

LEADERSHIP FOR ALL – LEARNING FOR ALL

Making this visible by writing Learning Stories that enable children, families and teachers to have a voice

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Leadership for all leads to learning for all. Yet what kind of leadership and what kind of learning? This chapter utilises the research of the teachers at Greerton Early Childhood Centre, supported by their academic associates, Professor Margaret Carr and Wendy Lee (Sands, Carr, & Lee, 2012), as they explored what happens when teachers engage in the process of building a collaborative, leaderful community, where the principles of Te Whāriki, New Zealand Early Childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996, 2017) are evident for all to see. This was a Centre of Innovation research project (Meade, 2007) designed to examine the threads of inquiry that underpinned a learning and teaching setting characterised by responsiveness, reciprocity and respectfulness. The research revealed that building a collaborative, leaderful community, within a socio-cultural framework (Rogoff, 2003), was a dynamic, interactive enterprise that relied on the interconnectivity of environment, relationships and context. It wove together individual interest and passion, and shared endeavor in a social setting. It depended on everyone helping each other to recognise and respond in ways that enabled confident, capable leaders and learners to flourish as empathy, fair-mindedness and positive attitudes towards diversity were valued and made visible.

Sir Ken Robinson (2006) teaches us that creatively exploring ideas nurtures children's capacity for innovation, for original thinking, for diversity, and for building identities as successful learners now and into the future. Our learning community at Greerton Early Childhood

Centre encourages everyone to follow their interests. We are a community who actively engage in the continuing process of learning that collaboration is a powerful way to work together. As we help each other, we become part of an empathic community that enables everyone to learn what is important to them, all the while making space for each of us to follow our own driving energies, passions and spirits.

This kind of learning community is invested in ‘leadership’. It is a fluid one that invites each of us to play our part inside this complex notion we call learning. At Greerton, the idea of leadership as fluid, binding learners, ideas and the learning environment together, because leadership passes from one to another, has been an organic process. It evolved as teachers began to explore the way learning identities could be strengthened when responsive leaders (children, families and teachers) engage together to craft vibrant, innovative settings, designed for learners to stretch themselves to the edges of possibility, and then with flair, creativity and courage, to step beyond.

An exemplar about leadership is provided by Tanya Johnson, a teacher at Greerton Early Childhood Centre. She wrote a Learning Story (a narrative assessment) illustrating this. The story offers an example of ‘expansive possibility’, for as children take on a leadership mantle and develop their ideas further, they build complexity into their thinking. This is often a social response, with play uppermost in their minds. An excerpt:

As I pulled the sewing machine out to do a repair job on our parachute, a group of curious children gathered, bursting with ideas. A piece of fur had Francesca’s imagination captured and she decided to make a wolf’s tail. Emma liked this idea too, but they only had one piece of fur. ‘I know!’ Francesca declared. ‘I can cut it in two and then you can have a piece!’ The smile on Emma’s face said it all. What a gift to have someone make you feel so included and loved, by having them share their treasure.

Our community’s definition of leadership, as a shared endeavor, sits inside a reflective vision for learning. Time is important in this view, for scheduled, time-bound routines or activities destroy creative thought processes when they cut across motivated, engaged learners in the act of ‘doing’. Imagine interrupting Francesca’s experience at any point along her way towards conceiving an imaginary wolf, making a theatrical prop to enhance the drama, or limiting her

joyful play with Emma. Once this thread is broken, often by arbitrary decisions from the adults inside an early learning setting, the ability to practice self-managing one's life is undermined. The internal character of a burgeoning learner is interrupted, and when adults do this to children time and again, it comes at a huge cost.

Professor Sir Peter Gluckman, New Zealand's chief science advisor, links self-regulation to lifelong success (2011). Yet, self-regulation is not defined just by one's ability to be self-disciplined, to be focused, to persevere and to practice the difficult, tricky bits of a challenging goal. It is linked inextricably with the social aspect of enabling others to do this too, without interfering in their right to pursue a self-set challenge. It stretches further, as passionate learners draw others into a plan through inviting, listening and altering their ideas to accommodate multiple voices. When children get to practice all these dispositions, skills and working theories, inside a community, with people who care to learn from mistakes, take on varied ideas and act co-operatively to create new solutions, then children's identities of themselves as creative, tolerant, hardworking, diligent social beings is nurtured.

Children's working theories are complex responses to their social world. Our research has reinforced again and again that when children are offered learning environments that value struggle, effort, practice, perseverance and social competency, to name a few of the dispositions that characterise successful lifelong learners, they set themselves edgy, difficult goals, far in excess of what adults could visualise for them. Peter Gray (2015, p. 220) offers a view on how such self-initiative develops, and this too is an important precursor to thoughtfully enacted leadership:

If freedom, personal responsibility, self-initiative, honesty, integrity and concern for others rank high in your system of values, and if they represent characteristics you would like to see in your children, then you will be a trusting parent [or teacher]. None of these dispositions can be taught by lecturing, coercion or coaxing. They are acquired (or lost) through daily life experiences that reinforce or suppress them. You can help your children build these values by living them yourself and applying them in relationships with your children. Trust promotes trustworthiness. Self-initiative and all the traits that depend on self-initiative can develop only under conditions of freedom.

Leadership can very aptly be added as one of the characteristics of self-initiative and likewise requires freedom to practice its tenets, with and alongside others who are both more and less experienced than themselves. Peter Gray (2015, p. 76) says this about free age mixed play:

... the presence of younger children naturally activates the nurturing instincts of older children. Older children help younger ones when they play together, and in that way they learn to lead and nurture and develop a concept of themselves as mature and caring.

A significant aspect of our community is the free association of children of all ages together, infants, toddlers and young children. Our more recent reflections have enabled us to understand the significance of everyday leadership opportunities for children as the day's rhythms and rituals unfold in surprising and relaxed ways across the whole setting.

The growth of shared leadership in relation to children's learning in the Greerton Early Childhood Centre

During the Centre of Innovation program, the team focused on an image of the child as a researcher, an explorer making sense of the people, places and things in their world (Ministry of Education, 1996, 2017). The teachers wanted to fully understand the culture of learning and teaching at Greerton, where the intention was to tilt all experiences towards a child's growing identity of themselves as a learner, with an increasing awareness that effort and practice are the key to increasing capability (Dweck, 2006). The key research question was: *How does a 'question-asking' and a 'question exploring' culture support children to develop working theories to shape and re-shape knowledge for a purpose?* As we saw children experimentally shaping and re-shaping their understandings and honing their skills, we realised that they were leading their own learning and drawing other children, teachers and families into their plans. As a consequence, teachers worked on building environments that were rich, vibrant learning settings, to support children's identities of themselves as creative, resourceful, resilient learners. One of the things we learnt during the research was that children, teachers and families were extraordinarily interested in social learning. The teachers agreed that it was this context of learning and teaching as a 'collaborative

endeavor’ that captivated their interest to find out more about what kinds of settings and relationships make a difference to children’s learning. It was our intention to disrupt conventional thinking through writing Learning Stories that showed invested teaching including; co-construction between children and teachers, sustained shared teaching episodes extending children’s thinking, valuing of children’s contribution to the learning experience and making links across time by revisiting children’s ideas and interests.

Because the teachers see knowledge as a process (Gilbert, 2005), a way of finding out, a way of building understanding that can occur over a long period, they created time and space for children to investigate, opening possibilities for children to be leaders of their own learning, and to be leaders who routinely invited others to join their plans. As we immersed ourselves in growing this kind of learning community, we realised we were more aware than ever before, that children ought to be designers of their own learning (Ministry of Education, 1996, 2017). Our research became more focused on children’s and teachers’ experiences as they explored the possibilities offered in an environment that embraced relationships (Ministry of Education, 1996, 2017); an environment where people listened to each other. As the research progressed, we developed ‘Threads of Inquiry’ detailing the aspects of a ‘leaderful community’ that could enable everyone to go beyond their comfort zones into more complex play and adventurous learning. Costa and Kallick’s (2000, p. 34) thoughts surrounding flexibility in learning have supported our research. They write that:

Flexible people seem to have an almost uncontrollable urge to go beyond established limits. They are uneasy about comfort; they ‘live on the edge of competence’. They seem compelled to place themselves in situations where they do not know what the outcomes will be.

When children are in a community that feeds their appetites for curiosity – as well as companionship, rhythm and ritual – ideas flow, and action results. Children lead, and because we live and learn inside a socio-cultural context, teachers and families also lead, but they do so in a spirit of respect for children’s burgeoning capabilities. The most salient point to make is that leadership is a shifting possibility and no one person or group has the prerogative to make all the

decisions. This makes for a viscerally appealing environment as well as an intellectually exciting and socially inclusive one.

The role of Learning Stories (narrative assessment) in broadening leadership at Greerton

Over time we have continued to align our practice with the Early Childhood curriculum, Te Whāriki and its principles and strands (Lee, Carr, Soutar, & Mitchell, 2013). One of the most important reasons for deepening our understanding of these has come about through the writing of Learning Story narrative assessments. Learning Stories (Carr, 2001) offered us a practical way of connecting with the principles of Te Whāriki that had previously eluded us. We wrote in more engaged, emotionally connected ways. As families and children delighted in the stories that started with what children could do, we analysed learning pathways from a variety of perspectives, moving towards possibilities and opportunities for action. We soon realised the transforming power of these Learning Stories (Carr & Lee, 2012). Our teaching was different from before because we started to notice, recognise and respond to children's learning in ways we had never previously considered. The very act of writing our perspective of children's learning made our teaching practice visible, and the honest, often puzzling accounts about our role in supporting this learning, realigned us as researchers, learners and leaders journeying alongside children. We realised that children were equally as motivated to research their world, puzzle over things that were novel, and to lead their inquires through a growing sociability that included others (Fleet, Patterson, & Robertson, 2006). In our experience, shifts in practice result from prolonged teacher conversations around pedagogy. Team relationships are pivotal in these shifts; when Te Whāriki principles are as engaged for teachers as they are designed to be for children and families, they have a powerful impact on the way teachers, teach and learn. Terry Atkinson and Guy Claxton's (2000) writing around intuitive practitioners has had a pervasive influence on us. As teachers are freed to be comfortable about 'not knowing', not necessarily being an imparter of knowledge, they are able to throw ideas around, to be playful and to be imaginative, all inside a setting that creates space for intuition to flourish.

The teachers' Learning Stories at Greerton increasingly reflected this understanding. Many of the narrative assessments started

conversations with children, families and each other, valuing the idea that meaningful, collaborative, expansive learning relies on a growing sense of fair-mindedness. It also depends on care and kindness to stretch learning to the edge and beyond, with and alongside their friends. In a 21st-century world that is full of surprise and uncertainty, as change is exponentially thrust upon us, the work at Greerton is based on a view that successful learners will be those who see the world as a place full of possibility. It is the teachers' intention to foster resourceful, resilient learners who are deeply involved in their learning and who are active in leading their learning and that of others.

As the research progressed, we began to re-define our view of leadership and started making this valued view of learning more visible in the way we constructed our Learning Story narratives. Teachers were intent on ensuring our children could see themselves through these narratives, as learners and leaders, pursuing the serious fun of tackling the edgy, interesting things, as well as doing the hard graft that gets you where you want to be! The teachers began to realise that these are the kinds of 21st-century learners/leaders the world actually needs. We write Learning Stories with wholehearted, energised intelligence, based in the view that children's play lights up every synapse in their brains (Brown, 2010) and the stories we write will make a difference, now and into the future – to children, to families and to ourselves.

Amelie is just such a learner, and the following Learning Story, written by Lorraine, offers a useful glimmer into what the Greerton community have been intent on enabling.

What about a swimming pool for dinosaurs?

It's not a usual event at Greerton, but then so much of the creative energy that explodes around here could hardly be called 'usual'. It's when friends with ideas team up that the really good 'stuff' happens! So why not add some water to a jar to create realism, put some compliant dinosaurs into the mix and create a building to contain the mayhem!

My thoughts on your learning . . .

Amelie, you know how to work with your friends and get to the 'sweet spot' which is the right level of 'skill', the right level of 'stretch' and the emotional intelligence to work creatively alongside your friends!

How might this learning stretch further?

Teachers might think they can ‘plan’ for learning but ‘no’, you do this! All we can do is plan for the environment that sits ‘behind’ and enables learning to happen in free spirited ways because there is time, space, interesting resources and a culture that is enthusiastic about creativity in all its mess, its logic, its unfathomable depth of creative thought and social spark! What I love to see is this all unfolding, and try to ‘know’ when to have fabulous conversations and when to just watch and marvel. That’s a tricky thing to know because adults are very good at hijacking children’s ideas and that’s not fair! So Amelie, my friend, I will continue to marvel each day as your creative spirit and sheer zest for life unfolds, and be there when invited to participate or offer ideas as a contribution not as a game changer of your direction!

In the minds of each teacher at Greerton is the view that ‘play’; uninterrupted complex opportunities for children to be in charge of their learning, is the key. It is in play that children are able to experience every aspect of cultural and social competency, of resilience, of social justice resourcefulness, and creativity (see Figure 3.1). Play forms the building blocks underpinning a learner’s identity; David Perkins’ (2009, p. 29) comments are resonant of the way we view leaderful learning.

It’s never just routine. It’s about thinking about what you know and pushing further. It involves open-ended or ill-structured problems and novel, puzzling situations. It’s never just problem-solving; it involves problem-finding. It’s not just about right answers. It involves explanation and justification. It’s not emotionally flat. It involves curiosity, discovery, creativity, camaraderie.

The ‘camaraderie’ notion struck a particular chord with us because it gave us another insight into what kind of leadership we wanted to grow. Many discussions ensued about the notion of what collaborative learning looked like, in particular, how we could encourage all children, each and every one, to be leaders of this kind of learning. Gavin Kerr, a teacher at Greerton, during a usual weekly trip to a local forest and farm, explored the camaraderie effect on leadership when it is



Figure 3.1 Learning is emotional

located in shared experience and common purpose. His Learning Story captured the essence of courageous, collaborative learners. The following is an excerpt focused on the way children's working theories can build surprise and uncertainty into their endeavors.

Today we discovered a number of fallen ponga trunks (NZ Tree ferns) in the forest. We hacked them out into the open field at the bottom of the farm to inspect... Using a little team work power, the children managed to carry the trunks

over to a stream nearby that had risen with the rain and was proving difficult to cross. It took some thinking and planning and we eventually managed to secure the trunks across the stream. . . The bridge held firm and a little cheer went up as Catalina (teacher) made it to the other side, still dry! After that we took turns traversing our new ponga bridge, building on the techniques we had practiced at the Quarry Park so many weeks ago.

My thoughts on this learning . . .

It is amazing to witness the flow of ideas being shared between the group – how they bounce thoughts and ideas off one another, triggering new ones by introducing memories of past experiences. . . New learning and an understanding of a range of concepts were being tangibly formed today as the children used their combined skill and understanding to re-create a practical, functioning bridge, using the resources at hand to solve a problem. What an amazing display of social learning!

No one knows when leadership will shift – and this may happen in a myriad of ways, over time or within moments. What is important here is the understanding that everyone's contribution is valued, explored, tested and deliberated on. This happens through conversation, not titled authority. All contributions are worthy of examination and each person has a right to articulate and convince others. Ideas that are offered, backed up by passion and commitment, as well as rational thought, are likely to be accepted by the group. It is in experiencing these conversations often, that children in fact become more articulate, more confident to offer ideas, even the ones that after reflection are rejected. This is called emotional stamina, empathy and collegial endeavor. Nothing creative happens unless we are prepared to be vulnerable, to be open to failure, to learn and re-think, re-make, re-conceptualise. Competition may have its place, but it is in collaboration that communities thrive.

Can early childhood education (ECE) teaching practice be effective, authentic and innovative while meeting external system demands?

Every early childhood setting and school in New Zealand is externally reviewed by the Education Review Office (ERO). The Greerton

teachers value external evaluation because it offers an outsider’s perspective and enables us to refine our thinking further. The latest Education Review Office (2017, p. 1) report had this to say:

The highly-effective curriculum is implemented as a pōkeka (cloak) which embraces the whole child. The children drive the curriculum, through their interests, skills, knowledge and dispositions. Parents and whānau (wider family) have many opportunities to contribute to learning. Children benefit from a broad, rich curriculum, which offers risk and challenge in response to their interests. . . All areas of the holistic curriculum, including literacy, mathematics and science, are naturally incorporated into the program in meaningful contexts for children. Teachers skillfully promote oral language development. Children and teachers access information and make regular trips into the local community to support interests and investigations. A feature of the program for older children is the weekly farm visit that supports them to develop resilience and investigation skills. Children work together to plan their day and explore the natural environment. They benefit from participating in education within and outside of the center, and continue developing skills for life-long learning. The strong assessment and planning practices are credit-based and focused on dispositional learning. Teachers work in depth with the Principles and Strands of Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) while being highly skilled at sharing educational theory, research and quality learning in early childhood with parents.

The ERO report indicates that leaderful teaching can meet the Ministry of Education’s requirements. But what does it look like in practice and how are we sharing such pedagogical theory within our community? We write in ways that offer families an insight into learning theory. Our intention is to keep these ideas emotionally engaging, relevant to the family and specific to the child, by setting out the context for the learning, with photos that show aspects of progress, concentration and social connection. These stories often highlight families’ contributions to our learning community. When families realise the importance of things like ‘loose parts’ in sparking creative thought, they are very willing, both to gather resources and offer their help. Learning Stories refrain from ‘teacher talk’, like

the fine motor co-ordination required to manipulate the materials, and concentrates on putting forward the notion of the ‘creative thinker’, the power of developing a growth mindset, the role of resilience and resourcefulness in creating a self-determined learner. It illustrates to parents and families the importance of dispositions alongside skills and knowledge. It shows them the wider benefit of self-directed, open-ended play and the environments needed to nurture and promote this. Books, loose parts, freedom to move equipment and resources to the many and varied places required by children to realise their creative intent, offer provocations that bind many children together in complex play using props they have made themselves. Teachers plan for this ‘environmental design’ (rather than activities), and trust that children, inside a setting that offers space, and resources for curiosity unfettered by adult interference, as well as unlimited time to conceive, make and share dramatic props within play scenarios, will lead their own learning.

Essential in ensuring that leadership for all leads to learning for all, is the notion that learning ought to be irresistibly engaging for all (Fullhan, 2012). Each and every one of us makes decisions about leadership and learning each and every day, and as children only get one early childhood life to build the brain they will have for life, the responsibility to build a learning community for those social/cultural brains to flourish is weighty indeed. That community is strengthened when everyone has the opportunity to lead their own learning, with and alongside others who care to listen to and support each other. Individually and collectively we determine what communities of learning look like, and individually and collectively we are responsible for the kinds of communities we build, moment by moment, idea upon idea.

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