nine capabilities. These capabilities are applicable to all three leader groups, but in varying ways and degrees. PCTs, for example, are unlikely to have the capacity to develop leadership capabilities that influence the organisation and beyond. Rather, this expectation is more likely to be the domain of positional leaders. The sense of authority or power that often comes with a designated leadership role and years of teaching experience and opportunity may influence how this decision plays out, although there is also no acknowledgement of power dynamics in the LS or CF.

Discussion

As mentioned earlier, the LS and CF were developed to support the leadership learning of a number of teacher and leader groups in a wide range of educational settings. Our main finding is that while this purpose signals both the LS and CF have applicability to many groups, which we view as a strength, the leadership narratives overall may not be clear to everyone, creating confusion for them in their settings at a touchdown level. This main finding gives rise to three issues: coherence, contextualisation, and complexity. We discuss these issues from the perspectives of PCTs, teacher leaders, and positional leaders.

Coherence

The plethora of terms used to define and describe leadership and associated expectations is no surprise. The same situation is acknowledged in the international leadership literature, reflecting the wide interest in leadership for quality educational provision (Douglass, 2019). What is problematic though is that having so many terms risks aligning everything with leadership and, in turn, these terms not actually adding anything meaningful (Dugan, 2017). It may be that the goal to incorporate as many perspectives of leadership roles and understandings as possible, which the consultation document demonstrates was the case (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018b), has generated narratives that represent so many ideas about leadership that they potentially lack definitional clarity and meaning (Douglass, 2019; Dugan, 2017), rendering them incoherent in part.

This situation is problematic. On the one hand, if leadership means different things to different people, some argue it is important to define it clearly (Douglass, 2019). On the other hand, by refraining from limiting leadership to one definition or description, as the LS and CF seem to do, this can invoke reflection from different groups about what leadership means in relation to their everyday realities (Dugan, 2017). Hence, we acknowledge that while the leadership narratives communicated by the policy texts include aspects that are incoherent, perhaps this leaves the necessary space for teachers and positional leaders to discuss, make sense of, and contextualise the leadership expectations and responsibilities in relation to their unique situations and settings.

Contextualisation

The ambitious intent of the LS and CF to be inclusive of all gives rise to another issue, that of contextualisation. Having a one-document-for-all approach to developing leadership across the profession seems to undervalue the unique approaches to leadership undertaken by diverse ECE settings in NZ. Moreover, leadership in ECE is influenced by a range of factors, including national cultures and policies, colleagues, and children (Kahila et al., 2020). Although the LS encourages interpretation for leadership roles and responsibilities "for different settings, contexts and spheres of influence" (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018c, p. 12), it does not explicitly mention the diverse nature and cultural communities of ECE services that influence leadership enactment and understandings. Related to this, there is a lack of ECE-specific leadership literature informing the understandings of leadership presented in the LS (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018c), which might also explain why terms used in the documents, such as expert teachers and middle leaders, are more commonly used in the school sector than ECE. This reiterates the value of engaging with policy texts and contextualisation to align with ECE leadership language, for example, team leader and pedagogical leader. These matters of contextualisation raise the question about how the LS and CF 'speak' to ECE, which might be considered in a revised version of these texts in the future to support leadership understandings and enactment at a touchdown level.

Despite these issues, opportunities for policy learning are still possible. For example, positional leaders can encourage teachers to unpack the policy texts with them and create opportunities for teachers to share their learning and understandings with colleagues, such as in staff meetings or during internal evaluation processes. Positional leaders and teachers engaging with leadership policies in these ways reflects leadership as a collaborative and distributed practice (Kahila et al., 2020) as all teachers are involved in centre-wide discussions for the purpose of improving the quality of education, while positional leaders demonstrate the capability of "building and sustaining collective leadership and professional community" (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018a, p. 9).

This idea of collectively learning about leadership in policy texts concurs with the ECE literature, which suggests that teachers need purposeful opportunities to engage in discussions to learn about leadership as "a collaborative, inclusive and everyday practice" (Cooper, 2020, p. 18). However, in-house learning that is initiated by individual settings may be helpful, but it is not enough. Teachers should also have access to sector-specific professional learning and development opportunities (Cooper, 2019; Thornton, 2019; Thornton et al., 2009) to support them in unpacking the complexity of leadership in policy and contextualising the associated narratives in relation to their practice and unique setting. While it is promising that the LS acknowledges the under-served nature of leadership learning in ECE, it does not seek to resolve this issue with the provision of targeted support for ECE.

Complexity

Grappling with leadership knowledge and practice amid issues of coherence and contextualisation identifies an array of complexities within the narratives conveyed by the LS and CF. First, power and dominance are problematic in leadership as they can create tensions for peer relationships. Second, the complex situation for PCTs to be leaders is

overlooked, and their inclusion in these leadership-related policy texts requires recognition of their newness to the profession. Moreover, the formalised leadership expectations and capabilities of teachers and positional leaders demand robust discussion and reflection to unravel the capabilities and determine what is meaningful to/for them.

Understanding power and dominance is important. Notions of leadership that endorse hierarchical structures and assign leaders a position of privilege and dominance, present an unproblematic image of leadership. This is because their starting point is the superior power of the leader, which gives leaders a voice while silencing the voice of 'followers' (Gordon, 2011). More recent notions of leadership, including distributed leadership and a practice view of leadership, help to problematise this power by decentring leadership and associated responsibilities from the individual and redistributing these to multiple individuals with capacity and capability (Cooper, 2020).

The intent of the LS and CF to redistribute power to teachers and leaders in positional *and* non-positional roles aligns with this shift. However, there is no explicit reference to power in either text, nor any acknowledgement that redistributing power amongst positional leaders and teachers may be problematic in some settings. There is also no attempt to encourage reflection on the dynamics of power, through themes such as power-through or power-with instead of power-over (Gordon, 2011). While power can be used to create positive change in education, disregarding the dynamics of power within leadership overlooks an important complexity that risks leader-follower dualisms becoming a taken-for-granted reality (Gordon, 2011). This risk may obstruct the opportunity for leadership and leadership learning to be "accessible to everyone" (Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018a, p. 3) in reality.

Power dynamics in peer relationships also need to be identified and addressed before relational trust can be established for enacting leadership (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). When leadership is distributed among teachers, issues of power may arise. Teachers have powerful influences on each other and can constrain or restrict others' enactment of leadership through psychological harassment or "horizontal violence" (Hard, 2006). For example, a teacher with a designated leadership role may be perceived as having power-over their teacher peers, and in turn, may feel pressured to conform to what the group wants. This risks a teacher feeling marginalised when they are identified as a leader in a setting where power is used to treat others in derisive ways. Hence, identifying and addressing power dynamics is critical to minimise these risky situations.

Another complexity concerns the minimal visibility, positioning, and unclear expectations for PCTs as leaders. This situation may not be surprising, given that PCTs have only just entered the profession and are busy adapting to the role, making sense of what it means to be a teacher in a real-life setting, and putting learned theories into action (Aitken, 2006). It is assumed that ECE services that employ PCTs will recognise their newness and cultivate conditions and guided opportunities to foster their leadership potential. In addition to PCTs, some teacher leaders are still developing their leader identity and require support from their positional leaders and colleagues to develop their leaderful selves (Cooper, 2020). These different points on a continuum of leadership learning are not explicitly referred to in either text, yet they influence how a teacher understands leadership, develops confidence as a leader, and embraces a leader identity.

Finally, the LS and CF do not prescribe how the leadership capabilities will be taken up and developed, rather they remain open to interpretation, creating opportunities for local touchdown for PCTs, teacher leaders, and positional leaders. This characteristic

enables PCTs in particular to start by engaging with those capabilities that resonate the most with their teaching responsibilities, and with support and guidance to do this well (Cooper, 2020). As PCTs become more experienced and are given opportunities to lead informally by their more experienced peers, they may develop additional capabilities, contributing to enhancing their confidence that influences the level of leadership enactment (Jia, 2022). PCTs may then go beyond their role to support the practice of others, as teacher leaders might. More obvious to us though, it is positional leaders who are likely to have the capacity and capability to discuss and develop a wider range of these leadership capabilities, as well as go beyond them, due to the assumed authority and responsibility they have for themselves, others, and the organisation.

Limitations

Our qualitative analysis of two policy texts that impact educational leadership practice in NZ was a meaning-generating exercise, with some limitations. The insights we presented were our interpretations of the document data based on our decision-making processes and subjective lenses. Others reading the same material are likely to come up with alternative insights due to their unique perspectives. We also appreciate that what we read informs our perspective and call to provoke further discussion and debate, and alternative analyses.

Conclusion and implications

Altogether, our analysis identifies leadership narratives comprising varied messages and ideas about leadership that speak to PCTs, teacher leaders, and positional leaders in different ways. PCTs appear to be the most under-regarded group out of the three in relation to visibility and positioning in the LS and CF. ECE as a sector is included, but its diversity is overlooked as an important consideration for leadership development. Further, there is no explicit recognition of leadership as a complex concept, phenomenon, and practice. This omission may potentially encourage superficial engagement with the nine capabilities unless there is sector-specific support provided for the unpacking and contextualising of the strategy and capabilities, consideration for the power dynamics within leadership, and an acknowledgement of where individuals are at in their unique leadership journeys.

Understanding leadership is more about engaging with leadership knowledge with agency and becoming a critical learner than acquiring terminology (Dugan, 2017). Therefore, at the practice level, our analysis encourages the idea that PCTs, teacher leaders, and positional leaders may collectively engage with policy texts such as these to discuss translation of ideas for practice, with careful consideration for coherence, contextualisation, and complexity. Reflective dialogue and a constructive lens can assist teachers and positional leaders to engage with policy texts that are meaningful for their settings. Then, at a national level, we argue the need for sector-specific professional learning support to ensure that the leadership narratives conveyed by these policy texts 'reach' all their intended readers and are contextualised for practice in appropriate ways. Finally, it is our view that these policy texts demand a careful, critical read to determine what exactly is being asked of all those who aspire to enact leadership. In order to enact leadership effectively, we propose to start with policy learning with an awareness that policy texts generate particular narratives that, in turn, generate particular practices.

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