Courage, Commitment and Collaboration: Notions of leadership in the NZ ECE Centres of Innovation

Kate Thornton, Victoria University of Wellington

This paper is based on a research study that explored notions of leadership in the New Zealand early childhood education (ECE) Centres of Innovation (COI) programme. The paper will begin by outlining the context in which this study was carried out with particular reference to the lack of recognition of the importance of leadership in the ECE sector and the significance of the Early Childhood Strategic Plan for future leadership development. The research study and findings will be described before a model and definition of leadership based around the concepts of courage, commitment and collaboration are suggested, and implications for future leadership development discussed.

Setting the scene

Leadership within the ECE sector has in the past been virtually ignored in Government policy and also to a large extent within the sector, with a scarcity of resources and research (McLeod, 2002), and little recognition of its importance. A literature review carried out as part of this research depicted a sector in which there was a lack of clarity as to what leadership actually meant or looked like. Studies have identified a lack of awareness and a level of discomfort with leadership roles amongst those in leadership positions in ECE settings (Geoghegan, Petriwskyj, Bower & Geoghegan, 2003). Scrivens (2002, p.52) has commented "there is still confusion in the minds of leaders, particularly at centre level, about how they should construct leadership". According to Rodd (1998, p.1), where leadership is recognised at a personal level, it does not appear to have been translated into "aspirations for more general or professional leadership which could advance the professionalism of the early childhood field and achieve much needed advances in community credibility and status".

The low profile of leadership in the ECE sector may be attributed to a number of factors including a lack of identification with commonly accepted notions of leadership and a lack of support for leadership development. Cox (as cited in Rodd, 1998, p.7) has suggested that the development of leadership in early childhood may have been impeded because of "the antithesis many women appear to have towards roles and responsibilities that involve power". The view that leadership is about a single person and that leaders are concerned with competitive and product-oriented organisations obviously does not fit the early childhood sector, which has a non-hierarchical structure and is dominated by women (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003). The lack of understanding and consensus on what leadership involves has been attributed to the "complexity of the field and the wide variety of programme types" (Schomberg, 1999, p.251). Rodd (2001, p.10) has argued that "leadership is a contextual phenomenon, that is, it means different things to different people in different contexts". Scrivens (2003), drawing on Southworth's (2002) work,

agrees. She has contended that "there is not just one way to be a leader" and that "leadership will vary from culture to culture and situation to situation" (p.30).

Different models of leadership both in the early childhood sector and beyond were considered as part of this study in an attempt to explain and analyse what is involved in effective leadership in ECE. Some models appeared to emphasise the differences between leadership in the ECE sector and in the school sector or corporate world. Several authors (Henderson-Kelly & Pamphilon, 2000; Kagan & Hallmark, 2001; Morgan, 1997) have suggested that the non-hierarchical structure and collaborative nature of ECE services contrasted with other leadership contexts. More recent literature from outside the sector (Hargreaves and Fink, 2003; Harris, 2003; Lambert, 2003), promoting frameworks more in line with the collaborative leadership approaches favoured in the ECE sector, appears to minimise the differences. There seems to be general agreement in the literature that identification with leadership is related to how it is defined. As Hard (2004, p.127) has suggested, "if leadership were to be considered in terms of more democratic and collaborative models, then ECEC (early childhood education and care) personnel will be more positive about adopting leadership activities".

The low profile of leadership in ECE may also be partly attributed to a lack of support for leadership training and professional development (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003). Initial teacher training is aimed at developing capable and competent teachers and although there are many similarities between good teaching and good leading, there is general agreement that those in leadership roles need to be further supported through the provision of appropriate training and professional development opportunities (Bloom & Bella, 2005; Geoghegan et al., 2003; Hard, 2004; Henderson-Kelly & Pamphilon, 2000; Rodd, 2001; Schomberg, 1999; Scrivens, 2004; Smith, 2005). Possible directions for leadership development will be discussed later in this paper.

Significance of the Strategic Plan
The ECE Strategic Plan, *Pathways to the Future: Ngä Huarahi Arataki* (Ministry of Education, 2002), was launched by the Minister of Education in September 2002. In the foreword to the document, the Minister stated "if we are to build a strong future for this country, I believe we must firmly establish early childhood education at the cornerstone of our education system" (p.1). The plan set out how the Government's vision of "lifting the educational achievement of all New Zealand children" (p.2) would be met through three key goals: increasing participation, improving quality and promoting collaborative relationships. Within the goal of improving quality, two actions of significance to this research study were signalled. These were the establishment of six COI for a three-year term and the provision of leadership development programmes to strengthen leadership in ECE services. Up until the release of *Pathways to the Future*, the ECE strategic plan (Ministry of Education, 2002), there was no mention of professional leadership in any of the Government's official documents (Scrivens, 2002), and no policy for supporting leadership development.

The provision of leadership development programmes are signalled at step four in the strategic plan, though at this time there is no detail on what these programmes may look

like. Some leadership training and education opportunities do already exist including post-graduate diplomas or degrees in education, professional development courses, and teachers' refresher courses. However leadership training and development has had to compete for scarce financial resources alongside other professional development areas and has not been seen as a priority.

This lack of recognition of leadership in ECE can be contrasted with the support for leadership training and education provided for the school sector. In a recent speech to the Principals' Federation the Secretary of Education stated that "supporting school principals' professional leadership is an important key to raising student achievement" (Ministry of Education, 2005). Policy initiatives announced in the 2001 budget allocated $19 million over a four-year period to develop leadership and management capabilities amongst principals (Ministry of Education, 2001). The Government initiatives included an induction programme for first time principals, a development centre programme for more experienced principals, an electronic principals' network and a guiding framework for professional development. Specific positions exist in the Ministry of Education relating to leadership in schools. At present there is no equivalent support for leadership in the ECE sector. It can be argued that effective leadership in the sector is necessary for the implementation of the whole strategic plan as many of the other strategies, for example promoting collaborative relationships, require leadership.

Centres of Innovation (COI)
The establishment of six COI was signalled at step two of the strategic plan and was intended to "to help improve quality in early childhood education services by demonstrating competent practice and innovation in early childhood education, and by reflecting – in public – on quality practices in action research" (Meade, 2003a, p.1). Licensed and chartered early childhood centres that met certain criteria laid down by the Ministry of Education were invited to apply to become COI for a three year period in late 2002. The chosen centres were funded and supported to develop and document innovative learning processes and to work alongside research associates to find out what children gain from these learning processes. Dissemination of research findings was also required (Ministry of Education, 2002).

According to Anne Meade, the programme coordinator for the first round of COI, the centre responsibilities signalled a leadership role. She has suggested "COIs provide case studies of educative leadership through the curriculum they offer, through their articulation of innovation and willingness to research it, and by demonstrating an ethic of care for colleagues in the sector at large" (Meade, 2003b, p.3).

The research study
The six inaugural COI selected represented a variety of different services. Of these services, three, a state kindergarten, a playcentre and a community-based education and care (childcare) centre chose to participate in the present research. A collective case study approach was chosen for this qualitative research which was carried out in 2004. The methodology involved analysis of primary documents including centre expressions of interest and research proposals, focus group interviews with members of the participating

COI, and an interview with Anne Meade, the national COI programme coordinator. The overall research question was: **How is leadership defined and enacted in the Centres of Innovation?**

Participants in the focus groups were asked about:
- their understandings of the term *leadership*;
- the leadership roles that existed in each COI and how these were shared;
- new leadership opportunities that had arisen from participation in the COI programme; and
- preparation and support that existed for these leadership roles.

Research findings

Leadership structures and understandings varied across the three COI in this study. The childcare centre case study revealed a group of committed teachers following a shared vision. The centre had undergone a transformation from a fairly isolated centre unwilling to engage with the outside world to one sharing their innovative practices with local, national and international audiences. As part of their journey, the teachers had completely changed the way the centre programme was planned, delivered and assessed. This transformation required courage and leadership, not only from the designated leader but from the whole team. This COI, with a staff of ten, had the most hierarchical leadership structure amongst the study centres, however, there was a strong commitment to team work and all teachers were encouraged to take on leadership roles.

Although there were designated leadership roles in the parent cooperative playcentre setting, leadership was distributed among centre members with people taking on different responsibilities according to their strengths and interests. Emergent leadership, a principle that encourages regular turnover in leadership positions to allow newer people to gain leadership experience, is a unique aspect of playcentre philosophy (Goldschmidt, 1998), and was a strong feature of the organisational culture of this playcentre. People in leadership roles felt supported by other centre members and there was a strong sense of community and shared responsibility.

The kindergarten, with a teaching team of three, offered a case study of leadership with an outward focus. Teachers at the kindergarten viewed leadership as being about 'making others aware of the possibilities' and agreed that the kindergarten as a whole was providing leadership through their work with the local Samoan Community and the other kindergartens in the local kindergarten association. The teachers were, however, reluctant to personally identify themselves as leaders and had felt uncomfortable being described as such.

All three centres experienced similar leadership opportunities arising from participation in the COI programme. These included giving presentations, writing articles, welcoming visitors and generally articulating and sharing their innovation with external audiences. There was general agreement that educators had received little formal preparation for these leadership roles. Several of the key personnel had previous post-graduate study or workplace experiences that they believed had been helpful.

Discussion

Despite contextual differences between the COI in this study, strong similarities in the ways in which leadership was enacted emerged from this research. Courage, commitment and collaboration were three key notions to emerge from this study. Courage was required in order to introduce and embed an innovation and to open the centres up to the scrutiny of others. Teachers in the kindergarten described leadership as being about taking risks and rising to the challenge. Meade agreed when she describes COI as doing "some things that really have pushed them out of their own comfort zones and yet they've done it" (Meade Interview, (MI), 2004). Public speaking also took courage and was described as nerve wracking by several educators.

A strong commitment to their visions, values and beliefs was demonstrated by all the COI in the study. This commitment, which took various forms, involved doing what was best for the children attending the centres and their families. The visions articulated by each of the COI were developed and shared by all educators. According to Lambert (2003, p.6) realising a shared vision or purpose is an energizing experience for participants, and a shared vision is the unifying force for participants working collaboratively". Leadership in the COI studied for this research was collaborative with leadership roles and responsibilities being shared between team members. This collaborative style of leadership was part of the culture of each centre and resulted from the willingness of the designated leader to encourage and support the leadership experiences of others. Waniganayake, Morda & Kapsalakis (2000, p.18) suggest that this style of leadership "offers increased vitality and strength to the whole organisation". Although individuals took defined leadership roles at certain times, decisions were made jointly and everyone was encouraged to participate in leadership opportunities. Collaborative leadership is also supported by Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2003, p.35) who promote a "participatory and decentralized approach to leadership" in which people can lead in their areas of expertise.

The concept of teacher leadership (Harris, 2003; Lambert, 2003) fits well with notions of leadership in the COI. Harris (p.46) suggests that teacher leadership "engages all those within the organisation in a reciprocal learning process that leads to collective action and meaningful change". Lambert's (2003, p.33) description of teacher leaders as "those whose dreams of making a difference have either been kept alive or have been reawakened by engaging with colleagues and working within a professional culture" fits with the passion and enthusiasm shown by those working in the COI. These distributed models of leadership do not mean that there is not also a place for formal leadership roles. According to Harris (2002, p.2), "the job of those in formal leadership positions is primarily to hold the pieces of the organisation together in a productive relationship". Leaders who promote and model respectful and collaborative relationships, and provide support and mentoring, encourage their colleagues to become involved in the leadership of the centre.

Notions of leadership in the COI
As a result of this study, leadership in the COI can be defined as working collaboratively in a learning community towards a shared vision. This requires courage and commitment. The diagram below presents a model of notions of leadership in the COI.
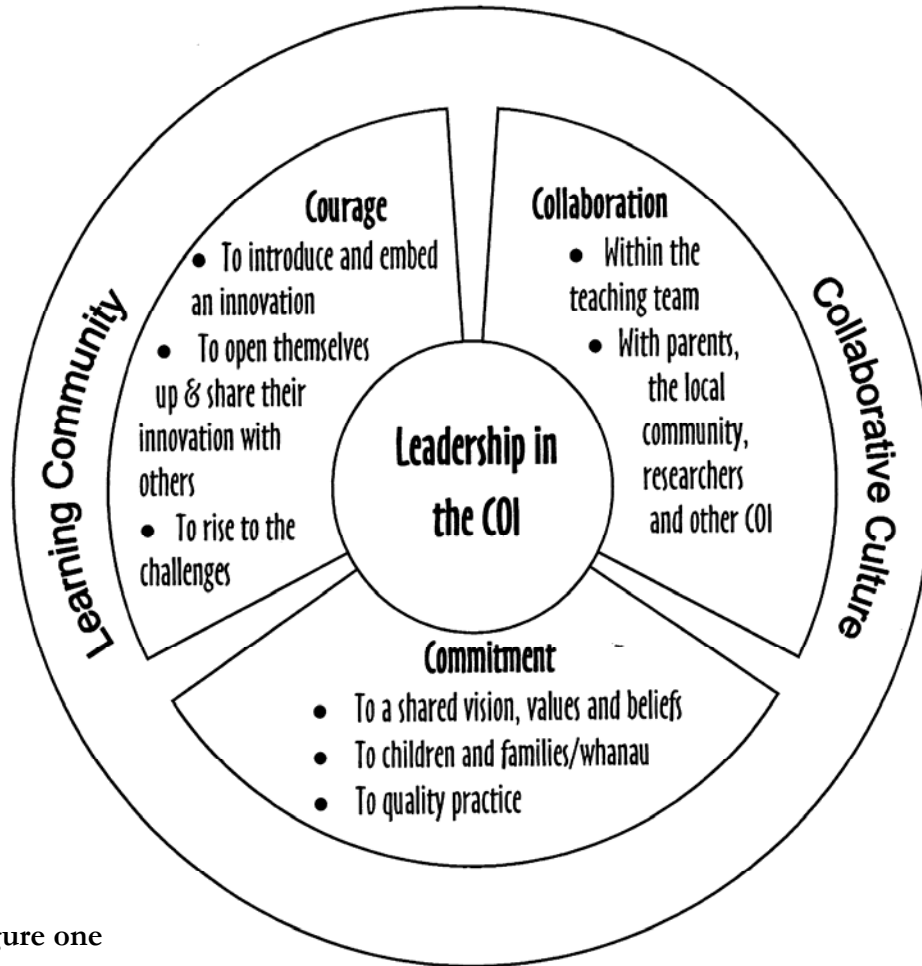

Figure one

Learning communities and collaborative cultures provide the framework in which the leadership characteristics of courage, commitment and collaboration are enacted. The centres were all committed to providing a quality service for the children attending the centre and their families. They had discussed and articulated clear visions, values and beliefs and had shown courage in the way in which they rose to the challenges of introducing and embedding an innovation and sharing this with others. The COI all worked collaboratively with the groups in their learning communities including parents, researchers and colleagues.

Implications for leadership in the ECE sector
This research highlighted a lack of clarity about educators' understandings of leadership, and a lack of support for leadership development. Although leadership is definitely being shown within and by these quality centres, this needs to be acknowledged and articulated.

As Lambert (2003, p.4) has indicated, "how we define leadership frames how people will participate in it". The definition developed in this study could provide a starting point for others to consider. Any broader definition needs to be inclusive of the way leadership is enacted in different services and also needs to promote the concept of collaborative leadership.

This research has implications for both teacher education and professional development programmes. If collaborative leadership is to be promoted then teacher education programmes need to encourage an acceptance that leadership is something that everyone can be part of. Rather than viewing leadership as something that is solely the responsibility of those in positions of head teacher or supervisor, graduating teachers need to be challenged to develop as teacher leaders. As Lambert (2002, p.37) has suggested, "leadership is an essential aspect of an educator's professional life". Those already in leadership positions need to engage in ongoing professional development opportunities that encourage them to reflect on frameworks and models of leadership and to consider their role in promoting collaborative cultures in which teacher leadership is encouraged.

Future leadership development
This study revealed a lack of support for leadership development in the New Zealand ECE sector. A variety of suggestions were made across the COI for future leadership development programmes. These included leadership development for all teachers, particularly as professional leadership is one of the criteria for teacher registration, and support from mentors. Strategies for supporting leadership need to encourage the development of distributed or teacher leadership. The evidence that this collaborative style of leadership is influenced by the support and encouragement provided by those in designated leadership positions also needs to be taken into account in planning leadership development. Mentoring and formal opportunities for reflecting on models of leadership and emotional intelligence are both important aspects of leadership development.

Both the literature (Bloom, 2003; Kagan & Hallmark, 2001; Lambert, 2003; Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, Roth & Smith, 1999; Smith, 2005; Southworth, 2002) and the research participants promoted the value of mentoring relationships as part of leadership development. Meade has acted as a mentor to the COI but this aspect of her role was restricted by limited time and funding. Mentoring support to enable those in leadership roles to develop their own skills and to learn how to effectively mentor others is vital for the sector. Mentoring programmes exist for the compulsory education sector in New Zealand as part of the 'First-time Principals' Induction Programme' and focus on "improving educational leadership and supporting new principals as educational leaders" (West, 2003). Existing mentoring programmes in both the school sector and small-scale programmes already developed for the ECE sector need to be explored to see how they could be adapted for national use.

Formal study opportunities that promote aspects of teacher leadership such as reflection, inquiry and self-assessment (Lambert, 2003) are crucial for those working in the field of ECE. Rodd (2001) has advocated the development of conceptual and interpersonal

expertise as the key to realising leadership potential. Her suggestions for developing conceptual expertise include a focus on critical thinking, goal setting and articulating a vision. The aspects of interpersonal expertise she believes to be important include emotional literacy and reciprocal communication. Other authors have promoted the importance of developing self-awareness and self-reflection as part of leadership development programmes (Bloom & Bella, 2005; Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2002; West-Burnham, 2003). Day, Harris, Hadfield, Tolley & Beresford (2000) have advocated leadership training which focuses on values analysis; reflective thinking; intrapersonal and interpersonal skill development; and problem solving. The importance of leadership development promoting effective communication with others from differing backgrounds was emphasised by one of the COI in the study. This reflects Fullan's (2003) view that relationship building with diverse groups is an important part of leadership development.

The need for post-graduate study is emphasised by McLeod (2002, p. 261) who has noted that a diploma level qualification, the minimum recognised qualification for early childhood teachers, marks "the beginning of a teaching career not a supervisory one" and that "continuing professional development that encourages deeper levels of reflection, and understanding should follow, particularly in the form of post-graduate study in the field of leadership and management". Meade (MI, 2004) also considers post-graduate study that involves reflection on principles and frameworks of leadership to be an important aspect of leadership development. She mentioned the Government supported leadership development programme that was set up for the Centres of Excellence in Britain as a worthwhile model to consider. This was also referred to by one of the COI as a potentially useful programme. Bloom and Bella (2005), in a discussion of the impact of leadership training initiatives in the State of Illinois, reported that participants experienced a sense of empowerment, an increase in their advocacy roles, and a shift in priorities from day-to-day management tasks to broader leadership challenges. Bloom and Bella have proposed a number of key elements that serve as a framework for planning effective leadership development programmes. These include basing the programme on participants' assessed needs; focusing on the role of the leader as change agent; providing opportunities for collegiality and networking across different ECE services; and ensuring follow-up training is available.

Role of the Ministry of Education
The Ministry of Education needs to consider support for leadership development programmes for early childhood services equivalent to what is offered to the school sector. This action would help meet the promise made by the current and previous Labour Governments of giving ECE equity with other education sectors (Department of Education, 1998; Ministry of Education, 2002) and also assist in meeting the goal of improving the quality of ECE services set out in *Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Arataki,* the ECE strategic plan (Ministry of Education, 2002). The programmes that already exist for school principals could be tailored to fit the collaborative way in which early childhood services operate. Some small-scale programmes already operating as part of Ministry of Education funded professional development contracts may provide a blueprint to be followed.

Conclusion

Leadership in the COI is characterised by courage, commitment and collaboration. The innovative approaches of the COI appear to be due in no small part to the collaborative centre cultures in which innovation is encouraged, educators feel valued and supported, and there is regular reflection and a commitment to continuous improvement. Those in leadership positions in the COI have promoted these collaborative cultures and through their example teacher leadership has been encouraged. The model of teacher leadership, which is a feature of the COI, needs to be encouraged in the whole ECE sector to ensure that teachers working with young children work collegially, are committed to quality practices and maintain their dedication and enthusiasm. Leadership development, which supports these models of distributive leadership, is a priority not only for present and future COI but for the sector as a whole.

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